

Spelthorne leaders play musical chairs in Council's dying days

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A Surrey district council has chosen to replace its council leader just months before the council's abolition next spring. Councillor Joanne Sexton (Independent Spelthorne Group: Ashford East) will now lead Spelthorne Borough Council until next April, when the authority is absorbed into the new West Surrey council.

It came after the now ex-leader, Greg Neall (Liberal Democrats: Ashford Town), faced a no-confidence motion, despite having led the council since May. The motion was tabled by another former council leader John Boughtflower (Conservative: Shepperton Town), who sought to return to the post following Councillor Neall's removal from office.

But the meeting quickly turned bitter and acrimonious as Councillor Neall fought to defend the record of his brief spell in the job. Opening the debate, Councillor Boughtflower said: "We voted in the current leadership with high hopes, but this has quickly faded."

The former council leader attacked the current executive over ongoing asset sales amid the authority's precarious financial picture, saying "we just don't have the confidence".

He added: "With some major challenges left, I'm not filled with any confidence. We need to get the last part of this council right before it moves to West Surrey."

Spelthorne is currently overseen by government-appointed commissioners, who were brought in last year to close the council's budget gaps after it amassed significant debts.

Deputy leader Councillor Chris Bateson (Liberal Democrats: Staines South) blasted the no-confidence motion as an "act of self-indulgence by the opposition".

Addressing Councillor Boughtflower's criticisms of asset sales, he said: "Let's not be under illusions when we talk about property. We are under government direction for asset sales.

"And behind the scenes we have our arguments with the commissioners, but at the end of the day they trump everything - and whoever sits in these seats will face the same issues and get the same answers."

Councillor Neall also stood up to back up his record and echo his deputy's sentiments about the motion.

"Contrary to the absence of evidence in this motion, there is plenty of evidence that my leadership has been successful," he said, citing housing targets, morale among service teams and the performance of planning officers as among his achievements.

"Anything less than voting against this motion is electing a leadership team who don't even know where their confidence lies from one month to the next.

"Whether I am leader of the council after this meeting or not, I will hold my head up high knowing that my leadership was successful and I have the evidence to prove it."

It comes as Spelthorne Borough Council enters its final few months of existence before the abolition of the current two-tier council structure in Surrey in favour of two new unitary councils in the West and East.

The current system has an overarching county council alongside several borough councils, both of which carry out different functions.

Under the incoming system, all local government services will be provided by each of the two new councils in their respective areas.

Accusations of "personal attacks" were frequently levied throughout the confidence debate, with the chair intervening on multiple occasions to insist that councillors refrain from "aggravation" and stick to the specifics of the motion.

Members ultimately voted to remove Councillor Neall from the leadership, with 12 votes in favour of a motion to declare no confidence, 9 against, and 12 abstentions. No one party has a majority on Spelthorne Borough Council, with the Conservatives being the largest group - holding 14 of the council's 39 seats.

The next step of the motion would have been a vote to install Councillor Boughtflower as council leader in his stead. However, Councillor John Turner (Liberal Democrats: Halliford and Sunbury West) interjected to table an amendment suggesting Councillor Sexton as the replacement leader. His amendment also proposed Councillor Bateson be brought back as deputy leader.

Councillor Turner said: “We had a successful partnership there for many months, and hopefully we can heal a few wounds tonight and get on with what we have to do.”

Spelthorne has seen a high turnover of council leaders over the past decade, with 10 different councillors having held the role since 2011.

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Image: Epsom and Ewell Times