

East Surrey Council, an election that calls for distinction?

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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 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.

