

Eviction may kill societies

The future of Surbiton societies and groups is in peril after their overnight eviction from the council-owned hall where they've met for decades.

With no advance warning, 30 clubs were emailed by council contractor Engie to say that hire of the Ewell Road library annexe had ended with immediate effect.

Bird watchers, poets, historians, train buffs, archaeologists, tap dancers... all were suddenly given the heave-ho.

Engie, the £145bn giant contracted to run local services, told hirers: "Kingston Council have decided to take back the hall for permanent use by their staff".

The shock move has already forced two groups to close after a Covid-ruined year.

Others may fold too, robbing Surbiton of the interest groups which contribute so much to community life... exiled from the place specifically built to house them.

MP Ed Davey has been alerted, and councillors are now demanding answers.

Toddlers' music, Surbiton Arts Group, Surbiton Historical Society, Surbiton Bird Watchers, the poetry circle, the railway nostalgia group, Kingston Archaeological Society, Kingston Philatelic Society, Young Embroiderers... all are homeless.

The council recently upgraded, redecorated and sanded the floors of an annexe built next to the library in 1964 to satisfy societies' demand.

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The straight 'A' star

● Stand out from the

● Cont'd from p1

Groups are evicted from hall

Tony Drake, who attends historical society meetings and Talking of Trains lectures, said: "Closure of the hall could mean closure of many activities, and a great social loss to the community."

The Jo Jingles music and movement class has been forced to close. "I've hired it for five years," said a sorrowful Rebecca English. "I'm shocked they now want the hall for themselves."

Engie offered alternatives in Kingston and New Malden, but it's of little use to Surbiton societies, many of whose members walk to their local meetings.

Is the hall really needed for council staff? One hirer said: "I'm surprised; I didn't realise they worked at night!"

A Guildhall insider told The Good Life that with many staff still working from home, more space wasn't required.

Oddly, adult education classes, forced to quit the King Charles Centre, are

being listed at the hall this month, with drawing, flower-arranging and photography among the subjects.

Surbiton Historical Society chair Paul Lang called it "a terrible shock".

Dance instructor Don Rae said: "This is not fair", while line dance coach Janice Golding said it was "extremely harsh of the council to make us homeless overnight".

Pat McKenna of Kingston Archaeological Society said: "I find it incomprehensible that in a year which has proved very difficult for all local societies, it's now been made worse. These actions show contempt."

Brian Sole (Kingston Philatelic Society) who has used it for 30 years, said: "Losing our meeting place could result in the society's closure."

Clare Rowland of Dancestars called it "a total nightmare".