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Reigate resignation signals end of LibDem East Surrey honeymoon?

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An East Surrey councillor has quit the majority group on the council in protest at a contentious proposal to move the location of a Reigate primary school.

Councillor Mark Johnston (Liberal Democrats: Reigate) has resigned from the Liberal Democrat grouping on the East Surrey shadow authority after its cabinet green lit the relocation of Reigate Priory Junior School to Woodhatch Place last month.

In an email seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service, Councillor Johnston told colleagues he believes East Surrey Council “acted hastily”, and that the school move is something the new authority “should have nothing to do with”.

The move of the highly-regarded primary school from its historic current location had been passionately debated by cabinet members, with two of them ultimately voting against it.

Some raised fears over the new site’s distance from the centre of Reigate and potential for greater buildup of traffic in the area. Councillor Ashley Tilling (Liberal Democrats: Walton South & Oatlands), who opposed the move, said in the meeting that moving the school would leave the old site as a “boarded up, looking rather ugly Grade I building”.

Conversely, finance lead Councillor Andy Burton (Liberal Democrats: Esher, Claygate & Oxshott North) argued the decision had been made by the outgoing county council “many years ago” and that the “financial binds tighten” around such moves over time.

After a spirited discussion, East Surrey’s cabinet would ultimately approve the school move by seven votes to two.

Councillor Johnston has now quit the majority Liberal Democrat grouping on East Surrey Council over this choice, and continues to urge for the decision to be reconsidered.

In his email, he wrote: “None of the existing Reigate ward councillors support the move. Nor do many county and borough councillors in neighbouring divisions and wards.

“Alongside them thousands of local people, including hundreds of families – past and present users of local schools – are also in opposition.”

He said East Surrey had “squandered” the opportunity to “reverse this scandal” and was quitting the majority group as a result.

While he has left the Liberal Democrats on East Surrey Council, he remains a member of the national party and a part of the Lib Dem group on Reigate & Banstead Borough Council (RBBC).

“I intend to remain a member of the Council and to continue serving residents of Reigate and, to the extent possible, of the East Surrey area as a whole,” he wrote.

“As one should expect, I will consider carefully all matters before the Council on their merits including proposals brought by any member or group. I do not plan to leave my party or my RBBC council group.”

East Surrey Council will assume all responsibility for education across the five boroughs set to be brought under its banner from April 1 – a service area that is currently overseen by Surrey County Council.

Responding to Councillor Johnston’s resignation, East Surrey council leader Steve Wotton (Liberal Democrats: Horley West, Salfords & Sidlow) said: “We are, of course, disappointed that Mark has chosen to resign from the Liberal Democrat council group.

“We understand his strength of feeling on this issue as a Reigate councillor and will value his local input based on the decision we have made to progress with the new school, including how we repurpose the existing site to benefit the town.”

However, Councillor Wotton stood by the “extremely difficult” decision to approve the school move, while acknowledging the strength of feeling on both sides of the argument.

He noted that, as East Surrey remains a shadow authority solely tasked with setting up the new council until April, cabinet members’ role was limited to deciding whether to approve Surrey County Council’s project.

“We were not in a position to progress alternatives through this process without exposing the council to material financial

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risk," he said. "Planning permission for the new site and the underlying education decisions had already been agreed through Surrey County Council."

"The existing site does not meet the children's needs, as confirmed by the Department for Education. Not proceeding with the relocation to Woodhatch Place would risk significant further delay, leaving children in accommodation that falls short of the standards they deserve.

"Now that the decision has been made, our focus is on ensuring that the children who attend the new school have the best possible environment in which to learn."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

Cllr Mark Johnston speaks at a council meeting (Credit: ESC)

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The first two are particularly relevant: the first covers the original dispute over the school relocation, while the second is EET's editorial examining the significance of open disagreement within the Liberal Democrat cabinet.

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