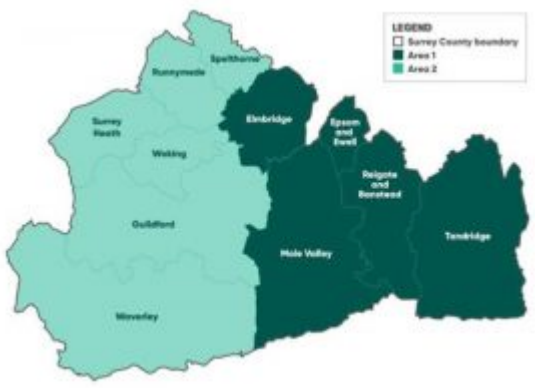
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A West Side Story of Surrey's new Parish Councils

22 September 2026



New lower tier councils will be created in Runnymede, Surrey Heath, Woking, and most controversially Guildford, just months after elections were held to simplify local government in Surrey.

In May, residents went to the polls in what was described as a once in a generation vote that would see Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts dissolved and replaced with two new mega authorities covering West and East Surrey.

The argument was it would mean less complexity, better value for money, and improved services.

However, some feared the huge new councils could leave too large a disconnect between residents and their representatives with some areas voting to create new hyperlocal bodies to oversee issues that might get overlooked by the larger bodies – at a cost.

The parish councils will require budgets of several hundred thousand pounds in start-up costs, and will have uncapped powers to charge more tax.

With some areas potentially facing increases in band d council tax bills of up to £100 for the privilege.

In three of the areas residents backed the plans and they were voted through by West Surrey's executive committee with little issue.

However, in Guildford, a public vote found 47 per cent of the people were against the plans compared with just 46 in favour but they were pushed through regardless, leading to calls for West Surrey to reject the bid.

Councillor Jane Austin, leader of the Conservative opposition group, said: "Generally my position is a parish council should go ahead if there is a clear will for it and a clear benefit to residents.

"I think this test has been met looking at the smaller parishes in Surrey Heath and Runnymede but I can't see evidence of this anywhere in the report for the Guildford case

"Given its significant size and budget we need more detail.

"If we are asking for a major part of Guildford to pay an extra estimated £69 per year.

She added: "The tests of whether people want this, whether they are happy with the cost, and whether this represents value and benefits the residents of Guildford have not been met."

Cllr Catherine Young (Horsleys: Residents for Guildford and Villages) said she believed the reason the vote was so close was that many people didn't understand the benefits of being in a parish council.

The expectation is that there will be elections held for the newly created lower councils in May 2027.

It would then be the new parish councils decisions to determine their own budgets.

Leader of West Surrey Council, Paul Follows said: "Do you think that the Western cabinet will be sitting here discussing planters in Guildford Town Centre, or the Christmas lights, or the fireworks, or what we're doing with certain elements of localised green spaces?

"It is ludicrous to think so and the problem is without making sure somebody else is responsible for it, we will be responsible for it, knowing that we don't have the time or capacity to deal with it properly, or with any real local understanding."

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

Surrey East West. (Credit: Elmbridge Borough Council) Permission for use.

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Epsom and Ewell to have three tiers of government when promised one?

22 September 2026



Following Surrey County Council's release reported here Plans for East Surrey Council continue to progress that the new East and West Unitary Councils will work toward adoption of an overarching Foundation Strategic Authority for all of Surrey and a local Charter Trustees body for Epsom and Ewell, Epsom and Ewell Times provides our readers with a summary guide to what Foundation Strategic Authorities are:

Surrey's proposed new strategic authority: what would it do?

Surrey's two new shadow unitary authorities have backed the creation of a county-wide Foundation Strategic Authority, adding another layer to the local government structures due to take effect in April 2027.

The proposed body would bring East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council together to make decisions on matters considered too large or interconnected to be handled effectively by either authority alone.

An analysis published by the Local Government Information Unit describes Foundation Strategic Authorities, or FSAs, as the entry level in the Government's new system of devolved regional government.

Unlike a Mayoral Strategic Authority, an FSA would not have a directly elected mayor. It would instead be governed collectively by representatives of its constituent councils.

For Surrey, this would mean the two new unitary councils retaining responsibility for everyday services such as social care, waste collection, local planning, housing and environmental health, while working through the FSA on broader county-wide priorities.

What powers would it have?

According to the LGIU, Foundation Strategic Authorities are intended to provide a statutory framework for strategic functions including:

- transport planning;
- adult education and skills;
- economic development;
- infrastructure and investment;
- housing strategy; and
- the preparation of a Spatial Development Strategy.

The last of these could be particularly significant. A county-wide spatial strategy would establish the broad direction for development, housing and infrastructure across Surrey, above the more detailed local plans prepared by East and West Surrey councils.

An FSA could also act as Surrey's Local Transport Authority, allowing decisions about buses, roads and other transport investment to be planned across the whole county rather than divided between the two new councils.

The Government argues that operating at this larger scale will make it easier for areas to negotiate with Whitehall, attract investment and coordinate services that cross council boundaries.

Not as powerful as a mayoral authority

The LGIU stresses, however, that an FSA occupies the lowest of the Government's three strategic-authority tiers.

Above it sits a Mayoral Strategic Authority, led by a directly elected mayor, and then an Established Mayoral Strategic Authority. Authorities in the higher tiers can gain greater powers, more influence over government departments and access to broader, longer-term funding arrangements.

A Foundation Strategic Authority would therefore give Surrey a formal seat at the devolution table, but it would not initially receive all the powers or financial freedoms available to areas such as Greater Manchester.

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This raises the question of whether an FSA is intended to be a lasting form of government in its own right or principally a "waiting room" on the way to an elected Surrey mayor.

The Government has said that areas may choose a non-mayoral arrangement, but its most substantial devolution offers have generally been attached to mayoral authorities.

A third level of decision-making

From April 2027, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and Surrey County Council are due to disappear, with their responsibilities passing to East Surrey Council.

The FSA would sit above both East and West Surrey councils for specified strategic functions. Residents would therefore be governed locally by a unitary council and, on county-wide matters, by the strategic authority.

This would not reproduce the present county-and-borough division because the FSA would have a narrower and more strategic role. Nevertheless, its creation means the replacement of Surrey's current two-tier system will not leave the county with a single level of local decision-making.

Questions remain about how the FSA would be constituted, how its decisions would be scrutinised, how costs and votes would be divided between East and West Surrey and how clearly residents would be able to identify which authority was responsible for a particular policy.

Why Surrey wants one

Surrey County Council has argued that establishing an FSA will unlock further devolution and allow more decisions and funding to be transferred from central government.

The two shadow councils would remain separate unitary authorities, but the strategic body would preserve a mechanism for county-wide coordination after Surrey County Council is abolished.

Its practical importance will depend on the powers and funding ultimately transferred by ministers. Without substantial resources, the FSA could amount mainly to another coordinating committee. With meaningful control over transport, skills, strategic planning and investment, it could become one of the most influential public bodies affecting Epsom and Ewell.

The central issue identified by the LGUI analysis is therefore not simply whether an FSA is created, but whether it is given sufficient authority, money and public accountability to make a noticeable difference.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Plans for East Surrey Council continue to progress

22 September 2026

Plans for the new East Surrey Council continue to move forward as Surrey's local government reorganisation programme progresses with the full support of both central government and Surrey leaders. Key decisions are helping shape a modern, locally focused council that will deliver high-quality services for residents and communities.

The East Surrey Shadow Executive met on 14 September to continue preparations for the launch of the new authority on 1 April 2027. Councillors reviewed progress on the implementation of local government reorganisation and considered a number of important decisions that will help ensure services continue smoothly from Vesting Day.

A key decision at the meeting was to approve Woodhatch Place in Reigate as East Surrey Council's main office from 1 April 2027. This short-term arrangement provides a practical and cost-effective base for the new authority, ensuring it can operate safely and lawfully from day one while longer-term property plans are developed.

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Access to council services will remain local and convenient for residents. Existing council offices across East Surrey will continue to provide face-to-face support, alongside online and telephone services, giving residents a choice in how they access help and information.

Looking beyond council boundaries, councillors backed proposals for East Surrey and West Surrey to work together on strategic county-wide issues through a proposed Foundational Strategic Authority. Members recognised the potential benefits for transport, housing, economic growth and local funding, while also calling for further details from government on matters including any future visitor levy and Surrey's devolution arrangements.

The meeting also explored how communities could play a greater role in shaping the future council. An early East Surrey Council Strategy was discussed, setting out a vision for an inclusive and sustainable East Surrey where people feel heard, supported and connected. Councillors also considered community-led neighbourhood governance arrangements that would give residents and local organisations more influence over local priorities and services.

Protecting local identity and civic traditions was another important area of discussion. Councillors supported the creation of Charter Trustees in Elmbridge and **Epsom & Ewell** from 1 April 2027, and in Reigate & Banstead if a proposed parish council is not established. These bodies help preserve historic traditions, ceremonial events and local heritage during the transition to the new council structure.

Preparations for Vesting Day also included consideration of the legal agreements needed to create the new councils. These agreements will set out how assets, contracts, responsibilities and financial obligations transfer from Surrey County Council and the district and borough councils to East Surrey and West Surrey, while also establishing how the two authorities will work together on shared services and other arrangements after 1 April 2027.
Councillor Steve Wotton, Leader of the East Surrey Shadow Council, said: "The pace of progress demonstrates our determination to make East Surrey Council a success. Each milestone is taking us closer to creating a council that is shaped by local priorities and focused on what matters most to residents.

"We have a real opportunity to create a stronger platform for long-term economic growth, investment and infrastructure improvements across Surrey, this will help us to rethink on how key services, such as SEND, are delivered for people across our communities.

"By combining services at a strategic level and empowering communities to shape local decisions, we can create better outcomes for residents and build a stronger future for East Surrey."

In the months ahead, shadow councillors will use Section 24 powers to review and approve key financial decisions as Surrey prepares for the creation of East Surrey and West Surrey councils. This will help protect the finances of the new councils by ensuring major spending commitments made before 1 April 2027 are in the long-term interests of residents and support a strong start for the new authorities.

Surrey County Council

Secret Legal Advice that leaves Surrey high and dry?

22 September 2026



The legal advice that forced the nationwide cancellation of local government reorganisation, with the single exception of Surrey because it was too far down the track, will be kept private, the secretary of state said.

It has led to fears the county has been 'thrown under the bus' with Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts set to dissolve and be merged into two mega authorities under shadowy legal circumstances.

Last year the county was selected to be fast-tracked to undergo generational reorganising. Councils that had stood for more than half a century would be closed down and their services merged – with residents told it would save money.

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It was then to be rolled out across the country but this week came the shock announcement the entire process, save for Surrey where elections had already taken place , would be put on ice.

Those who called to see the legal advice that caused the seismic u-turn were told it wasn't government policy to divulge such information.

West Surrey leader Councillor Paul Follows, writing to Angela Rayner, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government, said: "The change in approach to local government reorganisation (LGR) set out in your ministerial statement…has raised several questions about the process undertake in Surrey.

"Your statement referred to legal advice that has informed the position of the present administration of national government, to the effect that the LGR process to date was not sufficiently robust or legally sound."

He said understood Surrey's position, that legislation to create the East and West Surrey Councils had been passed and elections held, but called for the new legal position to be shared so Surrey could best understand its new landscape.

He added: "If that decision making process has been deemed legally faulty or otherwise unsound I would like to ask for the opportunity for my officer to asses the potential impact on West Surrey, and in particular the crucial matters of finance and inherited debt.

"Would it be possible to have a copy of the legal advice on which the government has based its decision to pause the next tranches of LGR.

"I ask this solely to help correct or compensate for any deficiencies now identified by your department and to ensure the residents of West Surrey are not adversely impacted."

Speaking in the House of Commons, Guildford MP Zoe Franklin echoed the call for the legal advice's publication so communities could understand what went wrong with the original process.

She added: "In my own area of Surrey, councils were forced down a reorganisation route that now appears to be effectively abandoned by the Government and questionable on a legal basis.

"Will the Secretary of State commit to meeting Surrey MPs and the new authority leaders to discuss how our county can avoid the risks and uncertainty that the Government say have prompted this decision elsewhere?"

MP Monica Harding, said: "My constituents in Esher and Walton, in Surrey, are left wondering whether they have been thrown under the bus by a Government who failed to be secure in the legal advice and the costs from the very beginning.

"This is incompetent.

"Will the Government release the legal advice? What are the legal implications for Surrey?

"What extra support will she give Surrey regarding the cost implications?"

Surrey Heath MP Al Pinkerton said: "One of the potential unintended consequences of today's announcement is to leave Surrey in the slightly discomfiting position of being in an experimental cohort with a sample size of one, the one county being reorganised under this legislation.

He added: "Do the legal concerns that the Secretary of State has expressed today also relate to Surrey?

"If Surrey is affected by those legal concerns, what faith should my residents have that this experiment is not going to come fully off the rails before April 1, 2027?"

The Secretary of State said she understood the strength of feeling but told the commons: "I considered the legal advice provided as part of the judicial review process, and the decision to withdraw the decision reflected updated legal clarity.

"It is a long-standing principle that the Government do not publish or comment on legal advice.

"I have been clear that I want to be able to review these decisions to ensure, as the new Secretary of State, that they are the right ones.

"We will consider the programme in the round in the light of the Government's priorities, as set out in "Rewiring the State", and Ministers will meet with Members of this House and will set out decisions at our earliest opportunity."

Asked after the debate whether it would publish the advice, the department reiterated the ministerial statements raised in the commons.

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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Related report:

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The shake up of Epsom and Ewell's local government: was it all a waste of time as Rayner

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puts pause on LGR elsewhere?

22 September 2026



Surrey's political leaders insist the replacement of the county's 12 councils by two large unitary authorities remains on schedule. But a government review of local government reorganisation elsewhere in England has reopened questions about whether Surrey was right to proceed so quickly with its own costly transformation.

A major retreat by the Government over the restructuring of English local government has inevitably reopened the argument over whether Surrey was right to rush ahead with its own reorganisation.

Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary **Angela Rayner** has announced a national review following what her department described as "updated and privileged legal advice".

Decisions affecting Essex, Hampshire, Norfolk and Suffolk have been withdrawn. Plans for a further 14 areas have been paused, along with reorganisation proposals for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and West Sussex which had not yet been settled.

Existing councils in those areas will now hold elections in May 2027 on their current boundaries.

The change is highly significant. Only months ago ministers were presenting the abolition of county and district councils across England as an essential part of creating simpler and more economical local government.

Ms Rayner said she wanted to be satisfied that the correct process was in place, that it complied with the law and that the proposals remained consistent with the priorities of a new Prime Minister and administration.

The precise legal advice has not been disclosed because the Government says it is privileged. It follows a succession of threatened or commenced judicial reviews challenging ministers' selection of boundaries for the new councils.

In Essex, the county council began legal proceedings after former Communities Secretary Steve Reed selected a five-unitary arrangement rather than an option for fewer and larger authorities which was reportedly preferred by departmental officials. Challenges were also launched or contemplated in Hampshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Portsmouth and Kent.

The Government's wider retreat has been described by the Local Government Information Unit as threatening to turn the programme into a "colossal white elephant", consuming thousands of hours of council officers' and councillors' time.

Surrey says it remains on course

Surrey's councils responded quickly to the national announcement by reaffirming their commitment to creating East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council on 1 April 2027.

In a joint release issued through Surrey County Council, they said the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government had confirmed that Surrey would not be affected by the review.

The councils said significant work had already been undertaken to develop the proposals, consult partners and communities and prepare for the transfer of services. They maintained that the new structure would simplify local government, strengthen accountability and improve services.

Councillor Steve Wotton, Leader of the shadow East Surrey Council, which includes Epsom and Ewell, said: "Government has been clear that Surrey's local government reorganisation programme remains on track.

"Councils across Surrey have worked at pace to develop robust proposals that will deliver long-term benefits for residents, businesses and communities. We remain confident that reorganisation will create stronger, more sustainable local government and help us deliver better outcomes for local people."

Councillor Paul Follows, Leader of West Surrey Council, said significant progress had already been made and that partners were continuing to work constructively together.

"We remain committed to delivering reorganisation successfully and ensuring that residents, colleagues and partners are supported throughout the transition," he said.

Residents have been assured that existing councils will continue delivering services normally until the transfer takes place.

The Surrey statement addresses the immediate practical question: the national review will not delay Surrey's changeover. It does not, however, resolve the wider question raised by the Government's change of course: whether the original national programme, including the accelerated Surrey process, was soundly conceived.

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Why Surrey is different

Surrey has progressed considerably further than the areas placed under review.

The Government decided in October 2025 that Surrey County Council and the county's 11 district and borough councils should be replaced by two authorities.

East Surrey will encompass Epsom and Ewell, Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Reigate and Banstead and Tandridge. West Surrey will cover Guildford, Runnymede, Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Waverley and Woking.

The Surrey (Structural Changes) Order 2026 was approved by Parliament, made on 9 March and brought into force on 10 March. Elections for both new councils took place in May.

East and West Surrey now exist as shadow authorities. They are preparing budgets, staffing structures, constitutions and service arrangements before assuming full responsibility on 1 April 2027.

On that date Surrey County Council, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and the other ten borough and district councils will be abolished.

Surrey therefore cannot simply be added to the list of paused areas through an administrative announcement. Reversing course would require ministers and Parliament to undo an order already in force, deal with two elected shadow authorities and decide whether the councils marked for abolition should instead be preserved.

The existence of that legal and democratic machinery probably explains why ministers have chosen to let Surrey continue. It does not necessarily amount to a fresh examination or endorsement of the merits of the two-unitary model.

Nor does it establish that the legal difficulties identified elsewhere could never have affected the earlier Surrey process. Ministers have not published the new advice or explained in detail why it applies to later decisions but not to Surrey.

The cost before the savings

Surrey's own published figures show that reorganisation is not a cost-free exercise.

The May 2026 implementation plan estimates that setting up the two new councils before April 2027 will cost £35.3 million.

Surrey County Council is expected to provide £28.24 million. The remaining 20 per cent is being divided among the borough and district councils according to their council tax bases.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's allocated contribution is £454,094.

That £35.3 million covers work before the new councils take over. The implementation plan expressly states that costs incurred after April 2027 will have to be funded by East and West Surrey themselves. The eventual total may therefore be higher.

There are also costs which are harder to place on a balance sheet: senior officers and specialist staff diverted from ordinary council work, consultants and legal advisers, harmonising computer systems and employment terms, splitting Surrey County Council's budget and assets, rewriting contracts and policies and deciding what happens to hundreds of council-owned properties.

Council tax levels and services which currently differ between boroughs must also eventually be reconciled.

Supporters argue that these are one-off investments which will produce larger recurring savings. The Surrey business case forecast that savings could begin in the first year and increase substantially from year three. Later financial papers quoted a projected saving of about £23 million a year by year five, after allowing for continuing implementation costs.

If those savings are achieved and sustained, a £35.3 million initial expenditure would not by itself prove waste. It could be recovered within a comparatively short period once the full annual savings materialise.

The more difficult question is whether the promised savings will survive the practical complexities of combining 12 councils.

Two councils, but very different financial inheritances

The two new authorities will begin with markedly different financial problems.

Every existing Surrey council is forecasting a medium-term budget gap. West Surrey must also absorb the consequences of Woking Borough Council's financial collapse and Spelthorne Borough Council's debt and investment difficulties.

The Government has announced exceptional assistance for Woking, but reorganising boundaries does not make underlying borrowing disappear. Debt, assets, liabilities and interest costs still have to be allocated or supported.

East Surrey avoids Woking's particular difficulties but will inherit its share of Surrey County Council's pressures in adult social care, children's services, special educational needs and school transport. These are among the most expensive and rapidly growing areas of council expenditure.

Unitary status may make it easier to coordinate housing, social care, roads, waste, planning and public health. It does not remove the demographic and financial pressures driving those services.

The Government's original case for the Surrey changes promised fewer senior managers and councillors, reduced duplication, clearer accountability and more joined-up services.

It suggested, for example, that families needing help with education, social care and housing would no longer have to navigate separate county and borough organisations.

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Those are plausible benefits, but they remain promises rather than demonstrated results.

What Epsom and Ewell loses

For Epsom and Ewell, the question is not only financial.

The borough, with its own civic identity and relatively small geographical area, will become one part of an authority stretching from Elmbridge in the west to Tandridge in the east. Decisions presently taken at Epsom Town Hall will ultimately be made by a much larger council serving around half of Surrey.

The number of councils may be reduced, but the distance between residents and the principal decision-making body will increase. Planning, licensing, parks, refuse collection, homelessness and other distinctly local services will be transferred to East Surrey.

That sits uneasily with the claim in the councils' latest statement that reorganisation will strengthen local accountability.

Area committees, community boards or similar arrangements may be established to maintain a connection with individual towns and communities. Epsom and Ewell's proposed Charter Trustees could preserve the mayoralty and some civic traditions, but would not replace the borough council's service-delivery or decision-making powers.

If funded through an additional local precept, the Charter Trustees would also create a modest new layer of cost beneath the new unitary authority.

The tension is clear: reorganisation seeks savings through scale while simultaneously having to devise new structures to restore some of the local connection which that scale removes.

Was it all a waste?

The Government's pause does not, by itself, prove that Surrey's reorganisation has been a waste of time and money.

Surrey's two councils have been established in law, their councillors have been elected and implementation is well under way. Stopping now could waste more of the work and expenditure already committed while creating legal and administrative confusion.

Surrey leaders are also entitled to point to the amount of preparation already undertaken and the need to give certainty to residents, council employees, contractors and voluntary organisations.

Nevertheless, the national reversal seriously weakens the confidence with which the programme was sold.

The policy was announced in the December 2024 English Devolution White Paper and was not contained in Labour's 2024 general election manifesto, as recorded in the House of Commons Library's July 2026 briefing.

Surrey was placed on an accelerated timetable, submitting proposals in May 2025 while most other areas were given until the autumn.

Residents were asked to accept postponed elections, hurried consultation and a fundamental alteration of local democracy on the basis that the national direction was settled and the financial case compelling.

Less than two years later, ministers are checking whether much of that programme was lawful, procedurally robust or even consistent with the new administration's priorities.

Surrey appears to have crossed the bridge just before the Government closed it for a structural inspection.

Whether that makes Surrey fortunate or merely the first county irrevocably committed to a questionable experiment will not be answered by ministerial assurances or council press releases.

It will depend on measurable results after April 2027: the final transition bill, actual rather than forecast savings, council tax levels, the quality of services and whether residents still feel that local decisions are being made locally.

For now, the fairest conclusion is that Surrey's reorganisation is too advanced to be treated as abandoned expenditure, but nowhere near advanced enough to be declared money well spent.

Lionel Blackman

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Image: Angela Rayner Official Cabinet Portrait, July 2024

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Secret Surrey leaders' talks challenged by Epsom councillor

22 September 2026



An Epsom and Ewell councillor has launched a sustained Freedom of Information campaign to uncover what Surrey's council leaders have discussed and agreed behind closed doors.

Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent, Ruxley) is seeking the agendas, minutes and decisions of the Surrey Leaders' Group, a forum bringing together the leaders of Surrey County Council and the county's 11 borough and district councils.

The Group is currently chaired by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Leader Councillor Hannah Dalton (RA, Stoneleigh).

Cllr Coley's efforts began in March, when he requested records covering the civic years 2022/23 to 2025/26. Establishing which authority was responsible for answering proved to be the first hurdle.

Surrey County Council said that it did not hold the information. A response sent through a WhatDoTheyKnow account bearing the name "Surrey Leaders' Group" came from Guildford Borough Council, which also said it did not hold the records because it did not provide the Group's secretariat.

Guildford directed Cllr Coley to Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, which eventually confirmed that it held at least some of the material.

However, Reigate and Banstead initially refused the four-year request on cost grounds. It said more than 200 documents were spread across different authorities, including records kept by a previous secretariat. Locating, retrieving and reviewing them would exceed the Freedom of Information Act limit of £450, calculated as 18 hours of staff time at £25 an hour.

Cllr Coley expressed surprise that the basic records of a body composed of senior elected representatives should be so difficult to retrieve.

He argued that the failure to maintain a readily accessible publication scheme had itself helped create the situation in which answering an FOI request was said to be too expensive.

He subsequently narrowed his request to 2024/25 and 2025/26 and asked which council held the records for the two earlier years.

After extending its response deadline to consider the public interest, Reigate and Banstead released the Group's constitution and collections of agendas. It has, however, refused to disclose the minutes.

The Council relied upon section 36 of the Freedom of Information Act, which can protect information where disclosure would be likely to inhibit the free and frank provision of advice or exchange of views.

It said the Group provided a "safe space" in which senior councillors could test ideas, challenge assumptions and discuss politically sensitive or developing issues before proposals entered the formal decision-making processes of their respective councils.

Disclosure, it argued, could have a "chilling effect", making participants less candid and ultimately weakening the quality of subsequent council decisions.

The Council also maintained that the Surrey Leaders' Group is not itself a formal decision-making body. It said any binding decision would still have to be taken through the constitutional and democratic procedures of the council concerned.

Constitution complicates the picture

The constitution disclosed through the FOI request presents a more complicated picture.

Among the Group's stated objectives is taking decisions about joint activities across Surrey. It may make representations, determine certain nominations to outside bodies, levy subscriptions upon its member councils and maintain a fund that can be used to employ consultants or commission research.

Although it cannot bind constituent councils without referring an issue back to them, the constitution states that the decision-making powers of the former Surrey Delivery Board are to be exercised by the Leaders' Group, subject to council ratification where required.

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It also provides for voting, with each council leader having one vote, although the stated aim is to reach decisions by consensus.

The agendas demonstrate that the Group has considered matters extending far beyond informal networking. Subjects have included local government reorganisation, the allocation of reorganisation costs, strategic planning, health services, policing, economic growth, staff retention and the future governance of Surrey.

One agenda expressly recorded that a “decision” was required from leaders on proposals for funding the implementation of local government reorganisation. Leaders were asked to agree the proposals and take steps to set aside money from their councils’ budgets or reserves.

Another item asked leaders to provide a “steer” on proposed voluntary financial controls associated with the restructuring.

“No transparency”

Cllr Coley has now requested an internal review of the refusal to release the minutes.

He disputes the claim that publication would provide only limited additional transparency. He says the Group does not routinely publish its agendas, minutes, decision notices or even its constitution.

He also claims that at least one Surrey chief executive has acknowledged in writing that decisions were made at the Group rather than by its constituent councils. He says the current chair Cllr Dalton has told councillors that a particular course had to be followed because it had already been agreed by Surrey Leaders.

“The Surrey Leaders Group should not be a secret forum to circumvent public scrutiny,” he wrote in his request for a review.

Cllr Coley contrasted its private proceedings with the new East and West Surrey joint committees, whose agendas, minutes and decisions have been published and whose meetings have been open to the public and available to watch online.

That distinction is particularly important during the reorganisation of Surrey’s councils. Decisions and informal agreements made now could influence the structures, finances and services inherited by the two new unitary authorities.

Cllr Coley also argued that any need for continuing secrecy should be reduced by the impending abolition of the Group’s constituent councils. He told the Epsom and Ewell Times ” Your readers might chuckle at the idea of a “deep state” in Surrey, but what else should we call these arrangements where the most far reaching decisions are made in private with no scrutiny or public record and the mere existence of the Surrey Leaders Group is shrouded in mystery?”

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council acknowledged the internal review request on 2nd September. It aims to provide its decision by 30th September.

The complete FOI correspondence and released documents can be read on WhatDoTheyKnow.

Sam Jones – Reporter



How two became one became three – how “unitary” means “trinity”.

22 September 2026

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

The central promise of local government reorganisation was easy to understand. Surrey’s confusing two-tier system would be swept away. Surrey County Council and the county’s 11 borough and district councils would be replaced by streamlined unitary authorities.

One council would deliver the principal local services in each area. Duplication would be removed, accountability would become clearer and residents would know which authority was responsible.

That was the theory.

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The emerging reality looks rather different. The Government is abolishing two tiers of local government, but Surrey now appears to be heading towards three separate layers or bodies: a countywide strategic authority or elected mayor, the new East Surrey Council and, within Epsom and Ewell, Charter Trustees preserving the borough's civic and ceremonial functions.

Not all three would have equivalent powers. Charter Trustees would not run ordinary council services and a strategic authority would operate at a regional level. Nevertheless, each would be a public body with functions, office-holders, meetings, administration and potential financial consequences.

Residents might reasonably ask: how exactly is this simplification?

From two councils to one – and then back again

At present, Epsom and Ewell residents are served principally by Surrey County Council and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council.

From April 2027, both are due to disappear and be replaced locally by East Surrey Council. On paper, that reduces two councils to one.

But the reorganisation was always linked to a wider devolution agenda. A Foundation Strategic Authority covering Surrey is proposed as a possible first step towards a Mayoral Strategic Authority headed by a directly elected Surrey mayor.

The latest Government proposals would give regional mayors substantial powers, including the ability to intervene in major planning applications. Those powers could extend to developments of more than 150 homes, large commercial schemes and buildings of 30 metres or more.

Whatever view one takes of those powers, this would plainly be more than a decorative office. A Surrey mayor and strategic authority would sit above East and West Surrey councils, making decisions across the county on matters potentially including planning, transport, housing, infrastructure and economic development.

The old county council tier would therefore disappear, only for a new countywide strategic layer to emerge in a different form.

It may have different boundaries of responsibility, a different constitution and a directly elected mayor. But to residents looking up the governmental ladder, it may feel remarkably like the return of a second tier.

A new body below as well as one above

Epsom and Ewell also came close to acquiring an additional layer beneath East Surrey Council.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council conducted a Community Governance Review into establishing two parish councils, styled as Epsom Community Council and Ewell Community Council. Parish councils are statutory local authorities with elected councillors and the power to raise their own Council Tax precept.

The proposal was rejected decisively by residents. Around 82 per cent of approximately 2,200 respondents opposed it, and the plan was abandoned.

That should have settled the question of creating another precepting body below East Surrey Council. Yet the abolition of the borough leaves a genuine question about what happens to Epsom and Ewell's mayoralty, civic identity and ceremonial traditions.

The Borough Council's preferred answer is Charter Trustees.

Charter Trustees are not parish councils. Their role would be much narrower, principally preserving the mayoralty and civic and ceremonial functions of the disappearing borough. They would probably be drawn from East Surrey councillors representing the Epsom and Ewell area rather than forming another separately elected council.

But they would still constitute another public body. They could seek funding from East Surrey Council during their first year and thereafter would have the power to levy a precept through Council Tax. The Borough Council's report suggested that the average Band D charge imposed by existing Charter Trustee bodies is about £2.50 a year.

That may sound modest. The more important question is one of principle and accountability. Residents rejected two new parish councils carrying separate precepts. They may nevertheless find another precepting body created to preserve civic arrangements after the borough council is abolished.

There may be a respectable case for maintaining the mayoralty and Epsom and Ewell's civic identity. But if residents are to pay for it, however small the initial sum, they are entitled to be consulted and told clearly what the body will cost, what it will do and how its spending will be controlled.

Three bodies where two once stood

The prospective structure can therefore be summarised simply.

Today, Epsom and Ewell has two principal councils: the borough and the county.

Tomorrow, it may have East Surrey Council in the middle, a Surrey strategic authority and mayor above it, and Charter Trustees below it.

Two bodies become three.

That does not necessarily mean three full tiers of service-delivering local government. Ministers and council leaders will no doubt insist upon that distinction. They will describe the mayoral authority as strategic and the Charter Trustees as

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ceremonial.

Technically, they would be right. From the resident's perspective, however, government is not simplified merely by giving every new layer a different description.

Residents will still want to know who is responsible for a decision. They may have to distinguish between East Surrey councillors acting as members of the unitary authority and some of those same councillors acting as Charter Trustees. On major strategic issues, they may have to determine whether responsibility rests with East Surrey Council, a Surrey mayor or central government.

If the objective was clearer accountability, the emerging structure risks producing the opposite.

Powers must be matched by money and accountability

There is a legitimate argument for devolution. Decisions about Surrey's transport, infrastructure, economy and housing may often be better made in Surrey than in Whitehall. A directly elected mayor could provide visible leadership and secure powers and funding which individual councils could not obtain alone.

But devolution must mean more than transferring obligations without sufficient money. West Surrey Shadow Authority leader Councillor Paul Follows is right to warn that local government cannot continue absorbing unfunded mandates.

Nor should devolution become a convenient name for rebuilding the hierarchy that reorganisation was supposed to dismantle.

If a Surrey mayor is necessary, ministers should explain why the strategic functions cannot be exercised jointly by the two unitary councils. If Charter Trustees are necessary, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council should explain why the civic functions cannot be preserved more simply and without another Council Tax precept.

Above all, the complete structure and its cost should be presented openly. Residents were asked to accept the disruption, expense and democratic upheaval of abolishing 12 councils on the promise of simpler and more efficient government.

They should not discover, piece by piece, that the promised single tier comes with another body above it and another below.

Local government reorganisation was sold as the removal of layers. Surrey now appears to be replacing them under new names.

That may be devolution. It may be reorganisation. It may even produce better government if it is properly designed and funded.

But nobody should call it simplification.

Tiers not shed for local government in Surrey after all....?

22 September 2026



Surrey's shadow authority leaders have insisted that devolution in the county must be "done right" after the government proposed beefed up new planning powers for mayors.

Proposals due to be published in the coming week would see mayors across England granted the authority to override councils on certain planning applications – giving them the same powers already held by the Mayor of London.

These "call in" powers would only apply to developments of more than 150 homes, more than 15,000 square metres of commercial space, or of buildings 30 metres or taller, the BBC has reported.

It comes amid widespread change to local government in Surrey, with two new unitary councils in East and West Surrey

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set to take over from the county council and 11 district councils next year.

But many figures in local government are calling for additional changes that would see the county get an overarching elected mayor covering the whole of Surrey.

East Surrey Shadow Authority leader Councillor Steve Wotton told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) he supports the creation of a mayor and welcomes the prospect of additional powers handed over from Westminster.

He said: “We have a national housing crisis, public transport leaves behind rural communities and is wholly centred around London, and there is great potential in the county’s own local economies.

“More power out of Westminster and closer to Surrey, with a mayor, can help tackle these issues if done right.”

Prime Minister Andy Burnham, who assumed office last month, has made regionalism one of his core missions in government.

Mr Burnham previously unveiled proposals to give regional mayors a share of income tax revenue as part of a broader devolution drive.

The upcoming planning changes could also see mayors given the power to grant “up front” development permission, although a government spokesperson said councils will still decide most planning applications.

Under current proposals, Surrey could see a foundation strategic authority (FSA) set up from April 2027, which would allow the two new unitary councils to pool resources on certain service areas.

An FSA serves as a stepping stone towards the creation of a mayoral combined authority, which would involve the creation of a directly elected mayor of Surrey.

Councillor Wotton added: “It will be important that a future mayor works very closely with the two new councils in Surrey.

“We look forward to seeing further detail from government, so that we can help shape what is right for Surrey’s residents and businesses.”

West Surrey Shadow Authority leader Councillor Paul Follows told the LDRS he is “very keen” to see more powers devolved to the county, but that “those powers need to come with the funding to make them meaningful”.

He added: “Local government at every level cannot absorb more un-funded mandates.

“Mayors make sense in some parts of the UK but not all, and I hope that the government will be open to working with local government to develop the most appropriate plans for each area rather than a one-size-fits-all option.”

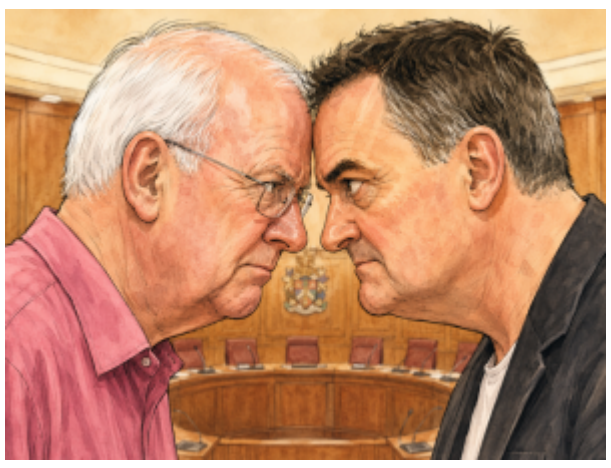
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Epsom & Ewell Council refuses to explain complaints disparity

22 September 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has refused to answer detailed questions about the apparent disparity between its

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vigorous pursuit of a complaint made by Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) and its handling of complaints made against him.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked a series of specific questions concerning the Council's decision to send a complaint against Labour councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) to a formal hearing, the involvement of Monitoring Officer Piero Ionta, the composition and powers of the proposed Hearing Panel and the progress of complaints against Cllr Dallen.

The Council responded within 45 minutes with a single paragraph.

A Council spokesperson said:

"As a matter of principle, the Council does not comment on allegations or complaints concerning individual elected members. Any such matters are considered in accordance with the Council's standards procedures and applicable confidentiality requirements."

That response did not answer any of EET's questions.

Many did not seek comment on the truth of allegations against individual councillors. They concerned the Council's procedures, constitutional powers, management of possible conflicts and the legal basis for conducting an entire hearing in private.

The refusal leaves unanswered who referred the complaint against Cllr Ames to a hearing, whether that person had authority to do so, whether the Council's Independent Person was consulted and why councillors involved in the original dispute have been selected to judge it.

It also leaves the Council unable or unwilling to demonstrate that complaints against Cllr Dallen are being treated with the same urgency as the complaint he made against an opposition Labour councillor.

The Dallen complaint against Ames

Cllr Dallen complained about Cllr Ames following the Strategy and Resources Committee meeting of 27 January.

Cllr Ames repeatedly questioned the secrecy surrounding an urgent decision making up to £500,000 available for work at the Rainbow Leisure Centre. The decision had been taken by officers in consultation with Cllr Dallen, who supported keeping it confidential and then chaired the meeting at which it was questioned.

Cllr Ames asked who had decided that the public interest in withholding the document outweighed the public interest in its publication.

Cllr Dallen and the Monitoring Officer repeatedly referred instead to the separate procedure for excluding the press and public if confidential information needed to be discussed during the meeting.

Cllr Ames was not asking to discuss the confidential information. His question was why the document had already been withheld and whether the required public-interest assessment had been undertaken.

The failure to identify and answer that distinction drove the confrontation.

What was really a point of order

The sequence in which the exchange deteriorated is important.

Cllr Ames first questioned Cllr Dallen's understanding of the procedures and attempted to continue asking who had made the confidentiality decision.

Cllr Dallen then brought the discussion to an end, saying:

"It does say in the Constitution that this is the chairman's meeting, and the Chairman has decided there's going to be no further discussion."

Only after that assertion did Cllr Ames call him arrogant:

"I've never known such an arrogant man in all my life, you're completely out of your depth, you are completely out of your depth."

Cllr Dallen then said:

"Councillor Ames, it is my meeting, I am Chairman of this meeting."

Cllr Ames responded by accusing him of "more cover-up and more cover-up".

The sequence does not excuse Cllr Ames's descent into personal criticism. But it contradicts any simplified account in which an unprovoked insult caused the chair to assert his authority. Cllr Dallen had already described the committee as "the chairman's meeting" and announced that questioning would cease.

Underneath the anger was an obvious procedural issue.

Cllr Dallen had participated in approving the urgent decision, supported its confidential treatment and was then chairing the committee while members questioned those actions. The appropriate issue was whether his involvement meant that he should relinquish the chair to the vice-chair for that item, allowing the questions to be considered by someone not personally connected with the decision.

Neither protagonist handled that issue properly.

Cllr Ames should have stopped, expressly raised a point of order and asked the Monitoring Officer for a ruling on whether Cllr Dallen should relinquish the chair. Instead, he personalised the dispute by attacking Cllr Dallen's competence and character.

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Cllr Dallen should have recognised that his own involvement was the subject of the questioning. Instead of characterising the committee as his meeting and using his authority to end scrutiny of his own conduct, he should have referred the point to the Monitoring Officer and invited the vice-chair to preside while it was resolved.

The Monitoring Officer should also have recognised the conflict-management question and advised on it. He did not.

The confrontation was therefore not simply a case of one councillor disrespecting a blameless chairman. It resulted from the failure of Cllr Ames, Cllr Dallen and the Council's legal adviser to identify and deal appropriately with the procedural issue sitting in plain sight.

Only one of them is now facing a formal standards hearing.

Ames acknowledges his mistake

Cllr Ames subsequently told EET that he regretted calling Cllr Dallen arrogant. He said he should instead have raised a formal point of order challenging Cllr Dallen's continued chairmanship of the item.

That acknowledgement goes directly to the distinction between the legitimate issue and the inappropriate way in which it was pursued.

Cllr Dallen nevertheless submitted a Code of Conduct complaint on 11 February, alleging disrespect and bullying.

Independent investigators appointed by the Council recommended that Cllr Ames be found to have breached the requirement to treat other councillors with respect.

Their report concluded that his personal criticism, allegations of a cover-up and repeated interruptions went beyond acceptable political debate.

But it also made findings which place his conduct in a more complicated context.

The investigators accepted that Cllr Ames was pursuing "a genuinely held, good faith argument" about transparency and access to information. They found that he was not engaged in a calculated or malicious attack and recognised that political speech attracts enhanced protection.

They expressly declined to decide whether his questions were legally and procedurally correct.

"It is not within the scope of this investigation to comment on any of the concerns highlighted by Councillor Ames during the meeting," the report stated.

The investigation therefore examined how Cllr Ames challenged Cllr Dallen and the Monitoring Officer, but not whether his challenge was substantively justified.

Nor did it investigate whether Cllr Dallen's insistence that it was the chairman's meeting, his termination of questions about a decision in which he had participated or his failure to relinquish the chair contributed to the disorder.

The report treats respect for "the authority of the Chair" as a consideration against Cllr Ames without examining whether the authority of the chair was itself being exercised properly.

Who referred it to a hearing?

The complaint is now due to be considered by a Standards Hearing Sub-Committee on 22 September.

There is, however, a fundamental uncertainty over how it arrived there.

The Council's scheme of delegation states:

"Determination of complaints referred by an Investigating Officer regarding alleged breaches of the councillors' Code of Conduct shall be delegated to Hearing Panels."

Democratic Services told Cllr Ames:

"The hearing has been convened following receipt of the Investigating Officer's Report into the Code of Conduct complaint."

It continued:

"In accordance with the Council's arrangements, the determination of complaints referred by an Investigating Officer regarding alleged breaches of the Councillors' Code of Conduct shall be delegated to a Hearing Panel."

In this case, the Investigating Officer was the external investigator who wrote the report.

The report recommends that Cllr Ames be found in breach. It does not expressly recommend or direct that the complaint be referred to a Hearing Panel.

That distinction may be important.

The Council's Constitution gives the Monitoring Officer broad authority over Code of Conduct matters except for decisions reserved to a Hearing Panel or another decision-making body. But the specific delegation to Hearing Panels appears to apply to complaints "referred by an Investigating Officer".

If those words establish a mandatory gateway, the question is whether the external investigator actually made such a referral. The Monitoring Officer cannot necessarily substitute himself for the Investigating Officer or silently supply a procedural step which the Constitution assigns to someone else.

There may be an answer. The Council might argue that a report recommending a finding of breach necessarily constitutes an implied referral. It might identify a separate written decision by the external investigator which has not been included

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in the report supplied to Cllr Ames.

But the Council has declined to say.

EET asked who made the referral, when it was made, where it was recorded and under which constitutional power. The Council's blanket response does not identify any decision or decision-maker.

This was not a request to prejudge the allegation. It was a request for proof that the body proposing to judge it had been properly convened.

Report arrived after hearing invitation

The procedural uncertainty is compounded by the Council's communications with Cllr Ames.

On 7 August, Democratic Services sent an invitation to the proposed Hearing Panel. It did not identify Cllr Ames as the subject member in the body of the invitation.

When he replied that he did not know what the hearing concerned and would not attend, Democratic Services responded:

"For the avoidance of doubt, you are the subject of the Standards Hearing Sub-Committee."

Cllr Ames says that was the first time he had been told expressly that the complaint was proceeding to a hearing.

He had not received the final investigation report. The investigator subsequently attributed this to a "communication breakdown" between himself and the Council's legal services team.

Instead of acknowledging that failure and apologising, the Council adopted a tone which implied that Cllr Ames should already have understood the position.

Cllr Ames has asked who decided to refer the case, on whose recommendation and under what policy. No substantive answer is contained in the correspondence supplied to EET.

Monitoring Officer was involved in original dispute

The position of Monitoring Officer Piero Ionta creates a separate concern.

Mr Ionta attended the January meeting and gave advice supporting Cllr Dallen during the disputed exchange. It was the adequacy and correctness of that advice which Cllr Ames was challenging.

The Monitoring Officer also failed to identify and advise upon the underlying question of whether Cllr Dallen should relinquish the chair while his own part in the urgent decision was being questioned.

The independent investigation was subsequently commissioned on the Monitoring Officer's behalf.

Employing an external investigator does not necessarily remove an apparent conflict if the Monitoring Officer defines the remit, supplies the evidence, receives the report, manages the procedure and controls what happens next.

The external report placed the legal and procedural correctness of the Monitoring Officer's advice outside its scope. It then recommended a finding against the councillor who challenged that advice.

EET asked why Mr Ionta did not withdraw from managing the complaint and whether an unconnected monitoring officer from another authority had been considered. These are questions about institutional impartiality, not the merits of the complaint against Cllr Ames.

The Council declined to answer them.

A participant proposed as judge

The proposed panel consists of Cllrs **John Beckett** (RA Auriol), **Alan Williamson** (RA West Ewell) and **Julian Freeman** (LibDem College), with Cllr **Rachel King** (RA Town) named as reserve.

Cllr Beckett is scheduled to chair it.

But Cllr Beckett participated in the January exchange which the panel will be required to assess.

When Cllr Ames questioned why the Rainbow information had been withheld, Cllr Beckett defended confidentiality on the basis that private companies would not want their financial information published. Cllr Dallen immediately told him that he was right.

Cllr Beckett's intervention is quoted in the independent investigation report.

This does not prove that he has predetermined whether Cllr Ames breached the Code. Nevertheless, appointing someone who participated in the underlying dispute to chair the subsequent disciplinary hearing creates an obvious appearance problem.

EET asked whether all panel members had confirmed that they had not predetermined the complaint and why Cllr Beckett had been selected despite his involvement.

The Council declined to answer.

Hearing behind closed doors

The Council has announced in advance that the hearing will not be webcast and that "all evidence shall be received and heard in exempt session".

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Some evidence about individual councillors may lawfully require protection. It does not follow that the whole hearing must be secret.

The incident occurred during a public meeting recorded on the Council's webcast. The complaint, the investigation and the proposed hearing concern the conduct of elected representatives performing public duties.

The Council has not identified which statutory exemption justifies excluding the public from the entire proceeding or whether the required public-interest assessment has been undertaken.

It has also declined to identify the sanctions constitutionally available to the panel if it finds a breach.

The Council's response invokes "applicable confidentiality requirements" without identifying what those requirements are or explaining why they prevent answers about jurisdiction, procedure and panel powers.

Complaints against Dallen

The contrast with complaints against Cllr Dallen is increasingly difficult to ignore.

Cllr Ames says that he made a complaint against Cllr Dallen arising from the same January meeting. Among other matters, it challenged Cllr Dallen's use of the chair to prevent continued scrutiny of a decision in which he had participated.

That complaint was rejected without an equivalent external investigation.

A complaint from a member of the public against Cllr Dallen was also reportedly rejected.

Cllr Ames has also made a complaint concerning Cllr Dallen's reported participation in a panel dealing with a complaint against the Chief Executive about the Rainbow Leisure Centre urgent decision.

His case is that Cllr Dallen's direct involvement in approving that decision created a conflict when he subsequently helped consider a complaint about the Chief Executive's account of it.

EET does not suggest that any complaint against Cllr Dallen must be upheld. Different complaints can properly receive different assessments and outcomes.

The issue is whether they have been examined with the same willingness to commit time and external resources as Cllr Dallen's complaint against Cllr Ames.

The Council could have answered that concern by publishing anonymised information about receipt dates, assessment dates, reasons for decisions and outcomes. Instead, it has invoked a blanket principle of silence.

Confidentiality or avoidance?

There are legitimate reasons for protecting information about unresolved complaints. Premature disclosure can damage reputations, discourage witnesses and undermine a fair investigation.

But confidentiality should protect the integrity of a process, not conceal whether a proper process exists.

EET did not ask the Council to decide publicly whether either Cllr Ames or Cllr Dallen had breached the Code. It asked:

- who exercised the power to refer the Ames complaint to a hearing;
- where that referral was recorded;
- whether the Independent Person was consulted;
- how the Monitoring Officer's involvement was managed;
- why a participant in the original incident was selected to chair the hearing;
- why the whole hearing was designated private in advance;
- what powers and sanctions the panel possesses; and
- how the Council ensures that complaints are prioritised consistently.

None of those questions required the Council to reveal confidential witness evidence or prejudge an allegation.

A response sent within 45 minutes which simply restates a policy of not commenting creates the impression that the Council did not attempt to distinguish questions about confidential merits from questions about public governance.

Standards or selective discipline?

The case against Cllr Ames is not fabricated. His language became personal and intemperate. An independent investigator has provided reasoned grounds for finding that it breached the Code.

But that is only one side of what happened.

Before Cllr Ames called Cllr Dallen arrogant, the chair had already declared that it was "the chairman's meeting" and terminated further discussion of an issue involving his own earlier decision. After the insult, he intensified the same assertion with the words: "It is my meeting."

Cllr Ames failed to convert his legitimate concern into the formal point of order it should have been. Cllr Dallen failed to recognise that the proper response was to obtain a ruling and consider relinquishing the chair to the vice-chair. The

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Monitoring Officer failed to guide either of them towards that procedure.

Yet only Cllr Ames's failure has been externally investigated and sent towards a disciplinary hearing.

The legitimacy of any finding against him depends upon the legitimacy of the process used to determine it.

A Council cannot demand meticulous respect for standards from an opposition councillor while treating its own compliance with constitutional gateways, impartial adjudication and transparent decision-making as matters upon which it will say nothing.

Nor can confidentiality be allowed to make unequal treatment impossible to test.

Different complaints can properly have different outcomes. A pattern of different outcomes does not prove political bias. But where a complaint by Cllr Dallen against a Labour opposition councillor receives an external investigation and formal hearing while complaints against Cllr Dallen are rejected or apparently progress no further, the Council must provide enough procedural information to demonstrate that the difference results from evidence and established criteria rather than identity or influence.

The unanswered question is no longer merely whether Cllr Ames spoke disrespectfully to Cllr Dallen. It is whether EEBC has constructed a fair and constitutionally valid process for deciding that question, while applying the same standards to the person whose conduct and chairmanship provoked the dispute.

By refusing to answer, the Council has not protected public confidence in its standards regime. It has deepened the doubts surrounding it.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Epsom Council chamber walk-out: a postscript

22 September 2026



The procedural controversy at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council did not end when 11 councillors walked out of the Council Chamber on 21 July in protest at the Mayor's ruling in favour of her father participating in a debate on the development of Council owned Hook Road arena, where his annual fireworks display is held.

Since Epsom and Ewell Times's (EET) report, "Fireworks at Epsom Council spark walk-out", further exchanges with Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA, Town) and the Mayor, Councillor **Lucie McIntyre** (RA, West Ewell), have raised questions about accountability, consistency and the proper boundary between robust scrutiny and personal abuse.

An interview made a condition of answering

Before the earlier publication, EET sent Cllr Dallen straightforward written questions about his position as a director of Epsom Fireworks Display Limited, the company's agreement to hire the Council-owned Hook Road Arena, and whether he has ever received remuneration, expenses or another financial benefit through the company. After five days Cllr Dallen did not reply before publication.

After the publication he made an interview a condition of responding: "I do not intend to answer them *(the questions)* in isolation but if you wish to meet and discuss the firework display, how it is organised, who benefits etc. I would be very happy to meet you either face to face or online."

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EET explained that its settled news-gathering policy is to conduct enquiries by email. This creates an exact, contemporaneous record of the questions asked and answers given and protects reporters, contributors and those being interviewed against later disagreement about what was said. This policy has been expressly approved by EET's regulator IMPRESS. Furthermore, as volunteers we do not have the time to give and Cllr Dallen is no exception to our method. EET would welcome for publication an article about the history of the Epsom fireworks, an annual event that has been a staple of community life in the Borough since 1971.

Cllr Dallen replied: "*I can see no point in responding*. Perhaps you need to consider taking out insurance or getting agreement to record meetings."

For clarity, Cllr Dallen did not decline an interview. He required one before he would answer. EET declined that condition and renewed its invitation to answer in writing. No substantive response has followed.

Cllr Dallen is under no general legal obligation to answer questions from a newspaper. His decision not to answer proves neither payment nor wrongdoing. EET nevertheless considers the questions proper and relevant to the public controversy.

In particular, the question remains unanswered:

As a director, does Cllr Dallen receive, or has he ever received, fees, expenses or any other financial benefit from Epsom Fireworks Display Limited?

Gain is not the only possible interest

At the 21st July Council meeting, Cllr Dallen declared that he was a director and trustee connected with the fireworks display, but said he did not have a pecuniary interest in the Hook Road proposal.

It is possible that he reached that conclusion in good faith because the motion sought to advance development which might ultimately bring the annual firework display to an end rather than produce a gain for him.

A pecuniary interest, however, is not confined to the prospect of making money from the decision. An existing financial interest may also be adversely affected and that would constitute a "*pecuniary interest*"

Moreover, EEBC's Members' Code of Conduct includes among disclosable pecuniary interests a contract between the Council and an incorporated body of which the councillor is a director, where goods or services are to be provided and the contract has not been fully discharged. Epsom Fireworks Display Limited had an agreement to hire Hook Road Arena for the November 2026 display.

The Code says that, where a matter "directly relates" to such an interest, the councillor must disclose it, take no part in the discussion or vote and leave the room unless granted a dispensation.

That leaves an important question of application. Did a motion merely making development of the Arena a strategic priority "directly relate" to the existing fireworks-hire contract? The motion did not itself cancel that agreement or approve a particular development. There is consequently room for legal argument.

But the existence of a company contract is relevant independently of whether Cllr Dallen receives directors' fees. An answer about remuneration would still help establish whether his directorship also falls within the separate category of an office carried on for "profit or gain" and would allow the public to understand the full nature of his interest.

It remains a question Cllr Dallen has chosen not to answer.

The Mayor's full statement

EET also asked Cllr McIntyre why she did not formally disclose that Cllr Dallen is her father and why she did not invite the Deputy Mayor to chair the dispute over his participation.

The Council supplied the following statement on her behalf: "I was elected Mayor this year and, as you will read in my biography on the Council website, the commitment my father, Councillor Dallen, demonstrates in helping others is one of the things that inspired me to serve my community by becoming a councillor, and now Mayor. I am perfectly able to chair a meeting in my capacity as Mayor when my father is in attendance. At the Full Council meeting on 21 July, Councillor Dallen declared that he did not have a pecuniary interest in the item concerning Hook Road Arena, which was his right."

The original report summarised the first part and reproduced the final two sentences verbatim, these being the part directly addressing the question. The Council subsequently insisted that the entire statement should appear, saying that editing it had altered its meaning.

EET therefore publishes it above in full.

The additional passage undoubtedly supplies context. It also expressly records Cllr McIntyre's admiration for her father and the influence he has had upon her own public life. Readers may consider that this reinforces, rather than dispels, the appearance of a conflict when she chaired rulings determining whether he could remain, speak and move the motion.

The issue is not whether a mayor can ordinarily chair a meeting attended by a parent. It is whether she should have continued to chair the particular dispute over that parent's interests, without formally disclosing the relationship and when the Deputy Mayor was available.

Cllr McIntyre's statement does not answer that question.

In requesting publication of the full quotation, the Council's communications team added: "We value our working relationship with local media and always respond to enquiries in good faith, with the expectation that comments will be represented accurately."

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This was not an express threat to end cooperation with EET. In its context, however, the reference to the working relationship could be read as placing institutional weight behind the request. A constructive relationship between a council and the local press must permit fair editing, difficult questions and disagreement over what is relevant. It cannot depend upon every supplied statement being published in full.

Was there “hate” in the chamber?

At the conclusion of the Hook Road debate, Cllr Dallen said: “We, as a council, made a motion about Debate Not Hate, and I think we need to remind ourselves about that.”

EEBC unanimously adopted its Debate Not Hate motion in July 2023. It committed the Council to challenging abuse and intimidation while encouraging healthy political debate.

The campaign was never intended to make councillors immune from criticism. When the East Surrey Shadow Authority recently supported the same Local Government Association campaign, councillors emphasised that they expected their decisions to be questioned and that there was a fundamental difference between robust disagreement and personal abuse. As one councillor put it: “We should challenge each other’s policies, question decisions, and hold one another to account.” Read EET’s report.

EET has reviewed the transcript of the Hook Road exchange. It records repeated procedural objections, interruptions, an adjournment and the walk-out. Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) called the Council “a joke”. Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) praised those opposition councillors who remained for showing a “mature side”, prompting Cllr **Chris Watson** (Labour Ewell Court) to defend the walk-out as a valid democratic act. Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) referred more generally to “cheap pop shots and remarks” and councillors feeling “mauled”.

Some of that language was sharp and the atmosphere was plainly heated. EET found no threat, discriminatory abuse, harassment or personal attack upon Cllr Dallen in the recorded Hook Road exchange of the kind at which Debate Not Hate is principally directed. The objections concerned whether he was entitled to participate and whether the correct procedure had been followed.

It is therefore fair to ask what Cllr Dallen intended by invoking Debate Not Hate. If it was directed at those procedural objections, it risked treating scrutiny as abuse and turning a campaign designed to protect democratic participation into a means of discouraging it.

“Debate Not Hate” cannot sensibly mean “debate, but no uncomfortable questions”. The campaign protects councillors against intimidation; it does not release them from accountability.

Cllr Dallen may maintain that he had no pecuniary interest and was entitled to participate. Cllr McIntyre may maintain that she was capable of chairing impartially. Both are entitled to state those positions.

But accountability involves more than asserting that one is right. It includes answering reasonable questions, disclosing relationships relevant to public perception and permitting established rules to be tested without characterising the challenge itself as hate.

Whether the approaches taken here demonstrate consistency—or something closer to selective accountability—is a judgment readers can now make with the exchanges before them.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Related reports

- Fireworks at Epsom Council spark walk-out
- Why procedure matters—even in little old Epsom and Ewell
- Debate Not Hate says East Surrey Shadow Authority

How would you pronounce “WSASMC”?

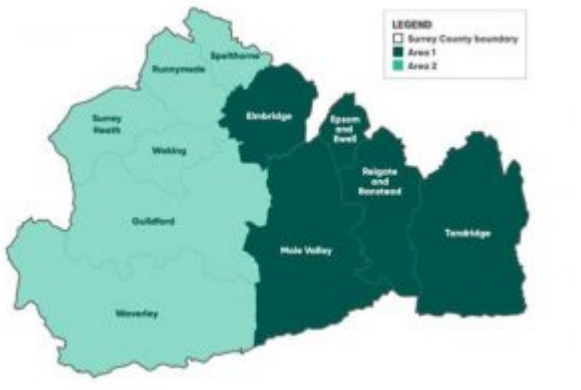
22 September 2026

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One of the first orders of business for the newly formed Liberal Democrat-run, £4billion indebted West Surrey Council – will be to seek to change its name.

A motion is being put forward by Spelthorne-based councillors to rebrand West Surrey Council into the catchily named West Surrey and South Middlesex Council (WSASMC).

Proposed by Councillor Harry Boparai the motion to the Thursday, July 30, West Surrey Shadow Authority calls on the council to ask the government to rebadge the new body before it formally comes into being.

Posting to Facebook he described it as the most important motion for Spelthorne in 50 years.

He said: “Yes this is about identity that has been brushed under the carpet since 1965 which is shameful.”

His motion reads: “It is important that the name of the new unitary authority accurately reflects the history and identity of the communities it serves.

“Unlike the rest of the new authority Spelthorne lies north of the River Thames and has been historically a part of Middlesex, not Surrey, for centuries.

“Indeed, the postal address of properties in Spelthorne remains Middlesex.

“This council resolves to ask the government to rename the West Surrey Authority as West Surrey and South Middlesex as this would more accurately reflect and respect the history and identity of all the communities it serves.

“It would also remind councillors, officers, and others on a daily basis of the existence of a part of the new authority on the other side of the River Thames.”

The timing comes just two days after West Surrey Council leader Cllr Paul Follows issued his vision for the future of West Surrey. It mentions West Surrey 18 times. It never once says South Middlesex.

Cllr Follows said: “It is our collective understanding that this motion has broad opposition support.”

Had the council waited until it formally took over, in April 2027, it would require a two-thirds majority of members to change its name.

Leader of the opposition, Cllr Jane Austin criticised the decision to push forward with the name change during the summer holidays, when many residents would be away.

She said: “It is extraordinary that the Liberal Democrats’ first major signal of intent for West Surrey Council is to debate changing its name rather than tackling the enormous challenges facing the new authority.

“They are attempting to push through a significant change without consulting the nearly 700,000 residents we have been elected to serve.

“Meanwhile, the real issues – integrating six councils, managing around £4.5 billion of inherited debt and ensuring the new authority is ready for Vesting Day – remain unaddressed, and councillors are still largely in the dark about the administration’s intentions.

“I understand why many people in Spelthorne feel strongly about their Middlesex heritage, but Spelthorne is one of six council areas that will form the new authority, and its name must represent everyone.

“West Surrey does exactly what it says on the tin.

“By contrast, the proposed alternative is cumbersome and is being advanced without first seeking the consent of the residents it would represent. Rather than bringing people together, it risks creating division from day one.”

“In my view, it is outrageous that the Liberal Democrats are prioritising rebranding over building a council that is financially secure, well run and focused on delivering for residents.”

East Surrey Council has no plans to change its name.

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

Image: Surrey East West. (Credit: Elmbridge Borough Council) Permission for use.

Debate not hate says East Surrey shadow authority

22 September 2026

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East Surrey councillors shared their experience of facing intimidation and harassment from voters as they debated a motion calling for civility in political discourse.

At a meeting of the full shadow authority, several members recalled facing extreme vitriol from members of the public and implored councillors and voters to engage respectfully.

It came as councillors debated a motion supporting the Local Government Association's (LGA) 'Debate Not Hate' campaign, which aims to tackle growing abuse against local politicians.

Introducing the motion, Councillor Kirsty Hewens (Liberal Democrats: Walton South & Oatlands) said: "This motion is not about stifling or sanitising debate. We all know there is a fundamental difference between robust political disagreement and personal abuse.

"What matters is how we conduct those debates."

She added: "As councillors, we expect to be challenged. And we should be. Residents have every right to question our decisions, disagree with us and hold us to account."

However, she said there is a line between this and growing volumes of abuse directed towards councillors and officers from the public.

"This behaviour discourages good people from standing for public office," Councillor Hewens said.

Other shadow authority councillors shared their own first hand accounts of receiving intimidation and harassment from voters.

Councillor Shelly Newton (Conservative: Tadworth, Walton & Kingswood) told councillors the authority's Conservative group would support the motion, saying: "Politics is about ideas. We should challenge each other's policies, question decisions, and hold one another to account.

"That's what our residents expect us to do. That's why they elected us. But there is a clear line between challenging someone's views and attacking the person behind them."

She added that in her two years as a councillor, she had received inappropriate messages and experienced harassment that resulted in police involvement.

"While canvassing I was grabbed, pulled into a resident's home, and had my way blocked out by the resident who then shouted at me about national politics," she added.

An LGA survey found that seven in 10 councillors across the country have reported experiencing abuse or intimidation in the past year.

The East Surrey motion threw the shadow council's support behind the LGA's campaign and called for the authority to commit to "fostering a culture where political debate is encouraged, but personal abuse, intimidation, discrimination and harassment are never tolerated".

Councillor Andrew Matthews (Liberal Democrats: Bookham & Fetcham West) added: "As I'm sure many of us have experienced, we've had threats of violence. I've been threatened with being punched in the face. I've had people stalk me. I'm not alone."

Seconding the motion, Councillor Elly Heaton (Green Party: Redhill West & Meadvale) thanked the councillors for sharing their stories, calling them a "disappointingly relatable experience".

The LGA's campaign also noted that more than half of councillors have reported being victims of misinformation.

The organisation's website says: "The increasing level of abuse and intimidation aimed at local politicians is preventing elected members from representing the communities they serve, deterring individuals from standing for election and undermining local democracy."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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Image: Councillors debate the motion (Credit: East Surrey Shadow Authority)

Burnham 'commitment' to Surrey devolution

22 September 2026

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East Surrey's shadow council leader has welcomed Andy Burnham's "strong commitment" to devolution as Surrey continues to take steps that could see the county get its own elected mayor.

Speaking at a meeting of the full shadow council, Councillor Steve Wotton (Liberal Democrats: Horley West, Salfords & Sidlow) congratulated the new Prime Minister and wished him "every success".

"I plan to write to him in due course to set out our plans for East Surrey Council, and update him on the progress we're making," he added.

Councillor Wotton told councillors the government has confirmed its intention to bring forward a Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA) for Surrey from April 2027 – pending local consultations and ministerial approval.

This would mean that the new West Surrey and East Surrey councils could pool resources and work together on certain key strategic issues, such as transport and economic development.

"We continue to see a strong commitment from government for the devolution agenda," Councillor Wotton said.

"Following the recent appointment of Andy Burnham as prime minister, the government has reiterated its ambition to transfer more power and responsibilities and funding away from Whitehall and into local areas."

An FSA would also serve as a stepping stone towards the potential creation of a mayoral authority – which would create a directly elected mayor for all of Surrey.

Councillor Wotton said an FSA would give Surrey a "clear route" into that next phase of devolution, adding that failure to embrace it would "risk leaving Surrey outside the main direction of travel".

East Surrey and West Surrey shadow authorities are currently tasked with setting up their respective councils ahead of assuming full responsibility of local government services in April 2027.

At that point, Surrey County Council and the county's 11 district councils will all be abolished. Elections to the shadow authorities took place in May 2026.

Councillor David Lewis (Conservative: Cobham & Oxshott South) welcomed the move towards an FSA and said the shadow authority's Conservative group supports its foundation.

"We believe that the additional devolved powers and funding that would come with a mayoral strategic authority would be beneficial for the residents of Surrey," he said.

"Directly elected mayors have brought an additional focus to their areas, which has resulted in higher levels of economic growth."

Councillor Jonathan Essex (Green Party: Redhill East & North Earlswood) said the authority's Green group supported the FSA creation "in principle", but questioned why mayoral devolution had not been fast-tracked to Surrey.

"We were told by Surrey County Council in very early 2025 we would be fast-tracked to be new unitaries in Surrey on the basis this would enable a mayoral authority to be created," he said.

Addressing these concerns, Councillor Wotton said he is "more confident now" of the government's commitment to Surrey's devolution under Andy Burnham's premiership.

"But fundamentally this is about moving us forward on a journey towards devolution", he added. "It does not guarantee a mayor, but it the first step necessary to achieve a mayor."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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Image: Councillor Steve Wotton

Fireworks at Epsom Council spark walk-out

22 September 2026

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Eleven councillors walked out of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council after the Mayor ruled that her father could remain in the chamber and lead a debate on the future of land hired by a company of which he is a director.

Despite the upheaval, the Council agreed on Tuesday 21st July to give strategic priority to the potential development of sports facilities and housing at Hook Road Arena.

The decision does not approve development. It elevates the Council-owned, 14-hectare site between Chessington Road and Horton Lane to one of EEBC's strategic priorities for its final months before abolition in April 2027.

A feasibility study will examine whether housing on part of the Arena could finance playing pitches and other sports and recreation facilities. Up to £250,000 has already been allocated from the Council's Corporate Projects Reserve.

Consultants are expected to be appointed by the end of August, with the study intended to be completed before EEBC's functions transfer to the new East Surrey Council on 1st April 2027.

However, the merits of the proposal were overshadowed by a bitter dispute over the participation of Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA, Town), chair of the Council's Strategy and Resources Committee.

Fireworks company hires Council land

Cllr Dallen is a director of Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd and a trustee of the associated Epsom Fireworks Display Charitable Trust.

The company contracts with EEBC to hire Hook Road Arena for its annual fireworks display. It has done so since between 2019 to 2021 after taking over from the local scouts that had organised the annual event since 1971. The company has a further agreement with the Council for the November 2026 event.

The company has just three directors. Two of those directors are two of the four trustees of the charity that distributes its income to scouting groups and other worthy charitable causes.

Development of the Arena could eventually bring the fireworks display at that location to an end.

At the beginning of the ordinary Council meeting, Cllr Dallen declared that he was a director and trustee of the fireworks organisations and that the Arena was used for the display.

He also disclosed that he had met representatives of Epsom and Ewell Football Club and the borough's netball club concerning their proposals for the site.

Cllr Dallen told the meeting that he had never expressed a view for or against their plans and was "confident that I have an unbiased and open mind".

When the Hook Road item was reached, he proposed that development of the Arena be made a strategic priority.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent, Ruxley) immediately raised a point of order. He said Cllr Dallen had treated the same connection as a conflict on two previous occasions when Hook Road Arena was discussed by the Strategy and Resources Committee.

Cllr Dallen disputed Cllr Coley's account. He said he had not left the room at the earlier meetings, although on one occasion he had not voted.

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative, Horton) supported Cllr Coley's objection. She said the conflict had caused controversy at both previous meetings and asked for a ruling from the Council's Monitoring Officer.

The legal officer advising the meeting said Cllr Dallen had declared his connection and had self-declared that it was not a pecuniary interest. The officer said that where a member decided that an interest was not pecuniary, participation was a matter for that member's discretion.

Cllr Coley tried to point out that Companies House registered Cllr Dallen as a director of Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd and that the company had a financial relationship with the Council.

Mayor Cllr **Lucie McIntyre** (RA, West Ewell) repeatedly instructed him to stop speaking and sit down.

She ruled that it was for Cllr Dallen to decide whether his interest was pecuniary and said councillors who disagreed could pursue the relevant complaints procedures after the meeting.

After further objections, the Mayor adjourned proceedings. When councillors returned, she announced that Cllr Dallen had confirmed that he did not consider his interest pecuniary and would continue to participate.

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Eleven councillors then walked out of the chamber.

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative, Horton) put on record his view that “this council is a joke”.

Cllr **Chris Watson** (Labour, Ewell Court) remained but later defended the absent councillors, saying their walkout was “a perfectly valid democratic process”.

Mayor was ruling on her father

It was not disclosed to the meeting or to members of the public that Mayor Cllr Lucie McIntyre is Cllr Dallen’s daughter.

It does not follow that being Cllr Dallen’s daughter automatically gave the Mayor a disclosable pecuniary interest of her own under the Localism Act. The statutory definition generally extends to a councillor and their spouse, civil partner or person with whom they live as a partner—not to an adult parent or child.

Nevertheless, Cllr McIntyre was making contested procedural rulings about whether her father could remain, speak, propose the recommendation and vote.

No suggestion is made that the family relationship necessarily disqualified her from chairing the whole meeting. However, declaring it would have enabled councillors and the public to assess openly whether the Deputy Mayor (Cllr **Julie Morris** Independent College) should have ruled upon this particular dispute.

EET asked the Mayor why she did not disclose that Cllr Dallen is her father or invite the Deputy Mayor to chair the objection to his participation and the item. After referring to her reference in her Council website biography to the inspiration her father gave her to be a Councillor she responded: “I am perfectly able to chair a meeting in my capacity as Mayor when my father is in attendance. At the Full Council meeting on 21 July, Councillor Dallen declared that he did not have a pecuniary interest in the item concerning Hook Road Arena, which was his right.”

EET asked the Council’s legal adviser if his legal advice took account of the live company-council contract and the statutory contracts category in the 2012 Regulations? And whether any formal dispensation was granted to Dallen to participate, and whether an external Monitoring Officer will be asked to review the matter?

A Council spokesperson responded: “*At the meeting of the Full Council on 21 July, Councillor Dallen declared that he did not have a pecuniary interest in the item concerning Hook Road Arena. There are no plans to review this*.”

Five sources allege history of obstruction

Cllr Dallen’s public advocacy of the Hook Road project also contrasts with accounts given privately to Epsom and Ewell Times (EET) about his earlier approach.

Three councillors belonging to Cllr Dallen’s own Residents’ Association group and two sources closely connected with Epsom and Ewell Football Club have independently told EET that he repeatedly impeded progress on proposals for the Arena.

The sources allege that proposals were pushed “from pillar to post” and from one committee or process to another, causing avoidable delay.

Cllr Dallen has also been quoted by more than one source as saying, while discussing the future of the Arena: “I want the fireworks four more years.”

The sources asked not to be named because of their continuing political or organisational relationships. EET knows their identities and considers each to be in a position to have direct knowledge of the events described.

Their accounts do not, by themselves, prove that every delay resulted from Cllr Dallen’s intervention or that any intervention was motivated by the interests of the fireworks company. Large developments involving Green Belt, restrictive covenants, sports bodies, housing and Council land inevitably pass through several stages.

Nevertheless, the consistency of the accounts raises a legitimate question about why a councillor alleged to have resisted or delayed the proposals behind the scenes emerged at Full Council as their proposer and public champion. Was he seeking to publicly erase perceptions that he had been the cause of previous delays?

Cllr Dallen told the meeting that he wanted the work concluded quickly and, ideally, before EEBC ceased to exist, although he acknowledged that this might not be possible.

EET has asked Cllr Dallen to respond to the allegations that he previously delayed the project, to confirm whether he said he wanted the fireworks to continue for four more years, and to explain what caused his apparent change of approach.

At the time of publication, Cllr Dallen had not responded.

What do the fireworks accounts reveal?

Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd’s latest micro-entity accounts show turnover of £109,324 for the year ending 30th April 2025.

Almost the entire amount—£108,890—is placed under the single expenditure heading “cost of materials”, leaving a profit of £434.

The company accounts state that it had no employees, but do not break down the £108,890. They do not separately identify the cost of fireworks, Arena hire, insurance, event services, charitable donations, directors’ remuneration or directors’ expenses.

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Accounts filed by the associated charitable trust show total income of £48,623 during the same year, including a £41,250 donation from Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd.

The Charity Commission register states that the charity's trustees receive no remuneration, payments or benefits from the charity. That does not answer the separate question of whether anyone receives payment or expenses from the limited company.

The company's accounts neither establish that its directors were paid nor prove that they were not. The donation to the charity must form part of the £108,890 wrongly described as all being "cost of materials".

Companies House identifies Cllr Dallen as one of four directors. It names another director, **Anthony Williams** FCCA (Fellow of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants)**,** as the company's only registered person with significant control. Cllr Dallen's directorship therefore does not, without further information, establish that he owns or controls the company. It is a company limited by guarantee with no share capital.

EET has asked Cllr Dallen whether he receives any remuneration, expenses or other financial benefit from Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd.

At the time of publication, no response had been received.

The legal question

The Localism Act 2011 prevents a councillor with a disclosable pecuniary interest from participating in a discussion or vote unless a dispensation has been granted. A beach is a criminal offence.

The prescribed interests include an "employment, office, trade, profession or vocation carried on for profit or gain", together with specified contractual, property and ownership interests.

Whether Cllr Dallen's directorship falls within that statutory definition may therefore depend upon facts not revealed by the micro-entity accounts—including whether his office as director is carried on for profit or gain and whether he has a beneficial interest in the company.

The existence of a statutory interest is not ultimately determined by whether a councillor personally "feels" that an interest exists. Members must initially assess and declare their own position, but whether the legal test is satisfied is an objective question of fact and law.

The legislation is preventive. If a disclosable pecuniary interest exists, the prohibition applies regardless of whether the councillor supports or opposes the proposal and regardless of whether the councillor believes that he has an open mind. An ongoing contractual relationship is a disclosable interest regardless of any personal benefit.

There is a paradox in this case. Development could ultimately end the fireworks display at Hook Road Arena. Cllr Dallen was therefore advocating a process which may operate against, rather than in favour of, the future interests of the fireworks company and the charitable causes it supports..

That may be relevant when assessing his motivation and the seriousness of any alleged breach. It does not, by itself, determine whether the statutory definition of an interest was satisfied.

The Council's wider code of conduct and the appearance of bias are separate issues from the narrower statutory offence concerning disclosable pecuniary interests.

Rainbow row preceded ordinary meeting

The ordinary Council meeting followed an extraordinary meeting convened earlier that evening to debate the governance of the emerging Local Plan.

During that earlier meeting, Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour, Court) expressly referred to the controversy surrounding the Rainbow Leisure Centre.

Cllr Dallen had authorised an urgent and confidential Council decision making up to £500,000 available to address an unexpected dilapidations liability following the change of leisure-centre operator.

Cllr Ames told the extraordinary meeting that problems with the Rainbow contract had become apparent early and argued that an officer and urgent-decision process had been used to bypass democratic scrutiny.

Mayor Cllr McIntyre interrupted him twice and instructed him to return to the Local Plan motion.

Cllr Ames replied: "I really don't think it's for you to tell me what my speech is to be about, Madam Mayor. Absolutely not. If I think this is relevant, I will make this point. I will not be silenced."

He said the Rainbow affair formed part of a pattern in which procedural rules had been used to prevent councillors discussing matters for which they were responsible.

Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA, Ewell Village) subsequently described criticism of officers as "unconscionable" and said the opposition did not like the answers it received.

Sports shortage wins support

After the walkout from the later ordinary meeting, the councillors who remained overwhelmingly supported making Hook Road Arena a strategic priority.

Cllr **Peter O'Donovan** (RA, Ewell Court) said the borough had a severe shortage of sports pitches. He referred to 84

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junior football teams and said the netball club lacked a permanent base and was forced to hire facilities which could be withdrawn at short notice.

Cllr **Alison Kelly** (Lib Dem, Stamford) said residents frequently raised the shortage of accessible local sports facilities. She described the feasibility study as the first step towards evaluating the available options.

Cllr Clive Woodbridge said the site had “tremendous potential” as a sporting hub but stressed that the Council was not approving the details of development.

Cllr **Jan Mason** (RA, Ruxley) supported further investigation but warned against simply stamping through a large scheme without careful consideration of the surrounding homes and existing open land.

Council papers acknowledge substantial obstacles. The Arena is in the Green Belt and a 1975 deed restricts its use largely to open space and recreation unless Surrey County Council consents.

Any housing would also depend upon the emerging Local Plan. Development beyond the feasibility stage would require a separate business case and further decisions, some of which would require the consent of the new East Surrey authority.

The recommendation was carried without a recorded numerical vote.

Cllr Dallen ended the debate by reminding councillors that EEBC had adopted a “debate, not hate” motion.

The Council’s decision means the future of Hook Road Arena will now advance as a formal strategic priority. Whether the dispute over Cllr Dallen’s participation also advances through the Council’s standards process—or to the police under the Localism Act—remains to be seen.

After the meeting Cllr **Steven McCormick** (Conservative and former prominent RA – Woodcote and Langley) said

“To put this forward now is too little, too late. This council had a prime opportunity over many years to clear the path for enhanced sports facilities at Hook Road Arena, yet proposals were repeatedly shuffled from committee to committee while time ran out.”

He added “Instead of proactive leadership when it could have made a real difference, we are left with a last-minute scramble just months before council abolition. Residents and sports clubs were forced to wait years for progress; they deserve to know why momentum was continually blocked until the eleven-hour mark.”

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Why procedure matters, even in little old Epsom and Ewell

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Nobody seriously disputes that developing Hook Road Arena as a centre for community sport, supported where necessary by housing, deserves proper investigation.

The proposal enjoyed overwhelming support. Had almost any councillor moved it at the meeting of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 21st July, it would have passed comfortably and probably without drama.

Yet the debate produced an adjournment, angry exchanges and the walkout of 11 councillors—including, it appears, at least one member of the ruling Residents' Association group.

Why?

The answer cannot lie in opposition to the proposal itself. Most, if not all, of those who walked out supported giving Hook Road Arena strategic priority. Their protest concerned the process by which the decision was being made and, more particularly, the identity of the councillor who was permitted to present himself as its principal champion.

That distinction matters.

Procedure is not an inconvenience

There is a temptation, particularly where the desired outcome appears uncontroversial, to dismiss procedural objections as political gamesmanship.

Why worry about who proposed the motion if it was going to pass anyway? Why interrupt an important debate about desperately needed sports facilities with arguments about interests, declarations and who should occupy the chair?

The answer is that procedural rules are not decorative. They exist to preserve confidence in the decisions reached under them.

Substantive rules determine what a council may decide. Procedural rules determine how it must decide it, who may participate and whether the process can command public confidence.

A good outcome reached through a questionable process does not retrospectively cure that process. Nor can councillors embrace constitutional rules when those rules assist them, only to minimise or reinterpret them when their application becomes personally inconvenient.

Rules which operate only when the powerful find them useful are not rules at all. They become instruments of discretion—and discretion exercised in one's own cause is precisely what rules governing conflicts of interest are intended to restrain.

The interest question

Cllr Neil Dallen is a director of Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd, which contracts with EEBC to hire Hook Road Arena for its annual display. He is also a trustee of the associated charitable trust.

Development could eventually end the fireworks at the Arena. The company's precise financial arrangements remain unclear, as do any payments or expenses received by its directors.

This does not establish that Cllr Dallen possessed a disclosable pecuniary interest within the strict definition of the Localism Act. That depends upon facts which the company's abbreviated accounts do not reveal. Though there is undoubtedly a related current contract with the Coucil and his company – which in itself – regardless of personal gain – is disclosable and prevents the councillor participating, absent a clear dispensation, on pain of a criminal penalty.

It is also true that Cllr Dallen was supporting a proposal which may ultimately operate against the continued use of the Arena by the fireworks company. That apparent paradox may weigh significantly against any suggestion of corrupt motivation at the meeting itself.

But the law on interests is preventive. If an interest falls within the statutory definition, a councillor cannot participate merely because he believes he is acting impartially, because his preferred outcome is publicly beneficial or because he is voting against the immediate interests of the connected organisation.

The test is not whether the councillor "feels" conflicted. It is whether the relevant facts satisfy the applicable rules.

The Mayor's position

There was a second and arguably more obvious procedural issue which received surprisingly little attention.

The Mayor, Cllr Lucie McIntyre, is Cllr Dallen's daughter. This is an undisputed and widely known fact, almost certainly familiar to every councillor in the chamber.

Yet the relationship was not formally disclosed at the meeting.

Being Cllr Dallen's daughter did not automatically give the Mayor a disclosable pecuniary interest. However, she was being asked to rule on whether her father could remain in the chamber, speak, move the recommendation and participate in the vote.

Her father plainly had, at the very least, a reputational interest in that ruling. His conduct, consistency and integrity were being challenged publicly.

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The question was therefore not whether the Mayor was capable of chairing impartially. It was whether public confidence would have been better protected by disclosing the relationship and allowing the Deputy Mayor to rule upon that discrete controversy.

Justice must not only be done but be seen to be done. That principle applies to modest local proceedings as surely as it applies to a courtroom.

The opposition focused its objections almost entirely on Cllr Dallen. It did not press the equally apparent question of whether his daughter should continue to chair the dispute about him.

Why?

Perhaps the relationship was so universally known that councillors did not consider a formal declaration necessary. Perhaps tempers and confusion prevented the point from being articulated. Perhaps they accepted that the Mayor was relying upon legal advice and did not wish to personalise their protest further.

But the omission also invites a less comfortable question: was the walkout motivated solely by concern for constitutional principle, or partly by anger at the spectacle of Cllr Dallen receiving public credit for a project which others believe he had previously frustrated?

From obstruction to championship?

EET has received consistent accounts from three councillors within Cllr Dallen's own Residents' Association group and two people closely connected with Epsom and Ewell Football Club.

They allege that proposals for Hook Road Arena were repeatedly pushed "from pillar to post" and between processes, contributing to delay. Cllr Dallen has also been quoted as saying: "I want the fireworks four more years."

These remain allegations to which Cllr Dallen is entitled to respond and since Sunday when he was asked to EET has received no comment from him.

Was the walkout driven not merely by the disputed legal interest, but by a sense of hypocrisy? Did councillors object to seeing someone whom they believed had privately impeded progress now appearing publicly as the development's leading promoter?

If so, the protest was about political ownership and credibility as well as legal compliance.

That would explain why councillors who supported the motion nevertheless refused to remain for it. They were not rejecting Hook Road Arena. They were rejecting the presentation of Cllr Dallen as its champion.

But that interpretation also carries a warning for the protesters. If their objection was truly one of principle, they should have applied that principle consistently—including to the Mayor's position in the chair. Selective indignation is no more attractive from the opposition than selective compliance is from the administration.

The small scale is no excuse

It would be easy to regard this as a parochial quarrel in a council which will cease to exist in eight months.

That would be a mistake.

Respect for the rule of law is built from the bottom upwards. It begins with small decisions, modest offices and local institutions. It depends upon people following rules even when the consequences are inconvenient and even when ignoring them might produce the same substantive result more quickly.

The erosion usually starts harmlessly: a procedure is treated as unnecessary because everybody supports the outcome; an interest is dismissed because the individual believes himself honest; a relationship is left undeclared because everybody already knows about it; an awkward question is silenced because it is said to be outside the scope of the debate.

Each departure can be rationalised. Together, they create a culture in which rules become optional for those exercising power.

At national and international level, the same habit has graver consequences. Selective obedience breeds cynicism; cynicism produces contempt for institutions; and contempt for institutions opens the way to disorder, violence and, ultimately, conflict.

Epsom and Ewell is not on the verge of anarchy because of a disagreement over a fireworks display. But the principle is indivisible. We cannot demand fidelity to constitutional rules in Westminster, respect for courts nationally or adherence to international law abroad while treating procedural safeguards as dispensable in our own council chamber.

Rules matter most when they are inconvenient.

Hook Road Arena deserved to be made a strategic priority. It did not need Cllr Dallen to move the recommendation, and the proposal would have passed without his participation.

The Council could therefore have avoided the entire controversy at virtually no cost. Cllr Dallen could have withdrawn; another councillor could have proposed the recommendation; the Mayor could have disclosed the family relationship and allowed her deputy to determine the procedural objections.

The same substantive decision would have been reached, but through a process carrying far greater public confidence.

That is the point of procedure. It is not there to frustrate good decisions. It is there to ensure that good decisions are reached in a way that deserves respect.

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