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Plus ça change …… will this openness last?

30 October 2026



East Surrey's open cabinet: a new culture or a honeymoon?

There is something refreshing about a council cabinet meeting at which the outcome does not appear to have been settled before the public arrives.

East Surrey's debate over the relocation of Reigate Priory Junior School offered residents something worth watching: cabinet members expressing different views, arguments being challenged and a decision reached by a divided vote.

Cllr Ashley Tilling (LibDem Walton South & Oatlands), the shadow authority's lead for children and youth services, opposed the move. Seven colleagues supported it. He lost the argument and the vote.

Should that cost him his position? Apparently so, according to Conservative opposition leader Cllr David Lewis (Conservative Cobham & Oxshott South), who suggested that he should "consider his position".

But what, precisely, was the offence? Expressing a judgement openly? Failing to agree with the majority? Allowing the public to discover that a difficult decision had produced disagreement among those responsible for making it?

Cllr Tilling described the proceedings as a "healthy debate". On the evidence of the report, that seems a reasonable description.

A contrast with Epsom and Ewell

For residents accustomed to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, the contrast is striking.

The ruling Residents' Association group's practice of meeting privately to settle its position before public council meetings has left an obvious question hanging over proceedings: how much opportunity remains for public debate to change the outcome?

Private political meetings are legitimate. Councillors need opportunities to discuss proposals, test arguments and organise their work. Every political group will sometimes want to talk behind closed doors.

But there is a democratic cost when those discussions effectively determine decisions that are subsequently presented to the public for formal approval. Residents can watch the speeches and count the votes while remaining unable to see where the decisive arguments were made, whose objections were overcome or what persuaded anyone to change their mind.

A meeting can satisfy the requirements of public access while revealing remarkably little about how power is exercised.

The Residents' Associations' claim to stand apart from conventional party politics makes this particularly relevant. Independence is less convincing when the public sees a settled group position but cannot follow the discussion that produced it.

Disagreement is useful information

East Surrey has, on this occasion, shown another possibility.

Residents know that the school relocation divided the cabinet. They can examine the objections, assess the majority's response and hold individual councillors accountable for their votes.

That is useful democratic information. Public unanimity would have told them less.

Nor should opposition councillors discourage this openness. They are entitled to challenge a cabinet member's judgement, expose inconsistencies and question whether a policy is workable. But suggesting that losing a cabinet vote makes someone's position untenable risks encouraging the very discipline that turns public meetings into rehearsed performances.

There is a distinction between opposing a proposal before the decision and obstructing its implementation afterwards. The report establishes the former. It provides no basis for assuming the latter.

The harder test lies ahead

Nevertheless, one divided vote does not establish a lasting culture.

East Surrey is a new authority, still enjoying some of the freedom that comes with a fresh start. Is this the beginning of a more open approach, a honeymoon, or an experiment that experienced political operators will eventually dismiss as naive?

The real test will come when disagreement becomes electorally inconvenient.

Will cabinet members remain free to dissent when budgets tighten, services disappoint and opposition campaigners turn

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their words into leaflets? Will the leadership defend open debate when headlines describe it as division? Will councillors tolerate public uncertainty when the next election approaches?

Or will they retreat into the familiar safety of private group meetings, settle the difficult questions there and emerge with an agreed position for public consumption?

The answer will depend partly on how dissent is treated now. Demand resignation whenever a cabinet member loses a vote and the incentive to resolve every disagreement behind closed doors becomes stronger.

East Surrey deserves credit for allowing residents to witness a real difference of opinion. As Epsom and Ewell's borough council approaches its end, that offers a welcome contrast with the RA's closed approach to settling its position.

The challenge is to make openness a habit that survives political pressure. Residents should remember this meeting—and expect the same candour when governing becomes harder.

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Related report:

East Surrey Cabinet member will not be moved, but school will be

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Dallen's Dilemma

30 October 2026

Cllr Neil Dallen has a decision to make. How much more public money should be spent deciding whether another councillor was sufficiently respectful towards him during an argument about public money?

The external invoices arising from his complaint against Cllr Chris Ames already total £8,567.64. Council officers' time has not been separately costed. Further proceedings could add to the bill, and the Council has disclosed no estimate for completing them.

This is not expenditure on finding out how the Rainbow Leisure Centre came to require up to £500,000 of repairs. It is expenditure on investigating and adjudicating upon the conduct of a councillor who pressed for answers about the secrecy surrounding that decision.

The distinction ought to trouble every councillor responsible for safeguarding the public purse.

A failure of collective judgement

The confrontation at January's Strategy and Resources Committee was avoidable.

Dallen had supported the urgent Rainbow decision and its confidential treatment. He then chaired the meeting at which Ames questioned those matters, putting himself in the position of controlling scrutiny of a decision in which he had participated.

His declaration, "It is my meeting", captured the problem. A committee meeting belongs to the Council and serves the public. The chair's authority exists to facilitate its business, including uncomfortable scrutiny.

The Constitution gives a chair powers to regulate debate. EET questions the suggestion that those powers justified closing down questions about the chair's own involvement without first addressing whether he should hand over to his vice-chair.

Ames, too, mishandled the confrontation. Calling Dallen arrogant personalised a legitimate argument and made it easier to divert attention from the unanswered questions. Ames has acknowledged that he should have raised a formal point of order.

Dallen should have recognised the difficulty of presiding over scrutiny of his own actions. The Monitoring Officer should have helped the meeting resolve that difficulty. Other councillors could have intervened to bring the discussion back to proper procedure.

Instead, a collective failure of judgement became a disciplinary case against one participant.

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Who stands outside the dispute?

The position of Monitoring Officer Piero Ionta deserves particular scrutiny. He advised during the January exchange, supporting Dallen's position. His advice was itself challenged by Ames.

The subsequent external investigation was commissioned on the Monitoring Officer's behalf. Ames's complaint about Dallen's conduct at the same meeting was rejected without an equivalent external investigation.

Those facts create an obvious question about the separation of roles. An officer whose advice formed part of the dispute should not simply assume that commissioning someone else to investigate removes every concern about his continuing involvement.

The investigator's independence must be respected. Being paid by the Council does not establish bias. But an external appointment does not, by itself, answer questions about who decided that an investigation was warranted, who settled its scope and who controlled the subsequent process.

Dallen's personal decision to complain did not itself justify committing public resources. That required an official assessment under the Council's arrangements. Responsibility for the expenditure therefore extends beyond the complainant to those who authorised the machinery to proceed.

The investigator's recommendation against Ames is also a recommendation, not a verdict. The hearing panel has yet to determine the complaint. The September proceedings instead became entangled in questions about the arrangements under which the Council was acting.

A process invoking standards should be able to demonstrate its own.

This is no criminal prosecution

Dallen's statement that the process should run its course invites examination of what kind of process this is.

In a criminal case, there are institutional divisions between investigation, prosecution and adjudication: police investigate, the CPS makes independent prosecution decisions in cases within its remit, and courts determine guilt. Those divisions provide safeguards against one institution controlling the whole course of a disputed allegation.

A council standards complaint is a different system. Here, a powerful councillor complained about an opponent; the Council's own administrative machinery assessed and progressed the matter; an investigator commissioned at Council expense recommended a finding; and a Council panel is to determine it.

That does not automatically make the proceedings unfair. It makes transparency about independence, conflicts, authority and proportionality essential.

Dallen chairs Strategy and Resources, the Financial Strategy Advisory Group and the Shareholder Sub-Committee, and is vice-chair of Licensing and Planning Policy. He is among the borough's most influential councillors. Scrutiny of how the institution responds to his complaint is entirely proper.

Whose answer was the Council sending?

EET asked Dallen whether, in light of the costs, he would withdraw his complaint. The Council's communications team supplied a statement attributable to him.

Why was the Council's publicly funded communications machinery answering a question about whether an individual councillor would continue a complaint he had personally chosen to lodge?

There may be an administrative explanation. Councils can properly explain their procedures and assist with enquiries concerning public duties. But the distinction between explaining an institutional process and providing communications support for its complainant matters.

The Council should explain the basis on which that assistance was provided, who authorised it and whether equivalent assistance would be available to the councillor complained about.

Otherwise, the appearance is that the institution funding the complaint's progression is also helping its initiator defend its continuation.

Public scrutiny is not improper pressure

Dallen said: "The process should be allowed to run its course without external pressure being placed on any of those involved."

He also said the appropriate forum was the standards process, rather than the media.

A panel must decide the complaint fairly on the evidence. EET is not asking it to decide according to newspaper opinion.

But whether continuing the complaint justifies further public expenditure is a question for public debate. So are the handling of apparent conflicts, the treatment of competing complaints and the deployment of Council staff.

A complainant cannot place those questions beyond scrutiny merely because proceedings remain unfinished.

For residents unable to attend meetings, examine committee papers or pursue unanswered enquiries, the local press is often the only practical means of discovering what their Council is doing. Public questioning of public expenditure is accountability in action.

A senior councillor who seeks protection from that scrutiny should consider what his position says about his

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understanding of public office.

The choice now

The disclosed external fees are a small fraction of EEBC's annual budget. They nevertheless equal almost 36 households' annual payments of the borough council's Band D Council Tax share.

The issue is proportionality. What useful public outcome now justifies spending more?

A finding, a censure, an apology or training might mark the Council's disapproval of Ames's language. None would explain the Rainbow repair liabilities or answer the original questions about confidentiality. With EEBC due to disappear in April 2027, the practical benefit of prolonging this dispute becomes harder to identify.

Dallen received £17,057.52 in councillor allowances in 2025/26. The external invoices alone amount to slightly more than half that sum.

If he withdraws, residents may reasonably ask whether he should voluntarily return some allowance to acknowledge the resources consumed. Withdrawal would not establish a legal obligation to repay, nor would it make him solely responsible for expenditure officers authorised. It would, however, leave a political question about taking responsibility.

Continuing the complaint cannot sensibly be justified by a desire to avoid that question. Money already committed is no reason to commit more.

The most troubling appearance is that Ames faces formal condemnation after trying, however intemperately, to obtain answers about public money, while Dallen faces no equivalent proceedings for stopping those questions. A complaints system that concentrates on the language of challenge while leaving the obstruction of scrutiny unexamined risks teaching councillors the wrong lesson.

Ames should have chosen his words and procedure better. Dallen should now demonstrate the financial judgement expected of the chair of Strategy and Resources.

He should withdraw his complaint and ask the Council to bring the matter to a proportionate close. The Council should explain whether any further action is necessary, what it would achieve and what it would cost.

The public has already paid enough for a meeting that those present should have managed properly.

How two became one became three – how "unitary" means "trinity".

30 October 2026

The central promise of local government reorganisation was easy to understand. Surrey's confusing two-tier system would be swept away. Surrey County Council and the county's 11 borough and district councils would be replaced by streamlined unitary authorities.

One council would deliver the principal local services in each area. Duplication would be removed, accountability would become clearer and residents would know which authority was responsible.

That was the theory.

The emerging reality looks rather different. The Government is abolishing two tiers of local government, but Surrey now appears to be heading towards three separate layers or bodies: a countywide strategic authority or elected mayor, the new East Surrey Council and, within Epsom and Ewell, Charter Trustees preserving the borough's civic and ceremonial functions.

Not all three would have equivalent powers. Charter Trustees would not run ordinary council services and a strategic authority would operate at a regional level. Nevertheless, each would be a public body with functions, office-holders,

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meetings, administration and potential financial consequences.

Residents might reasonably ask: how exactly is this simplification?

From two councils to one – and then back again

At present, Epsom and Ewell residents are served principally by Surrey County Council and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council.

From April 2027, both are due to disappear and be replaced locally by East Surrey Council. On paper, that reduces two councils to one.

But the reorganisation was always linked to a wider devolution agenda. A Foundation Strategic Authority covering Surrey is proposed as a possible first step towards a Mayoral Strategic Authority headed by a directly elected Surrey mayor.

The latest Government proposals would give regional mayors substantial powers, including the ability to intervene in major planning applications. Those powers could extend to developments of more than 150 homes, large commercial schemes and buildings of 30 metres or more.

Whatever view one takes of those powers, this would plainly be more than a decorative office. A Surrey mayor and strategic authority would sit above East and West Surrey councils, making decisions across the county on matters potentially including planning, transport, housing, infrastructure and economic development.

The old county council tier would therefore disappear, only for a new countywide strategic layer to emerge in a different form.

It may have different boundaries of responsibility, a different constitution and a directly elected mayor. But to residents looking up the governmental ladder, it may feel remarkably like the return of a second tier.

A new body below as well as one above

Epsom and Ewell also came close to acquiring an additional layer beneath East Surrey Council.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council conducted a Community Governance Review into establishing two parish councils, styled as Epsom Community Council and Ewell Community Council. Parish councils are statutory local authorities with elected councillors and the power to raise their own Council Tax precept.

The proposal was rejected decisively by residents. Around 82 per cent of approximately 2,200 respondents opposed it, and the plan was abandoned.

That should have settled the question of creating another precepting body below East Surrey Council. Yet the abolition of the borough leaves a genuine question about what happens to Epsom and Ewell's mayoralty, civic identity and ceremonial traditions.

The Borough Council's preferred answer is Charter Trustees.

Charter Trustees are not parish councils. Their role would be much narrower, principally preserving the mayoralty and civic and ceremonial functions of the disappearing borough. They would probably be drawn from East Surrey councillors representing the Epsom and Ewell area rather than forming another separately elected council.

But they would still constitute another public body. They could seek funding from East Surrey Council during their first year and thereafter would have the power to levy a precept through Council Tax. The Borough Council's report suggested that the average Band D charge imposed by existing Charter Trustee bodies is about £2.50 a year.

That may sound modest. The more important question is one of principle and accountability. Residents rejected two new parish councils carrying separate precepts. They may nevertheless find another precepting body created to preserve civic arrangements after the borough council is abolished.

There may be a respectable case for maintaining the mayoralty and Epsom and Ewell's civic identity. But if residents are to pay for it, however small the initial sum, they are entitled to be consulted and told clearly what the body will cost, what it will do and how its spending will be controlled.

Three bodies where two once stood

The prospective structure can therefore be summarised simply.

Today, Epsom and Ewell has two principal councils: the borough and the county.

Tomorrow, it may have East Surrey Council in the middle, a Surrey strategic authority and mayor above it, and Charter Trustees below it.

Two bodies become three.

That does not necessarily mean three full tiers of service-delivering local government. Ministers and council leaders will no doubt insist upon that distinction. They will describe the mayoral authority as strategic and the Charter Trustees as ceremonial.

Technically, they would be right. From the resident's perspective, however, government is not simplified merely by giving every new layer a different description.

Residents will still want to know who is responsible for a decision. They may have to distinguish between East Surrey councillors acting as members of the unitary authority and some of those same councillors acting as Charter Trustees. On major strategic issues, they may have to determine whether responsibility rests with East Surrey Council, a Surrey mayor

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or central government.

If the objective was clearer accountability, the emerging structure risks producing the opposite.

Powers must be matched by money and accountability

There is a legitimate argument for devolution. Decisions about Surrey's transport, infrastructure, economy and housing may often be better made in Surrey than in Whitehall. A directly elected mayor could provide visible leadership and secure powers and funding which individual councils could not obtain alone.

But devolution must mean more than transferring obligations without sufficient money. West Surrey Shadow Authority leader Councillor Paul Follows is right to warn that local government cannot continue absorbing unfunded mandates.

Nor should devolution become a convenient name for rebuilding the hierarchy that reorganisation was supposed to dismantle.

If a Surrey mayor is necessary, ministers should explain why the strategic functions cannot be exercised jointly by the two unitary councils. If Charter Trustees are necessary, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council should explain why the civic functions cannot be preserved more simply and without another Council Tax precept.

Above all, the complete structure and its cost should be presented openly. Residents were asked to accept the disruption, expense and democratic upheaval of abolishing 12 councils on the promise of simpler and more efficient government.

They should not discover, piece by piece, that the promised single tier comes with another body above it and another below.

Local government reorganisation was sold as the removal of layers. Surrey now appears to be replacing them under new names.

That may be devolution. It may be reorganisation. It may even produce better government if it is properly designed and funded.

But nobody should call it simplification.

Why procedure matters, even in little old Epsom and Ewell

30 October 2026

Nobody seriously disputes that developing Hook Road Arena as a centre for community sport, supported where necessary by housing, deserves proper investigation.

The proposal enjoyed overwhelming support. Had almost any councillor moved it at the meeting of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 21st July, it would have passed comfortably and probably without drama.

Yet the debate produced an adjournment, angry exchanges and the walkout of 11 councillors—including, it appears, at least one member of the ruling Residents' Association group.

Why?

The answer cannot lie in opposition to the proposal itself. Most, if not all, of those who walked out supported giving Hook Road Arena strategic priority. Their protest concerned the process by which the decision was being made and, more particularly, the identity of the councillor who was permitted to present himself as its principal champion.

That distinction matters.

Procedure is not an inconvenience

There is a temptation, particularly where the desired outcome appears uncontroversial, to dismiss procedural objections as political gamesmanship.

Why worry about who proposed the motion if it was going to pass anyway? Why interrupt an important debate about desperately needed sports facilities with arguments about interests, declarations and who should occupy the chair?

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The answer is that procedural rules are not decorative. They exist to preserve confidence in the decisions reached under them.

Substantive rules determine what a council may decide. Procedural rules determine how it must decide it, who may participate and whether the process can command public confidence.

A good outcome reached through a questionable process does not retrospectively cure that process. Nor can councillors embrace constitutional rules when those rules assist them, only to minimise or reinterpret them when their application becomes personally inconvenient.

Rules which operate only when the powerful find them useful are not rules at all. They become instruments of discretion—and discretion exercised in one's own cause is precisely what rules governing conflicts of interest are intended to restrain.

The interest question

Cllr Neil Dallen is a director of Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd, which contracts with EEBC to hire Hook Road Arena for its annual display. He is also a trustee of the associated charitable trust.

Development could eventually end the fireworks at the Arena. The company's precise financial arrangements remain unclear, as do any payments or expenses received by its directors.

This does not establish that Cllr Dallen possessed a disclosable pecuniary interest within the strict definition of the Localism Act. That depends upon facts which the company's abbreviated accounts do not reveal. Though there is undoubtedly a related current contract with the Coucil and his company – which in itself – regardless of personal gain – is disclosable and prevents the councillor participating, absent a clear dispensation, on pain of a criminal penalty.

It is also true that Cllr Dallen was supporting a proposal which may ultimately operate against the continued use of the Arena by the fireworks company. That apparent paradox may weigh significantly against any suggestion of corrupt motivation at the meeting itself.

But the law on interests is preventive. If an interest falls within the statutory definition, a councillor cannot participate merely because he believes he is acting impartially, because his preferred outcome is publicly beneficial or because he is voting against the immediate interests of the connected organisation.

The test is not whether the councillor "feels" conflicted. It is whether the relevant facts satisfy the applicable rules.

The Mayor's position

There was a second and arguably more obvious procedural issue which received surprisingly little attention.

The Mayor, Cllr Lucie McIntyre, is Cllr Dallen's daughter. This is an undisputed and widely known fact, almost certainly familiar to every councillor in the chamber.

Yet the relationship was not formally disclosed at the meeting.

Being Cllr Dallen's daughter did not automatically give the Mayor a disclosable pecuniary interest. However, she was being asked to rule on whether her father could remain in the chamber, speak, move the recommendation and participate in the vote.

Her father plainly had, at the very least, a reputational interest in that ruling. His conduct, consistency and integrity were being challenged publicly.

The question was therefore not whether the Mayor was capable of chairing impartially. It was whether public confidence would have been better protected by disclosing the relationship and allowing the Deputy Mayor to rule upon that discrete controversy.

Justice must not only be done but be seen to be done. That principle applies to modest local proceedings as surely as it applies to a courtroom.

The opposition focused its objections almost entirely on Cllr Dallen. It did not press the equally apparent question of whether his daughter should continue to chair the dispute about him.

Why?

Perhaps the relationship was so universally known that councillors did not consider a formal declaration necessary. Perhaps tempers and confusion prevented the point from being articulated. Perhaps they accepted that the Mayor was relying upon legal advice and did not wish to personalise their protest further.

But the omission also invites a less comfortable question: was the walkout motivated solely by concern for constitutional principle, or partly by anger at the spectacle of Cllr Dallen receiving public credit for a project which others believe he had previously frustrated?

From obstruction to championship?

EET has received consistent accounts from three councillors within Cllr Dallen's own Residents' Association group and two people closely connected with Epsom and Ewell Football Club.

They allege that proposals for Hook Road Arena were repeatedly pushed "from pillar to post" and between processes, contributing to delay. Cllr Dallen has also been quoted as saying: "I want the fireworks four more years."

These remain allegations to which Cllr Dallen is entitled to respond and since Sunday when he was asked to EET has received no comment from him.

Was the walkout driven not merely by the disputed legal interest, but by a sense of hypocrisy? Did councillors object to seeing someone whom they believed had privately impeded progress now appearing publicly as the development's leading

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promoter?

If so, the protest was about political ownership and credibility as well as legal compliance.

That would explain why councillors who supported the motion nevertheless refused to remain for it. They were not rejecting Hook Road Arena. They were rejecting the presentation of Cllr Dallen as its champion.

But that interpretation also carries a warning for the protesters. If their objection was truly one of principle, they should have applied that principle consistently—including to the Mayor's position in the chair. Selective indignation is no more attractive from the opposition than selective compliance is from the administration.

The small scale is no excuse

It would be easy to regard this as a parochial quarrel in a council which will cease to exist in eight months.

That would be a mistake.

Respect for the rule of law is built from the bottom upwards. It begins with small decisions, modest offices and local institutions. It depends upon people following rules even when the consequences are inconvenient and even when ignoring them might produce the same substantive result more quickly.

The erosion usually starts harmlessly: a procedure is treated as unnecessary because everybody supports the outcome; an interest is dismissed because the individual believes himself honest; a relationship is left undeclared because everybody already knows about it; an awkward question is silenced because it is said to be outside the scope of the debate.

Each departure can be rationalised. Together, they create a culture in which rules become optional for those exercising power.

At national and international level, the same habit has graver consequences. Selective obedience breeds cynicism; cynicism produces contempt for institutions; and contempt for institutions opens the way to disorder, violence and, ultimately, conflict.

Epsom and Ewell is not on the verge of anarchy because of a disagreement over a fireworks display. But the principle is indivisible. We cannot demand fidelity to constitutional rules in Westminster, respect for courts nationally or adherence to international law abroad while treating procedural safeguards as dispensable in our own council chamber.

Rules matter most when they are inconvenient.

Hook Road Arena deserved to be made a strategic priority. It did not need Cllr Dallen to move the recommendation, and the proposal would have passed without his participation.

The Council could therefore have avoided the entire controversy at virtually no cost. Cllr Dallen could have withdrawn; another councillor could have proposed the recommendation; the Mayor could have disclosed the family relationship and allowed her deputy to determine the procedural objections.

The same substantive decision would have been reached, but through a process carrying far greater public confidence.

That is the point of procedure. It is not there to frustrate good decisions. It is there to ensure that good decisions are reached in a way that deserves respect.

Power changes. Our duty does not.

30 October 2026

One of the easier occupations in local journalism is to be a cheerleader. Another is to be a partisan attack dog. Epsom and Ewell Times intends to be neither.

Our role is simpler and harder: to report fearlessly, scrutinise those who exercise power, publish differing viewpoints,

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correct errors where necessary, and ask awkward questions whoever happens to occupy the seats of authority.

Readers familiar with our record know this is not a new posture adopted for convenience.

Over recent years, EET has carried extensive and often critical reporting concerning the record of the Residents' Association administration at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.

We reported searchingly on the Local Plan controversy — including questions surrounding process, oversight, governance and public confidence in decision-making.

We reported vigorously on the Bourne Hall redevelopment dispute, including clashes between councillors, scrutiny concerns, executive decisions and the wider debate about transparency and democratic accountability.

We covered controversy surrounding Rainbow Leisure Centre and wider issues of public assets, local services and decision-making priorities.

Those reports did not always please those holding office. That is not the point. The point is that power — especially long-established power — deserves examination.

Political circumstances in Epsom and Surrey are now changing rapidly.

The Residents' Association's once dominant electoral position has weakened dramatically. Liberal Democrats are increasingly influential in both Epsom and Ewell and the emerging East Surrey structures.

Some might therefore expect a local newspaper to change its tone, soften its scrutiny, or discover fresh loyalties.

They should not.

Our reporting has already shown this.

We reported concerns surrounding attempts to restrict candidate engagement with the press during the recent election period — what became known publicly as the "gagging order" controversy.

More recently, we examined the decisive leadership vote at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council in which two Liberal Democrat votes helped retain the incumbent leadership by a single vote. In doing so, we put questions directly to Liberal Democrat councillor Julian Freeman regarding his stated reasons for supporting the incumbent leader and the consistency of those reasons with aspects of his own political history.

That is not anti-Liberal Democrat reporting. Nor was previous scrutiny anti-Residents' Association reporting.

It is journalism.

There is a distinction.

Political parties, independents, residents' groups and elected personalities all understandably wish to advance narratives favourable to themselves. Newspapers have a different obligation.

We are not an extension of any political campaign, administration, opposition group, business interest or activist faction.

We are a local, community-based, not-for-profit news organisation. Our loyalty is to evidence, public interest and readers.

That means some reports will discomfort the Residents' Association. Others will discomfort Liberal Democrats, Conservatives, independents, campaigners, officials, developers, pressure groups — and occasionally ourselves.

So be it.

A healthy local democracy requires neither compliant journalism nor selective scrutiny reserved for yesterday's establishment while today's rising powers enjoy indulgence.

Power changes hands.

The duty to hold it to account does not.

East Surrey Council, an election that calls for distinction?

30 October 2026

As voters in Epsom and Ewell prepare to elect representatives to the new East Surrey Unitary Council on 7th May, two unfolding controversies raise a broader question: how should voters judge those seeking office when key decisions remain unexplained?

At the centre of both issues is a bizarre but all the same political deployment of Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986 to justify a refusal to answer questions. As previously reported, this provision is aimed at preventing political publicity, not at preventing factual explanation. Yet it has been relied upon in two separate cases to decline engagement

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with legitimate enquiries.

One concerns the Rainbow Leisure Centre, where a confidential council decision identified potential dilapidations of up to £500,000 shortly after a change of operator. The public is still waiting for clarity on how such a liability arose. The other concerns the signing of a submission in the name of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council relating to a proposed second tier of governance above unitary councils, where questions remain about authority and process.

In both cases, the refusal to answer questions has come at a moment when accountability matters most — immediately before an election.

This matters because local elections are not simply about party labels. They are about judgement, competence and accountability. For nearly a century, the Residents' Association has governed Epsom and Ewell, attracting many capable and committed councillors who have avoided the severe financial problems seen in a number of Councils in West Surrey. That record carries weight.

But continuity also brings its own challenges. Some councillors, including among the four who have left the ruling group of Residents Association councillors since the last Borough elections, have raised concerns about the "undemocratic" style of leadership in recent years. Others, still within the group, have expressed to Epsom and Ewell Times unease but privately. Many councillors are not political operators by instinct and appear reluctant to challenge leadership decisions publicly or otherwise "rock the boat". Though the former main opposition LibDems on EEBC have not been without their own divisions; they lost two of their four councillors to independent benches.

For voters, that creates a need to distinguish between individuals as well as affiliations. A candidate's independence of judgement, willingness to question, and approach to transparency may matter as much as their political alignment.

At the same time, the forthcoming election is not for the existing borough council but for a new authority covering a much wider area. The East Surrey Council will bring together multiple districts into a single body responsible for all local services. That change introduces a second consideration for voters: influence.

Available projections and polling suggest that no single grouping is guaranteed dominance, but that larger national parties — including the Liberal Democrats and others with broader geographic bases — may be well placed to secure significant representation across the new authority. A recent JLP Partners opinion poll has placed the Liberal Democrats a nose ahead at 29% over a split right vote between Conservatives (25%) and Reform (27%). At a national level, the political landscape itself appears increasingly fragmented, with gains forecast for smaller and emerging parties alongside shifts in traditional support.

In that context, voters may find themselves weighing two different questions. One is who best represents Epsom and Ewell locally. The other is which candidates are most likely to have influence within the Unitary Council that will take decisions affecting the area for years to come.

Neither question has a simple answer. Voting for independent or Residents' Association candidates may prioritise local identity and continuity. Voting for candidates aligned with larger parties may offer a greater chance of being part of the administration of the new authority.

What the current controversies underline is that accountability, transparency and willingness to engage with scrutiny are central to that judgement. When questions about significant public decisions remain unanswered, voters are entitled to take that into account.

The ballot on 7th May is therefore not only about the future structure of local government. It is also an opportunity for voters to decide what standards they expect from those who seek to represent them.

Epsom and the Perils of Instant Judgement

30 October 2026

Epsom has, in recent days, found itself at the centre of a story that has travelled far beyond the town. What began as a serious and distressing report rapidly became something else: a test of how a modern community processes information in the age of instant communication, social media amplification, and deeply ingrained expectations of immediacy.

The latest position from Surrey Police is clear and must be the starting point for any responsible reflection: "To date, we have not found any evidence of the offence as reported but the investigation is ongoing." That is neither a conclusion nor an exoneration of any set of facts. It is a statement of where the evidence presently stands.

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Yet in the vacuum between allegation and verification, something else has taken hold.

Within hours of the initial report, narratives began to form. Some were expressions of genuine concern for a potential victim. Others moved swiftly into assumption: about what had happened, who may have been responsible, and what it meant for the safety and character of the town. From there, the escalation was almost predictable. Social media posts became assertions; assertions became “facts”; and “facts” became rallying cries.

Now, as the evidential position has shifted, a further turn is visible. Claims are being circulated that the police are engaged in a “cover-up”, often tied to the same earlier unsubstantiated assertions about those supposedly responsible. Calls for renewed protest have followed.

This is the cycle we must confront.

The combination of smartphones, social platforms, and the 24-hour expectation of updates has created a culture in which the absence of immediate answers is often treated as suspicious in itself. The slower, methodical process of investigation—gathering CCTV, interviewing witnesses, testing forensic evidence—sits uneasily alongside a public appetite for instant certainty. Where that certainty is not provided, it is too often manufactured.

This is not a criticism of concern. Communities are right to react when confronted with reports of serious crime. Nor is it a denial that the initial report was capable of causing profound alarm. But it is a warning about what follows when concern is overtaken by conjecture, and conjecture hardens into belief.

There are, however, questions that can properly be asked—calmly and without accusation. In particular, whether the sequence of communication in the early stages of the investigation may have inadvertently contributed to the intensity of the reaction. An initial appeal for witnesses, issued before a full review of available CCTV and other material, is entirely understandable in policing terms. But in a case of this gravity, it can also set in motion a chain of public response that is difficult to moderate once underway.

That is not to suggest fault, but to recognise reality: that in the current media environment, every official statement carries not only informational weight but social consequence.

There are lessons here, and they are not confined to any one institution.

For the public, it is a reminder that not everything that is widely shared is true, and that the speed with which information travels is no guarantee of its reliability. For those who seek to exploit events—whether for ideological, political or simply opportunistic reasons—it exposes the ease with which division can be stirred before facts are known. For public authorities, it underlines the delicate balance between transparency and timing.

And for the media, including this publication, it reinforces the obligation to distinguish carefully between what is known, what is alleged, and what is simply being said.

Epsom is not accustomed to finding itself at the centre of such a storm. That in itself may have contributed to the intensity of the response. But it is precisely because such incidents are rare that they demand the greatest care in how they are handled—by all of us.

The investigation continues. That must remain the focus. In the meantime, restraint, patience, and a commitment to evidence over assumption are not signs of indifference. They are the foundations of a community determined to remain both fair and united in the face of uncertainty.

Devolution or dilution? And who decides?

30 October 2026



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

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

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

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

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

Which is why process matters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related reports

Cllr Dalton seeks another layer of local government

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

Epsom on road to twin with world-famous Ukraine town of Bucha

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Process matters — but so does the balance sheet

30 October 2026

Epsom & Ewell Times has recently published a run of stories raising concerns about process, openness and transparency at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC). Those issues matter. A council can deliver services and still fall short on how it explains itself, records decisions, shares information, and responds to scrutiny.

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But if we are going to judge the borough fairly, we should also place EEBC in a wider Surrey context — particularly on the question that has become existential for parts of local government: financial resilience. In this respect we are all lucky not to be living in one of a number of other Surrey boroughs which carry massive debt.

A Surrey league table no council wants to top

Using each district and borough council's reported borrowing position and dividing by population, the county picture is stark. A small number of councils sit in an entirely different universe of debt-per-resident — Woking and Spelthorne above all, with Runnymede also far ahead of the pack.

At the other end, councils such as Reigate & Banstead report minimal borrowing compared to the Surrey outliers.

EEBC, on the same simple "borrowing per head" measure, is firmly in the low-debt group — nowhere near the high-risk profile that has dominated headlines elsewhere.

What this means for EEBC's story

It would be a mistake to pretend that "good finances" cancels out "poor process". It doesn't. Residents are entitled to proper explanations, accessible records, timely disclosure, and a culture that treats scrutiny as a civic asset rather than a nuisance.

But it would also be a mistake to ignore that, in Surrey terms, EEBC's financial position looks comparatively restrained — particularly when set against the scale of borrowing reported by the county's worst-affected councils.

That relative prudence matters because Surrey is heading toward local government reorganisation. When structures change, it is the underlying financial inheritance — and the habits that created it — that shape what services survive, what investments stall, and what risks get handed on.

The Residents' Association question

EEBC is unusual in one respect: it is dominated by Residents' Associations rather than the national parties. Some voters might reasonably assume that an administration not driven by national political goals would be **best-in-class** on the basics of local stewardship — especially finance.

Yet "not being party political" is not, by itself, a guarantee of excellence. A locally rooted administration can still fall into bad habits: weak challenge, insularity, a defensive attitude to information, or an over-reliance on officer-led process that leaves elected members appearing remote from key decisions.

If EEBC wants to claim the mantle of the "competent local alternative", then the test is simple: keep the financial discipline — and raise the bar on transparency to match it.

Cllr Shanice Goldman's defection to the Conservative Party and her reasons contain some irony in this context. The super-debt league leaders of Surrey Districts' table of financial infamy are or were Conservative led during their plunges into debt despair.

A constructive conclusion

EEBC's comparatively modest borrowing position gives it something precious: room to manoeuvre. The council should use that room not to relax, but to improve how it governs: publish clearer narratives, make decision trails easier to follow, treat FOI and public questions as part of democratic health, and build trust through routine openness rather than reactive disclosure.

In other words: Surrey shows us what happens when the balance sheet breaks. EEBC should ensure that, locally, the democratic culture doesn't.

Related reports:

Another Epsom and Ewell Borough Council cover-up of criticism?

A Decision Not Fully Bourne Out?

Epsom Councillor claims he is being silenced for his transparency concerns

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

Goldman sacks the Epsom and Ewell Residents Association

Surrey districts "debt per head" league table

(£ per resident; higher = more debt per head)

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1. **Woking** – **~£21,145 per head** (total borrowing ~£2.180bn at 31 Mar 2025).
2. **Spelthorne** – **~£10,299 per head** (long-term borrowing ~£1.042bn at 31 Mar 2025).
3. **Runnymede** – **~£6,553 per head** (long-term borrowing ~£587.1m at 31 Mar 2025).
4. **Surrey Heath** – **~£2,029 per head** (borrowing ~£183.4m at year end).
5. **Guildford** – **~£1,842 per head** (borrowing shown as £74.040m short-term + £201.508m long-term at 31 Mar 2025).
6. **Mole Valley** – **~£1,192 per head** *(see caveat)* (snippet-reported "external borrowing" ~£103m, referenced to its audited 2022/23 position).
7. **Tandridge** – **~£1,088 per head** *(see caveat)* (figure inferred from the draft accounts extract available in search results; I was not able to open the full PDF again to verify the precise borrowing line-item).
8. **Epsom & Ewell** – **~£796 per head** (borrowing ~£64.427m at 31 Mar 2025).
9. **Elmbridge** – **~£353 per head** *(see caveat)* (accounts page was blocked to me; borrowing figure comes from the published accounts snippet indicating borrowing outstanding at 31 Mar 2025).
10. **Reigate & Banstead** – **~£33 per head** (balance sheet shows **£5.0m short-term borrowing** and **no long-term borrowing** at 31 Mar 2025).

Caveat

Councils report "deficit" in several non-equivalent ways (e.g., accounting deficit on provision of services, general fund outturn variance, in-year overspend funded by reserves). EET had difficulty sourcing the figures for Waverley.

Parish power, democratic ideals — and the Residents' Association dilemma

30 October 2026

EDITORIAL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

30 October 2026



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

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

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

The proposal is also set against the backdrop of Surrey County Council's own recent approach to local engagement. In other parts of Surrey the County Council has piloted "Neighbourhood Area Committees" aimed at bringing councillors, residents and partners together to shape local priorities without creating new bodies with precept-raising powers. These

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committees are designed to provide an alternative route for local consultation and influence that stops short of formal parish governance. Whether such models should be adopted more widely under a single-tier system—and whether they might re-emerge under the new East Surrey Council—adds a further dimension to the discussion about the need for, and value of, parish councils.

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

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

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

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

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

See

Neighbour Area Committees in Surrey

Local government reform or just more layers?

30 October 2026

EDITORIAL

When Whitehall speaks of "streamlining" local government, most people imagine fewer tiers of decision-making, simpler accountability, and a shorter distance between citizen and power. Yet, as the picture for Surrey emerges, the so-called "reorganisation" seems to be producing the opposite effect.

Instead of the two existing levels – borough and county – the new design threatens to spawn three or even four. We are told that the twelve boroughs and districts, together with Surrey County Council, will be swept away and replaced by one or more "unitary" councils. But at the same time, ministers promise a directly elected county-wide Mayor and a new Strategic Authority above the unitaries. Meanwhile, below them, parish and neighbourhood councils are to be invented to replace the voice that boroughs once provided. It all begins to look suspiciously like multiplication rather than simplification.

The slogans speak of bringing local government closer to the people. Yet residents may soon find themselves further away from anyone who can actually make a decision. The proposed Mayoral Authority will sit at a distance, occupied with big-

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ticket issues such as transport, growth and infrastructure. The new unitaries will cover territories so large that many of Surrey's smaller communities will struggle to be noticed. Below them, the new parish or "community" councils will have limited powers, modest budgets, and uncertain influence.

Epsom and Ewell's own decision to consult on forming parish councils is both understandable and ironic. For ninety years the borough has prided itself on a direct, residents-led form of local democracy. Now, in the name of devolution, that independence is being dismantled. The new parish layer would exist solely to replace what is being abolished. It may well be the right precaution, but it is a strange kind of progress.

Surrey County Council's pilot "Neighbourhood Area Committees" add a further tier of consultation. These panels may be useful experiments in local engagement, but they are not elected and carry no statutory power. However well-intentioned, they underline the growing sense that accountability is being replaced by advisory talk-shops.

If the reform was meant to cut complexity, it has already failed that test. Residents will have to learn a new vocabulary of "unitaries", "mayoral authorities", "combined areas" and "neighbourhood committees" – each with its own meetings, officers, and costs. The idea of saving money and clarifying responsibility fades the more layers are drawn on the map.

There is still time for ministers to stop and listen. Surrey is not ungovernable; it is merely suffering from the same pressures faced by councils everywhere – tight budgets and rising demand. Reorganisation may change the furniture, but it will not conjure new funds or restore trust.

Before dismantling the one part of local democracy that still feels local, government should ask a simple question: is this truly reform, or is it bureaucracy reborn?

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30 October 2026

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What might local government reorganisation mean for Epsom and Ewell?

30 October 2026

As Surrey faces a significant overhaul of its local government structure, residents of Epsom and Ewell are rightfully concerned about the potential financial repercussions. The proposed reorganisation may lead to two unitary authorities that merge the county's 11 borough and district councils, a move intended to streamline services and reduce administrative costs. However, this consolidation raises pressing questions about fiscal responsibility and the equitable distribution of debt, particularly for boroughs like Epsom and Ewell that have historically maintained prudent financial practices.

The Financial Landscape of Surrey's Boroughs

The Epsom and Ewell Times has just published three reports detailing the financial woes of three councils within Surrey that are grappling with substantial debts resulting from ambitious investment strategies.

- **Woking Borough Council** declared effective bankruptcy in 2023, burdened by debts exceeding £2 billion due to failed investments in large-scale projects. The council has since been compelled to implement severe austerity measures, including significant tax increases, service closures, and asset sales.
- **Spelthorne Borough Council** faces over £1 billion in debt from investments in commercial properties. A recent audit revealed "significant weaknesses" in financial record-keeping, inadequate plans to address looming budget gaps, and concerns over governance and internal culture.
- **Guildford Borough Council** is confronting a challenging financial future, with projected budget gaps escalating to £5.9 million by 2028/29. The council has acknowledged the need for cost reductions and increased income to manage these pressures.

Epsom and Ewell's Prudent Financial Management

In contrast, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has consistently balanced its budgets or been able to use reserves to meet its obligations, demonstrating fiscal discipline and effective financial stewardship. This prudent management has enabled the council to maintain most services and infrastructure without accruing unsustainable debt levels.

The Justice of Debt Redistribution

The proposed reorganisation raises a critical question: Is it just for residents of financially prudent boroughs like Epsom and Ewell to assume responsibility for the substantial debts incurred by other councils? Merging councils into larger unitary authorities could lead to a pooling of assets *and liabilities*, potentially obliging Epsom and Ewell's residents to contribute to servicing debts they had no part in accumulating.

This scenario not only challenges principles of fiscal fairness but also risks penalising councils that have exercised sound financial management. It is imperative to consider whether it is equitable for residents to bear the financial burdens resulting from the mismanagement of neighbouring authorities.

Calls for Government Intervention

Recognising the potential injustice, Surrey County Council's leader, Councillor Tim Oliver, has advocated for central government to write off the significant debts of councils like Woking before proceeding with devolution plans. This approach aims to mitigate the financial risks associated with high debt levels and prevent the unfair distribution of financial burdens across the county. How likely is it that a Labour Government will write off a debt accumulated by Woking under its previous Conservative led Council?

The Path Forward

As discussions about local government reorganisation progress, it is crucial to ensure that any new structures are underpinned by principles of fiscal responsibility and equity. Potential solutions include:

- **Debt Segregation:** Isolating the debts of heavily indebted councils to prevent them from being transferred to newly formed unitary authorities.
- **Government Debt Relief:** Advocating for central government intervention to alleviate or write off unsustainable debts, ensuring that the financial missteps of certain councils do not adversely impact the entire county.
- **Transparent Financial Assessments:** Conducting comprehensive financial evaluations of all councils involved

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in the reorganisation to inform fair and equitable decision-making.

The proposed reorganisation of Surrey's local government presents an opportunity to enhance efficiency and service delivery at the cost of Borough based democracy. However, it also necessitates careful consideration of the financial implications for all residents. Epsom and Ewell's community, having benefited from prudent financial management, should not be unduly burdened by the debts of other councils. It is incumbent upon policymakers to design a reorganisation framework that upholds fiscal justice, ensuring that the residents of Epsom and Ewell are not unfairly disadvantaged in the pursuit of broader administrative reforms.

Related reports:

All change! Epsom and Ewell Borough Council approaching its final stop?

Surrey's Conservative leader wants to postpone May's poll reckoning

Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

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