

Epsom and Ewell Parish councils decision looms amid questions over cost, timing and scrutiny

16 February 2026



Full Council set to decide weeks after consultation closes.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is preparing to decide whether to create new Community or Parish Councils for Epsom and Ewell, with a final decision expected at Full Council on 12 March.

The move follows the closure on 1st February of the statutory Community Governance Review consultation. The Council has confirmed that councillors will consider the consultation outcome and decide whether to make a Reorganisation Order formally establishing the new councils. The agenda and supporting analysis are expected to be published only in the week before the meeting, leaving limited time for councillors and residents to review the findings before a potentially irreversible decision.

Cllr **John Beckett** (RA Auriol - Chair of the Standards and Constitution Committee) said "I thank everyone who responded to the consultation for taking the time to have your say."

Conservatives warn residents face "another tax" for limited services

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative, Horton Ward) has warned that residents could face significant additional costs without any certainty that parish councils will deliver meaningful services.

He said the proposal risks introducing "another layer of local government and another tax" without a clear or guaranteed transfer of responsibilities.

At present, allotments are the only service clearly identified for transfer. Epsom and Ewell has 11 allotment sites which together cost around £20,000 per year to operate.

However, the administrative cost of running the proposed parish councils has been estimated at around £1.5 million per year.

Crucially, any expansion of parish council responsibilities beyond allotments would require the agreement of the new East Surrey Unitary Authority after the borough council is abolished in April 2027. There is no guarantee that such agreement would be given.

This raises the prospect that residents could face substantial additional council tax through a parish precept to fund administrative structures whose only assured function would be managing allotments costing a small fraction of the projected overhead.

Cllr Persand said residents were being asked to support a costly and permanent new tier of government without clarity on what it would actually do.

Move comes as borough council prepares for abolition

The parish council proposal comes against the backdrop of Local Government Reorganisation, which will see Epsom and Ewell Borough Council abolished and replaced by the new East Surrey Unitary Authority in April 2027.

Parish councils can preserve a layer of local representation after district councils cease to exist, but they also introduce an additional tier of governance funded through their own council tax precept.

Once established, parish councils are permanent public authorities and cannot easily be dissolved.

Questions over scrutiny and decision-making process

The timing and handling of the decision has also prompted procedural questions.

The Council's Strategy and Resources Committee normally considers major financial and governance matters before final decisions are taken by Full Council.

Will the parish council proposal be referred to Strategy and Resources Committee or to the Standards and Constitution Committee for detailed examination on 12th March — as the Bucha (Ukraine) town-twinning motion was on 10th February — or will Full Council proceed directly to a final decision without prior committee scrutiny?

That earlier twinning proposal involved only a symbolic endorsement and no financial commitment, yet it was referred to

committee without debate, delaying any decision.

The parish council proposal, by contrast, would create entirely new public bodies with tax-raising powers and long-term financial implications for every household in the borough.

Decision will shape Epsom and Ewell's future governance

Supporters argue Community / Parish Councils will preserve local voice and identity. Critics warn they risk creating costly administrative structures without guaranteed powers or meaningful responsibilities.

With the consultation now closed and a decision imminent, councillors face a choice that could reshape local government in Epsom and Ewell for decades to come.

The Epsom and Ewell Times is keeping open its own Reader Survey for two more weeks. A survey that provides residents an opportunity to express their views on a wider set of options than the Council consultation provided.

Click [HERE](#) to access the Epsom and Ewell Times LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION SURVEY

Sam Jones - Reporter



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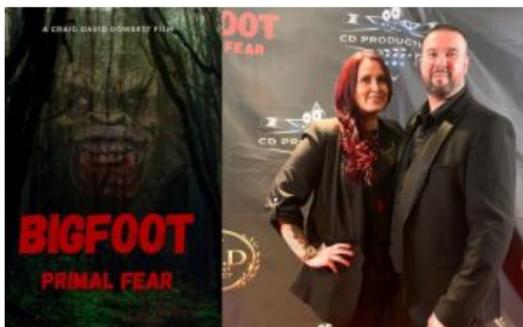
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Epsom has no fear hosting primal premiere

16 February 2026



Valentine's Day brought screams instead of romance to Epsom Picturehouse as Craig Dowsett premiered his directional debut, *Bigfoot: Primal Fear*, on 14 February.

Dowsett began acting shortly after Covid and rose to prominence playing Winnie the Pooh in *Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey*, produced by Jagged Edge Productions. After the film's success, he moved into writing and directing, seeking full creative control over his own projects.

Bigfoot: Primal Fear is the first independent Bigfoot horror film shot in the UK and features well known faces from the UK independent film scene. It also stars American Bigfoot expert Ryan "RPG" Golembeske from Expedition Bigfoot and DJ Brewster from Alaskan Killer Bigfoot.

The story follows a group of campers whose woodland getaway turns into a nightmare when they realise they are not alone and something is hunting them. Every step could be their last as they fight to survive. Click [HERE](#) for a trailer:

Made on a small, self-financed budget, the film relies on practical effects, fast pacing and plenty of twists.

Sitting in the audience, my eyes were glued to the screen. The film moved at such a pace it felt over in a flash, each scene building tension and keeping viewers fully engaged. I will now look at Epsom Common very differently. Who knows what might be living there?

"Having our very first red carpet event at Epsom Picturehouse is absolutely amazing," said Dowsett. "Epsom is a fantastic place for red carpet premieres because it has the perfect balance of being intimate yet vibrant, bringing the local community together to celebrate independent cinema. Everyone had an amazing time and went away with magical

moments. We will definitely be back later in the year for another premiere.”

The film will be released on streaming platforms later this year, with Dowsett encouraging audiences to support independent filmmaking in what he describes as a tough industry, adding that he hopes viewers enjoy the film as much as the team enjoyed creating it.

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Photo: Craig and Emma Dowsett

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Stoneleigh & Auriol Voters Back Neighbourhood Plan - But What Will It Change?

16 February 2026



Residents of Stoneleigh and Auriol have decisively backed their Neighbourhood Plan in a local referendum, giving it formal authority to influence planning decisions in the area until 2039.

At the poll held on 12 February 2026, 1,296 voters supported the plan, with 92 voting against. Turnout was 20.7% of the 6,724 electorate, with just one ballot paper rejected.

Voters were asked whether Epsom & Ewell Borough Council should use the Neighbourhood Plan to help decide planning applications in the neighbourhood area.

The Council has confirmed that the next step is for the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee formally to “make” (adopt) the plan, after which its policies will be used in determining planning applications in Stoneleigh and Auriol.

What the Plan Covers

The Stoneleigh and Auriol Neighbourhood Plan (SANP) covers around 180 hectares broadly aligned with the two wards and runs to 2039.

Prepared by the Stoneleigh and Auriol Neighbourhood Forum, the plan’s stated vision is to retain the area’s “unique character and strong sense of community” while allowing it to grow to meet future needs.

Once made, it becomes part of the statutory development plan and must be used in deciding planning applications, alongside the Borough Local Plan and national planning policy.

Core Principles in the Plan

The plan does not allocate major development sites. Instead, it focuses on design control, protection of character, safeguarding retail and community facilities, environmental sustainability and parking standards.

Housing and design: New development must maintain consistent building lines and complement existing form, massing and roofscapes, reflecting the area’s largely 1930s suburban layout. Development should generally respect the prevailing two to three storey character, using materials sympathetic to the area. Backland development may be permitted only where access, amenity space and privacy standards are satisfied. The Forum supports higher-density development where it is demonstrably sympathetic and does not harm local character.

Retail and community facilities: Proposals that enhance local retail facilities will be supported, while changes of use that threaten the predominance of commercial uses in retail centres will be resisted.

Green spaces and environment: The plan designates and protects local green spaces, seeks to minimise flood risk and supports renewable energy and energy efficiency measures where compatible with local character.

Transport and parking: Development must assess transport impact and provide adequate residential parking and cycle storage.

What Is Its Legal Weight?

Neighbourhood Plans derive their authority from national planning legislation. Once formally “made”, they form part of the statutory development plan.

Planning applications must be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. In practical terms, SANP policies will therefore carry weight in planning decisions and appeals.

However, they must be in general conformity with strategic policies in the Borough’s Local Plan and with national planning policy. They cannot override housing targets or contradict higher-level planning frameworks.

Does It Add Anything New?

The referendum result gives the plan a strong democratic mandate. Yet a legitimate question arises: does the Neighbourhood Plan introduce new planning principles, or does it largely restate existing ones?

Many of its core themes — protecting local character, limiting excessive height, maintaining building lines, safeguarding retail centres, supporting sustainable drainage and requiring parking provision — are already embedded in the National Planning Policy Framework, existing Borough Core Strategy and Development Management Policies, and established appeal decisions emphasising design quality and character.

The plan does not set housing numbers, allocate strategic sites or alter Borough-wide growth targets.

Its practical effect may therefore be less about introducing new rules and more about giving locally specific design guidance additional statutory status, strengthening the weight attached to character arguments at appeal, and sending a clear political signal about community expectations.

Whether that materially alters planning outcomes will be tested in future applications and appeals.

What Happens After April 2027?

The abolition of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council in April 2027 and its confirmed replacement by the East Surrey Unitary Authority will not invalidate the Neighbourhood Plan.

Neighbourhood Plans form part of the statutory development plan for the land area, not merely for the council that adopted them. The East Surrey Unitary Authority will inherit responsibility for applying the SANP in determining planning applications within Stoneleigh and Auriol.

However, the new authority will prepare its own strategic development plan covering a much wider geography. Over time, neighbourhood plan policies can be superseded or carry reduced weight if inconsistent with new strategic frameworks. The Neighbourhood Forum will also require renewed designation if the plan is to be formally reviewed or updated.

In short, the SANP is likely to survive reorganisation — but its long-term influence will depend on how it aligns with the policies of the incoming East Surrey authority.

A Strong ‘Yes’ — and a Test Ahead

With more than 93% of votes cast in favour, residents have clearly expressed a wish to shape development in their area.

The real question now is whether the Neighbourhood Plan will meaningfully change planning outcomes — or whether it primarily codifies principles already embedded in existing local and national policy.

That answer will emerge not at the ballot box, but in the planning committee room — and, potentially, on appeal.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Image: Typical Stoneleigh residential road. Google Street View

Cllr prays for Priest Hill not to be developed in Ewell

16 February 2026



A controversial proposal to build hundreds of homes on Green Belt land at Priest Hill in Ewell has re-emerged, with developers now progressing a revised scheme for up to 300 homes. The land, adjacent to Ewell East Station, had previously been identified in the draft Local Plan as a major housing allocation but was later removed from the Regulation 19 version due to concerns over deliverability.

From 350 Homes to 300

Under the earlier Regulation 18 Draft Local Plan, the site — known as NON013 — was allocated for at least 350 net zero carbon dwellings, with buildings up to six storeys, ground-floor retail space and the re-provision of playing pitches at Hook Road Arena. However, concerns were raised during consultation. Sutton & Epsom Rugby Football Club (RFC), which leases part of the site until 2079, objected strongly, citing the importance of its pitches to its 2,000 members and warning of potential harm to its long-term viability. Sport England also raised concerns, noting that any loss of playing field land would have to meet strict national policy tests, including equivalent replacement in quality, quantity, location and accessibility. Following these issues, and in the absence of evidence that long leases could be surrendered, the Council removed the site from the Regulation 19 Proposed Submission Local Plan in November 2024.

What Has Changed?

According to the Council's latest position statement dated 22 January 2026, the landowner's agents are now seeking pre-application advice for a revised scheme. The updated proposal would redevelop approximately 4.9 hectares currently under the leasehold control of Old Suttonians for up to 300 homes, while retaining the 3.7 hectares leased to Sutton & Epsom RFC as sports pitches. Old Suttonians confirmed to the Council in December 2025 that their use of the land for sports ceased in 1999, the clubhouse and changing rooms were demolished in 2015, and they have signed an option agreement to return their land to the freeholder for redevelopment. They do not sub-lease or share the land with other parties. In contrast, Sutton & Epsom RFC confirmed in January 2026 that it fully utilises its leased land for three senior pitches and one mini pitch and has no intention of ending its lease early, with 53 years remaining.

Green Belt Concerns

Nonsuch Ward Conservative councillor **Shanice Goldman** has called for urgent clarity over the revived proposals. The site lies within the Green Belt and while the revised scheme indicates that rugby pitches would remain, residential development would still take place on designated Green Belt land. Cllr Goldman said: "The protection of Green Belt and transparency in process are not optional extras. They are fundamental." She added: "This is still Green Belt land. And once Green Belt is gone, it does not come back." Residents, she said, had been left with the impression that large-scale development at Priest Hill was no longer proceeding and were now asking what has changed.

Housing Need Versus Open Land

The landowner's agents have previously argued that the site is well served by public transport and should be reconsidered given the borough's unmet housing need. The current proposal is at pre-application stage, meaning no formal planning application has yet been submitted. However, the renewed activity is likely to reignite debate over housing numbers, Green Belt protection and the future of community sports provision in Ewell. Interested parties include Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, the freeholder Coldunell Limited, Old Suttonians and Sutton & Epsom Rugby Football Club. Further details are expected once a formal planning application is lodged.

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Land adjoining Ewell East Station

Image: Development area approximately overlaid on Google Map aerial view of Priest Hill.

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Edinburgh Duke visits Surrey's Arts University

16 February 2026



Thursday 12th February, The Duke of Edinburgh visited University for the Creative Arts (UCA) and its School of Creative & Cultural Industries, to celebrate it providing 170 years of practice-based, creative education and to meet its current young creatives who study across traditional and emerging arts.

UCA welcomed The Duke, who has a professional background in the creative industries and is a Patron of a range of organisations that aim to widen opportunities within the sector.

His Royal Highness was met at UCA by Joint Acting Vice-Chancellors, Professor Melanie Gray and Professor Mark Ellul, alongside Chancellor, Dame Magdalene Odundo; Executive Dean, Professor Sophy Smith; and Pro-Vice Chancellor Academic Partnerships & Industry Engagement, Professor Lyndsay Duthie.

Professors Gray and Ellul, commented: "We are honoured to welcome HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, a recognised champion of the arts, to UCA in Farnham. We were delighted to give His Royal Highness a tour of our specialist facilities, where he got hands-on experience of traditional crafts to future-facing technologies, and introduce him to the next generation of creatives, our talented student community."

The Duke was also introduced to globally renowned fashion designer and UCA Chancellor Emerita, Dame Zandra Rhodes. Zandra began her own creative career at UCA, studying at one of its former art colleges in the 1960s, which she credits as the foundation for her creativity.

Other alumni to meet The Duke included actor Gabin Kongolo, who made history as the first Black person to perform and speak Welsh on stage at Shakespeare's Globe and ceramicist Tim Fluck, a British Ceramics Biennial Fresh Talent Award winner.

The Duke's tour formally commenced in UCA's creative workshops, including its glass studio, where UCA is among only a handful of specialist institutions in the UK to offer a degree in the subject. Before the tour shifted up a gear, showcasing UCA's high-tech filmmaking space, its Virtual Production studio. Students used real-time rendering software and motion capture to immerse His Royal Highness in a scene from Moryow, which was shot in the space and will make its debut on the film festival circuit later this year.

Professor Duthie then led a Creative Economy Roundtable discussion in which The Duke actively participated, alongside UCA academics and members of the University's very own Creative & Cultural Industries Leaders Network, as well as alumni.

Professor Duthie said: "The UK's creative and cultural industries contribute £126bn to the economy and support over 2.4 million jobs. Concurrently the sector is being fundamentally reshaped by emerging technologies. It was encouraging to hear His Royal Highness articulate a vision that aligns so closely with ours. At UCA, we are preparing the next generation not just to adopt new tools, but to shape how they are used — equipping students to think critically, create boldly, and lead an industry evolving faster than ever before."

The Duke's tour concluded with the unveiling of an artwork created by second year BA Graphic Design student, Ella Stevenson and received a piece of glassware designed by glass technician, Laura Quinn. The works marked The Duke's visit, celebrating 170 years of UCA.

The Duke said: "Congratulations on 170 years of developing all those essential arts, crafts and keeping the creative flame well and truly alight."

University of the Creative Arts.

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Government comes to Surrey's SEND rescue

16 February 2026



The Government is 'finally recognising the heavy pressure placed on local budgets to support children' after agreeing to wipe out 90 per cent of the debt councils has accrued in Special Education Need and Disabilities spending.

Surrey has 46,000 children with Additional Needs and Disabilities (AND) with 16,870 children and young people with a statutory Education Health and Care (EHC) plan. This is more than double the number in 2018 and puts it at the third highest in the country.

Councils must, by law, have to identify and support children with special educational needs but the surge in numbers has seen spending far outstrip what they receive from Government. Surrey County Council has spent millions since 2018 as part of its recovery plan for the service - which it has said is yielding results, but has pressed for changes to the wider system, additional funding and reform.

MP Greg Stafford also told the Commons that the High Needs Block deficit in Surrey was forecast to run to £165m by 2027. It leaves councils having to find huge sums every year - with historically poor support from the Government. The news that £5billion will be spent to eliminate almost all historic debt in England, they hope, signals a major change in direction.

Helyn Clack, Surrey County Council's deputy cabinet member for children, families and lifelong learning said: "Surrey County Council welcomes the announcement on SEND deficits. It shows that central government finally recognises the heavy pressure placed on local budgets to support children with special educational needs, costs that should have been fully funded through the Government's Dedicated Schools Grant.

"We are mindful that this SEND deficit funding covers overspends we have already incurred. We now await more detail on the expected ongoing costs of the SEND system and the long-promised reforms needed to make it sustainable in the future. In the meantime, we are reviewing the details of the announcement to understand what it means for the Council."

The announcement follows Local Government Association (LGA) warnings that as many as eight in 10 English councils would be facing bankruptcy if forced pay back their SEND deficits in full.

Cllr Amanda Hopgood, chair of the Local Government Association's children, young people and families committee, said: "Councils want every child and young person to get the support they need. But under the current failing system, the rise in need has left many councils buckling under the strain.

"We were pleased that government announced it will tackle 90 per cent of councils' historic high needs deficits, following our call to address the deficits, which removes the immediate threat of insolvency for many councils. Fully writing off historic and future high needs deficits remains critical.

"The challenges within the SEND system are not just financial. The Schools White Paper must deliver brave and bold reform where more children can get the support they need in a mainstream school, without needing a statutory plan."

Chris Caulfield LDRS

New Surrey County Council HQ, Woodhatch Place on Cockshot Hill, Reigate. Credit Surrey County Council

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Surrey University installs Vice-Chancellor number six

16 February 2026



Guildford Cathedral played host as town and gown come together to see formal installation of Professor Stephen Jarvis as Surrey's sixth Vice-Chancellor

In a ceremony that fused a message about the dual research and teaching purpose of the University, the urgency of a rapidly changing world, and age-old academic pageantry, Professor Stephen Jarvis was formally installed as the University of Surrey's sixth President and Vice-Chancellor at Guildford Cathedral on 11 February.

The academic and civic occasion was attended by community representatives and leaders - including council leaders, current and former MPs and representatives from across the region's business and academic communities, alongside hundreds of staff and students from across the University community.

Professor Jarvis shared a message of a University with deep local roots - bringing together our community of academics, students and graduates with the wider community in Guildford, Surrey and beyond to contribute to social, economic and cultural wellbeing. He spoke of a University with a critical leadership role in combining entrepreneurship and purpose to find solutions to the challenges of the modern world, and in driving economic growth, social opportunity and the future skills agenda.

A computational scientist and former Royal Society Industry Fellow who helped establish The Alan Turing Institute, Professor Jarvis is internationally recognised for his academic leadership in high-performance computing, data science and applied artificial intelligence. On these foundations, he has established himself as an institutional and sector leader. At the University of Birmingham, where he served as Provost and Vice-Principal, he played a central role in shaping strategic vision, whilst at the University of Warwick he led industry-academic partnerships in big data as Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research).

Professor Jarvis took up the role of President and Vice-Chancellor at the University of Surrey on 15 September 2025. In his address to a packed cathedral, he said:

"The University of Surrey is defined by a dual commitment to excellence in both education and research. Ours is also a university with a clear sense of purpose: to provide an education that equips graduates for the world of work, and to undertake research that addresses some of the most urgent challenges facing society.

"Surrey aspires to be recognised among the very best universities in the UK, with a strong and growing global reputation, reach and influence. I firmly believe that the UK needs universities like ours to navigate the opportunities and challenges of technological change, respond to critical skills needs, and prepare students for the workplaces of the future.

"The University of Surrey is deeply rooted in its local community - not only a place of learning and discovery, but also an active contributor to the social, economic and cultural wellbeing of the communities we serve. The long-term success of a place is built through a shared endeavour: universities, colleges and schools that educate and inspire; public services that protect and enable; infrastructure that connects people to opportunity; and governance that provides stability, trust and direction. Aligned, we don't just function, we flourish."

The installation ceremony featured a traditional academic procession with full regalia, a specially commissioned fanfare, and music from the University Chamber Choir. The fanfare has been arranged for the installation by Dr Christopher

Wiley, Head of Music and Media at the University, having been originally composed by the renowned composer of the day Dame Ethel Smyth. Dame Ethel lived in Surrey for most of her life and is commemorated at the University and with a statue in her home town of Woking. More information on the fanfare is included in the Notes to Editors, below.

Professor Jarvis joins Surrey as the University continues to deliver Vision 2041, its long-term strategy to become a globally recognised top 100 leader in research, innovation, education and civic engagement. The University has achieved its highest-ever global position of 219th in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2026 and remains within the UK top 15 for student satisfaction, with 85% of graduates progressing into highly skilled employment.

Surrey University



The specially commissioned fanfare was originally composed in the 1930s as one of eight Fanfares for the Musicians' Benevolent Fund, each composed by one of the eight best-known British composers of the day, based on a traditional military bugle call. The 'Men's Meal (2nd call)' bugle call, also known as 'Hot Potatoes' was composed as a fanfare by **Dame Ethel Smyth**, who lived in Surrey for most of her life and is commemorated at the University and with a statue in her home town of Woking. As well as producing an impressive canon of musical works, Dame Smyth was a much-published author and an influential suffragette. Her fanfare was first performed by the Royal Military School Bandsmen under Captain H.E. Adkins at a Musicians' Benevolent Fund Annual Dinner held in London's Savoy Hotel on 8 May 1930. It was recorded by the same ensemble and performed on other occasions, but the manuscript was lost, with Dr Wiley using the 1930s recording to bring the fanfare back to life for today's installation.

Related report:

[Surrey's suffragette composer re-imagined in many ways](#)

Surrey's suffragette composer re-imagined in many ways

16 February 2026



Rediscovering long forgotten music does not mean recovering how it was meant to be performed, and that is a major challenge for the arts, finds a new study from the University of Surrey. An expert found that rediscovered music comes with no shared understanding for how it should sound, leaving performers to make radically different interpretive choices that reshape the work itself.

In an article published in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, a researcher focused on a little-known piano miniature by Surrey-based British composer Ethel Smyth, written in the late nineteenth century and forgotten for 120 years. When the piece re-emerged in the 1990s and began to be performed again, no traditions of interpretation had survived. There were no clear instructions for tempo, expression or dynamics, and no recordings of historical performances to learn from.

To understand what happens when performers face this problem, the research compared all professional recordings of the same rediscovered work. Using specialist audio analysis software, each performance was measured beat by beat to track tempo and rhythmic fluctuation across the piece.

Each pianist approached the music in a fundamentally different way, particularly at its unfinished ending. Some slowed dramatically, others pushed forward and none aligned closely with one another. Even the earliest modern recording failed to establish a shared interpretive reference point.

Dr Christopher Wiley, author of the study and Head of Music and Media at the University of Surrey, said:

"When musicians open a score like this, they are standing on empty ground. While written in standard notation that is commonly understood, there is no inherited wisdom to lean on as to how the piece is supposed to be played. What I found

when analysing modern recordings was not small variation in interpretation but completely different musical identities emerging from the same notes. This is creative and exciting, but also unsettling.”

The research argues that this challenge will only grow, as more pieces by historically marginalised composers are rediscovered. Nor is it an issue unique to music: performers across arts disciplines such as theatre and dance will likewise increasingly encounter works stripped of their original interpretive traditions.

Rather than relying solely on manuscripts, the study proposes more imaginative solutions: performers may need to draw on unconventional sources such as letters, memoirs and personal writings to guide interpretation. In this case, Smyth’s later autobiographical descriptions of the person she aimed to portray through her music offered valuable insight into its character, mood and emotional intent.

Surrey University



Image: Ethel Smyth with score to her composition March of the Women in the background. Sources: English composer and suffragette Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) Library of Congress’s Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID ggbain.33693, Author George Grantham Bain Collection; Restored by Adam Cuerden Score: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/smyth-march-of-the-women>. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication. Montage created by Epsom and Ewell Times and is copyrighted.

Epsom and Ewell Times adds: Dame Ethel Mary Smyth DBE (22 April 1858 - 8 May 1944) was an English composer and a member of the women’s suffrage movement. Her compositions include songs, works for piano, chamber music, orchestral works, choral works and operas. She lived in Surrey from childhood.

Epsom MP sponsors special youth art in Parliament

16 February 2026



Surrey young people using NHS mental health services have taken their artwork to the heart of government, with an exhibition at the House of Commons offering MPs an insight into their experiences and the support they received.

The exhibition, taking place from 10-15 February, showcases work created by young people supported by the STARS and New Leaf services, part of Mindworks Surrey. STARS supports young people affected by sexual abuse and assault, while New Leaf supports those who are in care, leaving care, adopted or under special guardianship orders.

Young people are sharing their artwork with MPs to showcase how creativity supports young people’s mental health and to highlight the positive impact of the services.

The pieces explore identity, hope, growth and recovery, capturing what can be difficult to articulate in words and offering an honest reflection of young peoples’ lived experiences of mental health support.

One young person whose artwork is being exhibited said: “STARS has changed my life, I can be me now. I was shocked when I heard my art would be at the House of Commons, I am really proud that people like my picture and what I created.”

Rebecca Robertson, Specialist Mental Health and Art Therapist said: “The young people we support have expressed their thoughts and feelings around their life experiences using art materials.

“Art making can provide an important alternative to more traditional verbal therapies and can be a vital part of helping young people to engage in support, particularly when working with trauma.”

The House of Commons event was sponsored by **Helen Maguire, MP for Epsom and Ewell**, who attended the

exhibition last summer and supported bringing the art to Parliament.

Helen said: "I'm delighted to see this exhibition come alive. It demonstrates the powerful work that New Leaf and STARS do and the importance of young people getting the right care and support for their mental health."

Emina Atic-Lee, Service Manager for STARS and New Leaf services, said: "We are incredibly proud to see the voices of the young people we support take to the stage at the House of Commons. Each piece offers an honest and powerful window into how young people use creativity to make sense of their experiences, express emotions that are hard to put into words, and recognise their own strength.

"To showcase this work in such a nationally significant setting is a truly special moment for them and for everyone involved in the services."

Press release from Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

Surrey Uni on challenging AI decisions

16 February 2026



AI systems already decide how ambulances are routed, how supply chains operate and how autonomous drones plan their missions. Yet when those systems make a risky or counter-intuitive choice, humans are often expected to accept it without challenge, warns a new study from the University of Surrey.

Epsom and Ewell Times adds that the Civil Aviation Authority has granted Amazon a licence to deliver items by drone. It is uncertain when this service will actually begin.

The research, published in the *Annals of Operations Research*, looked at the use of optimisation algorithms in relevant areas such as transport, logistics, healthcare and autonomous systems. Optimisation algorithms are systems that decide the best possible action by weighing trade-offs under fixed rules such as time, cost or capacity. Unlike prediction models that estimate what will happen, optimisation algorithms choose what should be done.

Optimisation algorithms decide what gets prioritised, delayed or excluded under strict limits such as weight, cost, time and capacity. Yet those decisions are mathematically correct but practically opaque.

The research team's findings implies that our increasing 'blind trust' creates serious safety and accountability risks in the increasing areas of everyday life where optimisation algorithms are used.

Using a classic optimisation challenge known as the Knapsack problem, the research demonstrates how machine learning models can learn the structure of an optimisation decision and then explain it in plain language. The method shows which constraints mattered most, why certain options were selected and what trade-offs pushed others out.

The study shows how organisations can challenge optimisation algorithms before their decisions are put into practice. Rather than replacing existing systems, the approach works alongside them, using machine learning to analyse decisions and explainable AI to reveal why one option was chosen over another and which constraints and trade-offs shaped the outcome.

Dr Wolfgang Garn, author of the study and Associate Professor of Analytics at the University of Surrey, said:

"People are increasingly asked to trust optimisation systems that quietly shape major decisions. When something looks wrong, they often have no way to challenge it. Our work opens those decisions up so humans can see the logic, question it and intervene before real-world consequences occur."

This is particularly important for autonomous systems such as delivery drones. Drones must constantly decide which packages to carry while balancing battery life, payload weight and safety requirements. Without transparency, regulators and operators cannot easily justify or audit those decisions.

Rather than replacing existing optimisation software, the approach works alongside it. Machine learning is used in this approach to analyse solutions, explain feasibility and identify brittle or high-risk decisions before deployment.

The research introduces a structured framework that ensures explanations are tailored to real decision makers. Instead of technical outputs, systems can provide human-readable reasoning, such as: "too many heavy items were selected, or battery limits were prioritised over delivery value."

Dr Garn continued:

“Regulators are starting to ask harder questions about automated decisions. If you can’t explain why your system chose one option over another, you’ll struggle to get approval — or defend yourself when something goes wrong. This framework makes that explanation possible.”

Surrey University



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See-saw debate on whether Epsom and Ewell Borough Council’s budget is balanced

16 February 2026



Inside the Claims and Counter-Claims at EEBC’s 2026/27 Budget Meeting

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) declared Tuesday (10th February) that it has delivered a “balanced budget without the use of reserves” for 2026/27.

The ruling Residents’ Association (RA) described it as the culmination of decades of prudent financial management. Opposition councillors from Labour, Liberal Democrat and Independent benches described something rather different: a one-year balancing act achieved by withdrawing revenue support for maintenance and capital projects, while pushing structural deficits into the future and increasing council tax to the legal maximum.

“Balanced Without the Use of Reserves” — What Does That Mean?

The morning after the meeting, EEBC issued a press release stating that the final budget had been “balanced without the use of reserves” following “£700,000-worth of savings” and a more favourable government funding settlement, particularly relating to temporary accommodation costs.

In the chamber, Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town), Chair of Strategy & Resources, framed the result as both fiscally responsible and stable: “We have produced a balanced budget without using reserves... while ensuring the borough’s finances are stable.”

Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) went further, calling EEBC: “an island of financial calm and stability” and describing the budget as “balanced... with no cuts... the continuation and culmination of decades of sound RA-led financial management.”

On the face of it, the claim is correct — in Year 1. The budget report states that, following savings and funding uplifts, the council has set a balanced budget for 2026/27.

However, the same report pack makes clear that this balance applies to the first year only. The medium-term financial strategy still shows a projected gap of approximately £0.206m in Year 2 and £0.373m in Year 3 — around £0.579m in total across the later years of the plan. The Section 151 Officer’s robustness statement acknowledges that the estimated gap by 2028/29 remains in the region of £0.56m–£0.57m.

So the question is not whether Year 1 balances — it does — but whether the structural challenge has been solved or merely deferred.

From £5 Million Gap to £579,000 — How Was It Done?

Back in July 2025, the projected three-year funding gap stood at £5.063 million. By February 2026, that gap had reduced to £0.579 million.

The improvement is attributed to three principal factors:

1. A favourable uplift in Revenue Support Grant (around £1.4 million) under revised funding formulae.*

2. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funding that exceeded expectations — around £1.08 million received versus £0.337 million forecast. [Click here for an Epsom and Ewell Times guide to EPR.]
3. Approximately £700,000 of savings achieved largely by removing planned revenue contributions toward capital projects and maintenance budgets.

The opposition did not dispute the arithmetic. They disputed the sustainability.

Liberal Democrat Warning: “We Are No Longer Maintaining Our Assets”

Cllr **James Lawrence** (Lib Dem College) delivered the most detailed financial critique of the evening. Referring directly to the budget papers, he acknowledged that the headline gap had fallen dramatically — but argued the method used to close it was deeply concerning.

He told Council: “We have 930k of savings being put forth for this year, 700,000 of that is because we’re no longer putting any revenue contributions towards our capital projects, and we’re not putting any towards our maintenance projects... That is 700,000 this year and all future years that we are not putting towards repairing and maintaining our buildings and capital assets.”

In other words, the largest element of recurring savings is the removal of revenue support for asset upkeep.

Lawrence also criticised what he described as unrealistic budgeting assumptions on temporary accommodation numbers the previous year, stating that predictions had been far below actual demand. He argued that the in-year deficit had only been reduced from around £900,000 to £500,000 because: “we took 400,000 out of the Rainbow Leisure Centre contingency.”

That reference would become a flashpoint later in the debate.

Temporary Accommodation: Windfall or Long-Overdue Reimbursement?

Homelessness spending sits at the heart of this budget story. The report pack acknowledges that 2025/26 is forecast to end with a deficit of around £520,000, largely due to housing and homelessness pressures, with a £750,000 increase built into 2026/27 for nightly paid accommodation.

The RA’s defence is that central government has finally begun to recognise real costs through revised funding formulae. Cllr Dallen told Council: “For years, they haven’t [paid], and we have been subsidizing that service by millions of pounds... The one and a half million they’ve given us still doesn’t cover the cost... So it’s not a windfall. It is actually starting to pay what they should be paying for homelessness.”

Opposition councillors saw it differently.

Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) argued that the scale of temporary accommodation expenditure reflected years of policy failure: “The council is spending huge amounts... on managing a homelessness problem, largely of its own making... People should be housed in permanent homes, not expensive temporary accommodation.”

Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court) added that prevention should sit “at the heart of our budget as a serious financial and moral commitment.”

The debate therefore split along a clear line: RA framing increased grant as overdue reimbursement; Labour framing homelessness spending as structural failure.

Council Tax: “Expected by Government” or “Squeezing Residents”?

The budget applies a 2.98% council tax increase — effectively the maximum allowed without triggering a referendum.

Cllr Dallen told Council that government “expects us to raise council tax by this amount,” warning that failure to do so could have grant consequences.

The report pack itself notes that the funding settlement assumes councils apply maximum Band D increases and deliver taxbase growth.

But Cllr Chinn challenged the choice: “The RA are again proposing residents pay the maximum increase allowed... this council should be reducing the pressure... not adding further costs.”

The political divide here is clear: RA sees the increase as prudent and necessary; opposition sees it as avoidable and poorly timed during cost-of-living pressures.

The Strategic Priorities Reserve — A Missed Opportunity?

One of the most substantive amendments came from Cllr Lawrence, seconded by Ruxley Independent Cllr **Alex Coley**, proposing that the Strategic Priorities Reserve — originally funded with approximately £2.3 million and still containing around £1.6 million unallocated — be dissolved and transferred to general reserves.

Lawrence argued that, with local government reorganisation and a shadow authority imminent, earmarking funds for long-term “wish list” projects no longer made sense.

Coley supported him: “I just don’t see the reason for keeping this money out of our general reserves any longer.”

Cllr Dallen rejected the amendment, invoking process: “We have a financial strategy advisory group... to suddenly have a

knee jerk reaction at a council meeting where officers are not allowed to speak... I think is crazy... We have proper processes.”

The amendment failed. The reserve remains intact.

The deeper issue: what constitutes prudence at the end of a council’s life — ring-fenced ambition, or flexible liquidity?

Rainbow Leisure Centre — The Unresolved Liability

During debate, Cllr Ames alleged that the transfer of Rainbow Leisure Centre to a new operator could leave the council facing: “a bill of around half a million pounds plus legal costs.”

Lawrence’s separate reference to drawing £400,000 from the Rainbow contingency fund amplified the concern.

The budget papers do not explicitly quantify any final Rainbow liability within the headline figures, and no detailed rebuttal was provided during the meeting.

For residents, the question is simple: if liabilities exist, where do they sit within the risk assessment of the medium-term plan?

Reserves: Not Used — But Still Doing the Heavy Lifting

The claim that the 2026/27 budget is balanced without reserves is technically correct. However, the report pack confirms that 2025/26 is forecast to close with a deficit to be managed through earmarked reserves, while the General Fund reserve stands at £1.555m — only £55,000 above the council’s stated minimum threshold of £1.5m.

The distinction is important. “No reserves used in 2026/27” does not mean reserves are irrelevant to the council’s overall financial stability.

The Vote — And What It Revealed

The budget passed on a recorded division: 19 in favour, 10 against, one abstention.

Cllr **Julian Freeman** (LibDem College) criticised what he described as bloc voting by the RA: “Residents councillors just voting along with their group.”

The RA closed ranks. Opposition parties voted against.

So — Balanced, or Balanced for Now?

The 2026/27 budget does balance in accounting terms.

But it does so through a combination of:

- Exceptional government funding uplifts.
- Removal of recurring revenue support for capital and maintenance.
- Maximum council tax increase.
- Deferral of structural gaps into later years.

The ruling group describes this as prudent stewardship at the end of an administration.

Opposition councillors describe it as a one-year fix achieved by stopping maintenance contributions and raising tax while underlying pressures remain.

With local government reorganisation approaching and a shadow authority soon to assume control, the final judgement may not be made by this council at all — but by its successor.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Image: Any resemblance to any particular councillor is random and their position on the see-saw is not indicative of whether they supported the budget or not.

*A general grant paid by central government to local authorities to help fund their day-to-day services, with no requirement that it be spent on any specific activity

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