

# Surrey declares experiment in community engagement a success

29 January 2026



Surrey County Council has endorsed the continuation of its pilot **Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs)**, hailing them as a successful new way of ensuring that “community voices are heard” during the transition to new unitary authorities.

At its Cabinet meeting on 27 January, the Council agreed that the four existing pilot NACs – in Dorking and the Villages, East Elmbridge, Farnham and North Tandridge – should continue operating until the pre-election period in 2026. Cabinet members also backed proposals to share learning from the pilots with the new shadow unitary authorities from May 2026, and to consider expanding the model to one or two further areas.

In a strongly positive Cabinet report, Surrey said the pilots had demonstrated “strong stakeholder engagement and consensus on evidence-based local priorities”. All 24 NAC members who responded to the final evaluation survey supported continuation, with 83 per cent reporting a positive impact on their work.

Council Leader **Tim Oliver** (Conservative) described the pilots as proof of what could be achieved “when communities, councils, and partners work even closer together”, adding that the NACs had delivered “stronger neighbourhoods” and could be scaled up across Surrey.

Senior figures from health bodies, the voluntary sector and district councils also welcomed the model, with supporters arguing that NACs provide a forum for aligning priorities across councils, the NHS, police, education providers and community organisations at a neighbourhood level.

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If you have not already done so we do urge you to take part in the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council consultation on creating new Parish or Community Councils and also the Epsom and Ewell Times reader survey designed to offer wider options for you to express your views on.

EEBC CGR Consultation

Click [HERE](#) to access the Epsom and Ewell Times reader survey.

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## Advisory forums - not elected bodies

However, the Cabinet paper and accompanying statements also underline a key limitation: NACs are **advisory and collaborative bodies**, not democratically elected councils.

Membership varies by area and includes appointed representatives from public bodies and voluntary organisations alongside councillors from existing authorities. While Surrey says this flexibility allows NACs to reflect local circumstances, critics argue it also raises questions about accountability, transparency and duplication – particularly as Surrey moves towards unitary local government.

In Epsom & Ewell no NAC pilot currently operates. Under current proposals, the borough will be represented by **10 elected councillors on the new East Surrey Unitary Authority**, covering a population of more than 80,000 residents. Decisions about neighbourhood-level governance will therefore have to sit alongside – or potentially compete with – a smaller number of unitary councillors holding formal democratic mandates.

## Parish councils versus NACs

The NAC model also sits uneasily alongside longer-established forms of local democracy, such as parish and town councils, which are directly elected and have statutory standing.

Several Surrey districts, including parts of Epsom & Ewell, have debated whether the creation of new parish or community councils would provide a clearer, more accountable way of preserving local voice following local government reorganisation. NACs, by contrast, have no independent legal status, no direct electoral mandate and no guaranteed budgetary powers.

Supporters of NACs argue that they are intended to complement, not replace, existing councils and that they are particularly useful during a period of structural change. The Cabinet report stresses their value in identifying shared priorities, coordinating preventative work and encouraging partnership working ahead of the 2026 unitary elections.

Yet the report stops short of explaining how NACs would interact with elected parish councils where these exist – or

whether they risk becoming a parallel governance layer once the new unitaries are fully operational.

### A transitional solution?

For now, Surrey's Cabinet appears to see NACs primarily as a transitional mechanism, helping to bridge the gap between the current two-tier system and the new unitary arrangements.

The four pilots ran between July and December 2025, and the decision to extend them only until the pre-election period in 2026 suggests that their long-term role remains unresolved. Expansion to further areas is framed as something to be "considered", rather than guaranteed.

As Surrey moves closer to the creation of East and West Surrey unitary authorities, the key question for places like Epsom & Ewell will be whether neighbourhood engagement is best delivered through appointed partnership forums – or through elected local councils with clearer lines of accountability to residents.

For now, Surrey County Council is celebrating what it describes as a successful experiment. Whether NACs evolve into a permanent feature of local governance, or give way to more traditional democratic structures, is a debate that is only just beginning.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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## The process of appointing the new local government chiefs begins

29 January 2026



Councillors from across Surrey met this week for the very first time as part of two new committees set up to manage the county's biggest council shake-up in decades.

The East Surrey Voluntary Joint Committee met yesterday (Thursday, January 15) at Woodhatch Place in Reigate, while the West Surrey Voluntary Joint Committee met today (Friday, January 16) at Woking Borough Council.

It marks a major milestone in plans to scrap Surrey's current council system and replace it with two brand-new authorities: West Surrey Council and East Surrey Council.

### What is changing?

Last year, the Government announced that Surrey County Council and the county's 11 district and borough councils will be merged into just two big councils.

In May, residents will vote for councillors who will sit on these new authorities. At first, they'll act as 'shadow councils' which means they will be basically planning everything behind the scenes. From April 2027, the new councils will officially take over all local services. Until then, the current councils will keep running things as normal.

## Why these meetings matter

Since there is a lot of work to do and not much time to merge all the responsibilities of the local authorities and split them in half, councillors have volunteered to get started early.

The two new joint committees are made up of existing councillors from county, district and borough councils. Their job is to start laying the groundwork for the big transition.

At their first meetings, both committees agreed to:

- Create a single implementation plan to manage the change safely and legally
- Set up an implementation team made up of senior council officers
- Decide how key interim leadership roles will be filled

This includes recommending temporary appointments for three crucial posts:

- Head of Paid Service (the council's top boss)
- Chief Finance Officer (in charge of the council's financial health)
- Monitoring Officer (who keeps everything legal)

These roles are required by law and will support the new shadow councils until permanent staff are recruited.

## 'An important milestone'

Terence Herbert, Chief Executive of Surrey County Council and senior officer in charge of the reorganisation, said: "This is an important milestone and I'm grateful that councillors have agreed to come together on a voluntary basis to get this vital work underway.

"At the heart of this is making sure residents continue to get the services they expect - both now and under the new councils."

He added that councils are "well prepared for change" and committed to making the transition as smooth as possible for residents and staff.

## What happens next?

Both committees will now meet monthly, rotating locations around their areas. They will keep meeting this way until the shadow councils are formally created after the May elections.

Each committee will have 10 members: five from Surrey County Council and five from district and borough councils. Their work programmes will be published online so residents can see what is being discussed.

## Bigger plans for Surrey

The Government has also said simplifying councils will help pave the way for more devolution, meaning more powers could be handed down to Surrey in future.

Talks are already under way about setting up a new strategic authority, like a metro mayor, for the county. For now, councillors say the focus is on getting the basics right which means making sure the new councils are ready to hit the ground running in 2027.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Councillors for the East Surrey Voluntary Joint Committee. (Credit: Surrey County Council). Epsom and Ewell Borough Council leader Cllr Hannah Dalton (RA Stoneleigh far left)

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# Epsom Councillor claims he is being silenced for his transparency concerns

29 January 2026





A meeting of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Standards and Constitution Committee** on 15th January exposed sharp tensions over councillors' scrutiny rights and the handling of Code of Conduct complaints, following an unusually fraught exchange between a senior councillor and the committee chair.

Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) claims that his raising of concerns about Council transparency has stimulated official complaints against him inhibiting him further from holding the Council to account.

### Councillor declares interest — and raises alarm

Early in the meeting, Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) declared a personal interest in the final agenda item reviewing Code of Conduct complaints, confirming he was the subject of two live complaints and would withdraw when the item was reached.

In an extended statement, Councillor Ames told the committee that he had chosen to be transparent because the complaints were already referenced in the report and likely to give rise to "public speculation".

He said: "Both complaints are effectively that I raised concerns about transparency failings at the council... I don't believe it's appropriate to use a code of conduct complaint to censor councillors' concerns".

Councillor Ames also argued that there appeared to be no clear written procedure for councillors who are the subject of complaints, beyond guidance aimed at complainants. He said this lack of clarity was itself a governance issue the committee should be concerned about.

The Chair, Councillor **John Beckett** (RA Auriol) intervened to halt the statement, telling him: "This is not really the time and place to discuss the actual complaints against you."

Councillor Ames responded that being required to recuse himself before any complaint was resolved was already preventing him from fulfilling his role: "On the basis of a complaint, this essentially has the effect of censoring me as a councillor."

### Constitution update prompts wider scrutiny debate

The committee later considered an update to the Council's Constitution, including changes to the Scheme of Delegation that governs what decisions officers can take without councillor approval.

Officers introduced a late addendum, explaining that an internal audit had identified an error in the Constitution. A requirement for an annual report to Audit and Scrutiny on "significant delegated decisions" was being corrected to refer instead to "urgent decisions", a defined category already used in practice.

The Monitoring Officer stressed the change was technical: "We're literally just recognising a defined term of decisions that don't exist for one that does. There will be no changes to the process."

However, Councillor Ames used the discussion to raise broader concerns about scrutiny being weakened in practice. He argued that councillors' existing rights to request scrutiny of delegated decisions were routinely ignored. Referring to the Constitution, he said: "There is a right for a councillor here to request that decisions taken by officers under delegated powers are scrutinised... but it doesn't appear to express a right for that scrutiny then to take place." He also mentioned: "Councillor Chinn (Labour Court) and I have been warned to be circumspect about what we can and can't say in public about the scheme of delegation. It's been declared to be an exempt issue."

He proposed amending the wording to make clear that such requests **must** be heard by the Audit and Scrutiny Committee, warning that without this, councillors' rights existed "for no effect". Councillor Ames went further, accusing the administration of blocking scrutiny: "All of the attempts at calling in are being blocked... The main object of the administration seems to be to stop the public finding out quite how bad they are by preventing things being aired in public."

### Proposal deferred, constitution changes approved

Officers advised that the proposal should be referred to the **Constitution Working Group**, made up of political group leaders, rather than debated fully on the night. Councillor Ames's amendment failed to attract a seconder but was formally referred to the working group at his request.

The committee then unanimously agreed to recommend the constitutional updates — including the late correction — to Full Council.

### Code of Conduct complaints: eight cases, two ongoing

After Councillor Ames left the meeting, the committee considered the report on Code of Conduct complaints.

Officers confirmed that eight complaints were assessed as valid between December 2023 and December 2025. Six had been resolved, with two still ongoing. No councillors were named, with officers citing the need for fairness and natural justice.

The report was noted without debate.

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### Why this matters

While much of the meeting dealt with technical governance changes, the exchanges revealed deep unease about transparency, scrutiny and the use of conduct complaints, particularly as the Council approaches local government reorganisation.

Whether Councillor Ames's concerns lead to stronger scrutiny powers — or remain unresolved — now rests with the Constitution Working Group.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Cllr Ames at the meeting: EEBC YouTube channel

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## More erudition on local government reorganisation in Epsom and Ewell

29 January 2026



Dear Editor,

In his letter of 13 January Trevor Burt makes a number of good points, including rightly calling out the determination of the ruling Residents Association (RA) clique to impose parish councils on the residents they claim to represent without giving them the opportunity to express support for an alternative “community governance” model.

He is also correct that Epsom and Ewell residents will have proportionately more influence in the smaller council of East Surrey than in the bigger pond of Surrey County Council.

But the RA's determination to force through the creation of parish councils that have little support in the borough is explained by a simpler mathematical calculation. Even in the unlikely event that the political party that claims not to be a political party were to win all the seats available in our current borough, it would still be in a minority on the new council.

As I and others have said, parish councils are about preserving the relevance of a clique that is used to seeing Epsom and Ewell as its fiefdom.

In the meantime, the RA will continue to mismanage the council, as the latest fiasco over the Rainbow Leisure Centre shows, as it wastes the valuable time of council tax payer-funded officers on the pursuit of the RA councillors' vanity project.

The Rainbow Centre fiasco also shows how determined the RA are to keep the truth of their incompetence from residents. It may interest your readers to know that I have written to the administration to seek confirmation that the decision to keep the huge repairs bill secret included an assessment of what the public interest required.

Yours faithfully,

Cllr Chris Ames (Labour - Court Ward)

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Dear Editor,

Sadly, in his support and criticism of my stance on both SCC's Neighbourhood Councils and the Town Council alternative, Trevor Burt (Letters to the Editor 13/01/26) seems to miss my point.

As I state in my penultimate paragraph, the engagement of residents in determining the outcomes of policies and spending in their area does not necessarily require replacement frameworks, large expenditure and more elections. It can be undertaken by devolving funds to Unitary Authority Councillors individually or jointly to spend on local priorities, more local consultations, the co-designing of local services with residents, regular pulse surveys, as well as transferring local assets to communities. These opportunities provide for real localism and for all residents, if they choose, to have their say.

Yours faithfully,

Eber Kington

Residents Association County Councillor

Ewell Court, Auriol and Cuddington

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## Is Epsom and Ewell getting “proportional representation” under Council shake-up?

29 January 2026



Dear Editor,

I was heartened to read Cllr Eber Kington's letter of 9th January. For once, a Resident Association councillor has broken ranks with the ruling Residents' Association line by publicly disavowing the party's own sponsored option of creating two community councils to replace Epsom and Ewell Borough Council following Local Government Reorganisation. That departure is to be applauded.

However, I must respectfully challenge the assertion that the current options before us truly trust residents — “the people most qualified to decide what is best for the borough,” as Cllr Kington rightly characterises them — with a meaningful say. In reality, EEBC hasn't offered residents any choice beyond:

- \* Two community councils (effectively parish/town councils with a precept), or
- \* No community councils at all.

If Cllr Kington has alternative proposals for how local democratic accountability and community decision-making can supplement ten councillors representing East Surrey on the new unitary authority, he has left it far too late for such alternatives to be prepared, costed, and properly considered before EEBC's much-awaited March 2026 meeting.

It is worth putting the democratic and financial context in sharper focus. At present, EEBC has 36 councillors servicing a modest borough budget of around £10.27 million for 2025/26. In contrast, Surrey County Council's budget of £1.2641 billion including responsibilities, covering education, highways, social care and more, account for roughly 76 % of the total council tax bill paid by residents, with EEBC receiving only about 10 %.

Under the new arrangements for two unitary authorities— as confirmed by government decision — the Epsom and Ewell area will be represented by 10 councillors on the East Surrey Council, dealing with the vast majority of public services currently under County control. Crude though it is, this means that for the major service budgets now handled at county



level, Epsom and Ewell will have significantly greater relative influence than before. Currently, just five county councillors represent the borough's interests on a much larger Surrey budget; in future, ten unitary councillors will cover roughly half of the former Surrey population's budget responsibilities.

Yes, it is true that we lose some of the micro-representation previously afforded by a larger cohort of borough councillors on planning and routine community matters — though even now many planning decisions are subject to Government inspectors overruling local decisions on appeal. But on the biggest pots of public spending — education, adult social care, highways, children's services — residents will likely be better represented proportionately than under the old two-tier county/district system.

So when debating the merits of Neighbourhood Area Committees versus community councils, let us be clear about the alternatives on the table. Both NACs and community councils have limitations and cost implications, and both are artificially constrained by the narrow set of options EEBC has chosen to present. The real democratic choice for residents should be wider than simply more or fewer tiers of parish councils.

If Cllr Kington truly believes, as he claims, that residents should decide how council tax is spent and how their communities are governed, then let us see a credible alternative framework— with transparent proposals, budget implications, and democratic accountability — ahead of March. Otherwise, the debate will continue to swirl around consultancy-driven options that neither trust nor empower the people they purport to serve.

Yours faithfully,

Trevor Burt

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## Long serving Epsom Councillor blasts LGR and NACs

29 January 2026



Dear Editor

I am not sure where your Editorial writer of 6<sup>th</sup> January 2026 gets their information on SCC's pilot project Neighbourhood Area Committees (Parish power, democratic ideals — and the Residents' Association dilemma), but NAC's are certainly not the answer to the proposed LGR centralisation of local government and are far away from the concept of local democracy.

But before I address that, let's just step back a bit and see how we got here. The Government had no electoral mandate to abolish SCC and Surrey's Districts and Boroughs. And even if a vague manifesto reference to the reform of local governments counts as legitimate, the Leader of SCC had no mandate to use his Executive power to drag all of Surrey's local authorities into a rushed and centralising new local government structure.

The Government and Tim Oliver also cancelled the May 2025 local County Council election, denying residents themselves of the chance to express their view on this change, via the ballot box. That said, residents used a different mechanism to say what they thought. The results of the Government's own public consultation on the Unitary Options, published in October, showed that 51% of respondents expressed support for the three Unitary Option and only 19% favoured SCC's two Unitary option, with 56% strongly opposed to it. Yet the Government decided it knows better.

The outcome is that we won't have the devolution of power as promised under LGR but, instead, the centralisation of local government upwards and into two Unitary Authorities covering populations over ½ million. And in my Division, covering Ewell Court, Auriol, and Cuddington, just two Unitary councillors will replace the current eight local councillors with the expectation (I suppose) that this is sufficient to ensure that our residents needs and expectations will still be adequately met.

And this is where the Government's concept of Neighbourhood Area Committees comes into play. How ironic that, having

realised Unitary Authorities will have nothing “local” about them, the Government decides (fully supported by the ruling party at SCC) that they will also impose what will fill that void.

Your Editorial seems quite keen on these. They write *“These advisory bodies bring together local councillors, police, NHS, voluntary sector leaders and community stakeholders — arguably, the very people most qualified to inform decisions on community priorities.”*

However – and given that I am a Residents’ Association councillor you probably won’t be surprised at this – I think the people most qualified to determine local priorities and what their council tax should be spent on, are residents and council taxpayers themselves. Not an unelected quango with a small minority of residents working to an agenda determined by the Unitary Authority. Neighbourhood Area Committees therefore do not pass the tests of democratic local government, representation of the people, nor the ability for local people and communities to influence local outcomes.

Your Editorial also states that NACs come *“at minimal administrative cost.”* I am not sure that’s a given if it’s only based on SCC piloting four NACs. If introduced by the East Surrey Unitary there could 36 or more of them. And how long will it take before the Police, NHS, and Fire Service, for example, realise that that simply cannot resource every NAC and every meeting in Surrey.

So, I do not support the NAC option. It is not local, it is not democratic, and it excludes the voice of most residents. But neither do I support the Town Council and precept model which will add a further tax burden on residents alongside any new elected Mayor’s annual precept, in order to run allotments and not much else.

We need to look at options such as providing Unitary Councillors, individually or jointly in their localities, with funding to allocate locally. We need more local engagement and consultations on the introduction of school streets, speed limits and no verge parking zones and more. We should increase opportunities for community asset transfers enabling communities take over council assets that are better run by those who will use them. And we should undertake more co-designing with residents and users of local services and facilities, to better reflect their needs and aspirations.

So, going forward, if I get the chance to influence the local arrangements, it won’t be to install a quango of unelected public servants and self-selected individuals, but it will be introducing localised structures and financial decision making to ensure that our residents are able to influence the important local choices and funding allocations that affect their lives.

Yours faithfully,

Cllr Eber Kington – (RA Surrey County Councillor Ewell Court, Auriol and Cuddington and former RA Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillor)

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Editor’s note: Epsom and Ewell Times received its published information about Neighbour Area Committees and the cost of running 16 meetings of pilots direct from Surrey County Council’s communications team.

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## Parish power, democratic ideals — and the Residents’ Association dilemma

29 January 2026



### EDITORIAL

For nearly ninety years, since the creation by Charter of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council in 1937, the Residents’ Associations have held political control of the council. Their defining claim — and the claim on which generations of RA councillors have been elected — is that they are not a political party. They describe themselves as pragmatic, non-ideological representatives, motivated only by the practical interests of residents and by efficient, modest and locally accountable government.



That historic self-identity now faces its most searching test in decades.

The decision to promote the creation of two new parish or “community” councils — one for Epsom and one for Ewell — at the very moment when Local Government Reorganisation is removing a tier of local government, raises a question that goes to the heart of the RA project. Is the Residents’ Association movement acting in accordance with its founding principles — or is it, for the first time, beginning to behave like the very kind of political body it has always claimed not to be?

The new community councils, if ultimately approved, would initially be responsible only for allotments and for acting as statutory consultees on planning matters. The projected precept would be around £43-£46 per Band D property — yet council reports make clear that the overwhelming share of the budget relates not to allotments but to administrative costs. The ratio highlighted during the council debate — approximately £1.5 million in administration and around £20,000 in allotment management — leaves opponents arguing that residents would be paying for a structure, not a service.

Supporters reply that this is about local voice, continuity and identity under the new East Surrey unitary authority. They argue that unparished areas risk being left behind elsewhere in the country, and that residents deserve the ability to remain represented at a truly local level.

That argument is a respectable one. But it is also a philosophical one.

It places a principle — more tiers of directly elected democratic representation — above the question of whether those tiers provide proportionate value for money or a clear functional purpose. In short, it places democratic ideology ahead of administrative efficiency.

That is — ironically — the kind of approach the Residents’ Associations have historically said they exist to avoid.

A further tension arises when one compares the parish model with the alternative now being piloted elsewhere in Surrey: Neighbourhood Area Committees. These advisory bodies bring together local councillors, police, NHS, voluntary sector leaders and community stakeholders — arguably, the very people most qualified to inform decisions on community priorities. They operate without a precept, at minimal administrative cost, and are designed expressly to improve coordination and engagement under the new unitary structure.

Yet this model does not feature in EEBC’s consultation options.

The consultation preamble instead foregrounds the “potential impact” of losing a local tier of governance, and asks residents to respond within a framework in which the only practical question is whether to establish parish councils — not whether alternative governance models may offer equal or greater benefit at far lower cost.

If the Residents’ Association ethos is one of pragmatism, value for money and minimal bureaucracy, then excluding the lowest-cost participatory model from public consideration is difficult to reconcile with that philosophy.

Some councillors have gone further, suggesting that the drive toward community councils is shaped less by principle than by personal and institutional incentives — that is, by the desire of some existing borough councillors to continue to occupy civic roles in a post-unitary landscape. Whether or not that suspicion is fair, the perception exists, and it has been voiced across party lines during the council debate.

The Residents’ Associations have for generations prided themselves on being the guardians of restrained, businesslike and non-political local government. If they now choose to champion new and potentially expanding administrative bodies — with uncapped taxation powers and initially limited service responsibility — they will need to persuade residents that this is not a departure from that tradition, but a logical extension of it.

That case will need to rest on facts, not sentiment; on function, not symbolism; and on the long-term interests of residents, not on the preservation of municipal office.

As the parish consultation enters its second phase, that is the question at stake: whether the proposals reflect the values the Residents’ Associations have always proclaimed — or whether, in the face of structural change, they risk becoming the very political establishment they were founded to resist.



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## Have your say on the future of local representation in Epsom and Ewell

29 January 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is currently running the second stage of its Community Governance Review (CGR), asking residents whether two new parish-style bodies — Epsom Community Council and Ewell Community Council — should be created to operate beneath the new East Surrey Unitary Authority.

The Epsom & Ewell Times is launching an independent reader survey to invite views not only on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's proposals, but also on an alternative approach to local consultation and civic participation which is not included in Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's formal consultation. Namely, Neighbour Area Committees.

### **The Council's consultation**

The Borough Council consultation follows its Full Council decision in December to continue exploring the creation of two new parish-style councils. According to the council's press release, the proposed bodies would:

- initially be responsible for allotments
- act as statutory consultees on planning matters
- be funded by a parish precept of around £43-£46 for a Band D property
- hold elections in May 2027 if created

The consultation also asks for views on warding arrangements and councillor numbers for the proposed new bodies.

The Epsom & Ewell Times encourages residents to read the council's consultation material in full and respond to it, whether in favour or opposed, so that the decision ultimately reflects as broad a range of resident opinion as possible.

EEBC CGR Consultation

### **Why EET is running an additional poll**

During the December council debate and in the public correspondence that followed, a number of councillors and residents raised questions about whether the consultation should also invite views on alternative forms of local representation, such as Surrey County Council's pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees, under the new unitary structure. See the Epsom and Ewell Times guide to Neighbour Area Committees [HERE](#)

See letters to the Epsom and Ewell Times from a number of Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillors [HERE](#).

The council's consultation asks residents only whether they wish to establish parish-style community councils and, if so, how they should be constituted. It does not ask whether residents would prefer any alternative approach or different mechanisms for an additional local voice to the 10 Epsom and Ewell elected Councillors to the East Surrey Unitary Authority

The Epsom & Ewell Times believes that the wider discussion about local democracy after 2027 may benefit from hearing resident views on more than one potential model. Our independent survey therefore allows participants to express:

- support for or opposition to the creation of community councils
- support, if any, for the alternative form of additional local consultation of Neighbour Area Committees
- views on cost, value for money and accountability
- opinions on how civic traditions, such as the mayoralty, might continue

The results will not form part of the official consultation process, but may provide an additional picture of community sentiment to inform public debate and future reporting.

Click [HERE](#) to access the Epsom and Ewell Times reader survey

### **Two platforms, one community conversation**

Residents are invited to complete both the council consultation and the Epsom & Ewell Times survey. The two exercises serve different purposes:

- the council consultation forms part of the statutory Community Governance Review
- the EET poll provides a space for residents to express views on a wider range of possibilities and priorities

Both, however, share a common aim — helping to ensure that local voices are heard at a time of significant change in how Epsom and Ewell will be governed in future.

The Epsom & Ewell Times will continue to report on developments in the Community Governance Review, the consultation outcomes and the wider debate about the future of local representation as the borough approaches the transition to the East Surrey Unitary Authority in 2027.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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## Epsom and Ewell's Local Democracy Debate: What's at Stake as Consultation Enters Phase Two

29 January 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has launched the second stage of its Community Governance Review (CGR), inviting residents to give their views on whether two new parish-style bodies — Epsom Community Council and Ewell Community Council — should be created when the borough is abolished in 2027 under Surrey's Local Government Reorganisation.

The consultation runs from 16 December 2025 to 1 February 2026. It proposes that the two new bodies would:

- cover the same geographic area as the present borough
- retain the existing 14 ward structure
- have two elected community councillors per ward
- levy a parish precept of around £43-£46 for a Band D household

If established, the new councils would initially be responsible for allotments and would act as statutory consultees on planning applications. Elections would be expected in May 2027.

The consultation takes place against the backdrop of the transition to the new East Surrey unitary authority, which from April 2027 will replace both borough and county councils across Epsom and Ewell, Tandridge, Reigate and Banstead, Mole Valley and Elmbridge.

The council states that while reorganisation "may open a number of opportunities", it is also "mindful of the potential impact that losing a more local tier of governance may have for local residents in relation to local representation, resource allocation and priority of services."

The consultation documents do not present alternative engagement models — such as Surrey County Council's pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) — as response options, a point that several opposition councillors have since raised in correspondence with the Epsom and Ewell Times.

### Support for Community Councils: Dalton argues democratic voice must be protected

In a detailed response to the Epsom and Ewell Times, Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (RA leader - Stoneleigh Ward) set out the Residents' Association case for progressing the consultation and exploring the creation of community councils.

She notes that Epsom and Ewell "is not alone" in carrying out such reviews, with similar work also under way in a number of other Surrey boroughs and districts. She states that 67% of respondents to the first consultation supported the proposal to investigate community councils further, and argues that residents should not be denied the opportunity to take part in this second and final consultation.

Cllr Dalton links the case for community councils to the scale of democratic change under the new East Surrey authority, writing that the reduction from 35 borough councillors and 5 county councillors to 10 unitary councillors represents "a 75% decrease in democratic representation," which she describes as "a compelling reason to explore introducing a local Community Council."



She describes the current proposal as a pragmatic starting point, with a modest precept that would fund administrative capacity and statutory planning consultation functions, while future roles could be agreed with the new unitary authority if appropriate.

Cllr Dalton also expresses scepticism about Surrey’s pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees, stating that evidence from other reorganised areas suggests that such bodies “do not have the requisite powers or representation to deliver for the residents they represent.”

### **Opposition concerns: cost, mandate and scope of responsibilities**

Opposition councillors from the Independent, Liberal Democrat and Conservative groups have written separately to the Epsom and Ewell Times to set out their concerns.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) warns that while the consultation presents an initial Band D precept of around £45, costs could rise significantly if community buildings and major assets were later transferred to the new bodies. He argues that residents risk facing an “uncapped” additional tax burden if responsibility for high-maintenance assets is devolved in future years.

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) questions the proportionality of the financial model at this stage, highlighting that the only defined operational responsibility is allotment management, while the bulk of projected expenditure relates to administration rather than service delivery. He argues that residents are being asked to approve a structure whose long-term role and cost profile are not yet clear.

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) argues that the proposals recreate an additional layer of local government at a time when reorganisation is intended to simplify structures. She questions the value for money of establishing elected community councils when Surrey’s Neighbourhood Area Committees are being piloted as a lower-cost forum for local voice and partnership working.

A number of opposition members also point to the relatively small number of responses to the first-stage consultation and argue that this does not amount to a clear mandate for creating new precept-raising bodies.

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The letters from Councillors — published in full [HERE](#) on the Epsom and Ewell Times website — set out contrasting views on democratic representation, accountability, taxation and local identity in the new unitary era.

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### **Neighbourhood Area Committees: an alternative model not included in the consultation**

Surrey County Council’s pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees are currently being evaluated after operating across four areas during 2025.

Surrey describes NACs as advisory partnership forums bringing together councillors, public services, voluntary and community organisations and residents to discuss local priorities. They do not have statutory powers or the ability to levy a precept, and have so far been delivered largely using existing staff resources and modest meeting costs.

Supporters of NACs argue that they provide a mechanism for local influence without creating a new tax-raising organisation. Supporters of community councils counter that advisory bodies cannot substitute for an elected local tier with formal status and statutory consultation rights.

The current CGR consultation does not invite residents to express a preference between these models.

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See the Epsom and Ewell Times short guide to Neighbour Area Committees (NAC) [HERE](#).

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### **Participation, turnout and cost-benefit questions**

The most recent full borough elections in May 2023 recorded an overall turnout of around 34% across Epsom and Ewell. Some opponents of the community council proposals question whether introducing an additional elected body represents good value where participation in local elections is already comparatively low.

Supporters respond that the reduction in democratic representation under the new unitary structure makes it more important, not less, to retain an additional tier through which residents can engage directly with locally-focused representatives.

The debate therefore continues to centre on differing conceptions of democratic voice, accountability and financial prudence during a period of structural change.

### **What happens next**

The CGR consultation materials and questionnaire are available online and in hard copy at Epsom Town Hall, Bourne Hall, local libraries and the Community & Wellbeing Centre.

Public engagement events are scheduled for January, after which councillors will consider the consultation responses at a

special meeting on or before 20 March 2026. At that meeting, the council will decide whether to make a Reorganisation Order to create the two new community councils.

Whatever the outcome, the decision will help shape how local representation, identity and civic life in Epsom and Ewell evolve as the borough approaches its transition into the new East Surrey authority in 2027.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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## Letters from local Councillors on Epsom and Ewell parishes

29 January 2026



Posted in the order of receipt.

### From Cllr Alex Coley (Independent Ruxley)

Dear Editor,

It is disingenuous to go to residents with a consultation that shows a band D precept of £43.52 (rounded up to £44), when this could be more than six times higher. The Council's own figures add up to a Band D precept of £296.62 for Epsom Parish Council, when certain key community assets are transferred. This is due to the enormous burden of running costs (£73.10) and building repairs (£180).

You will hear that this consultation is simply for the creation of new parish councils dedicated to representing residents' voices and the statutory provision of allotments. That is a Trojan Horse. Seeking a view from residents on a lower figure and then multiplying it several times later is deeply misleading. These additional costs are very likely to be even higher than shown as they are based on out-of-date running costs reported in February 2024 and building repair costs from July 2019.

Residents who worry about their area being left behind will discover that creating a new parish council opens up the opportunity for the forthcoming unitary councils to offload costly buildings. With an uncapped precept, residents can be made to pay for these offloaded buildings — whatever they cost. This can happen at ANY time AFTER the new parish council is created. The one thing that definitely won't be left behind is your money. I am seeking further analysis to calculate itemised costs for all the many buildings, parks and open spaces which could be transferred in future years, adding to the parish precept even further.

Using figures in the Council report from 9th December, these are the expected Parish Tax bands for Epsom when the three key community assets are included after the consultation has closed.

Band A — £197.75

Band B — £230.70

Band C — £263.66

Band D — £296.62

Band E — £362.53

Band F — £428.45  
Band G — £494.36  
Band H — £593.24

Residents are being treated like Turkeys. Not just voting for Christmas, but paying for Christmas too!

Yours faithfully,

Alex Coley (Independent - Ruxley)

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### From Cllr James Lawrence (Liberal Democrat, College Ward)

Dear Editor,

I would like to remind readers that this consultation is to set up two parish councils, that will only manage allotments. That is the only service proposed to be provided to residents. Of the 11 allotment sites in the borough, the council currently runs only 7. Some wards for which councillors are proposed don't even have any allotments in them. Before addressing the clear ambition to further expand responsibilities and costs, as indicated by "could work with East Surrey Council in the future to undertake any services which it is agreed may be better run at a local level, such as parks, open spaces and community buildings etc." I will first focus specifically on the proposals as written.

The consultation document (appendix 4 of 9 Dec 2025 Full Council papers item 11) on pg 8 states that "the budget essentially covers" two key things: "Parish Council Administration" and "Allotments". What is not explained anywhere in that document is the fact that of the total collective cost of £1.52mil, only £0.02mil is required for the management of the 7 allotment sites. This is the only part of the precept (the new tax) that may possibly relate to the suggested ambition to "improve community engagement, local democracy, and service delivery" (pg 2 of appendix 4), and even then only for the few hundred council allotment holders. At only 1% of the proposed cost, the "local democracy" part of the extra tax is at best a rounding error on the amount you will pay.

As has been indicated, in reality it is highly unlikely that the parish precept will remain at ~£45. What is the future projection of this additional tax? We will receive no discount on our unitary council tax rates. The council's own papers (appendix 7) predict significant rises to the tune of ~£220 above the £45 for a Band D property if the three big community assets of Bourne Hall, Epsom Playhouse and the Community & Wellbeing Centre are included. Why are none of these future expectations and cost breakdowns not included in the consultation document? I will leave the reader to decide.

Yours faithfully,

Cllr James Lawrence (LibDem College)

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### From Cllr Bernie Muir (Conservative, Horton Ward)

Dear Editor,

The white elephant of parish councils is an exercise in self-indulgence and self-interest at vast expense to the Borough's residents.

"The proposal adds an extra, unnecessary layer of cost and local bureaucracy with little, if any, benefit, especially given that all areas WILL be represented by new Neighbourhood Area Committees comprising of your Councillors, health, police and a tailored list of local groups or individuals that serve your community — a fact not mentioned in the Consultation."

Without having determined what the Parish Councils would do, other than manage allotments thus what it would cost, other than 'considerably higher' than the initial charge, they are asking residents their view on setting up two costly councils based on effectively no, or missing, information.

The maths reveal that lack of value — The council quotes an additional cost of £44-£46 for the first year (for a Band D property) to cover the cost of maintaining allotments, despite this costing only 60p per household with the rest of the precept, some 99% of the first-year charge, going on administrative costs.

The average cost per property would actually be almost 20% higher at £53 in the first year, exceeding the figures quoted in the consultation (around £45). That is because the average property in Epsom and Ewell is Band E, not the quoted Band D figure. The actual cost in the first year would vary between £30 (Band A) and over £90 (Band H).

However, that is only the tip of the iceberg.

The council has ambitions to take on much, much greater costs, all of which would be charged to residents as an additional council tax 'precept' in future years. The first three assets being considered for transfer to the new parish councils would alone increase the average additional precept cost per property in Epsom to around £350, with costs for Epsom households varying from £198 (Band A) to over £590 (Band H, Epsom) based on the council's figures.

The council's own public report pack goes on to state 'If other community assets (e.g. country parks etc) were to be transferred, the costs would be considerably higher'. Even £590 per year could go considerably higher! All this is on top of the standard council tax charge. Whilst borough council tax rises were capped at 3% each year, there is no cap at all on parish council precepts.

Before responding to the consultation, I encourage residents to ask themselves what, specifically, the proposed parish



councils are going to provide, and whether it is worth the large, increasing and uncapped costs.

Yours faithfully,

Cllr Bernie Muir (Conservative Horton)  
Vice-Chairman Surrey County Council  
Surrey County Councillor — Epsom West Division  
Epsom & Ewell Borough Councillor — Horton Ward

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**From Cllr Hannah Dalton (RA Stoneleigh) leader of the ruling Residents Associations Group on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**

Dear Editor,

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is not alone in making the decision that, as a result of Surrey local government reorganisation, there is an urgent need to review or establish Community Councils (also known as Parish or Town Councils). This work is also being undertaken by Guildford Borough Council, Mole Valley District Council, Reigate & Banstead Borough Council, Runnymede Borough Council and Surrey Heath Borough Council.

From July to October 2025, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council conducted the first resident consultation on the proposal to establish Community Councils, and 67% of respondents were supportive of the proposal. As a result of the consultation, and listening to our residents, further work has been carried out and the Council is undertaking a second and final resident consultation from December 2025 to February 2026.

It is disappointing that the Labour, Liberal Democrat, Conservative and Independent groups are seeking to derail this work and, in doing so, deny the residents of Epsom and Ewell the second consultation to make an informed decision on whether to proceed with establishing two Community Councils. To my mind, this is another example of political parties denying residents their democratic voice — which we have already seen through the cancellation of the Surrey local elections due to take place in May 2025, and more recently, through not listening to the resident voice in the consultation on Surrey local government reorganisation, where residents were vehemently opposed to the establishment of two Unitary Councils.

The case for establishing a Community Council becomes stronger when you consider what the new East Surrey Unitary Council — which will represent a population of 551,000 — will mean for democratic representation for the residents of Epsom and Ewell.

Currently, the residents of Epsom and Ewell have 35 Borough Councillors and 5 County Councillors. Following the establishment of the East Surrey Unitary Council, this will reduce to 10 Councillors for a population of 81,000; that is a 75% decrease in democratic representation. If ever there were a compelling reason to explore introducing a local Community Council, it is this.

The key areas the second consultation is seeking residents' views on are:

- to establish two Community Councils — one for Epsom and one for Ewell
- to maintain the 14 individual wards that currently make up the Borough of Epsom and Ewell
- to propose 2 Community Councillors for each ward, elected as usual, who would all be volunteers and receive no remuneration for representing residents at a local level
- a proposed precept of around £45 a year (approximately £3.75 a month or 12p a day)

The precept would cover the new Community Councils' administration — such as employment costs, office supplies and equipment, website and IT, insurances — but more importantly, services such as planning, because the Community Council would be a statutory consultee.

This is a pragmatic approach to the proposed introduction of Community Councils, as currently we do not know how the new East Surrey Unitary Council will function.

However, it is worth noting that evidence from areas which have already undergone local government reorganisation shows that there is a critical role for Community Councils, and that the 'Neighbourhood Area Committees' being proposed by Surrey County Council, in practice, do not have the requisite powers or representation to deliver for the residents they represent.

This Epsom and Ewell Community Governance Review consultation will close at 11.59pm on Sunday 1 February 2026 and can be accessed online at:

<https://eebc.inconsult.uk/CGRproposal/consultationHome>

Paper copies of the consultation can be found at:

The Town Hall  
Bourne Hall  
Stoneleigh Library  
Epsom Library  
Ewell Court Library  
Community and Wellbeing Centre

Yours faithfully,  
Cllr Hannah Dalton

### From Cllr Kate Chinn (Labour Court Ward)

Dear Editor

I do not believe there is a need for community councils and they will cause additional costs for residents. There are far too many unknowns. The new unitary council is only obliged to pass on management of allotments which, if the Residents Association councillors get their way, would be two costly administration systems set up for a minimal service.

Alternatively, all the borough's costly and heavily subsidised venues including the Playhouse and Bourne Hall could be transferred. Both need continued costly refurbishment. Costs that would be passed on to residents.

The RA-led council are clearly pushing for two parish/community councils – one for Epsom and one for Ewell. An increase of administration from the two currently representing the borough.

Yours faithfully,  
Cllr Kate Chinn

## 'I don't believe I am a political person': Surrey leader reflects

29 January 2026



As Surrey heads into the new year, the mood at Woodhatch Place, the county council's head quarters, is one of reflection and quiet apprehension for the year ahead. For Tim Oliver, leader of Surrey County Council, the festive period comes at the end of what he described as a "busy" year. One that began with the announcement of the biggest shake up in local government for decades and will end with the council preparing for even more change in 2026.

"It's been quite a journey," he said, reflecting on the year since local government reorganisation was announced. "But we've ended it in a pretty good place in terms of setting ourselves up for the heavy lifting over the next 12 months."

While Christmas brings a lull in council business and many work places, Cllr Oliver joked that residents "with a bit of time on their hands" are still keen to get in touch about local issues. But there is no resentment in his voice, just a familiar sense of public service never stops.

Sat in an office of some description, a blurred bookshelf marked a hazy backdrop, the council leader seemed slightly weary but ready for a half-hour interview. Reflecting back on his time at the local authority, at the last full year in power, he said: "I just marked seven years as the leader of this council. I feel proud of what the council has done over that period in terms of financial stability, we've invested a lot into communities like 'Your Fund Surrey'."

"I don't believe that I am a political person," said Mr Oliver, the Conservative leader of the council, speaking to the local democracy reporting service. "Or that I run this council in an overtly political way."

It is a claim some of his colleagues and opponents may find laughable. Particularly when the councillors might claim the council is concerned about financial resilience despite all the criticism over its SEND service, asset-based funding and ambitions to empower communities and charities with funding rather than expand the council's services. But Mr Oliver confirmed the council should not be swayed by ideology and national movements. "There shouldn't be party politics in local government," he said. "We have one job here and we are elected to improve the lives of our residents."

Yet the past year has shown how difficult that principle can be to maintain. Debates over reorganisation, he said, have exposed what he described as a rise in "tribal politics" within the council's HQ. "One of the things that has been slightly disappointing over this last year is that there has been a bit of tribal politics around the reorganisation," he said. Mr Oliver added: "

However, this criticism has been robustly rejected by opposition councillors. Paul Follows, leader of the Liberal Democrats, said that while the Conservative leader was "disappointed" by the tone of the debate, the response from other parties reflected what they described as the reality that only the Conservatives supported pursuing local government

reorganisation in its current form.

He said Lib Dems across Surrey had supported reform only where it was rooted in “genuine localism” and underpinned a proper assessment of the county’s financial challenges. Cllr Follows said: “It is difficult to see what, if any, benefit this rushed process of local government reorganisation brings to Surrey – particularly to boroughs that are largely self-sufficient and solvent, such as Waverley, Guildford, and Reigate & Banstead.”

Cllr Oliver acknowledged that local election results often reflect national sentiment, regardless of how councils perform. “You could be the most outstanding council,” he said, “but if you’re standing through a political party, it reflects the national position.”

While he said he was proud of the council’s record on financial stability and service improvement, he admitted he did not know how voters would respond in an election likely to be shaped by national politics, council tax pressures and public frustration. “I genuinely don’t know what will happen here locally,” he said. Mr Oliver said he saw no evidence that Reform-run councils were doing anything fundamentally different from authorities already under financial pressure.

Despite his concerns, Mr Oliver said residents ultimately judge councils on outcomes rather than ideology, on results rather than rhetoric. As he prepares to take a step away from leadership, Mr Oliver said whoever takes over must remain true to acting in the best interest of residents.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Tim Oliver (credit Surrey Live) and County graphic credit SCC.

Related reports:

[Epsom and Ewell to Go East in Surrey shake-up](#)

[Neighbour Area Committees in Surrey](#)

## Surrey to have a Mayor?

29 January 2026



Surrey will get a mayor despite months of uncertainty and a lack of solid confirmation from the government, the county council leader has insisted. Tim Oliver said he is “confident” a mayor of Surrey would go ahead, even though the central government has yet to formally sign off and has delayed mayoral elections in other parts of the country.

“I can assure you, it will happen,” Cllr Oliver said, speaking to the local democracy reporting service (LDRS), on December 17. Surrey was placed on the government’s first wave of local government reorganisation specifically to unlock devolution and create a mayor. The leader added that ministers were fully aware of the county’s position.

The delay, he suggested, was more about shifting national priorities and new ministers rather than any change of heart over Surrey itself. “It’s slightly frustrating,” he said. “We didn’t get a confirmation date of the mayoral election when we thought we would.”

Since reorganisation was announced last year, there has been a change of secretary of state and a rethink over how quickly devolution should roll out. Mayoral elections have already been pushed back to 2028, something Cllr Oliver believes Surrey is now being caught up in. “They haven’t said no,” he said. “But equally they didn’t say yes at the same time as the announcement, which is what we had expected.”

The county leader said he has already met with the minister responsible and is due to have another meeting in early January, saying discussions with the government were “active”. Despite the uncertainty surrounding a mayor, Cllr Oliver said Surrey’s positioning has remained strong and that the county would likely follow whatever timetable the government agrees with other mayoral areas: potentially bringing elections forward to 2027 rather than waiting until 2028.

While residents may find the process confusing, he said the end goal was clearer leadership and more powers devolved from Westminster. The LDRS reported in October there was “no promise” that Surrey could have a directly-elected mayor as part of the government’s devolution despite this being described locally by councillors as the entire main purpose of reorganisation.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has previously said that the references to Surrey getting a directly elected mayor were “not quite accurate” as the decision “has not been confirmed” and that they were only “committed to working with partners to establish a strategic authority for the area”.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Council Leader Tim Oliver speaking at full council meeting October 8. (Credit: Surrey County Council live stream)

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Government Casts Doubt on Surrey's Mayoral Devolution Promise

# Public of Epsom and Ewell to be asked if they want two new Councils

29 January 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has voted to continue exploring the creation of two new community councils—one for Epsom and one for Ewell—following an often heated debate at the Full Council meeting on Tuesday 9 December. The decision means the proposals will now go to a second phase of public consultation before a final vote in March 2026.

The meeting also saw **Cllr Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) elected—by 17 votes to 11—over **Cllr Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) as the Borough's representative on a Local Government Association forum related to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

The main item of the night, however, was whether to progress the Community Governance Review (CGR) and consult residents further on the proposed new parish-style councils.

## What was decided

Two recommendations were voted on separately, both by recorded vote:

- Recommendation 1: Proceed to a second-stage consultation
- Recommendation 2: Confirm the amended Terms of Reference and delegated arrangements for running that consultation

Both recommendations were carried by 17 votes to 6 (or 7) with 6 (or 5) abstentions, depending on the motion.

## Supporters: “Residents must have a voice before the borough is abolished”

**Cllr John Beckett** (RA Auriol), who proposed the motion, framed the issue as a democratic response to the looming abolition of the borough council under Surrey's move to two unitary authorities. He warned of a 75% reduction in elected representation once Epsom and Ewell's 35 borough councillors and 5 county councillors are replaced with just 10 unitary councillors.

Beckett said: *“These changes are about the centralisation of power and money all at the expense of local democracy.”* He added that the first consultation—352 responses, with 67% supporting further investigation—was *“the second highest response to a borough-wide consultation outside the Local Plan”*.

He argued that parish-style councils could preserve local identity and provide continuity: *“For our residents... this gives our residents a choice, and it gives our residents a voice.”*

**Cllr Hannah Dalton** told councillors that other areas undergoing unitary transitions, including Northamptonshire, Wiltshire and Somerset, saw unparished areas *“left behind”*. She said that if Epsom and Ewell did not act now, it risked becoming *“the only unparished area in East Surrey”*.

She added: *“Tonight we are only asking you to support further consultation... with a precept that has no transfer of assets, whatever our colleagues are saying.”*

**Cllr Neil Dallen** (RA Town) said the proposal was modest: *“We go out to the residents and we ask them... whether they want us to continue.”*

**Cllr Rachel King** (RA Town) emphasised that the public had only given feedback on principles so far: *“We now need to give them a proper opportunity to respond to a fleshed out proposal... We owe it to our residents to give them a voice.”*

## Opponents: “A flawed consultation, a financial burden, and a political stitch-up”

Opposition councillors delivered some of the sharpest criticism heard in the chamber for years.

## Claims of a flawed consultation

**Cllr Julian Freeman** (Lib Dem College) said the consultation process was “*flawed*” because respondents were forced to select an option rather than reject the idea outright. He argued: “*This is the wrong issue at the wrong time... The only reason this is being raised now is to create a role for the people in this room.*”

**Cllr Rob Geleit** (Labour Court), speaking also on behalf of absent **Cllr Kate Chinn**, said the proposals lacked community backing: “*A flawed and skewed consultation, a lack of engagement... giving no mandate... and poor financial analysis.*” He added: “*I see no point in removing a layer of democracy only to add it back again on a lesser level.*”

**Cllr Alison Kelly** (Lib Dem Stamford) said residents were mostly concerned about planning, but that the parish proposals did not address this: “*Most people... give the issue of allotments very little thought. We are showing a cost of a parish council around £45 for an allotment you don’t need in a flat.*” She noted that only around 230 respondents had expressed a desire for a parish council.

## Financial warnings: 98.7% admin, 1.3% allotments

**Cllr James Lawrence** (Lib Dem College) highlighted the ratio in the report: approximately £1.5m in administrative overheads versus £20,000 for allotment running costs. “*You will be telling [residents] you’re creating a parish council that is just for allotments... the allotments cost is 1.3% of the tax you’re going to charge.*” He added that consultation documents risked misleading residents by listing admin and allotments side-by-side “*as if they were roughly equal*”.

## “An uncapped tax burden on struggling households”

Cllr Alex Coley warned that the real precept could be much higher—up to £180 for Band D properties—if the community councils later took on community buildings with significant maintenance liabilities such as Bourne Hall: “*It would be disingenuous to go to residents with £40-something pounds when it could be £180... We should not seek a view from residents with a lower figure and then quadruple it.*” He said many residents were “*struggling financially*” and called the proposals “*an astonishing waste of time, energy and money.*”

**Cllr Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) urged councillors to wait until the new unitary structure and Surrey’s pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) bedded in: “*I think this is a premature discussion... we should see how the unitaries and NACs pan out and then move forward if we need to.*”

**Cllr Chris Ames** (Labour Court) was highly critical of the RA leadership: “*This wasn’t a review. This was one option chosen by the Residents’ Association to meet its own purposes... It’s all about providing a jumping-off point for the clique that runs this council.*”

## Admin cost vs allotment cost: the core numerical controversy

Using the figures in the Report to Council:

- Admin and support costs for new community councils: approx. £1.5 million
- Cost of allotment management: approx. £20,000

That means roughly:

- 98.7% of the expenditure is administration
- 1.3% is allotment provision

This ratio became a central argument for opponents, particularly **Cllr Lawrence**, who said allotments would be a “*rounding error*” in the parish budget.

Supporters responded that these were not final budgets, merely illustrative maxima, and that Phase 2 consultation would use the *true* starting point—around £43-£46 Band D—with no asset transfers.

## Conclusion

The council has opted to continue exploring parish councils despite sharp divisions. The second public consultation will now seek residents’ views on more detailed proposals before a final decision in March 2026—months before the borough is abolished and replaced by the new East Surrey unitary authority.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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# Do Epsom and Ewell Borough's allotments need their own elected Councils?

29 January 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillors will meet on Tuesday 9 December to decide whether to progress the next stage of creating two new parish councils for the borough before the authority itself is abolished in 2027. The proposal comes amid the Government's reorganisation of Surrey, which will see all boroughs, districts and Surrey County Council replaced by two large unitary authorities.

Parliament's direction of travel is clear: to simplify local government by replacing the current two-tier structure with single, consolidated authorities. East Surrey Council, which will take over responsibility for all local services from 1 April 2027, is intended to achieve economies of scale and reduce duplication between bodies. The question now before councillors is whether introducing new parish councils beneath the new unitary structure would support or undermine that objective.

Earlier this year the Borough Council launched a Community Governance Review seeking resident views on the creation of parish councils. Of a borough population of around 80,000, the consultation received 352 responses. The most favoured option was the creation of two parishes—one for Epsom and one for Ewell—each with its own parish council and councillors. Whether this level of public engagement constitutes a sufficient mandate for a constitutional change that introduces a new local taxation and governance layer is one of the issues councillors must now weigh.

The proposal is also set against the backdrop of Surrey County Council's own recent approach to local engagement. In other parts of Surrey the County Council has piloted "Neighbourhood Area Committees" aimed at bringing councillors, residents and partners together to shape local priorities without creating new bodies with precept-raising powers. These committees are designed to provide an alternative route for local consultation and influence that stops short of formal parish governance. Whether such models should be adopted more widely under a single-tier system—and whether they might re-emerge under the new East Surrey Council—adds a further dimension to the discussion about the need for, and value of, parish councils.

Supporters of parishing argue that the disappearance of the borough council leaves a significant democratic gap. Once abolished, the entire former borough area will be represented by just ten East Surrey councillors instead of the 40 elected representatives residents currently have across county and borough levels. Parish councils would help preserve local identity, provide a community voice on issues close to home, and maintain civic traditions, including the mayoralty, which would otherwise require Charter Trustees.

However, the financial implications remain uncertain. Initially, the proposed parish councils would take on only the minimum legal duty of managing allotments, with no parks, community buildings or other assets transferred. On that basis, it is estimated by Epsom Council officers, a Band D property would pay a parish precept of about £43-£46 per year. But if parish councils later seek wider responsibilities—whether by local choice or because East Surrey Council wishes to devolve services—the cost to residents could increase. In time, this could reintroduce something resembling a two-tier model from below, even as the new unitary seeks to simplify structures from above.

Proponents of the unitary approach argue that genuine savings depend on consolidating services, not recreating local administration. Advocates of parish governance counter that representation and community influence have a value that cannot be measured solely in financial terms. Councillors, meanwhile, must judge whether the balance of risks and benefits favours moving to the next stage of consultation or pausing the process entirely.

If the Borough Council votes to proceed on Tuesday, a second consultation will run from mid-December to early February, with a final decision required before March 2026, when powers transfer to the East Surrey Shadow Authority. If the proposal is halted, decisions about any future local governance arrangements—whether parish councils, neighbourhood committees or other models—will fall to the new unitary authority.

The choice before councillors therefore becomes one of the last major decisions the Borough Council will make about the shape of local democracy in Epsom and Ewell. Residents can follow the meeting live via the council's YouTube channel.





See

Neighbour Area Committees in Surrey

## Neighbour Area Committees in Surrey

29 January 2026



As Surrey prepares for major local government reorganisation, the County Council has been trialling a new model of community involvement known as Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs). These committees, currently operating in four pilot areas, are designed to give residents and partners a stronger voice in shaping local priorities without creating new councils or adding an extra layer of taxation. With Epsom and Ewell facing the abolition of its borough council in 2027 and debating whether two parish councils should be established, attention is turning to whether NACs offer an alternative blueprint for local influence in the new unitary era.

The first three pilot NACs were launched in summer 2025 in East Elmbridge, Dorking and the Villages, and North Tandridge. A fourth area, Farnham, joined the initiative in September. These areas were selected to test the model across different geographies and community types, including both parished and unparished areas. Epsom and Ewell is not currently included in the pilot scheme, but the County Council has indicated that NACs could eventually be rolled out county-wide if the pilots prove successful.

Unlike parish or town councils, NACs are not statutory bodies. They do not have legal powers, budgets or the ability to raise a precept through council tax. Surrey County Council describes them as advisory partnerships that bring together elected representatives, public services, voluntary and community organisations and local residents to identify shared priorities and shape decision-making at a neighbourhood level. Typical membership includes county councillors, district or borough councillors (where applicable), representatives from health, police, education and the voluntary sector, alongside community groups and residents. Subject specialists from County Hall provide officer support.

The aim is to encourage more collaborative working between public services and communities, promote preventative approaches, and ensure that future unitary authorities have access to local intelligence when planning services. NACs sit outside the formal structures of governance and do not replace any existing body. Where parish councils exist, they may participate in a NAC, but the NAC itself has no authority over them.

NAC boundaries are formed using existing county electoral divisions as building blocks, refined to ensure the populations are of manageable size, roughly around 50,000 residents. The pilots are running until the end of 2025, after which Surrey County Council will assess their effectiveness and consider whether to expand them across the county. The evaluation will look at levels of participation, the quality of partnership working, community impact and how well NACs might support the new East and West Surrey unitary councils from 2027.

The emergence of NACs adds an additional dimension to the ongoing debate within Epsom and Ewell about whether to create parish councils. Parish councils are formal, elected bodies with defined legal powers and the ability to raise funds through a precept. NACs, by contrast, are informal community partnerships with no statutory authority. Supporters of the parish council model argue that a legally constituted local body is necessary to preserve democratic representation once the borough disappears. Others believe NACs might offer a lighter-touch mechanism to maintain local influence without recreating a second tier of government or introducing new local taxes.

Whether NACs become a central feature of local engagement under East Surrey Council will depend on the outcome of the pilot phase and the design decisions made by the incoming Shadow Authority after May 2026. For now, Surrey's NAC pilots provide an insight into one possible direction for neighbourhood-level involvement in the years after reorganisation.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Related reports:

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## Epsom and Ewell Council transparency disputes revisited

29 January 2026



The Audit and Scrutiny Committee of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council met on 13th November, with long-running disputes about transparency once again overshadowing its agenda. Questions from the public and exchanges between councillors highlighted continuing disagreements over how openly the Council has handled its governance issues and its dealings with external auditors.

### Public challenge over unrecorded meetings with auditors

Resident Previn Jagutpal opened the meeting by questioning the Council's claim to have established "a very open dialogue" with its external auditors, Grant Thornton. He noted that a Freedom of Information response confirmed that no minutes were taken of the Chief Executive's first meeting with the auditors. He suggested that unrecorded, closed-door discussions were difficult to square with recent criticisms of the Council's transparency.

Committee Chair Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) replied that not all internal meetings were minuted and that the quality of discussions with auditors did not depend on the existence of formal notes. He maintained that the sessions were appropriate and did not represent secrecy.

Jagutpal pressed further, but the Chair repeated that such meetings were professional exchanges and were not inconsistent with openness.

### "Culture of secrecy" dispute resurfaces

Jagutpal's second question revisited an earlier controversy over whether the Local Government Association peer review team had used the phrase "culture of secrecy" when assessing the Council's decision-making. In September, Chief Executive Jackie King told the Committee she had an email from the peer-review lead saying they did not recall using that wording.

Jagutpal said that a fuller email chain disclosed under FOI showed that the LGA lead was "not present at every discussion", leaving open whether the phrase had surfaced elsewhere. He accused the Council of selectively presenting the peer review comments. Cllr McCormick rejected any suggestion of misrepresentation and said the full email would be circulated to members and attached to the minutes of the meeting.

### Clash over what may be discussed in public

Labour councillor **Chris Ames** (Court) then raised a formal point of order. He said councillors had been told they could not discuss certain matters in public that related to the 2023 changes to the Scheme of Delegation — the very subject that

led auditors to conclude there was a “significant weakness” in governance. He argued that restricting discussion created the impression that matters were being “stitched up behind the scenes”.

The Chair and the Monitoring Officer both insisted that exempt-information rules applied and that certain details could only be taken in a private session. Ames protested that this prevented transparent scrutiny, but the Chair declined to widen public discussion further.

## Disputed minutes and calls for further scrutiny

During approval of the September minutes, councillors and officers agreed to make a minor correction to a sentence summarising the Chief Executive’s comments. The amendment was adopted without dissent.

The meeting’s most heated exchange followed when Ames asked the Committee to add a future agenda item examining why the external auditors had not been informed earlier about changes to the Scheme of Delegation. Cllr McCormick initially resisted, saying the matter had already been covered by previous meetings.

Ames said that earlier discussions had been “stage-managed” and that the Committee had not been allowed to probe key issues. Liberal Democrat councillor **James Lawrence** (College) supported bringing the item back, saying members simply wanted clarity on when and how auditors were informed.

After a prolonged exchange, the Chair agreed that the subject could be added to a future agenda. Officers, not councillors, will prepare a report to support that discussion.

## Wider business proceeds quietly

Following these debates, the Committee turned to counter-fraud matters, financial monitoring, and internal-audit progress reports. These items attracted few comments and passed without controversy — in contrast to the extended disputes over transparency that continue to dominate the Committee’s work.

## Transparency remains the unresolved issue

Once again, the meeting demonstrated that the central challenge facing the Council is not simply the content of audit recommendations, but the competing interpretations of what “transparency” requires in practice. With further reports now expected, the question of how openly Epsom and Ewell Borough Council takes and explains its decisions seems set to return to the Committee table in the months ahead.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Related reports:

[Epsom and Ewell Council CEO contests ‘culture of secrecy’ claim and outlines fixes](#)

[RA councillor replaces Independent member as scrutiny row erupts at Epsom Town Hall](#)

[“Audit and Scrutiny” under scrutiny](#)

Image: Audit and Scrutiny Committee get ready for the meeting. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council YouTube.

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[Epsom and Ewell Times timeline on Council transparency tussle](#)

## How the Council’s transparency dispute unfolded

The debate over transparency at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has stretched across several meetings of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee. What follows is a clear timeline of how concerns first surfaced, how councillors reacted, and how the Council’s leadership has responded.

### March 2024 - Peer review flags concerns

An LGA Peer Review identifies weaknesses in decision-making processes, warning of confusion among councillors and raising concerns about the Council’s use of confidential sessions. It calls for clearer, more transparent explanations of how decisions are made under the committee system.

### February 2025 - External auditors find a “significant weakness”

Grant Thornton reports a “significant weakness” in the Council’s governance arrangements, citing both the peer review and the lack of transparency over 2023 changes to the constitution and Scheme of Delegation. The Council disputes the auditors’ interpretation, arguing that it is already operating transparently.



## **March 2025 - Committee requests Chief Executive attendance**

Audit and Scrutiny calls for Chief Executive Jackie King to attend its July meeting to explain management responses to the auditors' findings. Concerns centre on whether officers properly informed auditors about the delegation changes.

## **May 2025 - Governance statement controversy**

A draft Annual Governance Statement presented to the committee is criticised for downplaying the auditors' "significant weakness" finding. Members send it back for redrafting, saying it fails to give an honest account of the issues raised.

## **17 July 2025 - CEO absence sparks anger**

At the July meeting, members express frustration that the Chief Executive is absent despite earlier requests. Labour councillor Chris Ames repeatedly raises objections, accusing the Council of stalling accountability. The Chair says the CEO will instead attend the September meeting.

## **30 September 2025 - CEO gives evidence and defends actions**

Chief Executive Jackie King attends and answers questions for the first time. She denies that the peer review described the Council as having a "culture of secrecy", saying the LGA peer-review lead did not recall using the phrase. She outlines changes to reporting practices, including splitting public and confidential papers and providing plain-English explanations for exemptions.

Councillors, including Liberal Democrat James Lawrence, challenge the Council's transparency record, citing confusing urgent-decision processes, late information at the May AGM, and the need for clearer oversight of how auditors are kept informed.

The Committee receives the officers' report but signals that further scrutiny will be needed.

## **Early November 2025 - FOI reveals fuller peer-review email chain**

A resident obtains an email chain via Freedom of Information showing that the LGA lead was "not present at every discussion" during the peer review, raising questions about whether the term "culture of secrecy" may have arisen elsewhere. This adds fuel to concerns about whether the Council has selectively interpreted criticism.

## **13 November 2025 - Transparency dispute dominates meeting**

Two public questions challenge the lack of minutes for meetings between the CEO and auditors and question whether the Council has "filed" peer-review comments. The Chair defends the Chief Executive's position, saying not all professional meetings require minutes, and promises to append the full email to the minutes of the meeting.

A tense exchange follows when Cllr Chris Ames raises a point of order, arguing councillors are being prevented from openly discussing matters central to the auditors' "significant weakness" finding. The Chair and Monitoring Officer insist some discussions must remain exempt.

Ames calls for a future agenda item explaining when and how auditors were told about the delegation changes. With support from Cllr James Lawrence, the Chair eventually agrees that officers will prepare a report for future consideration.

Routine business proceeds quietly, but the transparency issue clearly remains unresolved.

## **Looking ahead**

With further reports pending and the Committee determined to revisit key questions, the transparency debate shows no sign of easing. How openly Epsom and Ewell Borough Council explains its actions, documents its decisions, and engages with auditors is likely to remain at the heart of future Audit and Scrutiny meetings.