

Dear Editor,

South Hams District Council has decided to suspend full council meetings for the rest of the year and to use Emergency Legislation procedures. This means that almost all Council decisions will now be taken by the Deputy Chief Executive, a paid official, with ratification by the six-member Council Executive, comprising five Conservatives and one Liberal Democrat.

As Chair of the South Hams Branch of the South West Devon Constituency Labour Party, I am writing to you to express our grave concern and the opposition of the local Labour Party to this drastic step, on two main grounds.

First, the Conservative Leader of the Council argues that most of Council business is now 'tactical', dealing with the Coronavirus emergency, not 'strategic', and therefore not requiring the involvement of elected members. This distinction, between 'tactical' and 'strategic', fails to meet the real concerns that local residents may have about the impact of the Coronavirus emergency on their daily lives.

Decisions taken by the District Council that affect local residents cannot now be questioned by elected representatives in full council meetings. Local residents are faced with Executive decisions about a wide range of activities. These include their businesses not being allowed to open, their waste collection services being cut, their accommodation not being properly maintained, voluntary services left at a loss to know how and why support from SHDC is being managed, and how the increasing numbers reliant on charities and voluntary support are going to feed their families and in extreme cases keep a roof over their heads. In these circumstances, residents are unlikely to be concerned about an abstract argument about whether these decisions are 'strategic' or 'tactical'. It's about impact, not management convenience.

Second, from their own statements, it appears that the Executive regard democracy as at best a luxury, mainly unnecessary and sometimes a nuisance. Local Democracy is not a luxury or unnecessary, though it may be a nuisance to elected councillors in leadership roles who would prefer not to have to have their decisions open to public questioning. Democracy is a right belonging to all local residents, not a luxury to be dispensed with by Executive choice as soon as convenient.

That is why the Labour Party opposes this decision by the South Hams DC Executive. In the absence of the proper and normal functioning of democracy, we will use every opportunity to bring home to the South Hams District Council the impact of its actions on local residents, who are really in the front line of the Coronavirus crisis.

Finally, we will also oppose any attempt to extend these counterproductive and undemocratic methods to Town and Parish Councils across the South Hams. There can be no justification for this.

Democratic representatives are needed, and should be allowed to do their work without restriction.

Paul Furlong, Chair, South Hams Branch,
South West Devon Constituency Labour Party