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Epsom and Ewell planning improving after Government threat?

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Three Surrey councils have been warned that their planning departments are “not good enough” and threatened with having their decision-making powers stripped.

Guildford, Waverley, and **Epsom and Ewell Borough Councils** have each been written to by the Housing Secretary Michael Gove over their “very poor” quality of service that fell “far below” expected thresholds.

Councils must determine at least 70 per cent of non-major planning applications within eight weeks – or agree to an extension. The three Surrey councils have fallen well below that figure, the department said.
Mr Gove was therefore “minded” to designate the councils, meaning developers could bypass them completely and submit planning applications directly to the Planning Inspectorate. The impact effectively strips a local authority’s say over planning matters.

The letter to all three councils, part of a group of 10 nationally to be given final warning, read:

“The Government is clear that having an efficient and effective planning service at local authority level is essential to delivering the homes, building and investment the country needs.
“The planning performance regime was introduced to ensure that all local planning authorities contribute to this objective. I have significant concerns about the performance of a handful of local authorities including your council.”

For Guildford, its performance of 50.1 per cent between October 2020 and September 2022 was far below the expected threshold of 70 per cent. In **Epsom and Ewell that level was 52.5 percent**, and in Waverley it was 61.7 per cent.

The letter continued: “That is indicative of a very poor quality service to local residents and a significant deterrent to investment in your local housing market and wider economy. That is not good enough, and despite some more encouraging recent data, I am therefore minded to designate [the council]. “

Mr Gove has now asked the Planning Inspectorate to prepare for designations over the summer period but said they had until June to make the required improvement to their planning service and “to exceed our performance thresholds and stay above it consistently”.

If levels were to drop again, he said, he would “ not hesitate” to use his “powers to designate your council later this year”.

Waverley Conservatives have since called on the council’s ruling coalition to “get a grip” on planning.
Councillor Carole Cockburn, acting leader of Waverley Conservatives, said: “Communities and local businesses have had the threat of the planning department being taken into special measures hanging over them for months because of the Lib Dem-Labour-Green-Farnham Residents Party coalition administration’s inability to deal with the problem. They need to get a grip, and fast, to save our local voice in planning matters. Otherwise, people and businesses across Waverley will continue to suffer.”

A spokesperson for Waverley Borough Council said that planning performance suffered in 2021 and early 2022, was a result of the pandemic, “teething issues” with a new planning IT system, an increase in applications following lockdown and a nationwide shortage of planning officers.

Since then, they said there had been a “significant uplift in planning performance, and we are making headway in reducing the backlog of planning applications, but caseloads for our officers remain high” . Staffing remains a “significant challenge”.

They added: “Mr Gove has acknowledged the improvement in our performance and rather than moving to formally designate the council, has given us the opportunity to demonstrate this improvement over a longer period of time.”

Waverley Borough Council portfolio holder for planning and economic development, Councillor Liz Townsend, said: “We have been working closely with the Planning Advisory Service to improve our performance, and during the three most recent quarters 83 per cent, 92 per cent and 96 per cent of non-major applications respectively, were determined within the allotted time – significantly above the Government’s 70 per cent target. Our view is that designation is not appropriate and would be counterproductive to sustaining and improving on the gains in planning performance we have achieved over the last year.”

A Guildford Borough Council spokesperson said that it have been working to reduce backlog since June but that caseloads remain high. They said: “To supplement our internal planning team and improve performance, we have employed external planning consultants and temporary planning officers.

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“With housing and the cost of living so high in Surrey, recruiting and retaining talent in the South-East remains a significant challenge. However, we are actively recruiting new permanent planners to help build a resilient planning function. Our new executive head of planning development, Claire Upton-Brown, took up post on March 20, 2023. She has a strong history of turning services around and is well qualified to address the challenges we are facing, with the support of the senior management and councillor team.”

Jackie King, chief executive of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** said the authority was hopeful the secretary of state would recognise the “significant” improvements it had made in recent months. She said: “The council has been fully aware of this historic issue relating to performance over that period, which was a result of Covid and capacity-related issues. “Having acknowledged the issues, the council took swift decisive action to address issues, resulting in the recruitment of a new management team in early 2022, the securing of additional staffing resourcing within the department as well as investing in IT and improved ways of working. Additional process reviews and follow on improvements were identified and implemented. All actions and process improvements have the full support of members. As a result of the council’s actions, performance on planning applications has improved rapidly and significantly. Since early 2022, the council has continued to determine well over 90 per cent of planning applications within the statutory timescale target.”

She added: “Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has demonstrated a sustained improvement in service and performance and have been in regular contact with officials at DLUHC over the past year to keep them up to date with the progress which the council has made. When the Minister reviews Epsom and Ewell’s performance again in June, the council will be able show five successive quarters of performance well above the 70 per cent target:

APR/MAY/JUN 2022 – 95 per cent
JUL/AUG/SEP 2022 – 92 per cent
OCT/NOV/DEC 2022 – 94 per cent
JAN/FEB/MAR 2023 – 96 per cent
APR/MAY/JUN 2023 – 97 per cent (to date)

“Once reviewed we are hopeful that the minister will acknowledge and recognise that the issues the council faced were historic and temporary in nature and this council has taken significant proactive steps to address and improve.”

The full list of councils written to by Michal Gove were:

Calderdale, Cotswold, **Epsom and Ewell**, Guildford, Hinckley and Bosworth, Pendle, Portsmouth, Vale of White Horse and Waverley councils, as well as the Peak District National Park Authority.

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