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Ewell’s Library of Things finally to become a thing?

1 July 2026



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council’s Environment Committee – Tuesday 30th June – has agreed to grant a police-approved outdoor storage unit in the grounds of Bourne Hall a five-year lease, with a two-year break clause, after councillors argued that officers’ original proposal of a two-year term was too short to give the volunteer group running the scheme any security.

The store is needed for the borough’s new “Library of Things” (LoT) — a scheme, similar to a book library, that lets residents borrow tools, camping equipment and household appliances rather than buying them outright. It is being set up by the volunteer group Epsom and Ewell Climate Action Network (EECAN) in partnership with Surrey Library Service, and will operate out of Ewell Library at Bourne Hall. Most items can be stored inside the library itself, but larger equipment needs a dedicated outdoor store — hence the need for a legal agreement over council-owned land.

A volunteer’s account

Before councillors debated the report, they heard a three-minute public statement from EECAN volunteer William Ward, describing himself as “a father and grandfather,” who joined the meeting online. Mr Ward told the committee: “I am working with 12 other volunteers to provide this free library of things at Bourne Hall, and I support the recommendations in the report.”

He used his statement to correct what he felt could be misunderstandings in the officers’ report. His original bid to the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) — a charge councils can levy on new development to fund local infrastructure — “was for one permanent shed, not multiple units,” he said, and had been approved at a meeting with six borough and county officers on 14 October, when the proposed site was shown to the volunteers present. He set out a lengthy timeline of pre-planning discussions, a planning application submitted on Christmas Eve, planning permission granted on 12 March, and confirmation from Building Control on 19 February that it did not need to be involved.

He also told the committee: “I’ve continued working with all partners, but only became aware last week from reading this report that the borough needed me to consult with the police. I want to reassure the committee that although I am [confident], the design addresses [many] of the risks [identified]. I’m happy to take further advice.” On safety, he noted that insurance was already in place, that Surrey County Council’s principal insurance officer had agreed to cover the store under its “Borrow a Bike” scheme, and that a planned green roof would carry a small solar installation providing only low-voltage lighting, with “no battery charging” to take place inside the unit.

Mr Ward ended with a warning about timing. If the lease “cannot be ready for signing well before April [20]27” — when local government reorganisation is due to sweep away the borough council in favour of a new East Surrey Unitary Authority — he said he might have to ask the incoming authority to reconsider storing the larger items inside Bourne Hall itself. He closed by asking the committee “to also consider the climate risk facing young people today,” saying his aim, with fellow volunteers, “has always been to help residents borrow instead of buy, save money and storage space, while lowering their carbon footprints.”

Officers’ concerns: wrong kind of shed

Introducing the report, Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley) explained that the store was needed because Bourne Hall library “does not have sufficient storage space for the large items” the scheme requires, and that a two-year, rent-free legal agreement directly with EECAN was proposed, subject to planning permission and a series of health and safety mitigations.

Cllr **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court) asked officers directly: “Is there a concern that this is a wooden building when it was proposed to be a metal building?” Cllr Frost confirmed this was indeed a live issue. The CIL bid had originally referenced small, “police-approved” metal storage units no larger than 2.2m by 1m by 2m — the kind of secure steel shed used for bike storage. The planning permission that was in fact granted, however, was for a much larger timber outbuilding measuring 7.2m by 3.4m by 3.4m. “There has been… a history of unfortunate incidents with break-ins, vandalism, arson, etc. for buildings like [this],” Cllr Frost told the committee. “So the lease would stipulate a police-approved structure.”

A legal puzzle officers could not resolve on the night

Cllr **Steve McCormick** (Conservative Woodcote and Langley) raised what he called a contradiction in the report between sections referring to the committee “waiving” the council’s Contract Standing Orders in order to grant the lease directly to EECAN (rather than opening it to competitive tender), and a later section stating that the council would still need to establish the land’s market value to satisfy “best value” — the legal principle requiring councils to secure fair value for public assets. “Forgive me, which is it?” he asked.

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No legal officer was present to answer. This was itself the subject of some frustration: Cllr McCormick had earlier asked in the meeting why nobody from the council's legal team was in attendance, only to be told by an officer that "legal don't attend committee meetings as standard… there was nothing that was foreseen tonight that would require their attendance." On the specific question about best value, the officer present said: "I think I would have to take that away and go back to legal on it, because I don't have the answer for you this evening, I'm afraid."

The case for a longer lease

The most substantial debate concerned the length of the lease. Cllr McCormick argued strongly for extending it well beyond the two years proposed: "This library of things item is great. We should get it done… I would question the duration, actually, of two years. I think it's incredibly short," he said, pointing out that other local charities had recently had leases extended to 15 or 20 years, giving them far more flexibility when applying for grant funding. He initially proposed extending the term to 10 or 15 years.

Officers explained that the two-year figure had come from legal advice, given specifically because EECAN was "a new group" without a track record of running such a scheme; the original suggestion, before that advice, had been five years. Officers said they could see no reason why a review clause could not allow for extension after two years "if all was going well," but that this would need to be confirmed with the council's legal team.

Cllr Frost, while sympathetic to the case for grant funding, questioned how much external funding a volunteer-led scheme with no office overheads would actually need, but agreed the recommendation could be amended.

Cllr **Julie Morris** (Independent College) backed a middle way — five years, with a two-year break clause — and spoke warmly of Mr Ward's track record: "I've known William Ward for some time… he's not the new kid on the block… he has been involved in environmental and sustainability issues for some years." She argued that a two-year offer, with an uncertain future council to renew it, sent the wrong message: "I don't see that as commitment from us to a gentleman that's actually done quite a lot for this borough that has a very good following, and will undoubtedly make a very good job of it. And I think it should be the role of this committee that we say [to] you're not here, guys: this is what we want you to do. We want five years with the break clause at two years, because we really want to put our weight behind such a good initiative."

Cllr McCormick accepted the compromise — "I'd like 10, but five, I'll go for five" — and, with Cllr Morris seconding, the amendment was carried.

The decision

The committee unanimously agreed, as amended, to enter into a legal agreement at nil rent for five years, with a two-year break clause, for a police-approved outdoor store at Bourne Hall for the Library of Things — subject to the risk mitigations set out in the report — and to delegate the final legal drafting to the Head of Property and Regeneration, the Interim Assistant Head of Service for Venues and Community Commercial Services, and the Chief Legal and Monitoring Officer. Cllr Frost thanked Mr Ward "for coming along and making his presentation to us," and thanked officers for their work on the report.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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Related reports:

Epsom "Library of Things" Delayed by Council Stand-Off

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