

## 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.

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