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LibDem vote kept RA's Dalton in power — but Cllr Freeman faces questions over his own political past

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The two Liberal Democrat councillors at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council appear to have played the decisive role in keeping Residents' Association leader Cllr **Hannah Dalton** in her Council leadership role despite the dramatic collapse of the RA's electoral position in the new East Surrey Unitary Council elections.

At the Borough Council's annual meeting, Dalton survived a leadership challenge from former Residents' Association councillor, now Independent, **Alex Coley**, by the narrowest possible margin — **15 votes to 14**.

The arithmetic of the vote suggests that at least two RA councillors backed Coley against their own group leader. Equally significant, had just one of the two Liberal Democrat councillors voted with the wider opposition bloc, Coley would have been elected leader.

The Liberal Democrat councillors, College Ward councillor **Julian Freeman** and Stamford Ward councillor **Alison Kelly**, backed Dalton.

Their decision has attracted attention because the Residents' Association's dominant local position has been severely weakened following the East Surrey Unitary Council elections, in which the RA was effectively wiped out, retaining only two successful candidates.

Asked by Epsom and Ewell Times why he supported Dalton, Cllr Freeman said he objected to politicians leaving the group under whose banner they were elected.

He stated: *"I do not support people who are elected as a representative of one political group and then decide to turn their back on those that voted for them. This is something that is happening with increasing regularity on the council at present."*

However, that explanation prompted questions about Freeman's own political history.

Material reviewed by Epsom and Ewell Times records that in 2006, while a councillor in the London Borough of Sutton, Freeman resigned from the Liberal Democrat group and sat as an Independent councillor. A published council decision notice recorded: *"Resolved: To note that Councillor Julian Freeman has resigned as a member of the Liberal Democrat Group and will sit as an Independent Councillor."*

When asked to explain the apparent inconsistency, Freeman disputed the comparison.

He replied that there was an "important distinction", stating: *"I was not approved as a candidate at the time due to an internal dispute with a ward colleague and stood as an independent at the following election. At no point did I willingly decide to change parties as this was not my decision."* He added: *"Your facts are wrong as I did not leave during my term of office."*

After EET provided him with evidence of the Sutton council record showing him resigning from the Liberal Democrat group and continuing as an Independent councillor, Freeman refined his position, replying: *"You can see that this was towards the end of my term of office and for just one full council meeting following deselection as a future candidate."*

Freeman also told EET that the decision to support Dalton was taken jointly between himself and Cllr Kelly. Kelly separately confirmed that account, stating that the leadership vote position followed discussions between the two councillors.

In a further explanation of his thinking, Freeman said he felt *"some sympathy for Hannah (Dalton) and Clive (Woodbridge) in losing their seats"* and argued that removing Dalton with just ten months left as leader would amount to *"rubbing salt in the wound and would achieve nothing of substance."*

The narrow vote leaves unresolved questions about the future direction of politics at EEBC. Since the last Borough Elections there have been seven councillors who have changed their party or group affiliation. The Residents Association losing five councillors and the Liberal Democrats two out of four and those two both having been leaders of the LibDem Group on the Council.

Dalton remains leader — but only just. The voting numbers suggest a council chamber in which party loyalties and traditional group boundaries are under strain, with dissension inside the Residents' Association itself and two Liberal Democrat votes proving decisive to the survival of an administration whose wider electoral base has been sharply

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