



## Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Annual Report

### EEBC publishes an Annual Report amid some questions over priorities and spending.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has released its *2024/25 Annual Report*, showcasing a range of achievements over the past year — but opposition councillors have questioned both the purpose and timing of the publication.

The report, available on the council's website, highlights milestones such as a balanced budget for 2025/26, the allocation of over £2 million in Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding to neighbourhood and strategic projects, and a 100% success rate in determining major planning applications within statutory deadlines. It also notes environmental achievements, including Epsom Common's eighteenth consecutive Green Flag Award and new solar panels installed at the Rainbow Leisure Centre.

Chief Executive **Jackie King** said she was "proud to present Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's 2024/25 Annual Report which reflects the dedication and impact of our teams on the borough over the last financial year."

She praised the efforts of the council's 280-strong workforce, highlighting the Waste Services team's 99.9% on-time bin collection rate and the Planning Policy team's award-winning work at the Royal Town Planning Institute's South East Awards for Planning Excellence.

"I am grateful for the hard work and dedication of everyone at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and I know we are in a good position to meet the challenges ahead," said Ms King. "I look forward to continuing to deliver the council's new strategic priorities and working towards local government reorganisation — whilst continuing to provide the high-quality services our residents depend upon."

However, some opposition councillors have some reservations about the report.

**Cllr Alex Coley** (Independent — Ruxley) said: "I wonder who the audience is for this brochure and what the staff resource was for this work at a time when the Council is already struggling to deliver work on its strategic priorities. I also wonder who decided to do this piece of work."

**Cllr James Lawrence** (Liberal Democrat — College) drew attention to ongoing financial pressures, particularly on housing budgets: "It is worth noting that at the same time this report is being published, an £875k overspend on temporary accommodation by the end of the financial year is being predicted. This is due to a combination of an increase in temporary accommodation need, and a substantially too optimistic budgeting of 71 temporary accommodation spaces when for the past year and a half approximately 90 spaces have consistently been required. It would not be accurate to describe the current 2025/26 budget as balanced."

Neither the Labour nor Conservative parties, both with small representations on the Council, offered comment.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council continues to be run by the borough's network of Residents' Association councillors, who hold the majority of seats.

Image: Cover page of the EEBC Annual Report. © EEBC

Sam Jones — Reporter



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## Inquest into Banstead tree fall death of 12 year old

A full inquest into the death of 12-year-old Brooke Wiggins, who was crushed to death by a falling tree branch on the Surrey and South London border last year, is set to take place next spring, as urgent questions remain over the tree's maintenance and safety.



The date was set following a pre-inquest review held on October 7 at South London Coroners Court, inside Croydon Council Chambers, and overseen by Coroner Ivor Collett. The inquest will determine whether Sutton Council, Surrey County Council, or both, bear any responsibility for the conditions that led to her death.

Brooke died on November 9 last year after a branch snapped from a tree she had been swinging on using a rope swing, while playing with friends at Grove Place, near the junction with Carshalton Road. The scene was described as deeply distressing, with her friends screaming for help as they waited for emergency services to arrive.

Emergency services spent over an hour trying to free her from the fallen branch, but despite efforts from residents and rescue teams, she was pronounced dead at the scene.

The inquest will hear evidence from the police, the Health and Safety Executive, and representatives of Surrey County Council. The council is responsible for managing the tree from which the rope swing was attached.

Arboriculture managers from Surrey will be called to give evidence on the inspection regime for the tree and whether it met required safety standards. The hearing will aim to establish if the branch failure was preventable and whether council maintenance processes were sufficient.

Coroner Collett noted the broader significance of the case, describing it as “an important issue for Surrey”, given that it has the highest number of trees of any county in England, with a tree cover of 22.4%. He has also granted Surrey County Council permission to begin ‘monolithing’ – the removal of remaining branches on the tree involved in the incident.

The coroner is considering whether the London Borough of Sutton should be named as an “interested party” in the inquest. Interested parties are individuals, organisations or representatives with a legal interest in the death, giving them the right to be more actively involved in the inquest than other witnesses.

Although the tree was under Surrey’s control, the branch extended over land owned by Sutton, and Brooke and her friends are believed to have accessed the area by crossing rights of way also owned by Sutton.

The inquest will examine the cause of Brooke’s death and determine how and why the branch gave way.

Brooke’s family attended the hearing and are expected to provide a pen portrait during the inquest to honour her memory. Coroner Collett confirmed that distressing body-worn footage from the day will not be used during the hearing, but that audio from the 999 calls will be played as part of the evidence.

Collett acknowledged that while the potential spring date for the three-day hearing was regrettable, it was a realistic outcome given the current backlog facing the court. Confirmation of the exact date is expected within the month.

Harrison Galliven – LDRS

Image: Brooke was killed after she was crushed by a branch in Banstead last year Credit: Google Maps

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## Three new schemes to help Surrey residents save energy and cut costs

Surrey County Council is launching three new schemes to help residents make their homes warmer, greener, and more affordable to run.

With over 300,000 homes in Surrey energy rated D or worse, many properties are poorly insulated, expensive to heat, and at risk of damp and mould. Improving energy efficiency is a key step in supporting residents and progressing towards Surrey’s ambition of becoming a net zero county by 2050.

Three ways Surrey residents can take action:

### Home Energy Improvement One-Stop Shop

In partnership with energy specialists Furbnow, Surrey County Council is offering a comprehensive retrofit support service. Homeowners can access expert guidance through a three-stage journey: a home energy plan, design support, and project management. Recommended retrofit measures may include insulation, solar panels, draught-proofing, ventilation upgrades, and heat pumps. Eligible Surrey households may access up to 20% off a Home Energy Plan and 30% off design and project



management services.

Registration is free and without obligation. Visit the **Furnow website** to learn more.

### Switch Together: Air Source Heat Pumps

Through the council's group-buying scheme, Switch Together, residents can upgrade to a highly efficient air source heat pump at a competitive rate. Each household receives a tailored quote and may be eligible for up to £7,500 in government funding via the Boiler Upgrade Scheme.

Residents can find out more and register on the **Switch Together Surrey website**. Registration is open until 31 October 2025.

### Big Community Switch

This free group-buying scheme helps residents find competitive energy tariffs with trusted suppliers, including 100% renewable electricity as standard. Participants receive a personalised energy offer based on their usage and household needs, making it easier to compare and switch without the hassle.

To apply for this scheme, visit the **Big Community Switch webpage**. Registration is open until 31 October 2025.

**Marisa Heath, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for Environment, said:** *"We know many households are interested in how to make their homes more comfortable, healthier, affordable-to-run and future-ready, and these tailored schemes are designed to make it easier to take action. Whether you're looking to improve insulation, switch to a heat pump, or find a better energy tariff, there's support available - and no pressure to commit. I'd really encourage residents to explore all three options and register their interest. It's a simple step that could make a big difference, and it helps us move closer to becoming a net zero council and county by 2050."*

For more information on all three schemes and other energy offerings visit our **home energy saving support for residents page**.

Surrey County Council



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## Historic Surrey Hills mansion saved from falling into "rack and ruin"

An additional 27 homes will be built at an abandoned Surrey Hills mansion and stables to stop the heritage buildings falling into "rack and ruin". In February 2023, Mole Valley District Council approved the creation of Audley Headley Court, a 112-home retirement community at the historic site. Now, following the October 1 meeting of the council's development committee, the extra units will be added to the green belt land to make the project financially viable to the developers.

The plans were passed without objection from councillors who were echoing residents' desire to see the old site returned to use and for its much-loved garden spaces to be opened to the public. David Preedy of Headley Parish Council said: "Headley Court is critical to our community both in terms of its history and the impact on the village." He admitted the extra homes were not without controversy but that the parish backed the plans to put an end to the "years of disruption and significant decay to the heritage of our village and the gardens and the heritage buildings".

The mansion house has been vacant since the departure of the Ministry of Defence, with the Jubilee Complex gardens used by the NHS and Surrey County Council during the pandemic. The estate has also been used to support Help for Heroes, those who fought in the Afghanistan war and more recently the NHS throughout the pandemic.

Developers said the refurbishment and reuse of listed mansion houses and stables, alongside sensitive reinstatement of the extensive grounds, will make much of the land publicly accessible for the first time. It would also help meet the need for specialist housing for older people as well as bring social and community benefits, the meeting heard.

The applicant's agent said: "It has received no objections from the local community with whom we have engaged extensively since



our first involvement with the site back in early 2022. We will continue to ingratiate ourselves into the local community as we have done elsewhere and bring the site back to its former glory.”

Councillor Roger Adams (Liberal Democrat, Bookham West) said: “This is a historic site and it would be a great shame to see it fall into rack and ruin.” He added: “It was a pity that green belt land must be taken but on the other hand if it must be taken to preserve the whole site and improve the whole site, then so be it.”

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Headley Court. Credit Angle Property.

Related report:

14 against 59 = 70? Dilemma for Headley

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## Epsom and Ewell Borough Council reveals scale of vacancies and agency costs

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is currently carrying 56 vacant posts, according to figures released under the Freedom of Information Act. The disclosure sheds light on the staffing challenges facing the Borough at a time when discussions continue over local government reorganisation (LGR) across Surrey.

The Council confirmed that five senior officers have left since April 2022, with all but two of those positions permanently replaced. Two roles were deleted as part of an internal reorganisation.

Despite the vacancies, the Council reported no “vacancy savings” for the current financial year. In previous years, however, unfilled posts generated savings of £286,000 in 2023/24 and £340,000 in 2022/23.

EEBC’s expenditure on agency, consultant and temporary staff remains significant, totalling £1.47 million so far in 2024/25, following £1.76 million in 2023/24 and £1.89 million in 2022/23.

The figures show that Operational Services consistently account for the largest share of agency spending — around £985,000 this year — followed by Property Management (£181,000) and Venues (£130,000). Other notable areas of spending include Community Services, Environmental Health, Finance and HR.

No senior management posts are currently filled by consultants or agency staff. The Council also said it holds no internal reports identifying recruitment difficulties or pressures linked to potential LGR changes, and no shared service arrangements have been entered into as a result of staffing shortages.

While EEBC stated it aims to operate “as an open, transparent authority”, the figures highlight the extent to which local authorities are relying on temporary staffing amid wider uncertainty over Surrey’s local government future.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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## Businesses get £2 million boost in Surrey

An economic boost worth millions, scores of new jobs and hundreds of local opportunities will be delivered thanks to funding awarded to dozens of businesses by Surrey County Council.



From vineyards and biotech to manufacturing and AI firms, a diverse range of organisations from across the county have been awarded grants in the first round of the Surrey Economic Growth Fund.

The scheme, launched by the council in April, brings together pooled funding streams including the government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund. Following a highly competitive process, close to £2 million has been awarded to dozens of recipients, unlocking significant match funding and private investment.

The successful bids are collectively estimated to grow Surrey's economy by £9 million, create or safeguard 300 jobs and bring 1,350 residents into employment.

## Local firms supported

Among those receiving funding is Aero Sensor, a technology firm at Dunsfold Industrial Park in Cranleigh, led by former F1 engineer Dr Barney Garrod. The company is one of only three globally developing new aerodynamic measurement probes for automotive and aerospace applications.

The grant will support the creation of a new wind tunnel facility to test its designs, creating highly skilled jobs in the process.

Dr Garrod said:

"The grant enabled us to fully kit out the wind tunnel with the tools and instruments we need. We'll also be hiring new staff and technicians. Having our own wind tunnel means we can halve our turnaround time and massively accelerate our development. It's moved the business forward by about a year."

Other successful bids include Woodlark Nurseries in Hersham, which is creating a new horticultural facility, while Upper Birtley Farm Partnership near Bramley will establish a premium glamping and outdoor education site in the Surrey Hills.

In Godalming, Sammi-Select will develop a 'practice interview' tool adapted from an AI platform to support marginalised jobseekers such as young people not in education or training and those who are digitally excluded.

## County-wide initiatives

There are county-wide projects too, including the Surrey Venture Studio scheme, a collaboration between Surrey's three universities to support start-ups, and Source in Surrey, led by the county's Chambers of Commerce, encouraging larger businesses to 'buy local'.

Both are expected to complement existing work through the council's Business Surrey initiative.

Councillor Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth, said:

"The new Economic Growth Fund has generated a huge level of interest from across Surrey, demonstrating the real appetite from our amazing business community to drive innovation, growth and job creation in our county.

"Round one was highly competitive and we've only supported the highest quality bids which fully met the criteria. This ensures every pound invested delivers genuine growth, meaningful jobs and positive outcomes for Surrey's communities.

"Our ambition is to position Surrey—which already contributes £50 billion to UK plc every year—as one of the UK's leading regional economies, and this fund is one of the ways we're building the foundations to achieve that."

## Next round

Round Two of the Surrey Economic Growth Fund is due to launch in October, focusing on Business Growth Grants. Applicants can expect a streamlined, one-stage process supported by a guidance handbook.

For full details visit: [businesssurrey.co.uk/innovate/economic-growth-fund](https://businesssurrey.co.uk/innovate/economic-growth-fund)

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Epsom and Ewell Times reporter adds Epsom winner Lesh Wear (or Lesh), is a maternity and nursing wear company focused on creating comfortable, leak-proof products for mothers, such as their FREEFLO nursing bra, aiming to reduce the use of disposable breast pads. The company, also known as Lesh Wear Ltd, was incorporated in March 2022 and is headquartered in Epsom, Surrey, with the primary goal of making the breastfeeding journey easier.



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## Recipients of Round One funding

A total of £1,979,982 has been awarded to the following organisations:

- Dorking Distillery, Dorking
- Halt Glass, Guildford
- Emilia JH, Reigate
- Sammi-Select, Godalming
- Molecular Medical, Guildford
- Bonovate, Camberley
- Woven Bio, Woking
- Streetwise Technology
- The Good Bacteria Company, Farnham
- UKIOT, Weybridge
- Lesh Wear, Epsom
- Woodlark Nurseries, Hersham
- Aero Sensor, Dunsfold
- Rhizo PTX, Guildford
- Cambertronics, Cranleigh
- Misty Moon Cider, Farnham
- DIREK, Guildford
- Tiontech, Guildford
- Raw Honey Distillery, Fetcham
- Whitespace Work Software, Godalming
- LenzIQ, Horley
- GT Joinery, Molesey
- Source in Surrey (via Surrey Chambers of Commerce)
- Surrey Venture Studio
- Surrey Innovation Board (via the University of Surrey)
- Blakes Lane Farm, Guildford
- Upper Birtley Farm Partnership
- Ivelle Farm, Waverley

Image: Matt Furniss, Exec Member for Growth, with Barney Garrood of Aerosensor  
Surrey County Council





## Surrey gets a sinking feeling over cost of its holes

Has Surrey become Britain's sinkhole capital? Well, the figures certainly point in that direction.

Surrey County Council is on track to spend a staggering £1.6m fixing the collapsed 65ft hole in a section of Godstone High Street – a bill that dwarfs what most local authorities spend on sinkholes.

Figures obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests show councils across the UK have spent more than £6.2m tackling over 7,000 sinkholes since 2020. But Surrey alone accounts for almost half of that total, shelling out over £3.1m making it by far the country's biggest spender.

The Godstone collapse, which first appeared in February, has left the part of the High Street shut for months and businesses struggling.

Surrey County Council has already spent £850,000 on emergency responses, surveys, roadworks and consultancy fees, including £360,000 on just site establishment.

Another £800,000 is forecast for stabilisation work, filling in the mine tunnels, and further repairs – taking the final bill to £1.65m. This will amount to just over a quarter of the total UK bill on sinkholes for the last five years.

### What is driving the cost?

The British Geological Society has stated that Surrey is particularly prone to sinkholes due to the underlying sands in the county, which are weakly cemented.

According to council documents, the ground beneath Godstone sits on the Folkestone Sandstone Formation – a weak, sandy foundation that made the area vulnerable to collapse. CCTV images provided under FOI request confirm the collapse was worsened by an old sand mine tunnel running beneath the High Street.

While the council insists the road should reopen by December 16, locals are not holding their breath. Residents have been struggling for months with the road closure, diversions, fall in trade and general feel of chaos. That being said, an official report shown to SurreyLive by the council does state that the project is tracking towards a final inspection date of December 16th.

A Surrey County Council spokesperson said: "This continues to be a highly complex incident involving a number of investigations led by our Highways Officers and other agencies, including specialist teams and utility companies.

"Work is underway to reconstruct the final footpath affected by the collapse and we're now planning how we stabilise the collapsed area and fill in the tunnel network.

"We are updating local residents and businesses as we progress through each stage of the process and expect the final two residents to be back in their properties by the end of September.

"Once our stabilisation work and the SES works to reconnect and relay the mains through the collapse area are completed, the area will be refilled and repaired permanently. We are currently planning to complete our repairs and reopen the High Street during December."

### A nationwide problem

The Godstone collapse may be dramatic, but it's part of a wider and growing problem. Since 2020, sinkholes have been recorded everywhere from Reading to Scotland, with councils spending millions to patch them up.

The top spenders after Surrey include Reading (£976,500), East Sussex (£767,238) and Transport Scotland (£602,000). If you take away the Godstone sinkhole expenditure, Surrey still comes up top with over £2.2m being put towards sinkholes.

Lloyd Allen, Infrastructure Team Manager for Surrey County Council, on Godstone high street. (Credit: Surrey County Council).

Emily Dalton LDRS



Additional reporting from Sam McEvans

Related reports:

Godstone's gasworks fury while sinkhole not fixed

Godstone "Sink-hole" residents to return

Surrey sink-hole major incident

## Epsom's Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is pleased to confirm that Places Leisure will take over the operation of the Rainbow Leisure Centre in Epsom from 1 October. This follows the Council's announcement in July appointing Places Leisure as the new operator on a 10-year contract, with the option to extend for a further five years.

This marks an exciting new chapter for the Rainbow Leisure Centre with members set to continue benefitting from high-quality leisure, health and wellbeing services.

Places Leisure, part of the PfP Group the UK's leading social enterprise, will be investing its own capital into the leisure centre, upgrading the gym, studios, swimming changing rooms and more.

From 1 October, existing members or anybody looking for a new membership should contact [enquiries@pfpleisure.org](mailto:enquiries@pfpleisure.org). More information can be found on their website - Rainbow Leisure Centre | Places Leisure. Places Leisure has been working closely with Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and the outgoing operator, GLL, to ensure an efficient and safe handover.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) , Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee said:

"The wellbeing of our community is at the heart of everything we do, and our Health and Wellbeing Strategy continues to shape how we support residents to live healthier, happier lives. We're proud to be entering a new era at the Rainbow Leisure Centre, one that embraces a holistic approach to health and fitness, and delivers an inclusive Active Communities programme, alongside activities delivered both at the centre and outside in the wider community.

"Places Leisure is providing a platform where everyone in our borough can thrive - opening up opportunities for residents of all ages, including young people, the elderly and those living with a disability or illness, wherever they may be on their wellbeing journey.

"I'd like to thank Places Leisure and Greenwich Leisure Limited for working together to ensure a smooth transition for members. I'd also like to extend our gratitude to Greenwich Leisure Limited for the positive legacy they leave behind, which we are proud to build upon."

**Dan Walker, Business Development Director at Places Leisure, said:** "It is clear that the Rainbow Leisure Centre stands at the heart of the community, providing opportunities for local people of all ages and abilities to enjoy being active and to bring people together. We are delighted to be the new operators of the centre, and we thank GLL for the hard work they have put in during their time as operator. We look forward to a successful partnership with Epsom and Ewell Council, local stakeholders, and of course the colleagues who bring the centre to life.

"A thriving community is a community where everyone is welcome in a truly inclusive way, which is why within the first year of our contract we will invest c£4.7million in a series of projects including a new fitness suite, studios and changing facilities to support community engagement. Our commitment will further boost community activities, inspire people of all ages to lead an active and healthy lifestyle, whilst generating over £5million of social value each year."

Places Leisure website - <https://www.placesleisure.org/>

Places Leisure will also offer a wider range of health and wellbeing-related activities, delivered both inside and outside of the leisure centre, including:

- An Active Communities programme, including exercise referrals for falls prevention, cardiac rehab and weight management; community wellbeing walks, as well as programmes such as 'move through menopause' and Health MOTs, which will support local people in an inclusive way and enable the community to thrive.





- New leisure centre programmes targeted at under 16s and the elderly: including LES Mills exercises classes and Saturday Night Project activities for the under 16s and new EGYM and walking sports to help older adults be more physically active.
- Social value initiatives: such as work placement opportunities including for unemployed and disabled people; leisure industry careers advice and curriculum support; and supporting the local economy by keeping spending within the local supply chain.

Places Leisure will continue to invest in the environmental sustainability of the centre, this will be overseen by an environmental coordinator.

Places Leisure is a social enterprise which is passionate about 'creating active places and healthy people' and improving opportunities for communities to be physically active. It experiences over 30 million visits per annum across the 101 leisure facilities that it operates on behalf of local authorities across the country and supports over 126k children and adults learning to swim each year. <https://www.placesleisure.org/>

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Related reports:

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Gold star at the end of the Rainbow

Pot of gold for Rainbow?

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## Epsom and Ewell Council CEO contests 'culture of secrecy' claim and outlines fixes

### Audit & Scrutiny grills council on transparency

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

### Why transparency was on the agenda

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

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

### The CEO's evidence and key claims

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

## Members' challenge

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

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

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

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

## What the Council's written position says

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

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



- Regular auditor check-ins are now in place after recognising an issue “should have been flagged sooner”.

## The chair’s take and decision

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

## What changes residents should expect next

- More public-facing content: reports split so only sensitive details are redacted, alongside plain-English explanations for any exemption.
- Audit follow-through: external auditors to sample the past 12 months of restricted items and give an independent view.
- Structured liaison: routine, documented meetings between the CEO and statutory officers and auditors throughout the year.
- Internal training and controls: a live decision-making flow-chart, refreshed training and clarified responsibilities for immediate publication of decisions.

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

Sam Jones – Reporter

Related reports:

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## Epsom reserves vs investment

A bid to raid a Epsom and Ewell council’s multi-million pound property reserves to pay for crumbling public buildings has been thrown out by councillors.

Epsom and Ewell Borough councillors blocked a move to dip into a £7m ‘rainy day’ fund to pay for important repairs to community venues.

Opposition councillors argued that money locked away in the ‘property income equalisation’ (PIE) reserve could be better spent fixing leaky roofs, broken boilers and delayed upgrades at places like Bourne Hall, the playhouse and the Harrier Centre.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) told a Strategy and Resources Committee meeting on September 25: “Why prioritise handing over a well- financed property empire to a new unitary at the cost of the huge burden of deferred works on our crumbling public buildings? Do we want to see our venues sold off or handed over to charitable trusts and then closed soon after because they can’t afford much needed repairs?”

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) backed the call, saying the council’s property income was now more secure and that modestly trimming the reserve could free up £1.5m to plug the gap in the capital budget: “We’ve come out of COVID uncertainty and we’ve got secure rental income.” He argued the council can safely reduce reserves and use the money to fund the projects residents actually need.

But senior councillors and officers pushed back hard, warning that the reserve was vital to protect the council from sudden losses if tenants went bust or properties stood empty. They said cutting it down to £1m would be “reckless” given the risks tied to £64m of commercial property borrowing.

Council leader, **Hannah Dalton**, (RA SAToneleigh) said: “You kind of need to take a whole system to view and not just pick bits



out.” She explained the council is working through the assets and reserves and will continue to work, keeping members updated.

Cllr Dalton said: “We’re also waiting to see what the fair funding review could mean for Surrey alone. They’re thinking there could be a deficit of 45 million pounds in the county so we’re having to look at everything.”

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) said: “We’re in the unusual position of not staring at bankruptcy like other councils — and that’s because we’ve been prudent. We’ve got reserves to cover things that have gone wrong and things have gone wrong and the reserves have actually been used to satisfy that.”

Council finance chiefs also reminded members that a full review of reserves and council-owned assets is already under way, with results due in November.

The Section 151 officer confirmed that if reserves are found to be “over-prudent”, some money could be released for other priorities, and that selling off struggling assets remained an option.

An attempt to water down the proposal — including disposing of 70 East Street and using the cash to top up building repairs — was also rejected. In the end, councillors voted to “note but take no action” on the motion.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council town hall. (Credit: Emily Dalton/ LDRS)

Emily Dalton LDRS