EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

29th October 2026

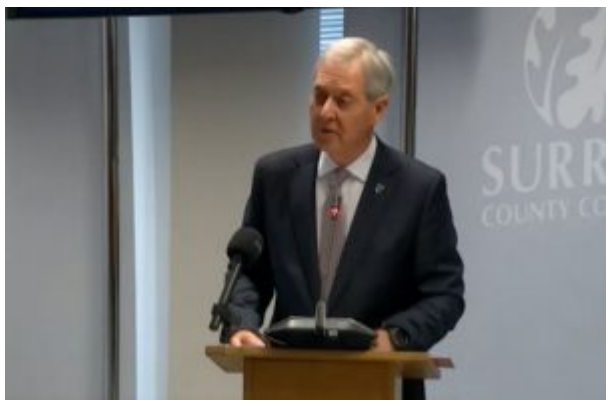
ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

Up to £1 where sold

Surrey County Council death throes debate

19 March 2026



Tensions boiled over in the council chamber as outgoing Surrey County Council leader Conservative Cllr Tim Oliver defended his administration and staff against accusations from local MPs and opposition councillors. He accused them of "cheap political mudslinging" against "the very people dedicating their working lives to helping others".

Speaking at the final full council meeting before the May elections, Cllr Oliver said a "small number of recently elected MPs have crossed the line multiple times" despite repeated attempts to engage with them on sensitive issues and the complex services the council provides.

Liberal Democrat MPs said after the meeting they make "no apologies for sticking up for residents".

"They continually undermine the work of dedicated expert staff, largely from a position of naivety and ignorance, all to try and score political points," Cllr Oliver said. "Cheap political mudslinging impacts the very people dedicating their working lives to helping others."

Cllr Oliver read aloud the words of a staff member from the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning Directorate, describing how political attacks felt like a "personal blow". He read: "Most people will never see the hours spent untangling difficult cases, the compassion behind tough decisions, or the sheer persistence required to get things right […] Words have consequences beyond political point scoring."

The criticism comes after a damning BBC report revealed the county council had been formally sanctioned by the SEND tribunal in 38 cases over a five-month period. The council said barring notices were issued during an "exceptionally high period of activity", according to the report. An ITV report claimed Surrey adults with learning disabilities face "dangerous" cuts to care; meanwhile the council insists it is increasing investment in the service and encouraging people to speak up if they feel the assessment does not meet their needs.

Cllr Oliver has urged MPs to engage constructively with staff and warned that the workforce would not easily forget years of political attacks. "While you may claim that your words are not directed at officers, I'm afraid there is no avoiding the impacts of cheap politicisation of serious and complex work," he said.

A statement later issued after the meeting read: "Liberal Democrat MPs make no apologies for sticking up for their constituents' interests and raising the failures of Surrey County Council, whether it is SEND provision, safeguarding, adult social care or potholes.

"No Surrey MP mentioned SEND in Parliament before 2024. They were all Conservative. As soon Liberal Democrats were elected in 2024 we relentlessly focused on making people's lives easier in Surrey – as we were elected to do. We hope the Leader of Surrey will work with us in trying to achieve that instead of his blatant electioneering."

Opposition councillors also pushed back. Cllr Paul Follows said he was "bored of the 'let's not be political' speeches followed by a version of 'everything is fine and nothing is broken'." He acknowledged Cllr Oliver's desire for a professional approach to the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) but said implying scrutiny from MPs or councillors was "unwelcome" and "simply a waste of everybody's time."

Clashes continue

The debate quickly turned into a wider clash over finances and priorities. Liberal Democrat councillors questioned whether the council's debt levels and budget planning were as secure as Cllr Oliver claimed, while Cllr George Potter described the leader as "thin-skinned" and accused him of dodging accountability by apparently "cancelling elections".

Despite the tension, Cllr Oliver called for a focus on collaboration across party lines. "Residents don't want to get caught in the crossfire of politics," he said. "They want their elected representatives to improve their lives, not score points."

As Surrey approaches its first Unitary Council elections in May, the row highlights the delicate balance between navigating political rivalries and council staff reputation, all while preparing for a major shake-up of local government. By the time Surrey's County Council meets again, the political map will look very different.

Emily Dalton LDRS

© 2021-2026. No content may be copied without the permission of Epsom and Ewell Times Ltd. Registered office: Upper Chambers, 7 Waterloo Road, Epsom KT19 8AY