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The Man Who Signed It, Chaired It, and Wouldn’t Explain It: Six Months of Silence Over Rainbow’s £500,000 Bill

11 July 2026



Six months after Epsom and Ewell Borough Council quietly authorised the use of its reserves to cover a dilapidations bill of up to £500,000 at the Rainbow Leisure Centre, the six basic questions this paper put to the Councillor who approved that decision remain unanswered. Not because the council disputes the facts. Not because litigation prevents comment. But because, first, it said the matter was commercially sensitive; then, once an election was called, it said the law forbade a response; and now that the election is over, it has offered residents a statement about gym upgrades instead.

The common thread through every stage of this story is one councillor: **Neil Dallen** (RA Town), Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee, who signed off the original urgent decision, chaired the meeting where questions about it were cut off, and has twice found a procedural reason not to say how the bill arose.

A smooth handover, on paper

Rainbow Leisure Centre transferred from its operator of 22 years, GLL, to Places Leisure on 1 October 2025. The council’s own account, recorded in the Urgent Decision document later obtained by this paper, describes an unremarkable changeover: no break in service, a deal offering “significantly more income than the Council had been receiving,” and a pre-handover check by an external consultant intended to confirm the building “would be handed back in good condition.” That check, the document specifies, “was not an invasive analysis.”

Within weeks, Places identified a long list of problems: faults in fire alarms, lifts, seating, glazing, sanitaryware, ventilation, damp, possible roof cracks, and machinery officers now describe as at “end of life.” Some were flagged as health and safety risks requiring immediate action.

December: a £500,000 estimate, marked not for publication

On 17 December 2025, under the reference DEC 158, the council took an Urgent Decision — a mechanism used when a matter cannot wait for the ordinary committee cycle — authorising its Section 151 officer to finalise dilapidations negotiations with Places. The document, marked “OFFICIAL SENSITIVE – NOT FOR PUBLICATION” and exempted under paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, put the likely cost at up to £500,000, to be met initially from the council’s dilapidations reserve and recovered from GLL only “in due course” — with the same document conceding the council “must accept that it will not be able to recover the Places claim in its entirety.” Cllr Dallen was consulted as committee chair and recorded his view in two words: “Happy to support.”

The decision stayed confidential until this paper obtained and published it in January.

January to March: leak, backlash, and the first stonewall

The story prompted sharp criticism from opposition councillors, who accused the ruling Residents’ Association of secrecy and complacency. The council’s public response — attributed to Dallen and Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village)— framed the transfer as “an exciting new chapter” and declined to discuss “terms and financial arrangements” as commercially sensitive. GLL, for its part, maintained it had fixed everything flagged by the pre-handover survey and handed the building back to the required standard.

This paper submitted a Freedom of Information request on 13 January seeking the lease’s inspection clauses, any log of landlord inspections or condition surveys since 2003, records identifying the backlog and its cost, and evidence of when councillors were first told. The council took over two months to respond, and released only a handful of lease clauses.

At the Strategy and Resources Committee on 27 January, Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) pressed Dallen, as chair, on why the decision had been kept confidential and whether a public-interest test had ever been carried out. Dallen confirmed he had supported both the decision and its confidential status, then closed the matter down: “It is my meeting… I have made a decision there is going to be no further comments.”

The survey that two accounts can’t both describe

A letter to this paper from Cllrs Ames and **James Lawrence** (Independent College), following the Audit and Scrutiny Committee’s March meeting, surfaced a direct conflict in how the council has characterised the pre-handover survey. The Assistant Director for Corporate Services told that committee that consultants Carter Jonas had been commissioned to carry out “a very detailed survey of the whole leisure centre.” But in June 2025, recommending the Places contract to the Strategy and Resources Committee, the same officer described the exercise as a stock condition report commissioned

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merely to “inform the procurement process,” on the basis that the council “has been very satisfied” with how the centre had been run and that it was, “overall,” in good condition.

Both descriptions cannot comfortably be true of the same piece of work — and neither sits easily with the Urgent Decision document’s own characterisation of the survey as “not an invasive analysis.” This paper has been unable to establish which account is accurate, because the council has refused to release the survey itself, citing legal professional privilege.

April and May: an election as a shield

As the 7th May East Surrey Unitary Council elections approached — in which Dallen was himself a candidate — the council declined to answer a detailed list of questions this paper put to him on 24 March, citing Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986, which bars councils from publishing material designed to influence political support. Independent expert opinion obtained by this paper, from **Nathan Elver**y, former Chief Executive of Croydon Council, concluded the questions posed were “factual in character” and that a response “would not constitute political publicity within the meaning of the Act” — the council, he noted, was “not being asked to promote a political position; it is being asked to account for its stewardship of public funds.” Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) relied on the same provision to avoid unrelated questions about a separate governance matter.

A subsequent FOI request established that the decision to invoke Section 2 in Dallen’s case involved the Chief Executive, the Monitoring Officer, senior communications officers, and Dallen himself — yet the council said it held no record of the legal or governance advice behind that decision. The guidance document it pointed to as its basis, meanwhile, explicitly permits councils to continue normal business and to publish factual information during an election period.

Dallen finally responded on 18 May, twelve days after polling. The response answered none of the substantive questions this paper had posed two months earlier about how the dilapidations arose; it repeated that “details relating to terms and financial arrangements are commercially sensitive.”

June: privilege claimed, release refused

On 18 June the council upheld its refusal to disclose the 2025 inspection report or any related backlog, dilapidation or financial exposure documents, now citing Section 42 of the Freedom of Information Act — legal professional privilege — on the basis that litigation was “a live issue” and the council was “already talking to our lawyers.” This paper’s request for internal review had argued the exemption was being applied as a blanket, rather than document by document, and that routine inspection and survey material does not become privileged merely because litigation is later contemplated. The council’s review upheld the original refusal in full. This paper is now preparing a complaint to the Information Commissioner’s Office.

29 June to 6 July: the same six questions, and no answers

With the election well behind it, this paper wrote to Dallen again on 29 June, posing six direct questions: did GLL hide the dilapidations; did the handover survey fail to report them accurately; is the scale of the dilapidations agreed by the council; did they arise in the gap between survey and occupation; is there another explanation; and which parties are under consideration for legal action. The council’s communications team acknowledged the request that evening and asked for a deadline — a response was received on 6 July, attributed to Dallen. It addressed none of the six questions. It described the transfer as “the beginning of an exciting new chapter,” referenced planned investment in the gym, studios and changing rooms, and reiterated that financial arrangements remain commercially sensitive.

Ames states: “”The holes in the administration’s story are so big they do not need an expert survey to locate them. It is obvious that it used the urgent decision process to cover up its own incompetence and negligence and that it has continued the cover-up ever since. When the issue comes before the Audit and Scrutiny Committee next week, I expect the administration to use every trick in the book – plus a few new ones – to hide the truth from residents, but I and other councillors are determined not to let this happen.”

Where this stands

Four explanations remain on the table for how a “very detailed” — or, on the council’s alternative account, non-invasive — pre-handover survey and an uneventful transfer became a £500,000 liability within three months: that GLL was not straight about the building’s condition; that the council failed to inspect or enforce its rights as landlord across more than two decades; that the survey’s scope was too narrow to catch what mattered; or that Places has overstated what it found. Each implicates a different party, and each is precisely why the underlying documents matter.

What is not contested is the pattern: a councillor who authorised the spending, chaired the meeting where it was challenged, and has since given two different procedural reasons — commercial sensitivity, then election law — for not answering the same six questions about how it happened.

Residents who ultimately fund the shortfall are still waiting for a plain account of why.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Related reports:

Epsom & Ewell Council blocks release of Rainbow Leisure Centre condition papers – 2 July 2026

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Big spending must be approved by new Councils from now

11 July 2026



Major financial decisions across Surrey must now be taken by the newly formed councils – despite the fact they will not take over for almost a year.

Elections held in May voted in two new authorities, East and West Surrey. In April 2027 they will take over the running of public services in the county, and all existing councils will be dissolved.

As part of the process the Government has written to the outgoing bodies to say key monetary decisions now need to be approved by the incoming authorities.

This means land sales or contracts over £100,000 must be kicked up the ladder – as well as capital contracts of more than £1m. It also covers staff contracts.

The order covers Surrey County Council and all the boroughs and districts except for Woking and Spelthorne as they are under the control of Government appointed commissioners due to the state of their finances and need to rapidly improve bottom lines to reduce the huge debt West Surrey will be lumbered with.

The Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, said East and West Surrey should have a say on agreements to be entered to ensure they were in the best interests of the new councils or the residents of the areas they serve.

It would also ensure that any agreements do not undermine or diminish the anticipated benefits or savings as a result of unitarisation or have an effect on the financial position of the new councils.

In practice the old councils have already been operating under this model with the understanding that it would be formalised.

East and West Surrey Councils are expected to publish reports in the next few days that include recommendations into how services across two bodies will be run from next year.

These will come to their respective shadow executives on July 20 and 21 for approval.

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (image Google)

House extension fees relief coming to Surrey?

11 July 2026

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News that the Government could end the controversial house-extension taxes that slapped Waverley homeowners with huge fines or even the prospect of jail has been welcomed.

The Community Infrastructure Levy was first introduced in 2010 to enable councils to fund projects such as new schools, green spaces and health facilities. The idea was to balance the impact that new developments had on existing communities.

In 2014, exemptions for people building their own homes or smaller extensions were introduced. However, these had to be applied for in advance, creating a ticking time bomb for residents caught out in a labyrinth of paperwork.

It soon became clear that some householders were slipping through the cracks, creating inadvertent or unintentional charges despite qualifying for exemptions. This left them facing huge and unexpected bills, with many Waverley residents directly impacted.

The Government has now said it will look to change the system and launch a consultation in due course. This has been welcomed by action groups and politicians alike. However, until that becomes law, Waverley Borough Council remains bound by the existing system.

For example, liability notices, where a charge is placed against a property, still cannot be lifted. Any changes will have to wait until the Government adopts its new policy.

In a statement following the Government's announcement, Waverley Borough Council recognised the difficulties some homeowners had faced and said it had written to Ministers highlighting concerns.

Councillor Liz Townsend, Waverley Borough Council's portfolio holder for planning, said that while the announcement laid out a path forward, there were still limits on what the authority was able to do.

The law still prevents councils from repaying money collected in CIL charges from the so-called CIL pot. Any payment must instead come from general funds, at either the taxpayers' expense or a cost to services. Equally, while the Government has said it will consult on reform, no dates have been set.

Cllr Townsend said: "We still cannot refund CIL from the CIL pot. We have always been clear that we couldn't refund from the CIL pot; it will be from the general fund under discretionary review.

"That's what we've already done and we've already made a payment, and that was where that was from. It hasn't changed, as we could make ex-gratia payments under exceptional circumstances.

"Removal of liability notices still can't be done, and that is so critical for our residents. It's currently black and white at the moment and we can't use our discretion. It's desperately important for residents that this is resolved. That needs to be done through an Act of Parliament.

"The consultation is very welcome. Hopefully it will put things right. We've been lobbying the Government for this; it desperately needs to be changed. It's too inflexible in its current state. We hope there are fundamental changes to housebuilder and self-builds."

CIL is a set charge on most new developments of 100 square metres or more, as well as on new dwellings of any size. It applies only in areas where a local authority has consulted on and approved a charging schedule setting out its levy rates, and has published that on its website.

It was adopted by Waverley Borough Council on October 31, 2018, and implemented on March 1, 2019.

The Government is now looking to change the system "to ensure that these issues do not arise again in the future – recognising the need to improve the operation of the CIL regime going forwards".

Its aim is to make CIL clearer and more proportionate for householders and self-builders.

Matthew Pennycook, Minister of State for Housing and Planning, said: "We are confident that these proposed changes will ensure that householders and self-builders who would otherwise be eligible for a CIL exemption are not faced with unexpected liability charges as a result of procedural errors in future.

"We are working to publish the consultation as soon as possible."

Waverley's Conservative opposition group has called for the council to go a step further and be proactive in making compensation payments from its general fund to those caught out by administrative errors.

Councillor Jane Austin, leader of the Waverley Conservative Group, said: "This is an important moment for residents hit by huge bills for self-builds and home extensions.

"Government has now confirmed councils are not powerless. Authorities retain discretion over enforcement and may consider ex-gratia compensation in exceptional cases. Let us get on with delivering justice for those hit – no more excuses."

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CIL campaigners described the process to get here as long, challenging and emotionally draining. They said they felt vindicated by the Government's acknowledgement of the injustice and added: "What has seemed on many occasions impossible has today been made possible."

A statement from the group said: "After a long, challenging and emotionally draining campaign, the victims of disproportionate Community Infrastructure Levy charges have finally been heard.

"The Government has now acknowledged the injustice faced by homeowners who have been subjected to substantial CIL liabilities as a result of procedural or administrative errors while simply seeking to improve their homes."

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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Epsom & Ewell Council blocks release of Rainbow Leisure Centre condition papers

11 July 2026



Epsom and Ewell Times to appeal to Information Commissioner after EEBC withholds inspection and dilapidation records linked to reported £500,000 repair exposure.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has upheld its refusal to disclose key papers concerning the condition of the Rainbow Leisure Centre, despite continuing questions over how the public facility came to face a reported repair and dilapidations bill of up to £500,000.

The Council has confirmed that it is withholding the 2025 inspection report and related information about backlog maintenance, dilapidations and financial exposure. It says the material is covered by legal professional privilege because litigation is now a live issue and the Council is already consulting lawyers.

The decision follows a Freedom of Information request by Epsom and Ewell Times seeking documents about the Council's landlord inspection rights, use of inspection powers, condition surveys, backlog repairs, financial exposure and committee consideration of the Rainbow Leisure Centre.

The Rainbow Leisure Centre, one of the borough's major public leisure assets, changed operator in October 2025. The issue later became controversial after it emerged that urgent works and dilapidation issues had been identified, with a confidential urgent decision reportedly warning that the final cost was not yet known but could be up to £500,000.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked the Council to disclose what it knew, when it knew it, and what inspection or condition records had been kept over the life of the previous contractual arrangements.

The Council did provide some contractual clauses showing that the operator was required to allow the Council's representative to inspect assets, equipment or materials used in the provision of leisure services. But it refused to release the 2025 inspection report, any related backlog or dilapidation assessments, and financial liability estimates.

In its original refusal, the Council said the withheld information fell under section 42 of the Freedom of Information Act, which protects information covered by legal professional privilege. The Council argued that releasing the material could undermine its legal position and affect recovery of public funds from the former operator.

Epsom and Ewell Times sought an internal review, arguing that the exemption had been applied too broadly. The review request pointed out that routine inspection records, condition surveys and factual reports do not automatically become privileged merely because litigation is later contemplated. It also asked the Council to consider partial disclosure, with any genuinely privileged legal advice or litigation strategy redacted.

The Council has now upheld its refusal.

In its internal review response, the Council stated: "We take the point that the survey reports would not normally be withheld, but that was a long time ago and under different circumstances. It is not the case that litigation is possibly contemplated, we are already talking to our lawyers about progressing this, so it is a live issue."

The Council also said it believed the public interest arguments in its original response were sufficient.

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That leaves residents with limited public information about a central question: whether the Rainbow Leisure Centre's condition arose from recent events, historic under-maintenance, inadequate inspection, failures by the previous operator, failures by the Council as landlord, or some combination of those possibilities.

The refusal also raises a further issue. The Council has stated that inspection and survey reports prior to 2025 are not held. If correct, that may prompt questions about how the Council monitored the condition of a major public asset over more than two decades of external operation.

The Council has also stated that it does not hold the dates on which councillors, committee chairs or Cabinet/Committee members were first informed that the Rainbow Leisure Centre required significant remedial or dilapidation works, or that the cost might be material to Council finances.

The Freedom of Information Act does allow public authorities to withhold legally privileged material. However, the exemption is not absolute. Authorities must show that the material is genuinely privileged and, where the exemption is qualified, must weigh the public interest in maintaining the exemption against the public interest in disclosure.

The paradox being that if there were to be litigation then under the rules these documents would be disclosable to all parties involved. "The truth will out".

Epsom and Ewell Times is now preparing a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office. The appeal will argue that the Council has not shown, document by document, that all the withheld information is privileged; that it has not properly considered partial disclosure; and that the public interest in understanding the management of a major public facility and potential exposure of public funds is substantial.

The newspaper will also ask the Information Commissioner to consider whether the request should have been dealt with, at least in part, under the Environmental Information Regulations, because the withheld material concerns the condition of a public building, plant, fabric and remedial works.

The dispute is not simply about one report. It goes to the wider question of how the borough's public assets are monitored, how risks are reported to councillors, and how much residents are entitled to know when public money may be at stake.

Epsom and Ewell Times will report the outcome of the appeal when the Information Commissioner has considered the complaint.

Sam Jones – Reporter



Related reports:

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"It's my meeting": Cllr Dallen stops questions about his role in alleged Rainbow "cover-up".

Dalton and Dallen double-down disclosure denial

"Are Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillors adults?" Bourne Hall row continues

11 July 2026



Epsom and Ewell councillors have backed a proposal to invest £250,000 over two years in Bourne Hall Museum, but only after another bruising debate over transparency, councillors' access to information and the continuing fallout from the withheld museum service review.

At a special meeting of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Community and Wellbeing Committee on 9 June, members voted by six votes to none, with one abstention, to support "Option 2" — investment in improvement of the museum. A funding request and business case will now go to the Strategy and Resources Committee in July.

The alternatives before councillors were to continue with business as usual, with no additional funding, or to close the museum.

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In a media release supplied after the meeting, the council described the decision as “a significant step forward” and said the investment would help the museum remain “relevant and sustainable”. Committee chair Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said Bourne Hall Museum was “a much-valued cultural asset” and that, with Local Government Reorganisation approaching, “ensuring a lasting legacy is more important than ever”.

Yet the meeting showed that the question of Bourne Hall Museum’s future has become inseparable from a wider dispute over how much information councillors and the public should be allowed to see before decisions are made.

The report before the committee referred to two 2025 reviews: the Bourne Hall Museum Service Review and the Local Government Association Cultural Peer Challenge. It stated that the reviews were relevant to all three options, including maintaining, developing or closing the service. However, the full Service Review was still not included in the public committee papers.

The report said the council’s Proper Officer had been invited to reconsider attaching the redacted service review, but had concluded that it would “not be appropriate” in order to “ensure the impartiality of information presented to members as the decision-making body”.

That explanation was fiercely challenged.

Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court), who is not a member of the committee but addressed the meeting with the chair’s permission, argued that councillors had a right under section 100F of the Local Government Act 1972 to inspect documents containing material relating to business before a committee unless they disclosed exempt information.

He told the meeting that “impartiality” was not a lawful exemption. He said councillors were “elected adults capable of weighing evidence” and accused the council of operating in an “Alice in Wonderland world” in which selected councillors were given a report but, he said, were being required to act as though they had not seen it.

Cllr Ames also raised the question of public access, saying that section 100B of the same Act required relevant background papers to be published unless a legal exemption applied. He said no such exemption had been claimed and warned that the decision could be vulnerable to call-in or legal challenge.

Cllr Woodbridge said members had “all had a chance to read the report” and tried to steer the discussion back to the future of the museum. But the disclosure issue repeatedly resurfaced.

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) said that, having now seen the information, she could not understand why it had not been provided in the first place. She described the situation as “appalling” and said councillors should be trusted unless they had demonstrated otherwise.

She then turned to the substance of the review, saying that if the document seen by councillors was the full consultant’s report, “they’ve completely wasted their money”, because much of it amounted to basic organisational advice.

Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court) also expressed concern about what councillors were or were not allowed to say about the service review. She said she had left a pre-meeting briefing “more confused” about what she could quote or refer to. When she asked whether “bias” was a lawful reason for withholding material, she said she had been told it was “not about the law” but about the Proper Officer’s decision-making.

The chair said he was sure legal advice had been taken, but that the decision was one for the Proper Officer, made on her own judgment.

Epsom and Ewell Times has seen a confidential email sent by Chief Executive Jackie King to members of the committee before the meeting. In it she said it was “not about confidentiality, sensitivity or lack of transparency” but about “impartiality of information presented to members as the decision making body”.

The Chief Executive wrote that the Service Review was “not unbiased” and would not be suitable in its “raw” form for inclusion in a committee report comparing options, because it “repeatedly emphasises the need for continued investment in the existing museum” and could steer readers towards a preferred conclusion. She said she was willing to share the operational report with committee members, with sensitive data such as names redacted, but maintained that it was not suitable to append it to the public options appraisal.

The council’s public agenda for the special meeting stated that no matters were scheduled which would appear to disclose confidential or exempt information under Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Financial questions also dominated the meeting.

The committee papers put the museum’s current annual budget at around £232,168. Of that, £65,785 related to employee costs for 1.5 full-time equivalent staff, while £123,840 was listed as “accommodation” — described in the papers as a central recharge for use of the space. Central services charges were £32,110, insurance recharges £2,292, other costs £12,180, and income from museum activities £4,039.

The “recharge” point was important because it raised doubts about what the museum really costs and what closure would actually save.

In simple terms, a recharge is an internal accounting allocation. The council incurs general costs for buildings, management, support services and overheads. It then spreads those costs across different services, so that each service appears in the accounts as bearing a share of the council’s wider running costs. That does not necessarily mean the museum is paying rent to an outside landlord, or that closing the museum would save the whole sum shown against it.

Cllr Woodbridge described these as “accountancy charges rather than real charges” and said that if the museum closed the council would not necessarily save that cost, because it was not a cost generated only by the museum.

That distinction matters. On the face of the papers, the museum appears to cost the council £232,168 a year. But more than half of that figure is the £123,840 accommodation recharge, and another £32,110 is central services charges. If

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those sums are mainly internal allocations of overheads which would remain elsewhere in the council's budget, the direct cash saving from closing the museum could be far lower than the headline budget suggests.

Cllr Muir queried why such a large accommodation cost was charged to a free public museum located in a council-owned building. She asked why the museum had been put in that position when it was a public service occupying space within Bourne Hall. Ian Dyer, Head of Operational Services, accepted that the charge was historic and "would need to be challenged".

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) said the recharge model could also make it "extremely unlikely" that the museum would succeed in major external funding applications, because funders would not want their money effectively being used to support internal council recharges. He said the LGA Cultural Peer Challenge had identified this issue.

Cllr Coley also questioned whether councillors were being asked to approve a meaningful investment or simply a process. He said some of the proposed actions — such as replacing long-form text in displays, creating strategies, branding work and social media planning — sounded like business as usual rather than a major transformation. He called for "concrete, tangible" outcomes rather than more paperwork.

Mr Dyer said some short and medium-term recommendations had already been completed by museum staff and that the next stage would be to bring back a business plan setting out what changes would be made with the proposed £125,000 per year.

Cllr Chinn, who proposed supporting Option 2, said any report to Strategy and Resources would need much more detail, including timescales, costs and the implications of Local Government Reorganisation. Cllr Woodbridge agreed that the committee was being asked to decide the principle, not the full business case.

There was little appetite in the room for closing the museum. Before the vote, Cllr Woodbridge said he sensed members appreciated the value of the museum and noted that Option 3 — closure — had not been pursued in the debate.

The committee's decision does not itself release the £250,000. That decision now passes to Strategy and Resources, where councillors will have to decide whether the business case is strong enough, whether the museum's accounting model is sustainable, and whether the long-running argument over the service review has been resolved or merely postponed.

For now, Bourne Hall Museum has survived another political test. But the controversy over who gets to see the evidence, and when, remains very much alive.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Epsom Councillor's disclosure claims Bourne out on review

11 July 2026



The future of Bourne Hall and its museum has become one of the most contentious issues in Epsom & Ewell local politics in recent months. Debate has ranged from ambitious proposals for the landmark "UFO-shaped" building's revival to sharp disagreements over governance, transparency and access to information. Earlier this year, councillors on the Community & Wellbeing Committee challenged elements of the Council's approach, while a decision connected with the matter was later suspended by the Council's Chief Executive acting in her statutory capacity. Central to the dispute has been a

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service review of Bourne Hall Museum, parts of which were initially withheld from councillors and the public.

In the following letter, Independent councillor Alex Coley sets out his view following a review and the subsequent disclosure of much of the report's contents.

A fuller background is provided in the following Epsom and Ewell Times reports:

Bourne Hall row escalates as Chief Executive suspends councillors' decision

Ewell's Bourne Hall plans knocked back by scrutiny

Independent view of Ewell's Bourne Hall

Ewell's "UFO" shaped Bourne Hall to take off anew

Letter to the Editor — Cllr Alex Coley

Dear Editor,

Amidst all the excitement of the Annual Council meeting on Tuesday 26 May, I received the outcome of an internal review into the FOI request that I submitted for the Service Review of Bourne Hall Museum at the beginning of February.

We should be very grateful to the service review author for the depth of understanding and breadth of appreciation for the questions they were asked to explore. This document is absolutely fundamental for elected members to deliberate the future of the museum. It should never have been withheld.

Comparing the redacted and unredacted versions side by side, it becomes apparent that an almost paranoid sensitivity to potential embarrassment has played a part in non-disclosure.

Unredacted sections describe the absence of any visitor data or visitor research, siloed working at EEBC, and the lack of structured objectives for the museum. Yet all these were laid bare in the LGA Cultural Peer Challenge and disclosed in full.

Recognising and acknowledging these issues are crucial to assuring councillors that the issues are understood sufficiently and that an injection of new funding will be used appropriately and effectively. This cannot be achieved behind a veil of secrecy. Trust must be earned rather than demanded.

From the original FOI request to the delayed response took 109 days — almost four months. The normal expectation is 20 days. The initial response was a mish-mash of erroneous case law and political deflection disguised by the application of Section 43(2) of the Freedom of Information Act — "to prejudice commercial interests".

I had to make a formal complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office when our Council failed to conduct an internal review within 40 days. The resulting correspondence makes it clear that it was ICO intervention which led to the information being disclosed properly.

Subsequently, the Council has disclosed most of the information unredacted.

However, the belated introduction of Section 36 of FOI in the response is an intriguing piece of code-switching. This relates to the "effective conduct of public affairs" and was not used in the original response. In layman's terms, this concerns the ability of council officers to give free and frank advice.

Section 36 was engaged as a reason not to disclose advice given by a consultant to council officers. While I agree that it is important for such advice to be given freely, the need to do so openly, honestly and transparently is critical when spending public money — not least to the decision-makers who are accountable for public expenditure.

Fortunately, with ICO involvement, a strong public interest has been shown to outweigh concerns.

For those who explore the response in full, you will note that the respondent decides: "the majority of the report contains high-level, non-controversial analysis and recommendations that do not meet the threshold of demonstrating a likelihood of prejudice."

Well, hurray!

I must conclude that significant effort and energy is being expended by both officers and councillors in battles over secrecy. This is a waste of public money and an affront to the representation of electors. Councillors should not have to become investigative journalists to know what is going on in the organisation they have been appointed to run.

Transparency is significantly better value for money and, as the unredacted contents of the service review reveal, a far better means for deciding how public money should be spent in future. Democracy should be done and seen to be done.

I hoped that this item would be brought back to the Community & Wellbeing Committee to be determined in the manner it always should have been — openly and with all the information available.

However, recent correspondence to councillors on Thursday 28 May seems disconnected from the FOI request. It refers to a Special Community & Wellbeing Committee on 9 June and states:

"Following the invitation to revisit the non-inclusion of the Bourne Hall Service Review in the previous committee papers, it is the decision of the Council's Proper Officer for access to information that the decision will not be overturned."

The missive goes on to say:

"However, in order to move this item forward, the Council's Proper Officer proposes to limit access to the Bourne Hall Service Review to the voting members of the Community & Wellbeing Committee that shall be in attendance at the 9 June special meeting and she will be present to discuss why the information will remain restricted."

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Finally, the message concludes:

“Please note that no photographs or copies of the exempt document are permitted to be taken.”

Readers of a certain vintage may recall sitcoms of the 1970s and 1980s — Dad’s Army, ’Allo ’Allo and, of course, Yes Minister. What a pity the writers never delved deeper into local government. There is a richness of material for satire and farce that is unmatched.

Perhaps we should reach for some of that Sir Humphrey comedy wisdom:

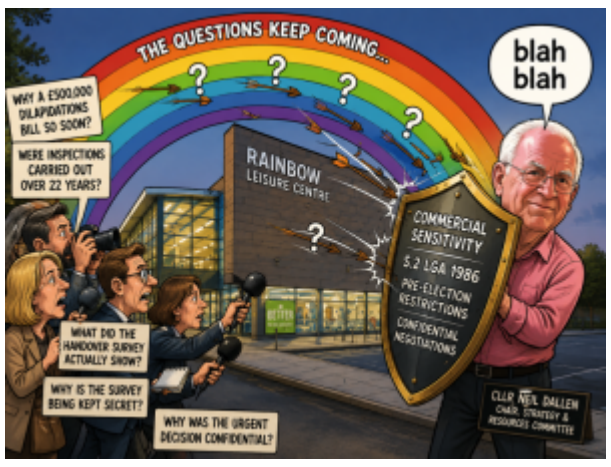
“If the right people don’t have power, do you know what happens? The wrong people get it. Politicians, councillors, ordinary voters!”

As we say in Epsom & Ewell: None Such.

Alex Coley
Independent Councillor – Ruxley

No end to Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre controversy

11 July 2026



Rainbow reply from Dallen leaves key questions unanswered.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council’s Chair of Strategy and Resources, Cllr Neil Dallen (RA Town), has finally responded to questions from Epsom and Ewell Times about the Rainbow Leisure Centre dilapidations controversy — nearly two months after first declining to do so while citing “pre-election” restrictions under Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986.

Readers will recall that the controversy arose after disclosure of a confidential “urgent decision” approved in December 2025 which stated: “The costs of the dilapidations are not yet fully known… However, an estimate is that this could cost up to £500k.”

The same document referred to issues affecting fire alarms, ventilation, damp, glazing, lifts and possible roof defects, with some matters said to raise health and safety concerns.

The issue quickly developed into wider questions about governance and transparency after Epsom and Ewell Times established that:

- the former operator, Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL), maintained the building had been handed back in satisfactory condition following survey and sign-off;
- the Council possessed contractual inspection rights throughout GLL’s 22-year tenure;
- the Council nevertheless stated in Freedom of Information responses that it held no historic inspection reports prior to 2025;
- the Council refused to disclose the handover condition survey while simultaneously asserting legal privilege over it;
- GLL confirmed the same survey had been provided by the Council to all tenderers during the procurement process;
- and the Council relied on Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986 to avoid answering further questions before the May elections.

The original questions sent to Cllr Dallen by Epsom and Ewell Times on 24th March stated:

“Dear Cllr Dallen,

Further to recent reporting and the Council’s FOI response (attached) concerning the Rainbow Leisure Centre, I am

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seeking your view on the underlying explanation for the position that has now emerged.

As you will be aware, there are a number of possible interpretations arising from the material in the public domain and the Council's response. In short form, these appear to include:

That the former operator (GLL) is correct in its position that the building was handed back in the condition required following survey and sign-off;

That the Council did not, over a prolonged period, exercise its inspection and enforcement rights in a way that would have identified and addressed accumulating dilapidations;

That the incoming operator has identified defects not previously recorded and is now addressing these with the Council accepting a reduced management fee as part of the commercial resolution;

That the survey relied upon at handover is subject to differing interpretations as between the parties;

Or any other explanation you consider to be the correct one.

I would be grateful if you could indicate which of these (or any alternative) you consider most accurately reflects the situation.

I would also welcome any clarification you wish to provide regarding the basis on which the urgent decision was treated as confidential, and whether you consider that a public interest assessment was undertaken.

I will, of course, reflect your response fairly in any further reporting.

With thanks in advance,

Sam Jones – Reporter."

At the time, the Council declined to answer, stating that pre-election restrictions prevented further comment.

Now, following the elections, Epsom and Ewell Times has finally received the following response from the Council, attributed to Cllr Dallen:

"Rainbow Leisure Centre transferred to a new operator, Places Leisure, on 1 October 2025. Since then, we've been pleased to see a number of improvements at the centre. This marks the beginning of an exciting new chapter for the leisure centre, and Places Leisure has ambitious plans, including significant investment to upgrade the gym, studios, swimming changing rooms and more, which are already underway, with a new gym already open.

The confidential negotiations have resulted not only in an improved facility but also an improved financial position for the Council and therefore residents. With any handover, it is normal practice for there to be negotiations around works to be carried out which form part of the contract finalisation. Details relating to terms and financial arrangements are commercially sensitive and therefore not in the public domain.

We look forward to seeing the plans for Rainbow Leisure Centre come to fruition, as it continues to serve communities in Epsom & Ewell and the surrounding areas, offering superb leisure facilities and innovative opportunities for residents of all ages to improve their health and wellbeing."

The response notably does not directly answer any of the central questions posed.

No explanation is offered for how a potential £500,000 dilapidations liability apparently emerged so soon after handover. The response does not address whether the building was or was not handed over in satisfactory condition, whether inspections were carried out during the previous 22 years, why no historic inspection records are held, whether the handover survey identified the defects now being asserted, or why the survey itself remains undisclosed.

The statement instead emphasises future investment and commercial confidentiality while avoiding the underlying issue: how a building apparently considered acceptable at handover could within weeks become associated with extensive defects, some allegedly serious enough to threaten continued operation on health and safety grounds.

That leaves unresolved the same competing possibilities previously identified by Epsom and Ewell Times. Either the former operator's account is substantially correct and the current concerns arise from differing assessments or commercial negotiations; or significant defects accumulated over many years without effective intervention; or the handover survey failed to identify the building's true condition; or the scale of the dilapidations has itself been overstated or differently interpreted.

Whether Cllr Dallen's response genuinely clarifies matters, or simply restates the Council's preference for confidentiality while avoiding difficult questions, readers will judge for themselves.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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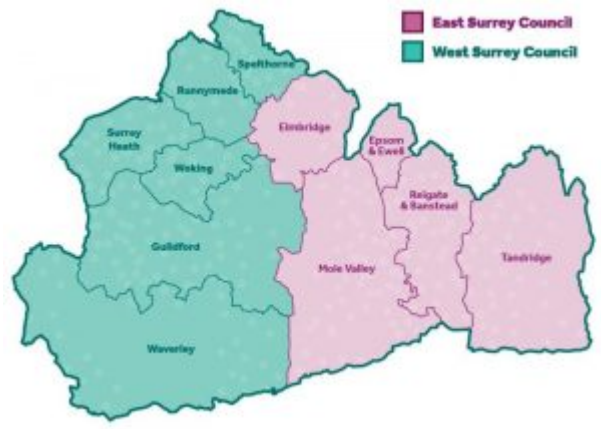
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West Surrey ‘much worse off’

11 July 2026



Surrey residents could face rising council tax bills and deep financial uncertainty under plans to overhaul local government and councillors say people are already “really angry” about it.

At a West Surrey joint committee meeting on April 14, politicians warned that changes to council tax under the new system could hit some households harder than others, at a time when many are already struggling with the cost of living.

Plans to “harmonise” council tax across the two new authorities (East and West Surrey) mean some areas could see increases above the usual 5 per cent cap. Cllr Joanne Sexton said the issue is coming up “all the time” on the doorstep and asked what protections would be in place for residents facing sharp rises.

Finance chief Andy Brown confirmed some households could pay more than 5 per cent increases to bring different council tax rates into line. “What you won’t see is an average increase across West Surrey that breaches the referendum principles,” he said. “But within that you may see areas… higher than the 5 per cent and some lower.”

Modelling has already been done and could be published, but the final call will be made by new “shadow councils” elected in May, ahead of the new system going live in 2027.

West Surrey ‘worse off’

Behind the council tax fears is a bigger concern: that West Surrey is heading into the new system in a much weaker financial position.

Councillors repeatedly warned the west could end up the “poor relation”, inheriting higher debt, greater infrastructure needs and more financial risk.

Cllr Liz Townsend said the scale of the problem is not being taken seriously enough. She said: “I still feel we haven’t emphasised the disparity between East and West and how by virtue of an arbitrary line drawn on a map the people in West Surrey are far more disadvantaged.”.

The Liberal Democrat councillor added: “I’ve been knocking on doors recently and people are really angry about it. I don’t think we’re emphasising how critical the situation is.”

Cllr Catherine Powell echoed those concerns, warning West Surrey is set to inherit “a much worse financial situation” than the east, something she said was not clearly reflected in official papers. The Farnham Residents councillor also raised concerns about infrastructure, saying the west faces specific challenges that are not being properly accounted for.

Debt mountain and government bailout

A major factor is the huge debt linked to Woking Borough Council. The government has already stepped in, promising £500m to help reduce Woking’s borrowing. But even after that, the council is still expected to carry around £1.7bn in debt.

The government, through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, has said there is “no reasonable means” for Woking to manage this on its own. So, ongoing national support will be needed. This creates a major risk for the new West Surrey authority which will inherit the problem.

Inequality fears and vulnerable residents

Councillors also raised concerns about how the changes could hit the most vulnerable. Cllr Powell warned that people on lower incomes are likely to be hardest affected by financial pressures but said current equality impact assessments do not fully reflect that.

Cllr Powell also called for a clearer breakdown of how decisions could affect different areas, warning the divide between east and west must not be hidden in “generic statements”. Officials said more detailed equality assessments will be produced alongside future decisions, including budgets.

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Confusion over what has been agreed

Adding to concerns, councillors warned official documents risk misleading residents about what has already been decided. Minutes from previous meetings appeared to suggest councillors had agreed to split assets geographically, something members insisted is not the case. They said they had only agreed that assets would need to be split, not how.

With local elections coming up on May 7, councillors called for clearer language to avoid confusion about who is making decisions and when. Officials agreed to tighten up the wording.

“Just a starting point”

Lead council officers stressed that nothing is final yet. Current proposals were described as a “starting point”, with work ongoing to figure out how services, staff and assets will be divided between the two new councils.

Final decisions will be taken by the shadow authorities after the elections, with the new system due to launch in 2027.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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Could Woking’s debt be shared by you after reorganisation?

Epsom and Ewell Times adds: Epsom and Ewell will come under the EAST Surrey Unitary Council. The promised £500 million debt repayment support from central Government falls far short of the overall debt accumulated in Woking, Spelthorne and other WEST Surrey districts.

West Surrey debt mountain – teenage fears

11 July 2026

Surrey’s Districts	Total debt	Per person
Woking	£2,155,641,000	£20,601.33
Spelthorne	£1,065,761,000	£10,252.24
Runnymede	£597,712,000	£6,608.79
Guildford	£311,532,000	£2,088.35
Surrey Heath	£183,436,000	£1,990.24
Waverley	£140,286,000	£1,061.60
Tandridge	£92,816,000	£1,038.11
Mole Valley	£73,850,000	£836.68
Epsom & Ewell	£64,427,000	£785.80
Elmbridge	£48,624,000	£346.08
Reigate & Banstead	£5,000,000	£32.05

A 16-year-old from Ash has urged ministers not to “lumber” his generation with billions of pounds of debt. He said it is not fair that people have to pay off debts when they have never been to Woking.

Harley Davey-Harper, who lives just a short walk from Aldershot town centre, said plans to merge borough councils into a new ‘West Surrey’ authority would tie his community to around £4.5bn in legacy debt.

Harley said: “As someone who will be starting my adult life and paying council tax in just two years, it is terrifying to know that my money will be sucked into a black hole to pay for Woking’s failed skyscraper projects and Spelthorne’s commercial property debts.”

Woking Borough Council is battling with debts of about £2.6bn after the former administration borrowed heavily to fund commercial development. Spelthorne Borough Council is also facing financial distress with over £1bn in debt from risky commercial investment.

Harley has written to ex-Chancellor Jeremy Hunt and local MP Alex Baker warning the shake-up could leave young people footing the bill for historic borrowing elsewhere in Surrey. He said: “I think it is important for MPs to know how the people are feeling.”

In his letter to the MPs, Harley wrote: “Being dumped into this new West Surrey mega-council feels like the final betrayal; we are being used as a piggy bank to fix mistakes made in towns 20 miles away that have nothing to do with us.

“Where I live is a mere 10-minute walk from Aldershot town centre. I am physically part of the Aldershot community, yet I am being forced into a council that stretches as far as Staines-upon-Thames.”

The college student has branded the decision as a “massive mistake” for the people of Ash. He said: “I don’t see why we should be paying for roads all the way over in Thorpe Park.” Harley said it is not fair that a certain group of people have

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to pay off the debts when some of the people have probably not been to Woking.

Harley said it is “heartbreaking” to see his home “dragged into a bankrupt Surrey merger”. He wrote: “My life is already entirely in Hampshire: my housing provider, Vivid, is Hampshire based; my post is processed in Aldershot; and the most local police force is Hampshire, who when I have called the police in the past Aldershot police have come as they are the closest in an emergency.”

Harley said he believes Ash is often overlooked compared to wealthier or more central parts of the county. “All the focus seems to go into Guildford,” he said. “Ash is forgotten. They only remember us when we need to pay our council tax- not much goes on there.”

Harley said: “It will be better for everyone if we are in the Hampshire region because the council tax will be lower.” So far, he has yet to receive a full response from MPs, though acknowledgements have been sent.

A Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government spokesperson said: “Proposals for local government reorganisation in Surrey were locally led and all the proposals received included Ash within a new West Surrey council.

“We recognise that Woking Borough Council holds significant debt that cannot all be managed locally, which is why we have committed to unprecedented debt repayment support of £500m.

“We will continue to support councils to deliver reorganisation in a way that protects services and reflects the needs of communities.”

Emily Dalton LDRS

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Woking bankruptcy sell off

11 July 2026



Woking Borough Council is selling off its flagship regeneration projects – including the town’s new Hilton Hotel and shopping centres to private investors to claw back public money – branded a “sad” and “sobering” reality of the bankruptcy. The small council gained infamy when it went bust in 2023 as the most heavily indebted borough in the country. It has dragged itself through huge job cuts and service reductions to address its £2.6 billion black hole and now come some of its costliest investments.

It’s leadership has agreed to market Victoria Square, Wolsey Place, Alexander House and energy company Thameswey Milton Keynes Ltd, in an effort to claw back some of the public money torpedoed into its doomed ventures between 2016 and 2019. Speaking at the Wednesday, March 18 executive committee was the portfolio holder for finance, Councillor Dale Roberts. He said: “The work of understanding and unravelling the council’s commercial structures has weighed heavily at times and that is in large part because of the scale of what we inherited. Hundreds of millions of pounds of public money invested through complex commercial structures. At times it has felt like we’ve been asked to work on the world’s most expensive jigsaw puzzle. Being able to bring these matters forward openly, with proper governance and transparency is therefore both a relief and a sign of the progress the council has made. It quickly became clear the first task was not to make immediate decisions about assets and companies but to ensure we had the right governance, reporting, controls in place to understand what we owned and how those companies and those assets were performing.”

Victoria Square Woking, including the Hilton Hotel where the council paid for its cutlery, will be sold off – although the car parks will be split off and retained by the council. Wolsey Place Shopping Centre, together with Wolsey Walk residential units, Alexander House and Export House, and units owned by Victoria Square will be combined into another single entity to maximise value. The council’s energy company – which supplies exclusive power to Victoria Square – will

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also be sold, with officers confident a specialist company could successfully fold the firm into an existing operation. A key element in the Thameswey sale is a debt for equity swap that will convert the council's existing loans into shares but banks a historic loss of about £42m associated with the investment.

Cllr Steve Greentree (Liberal Democrats: Knaphill) said: "It's sad to see the £42m loss in a venture that should never have been put at risk by a local borough council in a geography that is no way related to Woking." Cllr Ian Johnson, portfolio holder for housing said: "My overwhelming feeling is that of disappointment. Finally we will rid ourselves of something that has been a drain on our resources." He added: "It's fairly sobering isn't it but it's the right thing to do."

The sales had long been expected as part of the Government's effective bailout programme where it has already pledged about £500m to the borough. Further help has been held back until the Government knows what the council banks in asset sales. Borough leader, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker said: "It's been a very long-term ambition of this administration to sell Thameswey. It's costing us money, it's not contributing to our role as a council to deliver services for local people." Final approval of any deals will need the approval of full council.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Image: Hilton in Woking (Google)

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

11 July 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

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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’s empty and second homes face local tax increases

11 July 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has approved a 2.98% increase in its share of Council Tax for 2026/27, alongside new measures to penalise empty properties and second homes, but not without some questioning from councillors over the purpose and clarity of the changes. (Strategy and Resources Committee 27th January.) The increase equates to £6.93 a year for a Band D household, keeping within the government’s referendum limit and adding around 58p per month to bills. While modest in isolation, the rise sits within a wider package aimed at strengthening council finances and aligning local policy with other Surrey authorities ahead of the planned move to unitary government.

The more contentious element of the decision was the tightening of rules on empty homes and second properties. From April 2026, owners of empty and unfurnished properties will no longer receive a one-month exemption and will face a 100% Council Tax premium after one year, effectively doubling their bill. From April 2027, the same 100% premium will apply to second homes. Introducing the policy, Committee Chair Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) said: “It’s something that the rest of the boroughs and districts in Surrey are already doing… coming up to unitary it’s now proposed that we do do it and align ourselves ready for the unity proposal.”

Although the measures were approved unanimously, several councillors probed the reasoning and operation of the policy. Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) questioned whether the changes were primarily about raising income or achieving social outcomes such as reducing homelessness and increasing housing supply, asking whether the Council was “trying to achieve any of those things, or is it simply about… increasing the income that we get.” In response, Cllr Dallen indicated the policy served both purposes, noting that while the number of empty homes locally is limited, “every property is another family home,” and officers confirmed that bringing homes back into use remains an objective.

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) also raised detailed questions about how the policy would work in practice, particularly the rules around when a property is considered occupied and how time limits on empty status are reset. He highlighted potential ambiguity in the wording of the policy documents, suggesting that the distinction between a property being “substantially furnished” and actually occupied could lead to confusion. While confirming his support for the policy in principle, he sought reassurance that the expected income—estimated at around £29,000—would exceed the administrative cost of implementing the scheme.

The discussion reflected a broader concern among some members about balancing financial necessity with fairness and clarity. While there was no outright opposition to the proposals, the debate revealed differing emphases: some councillors focused on revenue generation and alignment with Surrey-wide practice, while others stressed the importance of ensuring the policy delivers genuine housing benefits and is clearly understood by residents.

In the end, the committee approved the recommendations without dissent, confirming both the Council Tax increase and the new premiums on empty and second homes as part of the authority’s budget-setting process for the coming financial year.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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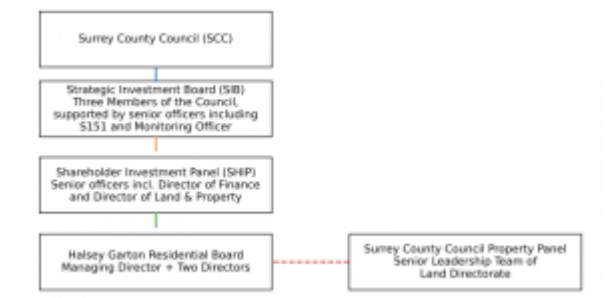
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Surrey Council reviews property sales as it signs off business plans for own firms

11 July 2026



Surrey County Council has signed off the latest business plans for two companies it owns as it tries to strengthen its finances during a difficult period for local government.

The council's Strategic Investment Board approved the 2026/27 plans for property company Halsey Garton Residential and recruitment firm Connect2Surrey on March 9. In a meeting mostly held in private (part 2) for commercial sensitivity reasons, the board also heard an update from the property data organisation TRICS Consortium Ltd, in which the council holds a smaller share.

What it means

Essentially, the council is reviewing how companies it owns or part-owns will operate over the next year and whether they can continue to bring in money.

Like many local authorities, Surrey County Council is under growing financial pressure, with rising costs and less support from central government. These companies are meant to help generate income and support council services.

Officials say the plans should help improve transparency and ensure the council keeps a close eye on how its investments perform.

Possible property sales

One of the biggest issues discussed was what to do with homes owned by Halsey Garton Residential. The council is considering the pace at which it sells off properties in the company's housing portfolio, and board members were asked to give direction on how quickly those homes should be sold.

That decision is partly being driven by changes to housing legislation coming into force in May 2026, which could affect how easily properties can be sold if they are currently occupied by tenants.

Selling homes more quickly could help the council bring in money sooner, but it also carries risks, including market uncertainty, reputational concerns and the challenge of completing sales before major local government changes take effect.

Financial pressures behind the move

Council officers warned the authority is operating in a "very challenging financial environment". Future funding reforms mean the council is expected to receive less support from central government, leaving it increasingly reliant on council tax and other income streams.

Investment companies like Halsey Garton Residential and Connect2Surrey are intended to help support the council's long-term finances, even if profits do not come immediately.

What happens next

The council will keep monitoring the performance of the companies over the coming year, with a half-year review planned later in 2026.

In the meantime, councillors are expected to continue weighing up how quickly to sell properties owned by Halsey Garton Residential. This decision could affect the council's finances and its property portfolio going forward.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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Last round of developers' funds in Epsom and Ewell to be spent

11 July 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is inviting local community groups and organisations to apply for funds, raised by the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), to deliver projects that benefit residents and support new development across the borough.

Bid applications will open on Monday 9 March 2026 and close on Sunday 17 May 2026.

This will be the final time that Epsom & Ewell Borough Council will run this funding process. From April 2027, the council will be dissolved and replaced by the new East Surrey Council, which will be responsible for delivering local infrastructure projects across the geographic areas of Elmbridge, Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge.

When new development takes place, it can place extra pressure on local services and facilities. The Community Infrastructure Levy enables councils to raise funds from development to be spent on the provision, improvement, replacement, operation or maintenance of local infrastructure—the levy is intended to give councils more choice and flexibility in how they fund the infrastructure required to support local growth.

Last year, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council allocated over ?230,000 from the 2024/2025 Neighbourhood CIL Fund for community infrastructure projects, including:

- a permanent secure storage shed for The Library of Things enabling residents to borrow useful household items
- energy-efficient lighting installed in a pedestrian tunnel for the Cattle Arch/Under-Rail Tunnel project
- a Road Safety Outside School Scheme implemented at Linden Bridge School improving pedestrian accessibility, a safety crossing for children on Grafton Road and traffic flow aids.

Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) , Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee said: "This Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy funding is a real opportunity to make a meaningful and lasting difference in our community. As this will be the last chance to apply through Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, we strongly encourage local community groups and organisations to put forward ideas that could benefit their neighbourhoods.

"We're proud that the Neighbourhood CIL funding has already helped deliver a wide range of successful local projects – from the recently installed 3G football pitch at Glynn School, to secure specialist bike storage for Wheels for Epsom, the regeneration of disused grounds at the Horton Arts Centre, and the water fountains installed at various locations across the borough. These achievements show just how powerful this funding can be when community ambition and local investment come together.

"As the council launches its final tranche of Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy funding, we want to ensure that money raised from new development continues to support projects that strengthen our community and improve the quality of life for residents across the borough for years to come."

Application process

The bidding process is designed to be a clear as possible and the application form — available to download from the council's website, with hard copies at Epsom Town Hall, Bourne Hall and Epsom Playhouse — aims to help make the process simpler. Neighbourhood CIL Funding | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Bids will be shortlisted using the criteria set out in section C of the CIL Spending Protocol (adopted March 2025). More information on the process and prioritisation criteria can be found in section 5 of the CIL Spending Protocol.

To receive funding, all CIL spending applications must be for infrastructure. All bids that pass stage 1 of the assessment process will be examined by the CIL Member Working Group, who will make recommendations to the Strategy and Resources Committee for approval.

It is important for each application to be completed in full. The CIL Spending Protocol **(adopted March 2025) needs to be read alongside the application form.**

Any questions about the application form or process can be emailed to: CIL@Epsom-Ewell.gov.uk.

About the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

- The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) allows councils to raise funds from new developments for infrastructure projects which help to mitigate the impacts of new development. Of the total collected:

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- 80% goes towards strategic borough-wide infrastructure – examples include highway schemes, permanent school expansions, hospitals, and other health and social care facilities
- 15% is allocated for local projects (neighbourhood CIL) a portion of the CIL is to be spent on local projects in accordance with the CIL regulations and aligns with the Corporate Plan – examples include sport pitches, courts upgrades, public realm improvements and community gardens
- 5% for the day-to-day costs of administering CIL.

- The Epsom & Ewell Borough Council CIL Spending Protocol was approved by the Licencing and Planning Policy Committee on 11 March 2025.
- The CIL Spending Protocol sets out the Epsom and Ewell Borough specific protocol governing the process and criteria for selecting infrastructure projects for funding through CIL. When completing a CIL bid form please read the CIL Spending Protocol alongside, as this sets out the guidance and criteria required for your Neighbourhood CIL bid application.
- More information about the Neighbourhood CIL Fund can be found here: https://www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/Neighbourhood-CIL

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Bourne Hall row escalates as Chief Executive suspends councillors' decision

11 July 2026



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

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

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

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

Chair expressed "disappointment" after councillors voted to delay decision

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

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

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

Coley: “If we’re spending public money… I find it very difficult to justify secrecy”

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

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

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

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

Muir: “We do not have enough information… this is unacceptable”

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) said the redactions were unprecedented in her experience. “I’m actually very, very concerned about the lack of the information we have. We are the front line of making decisions, and we don’t have enough information on which to make one.” She added: “I have literally, in nine years, never seen a document like the one that… we’ve been given… This is unacceptable. No company I’ve ever worked for would accept making a decision if we provided this.”

Chinn: “Every single recommendation is redacted”

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

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

Reynolds warned of consequences of continued delay

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

Chief Executive’s intervention raises constitutional questions

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

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

Future of museum — and decision-making authority — now unclear

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

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

Sam Jones – Reporter



Related reports:

Ewell’s Bourne Hall plans knocked back by scrutiny

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Independent view of Ewell's Bourne Hall

Ewell's "UFO" shaped Bourne Hall to take off anew

"It's my meeting": Cllr Dallen stops questions about his role in alleged Rainbow "cover-up".

11 July 2026



Rainbow Leisure Centre secrecy row deepens after heated council clash

A bitter exchange between councillors over a confidential "urgent decision" concerning the Rainbow Leisure Centre has raised fresh questions about transparency, governance and the condition of one of Epsom's major public buildings. The confrontation, between Residents' Association Strategy and Resources chair Cllr **Neil Dallen** and Labour Court ward councillor Cllr **Chris Ames**, follows earlier coverage by the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service [Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up] into claims that up to £500,000 of dilapidations had been discovered at the council-owned facility.

Questions have been raised as to whether the secrecy being maintained over the matter is justified by a need to protect negotiations with contractors or is motivated by covering up possible negligence of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council in failing to ensure the proper maintenance of a major asset it owns.

£500,000 repairs estimate revealed in confidential decision

The urgent decision document itself that was obtained by the BBC's LDRS — acknowledged extensive repair issues and stated: "The issues cover many aspects of the operation of the centre from issues like fire alarms, the lift, seating, glazing, sanitaryware, ventilation, damp, possible cracks in the roof etc." It went on to estimate the scale of financial exposure: "The costs of the dilapidations are not yet fully known… However, an estimate is that this could cost up to £500k." The report also confirmed that the council had spent little on the building during the previous operator's tenure: "The previous operator GLL ran and maintained the Rainbow Leisure Centre… During that time… the council has spent minimal money on the RLC over that period." At the same time, the decision warned that repairs were necessary to avoid jeopardising the new contract: "The key issue would be if we did nothing, which would be to jeopardise the contract." It also acknowledged health and safety implications: "Some items identified by Places relate to health and safety issues… to ensure a safe and practical operating environment." The urgent decision was approved on 17 December 2025 with the recorded support of Cllr Neil Dallen, who wrote simply: "Happy to support."

Chair invokes safety risk — but secrecy questioned

At the Strategy and Resources Committee meeting on 27 January 2026, Cllr Dallen defended the urgency of the decision, suggesting that without it the centre might have faced closure on safety grounds. But Cllr Ames focused instead on why the decision had been kept secret, telling the meeting: "Falling into a category of exempt information does not make information exempt from publication… Has somebody made a decision that, in all the circumstances, the public interest in withholding this document outweighs the public interest in disclosing it?" He pressed repeatedly for an answer: "This document should have been published… Who took that decision, and on what basis? And I'm not getting any answers." Cllr Dallen confirmed that he had supported the urgent decision and its confidential status but then halted further questioning, telling the committee: "We have given you an answer… This meeting is asked to note the urgent decision taken. I'm not going to have any more comments or questions." When Cllr Ames persisted, the chair asserted his authority: "It is my meeting. I am chairman of this meeting, and I have made a decision there is going to be no further comments." The debate ended without any explanation of whether a public-interest assessment had been formally carried out before the decision was withheld from publication.

After the meeting Cllr Ames stated to Epsom and Ewell Times his regret for calling Cllr Dallen "arrogant", realising instead he should have raised a point of order concerning Cllr Dallen remaining in the Chair for the item.

Council and former operator give sharply differing accounts

The urgent decision suggested extensive outstanding repair liabilities and the possibility of legal action to recover costs. But the former operator, Greenwich Leisure Limited, has strongly disputed any suggestion it failed in its responsibilities,

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stating: “The Council undertook… a full survey of the building prior to GLL exiting… items… were all completed prior to handover and signed off… GLL handed the building over to the standard required by the Council and under the contract.” GLL added it was “unaware of any legal claim” by the council.

Council declines to answer key questions

Before publication, Epsom and Ewell Times put a series of detailed questions to the council, including whether it had exercised its inspection rights over the building and when councillors were first informed of the scale of repairs. The council declined to address those points directly, saying: “Details relating to terms and financial arrangements are commercially sensitive and therefore not in the public domain.”

Governance and accountability questions remain

The dispute raises a number of unresolved issues, including whether the council had been fully aware of the building’s condition during the previous operator’s tenure, why the urgent decision was treated as confidential, and whether councillors were given complete information before being asked to note the decision. It also raises procedural questions about the conduct of the committee meeting itself, where the chair both confirmed his own role in approving the confidential urgent decision and subsequently closed down further questioning on the subject.

Epsom and Ewell Times has submitted Freedom of Information requests seeking clarification on the council’s inspection regime, the origins of the repair backlog, and the decision-making process behind the confidential urgent decision. At the time of publication, the council had not yet provided those answers and has stated it needs more time in excess of the statutory 20 day period to respond.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Related reports

Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up

Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators

Image: Epsom and Ewell Borough Council YouTube channel

Government comes to Surrey’s SEND rescue

11 July 2026



The Government is ‘finally recognising the heavy pressure placed on local budgets to support children’ after agreeing to wipe out 90 per cent of the debt councils has accrued in Special Education Need and Disabilities spending.

Surrey has 46,000 children with Additional Needs and Disabilities (AND) with 16,870 children and young people with a statutory Education Health and Care (EHC) plan. This is more than double the number in 2018 and puts it at the third highest in the country.

Councils must, by law, have to identify and support children with special educational needs but the surge in numbers has seen spending far outstrip what they receive from Government. Surrey County Council has spent millions since 2018 as part of its recovery plan for the service – which it has said is yielding results, but has pressed for changes to the wider system, additional funding and reform.

MP Greg Stafford also told the Commons that the High Needs Block deficit in Surrey was forecast to run to £165m by 2027. It leaves councils having to find huge sums every year – with historically poor support from the Government. The news that £5billion will be spent to eliminate almost all historic debt in Englands, they hope, signals a major change in direction.

Helyn Clack, Surrey County Councl’s deputy cabinet member for children, families and lifelong learning said: “Surrey County Council welcomes the announcement on SEND deficits. It shows that central government finally recognises the heavy pressure placed on local budgets to support children with special educational needs, costs that should have been fully funded through the Government’s Dedicated Schools Grant.

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“We are mindful that this SEND deficit funding covers overspends we have already incurred. We now await more detail on the expected ongoing costs of the SEND system and the long-promised reforms needed to make it sustainable in the future. In the meantime, we are reviewing the details of the announcement to understand what it means for the Council.”

The announcement follows Local Government Association (LGA) warnings that as many as eight in 10 English councils would be facing bankruptcy if forced pay back their SEND deficits in full.

Cllr Amanda Hopgood, chair of the Local Government Association’s children, young people and families committee, said: “Councils want every child and young person to get the support they need. But under the current failing system, the rise in need has left many councils buckling under the strain.

“We were pleased that government announced it will tackle 90 per cent of councils’ historic high needs deficits, following our call to address the deficits, which removes the immediate threat of insolvency for many councils. Fully writing off historic and future high needs deficits remains critical.

“The challenges within the SEND system are not just financial. The Schools White Paper must deliver brave and bold reform where more children can get the support they need in a mainstream school, without needing a statutory plan.”

Chris Caulfield LDRS

New Surrey County Council HQ, Woodhatch Place on Cockshot Hill, Reigate. Credit Surrey County Council

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