

# Bourne Hall row escalates as Chief Executive suspends councillors' decision

26 February 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's decision to delay plans for investing in Bourne Hall Museum has itself been suspended after the Council's Chief Executive intervened, raising questions about whether councillors have the authority to demand disclosure of the full report they say they need.

At a special meeting on 25 February, the Community and Wellbeing Committee voted to defer any decision on the museum's future until councillors could see the complete, unredacted service review. But in an email to all councillors the following day, leaked to the Epsom and Ewell Times, Chief Executive **Jackie King** said the resolution could not yet be implemented and was now on hold pending legal advice.

She wrote: "While the resolution was agreed at Committee, it relates to the Council's broader constitutional arrangements around access to information and the respective roles of elected Members and statutory officers... As legal advice was not available at the meeting, it is necessary to seek clarification from the Monitoring Officer regarding the constitutional effect of the resolution and appropriate next steps. In the meantime, implementation is suspended to ensure that any action taken is consistent with the Council's governance framework."

Her intervention leaves the museum decision in limbo and raises a wider constitutional question: whether a committee of elected councillors can compel disclosure of information that council officers have decided should remain confidential.

## Chair expressed "disappointment" after councillors voted to delay decision

The committee had been reconvened after the Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee ruled that the original January decision had been taken without councillors seeing key reports, including the Bourne Hall service review and peer challenge findings.

Opening the meeting, committee chair Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said: "This is being called as a result of a calling of a decision that we took back in January. Councillor Coley... called the decision in on the basis that the committee did not have all the information necessary to make the decision, in particular that we did not see the LGA corporate peer challenge report." He said councillors could either retake the decision or uphold it.

Instead, members voted to defer the matter entirely. After the vote, Cllr Woodbridge said: "I can't hide my disappointment at the decision, but it is the decision that you've taken."

## Coley: "If we're spending public money... I find it very difficult to justify secrecy"

Independent councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley), who initiated the call-in, said councillors were still being denied crucial financial detail. He told the meeting: "The Service Review provided has significant redactions which amount to several pages of missing content, especially that which relates to the financial aspects of the museum... If we're spending public money on services the council owns and operates directly itself, I find it very difficult to justify secrecy."

He warned councillors they were being asked to commit future funding without proper scrutiny. "Year one requires additional funding from revenue that was not allocated in our recently passed budget. Years two to five require funding from a council that doesn't exist yet... Surely, the most sensible option is to leave things as they are and allow the new unitary council to decide how best to proceed."

## Lawrence: "You need to see the plan in front of you before you spend a quarter of a million pounds"

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) criticised both the timing and substance of the information provided. "As of Monday at 2pm appendix three, the service review hadn't been published... Public money was paid for this report." Referring to the peer challenge findings, he added: "The peer challenge team were unable to access more detailed income slash expenditure relating to Bourne Hall... You need to see the plan in front of you before you spend a quarter of a million pounds on this."

## Muir: "We do not have enough information... this is unacceptable"

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) said the redactions were unprecedented in her experience. "I'm actually very,

very concerned about the lack of the information we have. We are the front line of making decisions, and we don't have enough information on which to make one." She added: "I have literally, in nine years, never seen a document like the one that... we've been given... This is unacceptable. No company I've ever worked for would accept making a decision if we provided this."

### **Chinn: "Every single recommendation is redacted"**

Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court), who proposed the deferral, told the meeting councillors were still missing the report's most important section. "A redacted version shall be appended... but every single recommendation is redacted. I don't understand how we can say that we've got all the information... I don't think this has moved on at all."

Her amendment to defer the decision until the full report is disclosed was carried by the committee.

### **Reynolds warned of consequences of continued delay**

Cllr **Humphrey Reynolds** (RA West Ewell) cautioned councillors about the risks of postponement, saying delay could itself harm the museum's future and create further uncertainty. He argued councillors needed to balance transparency with the need to move forward with decisions affecting services.

### **Chief Executive's intervention raises constitutional questions**

The Chief Executive's subsequent decision to suspend implementation of the committee's resolution now creates a new layer of uncertainty. Her email makes clear the issue is no longer just about the museum, but about the balance of authority between elected councillors and statutory officers.

Councillors voted to delay a decision until they could see the full evidence. The Council's most senior officer has now paused that instruction pending legal advice on whether councillors have the constitutional power to require disclosure.

### **Future of museum – and decision-making authority – now unclear**

The original plan involved investing substantial additional funding to improve the museum, with the aim of securing its long-term future ahead of the borough council's abolition in 2027 and replacement by a unitary authority.

For now, both the museum's future and the committee's attempt to obtain full disclosure remain unresolved. Councillors are awaiting legal advice from the Monitoring Officer, which will determine not only what happens next with Bourne Hall Museum, but potentially who ultimately controls access to key information at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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