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Epsom Councillor’s disclosure claims Bourne out on review

28 May 2026



The future of Bourne Hall and its museum has become one of the most contentious issues in Epsom & Ewell local politics in recent months. Debate has ranged from ambitious proposals for the landmark “UFO-shaped” building’s revival to sharp disagreements over governance, transparency and access to information. Earlier this year, councillors on the Community & Wellbeing Committee challenged elements of the Council’s approach, while a decision connected with the matter was later suspended by the Council’s Chief Executive acting in her statutory capacity. Central to the dispute has been a service review of Bourne Hall Museum, parts of which were initially withheld from councillors and the public.

In the following letter, Independent councillor Alex Coley sets out his view following a review and the subsequent disclosure of much of the report’s contents.

A fuller background is provided in the following Epsom and Ewell Times reports:

Bourne Hall row escalates as Chief Executive suspends councillors’ decision

Ewell’s Bourne Hall plans knocked back by scrutiny

Independent view of Ewell’s Bourne Hall

Ewell’s “UFO” shaped Bourne Hall to take off anew

Letter to the Editor — Cllr Alex Coley

Dear Editor,

Amidst all the excitement of the Annual Council meeting on Tuesday 26 May, I received the outcome of an internal review into the FOI request that I submitted for the Service Review of Bourne Hall Museum at the beginning of February.

We should be very grateful to the service review author for the depth of understanding and breadth of appreciation for the questions they were asked to explore. This document is absolutely fundamental for elected members to deliberate the future of the museum. It should never have been withheld.

Comparing the redacted and unredacted versions side by side, it becomes apparent that an almost paranoid sensitivity to potential embarrassment has played a part in non-disclosure.

Unredacted sections describe the absence of any visitor data or visitor research, siloed working at EEBC, and the lack of structured objectives for the museum. Yet all these were laid bare in the LGA Cultural Peer Challenge and disclosed in full.

Recognising and acknowledging these issues are crucial to assuring councillors that the issues are understood sufficiently and that an injection of new funding will be used appropriately and effectively. This cannot be achieved behind a veil of secrecy. Trust must be earned rather than demanded.

From the original FOI request to the delayed response took 109 days — almost four months. The normal expectation is 20 days. The initial response was a mish-mash of erroneous case law and political deflection disguised by the application of Section 43(2) of the Freedom of Information Act — “to prejudice commercial interests”.

I had to make a formal complaint to the Information Commissioner’s Office when our Council failed to conduct an internal review within 40 days. The resulting correspondence makes it clear that it was ICO intervention which led to the information being disclosed properly.

Subsequently, the Council has disclosed most of the information unredacted.

However, the belated introduction of Section 36 of FOI in the response is an intriguing piece of code-switching. This relates to the “effective conduct of public affairs” and was not used in the original response. In layman’s terms, this concerns the ability of council officers to give free and frank advice.

Section 36 was engaged as a reason not to disclose advice given by a consultant to council officers. While I agree that it is important for such advice to be given freely, the need to do so openly, honestly and transparently is critical when spending public money — not least to the decision-makers who are accountable for public expenditure.

Fortunately, with ICO involvement, a strong public interest has been shown to outweigh concerns.

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For those who explore the response in full, you will note that the respondent decides: “the majority of the report contains high-level, non-controversial analysis and recommendations that do not meet the threshold of demonstrating a likelihood of prejudice.”

Well, hurray!

I must conclude that significant effort and energy is being expended by both officers and councillors in battles over secrecy. This is a waste of public money and an affront to the representation of electors. Councillors should not have to become investigative journalists to know what is going on in the organisation they have been appointed to run.

Transparency is significantly better value for money and, as the unredacted contents of the service review reveal, a far better means for deciding how public money should be spent in future. Democracy should be done and seen to be done.

I hoped that this item would be brought back to the Community & Wellbeing Committee to be determined in the manner it always should have been — openly and with all the information available.

However, recent correspondence to councillors on Thursday 28 May seems disconnected from the FOI request. It refers to a Special Community & Wellbeing Committee on 9 June and states:

“Following the invitation to revisit the non-inclusion of the Bourne Hall Service Review in the previous committee papers, it is the decision of the Council’s Proper Officer for access to information that the decision will not be overturned.”

The missive goes on to say:

“However, in order to move this item forward, the Council’s Proper Officer proposes to limit access to the Bourne Hall Service Review to the voting members of the Community & Wellbeing Committee that shall be in attendance at the 9 June special meeting and she will be present to discuss why the information will remain restricted.”

Finally, the message concludes:

“Please note that no photographs or copies of the exempt document are permitted to be taken.”

Readers of a certain vintage may recall sitcoms of the 1970s and 1980s — Dad’s Army, ’Allo ’Allo and, of course, Yes Minister. What a pity the writers never delved deeper into local government. There is a richness of material for satire and farce that is unmatched.

Perhaps we should reach for some of that Sir Humphrey comedy wisdom:

“If the right people don’t have power, do you know what happens? The wrong people get it. Politicians, councillors, ordinary voters!”

As we say in Epsom & Ewell: None Such.

Alex Coley
Independent Councillor – Ruxley

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