

Minutes of the Meeting of the AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at the Council Chamber, Epsom Town Hall on 13 November 2025

PRESENT -

Councillor Steven McCormick (Chair); Councillor Phil Neale (Vice-Chair); Councillors Chris Ames, Steve Bridger, Christine Howells (as nominated substitute for Councillor Tony Froud), James Lawrence (as nominated substitute for Councillor Alison Kelly) and Chris Watson

Absent: Councillor Tony Froud, Councillor Alison Kelly and Councillor Jan Mason

Officers present: Andrew Bircher (Assistant Director of Corporate Services), Alex Awoyomi (Principal Solicitor), Sue Emmons (Chief Accountant), Will Mace (Corporate Governance & Strategy Manager), Phoebe Batchelor (Democratic Services Officer) and Angela Guest (Democratic Services Officer)

29 QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

A Member of the Public submitted two questions prior to the meeting as attached to an appendix to the agenda. The Chair provided a verbal response at the meeting.

The Member of the Public asked two supplementary questions at the meeting and the Chair gave verbal responses.

The Chair informed the Member of the Public that in relation to the second supplementary question the response from the Chief Executive provided to Members of the Committee following the previous meeting would be attached to the minutes of this meeting.

30 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor James Lawrence declared that he was a member of the Strategy & Resources Committee but did not believe there were any relevant items on the agenda.

31 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Committee confirmed as a true record the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on **30 September 2025** and authorised the Chair to sign them, subject to the following amendment underlined below:

“Minute 22e”,

e) LGA Peer review. The Vice Chair asked what specific actions are being taken to address the concerns Raised by the LGA peer review regarding the culture, secrecy and the lack of transparency. The Chief Executive informed the Committee that they had contacted the peer team to find out exactly what the comments were. She explained she had received an email earlier that evening from the lead peer who stated that they didn’t recall making the comment about there being a culture of secrecy at EEBC and they also did not remember hearing it in any of the sessions. The lead peer clarified that they were more concerned with transparency from the aspect of clarity rather than hiding things, meaning being transparent in a way that everybody understands the processes around decision making. The Chief Executive explained that somewhere along the line the meaning of the comment has been ***lost***. The Vice Chair asked if the LGA peer review was minuted and how the comment has not been able to be tracked down. The Chief Executive explained that the lead peer has gone back to their notes and stated that she did recall a conversation with three members about how they weren’t clear on how members and officers had come to some decisions around one of the Council’s larger projects. She agreed to follow up with this further and provide a response to Members in writing.

32 POINT OF PERSONAL EXPLANATION

Councillor Ames raised a point of order, that was accepted as a personal explanation rather than a point of order, in that he believed there was a breach of statutory provisions regarding the disclosure of exempt information and that Members were being told incorrectly they are not allowed to raise certain issues. He stated he had repeatedly asked the Chair about what could or could not be said about the changes to the scheme of delegation, and what the auditors were told about that, and had not received a reply. The auditor’s February report referred to changes to the scheme of delegation that were not fully transparent and were not made public. By implication, the auditors found out for themselves about the changes. He stated that he had been barred by the Chair and the Chief Executive from discussing this matter and wanted an explanation why.

The Chair stated that this matter had been covered several times and was part of the previous meeting where the Chief Executive had responded to questions on it. He stated a prior meeting had taken place to discuss key lines of enquiry pertinent to points being raised but if that topic was discussed then it would need to happen in a closed session.

33 WORK PROGRAMME - NOVEMBER 2025

The Committee received a report presenting its annual Work Programme.

The following matters were considered:

- a) **New item.** The Chair stated that Councillor Amis had requested an item on the agenda regarding the delay in Council telling external auditors that it had made changes to the Scheme of Delegation as an urgent item in July 2023. Councillor Ames asked the Chair why he had not put the item on an agenda himself as it appeared to him a governance failure that this committee should be looking at. The Chair stated that in his opinion the

matter had been dealt with at several meetings and particularly at the last meeting when the Chief Executive attended to respond to committee questions. However, officers would work with councillors to bring a report to the next meeting of the committee.

Following consideration the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) Note and agree the ongoing Work Programme as presented in Section 2.**

34 COUNTER-FRAUD AND WHISTLEBLOWING ANNUAL REPORT 2025

The Committee received a report presenting an overview of the governance the council has in place to prevent, detect and address fraud.

The following matters were considered:

- b) **Outcome ratings.** A Member of the Committee asked what constituted a negative and a positive outcome. The Corporate Governance & Strategy Manager explained that this data was provided by a partner council that did the work and would seek a definition and share with Members after the meeting.

Following consideration the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) Note and comment on the contents of the report, which outlines the work being undertaken to prevent and detect fraud.**

35 CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING QUARTER 2

The Committee received a report presenting the capital monitoring position as at quarter 2 for the current financial year 2025/26.

The following matters were considered:

- c) **Fairview Road.** A Member of the Committee asked how significant the increase in temporary accommodation costs was because of a delay in not having these homes or was that something that we look at in the budget or was it not that significant. The Chief Accountant explained that that analysis had not been undertaken and there would be no benefit to it as decisions taken would have remained the same. She went on to explain that the pressures on temporary accommodation and the temporary accommodation budget was very significant and the sooner another three properties could be brought into occupation, the better for the Council.

Following consideration the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- 1) Receive the capital monitoring position at quarter 2, as set out in the report.**

2) Note the progress of capital projects as set out in Appendix 1.**36 REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING - QUARTER 2**

The Committee received a report presenting the forecast revenue outturn position for the current financial year 2025/26, as at quarter 2 (30 September).

The following matters were considered:

- d) **Housing.** A Member of the Committee stated that he was happy with the appendix report from housing and the more realistic prediction based on what reported KPIs at the last committee meeting.
- e) **Cemeteries.** A Member of the Committee asked for an explanation for the shortfall in the cemeteries budget. The Chief Accountant explained that due to the nature of the business it was difficult to forecast cemetery income and there were other options to using council services. However, the shortfall of £20k was approximately 5% of the total budget and not considered a significant variance but officers were looking at this area in terms of level of demand and whether there needed to be any structural changes made.

Following consideration the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- 1) **Receive the revenue budget monitoring report, which sets-out a projected deficit of £510,000 for 2025/26;**
- 2) **Agree that regular reports continue to be prepared for Community & Wellbeing Committee to update members on progress against the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan;**
- 3) **Agree that the updated quarter 3 position will be reported back to Audit and Scrutiny Committee in February.**

37 INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT

As required by the Global Internal Audit Standards in UK Public Sector this report presents the Internal Audit Progress Report (September) 2025-26. The Committee received a report providing an overview of internal audit activity and assurance work completed in accordance with the approved audit plan and provides an overview of key updates relevant to the discharge of the committee's role in relation to internal audit.

The following matters were considered:

- f) **Planning Enforcement:** A Member of the Committee stated that he was pleased there had been progress and the recognition of need for an enforcement manual, especially around appeals. The Chair stated that the service was to receive additional resource which was good news.

- g) **Tree Preservation Orders (TPO).** A Member of the Committee stated that he was looking forward to seeing the summary of the TPO audit as he had conducted his own survey of trees in the road where he lived and found a few discrepancies. The Chair stated that the service was to receive additional resource, and an update could be provided to a future meeting.
- h) **Playground Maintenance.** A Member of the Committee questioned how the service had been awarded any assurance given the lack of documented strategy in place to set the overall direction and objectives of the service and nothing on risk. The Internal Auditor explained that the service had been given limited assurance that meant that several key concerns had been highlighted. These were now being action tracked and updates on overdue actions were being reported to the Committee. The Chair reiterated the Member's question that was more about why the service had not been attributed with no assurance as opposed to limited assurance and what the criteria was. The Internal Auditor offered to circulate a description of each assurance rating because there were definitions for each one; and even a limited assurance opinion did refer to significant gaps in internal control. The Committee Member went on to explain that his concern was also about the management risk as well as lack of documentation. The Assistant Director of Corporate Services explained that what committee sees was just a snapshot of the full audit report, what was not seen was all the good work undertaken. He stated that the rating was fair and yes there should be policies in place but there was an effective way of making sure playgrounds were looked after, inspected on a regular basis and were fit for purpose.

A Member of the Committee asked if the lack of paperwork left the council open to litigation. The Assistant Director of Corporate Services explained that the council did have a public sector software light system that recorded evidence as well as recording all the equipment from all 19 sites. There were systems in place to record and make sure that things were being tested but agreed that the strategy and policies were deficient. The Member explained that his concern was also about passing on knowledge and evidence to the new unitary, when that happens.

- i) **Information Security.** A Member of the Committee stated that they had a question about information security but rather than go into closed session he would email the questions to the Chair. The Chair thanked the Member and stated that a written response would be given for the questions and could be shared with the Committee. The Assistant Director of Corporate Services reminded the Member that there had been a very frank discussion with the Head of IT at the previous committee and maybe some of the answers to his question were recorded for that discussion. If not the Head of IT could provide an update.

Following consideration the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- 1) Note the internal audit progress report (October) 2025-26 from Southern Internal Audit Partnership (SIAP) attached at Appendix 1.**

The meeting began at 7.30 pm and ended at 9.01 pm

COUNCILLOR STEVEN MCCORMICK (CHAIR)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

From: Jackie King
Sent: 30 September 2025 18:29
To: [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk>
Subject: RE: [CAUTION EXTERNAL] RE: CPC findings



Jackie King reacted to your message:

From: [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk>
Sent: Tuesday, September 30, 2025 4:09:29 PM
To: Jackie King <JKing@epsom-ewell.gov.uk>
Cc: [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]@local.gov.uk>
Subject: RE: [CAUTION EXTERNAL] RE: CPC findings

Good luck with your A&S meeting!



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

From: Jackie King <JKing@epsom-ewell.gov.uk>
Sent: 30 September 2025 16:27
To: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk)>
Cc: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@local.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@local.gov.uk)>
Subject: RE: [CAUTION EXTERNAL] RE: CPC findings

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Thanks [REDACTED] – appreciate the clarification – fingers crossed!

Jackie King
Chief Executive

01372 73 [REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk)>
Sent: 30 September 2025 15:51
To: Jackie King <JKing@epsom-ewell.gov.uk>
Cc: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@local.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@local.gov.uk)>
Subject: RE: [CAUTION EXTERNAL] RE: CPC findings
Importance: High

Hi Jackie

I am copying [REDACTED] in here in case he has something to add from the LGA Peer Challenge team perspective beyond my own to your questions (below).

The original CPC Report that we prepared did not use the terminology set out in the question to your A&S Committee below. The recommendation we made was:

5. **Streamline and strengthen the Council's decision-making process, ensuring that consensus is built.**

What we had noted in the report was:

“There is frustration and confusion around the lack of transparency through the decision-making process, coupled with a lack of clarity around which items for decision should go to the senior leadership team and which should go to Committee Chairs. It is important to demonstrate each stage of how the Council builds consensus through its decision-making process, by first considering whether the final decision will be made at committee or council, then clearly mapping out each step to develop the final report. This should be communicated to all staff and Members. A number of key mechanisms for maintaining good standards are flagged in the Annual Governance Statement as

‘areas for improvement’, this should be addressed as a matter of urgency.”

I don’t think we made any reference to a ‘culture of secrecy’ or suggested that there was one, and I don’t recall anyone saying that to me (although of course I wasn’t present at every discussion session) this was simply about E&EBC needing to ensure greater transparency through the decision-making process given the frustration and confusion raised with the CPC Team, reflected in the extract above.

We split the discussion sessions between different members of the CPC Team so I wasn’t present at every one of them. My own notes record that with the Member peer, I was present at a discussion where three E&EBC Members were also present and raised this in respect of one project in particular (Town Hall relocation) and there seemed to be frustration and confusion with the process in particular, which will have contributed to the recommendation above.

The E&EBC CPC Peer Review Action Plan provided to the CPC Team which revisited E&EBC on Monday 17 February 2025 helpfully set out the progress the Council had made in addressing the CPC’s above recommendation:

	Action	Owner(s)	Timescale	Progress Update
5.1	Create a process which lays out the steps for committee reports to come to committee or full council	Statutory officers	Original date: Sept 2024 Amended date: November 2024	A process note has been drafted that Statutory Officers had sight of in late 2024; the Council’s eHuB is in the process of being updated to share this process note with all officers as a support tool moving forward.
5.2	Put in place a programme of work which addresses the areas flagged in the Annual Governance Statement as ‘areas for improvement’	Statutory Officers or Director of Corporate services (DoCS)	Sept 2024	This has been implemented in two ways. Firstly, areas for improvement that are key governance issues are added to the AGS action plan. This action plan has been incorporated within the new Performance Hub software system which tracks each action through to completion. Progress is reported quarterly within the corporate performance and risk report, which is reviewed by the Strategic Leadership Team, Policy Committee Chairs and Audit & Scrutiny Committee. Secondly, we have updated our

				AGS production checklist and template for the 2024/25 Statement, which now includes a reference to where the areas of improvement are being tracked, e.g. within the AGS action plan or another programme of work.
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The CPC Team’s revisit was of course dominated by the changed circumstances and in discussing the Council’s readiness for Local Government Reorganisation, but my own notes relating to discussion around the above suggest that the CPC Team noted the progress made above with the process note for officers, and observed that a ‘forward plan’ of committee / council reports, detailing all the consensus-building steps along the way (noting intended target dates for discussion with SLT, Leader / Chairs, informal committee discussions / external consultation with stakeholders, residents as appropriate) shared between officers and Members would be a helpful tool in improving transparency around the decision-making process, if not already being employed.

I trust that helps a bit.

Kind regards

[Redacted signature]



[Redacted text block containing several lines of blacked-out content]

From: Jackie King <JKing@epsom-ewell.gov.uk>
Sent: 29 September 2025 14:53
To: [Redacted] <[\[Redacted\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[Redacted]@stroud.gov.uk)>; [Redacted] <[\[Redacted\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[Redacted]@stroud.gov.uk)>
Subject: FW: [CAUTION EXTERNAL] RE: CPC findings

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Hi [REDACTED]

I hope you had a good break. Sorry to chase when I know you will have a lot to catch up on!

Our A&S is tomorrow evening so any assistance you can provide would be really helpful?

Many thanks

Jackie King
Chief Executive

01372 73 [REDACTED]

From: Jackie King
Sent: 22 September 2025 13:23
To: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk)>
Cc: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk)>
Subject: RE: [CAUTION EXTERNAL] RE: CPC findings

Thanks [REDACTED]

Jackie King
Chief Executive

01372 732202

From: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk)>
Sent: 22 September 2025 13:19
To: Jackie King <JKing@epsom-ewell.gov.uk>
Cc: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk)>
Subject: [CAUTION EXTERNAL] RE: CPC findings

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Dear Jackie,

Thank you for your email.

Kathy is currently on annual leave but will respond to your email on her return.

Kind regards



[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Working together to make Stroud district a better place to live, work and visit

From: Jackie King <JKing@epsom-ewell.gov.uk>
Sent: 22 September 2025 13:09
To: [REDACTED] <[\[REDACTED\]@stroud.gov.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@stroud.gov.uk)>
Subject: CPC findings

CAUTION: This email originated from outside your organization. Exercise caution when opening attachments or clicking links, especially from unknown senders.

Hi [REDACTED] – hope all is well with you.

In the absence of a follow up report for our CPC I wonder if you could help with something?

Our A&S committee are asking what we are doing with the 'serious' findings from the CPC review and have posed the following question for next weeks committee:

1. What specific actions are being taken to address the concerns raised by the Local Government Association Peer Review regarding the 'culture of secrecy' and lack of transparency?

Although these were comments made in the original report, I didn't take that to mean we had a serious issue and it wasn't a specific issue to look at on our action plan.

I wondered if you could further quantify how many people had said this and in what context – also, if you had any conversations during the follow up? This would help put it in context.

Many thanks for any help you can give!

Kind regards

Jackie King

Chief Executive

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council
Town Hall, The Parade, Epsom, Surrey, KT18 5BY

Tel: 01372 73 [REDACTED]

(Executive Assistant - [REDACTED])

Email: [REDACTED]@epsom-ewell.gov.uk
Website: www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk

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