

# Students Tuesday takeover of Epsom Picturehouse

16 January 2026



Students from **University for the Creative Arts** (UCA) in Epsom are set to return to **Epsom Picturehouse** later this month with another imaginative cinema takeover – this time built around the release of *Marty Supreme*.

The one-night event takes place on **Tuesday 20th January**, with activities beginning at **6.30pm**, and forms part of UCA Epsom's *Experience Economy* module. Rather than focusing on conventional event mana

The January screening will again see students working directly with the Picturehouse team to create an enhanced, interactive evening that goes beyond simply watching a film. While full details are being kept under wraps, organisers promise live elements and audience interaction designed to complement the themes and setting of the film.

The collaboration builds on last year's well-received student takeover, which re-imagined *Be Kind Rewind* as a playful, hands-on cinema experience. That event featured live performances, green-screen activities and interactive installations that transformed the building into a temporary creative hub and demonstrated how cinema can function as a shared social space rather than a purely passive one.

This year's focus is *Marty Supreme*, a new film set in 1950s New York and starring **Timothée Chalamet** as Marty Mauser, a driven outsider determined to become a champion table-tennis player and turn the sport into a nationwide phenomenon. The story's emphasis on confidence, ambition and refusing to be overlooked has provided fertile ground for students developing ideas around performance, identity and audience participation.

Epsom Picturehouse, which opened in 2018, has become a central part of the town's cultural life, combining six screens showing independent cinema and mainstream releases with a café-bar that is used for talks, community events and special screenings. The venue is part of the Picturehouse chain, known nationally for its focus on curated programming and local partnerships.

UCA's Epsom campus, located at the former Epsom School of Art, specialises in creative business, marketing and performance-related courses, with an emphasis on practical collaboration with external organisations. Projects such as the Picturehouse takeover form part of the university's wider approach to linking students with real-world audiences and venues.

Joe Stroud, Marketing Manager at Epsom Picturehouse, said the partnership reflects a shared commitment to creativity and community, adding that working with students brings fresh perspectives into the cinema and helps re-imagine how audiences experience film.

The *Marty Supreme* cinema takeover is a **one-night-only** event, with tickets available via the Picturehouse website.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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# Surrey businesses benefit from County grants

16 January 2026



Greentech innovators and gourmet food producers are among businesses benefiting from a further £1 million investment into the county's economy by Surrey County Council.

Nearly 30 companies and entrepreneurs are receiving individual grants of up to £75,000 in the latest round of funding.

The investment, which is largely made up of UK Shared Prosperity Funding from government, will unlock millions of pounds of match funding while creating dozens of local jobs.

Among the recipients are Mantonix, a University of Surrey spinout in Guildford, which has developed ultrasonic technology to sustainably destroy "forever chemicals". The new facility will reinforce Surrey's position as a leader in environmental innovation.

MS Venison will create a new butchery facility in Oxted while family-run catering business Afromufasa will purchase a new food truck, creating up to eight jobs in Weybridge.

Godalming-based DIY Her Way will look to provide online training for 100 women to become electricians, helping addresses Surrey's shortage of skilled tradespeople.

Councillor Matt Furniss, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth, said: "This investment represents another significant step in strengthening and growing Surrey's economy.

"The quality and breadth of the bids within the hundreds of applications that we received is testament to the vibrancy of the business community across the county.

"I'm delighted we have been able to support close to 30 companies with their innovative ideas to grow and look forward to seeing them delivering benefits to our people and places over the months to come."

Surrey County Council launched the Economic Growth Fund in April with a focus on supporting ideas to accelerate growth, boost innovation and create new employment opportunities.

About £2 million was distributed when the first round of grants was announced in September.

With a further £1 million awarded in round two, the total invested locally this year now stands at more than £3 million.

Among those to benefit include Rhevia (formerly known as Streetwise Technology) in Reigate. The firm uses hardware and AI to make highways safer for pedestrians while improving vehicle flow.

Dorian Isaacson, of Rhevia, said: "Being selected for funding by Surrey County Council was a huge vote of confidence for us at a critical stage of our growth.

"The grant has been genuinely transformational, it enabled us to recruit two new team members and significantly advance our technology, making our product more sophisticated and commercially viable.

"That progress has directly helped us win new customers and accelerate our growth. As we scale, we expect this to translate into high-value jobs, continued innovation, and a growing contribution to the Surrey economy."

The Economic Growth Fund is one of several ways the council supports businesses and a growing Surrey economy.

For further details and to register for fully-funded support to start and grow a business visit [www.businesssurrey.co.uk](http://www.businesssurrey.co.uk).

The businesses to win funding in round two of the Surrey Economic Growth Fund are:

Afromufasa  
Aqua Broadcast Limited  
Batts Hill Distillers  
BecDan Limited (DIY Her Way)  
Carpet Ease Limited  
Carry on Coffee  
Charlie and Ginger LTD  
DigiKind Ltd (Kathy Kyle)  
Fit with Frank  
Hurtwood Events CIC  
Kampyro Ltd t/a Emovement  
Lesh  
MS Venison Ltd  
Mantonix  
More Meals Ltd  
Morpheus Fluid Ltd  
Old School Longcross Ltd (t/a Old School Windscreens)  
Parcours Velo Ltd  
Porky Whites Ltd  
Rawlings Opticians  
Rhizo PTX  
Shetland Pony Club (registered as Shetland Pony Centre LLP)  
Silvermere Gymnastics  
Star Player Ltd  
Surrey Signs & Display Limited  
Systems & Networks Training  
The Nourishment Academy (t/a Strength & Bloom LTD)  
West Fisher Winery

Surrey County Council



Photo: Dorian Isaacson, of Rhevia, received funding from the Surrey Economic Growth Fund

## Surrey Uni powering hydrogen and low carbon energy

16 January 2026



A new partnership between the University of Surrey and leading clean energy technology company Ceres aims to speed up the development of next-generation clean power systems and hydrogen production – supporting the UK’s net zero ambitions and helping address a growing skills gap in electrochemical energy technologies.

The collaboration brings together Ceres’ expertise in solid oxide fuel cells (SOFC) and solid oxide electrolysis (SOEC) with Surrey’s research strengths in electrochemical energy systems, digital and multiscale modelling, and advanced materials characterisation. Solid oxide electrolysis allows for highly efficient hydrogen production using electricity and heat, while solid oxide fuel cells can generate low carbon power for applications ranging from industrial processes to data centres.

Under the partnership, the teams will focus on improving the efficiency, durability and performance of these technologies, using advanced modelling and mechanistic insights to help translate fundamental research into real-world systems more quickly. Together, they will pursue joint research projects, collaborative funding bids and new training and placement opportunities for students.

Professor Qiong Cai, Professor in Sustainable Energy and Materials at the University of Surrey, and academic co-lead, said:

*“Solid oxide electrolysis and fuel cells have huge potential to underpin the UK’s future energy systems, from large-scale hydrogen production to low-carbon power for industry. But real progress depends on improving efficiency, durability and performance so these systems can operate reliably in the real world. This partnership gives us the opportunity to tackle those challenges head-on, combining fundamental science with a clear route to application.”*

Professor Jin Xuan, Associate Dean of Research and Innovation for the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences, who is also a co-lead at Surrey, said:

*“There is a growing skills gap in hydrogen and electrochemical energy technologies, at a time when demand for these capabilities is increasing rapidly. Working together with Ceres, we aim to help train the next generation of engineers and scientists in these fields through placements and hands-on research, ensuring the UK has the expertise it needs to support a net zero economy.”*

The partnership is outlined by a three-year Heads of Terms agreement and will see the teams work together to develop a pipeline of joint research projects and funding bids.

A symbolic signing ceremony, which took place at the University of Surrey on 14 January 2026, formally marked the start of the collaboration and provided an opportunity for both parties to set out priorities for the work ahead.

Dr Subhasish Mukerjee is Chief Scientific Officer at Ceres and was recently appointed a Visiting Professor within Surrey’s School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering. He said:

*“We are delighted to expand our collaboration with the University of Surrey across fundamental electrochemistry research, modelling and digitalisation, and strategic testing to develop the next generation of clean energy technology. This collaboration strengthens our leadership in the solid oxide field and supports the UK’s drive toward achieving its net zero targets.”*

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Surrey University



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## Green escape to wellness for Surrey's anxious

16 January 2026



A new photography exhibition by Active Prospects is shining a light on the power of nature, creativity, and personalised wellbeing support.

The stunning images on display were all taken by people who have taken part in the charity's Green Escape wellness recovery programme, funded through the Mental Health Investment Fund (jointly funded by Surrey County Council and Surrey Heartlands ICB).

Over the past year, small groups of two or three people have enjoyed 8-10 nature trips to beautiful parts of Surrey, including places that are sometimes difficult to reach by public transport, such as RHS Wisley. Each trip gave participants the chance to explore new places, take photographs and build confidence at their own pace. Their work has now been brought together in a unique photo book and this special exhibition.

For many, these trips were life-changing. One participant had not left their home for 10 years. With gentle encouragement, practical support and small achievable steps, they were able to join the group, enjoy the outdoors and reach a personal goal they once thought impossible. Families are involved too, and wellbeing coaches from Active Prospects support each person throughout their journey. It's a true team effort.

At the end of the wellness recovery programme, each participant leaves with a personalised action plan. By removing barriers, such as fear of using public transport or trying new activities, people gain the confidence to become more independent. Some have even taken their new skills into work or volunteering. One participant discovered a passion for paddleboarding and is now a qualified instructor.

Research shows that around half of autistic adults experience anxiety disorders. Every part of Active Prospects' wellbeing coaching is designed to ease anxiety, build confidence and open up new opportunities for neurodivergent people over 18. Participants often tell the team they felt "invisible" before joining. Peer connection is central to the programme, and activities focus on what makes people smile, whether that's creative writing, photography or paddleboarding. One member's love of table tennis inspired Table Tennis Thursdays, which is now a much-loved weekly meet-up.

The programme is person-centred, with coaching tailored to each individual. Thanks to Mental Health Investment Fund support of £299,270 over 2 years, as well as the programme, Active Prospects also developed Emojjo, a digital wellbeing app that helps people track how they're feeling across eight areas of wellbeing such as 'Environment'. Users can set goals, get ideas for new challenges, and create a monthly mood calendar that helps them notice progress and patterns over time.

The photography exhibition celebrates everything the programme stands for, confidence, creativity, connection, and the joy of discovering something new.

Councillor Mark Nuti, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, and Public Health said: "The exhibition has showcased wonderful moments captured in nature, and it was inspiring to hear the stories behind each photograph. It's clear to see the positive impact of the support provided by Active Prospects—helping people improve their mental health, build confidence, and enhance their overall wellbeing."

Dr Charlotte Canniff, Joint Chief Medical Officer for NHS Surrey Heartlands, said: "This exhibition shows the real difference personalised wellbeing coaching can make. We're proud that, through the Mental Health Investment Fund, Active Prospects has been able to create Inclusive Wellbeing Coaches to support adults with multiple challenges to grow in confidence and quality of life."

Maria Mills CEO Active Prospects said: "Connecting to nature and the outdoors offers a real boost to wellbeing. Already

participants have shared a documented 25% improvement in their wellbeing presentation, showing how investment in inclusive community support pays back public funding in multiples, but most importantly enables people to thrive.”

Leanne - Programme participant: “I wasn’t going out, was overwhelmed and my senses were overloaded. Since being part of the programme, I’m able to get out and about and I’m seeing things differently.”

Kieran - Programme participant and a member of the Active Prospects Wellbeing Team: “Being outside (in nature) after years in hospital gives you a feeling of freedom and space.”

**Mental Health Investment Fund**

The Mental Health Investment Fund (MHIF) is a Surrey wide, all age, resource to enable the delivery of the outcomes in Priority Two of the Health and Well-Being Strategy. This priority area is focused on prevention, removing barriers, and supporting people to become proactive in improving their emotional health and wellbeing.

Established in 2022, the MHIF is a joint fund with Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care Board (ICB) and is part of the county’s No One left Behind agenda. The additional investment in mental health provision was ring fenced within the 22/23 Council Tax with an additional contribution from Surrey Heartlands.

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Surrey County Council

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Photo: Lucy a participant

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## A Surrey Police career goes to pot

16 January 2026



A former Surrey Police officer has been banned from policing for life after she smoked cannabis and then lied about it, a misconduct panel ruled.

Zara Ali was dismissed following a hearing at Surrey Police Headquarters on December 15. Although she had already quit the force and did not attend, the panel said she would have been sacked if she were still serving. She has now been added to the national barred list, meaning she can never work as a police officer again.

The panel found Ms Ali had smoked cannabis while off duty during a trip to the New Forest in May 2024. Ms Ali said she did not knowingly participate in taking any controlled drug substance and denied her conduct breached the Standards of Professional Behaviour identified.

Days later she was ordered to take a “with cause” drugs test, meaning a manager believed she could be under the influence of drugs. Before giving a urine sample, she was asked directly if she had taken any drugs but she did not admit to smoking cannabis.

The panel said this was a deliberate lie and criticised her for trying to dodge responsibility. Members said the public would be “appalled” that a police officer failed to answer honestly when questioned during a drug test.

Afterwards, Ms Ali told her supervisor, Sergeant Scott Legge, that she had taken “one puff” of a cannabis joint while camping with her boyfriend and his friends. She later told the same story to colleague PC Annalise Ware.

In the oral and written evidence of the incident, PC Ware said: “At this point, I did not think Zara had any involvement with controlled substances, her behaviour is erratic, she is loud and she struggles with focusing on one task at a time, but I was aware she has a formal diagnosis of ADHD and these are traits of her diagnosis.”

Members rejected claims that colleagues had misunderstood her because of her ADHD, saying there was no medical evidence and it was unlikely two officers would make the same mistake independently.

But when she spoke to senior officers, she changed her version of events. Instead, she claimed she had asked a stranger for a cigarette, taken one drag, thought it tasted odd and threw it away, suggesting she did not realise it might contain drugs.

The panel ruled this second version was untrue and was an attempt to make herself look less guilty. They said she had changed her story to avoid the consequences of her actions.

While the panel said it was right that she initially told colleagues about the cannabis use, they ruled she seriously damaged public trust by lying during the testing process. They said her behaviour was criminal, deliberate and dishonest, and posed a serious risk to public confidence in policing.

The panel concluded her actions amounted to gross misconduct, the most serious category, and said she could not have stayed in the job. They ruled that anything less than dismissal would not have been strong enough to protect the reputation of Surrey Police.

As a result, Ms Ali has been placed on the national barred list, preventing her from ever working in policing again. She has the right to appeal within 10 working days.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Surrey Police ethics print on wall at Mount Browne HQ. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)

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## Epsom Dance Group in World Championship

16 January 2026



An Epsom-based dance competition team is preparing to take to the international stage after being selected to represent Team England at the Dance World Cup 2026 in Dublin next summer.

CMDC (Charmille Dance Collective) received the news just before Christmas that one of its groups and two solo dancers had been chosen for the prestigious world finals, following national qualifying rounds.

Founder Charlotte Liddle said:

“We are thrilled that one of our groups and two solo dancers have been selected to represent Team England at the Dance World Cup in Dublin next year.”

The Dance World Cup is an annual, large-scale international competition focused on children and young adults, typically aged between five and 25. Dancers qualify through national competitions or video selection before reaching the world finals, making selection highly competitive.

The 2026 finals will take place at the Convention Centre Dublin from Wednesday 8 to Saturday 18 July 2026. Organisers expect more than 120,000 competitors from over 70 countries, competing across a wide range of styles including classical, contemporary, street, hip hop and theatrical dance. The event is widely regarded as one of the largest all-genre youth dance competitions in the world and a major milestone for young dancers.

Charmille Dance Collective was founded by sisters Charlotte and Millie Liddle, both graduates of the Laine Theatre of Arts. Despite being a relatively new team, CMDC has already built a strong competitive record, including a second-place finish at the All England finals in 2024.

Co-founder Millie Liddle said:

“We are so proud of the girls and how far they have come in such a short time. Their dedication and hard work have been incredible, and they truly deserve this opportunity.”

Before heading to Dublin, the team will be balancing intensive training with fund-raising activities to help cover travel and competition costs, as they look to give themselves the best chance of building on Team England’s previous successes at the event.

Charmille Dance Collective is a community dance team based in Epsom. Founded by sisters Charlotte and Millie Liddle, former students at Epsom's Laine Theatre Arts, the group competes at regional and national dance competitions across the UK.

Charlotte and Millie welcome help to fund the trip:

<https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/charmille-dance-world-cup>

Sam Jones - Reporter



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## Council's refusal leaves Esher's Marquis of Granby derelict

16 January 2026



The owners of the Marquis of Granby in Esher have hit back at Elmbridge Borough Council after it refused to recognise the venue as a restaurant. They said the decision they say is “wrong” and “based on a misunderstanding”.

Greene King, which owns the site on Portsmouth Road, has now submitted a fresh planning application asking for a Certificate of Lawful Existing Use. They want official confirmation that the Marquis of Granby should be classed as a restaurant, not a pub.

They argue the council made a “fundamentally flawed” decision last year when it rejected their original application in November 2023.

According to Greene King, the venue has operated primarily as a restaurant since 1994, with alcohol sales playing a secondary role. In simple terms: most people went there to eat, not just to drink.

Elmbridge council, however, ruled that the premises looked more like a “drinking establishment with expanded food”, a specific planning category used for pubs that also serve meals. The classification puts it outside the normal restaurant category and limits what the building can be used for in future.

Although 77.8 per cent of its sales come from food, officers said in their 2023 report, this is typical for modern pubs, which commonly serve meals, and pointed to industry data showing similar patterns nationwide. They also highlighted pub-style features including a large bar area, self-seating, multiple beer taps, a cellar stocked with kegs, gambling machines, event nights with DJs, and the venue's own website branding itself as a “local pub”. The council found these characteristics outweighed the presence of a restaurant area and concluded the premises more closely resembles a pub, not a restaurant, leading them to refuse the certificate.

But Greene King strongly disagrees. They say the council has misunderstood the planning rules and how they apply to the site. Their planning consultants argue:

- The Marquis of Granby has never been a drinking-led pub, so it cannot suddenly be classed as one.
- Planning rules do not allow a restaurant to automatically change into a “drinking establishment with expanded food” without permission.
- The business was still food-led even after its carvery deck was removed in 2020.
- Features like a bar, beer taps and a garden do not automatically make somewhere a pub and many restaurants have these too.

They also say the council relied too heavily on a trade magazine article about pub food and drink sales, which they describe as “meaningless” evidence.

Greene King points out that it successfully secured the same certificate for six similar venues elsewhere, with no

objections from councils. The Marquis of Granby is the only one that has been refused.

Since closing, the building has become run down, with heavy graffiti, vandalism and anti-social behaviour. Greene King says the lack of a certificate is “sterilising” the site and stopping it from being reused and that it is now a potential fire risk.

A spokesperson said the evidence clearly shows the venue was laid out for dining, with large kitchen facilities, menus focused on meals, tables set with cutlery and condiments and most of the space is dedicated to seated customers. They argued this proves food was the main attraction.

Greene King is now asking the council to reconsider and approve the certificate without delay. If granted, it would officially confirm the Marquis of Granby as a restaurant, making it easier to bring the site back into use.

The council has not yet commented on the new application.

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Emily Dalton LDRS

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Marquis of Granby pub on Portsmouth Road, Esher. (Credit: Google Street View)

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## What to do with an old Town Hall - lessons for Epsom?

16 January 2026



Hundreds of thousands of pounds have been spent on consultants – yet Elmbridge Borough Council still does not know what to do with its offices, say opposition councillors.

They have now criticised the council claiming it has “little to show for it after years of delay”.

Changing ideas, multiple funding injections, fresh consultant commissions and repeated delays have left people uncertain about what will actually happen to the council’s headquarters and the wider town centre vision.

Around £402,000 has been paid to external consultants across four years as the local authority pursued what it described as a “flagship” regeneration project in Esher town centre. The scheme includes council offices, a library, car parking, a bowling club, tennis courts and temporary accommodation units.

But the council has accepted that earlier business cases are no longer valid due to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), which will see Surrey split into two mega unitary authorities. Under the plans, Elmbridge will be absorbed into East Surrey.

Two consultancy firms received payments, of around £200k each, linked to the Civic Centre project between 2022 and 2025, according to a Freedom Of Information (FOI) request:

Urban Vision

- 2022: £97,200
- 2023: £116,400

31ten Consulting Limited

- 2023: £28,587.60
- 2024: £143,886
- 2025: £16,200

These figures do not include a further £50,000 approved by Cabinet and Council in November and December 2025 for additional consultancy work. FOI officers confirmed that this allocation has not yet been spent.

Despite the scale of consultancy spending, the council confirmed it has not carried out any surveys, tests or marketing of the Civic Centre building as part of the scheme. In its FOI response, the authority said it does not hold any information on costs for such work “as no such surveys, tests or marketing have been undertaken”.

**Cllr John Cope, Leader of the Conservatives and Opposition, Elmbridge Borough Council:** “Spending over £400,000 of residents’ money on consultants, with little to show for it after years of delay, sums up how the Liberal Democrat-led council has operated in Elmbridge for the past eight years.

“This comes on top of millions wasted on a failed Local Plan that was rejected by the planning inspector, and £50,000 spent on a climate change citizens’ panel PR stunt that has delivered no clear benefit for local taxpayers.

“At a time when Elmbridge has one of the highest council tax bills in the country, residents are right to expect far better. The council should be cutting waste, especially at a time it is ending support for things that residents value, like Meals on Wheels and the local community centres. Their approach is wrong, and local Conservative councillors will continue to fight for residents’ interests.”

Before the government announced devolution in Surrey, the council had prepared a full 40-year business case. This work recommended entering into a joint venture with a developer to deliver housing on the Civic Centre site, while relocating council offices by purchasing an existing office building in Esher.

Consultancy firm 31ten was appointed in August 2023 to develop a detailed financial model setting out the implications of redevelopment over a 40-year lifespan.

But, as a result of LGR, the entire business case is now defunct, making it necessary to seek new advice on a potential disposal of the site. Despite this, the council has said that redevelopment remains “integral” to Esher placemaking ambitions and could still “significantly enhance the vitality of the town centre”.

**Cllr Simon Waugh, Leisure, Portfolio Holder for Culture & Commercial Strategy**

“Our Esher vision, supported by local businesses and residents, as well as Councillors, sets out aspirations for Esher to be a vibrant town centre, providing residents and visitors with the opportunity to come together and take part in shared activities.

“At the December 2025 Elmbridge Council meeting it was agreed that limited funding was needed for a property consultant to assess the Civic Centre site for housing development within the context of the Esher vision.”

Portfolio holder said the civic centre is “no longer suitable as a modern workplace” as it is costly to maintain and environmentally unsustainable. He said Elmbridge council has continued to review options to ensure value for money, act in the best interest of residents and deliver a smooth as well as effective transition to the new unitary authority.

The council has cited several reasons for continuing work on the site, including government housing targets requiring councils to help deliver 1.5m new homes nationally.

Cllr Waugh said: “The demand for new homes remains strong across the country, including in Elmbridge. The government continues to set ambitious targets to address the housing crisis and Elmbridge Borough Council is firmly committed to supporting the delivery of housing within the borough.

“The Civic Centre site presents this Council with an opportunity to provide extra homes in Esher and to deliver on improved connectivity to the town - providing a community meeting point for markets and events currently lacking in the town. For residents and businesses, we foresee economic benefits for the high street, and improved connectivity around Esher town centre, as well as much needed housing. We will bring an update to Elmbridge Cabinet and Council in the coming months.”

The council is now seeking fresh advice on disposal options, even as responsibility for the site is expected to transfer to the new East Surrey authority by April 2027.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Elmbridge Civic Centre, where Elmbridge Borough Council is based. Photo credit Emily Coady-Stemp, LDR.

Related reports:

The Epsom and Ewell Town Hall plan

A new Town Hall for Epsom and Ewell?

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## **Cllr Dallen accused of £1/2 m Epsom & Ewell Council cover-up**

16 January 2026



BBC LDRS reports: A Surrey council [Epsom and Ewell] must pay out up to £500,000 after failing to properly check the condition of a major leisure centre before handing it over to a new operator. Poor ventilation, damp and ‘possible roof cracks’ were cited as some of the problems related to the “fabric” of the building.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has agreed to cover the costs of urgent repairs at Rainbow Leisure Centre after the new contractors took over the site and uncovered a long list of issues, some relating to the structure and fabric of the building. Places Leisure took over the contract on October 1, 2025, but has not yet signed on the dotted line, the LDRS understands.

The pay out was approved via a confidential urgent decision, seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), after Places Leisure said it should not be responsible for fixing the issues.

An urgent decision is when a council cannot wait until the usual decision-making committee process as it could harm the public or council interests.

Some of the problems relate to the fabric of the building, for which the council is responsible, the LDRS understands. This is despite the council previously insisting it had carried out such checks.

In a public report dated June 2025, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council said it had commissioned a stock condition report to make sure the building was handed over in good nick.

As the LDRS understands, council officers believed the centre would be handed back in good condition. An external consultant was used, but their inspection was not invasive, meaning hidden problems may not have been picked up. But just six months later, the authority is now facing a bill of up to £500k to fix problems that either were missed or not properly dealt with because the council did not know about them.

When Places took over, it found issues it believed the previous operator should have fixed. Some of the problems raised include:

- Fire alarm faults
- Lift issues
- Broken seating
- Damaged glazing
- Faulty toilets
- Poor ventilation
- Damp
- Possible roof cracks
- Machinery at “end of life”

Some were flagged as health and safety risks, meaning urgent action was needed to keep the centre safe and open.

The council has now agreed to let Places carry out the repairs and reclaim the costs by reducing the management fee it pays back to the council. Officers said this is the “most cost-effective” option, but it effectively means residents are picking up the tab.

#### **Why is the council paying?**

Under the contract, some repairs fall to the council as landlord responsibilities. Others may be recoverable from former operator GLL, but legal experts warn the council is unlikely to claw back the full amount. GLL has been contacted for comment. [See below for additional reporting.]

The authority plans to dip into its ‘dilapidation’ reserve, a pot of money set aside for building repairs, to cover the shortfall. Officers admit the final cost is still being worked out, but estimate it could reach up to £500,000.

#### **Opposition fury**

Councillors have slammed the council for not knowing the state of its own properties.

Cllr **Alex Coley**, member of the Independent group (Ruxley), said: “I’d have hoped that the council as landlord would understand the condition of the leisure centre to establish its potential liability.”

Labour group leader, Cllr **Kate Chinn**, (Court) hit out at the ruling Residents’ Association (RA), calling the situation a “shocking scandal”.

She said: “This secrecy wasn’t about keeping the costs involved from the parties to the negotiations as they already know

them. It was about preventing the public from learning how incompetent the RA are.”

She added: “Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) has rightly owned this fiasco, but without realising that his ‘nothing to see’ attitude that council tax payers should expect to be routinely stuck with bills on this scale shows how complacent he is with their money.”

She accused the ruling group of being distracted: “The RA have clearly taken their eye off the ball as they focus on a self-serving attempt to create new parish councils and new roles for themselves.”

Cllr **James Lawrence**, leader of the Liberal Democrat group (College), said the situation shows “the importance of maintaining key properties so they are in good working condition and ensuring the status of our properties is communicated to both councillors and residents in good time.”

### **Council response**

Council leaders defended the decision, saying negotiations are normal during handovers. Councillors Neil Dallen and **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said: “Rainbow Leisure Centre transferred to a new operator, Places Leisure, on 1 October 2025. Since then, we’ve been pleased to see a number of improvements at the centre.

“This marks the beginning of an exciting new chapter for the leisure centre... including significant investment to upgrade the gym, studios, swimming changing rooms and more, which are already underway.”

They added: “With any handover, it is normal practice for there to be negotiations around works to be carried out which form part of the contract finalisation.”

However, they refused to release further information, saying: “Details relating to terms and financial arrangements are commercially sensitive and therefore not in the public domain.”

### **Places Leisure**

A spokesperson said: “Places Leisure took over the operation and management of Rainbow Leisure Centre in partnership with Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on 1st October 2025. We are excited to work closely with the Council to implement changes and significant investment at the centre to make a positive impact for the local community.”

Emily Dalton LDRS - the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service

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### **Additional reporting from Epsom and Ewell Times:**

In a further twist GLL has supplied Epsom and Ewell Times a response to the issues: *“GLL was proud to partner with Epsom and Ewell Council on the design and opening of Rainbow Leisure Centre over 20 years ago. This innovative and award-winning centre has been extremely successful over the 20 years of GLL’s tenure, engaging millions of local residents in activity, improving their health and wellbeing.*

*“GLL is unaware of any legal claim that the Council is looking to bring in relation to the standard of the building on handover, especially as there are set protocols to deal with building handovers prior to any instigation of legal action. As background, the Council undertook, via specialist contractors, a full survey of the building prior to GLL exiting. As is normal in all leisure transfers, items that were identified for [repair or rectification] in that survey for GLL were all completed prior to handover and signed off by the specialist contractors on behalf of the Council. GLL handed the building over to the standard required by the Council and under the contract.”*

It is normal practice for Councils as landlords to have rights of periodic entry and inspection of premises it engages contractors to manage. Either the Council was negligent in failing to insert such rights in the contract with GLL or the Council has been negligent over an extended period of years in failing to carry out inspections or to carry out inspections properly.

The Council has made fully public announcements that Places commenced its contract on 1st October 2025. See Epsom and Ewell Times report: [Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators](#). The Information Commissioner has made plain that Council’s cannot evade accountability by claims of ongoing contractual negotiations. The tender process having ended for both GLL and Places means there is little if any financially sensitive information to protect justifying a confidential label on information that exposes probable Council incompetence.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked Epsom and Ewell Borough Council a series of questions about these issues and received the same “nothing to see here” response from Cllr Dallen as obtained by the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) reporter Emily Dalton, as above. The Epsom and Ewell Times has thus submitted to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council formal Freedom of Information Act demands for relevant information.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Related reports:

[Epsom’s Rainbow Leisure Centre Places new operators](#)

[Gold star at the end of the Rainbow](#)

[Pot of gold for Rainbow?](#)

# Is Epsom and Ewell getting “proportional representation” under Council shake-up?

16 January 2026



Dear Editor,

I was heartened to read Cllr Eber Kington’s letter of 9th January. For once, a Resident Association councillor has broken ranks with the ruling Residents’ Association line by publicly disavowing the party’s own sponsored option of creating two community councils to replace Epsom and Ewell Borough Council following Local Government Reorganisation. That departure is to be applauded.

However, I must respectfully challenge the assertion that the current options before us truly trust residents — “the people most qualified to decide what is best for the borough,” as Cllr Kington rightly characterises them — with a meaningful say. In reality, EEBC hasn’t offered residents any choice beyond:

- \* Two community councils (effectively parish/town councils with a precept), or
- \* No community councils at all.

If Cllr Kington has alternative proposals for how local democratic accountability and community decision-making can supplement ten councillors representing East Surrey on the new unitary authority, he has left it far too late for such alternatives to be prepared, costed, and properly considered before EEBC’s much-awaited March 2026 meeting.

It is worth putting the democratic and financial context in sharper focus. At present, EEBC has 36 councillors servicing a modest borough budget of around £10.27 million for 2025/26. In contrast, Surrey County Council’s budget of £1.2641 billion including responsibilities, covering education, highways, social care and more, account for roughly 76 % of the total council tax bill paid by residents, with EEBC receiving only about 10 %.

Under the new arrangements for two unitary authorities— as confirmed by government decision — the Epsom and Ewell area will be represented by 10 councillors on the East Surrey Council, dealing with the vast majority of public services currently under County control. Crude though it is, this means that for the major service budgets now handled at county level, Epsom and Ewell will have significantly greater relative influence than before. Currently, just five county councillors represent the borough’s interests on a much larger Surrey budget; in future, ten unitary councillors will cover roughly half of the former Surrey population’s budget responsibilities.

Yes, it is true that we lose some of the micro-representation previously afforded by a larger cohort of borough councillors on planning and routine community matters — though even now many planning decisions are subject to Government inspectors overruling local decisions on appeal. But on the biggest pots of public spending — education, adult social care, highways, children’s services — residents will likely be better represented proportionately than under the old two-tier county/district system.

So when debating the merits of Neighbourhood Area Committees versus community councils, let us be clear about the alternatives on the table. Both NACs and community councils have limitations and cost implications, and both are artificially constrained by the narrow set of options EEBC has chosen to present. The real democratic choice for residents should be wider than simply more or fewer tiers of parish councils.

If Cllr Kington truly believes, as he claims, that residents should decide how council tax is spent and how their communities are governed, then let us see a credible alternative framework— with transparent proposals, budget implications, and democratic accountability — ahead of March. Otherwise, the debate will continue to swirl around consultancy-driven options that neither trust nor empower the people they purport to serve.

Yours faithfully,

Trevor Burt

Related letters and reports:

[Long serving Epsom Councillor blasts LGR and NACs](#)

[Parish power, democratic ideals — and the Residents’ Association dilemma](#)

[Have your say on the future of local representation in Epsom and Ewell](#)

[Epsom and Ewell’s Local Democracy Debate: What’s at Stake as Consultation Enters Phase Two](#)

[Letters from local Councillors on Epsom and Ewell parishes](#)