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Sun sets on Residents' Associations' cherished Parishes for Epsom and Ewell

13 March 2026



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has formally abandoned plans to create parish-style community councils after a public consultation produced overwhelming opposition, bringing to an end a controversial review that has cost about £70,000.

The decision was taken at a full council meeting on 12th March following a debate that exposed sharp political divisions and prompted renewed criticism of the Residents' Association administration that initiated the review.

Councillors ultimately accepted a report concluding that the consultation "does not demonstrate sufficient public support for the proposals", after residents rejected the idea of creating two community councils covering Epsom and Ewell.

But the debate revealed tensions over the purpose of the consultation itself, the cost of the process, and the future of local representation in Surrey after local government reorganisation.

Beckett: residents "have spoken" but warns of democratic deficit

Introducing the report, Councillor **John Beckett** (Auriol), who led the Community Governance Review (CGR), said the council had carried out extensive engagement with residents and should be proud of the exercise.

He told councillors that more than 2,200 responses had been received, making it one of the council's most widely responded-to consultations in recent years.

Beckett said the consultation was justified because residents across Surrey had not been properly consulted about the government's decision to reorganise local government. He argued the borough had taken a different approach by asking residents directly what they wanted.

However, he acknowledged the result left the council with little option but to halt the plan. "Our residents have spoken on this matter, and with 82 per cent opposed to the idea of community councils, the recommendation of this report is not to proceed with CGR," he said.

Despite accepting the result, Beckett used both his opening speech and his closing remarks to warn that the new local government structure could weaken local representation.

He questioned how the proposed neighbourhood committees expected under the new unitary structure would address local issues. "How the non-funded, non-decision-making neighbourhood committees will miraculously deliver those local issues facing our residents," he asked, warning they may not resolve the democratic deficit created by large unitary councils.

In his summing-up he said the future system could leave a patchwork across Surrey of areas with and without meaningful local representation.

Opposition: "self-serving" and a "vanity project"

Opposition councillors were sharply critical of the review and its purpose. Labour councillor **Chris Ames** (Court) said the administration had been warned not to embark on the process. "The Residents' Association administration was warned not to take the council into this shambolic, costly and self-serving process," he said.

Ames argued the public had rejected what he described as an RA "vanity project". "The public saw through it. It's clear that the residents rejected the RA vanity project," he said, adding that residents also resented the idea of another layer of taxation.

He criticised the consultation structure, saying residents were effectively offered only one option. "It's laughable to present giving residents a choice of unwanted parishes or nothing at all as a choice," he said.

He also asked where accountability lay for the £70,000 cost of the review. "Seventy thousand pounds later, where does the CGR shambles leave us?" he asked.

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Claims the review was about creating roles

Councillor **Julian Freeman** (Liberal Democrat, College) argued there had never been a public demand for parish councils in the borough. “There’s never been any demand for it,” he said. Freeman suggested the proposal had been linked to the approaching abolition of borough councils. “It was a way of trying to carve out some kind of role for soon-to-be former Residents’ Association councillors,” he said.

He added that residents reacted strongly once they realised the potential council tax implications. “People saw that it was going to cost an extra £50 plus on their council tax bill and quite rightly said, what on earth do we want to pay for another layer of government for?”

Criticism of consultation design

Several councillors criticised the structure of the consultation. Councillor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) said residents had not been offered alternative governance models. “We were given one option or nothing,” she said.

She added that neighbourhood area committees proposed under Surrey’s local government reorganisation had not been presented as an option. “Those committees should at least have been given a chance to see if they worked,” she said.

Another councillor said the consultation had effectively framed the issue as a choice between parish councils or losing local influence entirely.

Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) reminded the Chamber that the proposed Parishes would only manage a handful of allotments that residents grow fruit and vegetables in.

Administration defends consultation

Residents’ Association councillors strongly defended the review as an exercise in democratic engagement.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said the borough had done what central government had not done during the reorganisation process. “We had the courage to ask our residents what they wanted,” he said.

He added that the council was respecting the outcome. “They’ve quite clearly said that they don’t want parish councils, and we will act upon that advice.” He claimed, wrongly as it transpired, that Epsom and Ewell would be the only area in the County without any parishes. See Epsom and Ewell Times table below.

Councillor **Rachel King** (RA, Town) also defended the cost of the consultation. She said the £70,000 spent equated to less than £1 per resident. “We’re talking about less than a pound per person for two full consultations,” she said.

King said the aim had been to explore how residents might retain local representation once the borough council disappears in 2027.

A consultation that defeated its own proposal

The consultation outcome – around 82 per cent opposition – effectively forced the council to abandon the idea it had been exploring.

But the debate highlighted a paradox. While the Residents’ Association leadership defended the consultation as a democratic exercise, several councillors argued the process appeared designed primarily to test support for parish councils rather than explore a range of possible governance models.

Critics pointed to the absence of alternatives such as neighbourhood area committees and the framing of the consultation around the creation of community councils.

At the same time, Beckett’s own speeches emphasised his belief that parish councils would have helped address what he described as the democratic deficit created by large unitary authorities.

End of a £70,000 process

The Community Governance Review had been one of the council’s strategic priorities for 2025–27. It involved two rounds of consultation, public meetings, publicity campaigns and engagement activities.

Despite the extensive engagement programme, the consultation produced a clear rejection of the proposal.

For now, Epsom & Ewell will remain without parish councils even after the borough council disappears under the planned Surrey reorganisation.

Parish councils across Surrey

Although Epsom & Ewell currently has none, several Surrey districts contain parish or town councils. In many cases these cover only parts of the district rather than the entire area.

District / Borough	Parish or Town Councils (examples)
Epsom & Ewell	None
Elmbridge	None
Guildford	Ash, Normandy, Pirbright, Shalford, Send, Worplesdon

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District / Borough	Parish or Town Councils (examples)
Mole Valley	Capel, Charlwood, Newdigate, Ockley
Reigate & Banstead	Horley Town Council; Salfords & Sidlow Parish
Runnymede	Englefield Green; Egham Town Council
Spelthorne	None
Surrey Heath	Bisley, Chobham, Windlesham
Tandridge	Numerous including Bletchingley, Burstow, Caterham Valley, Lingfield, Oxted, Warlingham
Waverley	Cranleigh, Farnham, Godalming, Haslemere, Bramley, Chiddingfold, Elstead and others
Woking	Several parish councils including Bisley, Horsell, Pyrford and others

This means that even in districts with parish councils, significant urban areas often remain unparished.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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