



Who will pay for Epsom's leisure centre "better deal"?

19 July 2025

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Your excellent article on the Council's decision to appoint a new operator for the Rainbow Leisure Centre raises important questions about what residents can expect. One crucial point not yet disclosed by the Council is that prices for residents are likely to rise — because the new provider, Places Leisure, has agreed to pay the Council more for the right to operate the Centre, and this additional cost will almost certainly be passed on to users.

The decision-making process, described by the ruling Residents' Association as "transparent", was anything but. It began with a now-familiar request for councillors to enter confidential session, shutting the public out of a decision that affects thousands of local families.

At consecutive meetings of the Community and Wellbeing Committee — on which I sit — and then the Strategy and Resources Committee, councillors were asked to approve the administration's preferred supplier, Places Leisure, over the incumbent GLL/Better and another bidder. We were told that failure to agree would result in the Centre's closure from 1 October. This ultimatum was presented as a matter of legal necessity under procurement law, but no explanation was provided as to why earlier action had not been taken to avoid such a stark choice.

The selection process itself raises concerns. A confidential paper outlined how bids were scored. Quality and commercial factors were supposedly given equal weight. On quality, GLL/Better scored higher than Places Leisure, with clear criteria applied. Yet for the "commercial" element, GLL was given a score close to zero — with no explanation offered for how this figure was reached. The absence of transparency on such a critical aspect of the scoring process undermines confidence in the outcome.

It was made clear that Places Leisure would pay the Council more for the right to run the Centre and would commit to making some "investment". However, this came with a catch — a "change to the fees which the operator would look to charge". In plain terms, residents will be paying more so the Council can generate more income from the Centre.

This is not how important decisions affecting public services should be made. Epsom and Ewell residents deserve better than secretive processes and rubber-stamped choices. I urge the new Leader of the Council to reflect on this episode, and to commit to greater transparency, genuine scrutiny, and open debate on future decisions — especially those involving public assets like the Rainbow Leisure Centre.

Cllr Rob Geleit

Labour, Court Ward
Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Editor's Note: This letter reflects the views of the author, an elected councillor. While it refers to matters that may or may not have been discussed in a closed session of the Council, we have published it in the public interest, given the implications for public services and local accountability. We invite the Council to respond if it wishes to clarify any aspect of the decision-making process.

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