# All change! Epsom and Ewell Borough Council approaching its final stop?

Surrey is changing "whether we like it" or not and county council leader **Tim Oliver** says it's better to be at the forefront of that change.

The Government wants to introduce new mayoral authorities across the country in a bid to streamline councils and shift power away from Westminster.

For Surrey, that means scrapping the 11 boroughs and districts as well as the county council, and replacing them with either a single, or what seems more likely, two authorities with a Strategic Mayor.

The question is how will it be done? The answer; it will either be imposed on Surrey, or the councils can create their own plans to merge under devolved powers.

County Council leader, Councillor Tim Oliver, favours playing a central role, arguing that change is inevitable, and it's best to be part of the conversation in order to shape the future, rather than sit on the sidelines waiting to be told what to do.

The Government wrote to the county council in December outlining how it planned to "transfer power out of Westminster through devolution and to fix the foundations of local government." It wants a simpler structure that is "clearer for residents" and said it would even pass new laws to postpone the May 2025 elections "to help manage" the once in a lifetime opportunity to restructure.

Writing to Surrey, Jim McMahon, minister of state for local government and English devolution, said: "We are under no illusion about the scale of issues facing local government. It is in all our interests to make sure we are avoiding unnecessary spend at a time when budgets are already tight."

He added: "I have heard from some areas that the timing of elections affects their planning for devolution, particularly alongside reorganisation. To help manage these demands, alongside our objectives on devolution, and subject to meeting the timetable outlined in this letter, I am minded-to lay secondary legislation to postpone local council elections from May 2025 to May 2026. However, I will only do this where this will help the area to deliver both reorganisation and devolution to the most ambitious timeframe – either through the Devolution Priority Programme or where reorganisation is necessary to unlock devolution or open up new devolution options."

Cllr Tim Oliver is already minded to take up the offer of pushing back the elections for a year to get devolution done. Holding the elections this year would cost about £1million, he says, and would take time away from officers already working to a tight fivementh deadline to get devolution over the line.

"The Labour Government has set up their agenda in the white paper and that is to create Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) across England. They have a strong majority and we can assume they will pass the legislation," Cllr Oliver said. "If you don't reach an agreement locally, then they will legislate. It's going to happen. It's better that we try to control or have some influence over what happens rather than have it imposed on us down the line."

"The primary focus should be 'what is in the best interests of the residents of Surrey?' Whether we like the model or not it is going to happen in Surrey and the reason for getting in early as we are, is that we are slightly unique here in that there are councils in Surrey that have significant debt levels."

This, he says, gives the Government a huge stick, to push councils to get on board. Councils such as Woking are bankrupt and need Government intervention. Merging the councils would pile its £2billion debt on to others.

Similarly, though not bankrupt, Spelthorne Borough Council has debts of more than a billion and Runnymede has debts of more than £600m. Surrey County Council, albeit with significantly larger spending power as a top tier authority, is also heavily indebted.

Cllr Oliver said: "The longer we leave it, the less likely we will get any support from the Government. That's what's driving me."

Historically, Surrey councils have not benefited as greatly as other local authorities from Government funding reviews and have to raise more money locally. Areas that can raise taxes will continue to be required to. Removing tiers of local government will be an efficiency driver and help stave off service cuts, or lead to more investment.

He said: "We have to divide up the county to create a minimum of two strategic authorities, and then we get a mayor. If we don't get on with that reorganisation, we will be years away from the benefits of a mayor, compounded with almost certainly reduced funding to Surrey councils."

Papers published ahead of the January 10 deadline to respond suggest the council leader will take up the Government's offer to hold off on this year's elections "to give time to consult."

Cllr Oliver said: "If we go ahead with elections in May, and I'm fine with that, I wasn't going to run again. But, ignoring who wins, you end up with an election in May that will cost over a million pounds, which they do, and then you will have a bunch of new councillors who have to find their feet, only to be out in two years when the council disappears. The next five months should be about the negotiation with the Government about what the future looks like."

"Every political party, and all the existing councillors who know the county better, will have the opportunity to input. I can't see what the Liberals, if they got a majority, would do differently? This way, we will get a bit of goodwill from the Labour Government by engaging with them now."

"Hampshire, Essex, and Hertfordshire are already getting on with their own plans for devolution, and if Surrey County Council just puts its head in the sand and gets on with the elections we will miss the opportunity to have the conversation with the Government about the debt levels."

"We've got five months to consider it, the key thing is to do an intensive piece of work now. We're not at the point where we've had the conversation about how it's split, but we've got five months to do this either the Government's way or our way. Yes, the timetable is much shorter than anybody would want particularly putting a letter in by January 10 but we have to respect the fact that this Government has an agenda and it can deliver because it has the mandate."

Later this month the Government will set out which areas will be included in its Devolution Priority Programme with a view to inaugural mayoral elections in May 2026. They are looking at creating new unitary councils with populations of 500,000 or more. Surrey has a population of about 1.2 million. Exceptions will be made to ensure new structures make sense for an area.

An extraordinary meeting of Surrey County Council is set to go ahead on Wednesday January 8 where the council will be "asked to note" that the leader intends to express interest in pursuing devolution and local government reorganisation.

#### Related reports:

Surrey's Conservative leader wants to postpone May's poll reckoning

Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

Tim Oliver Surrey County Council leader - Surrey Live

# **Epsom Green Belt Debate Intensifies**

The ongoing debate surrounding Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's Proposed Submission Local Plan has escalated as the Epsom and Ewell Times publishes two sharply contrasting letters – one from the Epsom Green Belt Group (EGBG) and the other a formal response from the Council itself. At the heart of the dispute lies the proposed development of Green Belt land, the availability of affordable housing, and the transparency of the consultation process.

## Epsom Green Belt Group: A Call for Change

The Epsom Green Belt Group's letter criticises the Council for failing to heed public sentiment and expert advice during the Regulation 18 consultation earlier this year. Despite overwhelming opposition to the proposed release of over 175 hectares (around 12%) of the borough's Green Belt, the Council has pressed ahead with plans that include development on high-performing sites such as Horton Farm and Hook Road Arena.

The EGBG highlights a key inconsistency: while the Council advised neighbouring Sutton Borough in September 2024 that they were under no obligation to review Green Belt boundaries, they have not followed this guidance themselves. Furthermore, the EGBG argues that prioritising brownfield and 'grey belt' land, as outlined in the updated National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) of December 2024, has been neglected.

The group also casts doubt on the Council's promises of 'affordable housing,' pointing out that discounts on market prices still place homes out of reach for many. Flats on brownfield sites, they argue, offer a more viable path to genuinely affordable housing.

A looming concern raised by the EGBG is the likelihood of the Local Plan being deemed unsound by the Planning Inspectorate. They warn that if the plan proceeds in its current form, it could pave the way for further Green Belt loss.

Read the full Epsom Green Belt Group letter here.

## Council's Response: Balancing Competing Priorities

In their formal response, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council defends the Proposed Submission Local Plan, arguing that it strikes a necessary balance between meeting housing needs and protecting the borough's environment.

The Council acknowledges the high demand for affordable housing, with over 1,350 households on the housing register. They stress that their policies reflect both national guidelines and financial viability assessments.

Regarding the consultation process, the Council points out that Regulation 19 is a statutory stage primarily focused on assessing the plan's legal compliance and soundness. They also address concerns over the timing of the consultation—spanning the Christmas and New Year period—explaining that it was essential to meet the submission deadline of 12 March 2025 under the current NPPF.

On the contentious Green Belt issue, the Council offers specific figures: 52.6 hectares of greenfield Green Belt land (3.36% of the total) and 85 hectares of previously developed Green Belt land (5.44%) are earmarked for development. They maintain that these changes are necessary to meet housing targets while acknowledging the flexibility offered by the NPPF.

The Council concludes by noting that while changes can still be proposed following the consultation, the Planning Inspectorate ultimately determines their validity.

Read the full Epsom & Ewell Borough Council letter here.

## **Diverging Priorities, Uncertain Outcomes**

Both letters reveal deep divisions not only in policy direction but also in trust between the Council and sections of the local community. While the Council presents its plan as a pragmatic response to national housing targets and local affordability issues, the EGBG sees it as a short-sighted and flawed approach.

Key questions remain unanswered:

- Why hasn't brownfield land been prioritised more explicitly?
- Will the Local Plan survive scrutiny by the Planning Inspectorate?
- Are the proposed 'affordable homes' truly affordable for local residents?

The coming weeks will be crucial as the consultation progresses and residents have their final opportunity to submit their views. One thing is clear: the future of Epsom's Green Belt hangs in the balance, and both sides are prepared to stand their ground.

Residents can participate in the consultation process until 5 February 2025 via the Council's consultation portal.

#### Related reports:

Can the green light to Epsom's Green Belt housing turn red?

Council minority vote Local Plan to next stage with Green Belt in

Conflict on Epsom's Green Belt plans of another kind?

Epsom and Ewell Green Belt battle lines drawing near

and many more. Search "local plan" in search bar.

## Walton Golf Club's dismissal of one-in-hole unfair

A greenkeeper who had worked at a Surrey golf course for almost 40 years has won a case for "unreasonable" dismissal after he was sacked when his digger fell into a hole. An employment tribunal found the disciplinary action taken against the 58-year-old had "snowballed" before alternative options were considered.

Michael Hayne's digger had to be hauled from a ditch at Walton Heath Golf Club, in Tadworth, after the machine had tumbled

into a hole, cab-side down while the driver was not warring a seatbelt. The deputy course manager initially dismissed the accident as minor because no harm was done, and so did not formally report it in an accident log book.

But his bosses at the golf club viewed it as a significant incident and Mr Haynes was later dismissed for gross misconduct. The managers argued it was a "serious breach" of health and safety rules that the accident was not reported, and could cause more incidents.

Mr Haynes argued that he was sure he told Mr Mann about the accident at the time and considered he did not need to write up the event in the health and safety book.

The report, published December 23, 2024, detailed that the golf course had two diggers weighing 7.5 tons and 2.5 tons. Mr Haynes had been externally trained on how to use the diggers since around 2005, and his certification was updated every five years- although his current renewal had been overdue.

During a staff training session in November 2021, the instructor reportedly told course manager at the time, Michael Mann, that Mr Haynes was "very lucky with his accident that he hadn't been seriously hurt or worse". But Mr Mann said he did not know about the digger incident.

After some initial investigation, the Surrey club launched a disciplinary hearing against Mr Haynes, accusing him of "gross misconduct" for failing to comply with health and safety standards.

In a letter before the disciplinary hearing in November 2021, Mr Haynes wrote: "I have been a faithful employee of this Club for nearly 40 years. I love this Club and have spent my life in its service. I have a clean disciplinary record.

"If I were to be dismissed, not only would I lose my livelihood but also my wife and I would lose our home. I can assure this meeting that I have learned a lesson and will never fail to report any incident again. I would welcome any additional training that is felt necessary."

Mr Haynes was dismissed without notice, and escorted off the site. The Chief Executive, Mr Woodward, had decided his explanation was "unacceptable" and the "trust and confidence placed" in him had been "completely undermined". He added further dangerous incidents could have been avoided if Mr Haynes had reported the initial accident.

In desperation, Mr Haynes appealed the dismissal twice and provided photographic and video evidence of incidents not reported by other members of staff. However, this appeal was rejected both times.

However, the employment tribunal has now found Mr Haynes' dismissal was "procedurally unfair". It said there was no real evidence that any of the decision-makers weighed up the possibility of an alternative sanction for the Claimant.

The report stated there were "flaws" with the golf club's investigation process such as "exaggerating and maximising the seriousness of the incident". For instance, inconsistencies in describing the final position of the digger as "tipping over" and "almost horizontal".

The tribunal still found Mr Haynes "culpable" for failing to report the digger incident in the accident book as he was involved. Employment Judge Leith said: "His failure to [report it] was rendered considerably starker because of his [senior] role [...] he should have known better."

Concluding the case, the tribunal ruled that Mr Haynes' compensation will be reduced by 50 per cent because of his failure to log the accident. The report did not disclose the amount.

Walton Heath Golf Club has been contacted for comment.

# New Year less cheerful for Epsom and Ewell football

Jersey Bulls 5-1 Epsom and Ewell FC. Combined Counties League - Premier Division South. Saturday 4th January 2025.

A trip to the Channel Islands for a meeting with the Jersey Bulls is never an easy fixture, and so it proved once again as we lost our third straight match there by a score of 5-1, although at least we broke our scoring duck this time!

This week our club referred to "A big away day to Jersey" as if it was an exciting fixture to look forward to, which, in fairness, it should be, but nobody seemed very keen to make the journey, as we were very poorly represented, apart from a few Committee and, yes, two regular supporters!

We also had new signing Nathan Best, who joined from Colliers Wood United where their very informative website advised he had scored thirteen goals in twenty-five appearances for the midtable Step Six team. Kardel really received a baptism of fire, while Best looked like a younger Jaevon Dyer by way of appearance and if he can be as good then he will prove to be a fine addition. Unfortunately his touch let him down a couple of times, never a good look when wearing sky blue boots!

We kicked off towards the St Helier end of the ground, or, if you've sat in the stand there before, we played from right to left, and started breezily enough, as was maybe appropriate when considering the bitter wind chill and freezing rain that was unpleasant enough for us, let alone the home crowd who were even less used to this sort of weather. We earned an early pair of Adam Green corners and it was also Green who provided the first shot of the day following a good run from Kionte Gillfillian-Waul, although it was wide of the mark.

Kardel was called into action with a low save from an angled shot by Rai Dos Santos before the ball in from the subsequent corner was sent over the bar from close range. It was a lucky escape but the hosts went ahead in the 23rd minute when a corner from Dos Santos was met a couple of yards ahead of our near post with a flick on by Toby Ritzema which eluded everyone and nestled in the far corner of the net.

The hosts were monopolising possession by this stage and we were struggling to get out of our half, although Will Kendall was challenging for everything, while Jason Bloor looked dangerous with the ball at his feet, but he was often a long way out from goal and we were just unable to get the numbers forward to help. Bloor picked up a yellow card for a clumsy challenge on Luke Watson and not long after that we had a small flash point that resulted in bookings for Green and Jersey's Luke Campbell.

However, from the Jersey free kick, the ball to the far post was knocked in first time where Dos Santos was waiting to head the ball in off Kardel from close range in the 39th minute. Kardel kept the score at 2-0 with a good low save but we were definitely second best at the break, with the two goal lead being a fair one.

We seemed to have a little more ambition in the second half and Green saw his shot on target easily gathered by Euan van der Vliet, although this shot on target was our first one in Jersey after we had even failed to do that on our two previous visits. We continued to press and a Niall Stillwell free kick to the back post was headed across goal by Kendall at which point there was a collision which resulted in four players hitting the deck, but no penalty was awarded and probably rightly so.

A deep cross was volleyed wide by the hosts but then things got interesting as we pulled a goal back. Green sent a clever pass down the right for Best to cut in and his pass resulted in a low shot from Anderson which was not held and a corner was conceded. From the 63rd minute Green corner, it was Stillwell who was able to time his run perfectly to head the ball in from close range. The hosts felt there was a foul on their keeper and they might have had a case, but Stillwell's first goal for our club, and of course, our first on either of the Channel Islands, threatened to make things interesting.

For just three minutes, as it turned out, as a ball across goal was met with a superb strike from Ritzema that gave Kardel no chance from around the edge of the penalty area. His first goal could have been questioned as to whether he meant it, but there was no doubt about this one!

We tried to fight back but with no real success. Watson picked up a yellow card for a foul after he stumbled before making a challenge on Best. Some of the Jersey players were saying it wasn't even a foul, but it was reckless and whilst accidental, left our new guy on the deck for a while, although he would recover to complete the ninety minutes.

Jack Torbett came on for the tiring Bloor while it was also good to see Stefan Aiwone back on the field as he replaced Tobi Falodi, but in between those replacements we conceded twice; in the 77th minute when a right wing cross was headed in unmarked by Karl Hinds and three minutes later when a simple straight pass caught us out and Dos Santos cleverly guided the ball underneath the advancing Kardel to make it 5-1. If it hadn't been all over at 3-1, it was now!

Aiwone made a superb block to keep the hosts out and after four extra minutes the final whistle blew to signify our fifth loss in a row to the Bulls. It wasn't pretty, but the guys who were present tried their best and if there is fault to be apportioned from this match, it should be aimed at the absentees.

Hopefully we'll have many more players available for our two upcoming big Cup matches, starting on Tuesday, weather permitting, when we are due to welcome Berks County in a League Cup tie.

In summary, and as the only Salts supporter to have attended all four of our matches in the Channel Islands, it's fair to say that a trip over can be both a blessing and a curse. The islands are lovely and the welcome from the locals is great, but it is a bit of a slog with the early start and the cost involved, not to mention the risk of the whole thing being postponed at short notice due to weather conditions, as was the case when we were first due to visit Guernsey back in 2012/13, eventually getting over at the third attempt. Based on this match, it may well be that we've had our last trip to Jersey for a while, as we've met all the top teams now, many of them twice, and I make the still unbeaten islanders clear favourites right now to finally reach the Isthmian League this season after a few near misses.

Epsom & Ewell: Kevin Kardel, Tobi Falodi, Kionte Gillfillian-Waul, Adam Green (c), Nicolas Bostan, Niall Stillwell, Sean Anderson, Craig Dundas, Will Kendall, Jason Bloor, Nathan Best

Subs: Jack Torbett for Bloor (77), Stefan Aiwone for Falodi (80)

# **New Year Cheer For Sutton and Epsom Rugby**

Sutton & Epsom RFC 21 Battersea Ironsides 20. Saturday 4th January.

The September fixtures had concluded with a rousing encounter at Garratt Green when these two fine sides could not be separated and fought to a standstill for an engrossing 19-19 draw. It was the first indication in this campaign that Sutton had transformed their rather porous defence of recent times into a far more formidable outfit. The Ironsides still remain the benchmark for this league and another fiercely competitive contest was expected. Rugby Lane had witnessed five home victories on the bounce but every one of them by a miserly margin. This match maintained that sequence as Sutton edged out Battersea by a solitary point to win 21-20.

With winter arriving in the week there were concerns the pitch might be under threat from the elements. Rugby Lane was spared and a small but knowledgeable crowd gathered in gelid amiability. Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings as Sutton attacked the clubhouse end. The hosts were in top gear at once with multiple phases and commendable continuity they advanced steadily into the visiting 22 but concluded by conceding a penalty. The defences held sway as they thwarted the best endeavours of both teams. However, S&E put themselves under unnecessary pressure with errant kicking from hand that has been an unwelcome feature in recent weeks. The first instance came on ten minutes when a simple touch kick failed to cross the whitewash. It was returned with interest, led to a penalty and suddenly the Black & Whites were defending a lineout near their line. The pack were held short of glory before the ball was transferred to Charles Jacobs on the wing who could empathise with Buridan's ass as he pondered whether to go outside or cut back and the brief hesitation enabled Adam Bibby to hold him up over the line.

Shortly afterwards from the first scrum Sutton failed to find touch and Charles Stuart executed a perfect 50/22 to put the hosts under the cosh once more. The 2024-5 Sutton vintage is far more robust than recent predecessors and the defence forced a handling error. From the scrum Rob Hegarty made his first penetrative carry from Number 8 on an afternoon that was to garner impressive yardage for a man celebrating his 50th cap. At the third time of asking S&E cleared with the boot. Back in the opposition half the fluent movement looked to have broken down disastrously. Charles Stuart intercepted and was sauntering off for a certain score when the referee, Matt Blackett, brought play back for a penalty for the home team. Bunting stepped up to the oche and slotted over a 45-yard penalty for the 3-0 lead.

Both teams were showing admirable attacking intent that was neutered by well-organised defences with ferocious tackling. The Ironsides were also hindered by ambisinistrous handling with the mitigation being the cold weather. On the half hour another Sutton attack floundered in the Battersea 22 but Mr Blackett brought play back for an infringement near halfway. Once again Freddy Bunting impressively bisected the uprights for 6-0. From the restart the Greens soon won a penalty of their own and kicked to the 22. The lineout drive shifted the play laterally before the attack drove towards the corner. The ball was recycled and spun to the opposite side and a mismatch in the centres was expertly exploited and Charles Jacobs ran in untouched for the try. Charles Stuart put Battersea 7-6 ahead with a perfectly struck conversion.

The hosts were soon offered the chance to restore their lead but on this occasion the penalty was just beyond the range of the Bunting boot. This was the start of a period of intense pressure from Sutton as they sought the lead before the break. A penalty was kicked into the corner and from the attacking lineout the ball was sent towards the wing only to be intercepted. Again Sir brought play back for a penalty. From the tapped penalty Rob Hegarty went close before hooker Sam Lennie forced his way over for his first Sutton try. Freddy Bunting converted and the whistle blew for the interval with S&E leading 13-7.

It was the type of afternoon where the pinquid offerings of a burger van are enjoyed more for the warmth given to the hands than their culinary delights. One local resident was seen to take pity on two elderly spectators on a bench. Having popped home he returned with cups of tea and added brandy much to the appreciation of the lucky supporters. The game was living up to expectations and the score reflected an even contest that was in the balance. No one doubted that the second half would be more of the same with no quarter being given by two excellent defences.

From the restart Battersea Ironsides set out to dominate the rest of the proceedings playing at a higher tempo and with great intensity they subjected Sutton to intense pressure. The hosts were up for the challenge and weathered the early storm. Aided by a knock on by Cameron Baker, resplendent in white tights, the hosts gained a foothold in Battersea territory. Soon the familiar

and reassuring sight of Freddy Bunting lining up a penalty was followed by cheers as the captain extended the lead to 16-7. Minutes later Charles Stewart replied in kind to reduce the deficit to a single score as Battersea Ironsides trailed 10-16.

The game entered the final quarter with the visitors' best efforts being undone by handling errors in the face of the relentless pressure from the home defence. Sutton's counters were promising rather than significant as the balance of play was in Battersea's favour with their glabrous Number 9 Ed Carr urging his team ever onwards. Finally, the pressure paid dividends as the Ironsides forwards were denied near the line the ball was spun wide. It was the turn of the men in green to benefit from Mr Blackett bringing the play back for a penalty. Charles Stuart accepted the easy 3-point option as the scoreboard eventually registered Sutton 16 Battersea 13 with ten minutes of regular time left on the clock.

For regulars at Rugby Lane this season this was familiar territory. Following the opening day thrashing of Old Colfeians every home game since has gone down to the wire.

#### Sutton & Epsom:

O'Brien, Huie, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Gibson, Mount & Rea.

#### **Battersea Ironsides:**

Baker, Diamond, Magee, Banton, Jacobs, Stuart, Carr, Martin, Lewis, Chetwynd, Trickett, Wharton, Macpherson, Chitan & Dollard.

Replacements: Borup, Plater & Hirons.

Image courtesy Robin Kennedy

# Prime Minister and Health Secretary Visit Epsom Hospital to Unveil NHS Recovery Blueprint

**Epsom Hospital** played host to Prime Minister **Sir Keir Starmer** and Health Secretary **Wes Streeting** today as they unveiled a significant national plan aimed at tackling the extensive backlog of NHS tests, checks, and treatments. The visit highlighted the government's strategy to expand healthcare capacity, streamline services, and reduce waiting times for millions of patients across the UK.

The blueprint includes a major partnership between the NHS and the private healthcare sector, intended to make additional hospital facilities, equipment, and staffing resources available. Prime Minister Starmer emphasized that healthcare reform must be "totally unburdened by dogma" and that prioritising patient outcomes over ideological constraints was essential.

The government announced plans for an extra 450,000 appointments for diagnostic tests and health checks, with local diagnostic centres operating 12 hours a day, seven days a week. GPs will have increased power to make direct referrals to these centres, reducing delays caused by administrative hurdles. Furthermore, 14 new surgical hubs will be established to handle less complex procedures, easing the strain on general hospital facilities.

Health Secretary **Wes Streeting** highlighted the urgency of these measures, pointing out that the current NHS backlog stands at 7.6 million patients awaiting elective treatments. He stressed that these reforms aim to address not only the backlog but also improve efficiency and convenience for patients.

**Amanda Pritchard**, Chief Executive of NHS England, expressed confidence in the proposed measures, stating that they would enable the NHS to deliver millions more tests, checks, and treatments annually, while also empowering patients and local healthcare providers.

While the national focus was clear, local concerns were also raised. Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom & Ewell, **Helen Maguire**, issued a statement welcoming the measures but stressing the ongoing need for infrastructure improvements at Epsom and St Helier Hospitals. She reiterated her campaign for the long-awaited Specialist Emergency Care Hospital in Sutton to be prioritised.

Cllr **Kate Chinn**, (Court Ward) Labour group leader on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council said: "It was great to see Keir in Epsom today, highlighting the great work done at SWLEOC and setting out Labour's plans to cut NHS waiting lists. People in Epsom and Ewell know how the NHS is struggling after 14 years of Tory neglect and false promises of a badly-needed new

hospital by 2030. Labour, which created the NHS, is determined to rebuild it, but it will not be an easy job."

As the government pushes forward with its ambitious NHS recovery plan, the people of Epsom will be watching closely to see how these national promises translate into real-world improvements at their local hospital.

Related reports:

Planning buses not missing them says Epsom's MP

Epsom and St Helier Hospitals in Desperate Need of Repairs

Public meeting about Epsom Hospital future

# Surrey's Conservative leader wants to postpone May's poll reckoning

The leader of Surrey County Council is set to write to the Government calling for the 2025 elections to be postponed in order to allow authorities to focus on merging under devolution plans. In December last year the Government announced its vision to merge councils in Surrey and get rid of its 11 boroughs and districts. There would also be a directly elected mayor.

Councillor Tim Oliver plans to formally ask the government to postpone county elections until May 2026 to give the councils time to "put together proposals for local government reform necessary to unlock further devolution for Surrey."

Not everyone has welcomed the delay with Surrey Heath Borough Council set to discuss a motion rejecting the county council leader's proposals and allow the May 2025 poll to go ahead "in the interest of democracy and hearing the resident's voice."

Devolution plans are part of sweeping changes to how services are run as Downing Street looks to reshape local government.

Surrey currently operates under a two tier system with the county council overseeing things such as education, transport and fire with the boroughs and districts focused local planning matters, refuse collection and housing.

Devolution would do away with this system and instead create single unitary authorities, arguing it is more cost-effective.

In a draft letter set to be approved at an extraordinary meeting next week, Cllr Oliver writes that he shares the ambitions for boosting the country's economic prospects and reforms to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of public services.

He said it was clear that reforming local government would unlock the full benefits of further devolution for the county.

The letter reads: "The current two-tier structure of local government in Surrey, comprising 12 sovereign local authorities, is fragmented and in a number of areas inefficient which inevitably diverts resources away from delivering the services that residents rightly expect.

"I believe reorganisation would provide more streamlined and cost-effective services for Surrey, enabling us to achieve further efficiencies and deliver better outcomes for our residents and communities.

"Local government reorganisation is a crucial stepping stone to further devolution for Surrey, to enable our communities to take more control of their own destinies."

Cllr Oliver said the county already delivered more than £50 billion in gross value added every year, but further and deeper devolution could lead to even better returns.

It adds: "I am therefore writing to ask you to exercise your ministerial powers to lay the necessary legislation to postpone the county council elections in Surrey, which are due to take place in May 2025.

This will give us the time to work with the leaders of Surrey's district and borough councils to put together proposals for local government reform that are necessary to unlock further devolution for Surrey."

New unitary elections could then take place in 2026, and a mayoral election in 2027.

He argues that the delay would also allow time to determine how to deal with the "significant financial risk of the level of debt currently held across the Surrey local government footprint."

Woking Borough Council is currently bankrupt with deficit of more than £1billion and debts of about £2billion, while Surrey

County Council and Spelthorne Borough Council both have debts of more than £1billion.

Any proposals, Cllr Oliver adds, will need to adequately consider how to ensure the sustainable operation of any authority in the absence of exceptional financial support from the Government or a level of write-off.

#### **Timetable for Devolution**

10 January 2025	Letter submitted to Minister of State requesting election postponement
Before March 2025	Minister's response to letter received
March 2025	Interim Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) proposal submitted to government
May 2025	Full LGR proposal submitted to government
May - June 2025	Government evaluates proposal(s) received for LGR and makes a decision on whether to proceed on single proposal, or to consult further on one or more proposals
July 2025	Government consultation with affected bodies on LGR proposal(s)
Autumn 2025	Government decision on LGR anticipated, which begins statutory process to establish new council(s)
January 2026	Parliamentary process begins to lay Statutory Instruments
May 2026	Elections to shadow unitary authority/ies
Spring 2027	New unitary/ies 'go live'
Spring 2027 or 2028	Mayoral elections and mayoral strategic authority 'go live', with the preparations for the establishment of the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) taking place throughout 2026/27, or Surrey joins MSA with neighbours

#### Related reports:

Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

Image: Tim Oliver - Leader of Surrey County Council, Woodhatch Place, Cockshot Hill, Reigate. GL

# Special case for VAT exemption for special education needs?

Private schools are "not a lifestyle choice but a necessity" for children with special educational needs (SEN), argues the headteacher of an independent school in Reigate.

Tuition fees are expected to soar from Wednesday January 1, 2025 as the government is scrapping the tax exemption on private schools across the country. The tax is expected to bring £1.7 billion a year, according to the Treasury.

But Mrs Michelle Catterson, head of Moon Hall School, a Specialist Dyslexia school, said: "If you can afford to pay, you should. But there should be exemptions for SEN kids."

Around 200 children between the ages of seven and 16 attend Moon Hall School- all of whom have been diagnosed primarily with dyslexia, a learning condition that can cause difficulty with reading, writing and spelling. Moon Hall provides a student-to-staff ratio of about 12:1 so pupils get extra support and adapt to meet their learning needs.

Mrs Catterson explained her students with SEN, 70 per cent of whom have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), often cannot have their needs met locally in state schools, so there is "no viable alternative" for education. The Local Authority, like Surrey County Council, will pay for specialist provision in these instances.

"We offer local authorities good value for money," Mrs Catterson claimed, with most of the school's GCSE results boasting higher than average.

The head teacher said she believed "100 per cent of the kids [at the school] have SEN" but because of long and complicated process of applying for an EHCP, many parents often "give up" on the process. Instead, around 30 per cent of students pay for the specialist education.

Fees used to start at £7,505 per term for a child in year 7, according to the school's prospectus. But now, parents could be set back £10,424. The Department for Education has said it does not expect school fees to increase by 20 per cent as schools do not pass VAT onto parents. But as tuition fees is Moon Hall's only source of income, Mrs Catterson argued that they have no choice. "Small, specialist settings like [Moon Hall] simply cannot absorb the additional costs imposed by VAT," she said.

Most Children with EHCPs have their needs met within the state sectors, according to government officials. If an EHCP assessment concludes a child can only be supported in a private school, the local authority funds that child's place and can reclaim the VAT they pay.

Despite the expensive tuition fees, the headteacher claimed Moon Hall is "not an affluent school" and the government will find "no swimming pools" on the grounds. As a charity, any extra income is put back into the school by spending on staff to help the students, according to Mrs Catterson.

## Impact on the parents

"It's really short-sighted," said Mrs Catterson. The head claimed adding VAT to SEN private school fees will mean more parents will apply for an EHCP, causing further backlog and creating extra costs to the government, which will need to provide for those needs.

Alternatively, some parents take on two jobs to fund their children through private school. Mrs Catterson stressed it would be an "awful situation" if a "settled, happy child, making good progress" was moved to the state sector where their needs cannot be supported.

Chris Coghlan MP for Dorking and Horley, said: "Moon Hall provides an outstanding education for children with special educational needs in Surrey. Adding VAT to school fees will place an unbearable strain on families who already make significant sacrifices to afford them. The Government must exempt specialist schools like Moon Hall from VAT to ensure children with special needs can continue to access the support and education they deserve."

## "Punish independent schools"

Built in 1863, Moon Hall is a grade II-listed building which was purchased by the founders of the dyslexic school and repurposed as an educational building some forty years ago. Although a grand historical building, repairs and maintenance costs to the site are almost constant- Mrs Catterson said the roof needs replacing which is expected to cost £1.6m, even before pricey specialist chimney repairs.

Not only is the school facing the VAT axe, Moon Hall will have to wrestle with changes in national insurance and minimum wage increases like many other charities. The head told SurreyLive she "still doesn't know what the true figure will do" to the school and where it can find the extra money. Mrs Catterson said: "It feels like the Labour government is trying to punish independent schools."

## Rebuilding "confidence and trust"

A government spokesperson said: "Ending tax breaks on private schools will help raise additional funds to break down barriers to opportunity and support the 94 per cent of pupils who attend state schools to achieve and thrive including those with SEND.

"Pupils with the most acute needs will not be impacted by this policy. Work has already begun to rebuild families' confidence in and reform the broken SEND system we inherited. The Budget invested £1b extra in day-to-day provision and earlier this month £740m was directed to support local authorities in creating more specialist places in mainstream schools."

They added: "We are committed to improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, and ensuring special schools cater to those with the most complex needs, restoring parents' trust that their child will get the support they need."

Related reports:

Surrey Tory MPs against school fees VAT

Taxing question for Surrey's private schools

Image: Outside Moon Hall School, Reigate. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)

# Ahmadiyya Youth Clean the Streets of Epsom to Welcome the New Year

#### By Luqman Ahmed

Leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association Epsom

As the first light of the new year stretched across the horizon, a group of volunteers from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association (AMYA) in Epsom began their day armed not with party hats or confetti, but with gloves, litter picking sticks, and determination. While others were still nestled in beds, dreaming of resolutions, this remarkable group was out in the cold, rainy and windy morning, embodying their motto: *Love for All, Hatred for None*.

The volunteers worked in harmony to breathe new life into their community. With every littered bottle picked up and every forgotten candy wrapper swept away, the streets seemed to exhale a sigh of relief. It was as if the city, shedding its New Year's Eve revelry, was donning a fresh, clean cloak to greet 2025.

The act itself was simple but profound. "We do this every year," said 30-year-old volunteer Ahmad Iqbal Ch, a doctor by profession. "It's our way of giving back and starting the year with positivity."

For the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Organisation, the clean-up event is more than just an exercise in tidiness; it finds its roots in the teachings of Islam, where the Holy Prophet (pbuh) told his followers that half of their faith is cleanliness and that removing even a stone out of someone's way is considered charity.

Members of the public, on their way to work in the wet and windy weather, stopped to thank the volunteers and wished them all a happy new year.

Three core principles guided the AMYA team that morning: humility, selflessness, and service. The humility to pick up after others, the selflessness to sacrifice a warm morning at home, and the service to a community they loved deeply. Their efforts painted a vivid picture of the human spirit at its best—undaunted by chill or challenge.

As the volunteers finished, one could almost hear the streets murmuring in gratitude, the trees nodding in approval, and the winds carrying their story to distant corners. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association had done more than clean up—they had planted seeds of hope, showing that even small acts of service can sweep away the remnants of the past and make way for a brighter, better future.

Indeed, as the Borough slept through its hangover, a group of quiet heroes ensured that its awakening would be one of cleanliness, care, and community—a new year, truly renewed.

# Epsom & Ewell Faces Tight Constraints in 25/26 Government settlement

**Epsom & Ewell Borough Council** has received its provisional financial settlement for 2025/26, and while the figures align with expectations, they highlight ongoing financial pressures on local services. The settlement forms part of the UK Government's wider local authority funding announcement, which has delivered mixed outcomes across Surrey's district and borough councils.

## **Epsom & Ewell's Settlement Overview**

According to the latest figures, Epsom & Ewell's **Core Spending Power** for 2025/26 is projected at £10.23 million, equating to £307 per dwelling. This places Epsom & Ewell below several neighbouring boroughs, including Woking (£378 per dwelling) and Elmbridge (£367 per dwelling), but slightly above Waverley (£300 per dwelling).

The **Settlement Funding Assessment (SFA)**, which includes central government grants and retained business rates, stands at **£1.63 million**. This figure underscores the limited financial flexibility available to the council, particularly given rising costs and increasing service demands.

## The Funding Context

The settlement includes a modest contribution from the **New Homes Bonus**, with Epsom & Ewell receiving only **£6,160**. This pales in comparison to Runnymede (£774,587) and Guildford (£614,903), reflecting the borough's slower rate of housing growth.

## A Challenging Year Ahead

The provisional settlement aligns with broader trends across Surrey, where councils have been advised to continue delivering "high levels of efficiency" to maintain balanced budgets. Surrey County Council, facing similar pressures, acknowledged the settlement as expected but warned of the continued uncertainty surrounding medium-term funding.

Councillor David Lewis, Surrey County Council's cabinet member for finance and resources, noted: "Councils across the country continue to face a very challenging financial future. Uncertainty on funding into the medium term, coupled with high prices and increased demand, means high levels of efficiencies continue to be required in order to balance budgets."

#### **Limited Relief from Government**

While councils such as Mole Valley have benefitted from additional Government grants targeting homelessness and recycling services, Epsom & Ewell has not been as fortunate. With no significant uplift in funding and reliance on reserves to bridge financial gaps, the council faces tough decisions in the coming financial year.

Furthermore, the **funding floor** mechanism has provided limited relief, ensuring that Epsom & Ewell does not see a drastic year-on-year funding drop. However, without long-term certainty or multi-year settlements, financial planning remains a significant challenge.

## **Looking Forward**

As the Government promises to 'fix the foundations of local government' from **2026-27 onwards**, Epsom & Ewell will need to rely on prudent financial management and creative revenue generation strategies to maintain essential services.

Residents can expect continued fiscal caution from the council as it navigates rising costs, growing demand for services, and ongoing funding uncertainty. The final settlement figures are expected to be confirmed early in the new year, and until then, the council's budget planners remain in a holding pattern.

Related reports:

Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

Examination of a Surrey Borough's 2nd highest UK debt

What cuts to Surrey County Council services are you prepared for?