



Storm Eunice - Can the Epsom Common Ducks handle it?

Storm Eunice is battering the nation, delaying flights, cancelling trains and causing general tutting and annoyance from all prospective travellers, but there are unsung victims of these gale-force winds, the poor ducks who reside in the ponds of Epsom Common, will they be able to cope with the 90mph winds? If gazebos and golden apple trees alike can't handle the winds, will our little winged friends manage?

Catalytic Converter Theft - What can we do?

Theft of catalytic converters in Epsom is a serious and longstanding issue for our area, despite repeated reassurances from the police that they are tackling this issues - can we truly feel safe leaving our cars unattended in Epsom?

Budget Report: More council tax for Epsom and Ewell

Epsom and Ewell households will pay more council tax from April after the Borough Council agreed on its budget for 2022-23 at a meeting of the full Council on Tuesday evening (February 15).

The budget-setting meeting sets out the Borough Council's expected revenue and expenditure for the forthcoming year and, as a consequence, the additional amount the Council needs to raise in council tax.

The budget proposals were put forward by the governing party, in Epsom and Ewell's case the Residents' Association group, stating how they are managing the council's finances. This was followed by speeches from the opposition council groups:

Councillor Colin Keane (RA, Nonsuch), chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee proposed a Borough council tax increase of £4.95 a year for a B and D property, or 2.38%, as a result of what he called "a robust and sustainable budget" and despite "another challenging year". "Our strong financial position" he said, "has been the result of many years of sound advice and excellent financial management by our finance team."

Councillor Keane criticised the Labour opposition for arguing that council tax should not be raised. He argued that such a course would create a £165,000 shortfall and accused Labour of failing "to propose what policies and strategies could be adopted to fill the reduced income".

Cllr Kate Chinn (Lab, Court Ward) argued that "residents of Epsom and Ewell, along with everyone else in this country, are facing a huge rise in the cost of living" and put forward ways of increasing revenue and cutting costs. "Review of venues such as the Playhouse and Bourne Hall can increase revenue and tackling homelessness can reduce costs," she argued and went on to propose other measures, even questioning whether the Town Hall itself is needed now that many staff continue to work from home.

But, later in the debate, veteran Councillor Jan Mason (RA, Ruxley Ward) responded angrily to Labour, saying that, for the £4.95 rise, "we get weekly bin collections, we get our parks and open spaces that are second to none, and we have the wonderful centre in Sefton Road. These are things we are choosing to do for our residents. We have one of the best boroughs in this country. If the Labour party are worried about nine and a half pence a week, the price of 2 cups of coffee a year, then all I can say to them is - get a grip of yourselves."

Speaking for the Liberal Democrat group, David Gulland (College Ward) concentrated on the Climate Emergency, arguing that, 3 years on from the Council's own Climate Action Plan, "we still have no funds allocated for specific actions to reduce our own emissions...Let's get on and do some of these projects." He also suggested that the Council should take a lead by shifting its own investments. "It would be relatively easy to ensure some of our portfolio is redeployed into equivalent funds with Green credentials," he said "Let's join up and live our values."

Another veteran Councillor, Eber Kington (RA, Ewell Court) quoted independent auditors as saying that "the Council has a track



record of delivering robust financial plans". He attacked the Labour party's zero tax rise policy and went on to criticise the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, whose one Borough Councillor was unable to respond as she was in the hospital.

Leading committee member, Cllr Hannah Dalton (RA, Stoneleigh), was the last to speak in the debate. Also responding to Labour's comments, she said that "review of the venues and venue strategy, the Town Hall strategy, and homelessness, they're all in here [the annual plan being discussed]". And responding to a Liberal Democrat comment about sharing services with other Councils, she said that "we are working closely with East Surrey to look at opportunities [for] synergy - we've got to be doing that".

26 Residents' Association Councillors, voted for the budget, the Labour group voted against, and Liberal Democrats, arguing they were broadly in favour but there were some aspects they couldn't support, abstained.

The £4.95 increase in the Borough Council's precept is not the only extra amount of council tax to pay in the forthcoming year. The Borough Council accounts for only 10% of the overall amount of council tax collected. Conservative-controlled Surrey County Council receives 76% of the council tax and the remaining 14% is taken by Surrey Police. SCC's portion is increasing by £77.31 this year (4.99%) for a Band D property and Surrey Police's precept by exactly £10 or 3.4%. This means that the overall council tax increase for a band D property in the forthcoming year will be £92.26 or 4.52%.

Council Meeting: Does Epsom need more trees?

Thursday 30 September 2021 the first in-person full Council meeting since Co-Vid was held in the Council Chamber Town Hall The Parade Epsom.

The Council considered the Annual Plan 2021-2022 in the context of the Council's Four Year Plan 2020 - 2024. Agreement was sought to update key objectives and performance indicators for 2021 - 2022.

One point of contention was raised by Cllr Julie Morris (College Ward Liberal Democrat) concerning the small number of trees the Council aims to have planted in the year. 10 being too few in her opinion.

Where on Council land do you think Epsom and Ewell Borough Council could plant a new tree? Could you or your neighbourhood buy a sapling and ask the Council to plant it? Let us know your thoughts

Council Meeting: Privatising Legal Advice?

Amardip Healy, the Chief Law Officer of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, resigned from her post in August. She filled the statutory role of "Monitoring Officer". The function of a Monitoring Officer is reporting on contraventions or likely contraventions of any enactment or rule of law and reporting on any maladministration or injustice where the Ombudsman has carried out an investigation; establishing and maintaining registers of Members' interests and gifts and hospitality; maintaining, reviewing and monitoring the Constitution.

During the Full Council of **30th September 2021** convened to authorise the appointment of an interim monitoring officer for 12 months, many Councillors were taken-aback by a decision reached "behind closed doors" to outsource this important function to a solicitor in private practice for a monthly fee of £1900 for an unspecified commitment in time and an hourly rate of £190 for exceptional work. One presumes VAT at 20% is added to the legal bills. The solicitor appointed, Olwen Brown of the firm Anthony Collins, is undoubtedly expert in this field and she impressed the inner circle of Councillors who had the privilege of interviewing her for the position.

Labour Councillors and some Residents Association Councillors expressed their concerns as to the cost. Eber Kington, former leader of the ruling Residents Association Group, defended the decision and claimed it would demonstrate resilience. Cllr Debbie Monksfield Court Ward (Labour) complained that this arrangement would inhibit her in the performance of her democratic duties. The Monitoring Officer provides neutral advice to Councillors in Opposition and from now she would be afraid to ask for advice knowing the lawyer's billing meter might be running at Council Tax payers' expense.

Cllr David Gulland (College Ward Liberal Democrat) criticised the process by which this *fait accompli* had come about but voted in favour of it reluctantly because the law requires a Monitoring Officer to be in place. The three Labour Councillors who form the



official Opposition against the 33 strong ruling Residents stood firm and voted against.

The Council's view is that the fixed rate will cover the expected workload and only exceptional work such as complex investigations of a Councillor would attract additional fees. For more detail of the financial arrangements see [HERE](#)*.

Support for Afghan Refugees

Following the British and allies' humiliation in Afghanistan in August this year the UK Government has urged local Councils to participate in the Afghan Locally Employed Staff Relocation Scheme. The urgent need is to provide homes to those refugees who fled from the Taliban takeover and are currently in temporary accommodation in the UK. Funds are promised to local authorities willing to support the resettlement of Afghan interpreters and others (and their families), who worked for UK Forces, the UK Embassy and other official British interests.

The scheme supports rent and other housing costs, local authority support staff salaries and "integration support" (e.g., English language, education and health). The funds promised by the Government range over a three year period from £22,340 for one adult in a one bedroom property to £134,040 for a 2 adult 4 children family in a 4 bedroom property.

The Council Officers recommended that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council undertake support for 2 families but an amendment moved by Court Ward Councillor Kate Chinn (Labour) was accepted by all Councillors and 5 families will be supported. The greatest challenge to the programme will be identifying landlords willing to provide suitable properties.

Nina Kaye of the Epsom Refugee Network responded to the decision We are pleased to hear that the Council has voted to take up to five Afghan families being re-settled under the LES (Locally Employed Staff) scheme. These families have risked so much to support our troops in Afghanistan and as a result have had to flee their homes and their country. There are many highly skilled individuals in this group who will be a real asset to our Community. Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network will be working with the Council to support these families when they arrive, helping them to learn English and settle into life in the UK".

Joanna Sherring of Epsom Community Sponsorship stated: "Our Charity is applying to be a Community Sponsorship group in Epsom & Ewell and it's great to see such support for refugees in our community. Hopefully we will never know what it feels like to lose everything and have to start a new life in a different country. I am so proud to be part of a such a passionate group of people who want to offer the chance of a new life to a refugee family"

Epsom and Ewell is by no means alone in the County in supporting the scheme with all the other 10 District Councils supporting between 2 (Mole Valley) and 5 to 10 (Waverley).

Full details of the scheme and Government explanations are available [HERE](#)