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Fireworks at Epsom Council spark walk-out

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Eleven councillors walked out of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council after the Mayor ruled that her father could remain in the chamber and lead a debate on the future of land hired by a company of which he is a director.

Despite the upheaval, the Council agreed on Tuesday 21st July to give strategic priority to the potential development of sports facilities and housing at Hook Road Arena.

The decision does not approve development. It elevates the Council-owned, 14-hectare site between Chessington Road and Horton Lane to one of EEBC's strategic priorities for its final months before abolition in April 2027.

A feasibility study will examine whether housing on part of the Arena could finance playing pitches and other sports and recreation facilities. Up to £250,000 has already been allocated from the Council's Corporate Projects Reserve.

Consultants are expected to be appointed by the end of August, with the study intended to be completed before EEBC's functions transfer to the new East Surrey Council on 1st April 2027.

However, the merits of the proposal were overshadowed by a bitter dispute over the participation of Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA, Town), chair of the Council's Strategy and Resources Committee.

Fireworks company hires Council land

Cllr Dallen is a director of Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd and a trustee of the associated Epsom Fireworks Display Charitable Trust.

The company contracts with EEBC to hire Hook Road Arena for its annual fireworks display. It has done so since between 2019 to 2021 after taking over from the local scouts that had organised the annual event since 1971. The company has a further agreement with the Council for the November 2026 event.

The company has just three directors. Two of those directors are two of the four trustees of the charity that distributes its income to scouting groups and other worthy charitable causes.

Development of the Arena could eventually bring the fireworks display at that location to an end.

At the beginning of the ordinary Council meeting, Cllr Dallen declared that he was a director and trustee of the fireworks organisations and that the Arena was used for the display.

He also disclosed that he had met representatives of Epsom and Ewell Football Club and the borough's netball club concerning their proposals for the site.

Cllr Dallen told the meeting that he had never expressed a view for or against their plans and was "confident that I have an unbiased and open mind".

When the Hook Road item was reached, he proposed that development of the Arena be made a strategic priority.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent, Ruxley) immediately raised a point of order. He said Cllr Dallen had treated the same connection as a conflict on two previous occasions when Hook Road Arena was discussed by the Strategy and Resources Committee.

Cllr Dallen disputed Cllr Coley's account. He said he had not left the room at the earlier meetings, although on one occasion he had not voted.

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative, Horton) supported Cllr Coley's objection. She said the conflict had caused controversy at both previous meetings and asked for a ruling from the Council's Monitoring Officer.

The legal officer advising the meeting said Cllr Dallen had declared his connection and had self-declared that it was not a pecuniary interest. The officer said that where a member decided that an interest was not pecuniary, participation was a matter for that member's discretion.

Cllr Coley tried to point out that Companies House registered Cllr Dallen as a director of Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd and that the company had a financial relationship with the Council.

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Mayor Cllr **Lucie McIntyre** (RA, West Ewell) repeatedly instructed him to stop speaking and sit down.

She ruled that it was for Cllr Dallen to decide whether his interest was pecuniary and said councillors who disagreed could pursue the relevant complaints procedures after the meeting.

After further objections, the Mayor adjourned proceedings. When councillors returned, she announced that Cllr Dallen had confirmed that he did not consider his interest pecuniary and would continue to participate.

Eleven councillors then walked out of the chamber.

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative, Horton) put on record his view that “this council is a joke”.

Cllr **Chris Watson** (Labour, Ewell Court) remained but later defended the absent councillors, saying their walkout was “a perfectly valid democratic process”.

Mayor was ruling on her father

It was not disclosed to the meeting or to members of the public that Mayor Cllr Lucie McIntyre is Cllr Dallen’s daughter.

It does not follow that being Cllr Dallen’s daughter automatically gave the Mayor a disclosable pecuniary interest of her own under the Localism Act. The statutory definition generally extends to a councillor and their spouse, civil partner or person with whom they live as a partner—not to an adult parent or child.

Nevertheless, Cllr McIntyre was making contested procedural rulings about whether her father could remain, speak, propose the recommendation and vote.

No suggestion is made that the family relationship necessarily disqualified her from chairing the whole meeting. However, declaring it would have enabled councillors and the public to assess openly whether the Deputy Mayor (Cllr **Julie Morris** Independent College) should have ruled upon this particular dispute.

EET asked the Mayor why she did not disclose that Cllr Dallen is her father or invite the Deputy Mayor to chair the objection to his participation and the item. After referring to her reference in her Council website biography to the inspiration her father gave her to be a Councillor she responded: “I am perfectly able to chair a meeting in my capacity as Mayor when my father is in attendance. At the Full Council meeting on 21 July, Councillor Dallen declared that he did not have a pecuniary interest in the item concerning Hook Road Arena, which was his right.”

EET asked the Council’s legal adviser if his legal advice took account of the live company-council contract and the statutory contracts category in the 2012 Regulations? And whether any formal dispensation was granted to Dallen to participate, and whether an external Monitoring Officer will be asked to review the matter?

A Council spokesperson responded: “*At the meeting of the Full Council on 21 July, Councillor Dallen declared that he did not have a pecuniary interest in the item concerning Hook Road Arena. There are no plans to review this*.”

Five sources allege history of obstruction

Cllr Dallen’s public advocacy of the Hook Road project also contrasts with accounts given privately to Epsom and Ewell Times (EET) about his earlier approach.

Three councillors belonging to Cllr Dallen’s own Residents’ Association group and two sources closely connected with Epsom and Ewell Football Club have independently told EET that he repeatedly impeded progress on proposals for the Arena.

The sources allege that proposals were pushed “from pillar to post” and from one committee or process to another, causing avoidable delay.

Cllr Dallen has also been quoted by more than one source as saying, while discussing the future of the Arena: “I want the fireworks four more years.”

The sources asked not to be named because of their continuing political or organisational relationships. EET knows their identities and considers each to be in a position to have direct knowledge of the events described.

Their accounts do not, by themselves, prove that every delay resulted from Cllr Dallen’s intervention or that any intervention was motivated by the interests of the fireworks company. Large developments involving Green Belt, restrictive covenants, sports bodies, housing and Council land inevitably pass through several stages.

Nevertheless, the consistency of the accounts raises a legitimate question about why a councillor alleged to have resisted or delayed the proposals behind the scenes emerged at Full Council as their proposer and public champion. Was he seeking to publicly erase perceptions that he had been the cause of previous delays?

Cllr Dallen told the meeting that he wanted the work concluded quickly and, ideally, before EEBC ceased to exist, although he acknowledged that this might not be possible.

EET has asked Cllr Dallen to respond to the allegations that he previously delayed the project, to confirm whether he said he wanted the fireworks to continue for four more years, and to explain what caused his apparent change of approach.

At the time of publication, Cllr Dallen had not responded.

What do the fireworks accounts reveal?

Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd’s latest micro-entity accounts show turnover of £109,324 for the year ending 30th April 2025.

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Almost the entire amount—£108,890—is placed under the single expenditure heading “cost of materials”, leaving a profit of £434.

The company accounts state that it had no employees, but do not break down the £108,890. They do not separately identify the cost of fireworks, Arena hire, insurance, event services, charitable donations, directors’ remuneration or directors’ expenses.

Accounts filed by the associated charitable trust show total income of £48,623 during the same year, including a £41,250 donation from Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd.

The Charity Commission register states that the charity’s trustees receive no remuneration, payments or benefits from the charity. That does not answer the separate question of whether anyone receives payment or expenses from the limited company.

The company’s accounts neither establish that its directors were paid nor prove that they were not. The donation to the charity must form part of the £108,890 wrongly described as all being “cost of materials”.

Companies House identifies Cllr Dallen as one of four directors. It names another director, **Anthony Williams** FCCA (Fellow of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants)**,** as the company’s only registered person with significant control. Cllr Dallen’s directorship therefore does not, without further information, establish that he owns or controls the company. It is a company limited by guarantee with no share capital.

EET has asked Cllr Dallen whether he receives any remuneration, expenses or other financial benefit from Epsom Fireworks Display Ltd.

At the time of publication, no response had been received.

The legal question

The Localism Act 2011 prevents a councillor with a disclosable pecuniary interest from participating in a discussion or vote unless a dispensation has been granted. A beach is a criminal offence.

The prescribed interests include an “employment, office, trade, profession or vocation carried on for profit or gain”, together with specified contractual, property and ownership interests.

Whether Cllr Dallen’s directorship falls within that statutory definition may therefore depend upon facts not revealed by the micro-entity accounts—including whether his office as director is carried on for profit or gain and whether he has a beneficial interest in the company.

The existence of a statutory interest is not ultimately determined by whether a councillor personally “feels” that an interest exists. Members must initially assess and declare their own position, but whether the legal test is satisfied is an objective question of fact and law.

The legislation is preventive. If a disclosable pecuniary interest exists, the prohibition applies regardless of whether the councillor supports or opposes the proposal and regardless of whether the councillor believes that he has an open mind. An ongoing contractual relationship is a disclosable interest regardless of any personal benefit.

There is a paradox in this case. Development could ultimately end the fireworks display at Hook Road Arena. Cllr Dallen was therefore advocating a process which may operate against, rather than in favour of, the future interests of the fireworks company and the charitable causes it supports..

That may be relevant when assessing his motivation and the seriousness of any alleged breach. It does not, by itself, determine whether the statutory definition of an interest was satisfied.

The Council’s wider code of conduct and the appearance of bias are separate issues from the narrower statutory offence concerning disclosable pecuniary interests.

Rainbow row preceded ordinary meeting

The ordinary Council meeting followed an extraordinary meeting convened earlier that evening to debate the governance of the emerging Local Plan.

During that earlier meeting, Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour, Court) expressly referred to the controversy surrounding the Rainbow Leisure Centre.

Cllr Dallen had authorised an urgent and confidential Council decision making up to £500,000 available to address an unexpected dilapidations liability following the change of leisure-centre operator.

Cllr Ames told the extraordinary meeting that problems with the Rainbow contract had become apparent early and argued that an officer and urgent-decision process had been used to bypass democratic scrutiny.

Mayor Cllr McIntyre interrupted him twice and instructed him to return to the Local Plan motion.

Cllr Ames replied: “I really don’t think it’s for you to tell me what my speech is to be about, Madam Mayor. Absolutely not. If I think this is relevant, I will make this point. I will not be silenced.”

He said the Rainbow affair formed part of a pattern in which procedural rules had been used to prevent councillors discussing matters for which they were responsible.

Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA, Ewell Village) subsequently described criticism of officers as “unconscionable” and said the opposition did not like the answers it received.

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Sports shortage wins support

After the walkout from the later ordinary meeting, the councillors who remained overwhelmingly supported making Hook Road Arena a strategic priority.

Cllr **Peter O'Donovan** (RA, Ewell Court) said the borough had a severe shortage of sports pitches. He referred to 84 junior football teams and said the netball club lacked a permanent base and was forced to hire facilities which could be withdrawn at short notice.

Cllr **Alison Kelly** (Lib Dem, Stamford) said residents frequently raised the shortage of accessible local sports facilities. She described the feasibility study as the first step towards evaluating the available options.

Cllr Clive Woodbridge said the site had "tremendous potential" as a sporting hub but stressed that the Council was not approving the details of development.

Cllr **Jan Mason** (RA, Ruxley) supported further investigation but warned against simply stamping through a large scheme without careful consideration of the surrounding homes and existing open land.

Council papers acknowledge substantial obstacles. The Arena is in the Green Belt and a 1975 deed restricts its use largely to open space and recreation unless Surrey County Council consents.

Any housing would also depend upon the emerging Local Plan. Development beyond the feasibility stage would require a separate business case and further decisions, some of which would require the consent of the new East Surrey authority.

The recommendation was carried without a recorded numerical vote.

Cllr Dallen ended the debate by reminding councillors that EEBC had adopted a "debate, not hate" motion.

The Council's decision means the future of Hook Road Arena will now advance as a formal strategic priority. Whether the dispute over Cllr Dallen's participation also advances through the Council's standards process—or to the police under the Localism Act—remains to be seen.

After the meeting Cllr **Steven McCormick** (Conservative and former prominent RA – Woodcote and Langley) said

"To put this forward now is too little, too late. This council had a prime opportunity over many years to clear the path for enhanced sports facilities at Hook Road Arena, yet proposals were repeatedly shuffled from committee to committee while time ran out."

He added "Instead of proactive leadership when it could have made a real difference, we are left with a last-minute scramble just months before council abolition. Residents and sports clubs were forced to wait years for progress; they deserve to know why momentum was continually blocked until the eleven-hour mark."

Sam Jones – Reporter



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