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Epsom town centre licensing clampdown rejected — for now

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Epsom and Ewell councillors have decided not to begin work on a tougher licensing policy for Epsom town centre, after a debate over whether late-night crime and anti-social behaviour justify stronger controls on new pubs, bars and late-night venues.

The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee met on 16 June to consider a request from Cllr Alex Coley to explore the work needed for a Cumulative Impact Policy, often shortened to CIP, for licensed premises in Epsom town centre.

A CIP is a licensing tool used where a council has evidence that the number or concentration of licensed premises in an area is contributing to problems such as crime, disorder, public nuisance or risks to public safety. Before adopting one, the council must first carry out a Cumulative Impact Assessment, or CIA, gathering evidence from sources such as police data, complaints, residents, businesses, health bodies and other responsible authorities.

If adopted, a CIP does not automatically ban new licences. But where objections are made to a new licence or a variation, it creates a presumption that the application will normally be refused unless the applicant can show that the proposal will not add to the existing problems.

That is stronger than the “Special Stress Area” policy already proposed for Epsom town centre. Under that approach, the town centre is recognised as an area of concern, particularly for night-time crime and disorder, and applicants are expected to address those concerns in their operating plans. But there is no presumption of refusal.

Principal Licensing Officer Paul Holliday told councillors that a CIP would require “a detailed evidence gathering process to demonstrate that the cumulative impact of licensed premises is undermining the licensing objectives”. He said adopting such a policy would introduce “a presumption of refusal for new licence applications and variations within a defined area”, unless applicants could show they would not add to the impact.

However, officers recommended that no assessment should be started at this stage. They said existing licensing powers, together with the proposed Special Stress Area, gave the council a proportionate framework for dealing with problem premises. Mr Holliday said the proposed approach would allow the council to focus on “problem behaviour rather than imposing broad restrictions”.

He warned that a CIP would need “robust and up-to-date” evidence and that without it the council could face appeals, legal challenge and financial costs. He added that a CIP could also have unintended economic effects by “discouraging investment from new operators” and limiting business diversity.

The officer report said no Surrey district or borough currently has a CIA in place, with Croydon and Merton cited as nearby examples outside Surrey. It also noted that an external estimate obtained in December 2023 put the likely cost of a CIA at £21,300, with no budget currently allocated.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) argued that the proposed Special Stress Area may not be enough. He told the committee: “I learned about the special stress area when I was a member of this committee. I sat on a licensing panel hearing where it was my impression that it wasn’t going to make a great deal of difference. It is about mitigation and conditions.”

He questioned the impression that Epsom town centre had no significant licensing-related problems, saying: “There’s no complaints, no reviews, no nuisance, no noise, no problems. There’s nothing to see here. We all know that’s not true.”

Cllr Coley added: “I think my concern is that the town centre has gotten out of control more and more. We do have more trouble at night. I’ve talked to some of the local residents, I talked to the business, to the manager of the BID, Business Improvement District, it’s pretty clear there are problems.”

He stressed, however, that he was not insisting the council immediately spend more than £20,000 on a formal assessment. He said: “I’m not saying that we must have this… I’d like to see it explored and reviewed.”

Other councillors took a different view. Cllr **Julian Freeman** (LibDem College) said he had direct experience of Epsom at night through volunteering as a street pastor. “I probably have a very different perception than Councillor Coley,” he said. “When I go out on a Friday night with my colleagues, what I do notice very much is the professionalism of the door staff outside most of the nightclubs and bars, which is really quite impressive.”

He added: “I don’t see it as the den of iniquity and licentiousness that is perhaps being portrayed. When I wander around there, normally between sort of 10 o’clock to about three in the morning, I find it increasingly quiet.”

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Cllr **Steve Bridger** (RA Stamford) opposed spending money on a CIA, saying: “This to me will be a total and utter waste of money.”

Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) said he was “puzzled” by the request, given that officers considered the council’s present and proposed policies adequate. “We don’t have any reports back from the police that this is required,” he said.

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town), the committee’s vice-chair, declared at the start of the meeting that he was “a member of the Business Improvement District, which looks after the town centre”, but said he came to the meeting “with an open mind and not influenced in any way by that”.

During the debate, Cllr Dallen said: “I do occasionally go into the town centre late at night because I live there, and it is now a lot better than it used to be. The further back you go, the better it is. It has steadily got better over the last 15, 20 years.”

That declaration may nevertheless raise questions for some observers, because Business Improvement Districts are funded by levies from eligible businesses within the BID area, which includes the Town centre’s licensed premises. A CIP would apply primarily to new licence applications and variations rather than existing licences, but the evidence-gathering exercise behind it could still involve scrutiny of the current night-time economy and the operation of existing venues.

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) sounded a note of caution. Referring to recent events in Epsom, he said: “I don’t think we should take this concern too lightly,” adding that £25,000 was “a lot of money for a council like us to spend right now”, but that he wanted to understand whether there was a “middle ground”.

When he asked whether there was data to support Cllr Dallen’s view that Epsom was getting safer, Mr Holliday replied that earlier work on the licensing policy had found “elevated levels of ASB and violent crime in Epsom town centre”. He added that, as an urban town centre, some higher levels would be expected, but that the data and councillor discussions had led to the proposed Special Stress Area.

Published Police.uk data for Epsom & Ewell Central shows that in April 2026 the area recorded 198 crimes. The most commonly reported categories were violence and sexual offences, with 47 reports, anti-social behaviour with 36, shoplifting with 27, and criminal damage and arson with 23. The monthly total rose from 151 in January to 198 in April, although monthly figures fluctuate.

Compared with other Surrey town policing areas for April 2026, Epsom & Ewell Central recorded fewer crimes than Guildford Town, which had 315 crimes, including 72 violence and sexual offences and 41 anti-social behaviour reports. But it recorded more than Woking Town, which had 102 crimes, including 29 violence and sexual offences and 28 anti-social behaviour reports; Staines Town, where the top categories included 25 violence and sexual offences and 24 anti-social behaviour reports; and Farnham Town Centre, which recorded 14 anti-social behaviour reports and 14 violence and sexual offences.

Those comparisons suggest Epsom town centre is not unique among Surrey towns in facing crime and disorder pressures. But the figures also support the officer’s acknowledgement that Epsom town centre has elevated levels of anti-social behaviour and violent crime when compared with quieter local areas. What the published statistics do not prove, on their own, is whether those offences are caused by the cumulative impact of licensed premises — the key evidential step needed for a legally robust CIP.

The committee ultimately endorsed the officer recommendation that no action should be taken to initiate a CIA at this time. There were two abstentions.

The issue may return. The council’s proposed licensing policy says the need for a cumulative impact policy and the Special Stress Area will be kept under review, and officers suggested that the new East Surrey authority may revisit the matter after local government reorganisation.

Sam Jones – Reporter

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