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Epsom Council leader’s delayed response to additional local government layer initiative

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Dalton says Surrey devolution letter was non-binding and rooted in Council’s 2025 vote

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council leader Councillor Hannah Dalton has said her decision to sign a letter supporting exploration of a new Surrey-wide “Foundation Strategic Authority” was based on the Council’s previous backing for local government reorganisation and the prospect of a future mayoral strategic authority.

The explanation follows questions raised by Epsom & Ewell Times over why Cllr Dalton signed the Expression of Interest without the matter first being referred back to the full Council.

Earlier attempts to obtain an answer were met with references to election-period restrictions, prompting criticism that the Council was avoiding a straightforward question about the authority under which its leader had acted.

In a response supplied to EET, and attributed to Cllr Dalton, the Council said the background lay in the Government’s English Devolution White Paper, published on 16 December 2024.

It said that, at a full Council meeting on 6 May 2025, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council agreed to support a proposal for local government reorganisation in Surrey. The proposal envisaged a future Mayoral Strategic Authority for Surrey, led by an elected mayor and intended to unlock the Government’s wider devolution offer.

Cllr Dalton said the Council and other Surrey authorities were now working on the reorganisation process and had recently been invited by the Government to explore a possible Foundation Strategic Authority.

The Council describes this as an intermediate stage towards fuller devolution. It says the letter signed by Cllr Dalton was a “non-binding Expression of Interest”, intended only to keep open the possibility that the proposed new East Surrey and West Surrey unitary councils could later explore creating such an authority.

The response states: “It did not commit the Council, confer obligations upon it, or determine any future course of action.”

It adds that any formal decision would follow a statutory consultation.

The answer clarifies the Council’s position that Cllr Dalton did not require a new Council resolution before signing the letter, because the authority relied upon was the Council’s broad 2025 endorsement of a reorganisation proposal which contemplated a Surrey mayoral strategic authority.

However, it is likely to leave open the political question of whether that earlier approval was sufficiently specific to authorise support for this particular Government initiative, especially where the letter was signed in the name of the Borough Council rather than simply as a contribution to exploratory discussions between Surrey leaders.

A Foundation Strategic Authority is a proposed form of combined authority with devolved powers but without an elected mayor. It may be used as a stepping stone towards a fuller mayoral combined or strategic authority. The Council says discussions with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government continue, including the next steps and the scope and timing of any statutory consultation.

The Council has directed readers to its online democracy pages for the reports and minutes relating to the 6 May 2025 meeting.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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