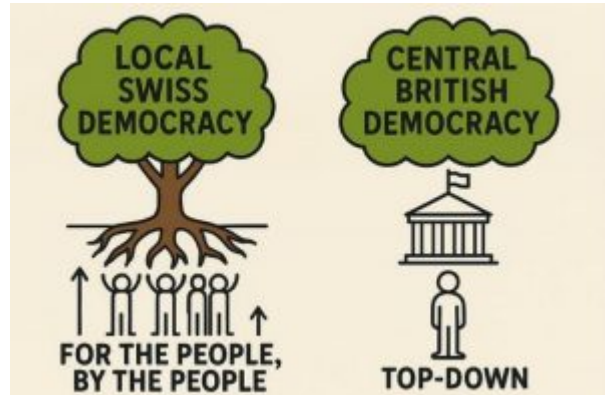


Top-Down Power, Bottom-Up Pain: How Central Control is Killing Local Communities

19 July 2025



When I was a child growing up in rural Surrey, I could never imagine why anyone wouldn't want to preserve the wondrous landscapes of Britain, only to replace them with concrete and tarmac for roads, houses, and airports. As I've gotten older, this disbelief has only grown stronger.

Take Ashted, for example — a small town not far from where I live. The local council wants to build 270 new homes on green belt land, despite furious local opposition. Even the council themselves are divided on the issue, pushing it through due to fear of top-down reprisal. In nearby Langley Vale Village, there's talk of potentially 110 homes being developed on equally green agricultural land that has been part of the local farming area for generations.

These are just two examples of dozens from my area alone. These plans are unpopular and have sparked fierce backlash and debate in the community. People wonder: Why do we have so little say in decisions that transform our neighbourhoods? Why do we often feel powerless against developers and top-down mandates?

Now, as I did then, I believe that Britain is still (at least for now) a beautiful country. However, my view of our island has matured to balance what I feel we have lost alongside what we've gained.

At 29 years old, many assume my generation is full of pro-modernist, latte-sipping, avocado toast-eating, Netflix-bingeing apathetics who don't value the past and would bulldoze anything if it meant lowering house prices. This stereotype is not just wrong — it's dangerous. Many of us care about more than just house prices; we care about landscape, beauty, nature and history. We want to preserve what was, and we think seriously about what is to come.

Many young people hear the mood of the nation and agree that things are broken. But I don't believe that a centralised, managerial approach with top-down policies is the way to fix this or make the country happier.

A big reason why Brits feel broken is that they have no control over their futures. Stagnant wages, rising living costs, and soaring house prices force many to delay milestones like having children, marriage, or retirement. But I believe the problem runs deeper. This apathy — and misery — comes from a lack of local agency, community, and belonging. Money is necessary, but the soul of a community comes from local decision-making, not cash.

Nowhere is this absence of local control clearer than in the planning system. Central London Starmerites (and many others before them) claim that communities, especially in the Home Counties, are just NIMBYs blocking progress to boost the economy. But it's far more complicated than this.

Today's planning process is little more than a tick-box exercise. Communities are asked for input, then routinely ignored. When a local council rejects a development, it's often overturned on appeal by higher authorities. Councillors face political backlash but have little real power to protect their communities. What looks like democracy is, in practice, centralisation.

This suppression of local democracy breeds apathy and resentment. People feel decisions are imposed on them, not made for them.

So here's an alternative — one I doubt either major national party would support, but let's dream.

In Switzerland, local communities decide their fate through direct democracy, sometimes gathering in town squares to vote on local issues. Local infrastructure, zoning, education, and some taxation are set at the local level. The central government only plays a guiding role in essential services and national taxes.

You might ask: won't richer areas just set tax rates low to outcompete poorer ones, increasing inequality? Two mechanisms prevent this. First, Swiss local tax rates operate within regulated bands, maintaining rough parity. Second, a redistributive model transfers wealth from richer to poorer areas, ensuring local empowerment without worsening inequality.

I would love to see this model brought to Britain. It would shake up the old, sclerotic national parties and restore real power to local people. Local councillors represent diverse parties and interests but are currently toothless. A Swiss-style local democracy would change that.

"But what if they don't build enough houses? What if businesses move to areas with better tax rates?" Then communities will respond accordingly. Challenges would remain, but at least people would be deciding their own trade-offs and paths forward.

Unfortunately, the UK is moving away from local democracy. Surrey provides a stark example. Our 11 boroughs are slated to merge into 2 or 3 "super authorities," with a directly elected mayor gaining sweeping powers over the county. How is this real devolution? It centralises power into a system locals had no say in creating — allowing the government to push

through top-down housing targets, often against local wishes.

In a Swiss or similar system, we'd live in a country truly made for the people, by the people — with agency, dignity, and hope for the future. I believe that Brits are capable of running their own communities, and it is patronising to suggest otherwise.

I wait with bated breath to see the fallout that is yet to come from this government's drive towards centralisation, continuing a tradition in this country that has hollowed out local communities for decades.

I can only hope we the people see the light before it's too late.

Matthew P. Dunn

Epsom Common 19th Green Flag Award

19 July 2025



Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve's enduring excellence recognised with 19th consecutive Green Flag Award

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is celebrating receiving the prestigious Green Flag Award for Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve, the international quality mark for parks and green spaces, for a 19th consecutive year.

Councillor **Liz Frost**, (RA Woodcote and Langley Vale) Chair of the Environment Committee said: "We are incredibly proud that Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve has received its 19th consecutive Green Flag Award! This is an outstanding achievement and a true testament to the dedication and hard work of our Countryside team, volunteers, and partners as they create and maintain habitats that help biodiversity to flourish.

"Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and as such it is important that we continue to protect and nurture its distinct habitats and wildlife for future generations to enjoy. A huge thanks to our Countryside team, volunteers and partners for helping us make a difference to our green spaces, including the Epsom Common Association, the Lower Mole Partnership and Natural England."

Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve dates back to Saxon times and is a nationally and internationally important wildlife site. It is designated a 'Site of Specific Scientific Interest' due to its rare insects and its importance of breeding bird habitat. This local nature reserve contains oak woods, open pasture woodland and wetland habitats, including large ponds, and hosts species including cotton spotted orchids and purple emperor butterflies.

To find out more about the walks and tours taking place, managed by the Countryside team at the council, take a look here: [What's on | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council](#).

Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve is one of 2,250 parks and green spaces in the UK to achieve the award.

Green Flag Award Scheme Manager, Paul Todd MBE, said: "Congratulations to everyone involved in Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve who have worked tirelessly to ensure that it achieves the high standards required for the Green Flag Award.

"Quality parks and green spaces like Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve make the country a healthier place to live and work in, and a stronger place in which to invest. Crucially, Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve is a vital green space for communities in the borough of Epsom and Ewell to enjoy nature, and during the ongoing cost of living crisis it is a free and safe space for families to socialise. It also provides important opportunities for local people and visitors to reap the physical and mental health benefits of green space."

The Green Flag Award scheme, managed by environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy under licence from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, recognises and rewards well-managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of green spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.

More information about Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve - Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

The Green Flag Award Scheme (<http://greenflagaward.org/>) is run by the environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy, under licence from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, in partnership with Keep Scotland Beautiful, Keep Wales Tidy and Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful.

Any green space that is freely accessible to the public is eligible to enter for a Green Flag Award. Awards are given on an annual basis, and winners must apply each year to renew their Green Flag Award status. A Green Flag Community Award recognises quality sites managed by voluntary and community groups. Green Heritage Site Accreditation is judged on the treatment of the site's historic features and the standard of conservation.

Hosepipe ban not reached Epsom and Ewell yet

19 July 2025



Frustration is growing towards Thames Water after it announced a hosepipe ban in parts of the South East just months after residents lived through a winter of “huge” leaks and sewage overflows. Thames Water has announced a hosepipe ban will kick in on Tuesday, July 22, covering all OX, GL, SN postcodes as well as RG4, RG8, and RG9, after the UK experienced one of its warmest and driest springs in over a century – followed by England’s warmest June on record. Currently the ban only impacts towns bordering Surrey, but Thames Water has said it may need to add postcodes “if anything changes”.

This year alone, residents in Surrey have endured water supply issues due to multiple pipe bursts, a report concluding water was “unfit for human consumption”, and people putting up barricades to stop raw sewage flooding homes. For some, a hosepipe ban would be the last straw. Sir Jeremy Hunt, MP for Godalming and Ash, said: “Godalming and Ash is not included in the hosepipe ban so far, but I completely understand residents’ frustration when they witness huge water leaks losing thousands of litres locally – Chilworth, Cranleigh, Ewhurst and Bramley in the last week alone – and yet Thames Water are asking us to use water sparingly brushing our teeth. I met with Thames Water CEO Chris Weston recently to press for investment locally because, although work is underway to improve water resilience, what is really needed is to connect our ‘water island’ area with the wider Thames water network – and to urgently replace those leaky pipes.”

Thames Water says its drought plan is designed to ensure the taps keep running for customers’ essential use while also protecting the environment. Water taken from the River Thames for the currently affected area is stored at Farmoor reservoir in Oxfordshire. If the warm, dry weather continues, the company anticipates reservoir levels will continue to drop. River levels are also below average, limiting how much can be drawn from the Thames while the hot weather also causes more evaporation.

Esher and Walton MP Monica Harding said: “The threat of a hosepipe ban shows how important investment in the basics is. Thames Water’s current crumbling infrastructure can’t protect us now, let alone in the future from climate change and population growth. Thames Water has failed miserably in providing the investment needed up to this point and have lost the public’s confidence. The Government should grip the ongoing crisis at Thames Water, place it in special administration, make it a public benefit company, and replace Ofwat with a tough new regulator with teeth, to protect bill payers and give us the clean water we all need.”

Thames Water is also looking to secure future water supplies and said it was working on plans for a new reservoir in Oxfordshire, securing water supply for 15 million people across the South East, including Thames Water, Affinity Water and Southern Water customers. The company is also working on what it calls a vital drought resilience project in London which will be supported by water recycling.

A Thames Water spokesperson said: “Leakage is at its lowest ever level on our network, down 13.2% since 2020, but we know we have more work to do. The extended warm weather also brings increased risks of leaks and bursts due to pipe stress and shifting foundations in the ground. We’ve increased leakage teams in our region and we’re fixing 650 leaks a week with our engineers targeting leaks with the greatest impact to local water supplies. We’re also replacing 500km of water mains over the next five years to reduce leakage. We’re using innovative technology and data to find and fix leaks faster. So far, we have installed almost 40,000 acoustic loggers on our water network to help detect leaks and expect to have 100,000 in place by mid-2027. We’ve installed over 1 million smart meters, which are critical in helping us to locate leaks at our customers’ homes. We’ll continue to roll out smart water meters to households in our area, installing or upgrading a further c.1,200,000 smart meters to homes and businesses by 2030.”

Surrey Uni expose the unwashed hospital toilet users

19 July 2025



Nearly 45% of hospital toilet users fail to wash their hands, study finds

Almost one in two people using a hospital toilet did not wash their hands afterwards, according to new research from the University of Surrey – raising serious concerns about hygiene compliance in high-risk environments.

In a 19-week study conducted in partnership with Bispebjerg hospital in Denmark, sensors were installed on toilet and sink pipes to unobtrusively monitor handwashing behaviour. The results showed that 43.7% of users did not wash their hands after using the toilet, with non-compliance peaking at 61.8% on certain weeks.

Despite the emphasis on hand hygiene during the pandemic, the findings suggest that regular handwashing is still not a consistent habit – even in places where cleanliness is vital for preventing infection spread.

Dr Pablo Pereira-Doel, lead author of the study and Human Insight Lab co-lead at the University of Surrey's Business School, said:

“People may assume handwashing is second nature by now – especially in hospitals and post-Covid-19 – but our data paints a different picture. In medical settings, not washing hands can directly affect patient safety. We need well-timed reminders and campaigns to get people back on track.”

The study used advanced Aguardio pipe sensors to measure temperature changes in pipes, detecting water flow from both toilets and sinks. If taps weren't used within two minutes before or four minutes after a toilet flush, the event was recorded as a failure to wash hands.

Out of 2,636 flushes monitored from two public hospital toilets, 1,153 were not followed by handwashing. Non-compliance was especially high at the start and end of the day, as well as during typical mealtimes, indicating potential windows for targeted interventions such as signage, prompts, or behavioural nudges.

Professor Benjamin Gardner, co-author of the study and MSc Behaviour Change Programme Lead at the University of Surrey's School of Psychology, said:

“A key strength of this study is that it uses accurate data obtained using sink sensors, rather than relying on people being willing and able to report whether they wash their hands. Strategies that raise awareness at the crucial point in a bathroom visit and easily understood messaging about how to wash effectively – like singing Happy Birthday twice over – can help people form handwashing habits that last.”

Professor Carrie Newlands, Lead for Clinical Skills at the University of Surrey's School of Medicine, added:

“These findings are worrying but not surprising. Even simple behaviours like handwashing can lapse without reinforcement. In hospitals, lapses like these can have serious consequences – for patients and for the wider healthcare system. It's time we moved beyond posters and hand gel stations to more effective behavioural strategies.”

New Epsom and Ewell Parish? Cherish or perish the thought?

19 July 2025



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council consults residents on new parish councils

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is asking residents and stakeholders for their view on whether to create parish areas, along with a parish council or councils, in Epsom & Ewell. The Community Governance Review (CGR) consultation opens on 17 July and will run for 12 weeks, closing at 11.59pm on 9 October.

Epsom & Ewell is currently an unparished borough which means there is no lower tier of local government below that of the borough council. As part of local government reorganisation in Surrey, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and the other district and borough councils and county council will be dissolved in April 2027. Two or three unitary councils will then be responsible for local government in the county, with each unitary council representing between around 330,000 to more than 650,000 residents, depending on whether the Government opts for a two or three unitary model.

Epsom Rotary and Epsom and Ewell Times hold a public question time with Councillors on local government organisation on Wednesday 23rd July at 7pm at St Josephs Catholic Church St Margaret Dr, Epsom KT18 7JQ. It is free to attend and open to all residents and businesses. Full details [HERE](#)

Councillor John Beckett, Chair of Standards and Constitution Committee, said:

“We feel it is vital that residents, businesses, and local communities within Epsom & Ewell are given the opportunity to explore the creation of parish councils. This will give them a greater local voice and enable them to stay closer to the decision-making process within local government in the future.

“A parish council could take on responsibility for parks, playgrounds, community centres and cultural events in the borough, keeping decisions locally on how these are delivered as well as having the ability to drive economic growth by attracting funding and grants that would boost the local economy.

“Another key factor which is close to the hearts of residents is planning. A parish council would be a statutory consultee on planning matters, and as such would be able to reflect the concerns and aspirations of residents during any planning application process.”

The CGR consultation asks residents:

- whether to create new parish areas and a parish council or councils
- what the geography should be, and
- how many councillors should be elected.

Residents will also be asked, if parish councils are formed, whether they should be divided into wards, and if they should be called parish, community, neighbourhood or a village council(s).

The consultation can be completed online on the consultation website: Community Governance Review – Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Consultations or by completing a paper consultation questionnaire. Paper consultations can be found in Epsom Town Hall, in Bourne Hall, in local libraries across the borough and in the Community & Wellbeing Centre, Longmead (during normal opening hours).

This summer, the council will also hold a series of events across the borough where residents will be able to ask Councillors questions about local government reorganisation and the community governance review, including this consultation, the process and timeline.

Councillor John Beckett continued:

“I urge every resident of voting age within the borough to have their say on the future of your local democracy and representation in your local government for Epsom & Ewell. Tell us what you think by completing the Community Governance Review consultation questionnaire online or on paper and posting it back to us.”

As part of the Community Governance Review a second consultation would take place in early 2026. A timeline and frequently asked questions about CGR can be found on the council’s website: www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/CGR

Find out more about Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s Community Governance Review: [Community Governance Review | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council](#)

Find out about local government reorganisation here: [Surrey Local Government Reorganisation Hub – Surrey LGR Hub](#)

Related reports:

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Two unitaries will save money says Surrey leader

Epsom and Ewell Considers New Community Councils as Local Government Shake-Up Looms

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council out – Community Council’s in?

and many more – search “local government reorganisation”.

Who will pay for Epsom’s leisure centre “better deal”?

19 July 2025



Dear Editor,

Your excellent article on the Council’s decision to appoint a new operator for the Rainbow Leisure Centre raises important questions about what residents can expect. One crucial point not yet disclosed by the Council is that prices for residents are likely to rise — because the new provider, Places Leisure, has agreed to pay the Council more for the right to operate the Centre, and this additional cost will almost certainly be passed on to users.

The decision-making process, described by the ruling Residents’ Association as “transparent”, was anything but. It began with a now-familiar request for councillors to enter confidential session, shutting the public out of a decision that affects thousands of local families.

At consecutive meetings of the Community and Wellbeing Committee — on which I sit — and then the Strategy and Resources Committee, councillors were asked to approve the administration’s preferred supplier, Places Leisure, over the incumbent GLL/Better and another bidder. We were told that failure to agree would result in the Centre’s closure from 1 October. This ultimatum was presented as a matter of legal necessity under procurement law, but no explanation was provided as to why earlier action had not been taken to avoid such a stark choice.

The selection process itself raises concerns. A confidential paper outlined how bids were scored. Quality and commercial factors were supposedly given equal weight. On quality, GLL/Better scored higher than Places Leisure, with clear criteria applied. Yet for the “commercial” element, GLL was given a score close to zero — with no explanation offered for how this figure was reached. The absence of transparency on such a critical aspect of the scoring process undermines confidence in the outcome.

It was made clear that Places Leisure would pay the Council more for the right to run the Centre and would commit to making some “investment”. However, this came with a catch — a “change to the fees which the operator would look to charge”. In plain terms, residents will be paying more so the Council can generate more income from the Centre.

This is not how important decisions affecting public services should be made. Epsom and Ewell residents deserve better than secretive processes and rubber-stamped choices. I urge the new Leader of the Council to reflect on this episode, and to commit to greater transparency, genuine scrutiny, and open debate on future decisions — especially those involving public assets like the Rainbow Leisure Centre.

Cllr Rob Geleit

Labour, Court Ward
Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Editor’s Note: *This letter reflects the views of the author, an elected councillor. While it refers to matters that may or may not have been discussed in a closed session of the Council, we have published it in the public interest, given the implications for public services and local accountability. We invite the Council to respond if it wishes to clarify any aspect of the decision-making process.*

Related report:

[Epsom and Ewell will judge change at their leisure](#)

Has Woking gone barking mad?

19 July 2025



People in social housing will soon need to ask for permission before getting a dog as Woking Borough Council looks to adopt a formal pet policy. The new nine-page list of rules regarding pet ownership is being drawn up to give the council greater enforcement powers should people’s pooches start to play up. These include clear guidelines spelling out that residents in social housing must notify the council when they get a dog and complete the dog registration form, that dogs must be kept on a lead in all communal areas, and that they must not defecate on balconies or any shared spaces.

Guidance on how to keep pets will also be updated to help mitigate noise problems.

In private housing, renting with pets is at the landlord's discretion. However, when the Renters' Rights Bill becomes effective, tenants will have stronger rights. Landlords must consider each pet request fairly, and if they refuse them, there needs to be a reasonable justification. Officers told the Monday, July 14 communities and housing scrutiny committee it has been an on-going challenge dealing with cases of nuisance pets and that the new policy should strengthen the council's hand. Committee chair Councillor Tom Bonsundy-O'Bryan said: "Noise nuisance from dogs barking (is a problem) and a real high percentage of those came from dogs being left outside at night time. You can see why the noise of barking at night time is more of a pain. The RSPCA also advises against letting dogs sleep outside, the vast majority of time it's bad as they are social animals. It's just really bad to let dogs sleep outdoors overnight."

The council says it understands the benefits of keeping a pet, particularly on people's mental and physical wellbeing, but that it needed to ensure animals do not cause nuisance to other residents or damage property. Households will generally be given permission to keep up to two dogs and two cats in a council-owned or managed house, and either one dog or cat in a flat. Anyone who wishes to have additional pets will need written permission.

Be positive about B negative blood donations

19 July 2025



Residents across Surrey and the wider South East are being asked to step forward and donate B negative blood, as the NHS warns that stocks of this rare blood group have dropped to critically low levels.

Stocks of B Negative Blood Hit Concerning Lows

Recent figures from NHS Blood and Transplant indicate that only 2,482 B negative donors in the region are currently eligible to donate, with overall donor numbers in dangerous decline. There are now fewer than 20,000 active B negative donors across the country, following a drop of 1,000 since last year.

B negative is exceptionally rare, present in just two percent of the population. This scarcity has raised serious concerns, as the NHS reports that patients with this group can only safely receive B negative or O negative blood. When B negative stocks run low, pressure increases on emergency supplies of O negative, the universal blood type.

Local Appeal and Priority Access for Donors

Existing B negative donors are being contacted directly and urged to book donation appointments as soon as possible. Anyone who already knows they have B negative blood, or suspects they might, is strongly encouraged to register and donate. Family members of B negative donors, meanwhile, are 30 percent more likely to have the same rare type—and are being called upon to consider giving blood.

Priority appointment slots will be made available to B negative donors struggling to find suitable times, and the NHS has appealed for the local community to act now, especially with increased summertime demand looming.

Why Your Donation Matters

Hospitals in England require more than 5,000 blood donations every day to support patients undergoing surgery, cancer treatments, managing sickle cell disease, or recovering from serious injuries. Each donation, which takes just an hour, has the potential to save up to three lives.

Besides B negative, donors with O negative and the extremely rare Ro blood are also desperately needed, especially to help treat sickle cell and other critical conditions.

How to Register

Men can give blood every three months and women every four months. Booking an appointment is fast and straightforward. Donors can:

- Visit the NHS Blood and Transplant website
- Use the GiveBlood app
- Call 0300 123 23 23

Donation sessions are held at permanent centres in nearby London locations, and through regular community sessions in town halls and other local venues across Surrey.

Local Voices

Gerry Gogarty, Director of Blood Supply at NHS Blood and Transplant, said:

“B negative donors are immensely important to our lifesaving work, but as one of the rarest blood types, it can be a challenge to always collect enough. Just a slight rise in hospital demand, or even one patient needing several units, can put supplies under severe strain. We urgently need B negative donors—regular and new—to come forward.”

The Bigger Picture

With the NHS needing up to 200,000 new blood donors nationally each year, the call is not just for today, but for a sustained community response to keep saving lives.

For more information, visit the NHS Blood and Transplant website or call 0300 123 23 23 to book your appointment. Every donation can make all the difference for someone, somewhere in need.

Surrey's NHS backlogs high

19 July 2025



Around 10 per cent of Surrey's population is currently stuck in the NHS backlog, facing long waits for crucial operations and cancer treatments, according to local health leaders.

Despite efforts to address delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, thousands of residents across the county are still waiting well beyond the national target of 18 weeks.

At a recent Surrey County Council meeting, NHS bosses revealed that while progress is being made, more than 200,000 people are still awaiting care, with over 4,000 of them waiting more than a year across Surrey. New measures like harm reviews, waiting list checks, and the opening of Ashford Elective Centre are being implemented, but staff shortages, IT issues, and NHS strikes continue to pose significant hurdles.

NHS bosses reported the significant results to Surrey county councillors at an Adults and Health Select Committee meeting on July 11. Chairing the meeting, Cllr Trefor Hogg said: “Roughly 10 per cent of the entire population of Surrey is somewhere in that backlog.”

He explained that every person whose treatment is delayed suffers, their family suffers, the economy suffers and the NHS suffers as the patient's condition worsens.

Frimley InTegrated Care Board, including Frimley Park and Wexham Park hospitals still has around 89,000 people waiting for treatment – and more than 4,000 of those have been waiting over a year.

Although a slight improvement from previous years, only 55 per cent of patients are being treated within the NHS national target of 18 weeks.

Meanwhile, Surrey Heartlands ICB, which covers hospitals like Ashford & St Peter's, Royal Surrey and Epsom, is further ahead.

Its waiting list peaked in 2023 but has since come down significantly. Around 143,000 people are waiting for non-urgent but important elective care operations.

NHS bosses said the total waiting list across Surrey Heartlands' three hospitals has decreased from a peak of approximately 162,000 in September 2023 to about 143,000 by March 2025. Still, nearly 61,500 patients are waiting more than 18 weeks for treatment, while over 2,000 people have been on waiting lists for over a year. These figures far exceed pre-pandemic levels, where waits beyond a year were rare.

NHS bosses said they still recognise that waiting over a year is a huge amount of time to wait but they are working on driving the delays down.

Surrey NHS bosses credited the success of bringing waiting lists down to a range of new systems. These included a new 'harm review' for assessing patients who have been waiting over a year for surgery, waiting list validation to check there are no duplicates on the operations waiting list, and virtual consultations to monitor the patient's condition.

Surrey Heartlands has been fortunate enough to receive funding to open Ashford Elective Centre, focusing on trauma, orthopaedics and ophthalmology. So patients on a long waiting list at Royal Surrey Hospital, for example, can opt to come

to Ashford elective centre for quicker treatment.

Both ICBs admitted there are still challenges including staff shortages, IT problems with new electronic health records, and the impact of ongoing NHS strikes such as the resident doctors.

Award-Winning Epsom Town Masterplan Shines Spotlight on Council's Planning Priorities

19 July 2025



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's Epsom Town Centre Masterplan has been named "Best Plan" at the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) South East Awards for Planning Excellence 2024. The win brings regional recognition to the Council's efforts in shaping the future of the town centre — but it also casts a renewed spotlight on the long-standing delays in finalising a borough-wide Local Plan.

The RTPI judges praised the Masterplan's participative and innovative approach, its use of digital consultation tools, and its firm emphasis on sustainability. The plan was commended as a model of non-statutory planning excellence, particularly impressive given it was not prompted by legislative requirement but by what the judges described as "a strong desire to make a better place."

The planning team achieved an unprecedented level of local engagement, with 1,979 consultation responses — almost 3% of the borough's population — including many residents participating in a council consultation for the first time. This level of public involvement far exceeds the national average of 1%, according to RTPI data.

Councillor **Peter O'Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, described the award as "reflective of the hard work and expertise" of the planning policy team, highlighting the central goal of "making Epsom an even better place."

The Masterplan, developed with consultancy firm David Lock Associates, provides clear development parameters for key town centre sites including the Ashley Centre, Hook Road, Depot Road car park, and Hope Lodge. It also outlines placemaking objectives, environmental improvements, and key design principles aimed at preserving and enhancing Epsom's historic core.

A Tale of Two Plans

While the award marks a triumph for the Town Centre strategy, it also contrasts sharply with the ongoing delays and controversy surrounding the borough's statutory Local Plan. The Local Plan, which is essential for long-term housing and infrastructure development across the wider borough, has faced repeated postponements, public protests, and uncertainty over Green Belt protections.

Epsom and Ewell Times has reported extensively on the Local Plan's troubled progress — from stalled timelines and passionate public campaigns resisting proposed housing developments on cherished green spaces. The Local Plan was officially submitted to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for independent examination. This significant step, taken on 10 March 2025

Observers may see the Masterplan's success as both a sign of the Council's planning capability and a reminder of its failure to deliver its statutory planning framework in a timely manner. The Masterplan may now proceed to the national RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence later this year, but it remains a non-binding vision — its implementation depends, in part, on a coherent Local Plan to support infrastructure and development across the borough.

Until then, residents can celebrate Epsom's win on the regional stage, while continuing to ask: when will the borough-wide plan finally materialise?

Epsom Town Centre Masterplan now advances as a finalist for the RTPI National Awards for Planning Excellence, to be announced in October. The awards ceremony is scheduled for 26 November 2025.

Related reports:

[Epsom & Ewell's Local Plan under the Green microscope](#)

[Epsom and Ewell Local Plan Submitted for Examination](#)

The Local Plan plot thickens after revised NPPF
Council minority vote Local Plan to next stage with Green Belt in
Epsom Town Centre Masterplan Unveiled
Mind the Epsom Town Centre Masterplan!
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Creative Futures: Year 10 Taster Days at Epsom's UCA

19 July 2025



The University for the Creative Arts (UCA), in collaboration with the Higher Education Outreach Network (HEON), is offering six exciting and inspiring Taster Days for current Year 10 students. These free events will focus on a range of creative disciplines including **Fine Art, Graphic Design, Animation, Acting, Textiles, and Creative Business**.

Taking place across UCA's campuses, each Taster Day is designed to give students a hands-on introduction to life at a specialist creative university. Participants will have the opportunity to work closely with practising artists, experienced academics, and current UCA students. Through engaging workshops and interactive sessions, students will gain valuable insight into what it's like to study and work in the creative industries.

These experiences allow students to explore the university's professional facilities, including industry-standard studios, workshops, and software. Whether it's using digital design tools, experimenting with materials, performing in rehearsal spaces, or developing their own summer music festival, these Taster Days are designed to develop creative confidence and key skills that can support students as they enter Year 11 and begin to think seriously about their future pathways.

UCA partners with HEON, a network of universities and colleges working together as part of the Office for Students' Uni Connect programme. HEON's mission is to raise awareness of higher education and help young people from North Hampshire and Surrey to make informed, confident choices about their next steps. By offering engaging and supportive activities, HEON aims to open doors to higher education for students who may not have previously considered it.

The Taster Days form part of this wider commitment to student outreach and aspiration-raising. They provide a first-hand experience of what it means to study creative subjects at a higher level, while also showcasing the range of career paths available in the creative industries, from visual arts and media to performance and entrepreneurship.

These Taster Days are not just about creativity – for many, it's the first time they've stepped onto a university campus or imagined themselves pursuing a career in the arts. We encourage all eligible Year 10 students to consider attending one of these fantastic opportunities.

24th July, 10:00-14:30 – UCA Farnham – Fine Art, Graphic Design, Animation, Acting

25th July, 10:00-14:30 – UCA Epsom – Textiles and Creative Business

Successful applicants will also be entered into a prize draw to win an artist's pack!

If you are a student, parent, or teacher interested in learning more, please don't hesitate to get in touch at outreach@uca.ac.uk.

Epsom and Ewell will judge change at their leisure

19 July 2025



When Epsom & Ewell Borough Council announced that **Better** will hand over management of the Rainbow Leisure Centre to **Places Leisure** in October 2025, many locals who have experienced booking glitches, understaffed gyms, and declining poolside conditions breathed a silent sigh of relief. The question now: how quickly will the promised improvements materialize?

Why the Council Doesn't Run Itself

The council does not manage leisure centres directly—instead, it contracts out operations. That's why swathes of public facilities across the borough, including the Rainbow Centre, are run by third-party providers. The rationale? Private operators like Better specialise in facility management, class programming, and membership administration. But that also means the council steps back, paying providers rent and oversight rights in exchange for promised upkeep and performance.

Transparency and Value for Money—Still in Question

Although the council has described Places Leisure as a “social enterprise,” it has offered no specifics about terms: contract length, rent paid, baseline investment, or expected improvements remain undisclosed. Without that data, taxpayers and users have no firm guarantee of value—simply a brand change.

Councillors have stressed that this switch aims to bring greater “community focus” and better reinvestment of any surplus—hallmarks of the social enterprise model. Yet sceptics point out that social enterprises aren't automatically transparent: some still report hefty executive pay packets. In particular, the CEO of **Places for People** the ultimate owners of Places Leisure reportedly earned £565,426 in 2023-2024 , raising eyebrows among voters who wonder.

A Closer Look at Places Leisure's Reputation

The local press release paints Places Leisure as a community-minded organisation, but reviews from employees and users tell a different story. Feedback on sites like Indeed and Breakroom varies significantly. Some praise friendly culture and flexible working, while others warn of poor management:

“Management loved to bully young lifeguards... poor pay”

“Awful communication, awful leadership... spend too much time fixing their mistakes”

On Trustpilot, users have lodged complaints about broken equipment, overcrowded classes, and appalling changing-room hygiene—low-grade experiences raising legitimate concerns over upkeep standards as they transfer from Better to Places Leisure .

The Case of the 'Midnight Lane-Booking' Mystery

Among the most frequent user frustrations at Rainbow Centre is the so-called **midnight lane-booking blackout**—where lane reservations vanish at midnight, impairing swimmers' schedules. While formal documentation is scarce, social media posts and member forums share similar experiences, consistent with online complaints directed at Better about buggy booking systems. Whether this was down to software limitations or internal policy remains unclear—but users will expect Places Leisure to fix this fundamental flaw.

A Moment for Accountability

This handover is more than a change of logo: it's a test of the council's commitment to local services. Users are invited to watch the roll-out carefully, demanding updates, realistic targets, and transparent accounting. Social enterprise status sounds progressive—but without openness, it can be nothing more than a sticker on the door.

The Bottom Line

Epsom & Ewell's move away from Better reflects mounting pressure from dissatisfied users. But who wins—the community or the balance sheet—depends on what happens once the ink is dry. Will we get a truly improved Rainbow Centre, or just a rebranded disappointment?

Time—and transparency—will tell.

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