



Devolution or dilution? And who decides?

13 April 2026



Surrey's proposal to form a Foundation Strategic Authority is framed as a step forward — aligning transport, housing and economic planning across the county and bringing decision-making closer to local areas.

It may yet prove to be that. But the way in which such steps are taken matters just as much as the structures themselves.

The reorganisation of local government in Surrey is already one of the most significant changes in decades. Boroughs such as Epsom & Ewell are to be abolished and replaced by two large unitary councils. Now, alongside that, a new county-wide strategic authority is proposed. In some areas, parish councils may also emerge.

This is presented as simplification. To many residents, it may look more like substitution — one system replaced by another whose overall shape is no less complex.

A Foundation Strategic Authority would not initially be directly elected. It would operate through existing council leaders, taking decisions that could shape the county's future for decades. That makes clarity of accountability all the more important.

Which is why process matters.

When asked to explain the basis on which Epsom & Ewell supported the Expression of Interest, the council leader **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) declined to comment, citing the pre-election period. Caution during such periods is understandable. But it is important not to overstate what the law requires.

The statutory rules in question are aimed at preventing local authorities from issuing politically sensitive publicity using public resources. They are not a shield against legitimate questions about how decisions have been made — still less where the very question is whether the authority itself took the decision at all.

If a council has formally acted, it should be able to say so, and explain how. If it has not, then that too is a matter of legitimate public interest.

Invoking restrictions designed for publicity to avoid answering questions about authority risks blurring a distinction that ought to remain clear.

The lack of democratic scrutiny over the FSA submission contrasts with the level of scrutiny to which and recently the same Council leadership is subjecting the popular proposal to twin Epsom and Ewell with Bucha in Ukraine: Full Council to Strategy and Resources Committee to a Working Group and then all the way back again.

Beyond this local issue lies a wider one. English devolution has long carried a tension between promise and practice. Powers are announced, structures created, and expectations raised. Yet control — particularly financial control — often remains at the centre.

The risk is not simply that new layers are added. It is that they exist without the clarity, authority or autonomy needed to justify them.

None of this is an argument against devolution. The case for decisions being taken closer to the communities they affect remains strong. But devolution requires more than new institutions. It requires transparency about who is making decisions, on what basis, and with what authority.

As Surrey moves through this period of change, those are not peripheral questions. They are central ones.



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Cllr Dalton seeks another layer of local government

13 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has apparently joined Surrey leaders in backing a bid to Government for a new county-wide “Foundation Strategic Authority” (FSA), prompting questions about how such a significant step has been taken locally.

A letter dated 20 March 2026, signed by council leaders across Surrey including Epsom & Ewell’s leader Cllr **Hannah Dalton**, (RA Stoneleigh) confirms an Expression of Interest to form the authority by April 2027 .

The proposal forms part of the Government’s latest devolution programme, under which areas without existing mayoral structures are invited to establish FSAs to coordinate transport, housing, infrastructure, skills and economic development.

What is being proposed?

An FSA would sit above the new unitary councils planned for Surrey in 2027, providing strategic oversight across the county. The submission to Government describes it as offering “unified strategic leadership” and supporting long-term planning across a coherent economic area .

FSAs are also widely seen as a potential stepping stone to deeper devolution, including the possibility of a future elected mayor.

A changing local government landscape

The proposal comes as Surrey undergoes major reorganisation, with existing borough and district councils — including Epsom & Ewell — due to be replaced by two unitary authorities.

Alongside that, some areas are exploring the creation of parish or community councils.

The combined effect could see a structure emerging of:

- unitary councils delivering local services,
- a county-wide strategic authority shaping major policy,
- and more localised parish-level bodies in some areas.

Local concerns over authority and process

In a **letter to the Epsom and Ewell Times**, Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent) raises concerns about how the decision to support the Expression of Interest was taken .

He questions whether the Leader of the Council had authority to sign on behalf of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, or whether the action was taken without formal approval through committee or full Council.

That distinction is not merely procedural. If the Expression of Interest was submitted on behalf of the Council, it would ordinarily be expected to rest on some identifiable constitutional or delegated authority. If not, it raises a different question as to the capacity in which the letter was signed.

Council leader declines comment

The Epsom and Ewell Times invited Cllr Hannah Dalton to clarify the position. She responded: “As we are in the pre-election period it is my understanding that elected members should not be making any comments on council matters and so I will not be providing a comment.”

Cllr Dalton is closely associated with the failed attempt to create parish councils for Epsom and Ewell.

Are pre-election publicity rules engaged?

The pre-election period places restrictions on **local authority publicity**, under the Code issued pursuant to the Local Government Act 1986.

However, those provisions are directed at preventing **the authority itself** from using public resources to publish material

that could influence an election. They do not impose a general prohibition on elected members explaining decisions or clarifying the basis on which actions have been taken.

More importantly in this context, the issue raised is whether the Expression of Interest was in fact an authorised act of the Council at all.

If it was, the question of authority is plainly a legitimate matter for public explanation. If it was not, it is difficult to see how statutory restrictions on “local authority publicity” could apply to a request for clarification of an individual member’s actions.

Either way, the question goes to **accountability, not publicity**.

What happens next?

The Government will now consider Surrey’s Expression of Interest. If progressed, further detail will be required on governance, powers and accountability.

For residents, the immediate issue may be more straightforward: understanding how decisions of this scale are made locally, and on whose authority they are taken.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Cllr Coley’s letter to Epsom and Ewell Times



Cllr Coley on an attempt to create another layer of local government

13 April 2026



Dear Editor,

I read the 29th March letter to the editor “Local Councillors react to hospital merger idea” with great interest. The letter mentions a decision ‘taken behind closed doors three weeks ago, without public comment and clearly no intention to engage with residents.’

I agree, this does not augur well. The central theme of the letter is reminiscent of parallel activity at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council.

Last week I discovered, by accident, that our borough council has supported an Expression of Interest to form a Foundation Strategic Authority as part of the Government’s next wave of devolution. This is a significant move with substantial implications for planning, housing, transport, skills, economic development, net-zero initiatives, police and fire services and perhaps most crucially – mayoral powers.

Cllr Hannah Dalton, the Leader of the Council in Epsom & Ewell has joined some, but not all, councils in Surrey to sign the Expression of Interest. There has been no announcement.

To obtain the proper authority in signing this Expression of Interest some Surrey councils have called an Extraordinary Council Meeting, some used a committee meeting and some brought a report to their Cabinet delegating authority to their Leader. There are also some councils which expressly give the constitutional authority to act, to their Leader.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has done none of these.

I have subsequently written to the Council’s Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer seeking clarity.

Do residents wish for their thoughts and concerns for the future to be guessed and assumed, perhaps ignored? Is a precedent being set, where a lone councillor can make strategic decisions on behalf of our borough without any of us knowing? Where is the public debate?

It feels that we have leadership-in-hiding and decisions made in secret. Like they say in Thelma and Louise “You get what you settle for.”

I don’t think we should settle for this.

Yours faithfully,

Cllr Alex Coley (Ruxley), Leader of the Independents – Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Unitary Council candidates standing in Epsom and Ewell

13 April 2026



[Click here for](#) : Details of all candidates for East Surrey Unitary Council standing in Epsom and Ewell

In the weeks ahead Epsom and Ewell Times will publish the personal statements of all candidates that wish to provide them to us.

Residents across Surrey - including Epsom and Ewell - will go to the polls on **Thursday 7 May 2026** in elections that will reshape local government for a generation.

The vote is part of the Government’s programme of **Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)**, which will replace

Surrey's current two-tier system with **two new unitary authorities** from April 2027.

For Epsom and Ewell residents, this means voting not for the existing Borough Council, but for councillors who will form the new **East Surrey Council**.

What voters are being asked to decide

The 2026 elections will choose councillors for the “**shadow**” **East Surrey Council**, a body that will operate alongside existing councils during a one-year transition period.

These councillors will:

- Set the first budgets and council tax levels for the new authority
- Establish governance structures and staffing
- Oversee the transfer of services ahead of April 2027

Once the new system comes into force, they will continue as full councillors of the new authority until at least 2031.

How the new system will work

Under the reorganisation:

- Surrey's **12 existing councils** (county plus districts/boroughs) will be abolished
- Two unitary councils - **East Surrey** and **West Surrey** - will take over all services
- East Surrey will cover areas including **Epsom & Ewell, Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge**

Each new authority will deliver everything from bin collections and planning to education and social care - functions currently split between borough and county councils.

Voting system and representation

Voters will be able to choose **up to two councillors per ward**, with the top two candidates elected under a first-past-the-post system.

Across East Surrey:

- 72 councillors will represent 36 wards
- Elections are based broadly on current county council divisions

What it means locally

Importantly, **no elections are taking place in 2026 for Epsom & Ewell Borough Council itself**. Existing borough and county councillors will remain in post until March 2027, creating a period of overlap.

For residents, day-to-day services are expected to continue unchanged during the transition.

Registering and voting

To take part:

- You must be registered to vote by **midnight on 20 April 2026**
- Photo ID is required at polling stations
- Postal and proxy voting options are available

A pivotal local moment

The Surrey LGR Hub describes these elections as a key step in creating a simpler system of local government, with councillors elected in May playing a “key role in setting up and then running the new councils.”

For Epsom and Ewell, the vote represents a significant shift away from long-standing borough governance towards a much larger strategic authority - with consequences that will shape local services, taxation and representation for years to come.

Sam Jones - Reporter

Two unitary proposal confirmed

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council agrees to submit proposal recommending three unitary councils for Surrey

County council set to propose two unitary councils for Surrey

Information on Epsom and Ewell Council's perished parishes plan blocked on cost

13 April 2026



A dispute between a resident and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council over the conduct of its Community Governance Review (CGR) has escalated, despite the Council's decision to abandon plans for new parish-style community councils.

In March, the Council dropped proposals to create Epsom and Ewell Community Councils after its second-stage consultation produced a decisive result, with around 82% of over 2200 respondents opposing the plans.

However, correspondence seen by the Epsom & Ewell Times shows that concerns about how the consultation was conducted — and how the Council has responded to those concerns — remain unresolved.

Resident raises formal concerns over consultation process

Local government elector Nathan Elvery and a former Council CEO submitted a detailed pre-action protocol letter in early March raising potential legal concerns about the CGR process, including:

- the design of the initial consultation survey and whether a clear “No” option was available
- the adequacy and transparency of financial information
- whether alternative governance models were considered
- compliance with consultation law principles
- whether equality duties had been properly addressed

He also submitted a series of Freedom of Information requests seeking disclosure of internal documents and analysis.

In a follow-up email to the Council's Chief Executive dated 3rd April, Mr Elvery expressed concern that his correspondence had not been substantively addressed, stating that the Council had treated his pre-action protocol letter as “a routine information request” rather than engaging with the legal issues raised.

He wrote that more than four weeks had passed without acknowledgement from senior officers and that “none of this has happened” in terms of the Council's own commitments to timely responses.

FOI request refused on cost grounds

On 1 April, the Council responded to Mr Elvery's FOI requests by confirming that it holds the information sought but declining to provide it on the basis that complying would exceed the statutory cost limit under the Freedom of Information Act.

The Council stated that responding would take more than 18 hours of officer time and was therefore not required under Section 12 of the Act.

In his 3rd April email, Mr Elvery challenges this position, arguing that the Council has improperly aggregated multiple requests to exceed the cost threshold and has failed to meet its duty to provide advice and assistance to narrow the request.

He also argues that some elements of the request — such as whether an Equality Impact Assessment exists or whether legal advice was obtained — could be answered quickly and should not have been refused.

Internal review and possible ICO referral

Mr Elvery has now requested a formal internal review of the Council's FOI decision and indicated that he will refer the matter to the Information Commissioner's Office if the refusal is upheld.

He has also renewed his request for a substantive response to the issues raised in his original pre-action letter, including confirmation of what steps the Council intends to take to ensure that future consultations comply with legal requirements.

Although he confirms that he will not pursue judicial review following the Council's decision to abandon the CGR proposals, he states that the procedural issues identified remain relevant to how the Council conducts future consultations under local government reorganisation.

Consultation outcome settles policy but not process

The Council's decision not to proceed with creating community councils has resolved the immediate policy question. However, the issues raised in the FOI correspondence highlight continuing debate about the consultation process itself.

One recurring point is that the CGR consultation did not include Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) — currently being piloted elsewhere in Surrey — as an option for residents to consider.

Epsom and Ewell Times (EET) survey suggests alternative preference

Alongside the Council's consultation, the Epsom & Ewell Times conducted an independent reader survey.

Although based on a smaller sample of only 112 respondents, the survey found:

- around 75% support for NAC-style local engagement structures
- a similarly high level of opposition to community councils as reflected in the Council's consultation

Unlike the official consultation, the EET survey invited respondents to compare different models of local representation.

Transparency and future implications

The Council's use of the cost exemption under the Freedom of Information Act is a lawful mechanism where a request requires disproportionate time and expense. However, the refusal has left a number of substantive questions unanswered in the public domain.

These include how consultation options were framed, what alternatives were considered, and how financial information was developed and presented to residents.

With Surrey's local government reorganisation continuing, and new governance structures still to be defined, the issues raised in this case may have implications beyond the now-abandoned community council proposals.

The outcome of the internal review — and any subsequent decision by the Information Commissioner — may determine whether further information is disclosed.

For now, while the policy proposal has been withdrawn, the debate about process, transparency and future local representation in Epsom and Ewell remains ongoing.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Many more search "parish council"

Guildford goes a different way to Epsom with Parish Council on a narrow margin

13 April 2026



Guildford Borough Council has approved plans for a new town council despite warnings from its own leader that the move

could hit the borough’s most financially disadvantaged residents hardest.

Council leader Cllr Julia McShane said the consultation results showed a pattern, with people in poorer areas more likely to oppose the plan with fears of extra costs.

She told councillors: “I have a deeply held conviction that we must work with our communities and not do to our communities.” She added the decision “disregards the outcome of the consultation” and the financial pressures facing residents.

Despite this, councillors voted to press ahead with proposals to ask the new West Surrey authority to create a parish-style council for Guildford from April 2027, with £300,000 set aside for set-up costs.

The new council would be funded through a precept, an extra charge on council tax, starting at around £69 a year for a Band D property, with the potential to rise.

The decision follows a public consultation involving more than 3,000 residents, which revealed a near even split: 46.5 per cent in favour and 47.1 per cent against. Turnout was just over 6 per cent, although this was higher than similar consultations elsewhere in Surrey.

“We stand at a critical juncture,” Cllr Vanessa King said. “This [...] is about protecting the residents’ voices and deciding how the unique character of this ancient town will be preserved for the future [...] How does Guildford keep its own voice in a much larger authority?” She stressed the result “is not a referendum”, meaning councillors were not obliged to follow it but debate the reasons.

But critics said pushing ahead lacked a clear mandate. Cllr Bob Hughes said: “Six per cent turnout is not a ringing endorsement... we can’t just keep going until we get the answer we want,” warning residents would “pay through the nose” due to the uncapped nature of the precept.

Cllr Joss Bigmore echoed concerns about fairness, calling it “effectively lumping a regressive tax on those who can afford it the least”. However, he acknowledged the future West Surrey council is likely to face major financial pressures of its own, which could limit its ability to maintain local services.

Supporters argued the town council could help fill that gap. Cllr George Potter said opposition was largely driven by confusion and concern over cost, rather than outright rejection, and warned that not creating a parish could disadvantage vulnerable residents in the long term.

Cllr Richard Lucas added that the financial modelling was based on “very conservative assumptions” and said more could be done to explore other funding sources.

The plans come amid wider local government reorganisation, meaning Guildford Borough Council can no longer create the parish itself. The final decision will now rest with the incoming West Surrey authority, which will decide whether the town council goes ahead.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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

Sun sets on Residents’ Associations’ cherished Parishes for Epsom and Ewell

Epsom and Ewell to ditch Parish Councils plan

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Surrey leaders promise smooth transition to unitaries

13 April 2026



On Friday 13 March, the East and West Surrey Joint Committees met to continue preparations for the transition to new unitary councils ahead of “vesting day” on 1 April 2027.

The committees, made up of councillors from existing Surrey authorities, are meeting monthly to lay the groundwork for the creation of East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council. This interim phase will continue until Shadow Authorities

are formally established following elections in May 2026. The focus is on ensuring stability and effective planning during a period of significant local government change.

Financial pressures and planning challenges highlighted

Members reviewed progress from the Implementation Team (Programme Board), which is overseeing the transition. A draft illustrative financial baseline was presented, offering an early indication of the financial position the new councils are likely to inherit.

The report highlighted that both East and West Surrey are expected to face ongoing financial pressures, including rising demand for services and constrained resources—challenges that would exist irrespective of reorganisation.

Particular concern was noted in parts of West Surrey, where historic debt issues—especially those linked to Woking—will require careful management. The importance of robust governance, financial oversight and continued engagement with government on potential debt support was emphasised.

A recent ministerial letter from Alison McGovern MP confirmed that the government would “continue to explore what further debt support is required at a later point”.

Scrutiny and governance arrangements

Looking ahead to the Shadow Authority phase, councillors discussed how implementation plans will be reviewed. Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committees will be established to provide independent challenge to decision-making, helping ensure plans are realistic, legally sound and properly risk-assessed.

A draft timetable for meetings during the Shadow period was also considered, with initial meetings expected to begin from 20 May 2026.

Devolution discussions continue

Surrey councils are continuing discussions with government on a potential countywide Strategic Authority, which could bring greater local control over areas such as economic growth.

Councils will consider whether to submit an expression of interest for a “Foundational Strategic Authority” — a non-mayoral model that could act as a stepping stone towards a future mayoral arrangement.

Leaders emphasise stability and strong foundations

Terence Herbert, Chief Executive of Surrey County Council and Senior Responsible Officer for the programme, said the work was about “planning ahead, being honest about the challenges, and making sure the new councils start on a strong footing.”

Cllr Bridget Kendrick, Chair of the East Surrey Joint Committee and Leader of Mole Valley District Council, said the focus was on “clear programme governance” and “strengthening scrutiny and oversight” to ensure a smooth transition.

Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, Chair of the West Surrey Joint Committee and Leader of Woking Borough Council, added that the priority was to establish “two stable and resilient councils... providing confidence, continuity and stability through the transition.”

What happens next

The next meetings of the Joint Committees are due to take place in April, with dates and venues to be confirmed. Meetings will continue to be webcast.

Background: what the changes mean

From April 2027, Surrey’s current two-tier system of county, district and borough councils will be replaced by two unitary authorities—East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council—each responsible for delivering all local services.

Elections for the new councils will take place on 7 May 2026, after which elected members will act as Shadow Authorities to oversee the transition.

Until then, residents will continue to access services through existing councils in the usual way.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Epsom and Ewell Council transparency row erupts as council backs publication of urgent decisions

13 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has agreed to improve transparency over so-called “urgent decisions” following a heated debate that revisited the controversy surrounding the Rainbow Centre and allegations of secrecy over a £500,000 liability.

At its Full Council meeting on 12th March, councillors voted to support a motion calling for a clearer and more timely system for publishing decisions taken by officers under delegated authority.

The move follows months of criticism over how urgent decisions have been handled and disclosed, culminating in disputes over a confidential document linked to the Rainbow Centre.

Motion seeks clearer publication of decisions

The motion, proposed by Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) and seconded by Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley), called for a formal process to ensure that officer decisions are properly recorded and made publicly accessible.

Lawrence told councillors that while urgent decisions are currently noted in committee papers, the underlying decision notices themselves are not published in a timely or transparent way. “The decision notice itself isn’t given... that is not at all in the same timeframe as a decision notice from committee,” he said. He added that in the past it could take months, or even up to a year, for such decisions to be reported.

The motion proposed that the Chief Executive develop a process for publishing these decisions, with an update to be reported back to council later in the year.

Legal compliance questioned

The debate turned on whether the council is already complying with transparency laws. Lawrence said the current arrangements were “legally questionable”, pointing to regulations requiring a written record of officer decisions to be produced “as soon as reasonably practicable”.

However, Councillor **John Beckett** (RA Auriol), chair of the Standards and Constitution Committee, rejected claims that the council was acting unlawfully. He told the meeting that the council’s existing practice - recording urgent decisions in committee agendas and reporting them annually - complied with the regulations. “The custom and practice of this council... satisfies this requirement,” he said.

The Mayor also intervened to clarify that officers believed no law had been broken.

Rainbow Centre controversy looms over debate

The discussion was heavily influenced by the ongoing controversy surrounding the Rainbow Centre, where an urgent decision was used to deal with issues linked to the site.

That episode has been the subject of previous reporting by the Epsom & Ewell Times, including concerns about a secret document referring to substantial potential dilapidation costs - reported to be in the region of £500,000.

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) directly linked the motion to that issue, accusing the council of a broader lack of transparency. “We’ve had an ongoing shambles over the so-called urgent decision over the Rainbow Centre,” he said.

He alleged that key information had not been disclosed and suggested there had been no intention to publish the document. “The reality is... there was never any intention to publish the document in the first place,” he said. Ames also described what he called a “growing transparency crisis” within the council.

Since 20th January Epsom and Ewell Times has awaited disclosure from Epsom and Ewell Borough Council of information

that will throw light on the Rainbow Centre controversy. Despite a 20 day legal limit under the Freedom of Information Act to disclose and our concession to accept delay where some items sought may take longer to find, we have received no disclosures of even readily available information.

Calls for greater openness

Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley), who seconded the motion, said he had been investigating urgent decisions since discovering their limited visibility several years ago. “I accidentally discovered that they exist,” he said. He told councillors that hundreds of historic officer decisions had not been publicly disclosed, including some involving significant financial commitments. “Some of them record millions of pounds being spent... even non-exempt information has been withheld as a matter of course,” he said.

Coley said progress had been made in recent years, but argued further reform was needed to ensure proper compliance and public confidence.

Cross-party engagement leads to compromise

Despite the sharp exchanges, the motion itself reflected a degree of cross-party cooperation. Both Lawrence and Coley acknowledged that they had worked with Councillor Beckett and officers to reach a compromise. Beckett, in turn, thanked them for their “time and patience” in developing the proposal.

The agreed approach stops short of declaring the current system unlawful, instead tasking the Chief Executive with designing an improved publication process.

Motion carried by council

The motion was approved by councillors, signalling a clear intention to increase transparency over urgent and delegated decisions. It requires the council to develop a system for publishing decisions in a more accessible and timely way, subject to the usual rules on confidential or exempt information. An update on progress is expected later in the year.

Wider implications

The debate highlights continuing concerns about governance and transparency at the council during its final years before abolition under Surrey’s local government reorganisation.

The Rainbow Centre episode appears to have acted as a catalyst for change, bringing the issue of urgent decisions into sharper public focus.

While the council maintains it has acted within the law, the adoption of the motion suggests a recognition that existing arrangements have not met public expectations. As one councillor put it during the debate, the issue is not only legality but trust.

With further major decisions expected before the transition to a new unitary authority, the way those decisions are recorded and disclosed is likely to remain under close scrutiny.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Epsom and Ewell Council put in proportion

13 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has approved changes to the political balance of its committees following further shifts in councillor allegiances, amid continuing tensions within the ruling Residents' Association group.

The decision, taken at Full Council on 12 March, reflects the latest change in group composition after another RA councillor, **Christine Howells** (Nonsuch), moved to sit as an independent.

The adjustment of committee seats - known as proportionality - is a routine requirement when political group numbers change. However, the debate revealed deeper concerns about control, transparency and internal stability within the council.

Rebalancing committees after defections

Introducing the report, Councillor **John Beckett** (RA Auriol) said the changes were necessary to reflect the council's evolving political makeup. "As a result of changes within the political representation within this council, there has been a need to review the proportionality sitting on committees," he told members.

The revised allocations had been agreed between group leaders and were presented for formal approval by the full council.

Councillors approved the updated distribution of seats, ensuring that representation on committees broadly reflects the current balance of political groups.

Dispute over whether seats belong to parties or individuals

The debate exposed a technical but significant disagreement about whether committee places belong to political parties or to individual councillors.

Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) argued that while parties are allocated seats proportionately, it is the council that appoints individuals to those positions. "It is not the party being appointed, it is the person," he said, adding that councillors who change political group should not automatically lose their place on committees.

He pointed to examples in the report where individuals had been nominated to seats allocated to a particular party, suggesting this supported his interpretation.

But Councillor **Rachel King** (RA, Town) rejected that view, insisting that committee places are fundamentally party allocations. "Seats are for parties, not for people," she said, adding that parties retain the right to nominate replacements if councillors change allegiance. She said the arrangements had been agreed by group leaders and urged councillors to support the proposals.

Tensions over substitutions and control

The issue of substitutions - where councillors stand in for others at meetings - also proved contentious. Opposition councillors criticised what they described as inconsistent or politically motivated handling of substitutions following recent defections.

Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) said the situation had become "farcical", alleging that rules were being stretched to maintain control. "The clique that runs this council has a special talent for alienating members... bending the rules," he said. He linked the proportionality changes to wider political instability, suggesting the Residents' Association group was "bleeding members".

The debate reflects a broader struggle over influence as the RA group's long-standing dominance of the council comes under increasing pressure.

Background: shifting political landscape

The latest changes follow defections from the Residents' Association group over recent months, with councillors moving to sit as independents or aligning with opposition groups. The departure of **Christine Howells** (Independent Nonsuch) from the Residents' Association further alters the balance, reducing the RA group's numbers and requiring another recalculation of committee representation.

Under local government law, councils must ensure that committee seats are allocated in proportion to the size of political groups, as far as practicable. This means that each defection can trigger a reshuffle of committee places and, potentially, influence over key decisions.

Vote confirms new balance

Councillors approved the revised proportionality arrangements, including updated committee memberships.

A separate vote on one recommendation – relating to specific appointments – was carried by 15 votes to eight, with four abstentions, indicating some continuing division within the chamber.

Despite the disagreements aired during the debate, the council formally adopted the new structure, bringing committee representation into line with the current political balance.

Ongoing instability ahead of reorganisation

The debate highlights a council in a degree of political flux as it approaches both local elections and the planned abolition of the borough under Surrey’s local government reorganisation.

With further changes in group membership still possible, additional reviews of proportionality may be required in the coming months.

The shifting balance of power on committees could prove significant in the council’s final year, particularly as it continues to make decisions on major issues before handing over responsibilities to the new unitary authority in 2027.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Sun sets on Residents’ Associations’ cherished Parishes for Epsom and Ewell

13 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has formally abandoned plans to create parish-style community councils after a public consultation produced overwhelming opposition, bringing to an end a controversial review that has cost about £70,000.

The decision was taken at a full council meeting on 12th March following a debate that exposed sharp political divisions and prompted renewed criticism of the Residents’ Association administration that initiated the review.

Councillors ultimately accepted a report concluding that the consultation “does not demonstrate sufficient public support for the proposals”, after residents rejected the idea of creating two community councils covering Epsom and Ewell.

But the debate revealed tensions over the purpose of the consultation itself, the cost of the process, and the future of local representation in Surrey after local government reorganisation.

Beckett: residents “have spoken” but warns of democratic deficit

Introducing the report, Councillor **John Beckett** (Auriol), who led the Community Governance Review (CGR), said the council had carried out extensive engagement with residents and should be proud of the exercise.

He told councillors that more than 2,200 responses had been received, making it one of the council’s most widely

responded-to consultations in recent years.

Beckett said the consultation was justified because residents across Surrey had not been properly consulted about the government's decision to reorganise local government. He argued the borough had taken a different approach by asking residents directly what they wanted.

However, he acknowledged the result left the council with little option but to halt the plan. "Our residents have spoken on this matter, and with 82 per cent opposed to the idea of community councils, the recommendation of this report is not to proceed with CGR," he said.

Despite accepting the result, Beckett used both his opening speech and his closing remarks to warn that the new local government structure could weaken local representation.

He questioned how the proposed neighbourhood committees expected under the new unitary structure would address local issues. "How the non-funded, non-decision-making neighbourhood committees will miraculously deliver those local issues facing our residents," he asked, warning they may not resolve the democratic deficit created by large unitary councils.

In his summing-up he said the future system could leave a patchwork across Surrey of areas with and without meaningful local representation.

Opposition: "self-serving" and a "vanity project"

Opposition councillors were sharply critical of the review and its purpose. Labour councillor **Chris Ames** (Court) said the administration had been warned not to embark on the process. "The Residents' Association administration was warned not to take the council into this shambolic, costly and self-serving process," he said.

Ames argued the public had rejected what he described as an RA "vanity project". "The public saw through it. It's clear that the residents rejected the RA vanity project," he said, adding that residents also resented the idea of another layer of taxation.

He criticised the consultation structure, saying residents were effectively offered only one option. "It's laughable to present giving residents a choice of unwanted parishes or nothing at all as a choice," he said.

He also asked where accountability lay for the £70,000 cost of the review. "Seventy thousand pounds later, where does the CGR shambles leave us?" he asked.

Claims the review was about creating roles

Councillor **Julian Freeman** (Liberal Democrat, College) argued there had never been a public demand for parish councils in the borough. "There's never been any demand for it," he said. Freeman suggested the proposal had been linked to the approaching abolition of borough councils. "It was a way of trying to carve out some kind of role for soon-to-be former Residents' Association councillors," he said.

He added that residents reacted strongly once they realised the potential council tax implications. "People saw that it was going to cost an extra £50 plus on their council tax bill and quite rightly said, what on earth do we want to pay for another layer of government for?"

Criticism of consultation design

Several councillors criticised the structure of the consultation. Councillor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) said residents had not been offered alternative governance models. "We were given one option or nothing," she said.

She added that neighbourhood area committees proposed under Surrey's local government reorganisation had not been presented as an option. "Those committees should at least have been given a chance to see if they worked," she said.

Another councillor said the consultation had effectively framed the issue as a choice between parish councils or losing local influence entirely.

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) reminded the Chamber that the proposed Parishes would only manage a handful of allotments that residents grow fruit and vegetables in.

Administration defends consultation

Residents' Association councillors strongly defended the review as an exercise in democratic engagement.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said the borough had done what central government had not done during the reorganisation process. "We had the courage to ask our residents what they wanted," he said.

He added that the council was respecting the outcome. "They've quite clearly said that they don't want parish councils, and we will act upon that advice." He claimed, wrongly as it transpired, that Epsom and Ewell would be the only area in the County without any parishes. See Epsom and Ewell Times table below.

Councillor **Rachel King** (RA, Town) also defended the cost of the consultation. She said the £70,000 spent equated to less than £1 per resident. "We're talking about less than a pound per person for two full consultations," she said.

King said the aim had been to explore how residents might retain local representation once the borough council disappears in 2027.

A consultation that defeated its own proposal

The consultation outcome - around 82 per cent opposition - effectively forced the council to abandon the idea it had been exploring.

But the debate highlighted a paradox. While the Residents' Association leadership defended the consultation as a democratic exercise, several councillors argued the process appeared designed primarily to test support for parish councils rather than explore a range of possible governance models.

Critics pointed to the absence of alternatives such as neighbourhood area committees and the framing of the consultation around the creation of community councils.

At the same time, Beckett's own speeches emphasised his belief that parish councils would have helped address what he described as the democratic deficit created by large unitary authorities.

End of a £70,000 process

The Community Governance Review had been one of the council's strategic priorities for 2025-27. It involved two rounds of consultation, public meetings, publicity campaigns and engagement activities.

Despite the extensive engagement programme, the consultation produced a clear rejection of the proposal.

For now, Epsom & Ewell will remain without parish councils even after the borough council disappears under the planned Surrey reorganisation.

Parish councils across Surrey

Although Epsom & Ewell currently has none, several Surrey districts contain parish or town councils. In many cases these cover only parts of the district rather than the entire area.

District / Borough	Parish or Town Councils (examples)
Epsom & Ewell	None
Elmbridge	None
Guildford	Ash, Normandy, Pirbright, Shalford, Send, Worplesdon
Mole Valley	Capel, Charlwood, Newdigate, Ockley
Reigate & Banstead	Horley Town Council; Salfords & Sidlow Parish
Runnymede	Englefield Green; Egham Town Council
Spelthorne	None
Surrey Heath	Bisley, Chobham, Windlesham
Tandridge	Numerous including Bletchingley, Burstow, Caterham Valley, Lingfield, Oxted, Warlingham
Waverley	Cranleigh, Farnham, Godalming, Haslemere, Bramley, Chiddingfold, Elstead and others
Woking	Several parish councils including Bisley, Horsell, Pyrford and others

This means that even in districts with parish councils, significant urban areas often remain unparished.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Epsom and Ewell to ditch Parish Councils plan

13 April 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has all but confirmed it will **not proceed with plans to create community councils** in the borough after consultation responses indicated a lack of public support.

The announcement follows an expensive Residents' Association led nine-month **Community Governance Review (CGR)** exploring whether the borough should introduce parish-style local councils – sometimes referred to as community councils – ahead of the planned reorganisation of local government in Surrey.

In a media statement issued on 4th March, the council said responses to the second phase of consultation showed residents did not support the proposals.

Consultation result halts proposal

Councillor **John Beckett** (RA Auriol) chair of the council's Standards and Constitution Committee, said the engagement process had asked residents both whether they wanted parish councils and, later, for views on a model dividing the borough into two areas.

The proposal would have created two bodies: **Epsom Community Council and Ewell Community Council**.

Beckett said: "Responses to the phase two consultation indicate that, at this time, residents do not support the proposals that were consulted upon. The recommendation that will be discussed at full Council is that the Community Governance Review is now concluded and will not be progressed further."

Councillors are expected to formally confirm the decision at a full council meeting scheduled for 12th March.

Threat of legal challenge

The decision comes after a **formal pre-action legal letter** warned the council it could face judicial review if it proceeded to create the councils.

Local resident and former senior local government chief executive **Nathan Elvery** wrote to EEBC chief executive Jackie King on 4th March raising concerns about the consultation process.

In the letter, sent under the judicial review pre-action protocol, Elvery argued the review process was procedurally flawed and warned that if the council made a reorganisation order creating the councils he would seek to have it quashed by the courts.

His challenge raised a number of potential grounds including:

- alleged flaws in the design of the first consultation survey
- reliance on a response rate of around **352 replies from roughly 57,000 electors**
- concerns that residents may not have been given full financial information about possible council tax precepts
- failure to present alternative governance models
- and consultation timing spanning the Christmas period.

He also submitted a series of **Freedom of Information requests** seeking internal documents, financial modelling and details of the consultation design.

Elvery requested the Council defer any decision until the issues were addressed and warned that proceeding regardless could lead to legal proceedings.

Experienced public sector leader

Elvery is a long-standing public sector leader with more than three decades of experience in local government transformation and finance.

He has served in senior roles including chief executive, chief operating officer and executive director across a range of councils and national public sector bodies, and now runs a consultancy advising councils and senior leaders.

Long-running debate

The CGR began in 2025 following Surrey's **Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)** plans, which will abolish the borough council and replace it with a new East Surrey unitary authority expected to take over services in 2027.

Supporters of community councils argued they could preserve a layer of local representation after the borough council disappears.

Critics, however, warned they would create a new tax-raising tier of government funded through an additional council tax precept.

Early council estimates suggested a precept of around **£43-£46 per Band D household**, though opponents argued the real cost could rise significantly depending on staffing and responsibilities.

Readers sceptical in Epsom and Ewell Times survey

An Epsom & Ewell Times reader survey on local government reorganisation gathered 112 opinions. The survey showed a big majority against the idea of new parish-style councils. The survey offered an opportunity for residents to express an opinion about alternative neighbourhood area committees. An option the Council had not provided in its consultation.

The survey results suggested readers were more concerned with maintaining effective local representation and protecting services during the transition to the new unitary authority.

Readers also expressed caution about adding an additional tier of governance funded by council tax.

And readers by a clear majority are against maintaining even a ceremonial mayoralty for the Borough.

The full survey results can be read here:

<https://epsomandewelltimes.com/epsom-and-ewell-times-lgr-reader-survey-results>

Elections in Epsom and Ewell to the new East Surrey Council are due to take place in May.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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