



Council cancel culture?

Some opposition Councillors on **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** have voiced concerns over the apparently high rate of cancellation of policy and scrutiny committees of the Council on which they serve.

Epsom and Ewell Times has looked at the 8 policy, audit and standard committees (and Full Council) in the Council calendar ending 31st March 2024.

Of 39 programmed meetings 9 are marked as having been cancelled in the 12 month period.

Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court) said "With 4 policy committees cancelled in March it does beg the question if the Residents' Association (the ruling group on the Council) leadership has run out of steam and ideas. There is little evidence of a vision and the laser focus needed to tackle the challenges the borough faces. Homelessness costs the council ever increasing amounts to house residents in out of borough temporary accommodations away from their children's schools and family support networks. Reducing crime and anti-social behaviour these are the issues we hear about on residents' doorsteps and where the residents want change."

She added: "We need the committees' meetings to generate ideas and plan how to manage these difficult issues rather than ignoring them in the misguided hope they will go away."

Cllr. **Julie Morris** (Liberal Democrat - College Ward) said: "The Liberal Democrats have been concerned at almost a whole cycle of policy committee meetings being cancelled. A progress statement, or discussion in public, on the Draft Local Plan is long overdue, amongst other progress reports on various topics. Whether or not decisions are being taken under delegated powers, or whether or not decisions do not actually need the meeting of a policy committee to take place, is irrelevant.

The point is that surely it is now virtually impossible for either councillors or the public to influence an agenda, similarly for the public to know what's going on within the Town Hall, or track a topic, nor is it obvious what major or minor decisions are being taken, and how and why they are being taken. Public engagement is at an all time low, lower than it has been at any time during my 27 years involved with the borough council."

She is proposing a motion at the next Full Council meeting due 16th April to promote greater transparency and reduce private sessions of committees that exclude press and public without clear justification.

Cllr. **Robert Leach** (Residents Association - Nonsuch Ward) said: "My understanding is that a meeting is cancelled if there is nothing to discuss. Simple as that!"

Cllr. **John Beckett** (Residents Association - Auriol Ward) said: "The reality is that the Council agrees dates of committee meetings up to 18 months in advance and Council business doesn't always fit with the timings of the agreed dates. Every council cancels and adds meetings to its annual calendar to reflect this and EEBC is no different. Also, no meeting is ever cancelled, or an extraordinary meeting called without there being a valid reason to do so."

Cllr. **Alex Coley** (Residents Association - Ruxley Ward) is Chairman of the Crime and Disorder Committee which has had three out of four meetings *apparently* cancelled, said: "There was a Crime & Disorder scrutiny committee from May 2022 to May 2023 which never met. This is because it would have duplicated the crime & disorder scrutiny powers of the Audit & Scrutiny committee. The cancellations of 10 Nov 2022, 10 Jan 2022 and 4 Apr 2023 were programmed in advance and should ideally be removed.

The current Crime & Disorder committee had meetings programmed into the annual calendar before I became chair. Upon taking the role I decided it would be more practical to reschedule the 2 Nov 2023 and 19 Mar 2024 meetings so they are in line with the other policy committee meetings which align to the Council's budget cycle (hence 12 Sep 2023 and 17 Jan 2024). I believe that ModGov (committee software) shows reschedules as cancellations."

A spokesperson for Epsom and Ewell Borough Council wrote: "Committee Meeting dates are agreed up to 18 months in advance, and Council business does not always fit with the timings of the agreed dates. It is normal practice in every council to cancel, reschedule or add meetings to reflect this, and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is no different. We have thorough, legally compliant and transparent processes to propose and add items to Committee Meeting agendas, and no Committee meeting is ever cancelled or rescheduled (or an Extraordinary meeting called) without there being a valid reason to do so."

Epsom and Ewell Times has looked at the committee calendars of the other ten Surrey Boroughs for the same period.

It is not possible to compare accurately as each Council uses its own terminology. Some Council's may programme fewer meetings in the first place. We have ignored, as we did for Epsom and Ewell, sub-committees, postponements and committees driven by external demand eg., planning and licensing.



Elmbridge Borough Council is very difficult to compare as it uses a different nomenclature and form for its committees. Guildford Borough Council cancelled 8 meetings in the same period. Mole Valley District Council appears to have had 3 equivalent committee meetings cancelled. Reigate and Banstead Borough Council cancelled 3. Runnymede Borough Council = 1. Spelthorne Borough Council = 3. Surrey Heath Borough Council - None. Tandridge District Council - None. Waverley Borough Council -2 and Woking Borough Council - None.

Related reports:

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Gina Miller Urges Ecocide Criminalization

Gina Miller, the leader of the True & Fair Party, and her Party’s Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for **Epsom and Ewell**, has called for the criminalization of ecocide, highlighting concerns over the UK’s environmental stance post-Brexit and its widening gap with the European Union (EU).

The True & Fair Party has become the first UK political entity to incorporate an ecocide pledge into its manifesto for the next general election.

Miller’s argues that Brexit has not only hindered environmental progress but also left the UK trailing behind the EU in environmental protection measures. The proposed legislation aims to define ecocide as a criminal offence, targeting deliberate acts leading to significant and lasting harm to ecosystems.

Gina Miller said: “We were once called the poor man of Europe. Unless our politicians seriously address the need for robust, pragmatic rules and regulations to safeguard our nation against the negative effects of climate change, we will be the dirty, ill, poor man of Europe.

“The WMO is sounding the alarm that climate change is closely intertwined with the inequality crisis. That extreme weather conditions, worsened by lack of action, are leading to food security and population displacement – unfairly impacting vulnerable populations.

“By enacting a law against ecocide, we will be taking decisive action to limit the reckless destruction.

Under her proposed law, major polluters could face severe penalties, including up to ten years in prison or fines of up to £3.85 million. This initiative aligns with efforts in other countries; France has already implemented similar regulations, while the EU is in the process of ratifying an ecocide law.

Recent analyses by the Institute for European Environmental Policy suggest a concerning trend in the UK’s environmental policies post-Brexit, indicating a weakening of regulations on crucial fronts like water treatment, air quality, and industrial emissions.

Miller emphasizes the need for international recognition, advocating for ecocide to be classified as a crime under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, alongside other serious offenses.

The urgency of such measures is underscored by warnings from the World Meteorological Organization about the escalating climate crisis. Miller warns that failure to address ecocide not only undermines environmental sustainability but also exacerbates inequalities and threatens future generations’ well-being.

Chris Packham, environmental campaigner, said: “It’s a bold, brave and exciting move by the True & Fair Party, to campaign to have ecocide written into law, in the midst of our climate and biodiversity crises. Congratulations!”

Georgia Elliott-Smith, Director of Fighting Dirty, and former UNESCO Special Junior Envoy for Youth & Environment, said: “Embracing ecocide as an international crime is a beautifully simple solution. It ensures the polluters pay for the harm they cause and can be punished as such.”

Miller’s call to action reflects a growing consensus among environmentalists and policymakers: addressing ecocide is imperative for safeguarding the planet’s future. As the UK navigates its environmental challenges, decisive legislative action could pave the way towards a more sustainable and equitable future.



Photo credit: Keith Edkins CC BY-SA 4.0

More than a Hollywood Moment for Surrey

Amazon MGM Studios and Netflix have taken up residence in the completed expansion of Shepperton Studios. The development makes Shepperton Studios the second biggest film studio in the world with a total of 31 purpose-built sound stages alongside ancillary production accommodation, the whole site covers 1.5 million sq ft.

Chris Bird, Managing Director, Prime Video UK said, "It feels fitting that, ten years from the launch of Prime Video, we're beginning our tenure in brand new facilities at Shepperton Studios. It's so exciting that some of our most loved series and movies around the world will be made right here in the UK, including season three of our fantastic UK Original The Devil's Hour. Shepperton Studios have long been synonymous with world class filmmaking, and we're delighted to continue supporting and investing in the UK creative industries."

Anna Mallett, Vice President Production EMEA/UK Netflix said, "The UK is our most important production hub outside North America. Today's announcement reinforces our long-term commitment to Britain's creative sector. Since 2020, we have invested over \$6 billion in the UK creating shows like Sex Education, The Crown and Bridgerton here. The completion of Shepperton will allow us to expand our footprint even further, creating incredible new shows, jobs and a boost for the economy."

Paul Golding CBE, Chairman, Pinewood Group said, "We're incredibly pleased to have opened our new state-of-the-art facilities at Shepperton Studios and to see Netflix and Amazon MGM Studios making this long-term commitment to the studios and to the UK."

Commenting on the announcement, **Tim Oliver**, Leader of Surrey County Council, said: "This is fantastic news for Shepperton and for Surrey as a whole, cementing our reputation as a region for innovation, creativity and top class talent."

"The fact that two of the largest content producers in the world have chosen Shepperton and Surrey for a global base speaks volumes for the amazing offer the county provides to businesses, large and small."

"We look forward to deepening our relationships with Shepperton, Amazon and Netflix in the months and years to come, so we can ensure our residents and businesses benefit from the investment, jobs and opportunities this brings."

Prime Minister **Rishi Sunak** said, "The decision by the two largest content producers in the world to choose their long-term home in the UK and base their global productions at Shepperton Studios backed by private sector investment is testament to the support the Government has given to the UK's screen sector."

"I am thrilled that Amazon MGM Studios and Netflix have taken possession of 17 new state of the art sound stages at Shepperton Studios making Pinewood Group, the biggest studio complex in Europe."

"This support was further demonstrated by the recent £1billion package of measures for the creative industries announced in the recent Budget. The UK is now the second largest production hub, second only to Hollywood, in the world."

Worcester Park school celebrates

Worcester Park's Linden Bridge School caters for 144 students with autism and complex social and communication needs from four to 19-years-old, including 20 in the sixth form and a residential facility which can accommodate 32 places, with pupils typically staying for two nights a week.

The school's pupils are exceptionally well-prepared for future life, and they feel valued and secure as a result of strong relationships with staff, says a recent Ofsted report, which judges pupils' personal development to be 'outstanding'.

The school was inspected in January and graded 'good' overall, recognising the ongoing improvements made since joining **The Howard Partnership Trust** in 2021, at which time it was judged as 'requires improvement.'

Principal, Mrs **Claire Gungah** said "We are absolutely delighted that the inspection report confirms that Linden Bridge School is a good school with an outstanding provision for the personal development of students."



"In highlighting the many strengths in our school, we are particularly pleased that the report recognises that we are delivering on our core mission, and acknowledges the hard work of staff, the Trust and support from our community in developing the school".

Noting that the report celebrated students being a credit to the school, and demonstrated their strong relationships with staff, she added

"A huge thank you needs to go to the students who were at the heart of the process and as always, made us proud throughout the inspection showcasing their maturity, friendships, communication skills and pride in their achievements."

The report says both the school and the Trust have 'rightly prioritised' improving the curriculum. Work had started at the last inspection, but it has 'gone from strength-to-strength.'

"The school's carefully designed curriculum is now well established in most subjects," notes the inspector.

"Learning to read is given a high priority. A new phonics programme has been introduced since the last inspection and is now securely established. Comprehensive training has ensured that staff are confident about teaching phonics," says the report.

"The school provides an extensive and ambitious range of events and activities. For instance, all pupils experience a sporting event and the oldest pupils are involved in organising events such as sports week."

Soni of Stagecoach Epsom lands lead role

Vishal Soni student of Stagecoach Performing Arts in **Epsom** landed the lead role in the National Theatre's musical production of Roald Dahl's **The Witches**.

Vishal fought off strong competition in auditions to land the role of Luke in a rip-roaring musical version of Roald Dahl's timeless tale. In the original the boy at the centre of the story is unnamed. "Luke" follows the 1990 film version which gave the boy the name.

Performing on stage at the National Theatre for the 11-week production, Vishal shone in his remarkable portrayal of the courageous young protagonist.

The Witches is a rip-roaring musical version of Roald Dahl's timeless tale, filled with wit, daring and heart. The Witches have come up with their most evil plan yet, and the only thing standing in their way is Luke and his Gran.

Vishal has been a student of Stagecoach Performing Arts in Epsom for nine years and has an impressive resume under his belt, including standout performances in *The Sound of Music* at Chichester, a UK tour of *Les Misérables*, and *The Prince of Egypt* in London's West End.

His upcoming role in the 2024 film adaptation of musical, *Wicked*, is a testament to his unwavering passion and undeniable talent.

Commenting Rachel Crouch, Principal of Stagecoach Epsom, said: "I've always been immensely proud of Vishal. Not only has he gone from job to job, but he has done so with such a professional and humble attitude. He's an absolute star and we couldn't be prouder. Thank you also to HF Management, his fabulous agents."

The *Witches* run at the National Theatre has now closed. *Wicked* is due to be released later this year.

Vishal in the production at the National Theatre. Photo credit: Marc Brenner

Civic awards at civic reception

The Epsom and Ewell Mayor's civic reception took place at Bourne Hall, Ewell on Friday 8th March. The "great and the good" of the Borough, including Member of Parliament **Chris Grayling**, gathered at this special annual event that witnessed the conferment of the title of Alderman of Epsom and Ewell to three long-serving local councillors.





The ceremonies began with the Mayor's Active Citizen Award. The Mayor, Cllr **Rob Geleit** (Labour Court Ward), presented this year's award to **Barbara Lewis**, praising her selfless dedication to the community: "Barbara, born in Kingston, was instilled with a strong sense of altruism by her late mother. After attending Tiffin Girls Grammar School and serving in the civil service, Barbara settled in Ewell with her husband Martin, celebrating their upcoming Golden Wedding Anniversary. Barbara's commitment to her local area, Station Avenue, has been unwavering. Notably, she spearheaded efforts to provide scrubs, masks, and other essentials to frontline workers during the pandemic, and organized a heartwarming visit from Santa for children in her neighborhood. Barbara's involvement extends to various charitable endeavors, including Epsom Twinning Society and Epsom Rotary Club, and she even finds time to teach a Spanish class for the University of Third Age (U3A). Additionally, Barbara has dedicated herself to fundraising, notably supporting the Mayor's Charity Committee. Her generosity knows no bounds, always willing to help and support her community."



Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh), spoke up for **Chris Frost**, and welcomed him as an Honorary Alderman of Epsom and Ewell, recognizing his positive impact on local politics: "Chris's journey in politics began in his youth, and his dedication led to his election to the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and later the Surrey County Council. Known for his community spirit, Chris spearheaded initiatives like the Interfaith Forum and the Epsom and Ewell Community Fund."

Ms Dalton commended Chris's wife, Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley), for her unwavering support and thanked his family for their presence. She expressed gratitude to all who supported Chris over the years, including council officers.



Eber Kington signs the book with Mayor and EEBC CEO Jackie King looking on.

Cllr **Peter O'Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) reflected on **Eber Kington's** remarkable career, celebrating his induction as an Honorary Alderman: "Born in Battersea, Eber's journey into local politics began in the 80s when he joined the Woodcote Residents' Association, eventually becoming a respected councillor. Eber's tenure was marked by his commitment to his constituents, often being the first point of contact for residents' concerns. Despite his aversion to planning matters, Eber's dedication to his community was unwavering. His tenure as Mayor in 1999 was memorable, highlighted by his unconventional but effective leadership style. Eber's dedication to community service extends beyond politics, evident in his charity work and love for Chelsea Football Club." Mr O'Donovan praised Eber's integrity, noting his willingness to listen and support fellow councillors.





Finally, Cllr **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley) spoke emotionally in praise of the late Mr **Clive Smitheram** who was awarded the Honour of Alderman of the Borough of Epsom and Ewell posthumously. Clive was a central figure in West Ewell having lived there for over 30 years with his wife Gill and family and although a proud Cornishman, Clive was someone who knew everyone locally and if he didn't know someone, he knew someone who did! Clive was a former police officer, having served 31 years in the service and was a retired community safety officer. As an active resident, it led to Clive being elected as a Resident Association Councillor for West Ewell serving for over 20 years, Clive was a former Mayor of Epsom and Ewell in 2010- 2011.

Mrs Smitheram receives the honour on behalf of the late Clive Smitheram.

All photos below heading courtesy Steven McCormick Photography

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New Bus Route for S2 through the Borough

The transport landscape in East Ewell has seen a significant improvement with the inauguration of Bus Route S2. Commencing operations on 2nd March 2024, the S2 service now runs seven days a week, including Sundays, providing a crucial link between Epsom and St Helier Station. The new route serves several key areas, including Ewell East, Cheam, and Sutton, enhancing connectivity for residents in these regions.

The introduction of Route S2 marks a strategic change in the local bus network, as it replaces the 470 service from Colliers Wood to Epsom, which now terminates at Sutton. This adjustment was made following consultation by Transport for London (TFL) on bus routes in the Sutton and Croydon areas.

Route S2 operates via a series of primary locations, including St Helier Station, Sutton Station, Cheam Station, Ewell High Street, and Epsom Clock Tower, offering a convenient and efficient mode of transport for commuters in the region. The route is operated by London General from their Sutton (A) garage, utilizing brand new Enviro200 MMC EV bodied BYD D8URs, with temporary use of an existing vehicle of the same type.

The introduction of Route S2 represents a positive step towards improving public transport accessibility and connectivity in East Ewell, benefitting residents and commuters alike.

Mixed reaction to Hunt's budget in Surrey

In a significant development outlined in today's Spring Budget, Surrey MP and Chancellor **Jeremy Hunt** confirmed the **Surrey County** Deal agreement, heralding a new era of devolution for Surrey County Council. This agreement, initially hinted at during last year's Autumn Statement, has been the focus of collaborative efforts between Surrey County Council officials and the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Outlined within this agreement are several key provisions aimed at empowering local governance within Surrey:

- Devolution of the Adult Education Budget and funding for Free Courses for Jobs.
- Integration of Local Enterprise Partnership functions.
- Transfer of new land assembly and compulsory purchase power to the Council.
- Strategic oversight for the delivery of future rounds of UKSPF.

Furthermore, the agreement signifies an intent for further devolution from central government to Surrey, allowing for the deepening of devolution arrangements over time, subject to Government agreement. Notably, this agreement does not mandate



any structural reform of local government or unitarisation, preserving the sovereignty of the 12 Councils, including 11 District and Borough Councils alongside the County Council.

"Local government and our local communities are best placed to deliver what Surrey needs. I'm pleased that the government is recognising that, with hopefully further devolved powers to local government in due course," said **Tim Oliver**, (Conservative) Leader of Surrey County Council, expressing optimism regarding the devolution deal.

"This is a positive step to enable ambitious plans for Surrey's residents by devolving control to Local government and our local communities, that are best placed to deliver what Surrey needs. Working with our Partners we can maximise opportunities across a wide spectrum of residents' priorities," said Surrey County and Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative - Horton)).

Dr. **Jonathan Carr-West**, Chief Executive of the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), offered insights into the broader context of today's Budget announcements. "Our latest research found half of councils believe they could face bankruptcy within the next parliament. Council taxpayers are paying ever higher rates for fewer services...The Chancellor recognised market failures in children's residential care and SEND support but councils will not feel that this is enough to counteract the cost increases they have faced in those areas," Dr. Carr-West remarked, urging for a productive debate on potential solutions to the funding crisis.

Paul Lavercombe, tax partner at BDO in the South East, provided a business perspective on the Budget, noting the limited measures for businesses but highlighting certain provisions that may benefit taxpayers and stimulate investment, particularly in regional growth businesses. He said "'The Chancellor was under pressure to deliver tax cuts and while this wasn't forthcoming for businesses with some hoping there would be a reduction to corporation tax signposted, taxpayers will welcome the national insurance cuts announced. Despite being pitched as a Budget for long-term growth, there was very little for business. The only obvious winner being the creative industries."

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False schizo claim rapist gets 8 years

Following a three week trial an **Epsom** man who claimed schizophrenia goes down 8 years for rapes. **Joseph Head**, 25, of Chase Road, Epsom, was found guilty of three counts of rape and one count of sexual assault by penetration. Head received an eight-year prison sentence at Winchester Crown Court on Tuesday, February 27.

During the three-week trial, the prosecution unveiled a troubling sequence of events characterized by manipulation and coercion. Head, in an attempt to evade accountability, feigned dissociative identity disorder, alleging that one of his personas, 'J', posed a violent threat, thereby pressuring his victim into compliance.

The survivor, displaying remarkable courage, shared her ordeal spanning three months, marked by fear and intimidation at the hands of Head. His peculiar fixation on the film 'Split', featuring a character with dissociative identity disorder, only served to underscore the calculated nature of his deception.

However, Head's elaborate facade unraveled under scrutiny. Expert testimony debunked his false claims, revealing the stark reality behind his manipulative tactics. A meticulous investigation, incorporating victim testimony, forensic analysis, and digital scrutiny, exposed the truth.

Investigating officer Andy Price of Surrey Police characterized Head as a "dangerous predator" who exploited and instilled fear in his victim. He added: "'The unique circumstances of this case posed a challenge to the team but with the unwavering support from the survivor, a thorough investigation and dedication by the team to bring Head to justice, a conviction was secured.

"I would like to acknowledge the bravery of the survivor was in coming forward to us, supporting the investigation and helping keep other women safe. Although the trauma of what happened cannot be erased, I hope this outcome can give at least some measure of closure."

If you have been sexually assaulted and need further help and advice, please click here <https://www.surrey.police.uk/ro/report/rsa/alpha-v1/advice/rape-sexual-assault-and-other-sexual-offences/>



More Surrey children in care to be cared for in Surrey

In a move to bolster support for children in care, **Surrey County Council** has announced the inauguration of three state-of-the-art children's homes, marking a significant stride in their commitment to enhancing residential capacity within the county. Situated in **Epsom** and Walton-on-Thames, these purpose-built facilities aim to provide a nurturing environment for Surrey children in need.

The council's investment of £34 million in improving sufficiency for children in care, coupled with £2.4 million allocated for workforce development, underscores their dedication to addressing the pressing needs of vulnerable children within the county. This comprehensive capital programme encompasses the creation of new facilities as well as the renovation and expansion of existing ones, resulting in the addition of over 30 individual bedrooms, thus affording more children the opportunity to remain within their communities.

Presently, approximately 70% of Surrey children in residential care are placed outside the county due to a scarcity of available homes. The council's strategic investment aims to reverse this trend by bolstering in-county provision. The newly inaugurated homes in Epsom and Walton-on-Thames, accommodating a total of ten children each, prioritize the placement of children currently residing outside the county, fostering a sense of belonging and stability.

The completion of these homes has been met with enthusiasm by **Clare Curran**, Cabinet Member for Children, Families, and Lifelong Learning, who expressed her delight at the prospect of offering more Surrey children a supportive home environment. Similarly, **Natalie Bramhall**, Cabinet Member for Property, Waste, and Infrastructure, commended the meticulous planning and design considerations that have gone into creating these homes, emphasizing their accessibility, homeliness, and integration with local amenities.

The construction of these homes has paved the way for new career opportunities in residential care, aligning with the council's commitment to workforce development. As the council moves closer to its sufficiency targets, with an additional home currently underway in Dorking, Surrey may emerge as a leading provider of children's home places nationwide by 2027.

Two Surrey children's homes have already receiving 'Good' and 'Outstanding' ratings from Ofsted this year. As Surrey County Council continues to expand its residential care capacity, the welfare of vulnerable children within the county is set to receive a substantial boost.

For more information, visit Surrey County Council's website and YouTube channel for insights into their Sufficiency Strategies and a video tour of one of the newly inaugurated children's homes, featuring commentary from key council members. Additionally, individuals interested in pursuing a career in residential care in Surrey are encouraged to explore current opportunities on the Surrey County Council job pages.