

Epsom and Ewell Council CEO contests ‘culture of secrecy’ claim and outlines fixes

1 October 2025



Audit & Scrutiny grills council on transparency

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s Audit & Scrutiny Committee on 30 September 2025, chaired by Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley), devoted a lengthy section of its meeting to the thorny question of transparency in council decision-making. Crucially, members heard directly from Chief Executive **Jackie King** after councillors had pressed for her attendance over the summer.

Why transparency was on the agenda

The committee had asked for a management paper expanding on the Council’s response to Grant Thornton’s value-for-money recommendation that the authority “develop a clear approach towards transparency” and be “mindful of requirements to be open and accountable”. Officers’ paper recapped the auditors’ reference to the LGA peer team’s concerns about decision-making and the handling of a constitution and delegations update that was “not fully discussed in public meetings”.

Senior management defended the lawful use of exempt items, promised clearer public rationales for any confidentiality, and said regular catch-ups with the external auditor were being instituted to ensure that key matters are raised and addressed appropriately.

The CEO’s evidence and key claims

Appearing for questions, Ms King told members she had already contacted the LGA peer review lead to verify what was actually said about EEBC’s culture.

“They don’t recall making the comment to say that there’s a culture of secrecy... they were more concerned with transparency from the aspect of clarity... being transparent in a way that everybody understood the processes around decision-making,” she said, adding that she would pursue written clarification for members.

On practical changes to reports and meetings, Ms King said officers are splitting reports so that only the genuinely confidential elements are in Part 2 and adding plain-English explanations for why any exemption applies.

“We’re going to continue to look at every paper... We’ve experimented with putting part of the paper in the public section and part in the exempt section... we can also add a section to say, in layman’s terms, what that actually means and why we’re doing it.”

She confirmed that external auditors will review a year’s worth of restricted items to provide assurance on whether exemption was appropriate.

Ms King also described the new audit dialogue: “We have... scheduled in catch-ups with myself... there’ll be a shared part where the Section 151 Officer is in there and possibly the Monitoring Officer... and then I’ll get some time on my own... We’re promoting that very open dialogue, and I believe I’ve got my first one... this week.”

On training and process controls, she said a decision-making flow-chart is on the staff hub and has been used in training. Controls have been tightened so that decisions are published promptly and responsibility for posting is explicit. “Everybody received training... We clarified... the timing of the publishing of a decision... we put in a step to make it very clear that it’s the initiating officer that has to publish it immediately.”

Members’ challenge

Vice-Chair Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) asked what concrete actions were being taken to address the peer review’s concerns and how their effectiveness would be monitored. Ms King responded that improvements would be visible in the content and structure of future public reports, with more part-public and part-exempt handling, and through the fact of regular auditor meetings, which auditors would consider in their conclusions. She also reminded members that actions from the Annual Governance Statement improvement plan had been acknowledged in a peer follow-up and are being tracked via the new performance hub.

When Cllr Neale pressed specifically on the “culture of secrecy” formulation, Ms King reiterated that the LGA lead, checking notes and recollections, did not recognise that phrase as the peer team’s finding, recalling instead a specific discussion where a few members “weren’t very clear on how we’d come to some decisions” on a major project. She undertook to write to the committee with any further detail.

Cllr **Steve Bridger** (RA Stamford) quizzed officers on how staff and members would be kept up-to-date with transparency expectations and what metrics would demonstrate progress. Ms King pointed to the ongoing training and process updates, but cautioned that some aspects are not easily reduced to KPIs: “You can’t really put metrics in for meetings or restricted paper measures.”

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College), who had pressed for the CEO’s attendance earlier in the year, set out why he felt the matter had to come back. He cited the auditors’ “significant weakness” conclusion and offered recent examples he felt illustrated shortcomings, including late tabling at the May AGM and confusion over an “urgent” fleet paper. Ms King accepted there had been human-error-type confusion, stressed that officers were learning and clarifying procedures, and distinguished between an “urgent matter” and an “urgent decision”.

What the Council’s written position says

The officers’ background paper to the committee set out a fuller management view. Headline points included:

- Lawful confidentiality is limited and reviewed: reasons for exemption are set out publicly and checked by Legal. Where possible reports are prepared part public and part exempt so debate can remain in open session.
- Clearer public explanations: officers acknowledged that rationales have not always been obvious and pledged clearer lay explanations in future.
- Urgent decisions: management said they try to timetable items for committees or hold extraordinary meetings. If urgency rules must be used, decisions are taken with the chair, published to Members’ News, reported to the next committee, and an annual public log comes to Audit & Scrutiny.
- Regular auditor check-ins are now in place after recognising an issue “should have been flagged sooner”.

The chair’s take and decision

After questioning, Chair Cllr McCormick noted that Audit & Scrutiny had, in effect, put officers “on the stand” and said the improvements on transparency were welcome, with the committee to continue monitoring. Members then received the report unanimously.

What changes residents should expect next

- More public-facing content: reports split so only sensitive details are redacted, alongside plain-English explanations for any exemption.

- Audit follow-through: external auditors to sample the past 12 months of restricted items and give an independent view.
- Structured liaison: routine, documented meetings between the CEO and statutory officers and auditors throughout the year.
- Internal training and controls: a live decision-making flow-chart, refreshed training and clarified responsibilities for immediate publication of decisions.

Jackie King CEO EEBC and Cllr S McCormick at Audit and Scrutiny Committee – Epsom and Ewell Borough Council YouTube channel

Sam Jones – Reporter

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“Audit and Scrutiny” under scrutiny

Caterham’s parochial battle.... a sign of things to come?

1 October 2025



Caterham could soon be governed by a single town council after a majority of residents backed the idea – but the proposal has split opinion among councillors and locals.

At the moment, Caterham is split between Caterham on the Hill parish council and Caterham Valley parish council. Parish councils are the ground level tier of government in England which look after parks, community centres, funding events, lobbying on planning and making local voices are heard.

A summer consultation found 77 per cent of 237 respondents supported merging Caterham on the Hill Parish Council and Caterham Valley Parish Council. But councillors pointed out that hardly one per cent of Caterham’s population responded to the consultation, at a Strategy and Resources Committee on September 25.

Cllr Michael Cooper said: “We haven’t had a consultation at all – less than one per cent took part [...]We need to involve the public properly.”

Others urged looking at the bigger picture. Cllr Jeremy Pursehouse said: “I know the people in the valley and people on the hill look at themselves as completely different species. I hate to disappoint you but everyone else looks at it as Caterham.”

The push for the merger comes as Surrey prepares for a major shakeup with new unitary authorities due in 2026 which will replace district and borough councils. Supporters of the town council plan say Caterham needs a stronger, unified voice to stop it being overshadowed in the new system.

Supporters say the merger would give the town a stronger voice, reduce duplication and save resources. Critics argue the consultation was poorly promoted and that fewer than one per cent of residents responded.

Caterham Valley Parish Council chair Tony Pierce, who is also standing in a by-election, said: “One single council representing the residents of Caterham is the optimum way to represent people. Caterham is not two towns but one – residents don’t confine their activities to either the Valley or the Hill. A larger council representing all residents will have a strong voice.”

Local resident Robin Franklin, from Caterham on the Hill, backed the move but urged councillors to think about younger generations. He said: “A town council gives Caterham a single negotiating voice and a clear chance to prioritise the things young people keep asking for: safer routes to school, better street lighting and cycle parking.”

Not everyone is on board. Caterham on the Hill Parish Council said it opposed a merger at this stage, arguing the process was rushed, that residents had not been given enough pros and cons, and that Valley households could face a massive hike in their local council tax bill. It also raised concerns that merging could dilute attention to local issues.

Speaking personally, Cllr Ben Horne said a merger could still bring benefits: “At the moment we’ve got two sets of meetings and duplication. A town council would carry more weight in seeking funding, modernise our governance and give Caterham the leadership it deserves.

The review panel has recommended pressing ahead with draft proposals. A second consultation – including details of council tax costs – will take place in the future.

If approved, Caterham Town Council would have 15 councillors across five wards, with the first elections due in May 2026.

View down Station Avenue, Caterham. (Credit: Google Street View)

Emily Dalton LDRS

LGR and CGR, what’s the difference for Epsom and Ewell?

1 October 2025



Two sets of initials could soon reshape local democracy in Surrey – and in Epsom & Ewell in particular.

LGR – Local Government Reorganisation – is the national government’s plan to abolish the county’s current two-tier system of Surrey County Council plus district and borough councils. In its place, two or three large “unitary authorities” would run services such as bin collections, road repairs and adult social care.

CGR - Community Governance Review – is something different. It is a locally led process that can create, merge or change parish council boundaries, or set up entirely new ones. Several Surrey councils, including Epsom & Ewell, have launched CGRs to give residents a direct say in how their communities are represented at the most local level.

What CGRs Do

A CGR reviews whether the smallest level of local government – parish, town, community or neighbourhood councils – reflects local identities and meets community needs. Councils must consult the public before making recommendations.

The aim is to:

- Give growing communities their own voice
- Reflect population changes
- Ensure fairer electoral representation
- Improve local accountability

Changes could mean creating a parish council for a town centre, merging existing parishes, or adjusting outdated boundaries.

Parish councils have elected members, meet regularly, and can run services such as allotments, parks, bus shelters, community centres, street lighting, litter bins, and festivals. They are funded through a “precept” added to council tax – typically a small sum, but dependent on the services provided.

Why Epsom & Ewell Is Doing a CGR Now

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is preparing for the possible abolition of the borough in 2027 under LGR. Its CGR is asking residents whether new parish councils should be created for areas within the borough so that, after the borough council is gone, communities still have a local voice.

The consultation runs until **9 October 2025**.

The LGR Position - Three Unitary Councils Proposed

This week, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council confirmed its support for a proposal backed by nine district and borough councils to replace the current two-tier system with **three unitary councils** – East, North and West Surrey – rather than one county-wide authority.

Council Leader Hannah Dalton said she has been speaking with residents at community events:

“People care deeply about their communities and local areas. They want to know their voice will continue to be heard after the changes to local government take place in 2027. This echoes what we found earlier in the year when... we asked residents to tell us what is most important to them about local government reorganisation.”

A spring 2025 survey found **63% of respondents** preferred three new unitaries, citing local decision-making and understanding of local issues as their top priorities.

The government’s decision on the future structure is expected in **October 2025**.

The Link Between LGR and CGR

While LGR is about creating larger unitary councils to simplify services and save money, CGRs are about ensuring that smaller, more local voices are not lost in the process. In effect, as the top tier becomes bigger, the smallest tier could be strengthened.

Epsom & Ewell’s view is that parish councils would give residents “a direct route to be heard” after borough councils disappear, keeping decision-making about local facilities and neighbourhood priorities close to home.

Have Your Say

Residents can take part in the **Epsom & Ewell CGR consultation** before 9 October 2025. Details are available on the council’s website.

Image shows the three unitary authority solution preferred by most Surrey district councils. Image Waverley Borough Council

Absence of CEO on audit Red Flag causes an outrage

1 October 2025



The Audit and Scrutiny Committee of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council met on 17th July. Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) expressed his outrage that the Chief Executive of the Council was not in attendance.

The Committee had previously agreed to request a report from the Senior Leadership Team of the Council explaining management responses to External Auditors, as reported to the Committee in February 2025. The attendance of the Chief Executive to discuss management responses and actions was called for.

Grant Thornton, the external auditors, had made the following “red flag” recommendation to the Council: “The Council should develop a clear approach towards transparency. The Council should be mindful of requirements to be open and accountable”.

The Chair (Cllr **Steven McCormick** – RA Woodcote and Langley) explained that the Chief Executive’s availability would be checked but he could not foresee an issue in her attending the July Committee meeting.

However, due to another commitment of the Chief Executive on the 17th July, the Chair had invited her to attend the September meeting of the Committee. Further, he assured Cllr Ames, the Committee could defer any particular matters requiring the CEO’s attention to the next meeting.

Cllr Ames was not satisfied with the failure of the CEO to attend and repeatedly expressed his outrage at the stalling of accountability. Accountability being a key element for the Council to improve, as stated in the auditors red flag recommendation.

His frustration was duly “noted”.

Related reports:

Annual audit of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

“Audit and Scrutiny” under scrutiny

Local Audit meet: unexpectedly interesting...

RA councillor replaces Independent member as scrutiny row erupts at Epsom Town Hall

Image EEBC YouTube. Cllr Ames.

Guildford going for new Town Council? Whither unitary authorities?

1 October 2025



Guildford could soon have its own town council for the first time in the hopes it would bring more local decision-making to its urban centre. The driving force behind this proposal is fears of a “democratic deficit” – with pending local government reorganisation looming, councils will be dissolved leaving some nervousness on how residents will be properly represented. The executive of Guildford Borough Council is looking at options for a formal ‘Community Governance Review’ to consider whether a parish council should be created to serve nearly half its residents in the currently unparished town centre. Members agreed to recommend the idea to the full council at an executive meeting on July 17.

If approved, it would bring Guildford in line with the surrounding villages (like Normandy or Ash) which already have their own parish councils. Unlike other parish areas like Shalford and Send, Guildford town has to rely solely on borough councillors to raise hyperlocal issues. Speaking at the meeting, Cllr Catherine Houston said: “Throughout this whole process of Local Government Reorganisation what has been missing has been the voice of the public, the imposition of this by the government without any consultation from people. We had the cancellation of the Surrey County Council election, so we have a democratic deficit currently going on within our county. This CGR allows people to decide whether they want to be represented at that very local level – that possibly could be lost, we don’t know – for an area of the borough which is not represented.”

Council reports state CGR aims to look at whether a town council would improve “community engagement, local democracy and service delivery”. The new body could also oversee things like town events, public toilets, benches, community grants and local planning consultations. If agreed, the new Guildford Town Council would be funded through a local council tax precept – a small extra charge already applied in parish areas. Normandy Parish Council required an extra £113.71, on top of ordinary council tax, for a Band D property for 2025/26. But other parishes vary. Around £300k could be spent in the first year setting up the new parish council which will be funded by Guildford council.

Boundaries, the number of councillors and a budget would likely be determined through consultation. The proposed town council would likely include wards such as Onslow, Stoke, Holy Trinity and Westborough. Technically, a CGR can only create parish councils and then, once established, can then agree to style itself as a town council. The earliest a town council would be created for the centre would be May 2027, with the elections to choose local representatives and possibly a mayor. Despite the proposed consultations, Guildford Borough Council, as it currently stands, will have the final say on whether to establish the new body.

Guildford high street buildings, town centre. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)

New Epsom and Ewell Parish? Cherish or perish the thought?

1 October 2025



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council consults residents on new parish councils

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is asking residents and stakeholders for their view on whether to create parish areas, along with a parish council or councils, in Epsom & Ewell. The Community Governance Review (CGR) consultation opens on 17 July and will run for 12 weeks, closing at 11.59pm on 9 October.

Epsom & Ewell is currently an unparished borough which means there is no lower tier of local government below that of the borough council. As part of local government reorganisation in Surrey, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and the other district and borough councils and county council will be dissolved in April 2027. Two or three unitary councils will then be responsible for local government in the county, with each unitary council representing between around 330,000 to more than 650,000 residents, depending on whether the Government opts for a two or three unitary model.

Epsom Rotary and Epsom and Ewell Times hold a public question time with Councillors on local government organisation on Wednesday 23rd July at 7pm at St Josephs Catholic Church St Margaret Dr, Epsom KT18 7JQ. It is free to attend and open to all residents and businesses. Full details [HERE](#)

Councillor John Beckett, Chair of Standards and Constitution Committee, said:

“We feel it is vital that residents, businesses, and local communities within Epsom & Ewell are given the opportunity to explore the creation of parish councils. This will give them a greater local voice and enable them to stay closer to the decision-making process within local government in the future.

“A parish council could take on responsibility for parks, playgrounds, community centres and cultural events in the borough, keeping decisions locally on how these are delivered as well as having the ability to drive economic growth by attracting funding and grants that would boost the local economy.

“Another key factor which is close to the hearts of residents is planning. A parish council would be a statutory consultee on planning matters, and as such would be able to reflect the concerns and aspirations of residents during any planning application process.”

The CGR consultation asks residents:

- whether to create new parish areas and a parish council or councils

- what the geography should be, and
- how many councillors should be elected.

Residents will also be asked, if parish councils are formed, whether they should be divided into wards, and if they should be called parish, community, neighbourhood or a village council(s).

The consultation can be completed online on the consultation website: Community Governance Review – Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Consultations or by completing a paper consultation questionnaire. Paper consultations can be found in Epsom Town Hall, in Bourne Hall, in local libraries across the borough and in the Community & Wellbeing Centre, Longmead (during normal opening hours).

This summer, the council will also hold a series of events across the borough where residents will be able to ask Councillors questions about local government reorganisation and the community governance review, including this consultation, the process and timeline.

Councillor John Beckett continued:

“I urge every resident of voting age within the borough to have their say on the future of your local democracy and representation in your local government for Epsom & Ewell. Tell us what you think by completing the Community Governance Review consultation questionnaire online or on paper and posting it back to us.”

As part of the Community Governance Review a second consultation would take place in early 2026. A timeline and frequently asked questions about CGR can be found on the council’s website: www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/CGR

Find out more about Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s Community Governance Review: [Community Governance Review | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council](#)

Find out about local government reorganisation here: [Surrey Local Government Reorganisation Hub – Surrey LGR Hub](#)

Related reports:

[Will the doomed Epsom and Ewell Borough Council rise from the ashes in other forms?](#)

[Two unitaries will save money says Surrey leader](#)

[Epsom and Ewell Considers New Community Councils as Local Government Shake-Up Looms](#)

[Epsom and Ewell Borough Council out – Community Council’s in?](#)

and many more – search “local government reorganisation”.

Parishing Epsom and Ewell is unholy?

1 October 2025



I enjoyed your write-up of the latest meeting of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, where you asked “Will the doomed Epsom and Ewell Borough Council rise from the ashes in other forms?” I would however suggest that the intention of the Residents Association (RA) clique that runs the council is to seek to continue its own existence as a relevant political force.

The RA has run the council since its creation and as Cllr Robert Leach (now the mayor) recently observed, feels that its dominant position means that it can do as it likes. [Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Faces Scrutiny Over Constitutional Reforms](#) › Epsom & Ewell Times

With the anticipated abolition of Epsom and Ewell as a borough council and effective merger with three or more neighbouring boroughs, the RA can see that its stranglehold will be broken. Its representatives may well be elected to a new unitary council, but they will likely be in a minority.

The paper at last week’s meeting that proposed what is called a Community Governance Review noted that “Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is one of the few District Councils within Surrey that is unparished”, meaning that there are no civil parishes or parish or other community councils.

Having been in charge for all these decades, the RA may wish to explain why this is the case. The answer to the *why now* question is obvious – to give the RA another host body to move to when its current host expires. Not that the RA clique doesn’t already have its fingers in a lot of pies locally.

There is also the *why not now* question, which the administration has skipped past. The report from last week notes that statutory guidance advises councils like Epsom and Ewell to avoid starting a community governance review if a review of local electoral arrangements is being, or is about to be, undertaken – i.e. the current situation.

Your article cites me as one of the councillors at the meeting who expressed doubts about whether information being given to residents will allow them to make an informed decision. I was specifically concerned that residents will only be consulted on the RA’s preference for new councils, despite recognition in the report that the government recently expressed a preference for the establishment of Neighbourhood Area Committees, which would operate within the auspices of a new authority.

Clearly these have been rejected as not suiting the RA’s purposes. For now we have to accept that the RA clique that runs the council can do what it likes, including spending £300,000 of desperately short funds on a process framed around its need to perpetuate its own relevance.

Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court Ward)

Epsom and Ewell Considers New Community Councils as Local Government Shake-Up Looms

1 October 2025



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) will meet Thursday, 26 June for an extraordinary session to decide whether to launch a formal Community Governance Review (CGR)—a move that could lead to the creation of one or more Community Councils across the borough.

The proposal comes in direct response to the Government’s initiative to abolish all 11 borough and district councils in Surrey, along with Surrey County Council, and replace them with fewer, larger unitary authorities. The Government is currently considering submissions for either two, or three new unitary councils for the county. The Government may still impose a single authority for the whole County. A decision is expected in autumn 2025.

If the borough and county councils are dissolved—as is widely anticipated in April 2027—Epsom and Ewell would be left as one of the few areas in Surrey without a “lower-tier” of local government unless it acts now to establish one. Unlike many other parts of the county, Epsom and Ewell is currently “unparished”, meaning it has no town or parish councils. The proposed Community Councils would fill that void.

What is a Community Council?

Community Councils are parish councils in all but name, capable of levying their own precept (a share of Council Tax) and taking on responsibilities such as managing parks, allotments, bus shelters, community centres, and street lighting. They may also act as local voices on planning applications and community development.

The proposal is for either:

- One Community Council to cover the whole borough, or
- Two Community Councils dividing the borough between East and West, with four different boundary configurations under consideration.

Maps, population data, and details of council assets in each option form part of the public consultation package.

Consultation and Timeline

If Full Council agrees to proceed, the CGR would begin in July 2025 with a twelve-week public consultation. The review process must be completed within 12 months if it is to inform the April 2027 reorganisation.

A second round of consultation will follow in early 2026, with a final decision due by June 2026. If approved, elections to the new Community Councils would be held in May 2027.

A £300,000 budget has been allocated to fund the consultation and planning stages, to be drawn from EEBC’s strategic priorities reserve.

What Would These Councils Do?

Community Councils could inherit some of the Borough Council’s functions and assets. However, this would depend on detailed financial and legal planning. Transfers of property and responsibilities would need to comply with any restrictions imposed under a potential Section 24 Direction—special powers the Secretary of State may use to restrict councils from disposing of assets in the run-up to local government reorganisation.

Significantly, the new councils would be able to raise funds independently through a local precept. While this could enable more responsive services, it also raises concerns about an increased financial burden on residents—particularly if a higher precept replaces services that were formerly funded by EEBC without any direct local taxation.

Too Many Layers?

One of the central arguments for creating large unitary authorities is to streamline governance, eliminate duplication, and reduce the cost of running multiple layers of local government.

But the creation of Community Councils risks reintroducing those layers, potentially replacing one borough council with both a unitary authority *and* one or more new Community Councils beneath it. Some have questioned whether such a system would actually reduce costs at all—especially if a new strategic authority is also established to coordinate policy between two or more unitary areas of Surrey.

Critics warn of a complex and potentially costly patchwork: unitary authority, strategic body, and newly-formed parish councils—all with their own budgets, meetings, officers, and elections.

EEBC, however, is keen to preserve a strong local voice. In a statement, Council Leader Cllr Hannah Dalton said:

“We’re navigating the biggest change in local democracy for more than 50 years. We want to make sure that, whatever the outcome of local government reorganisation, the voices of our residents and local communities continue to be heard in years to come – this is a vital element of local democracy.” Epsom and Ewell Times 28/05/2025.

What Happens Next?

Should the Council vote to proceed on Thursday, residents will be invited to participate in shaping the future of their local governance. A dedicated consultation website will go live in early July, with drop-in events, online surveys, and stakeholder workshops planned through to September.

Further updates will be provided via the Council’s social media and through local publications, including the *Epsom and Ewell Times*.

Have Your Say

Residents will be asked:

- Whether Community Councils should be created
- Whether there should be one or two (or more) such councils
- What functions they should perform
- How they should be funded
- What boundaries make the most sense

More information is available at www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk and by emailing: cgr@epsom-ewell.gov.uk

Related reports:

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council out – Community Council’s in?

Surrey’s partner organisations support county council plans for local government reorganisation

Surrey Councils launch Local Government Reorganisation engagement

Surrey's BIG debt question in local government reorganisation
Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey: Key Proposals

Gatwick Diamond authority denied

1 October 2025



Merging Reigate and Banstead Borough Council with its neighbour Crawley has been ruled out – in a decision that has left drivers behind the move “disappointed” with the Government. This week leaders from the 11 boroughs and districts, together with the county council, were told the Government planned to survey residents over merging into either two or three mega councils.

The council was told it would not be allowed to move forward with its preferred option because it had also backed the creation of three unitaries – and the rules stated councils could only support one idea, and they had to cover all of Surrey. The government also said the plan lacked enough detail on cost savings. They had wanted to form, at £13 billion plus, the largest economy in the sub-region, and to be conjoined by the world’s busiest single runway airport in Gatwick.

The news was relayed to the councils by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, Jim McMahon. He said: “I understand this will be disappointing; however, this consultation process allows for consultees to comment on whether the Secretary of State should implement one or other of the two proposals received, including the proposal co-signed by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council. If, in the future, there remains an interest in changing the boundary between Surrey and West Sussex, there are other mechanisms for doing so and this process does not prevent that. I also note your desire for the Gatwick Diamond economic area to be within the area of one Strategic Authority so as to best provide for economic growth. I want to make clear that the decision not to include your proposal in the consultation does not preempt devolution options for the wider area, including establishing or expanding a Strategic Authority that includes all councils making up the Gatwick Diamond.”

Leader of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Councillor Richard Biggs said: “We are disappointed that the Government will not be including our joint proposal with Crawley within the consultation. I am pleased that we took the opportunity to highlight to Government the important contribution that our combined area makes to the national economy, as well as its economic growth potential. While we accept the Government’s decision, we will continue to advocate for joined up economic and infrastructure planning and investment across both authorities. In terms of local government reorganisation, we are now focused on trying to secure the best available model of local government in Surrey – which we continue to strongly believe is three unitary councils. A three unitary model in Surrey will achieve the best balance of delivering value for money for our residents whilst maintaining strong local connections and identities and delivering high-quality service.”

Chris Caulfield

Epsom and Ewell Times adds:

The **Gatwick Diamond** is a term used to describe a key economic area in the South East of England, centred around **Gatwick Airport**. It includes parts of **Surrey and West Sussex**, notably towns such as **Crawley, Reigate, Redhill, Horsham, and Haywards Heath**.

Key features of the Gatwick Diamond:

- **Economic significance:** It is one of the UK’s most dynamic business regions, home to over **45,000 businesses** and supporting around **500,000 jobs**.
- **Transport hub:** Gatwick Airport, one of the UK’s busiest international airports, makes the area a major transport and logistics hub.
- **Sectors:** It hosts a mix of industries, including **aviation, engineering, financial services, professional services, and advanced manufacturing**.
- **Strategic location:** Situated between **London and the South Coast**, with excellent rail, road, and air links.

Purpose of the name:

The term is used by **local authorities, business partnerships, and regional planners** to promote regional cooperation, attract investment, and plan infrastructure in a way that supports sustainable economic growth. The **Gatwick Diamond Initiative** is a public-private partnership that actively markets the region for inward investment.

So, when Reigate and Banstead refer to the “**Gatwick Diamond economic area**”, they are aligning with this identity and economic cluster, arguing that the area’s interests may be best served by a unified strategic authority.

Additional reporting – Sam Jones.

Gatwick Airport (Credit Gatwick Airport)

Debate Opens on the Future Shape of Surrey’s Local Government

1 October 2025



Residents across Surrey are being asked to help shape the future of local government in what is being described as the most significant shake-up in over half a century. A government consultation launched this week invites public views on two competing proposals to reorganise Surrey’s local councils into unitary authorities.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is offering two options for reorganisation:

- A **two-unitary model** (East and West Surrey), proposed by Surrey County Council and supported by Elmbridge and Mole Valley.
- A **three-unitary model** (East, West and North Surrey), backed by a majority of Surrey’s borough and district councils, including Epsom & Ewell.

Councillor Hannah Dalton, Leader of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and Chair of the Surrey Leaders Group, is urging residents to take part:

“Residents have consistently told us that they want decisions made by people who know and understand their communities,” she said. “Over 60% of respondents to our April survey preferred a three-unitary model. We believe it delivers better services, stronger accountability, and a future that works for every part of Surrey.”

The government consultation runs until **5 August**, and is the only opportunity for the public to influence which of the two options is pursued. Dalton emphasised the importance of local voices in the process:

“We’ve been assured by the government that every response will be treated equally. This is your only chance to shape how your area is governed for future decades.”

The consultation follows the rejection of a third submission from Reigate & Banstead and Crawley Boroughs, which will not proceed.

Financial Concerns and Woking’s Shadow

Both proposals are said to be financially viable, according to Councillor Dalton, but depend on government action to address what she described as “**unrecoverable debt**”—most notably in Woking.

“We welcome the Government’s recognition that this debt cannot be managed locally. But we await details on what support will follow after 2026/27,” she said.

The issue of Woking’s financial crisis looms large in the background, with some viewing reorganisation as an opportunity to draw a line under past mismanagement—but others fear it could result in spreading liabilities more broadly across the county.

Streamlining—or Complicating?

While the proposals are framed as streamlining governance—abolishing the two-tier system of borough/district and county councils—there is growing concern that new layers may be introduced in their place.

The two-unitary model envisages an **elected Mayor** and a **Strategic Authority** overseeing countywide functions. At the same time, **Neighbourhood Area Committees** (formerly “Community Boards”) are being piloted to handle hyper-local matters. In towns like Epsom, where no town council currently exists, discussions have begun around establishing new local councils to fill the vacuum left by a dissolved borough council.

Some commentators have questioned whether the term “unitary” has become misleading in this context—raising the possibility that what was intended as simplification may, in practice, become a **reconfiguration of complexity**.

Clash of Visions

Surrey County Council’s Leader, Cllr Tim Oliver, argues the two-unitary model provides the best platform for efficient services and future prosperity:

“Two unitary councils will simplify services, save money and strengthen communities.”

In contrast, EEBC and its allies believe three smaller authorities would be more responsive and rooted in local identity. They also point to stronger alignment with community geography, opportunities for targeted infrastructure growth, and better democratic accountability.

How to Take Part

The government consultation is open until **Tuesday 5 August 2025**. Residents, businesses, community organisations, and parish councils are all invited to contribute their views.

Ways to respond:

- Online: [surrey-local-government-reorganisation](https://www.surreylgr.co.uk)
- Email: lgreorganisation@communities.gov.uk
- Post: LGR Consultation, Fry Building 2NE, MHCLG, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF
- Paper forms: Available at all 52 libraries across Surrey

Further details and background on each proposal can be found at the **Surrey Local Government Reorganisation Hub**: www.surreylgr.co.uk

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