

Plus ça change will this openness last?

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East Surrey's open cabinet: a new culture or a honeymoon?

There is something refreshing about a council cabinet meeting at which the outcome does not appear to have been settled before the public arrives.

East Surrey's debate over the relocation of Reigate Priory Junior School offered residents something worth watching: cabinet members expressing different views, arguments being challenged and a decision reached by a divided vote.

Cllr Ashley Tilling (LibDem Walton South & Oatlands), the shadow authority's lead for children and youth services, opposed the move. Seven colleagues supported it. He lost the argument and the vote.

Should that cost him his position? Apparently so, according to Conservative opposition leader Cllr David Lewis (Conservative Cobham & Oxshott South), who suggested that he should "consider his position".

But what, precisely, was the offence? Expressing a judgement openly? Failing to agree with the majority? Allowing the public to discover that a difficult decision had produced disagreement among those responsible for making it?

Cllr Tilling described the proceedings as a "healthy debate". On the evidence of the report, that seems a reasonable description.

A contrast with Epsom and Ewell

For residents accustomed to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, the contrast is striking.

The ruling Residents' Association group's practice of meeting privately to settle its position before public council meetings has left an obvious question hanging over proceedings: how much opportunity remains for public debate to change the outcome?

Private political meetings are legitimate. Councillors need opportunities to discuss proposals, test arguments and organise their work. Every political group will sometimes want to talk behind closed doors.

But there is a democratic cost when those discussions effectively determine decisions that are subsequently presented to the public for formal approval. Residents can watch the speeches and count the votes while remaining unable to see where the decisive arguments were made, whose objections were overcome or what persuaded anyone to change their mind.

A meeting can satisfy the requirements of public access while revealing remarkably little about how power is exercised.

The Residents' Associations' claim to stand apart from conventional party politics makes this particularly relevant. Independence is less convincing when the public sees a settled group position but cannot follow the discussion that produced it.

Disagreement is useful information

East Surrey has, on this occasion, shown another possibility.

Residents know that the school relocation divided the cabinet. They can examine the objections, assess the majority's response and hold individual councillors accountable for their votes.

That is useful democratic information. Public unanimity would have told them less.

Nor should opposition councillors discourage this openness. They are entitled to challenge a cabinet member's judgement, expose inconsistencies and question whether a policy is workable. But suggesting that losing a cabinet vote makes someone's position untenable risks encouraging the very discipline that turns public meetings into rehearsed performances.

There is a distinction between opposing a proposal before the decision and obstructing its implementation afterwards. The report establishes the former. It provides no basis for assuming the latter.

The harder test lies ahead

Nevertheless, one divided vote does not establish a lasting culture.

East Surrey is a new authority, still enjoying some of the freedom that comes with a fresh start. Is this the beginning of a more open approach, a honeymoon, or an experiment that experienced political operators will eventually dismiss as naive?

The real test will come when disagreement becomes electorally inconvenient.

Will cabinet members remain free to dissent when budgets tighten, services disappoint and opposition campaigners turn their words into leaflets? Will the leadership defend open debate when headlines describe it as division? Will councillors tolerate public uncertainty when the next election approaches?

Or will they retreat into the familiar safety of private group meetings, settle the difficult questions there and emerge with an agreed position for public consumption?

The answer will depend partly on how dissent is treated now. Demand resignation whenever a cabinet member loses a vote and the incentive to resolve every disagreement behind closed doors becomes stronger.

East Surrey deserves credit for allowing residents to witness a real difference of opinion. As Epsom and Ewell's borough council approaches its end, that offers a welcome contrast with the RA's closed approach to settling its position.

The challenge is to make openness a habit that survives political pressure. Residents should remember this meeting—and expect the same candour when governing becomes harder.



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