

Ewell's Bourne Hall plans knocked back by scrutiny

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A council decision to invest in the future of Bourne Hall Museum has been sent back to the drawing board after councillors ruled it was made without all the relevant information being made public.

The decision, taken unanimously by the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Community and Wellbeing Committee in January, backed plans to improve the museum rather than close it or leave it as it is. But at an Audit and Scrutiny Committee meeting last week, councillors voted to halt that decision and refer it back, arguing key reports were missing when the original choice was made.

At the heart of the row are two reports commissioned using public money: a service review by an external consultant and a Cultural Peer Challenge by the Local Government Association (LGA). Both were repeatedly referenced in the January committee report and described as providing "valuable insights" and a "blueprint" for the museum's future but yet neither was included in the public agenda papers. Even for the call-in meeting, the essential reports were not published in full.

Cllr **Alex Coley**, (Independent Ruxley) who called in the decision, said councillors were effectively being asked to vote blind. He told the scrutiny committee that members had been promised the reports would be published but they never appeared before the meeting. "None of us know what's in the service review, so none of us can tell how this might have influenced the decision," he said. "Either we do things properly or they get done again."

Other councillors backed that view, raising concerns not just about missing information but about transparency for the public. Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) warned it may be unlawful to rely on background documents without publishing them, adding that members of the public watching the meeting had no way of knowing what evidence councillors were relying on.

He highlighted one finding from the LGA report that was not clearly reflected in the summary given to councillors, that the museum's finances were "skewed" by how building and central council costs were allocated, potentially giving a misleading picture of how expensive it is to run. "That's absolutely crucial information," he said.

Council officers and the committee chair argued that all the important points from the reports had been summarised and that the final decision, to invest rather than close, matched the reports' overall conclusions. They also said funding would still need to be approved by another committee.

But scrutiny councillors stressed their role was not to re-argue the museum's future, but to decide whether the original committee had all the evidence it should have had at the time. In the end, they voted to refer the decision back to Community and Wellbeing with a view to reconsider the issue from scratch but this time with the full reports available.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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[View of Bourne Hall and Museum, Spring Street, Ewell. \(Credit: Google Street View\)](#)