

# Epsom and the Perils of Instant Judgement

20 April 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.

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?

20 April 2026



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

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

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

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

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

Which is why process matters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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## Process matters – but so does the balance sheet

20 April 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.

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.



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## Surrey districts “debt per head” league table

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

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.

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

20 April 2026



## EDITORIAL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

20 April 2026



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



See

Neighbour Area Committees in Surrey

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# Local government reform or just more layers?

20 April 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-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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20 April 2026



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## What might local government reorganisation mean for Epsom and Ewell?

20 April 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 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.

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## **Are Epsom and Ewell's Interests Served by Postponing Democracy?**

20 April 2026



The Conservative-led Surrey County Council's recent decision to seek a postponement of the May 2025 elections raises serious questions about the motivations behind this move. This decision, spearheaded by Councillor Tim Oliver, comes after the Conservative Party's near-total defeat in the July 2024 General Election and appears to be as much about retaining control as it is about facilitating local government reorganisation.

The argument put forward by the council's leadership—that elections would create a "zombie" authority that wastes public funds—is unconvincing. Elections are a cornerstone of democracy, not a bureaucratic inconvenience. By delaying them, the current leadership retains power at a time when its mandate to govern Surrey is at best questionable. Surrey's residents, many of whom voiced their dissatisfaction with Conservative governance at the ballot box just months ago, now

face the prospect of being governed by a council that is effectively prolonging its tenure without public consent.

One cannot ignore the context of this decision. Central government's push for local government reform and devolution is not an altruistic initiative aimed at better serving communities. It is a cost-cutting exercise disguised as modernisation. The Government's stipulation that new councils must serve a minimum of 500,000 residents almost guarantees the dissolution of smaller, locally focused boroughs like Epsom and Ewell.

For Epsom and Ewell, the smallest of Surrey's 11 boroughs, this means the likely loss of a council that has served its residents with proximity and understanding for decades. What replaces it may be a sprawling mega-authority or a fractured, less accountable unitary structure. Either way, Epsom and Ewell risks losing its unique voice, with decisions about its future made by those unfamiliar with its needs and aspirations.

Equally troubling is the inclusion of Woking Borough Council's extraordinary debt—reportedly the largest in UK local government history—in the negotiations surrounding devolution. This financial calamity, created under Conservative rule, should be a cautionary tale about the dangers of poor governance, not an issue swept under the rug in the rush to reform. Why should other Surrey residents shoulder the burden of Woking's mismanagement? And why has Surrey's Conservative leadership not been more transparent about its plans to address this issue?

The proposal to postpone elections also conveniently consolidates power for a party facing an uncertain future. By delaying the democratic process, Surrey's Conservative leadership ensures it remains at the table during pivotal discussions about the future shape of local government, even as the electorate has made its dissatisfaction clear.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, like others across the county, is being swept into a centralised reorganisation process with little clarity about what it will mean for its residents. The likely outcome is the erosion of local democracy, with decisions affecting communities being made further away and by people with less understanding of local needs.

Surrey's leadership has yet to explain convincingly why postponing the elections is necessary. If their proposals for reorganisation are sound, why not put them to the test of public approval? Democracy is not an obstacle to progress; it is the means by which progress is legitimised.

Epsom and Ewell's residents deserve to have their voices heard in shaping the future of their local government. They deserve transparency about what reorganisation will mean for their services, their representation, and their community identity. Most importantly, they deserve the chance to vote on who should lead that process. Anything less is an affront to democracy and a betrayal of public trust.

The May 2025 elections must go ahead. It is time for Surrey's leaders to trust the people they serve and stop hiding behind bureaucratic excuses.

Epsom and Ewell Times

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## Is Delay Defensible in the Fight to Protect Epsom's Green Belt?

20 April 2026



As Epsom and Ewell Borough Council deliberates its Local Plan in the face of imminent, significantly higher government housing targets, the council's slow-paced approach raises crucial questions about its strategy to protect our borough's green spaces. Led by the Residents' Association, the council is balancing on a tightrope between procedural rigour and an increasingly urgent need for action. But with higher housing quotas looming, is this balance tipping too far towards delay, at the cost of our precious Green Belt?

Nine opposition councillors have proposed an Emergency Full Council Meeting, arguing that swift action is essential to avoid a target increase to 817 new homes annually—double the current requirement. They rightly point out the risks to Epsom's character and environmental integrity. With development pressure escalating, the loss of even a small proportion of green spaces would have lasting consequences, affecting not just our landscape but also the local ecology and community fabric.

Residents' Association leaders, meanwhile, cite the need for strict adherence to regulatory procedures, with Councillor

**Peter O'Donovan** (Chair of the Licensing Policy and Planning Committee, RA Ewell Court) cautioning against shortcuts that might render the plan “unsound” in the eyes of government inspectors. RA Leader Councillor **Hannah Dalton** (Stoneleigh) echoes this sentiment, emphasising the need for quality and robustness in the plan to withstand scrutiny. But, does adherence to every procedural step outweigh the immediate urgency to avoid a government-imposed target that could open up the Green Belt for development?

If every councillor claims to prioritise the protection of our green spaces, it's difficult to justify the RA's slow and careful approach. What would be lost by speeding up the process, even at the risk of minor regulatory issues? The Local Plan's objective is clear: it must serve the community's best interests by ensuring sustainable development, but without jeopardising the green spaces that make Epsom unique. Rushing to complete this plan before the higher targets take effect doesn't mean compromising on quality—it means acknowledging the urgency of our current position.

The RA's insistence on caution may reflect their commitment to procedural integrity, but in the face of a looming housing target that threatens everything they aim to protect, this stance appears increasingly illogical. The stakes are high, and with public consultation already delayed due to a halt in 2023, it is hard to see what further delay achieves. As **Janice Baker** of the Epsom Green Party rightly points out, legal pathways exist to expedite the consultation phase, saving precious weeks and potentially allowing the community to dodge the higher target.

In the end, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council must decide if this cautious approach truly serves our borough's best interests. Every resident who treasures our green spaces deserves a council that can act quickly and decisively in their defence. The council's commitment to procedural correctness is admirable, but it must be weighed against the real and immediate threat of intensified development. It's time to ask, “What are we willing to risk?” Because in this case, the greatest risk might just be the price of waiting.

Related reports:

[Call to Epsom and Ewell Council to speed plan denied](#)

[Opposition Calls for Emergency Council Meeting Over Epsom and Ewell Local Plan](#)

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## Correction to our Epsom and Ewell Council reports

20 April 2026



We apologise unreservedly to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Chief Executive Officer Jackie King for an unintended publication of a report dated 26th September 2024 titled Challenges to Epsom and Ewell Council's Handling of Local Plan, reporting on the 24th September 2024 meeting of the Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee.

This report was overtaken by a report entitled Epsom Local Plan controversy heats up also reporting on the same meeting.

We attributed remarks to Jackie King even though she was not at the meeting. This part of the report has been repeated elsewhere on social media causing some concern in this sensitive area.

The first report was a draft that was intended to be discarded as it was clear that there was a muddle in interpreting the subtitles of the meeting. We do not usually report twice on the same meeting.

The report Challenges to Epsom and Ewell Council's Handling of Local Plan has now been unpublished.

Let us take this opportunity to appeal for new writers. You do not need a degree in English or Journalism. We can always reorganise the writing to a publishable standard. What we need is observers with time to provide us the facts of local matters. A Borough our size cannot sustain paid journalism. We rely on volunteers.

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## Democracy at work? Or strange mathematics?

20 April 2026



For the first time in its history as a Parliamentary constituency Epsom and Ewell has a Member of Parliament who is not a Conservative. Undoubtedly the events, personalities and circumstances at the national level impacted local results. Controversies that swirled around recent Conservative Prime Ministers Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, the squeeze on living standards, the failure of Brexit to deliver on its promise to stem immigration, Conservative aides and Parliamentary candidates placing bets on the date of the General Election.

Nevertheless, there were some local factors that contributed to the change that happened in Epsom and Ewell. The neighbouring constituency of Esher and Walton witnessed former Conservative Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab's share of the vote slump from a peak of 63% in 2015 to 49.5% in 2019 with Monica Harding for the Liberal Democrats just 4.5% behind. She proceeded to win on 4th July. Esher's rise of her party must have given Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrat's choice of Esher based candidate **Helen Maguire** belief that change was possible.

The Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrats ran their campaign with an unrelenting belief that even in the Conservative stronghold of this constituency voters could change their allegiance.

The intervention of the Reform UK party impacted the local result on 4th July with its 5795 votes, which if cast for Chris Grayling's replacement **Mhairi Fraser**, might have seen the new Conservative candidate, being elected. Reform's previous incarnation as UKIP not standing in the General Elections of 2017 or 2019 after the 2016 EU referendum.

Local tactical voting appears to have been influential with the Liberal Democrats seemingly taking the anti-Conservative or protest votes where in earlier elections Labour has come second in Epsom and Ewell to the Conservatives in both 2015 and 2017. The Liberal Democrats moved to second place in the 2019 poll.

The headlines of a Labour landslide nationally mask the true expression of public opinion with Labour's 4th July 2024 share of the vote being only 2% higher than Jeremy Corbyn's 2019 "worst election result for Labour in history". In fact in 2017 Labour polled 40% of the national vote under Mr Corbyn's leadership. Labour's 2024 share of the national vote at 34% is the lowest of any British Government ruling with a majority in the House of Commons seemingly ever in history.

Where the translation of votes into seats in the Commons appears to be so wildly out of sync. it requires new MPs to work their socks off in their constituencies if they wish to maintain the loyalty of voters in 2024 to the end of the new Parliament and the beginning of the next one.

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## Watch Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillors at work

20 April 2026



Not only can you watch online all Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and Council committee meetings live, you can also catch up on those you miss on the Council's YouTube channel.

The live online links can be found by navigating the pages of the Council website starting [HERE](#). You will also find on those pages the agenda and background papers and minutes.

Not forgetting that the public gallery is always open for personal observation of proceedings.

Whatever grumbles you may have about your local Council it cannot be denied that its decision making is open to public inspection.

There are times when committees go into closed session and the Epsom and Ewell Times has challenged some of the secrecy. But at least you will be aware when they have gone into secret session and can challenge such decisions through the Freedom of Information Act.

The Epsom and Ewell Times champions accountability, transparency and democracy. The provision by the Council of windows for the public to its business, using today's technologies, is to be praised.

In a world in which authoritarianism and autocracy are gaining ground it is vital at all levels of British society that we value the liberties we have. We can demonstrate how much we do so by living our democratic ideals daily, not merely paying lip-service to them at periodic elections.

Differences of view held passionately can give rise to personal antagonism but where debates are conducted fairly, mutual personal respect should prevail. Democracy leads to better decision making and can be fun. The alternatives will never be fun for anyone.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's transparency through public video recording is in itself a significant contribution to maintaining a higher quality of respectful debate.

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## Who should be moved?

20 April 2026



Today we have published a report about the case of a Reigate resident's rights to be moved away from nuisance neighbours.

Why should she move? Why do the rights of the nuisance neighbours to stay trump the rights of their victim to remain and quietly enjoy her residence?

Is it because it is easier and less expensive for the authorities to shift the innocent than it is to move the guilty?

The report recounts the failure of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council to do either. The Local Government Ombudsman, who investigated the victim's complaint, does not address the powers of the police or the Council or the social housing landlord to tackle the nuisance neighbours. The latter having powers to apply to a court for an eviction of the anti-social neighbours (if also their landlord).

The complaint of the victim was limited to her claim that the Council had failed to deal with her request for re-housing in an appropriate way. Hence the Ombudsman's investigation was carried out within the narrow tramlines of a re-housing application process.

The wider context of all the issues raised by this case are not addressed. E.g., the impact on the neighbourhood or a future resident taking the victim's place, of the nuisance neighbours remaining. The responsibilities of the Council, her landlord and the police, to use their powers to inhibit the nuisance. Those powers ranging from warnings and anti-social behaviour orders to evictions.