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Local MP comes to our defence?

30 September 2024



In a significant development in UK party politics, **Helen Maguire**, the Member of Parliament for Epsom & Ewell, has been appointed to the frontbenches of the Liberal Democrats. On September 19th, Liberal Democrat leader Sir **Ed Davey** announced that Maguire would take up the role of spokesperson for Defence and the Armed Forces. This announcement follows the unveiling of the Lib Dems new 33-member frontbench roster, following the party's success in July's general election, where they secured a record 72 parliamentary seats.

Maguire, a former Army captain in the Royal Military Police, brings extensive real-world experience to her new role. She served in Bosnia on a NATO peacekeeping mission and in Iraq, where she assisted the rebuilding of the Iraqi police force. Magiure took to X (formerly known as Twitter) to express her enthusiasm, stating that she is "delighted and honoured" to take on the role, while also highlighting the need for the UK defence budget to reflect the challenging times we face.

A party spokesperson for Defence and the Armed Forces plays a crucial role in communicating the party's stance on national security, military strategy, and defence spending. Helen Maguire is likely to become more prominent in debates on these issues in the House of Commons, especially in light of ongoing global conflicts and increasing geopolitical tensions.

In an era of emerging threats, the public will increasingly turn to the main political parties to ensure the military is effectively managed, underpinned by competent, transparent, and realistic governance. As global conflicts and tensions continue to rise, trust in the leadership and oversight of the armed forces will become a central issue in upcoming elections, with national security playing a critical role in shaping the public's confidence and the country's future stability.

Maguire faces a challenging task, especially as the Liberal Democrats work to rebuild public confidence. The party is likely to be cautious to avoid over-promising on policies, mindful of the damage caused when they reneged on their pledge to scrap tuition fees during their coalition government from 2010 to 2015, a decision that deeply hurt their voter base.

As the third-largest political party in the UK, the Liberal Democrats are attempting to position themselves for further growth. With Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer's approval rating dipping in recent Opinion polls and ongoing uncertainty surrounding the direction of the Conservative Party, the Lib Dems may believe that they are poised for future electoral gains. The political winds of British Politics are constantly shifting, and as Helen Maguire takes a substantial step forward into the spotlight, her performance on the frontbench might just determine if the Lib Dems can ride the wave of electoral success, or end up washed out to the fringes at the next general election.

A uniform approach to Epsom's schools

30 September 2024



Epsom and Ewell's new M.P., **Helen Maguire**, has called on local schools to address the growing concern over costly school uniforms, reaching out to 15 headteachers on 5th September. In her letter, Maguire urged schools to avoid placing unnecessary financial pressure on families by requiring expensive branded uniforms and PE kits, reflecting concerns raised by parents in her constituency.

Maguire highlighted the financial burden these branded items can create, stating, "It is important to consider if more costly branded kits are necessary." She emphasised that schools should review their uniform policies, particularly in light of the current cost of living crisis.

Schools are already required to follow statutory guidelines on uniform policy, ensuring that the cost of uniforms does not

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become a barrier for parents when choosing schools. According to this guidance, schools must ensure uniforms are affordable, minimise the use of branded items, attempt to avoid restrictive single-supplier contracts, and offer second-hand uniforms at reduced prices.

In her communication with headteachers in the local area, Maguire pointed to this statutory guidance and suggested that generic, unbranded items from low-cost retailers should be allowed in school uniform policy.

The available data on the average cost of school uniforms, however, remains up for debate. The Schoolwear Association claims the average cost of compulsory secondary school uniforms and sportswear is £101.19 per pupil. In contrast, research by The Children's Society suggests that parents spend an average of £422 a year on secondary school uniforms.

An official branded school sports polo top will typically be in the price range of £10 and £15, whereas a pack of two unbranded sports polo shirts from a lower-cost retailer like ASDA can be purchased for around £4-6. In this case, Maguire's suggestion to allow generic, unbranded clothing could offer struggling families much-needed relief amidst a cost of living crisis.

However, there are differing views on the role of uniforms in schools, and Maguire's approach seems to forget the findings of some of the great minds of Sociology. For instance, Stanley Cohen made the argument that reducing visible differences in dress can help lower social tensions among young people. Renowned sociologist, Émile Durkheim believed that uniforms helped in fostering a sense of community and solidarity, while David Brunsma argued that consistent dress codes promote social equality and reduce status competition based on clothing.

While it's entirely reasonable to want to relieve struggling families of unnecessary financial burdens, it's also important to recognise the value of maintaining uniformity in school dress. The potential impact on children's welfare in a school environment ought to be considered when considering such changes.

The **Epsom & Ewell Times** reached out to multiple schools in the local area for comments on Maguire's stance on the cost of school uniforms. As of now there has been no comments, we await a response to these three questions:

1. How are you addressing concerns around the cost of school uniforms and PE kits for families?
2. Are there any plans to introduce or expand the availability of unbranded or second-hand options for your pupils?
3. What measures are in place to ensure that uniform costs do not become a barrier for students attending your school?

As the conversation continues, it remains to be seen whether local schools will adapt their uniform policies to ease the financial strain on families, while still maintaining the sense of unity, equality and school pride that branded uniforms are said to have.

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What are the solutions to Epsom's homeless crisis?

30 September 2024



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, like many local authorities across England, is grappling with a growing homelessness crisis, as highlighted in a recent press release. [Click here for full press release]. The council, which is governed by the **Residents Associations** (RA), has laid out the stark realities of the situation, detailing the pressures it faces and the steps it is taking to address the problem. This has sparked responses from various political parties, local campaign groups, and concerned residents, each presenting their own perspective on how best to tackle the issue.

The council's press release reveals alarming statistics, positioning Epsom & Ewell among the top seven boroughs outside of London with the highest number pro rata of homeless households in temporary accommodation. With more than £1.6 million spent on nightly paid accommodation last year, and many families placed outside the borough, the human and financial costs are escalating. Councillor **Hannah Dalton**, (RA Stoneleigh) Chair of the Epsom & Ewell Residents Association, highlighted the "enormous human impact" of this crisis, pointing out the disruption to education and the health challenges faced by those in temporary accommodation.

Councillor **Neil Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, echoed these sentiments, stating, "The vast majority of homeless households are those who cannot afford suitable accommodation," and he pointed to the council's Homelessness Strategy as a key tool in mitigating the crisis. The council's initiatives include a Rent Deposit Scheme, a Private Sector Leasing Scheme, and efforts to bring empty properties back into use. However, both Cllr Dalton and Cllr Woodbridge acknowledge that these measures are only partial solutions, and significant action is needed to achieve a sustainable resolution.

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Opposition Parties Call for Central Government Support

In response to the council's press release, opposition parties have voiced their concerns and offered their own solutions. Liberal Democrat Councillor **Alison Kelly** (College) criticised the council's approach as "sticking plaster solutions," emphasizing the need for central government to provide financial incentives for social housing development, particularly on brownfield sites. She pointed out that increasing local housing allowances would provide immediate relief for those struggling to afford rent, arguing that this would reduce the number of families pushed into temporary accommodation.

Cllr Kelly's comments reflect a broader call for government intervention. "The rental increases and the continuing cost of living crisis mean many can't keep a roof over their head without going into debt," she said, urging the government to address these systemic issues to prevent homelessness in the first place.

Green Belt Protection vs. Housing Need

A significant debate centres around the use of green belt land for housing. The campaigning group **Epsom Green Belt**'s spokesperson **Katherine Alexande**r criticised the council for failing to plan adequately for affordable housing, accusing it of prioritising expensive developments over genuinely affordable homes. They advocate for using brownfield sites to provide low-cost housing, arguing that this would meet local needs without sacrificing green spaces.

"Destroying our valuable Green Belt without providing truly affordable housing would be unforgivable," she said, pointing to the council's own evidence that identified the high quality of the green belt land. She called for creative use of identified brownfield sites, such as the Town Hall site and former gas works area, to accommodate affordable housing.

Conservative Councillors Criticise Council's Approach

Conservative Councillors for Horton, **Bernie Muir** and **Kieran Persand**, also weighed in, accusing the council of systemic failures. Cllr Muir argued that the council's focus on green belt development was a "lazy and short-termist approach," and that the council had not adequately explored the potential of brownfield sites. "I completely accept that we need social and affordable housing," said Muir, "but the council is opting for the easy option rather than the optimal solution."

Cllr Persand highlighted what he saw as a lack of proper investigation into alternative development strategies, including multi-use and multi-purpose sites. He suggested that large-scale developments, common in other towns, could meet housing needs while also providing economic benefits, such as increased footfall for local businesses and opportunities for local graduates.

Labour Councillor Demands Immediate Action on Social Housing

Labour Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Court) was sharply critical of the Residents Associations' handling of the housing crisis, "As the Residents Association boast they have had control of the council for over 80 years, it is absolutely astonishing that they have put out a press notice highlighting their own failures on housing and homelessness." She added "When it comes to supporting homeless people, sending them to temporary accommodation away from friends, family and schools is highly damaging and the council is boasting about placing families in the private rented housing that it says itself is "expensive and insecure"."

Cllr Chinn called for the Town Hall site [see Epsom and Ewell Times report HERE on Town Hall development] to be used for social housing, insisting that the council should ensure 40% of any new homes built there are for social rent. She pointed to the successful development of mixed affordable and social housing in Hollymoor Lane as a model to replicate, advocating for an immediate start on building more council houses.

"The council needs strong leadership and a Community and Wellbeing committee that has a laser focus on housing and homelessness," she stated, calling for more resources for the housing team to manage the increasing demands placed on them.

Public Sentiment Reflects Diverse Concerns

Residents also voiced their opinions, questioning how Epsom & Ewell ended up among the worst boroughs for homelessness. Some suggested that the borough might be seen as a "soft touch" for homelessness registrations, while others pointed out that the affordability criteria used for new housing developments do not realistically address the needs of those facing homelessness. "A 20% discount on a £750k home on Green Belt does not help with homelessness," said one informant, advocating for lower-cost housing solutions on brownfield land.

The Path Forward

The council's press release and the responses it has provoked highlight the complexity of the housing crisis in Epsom & Ewell. While the council has implemented a range of initiatives, there is a clear consensus that more needs to be done, both locally and at the national level. The debate over green belt versus brownfield development, the call for greater government support, and the need for genuinely affordable housing options are central to finding a sustainable solution.

As Councillor Woodbridge remarked, "This is a situation which requires significant action to bring about a long-term and sustainable solution." With various stakeholders advocating different approaches, the challenge for Epsom & Ewell Borough Council will be to find a balance that addresses the immediate needs of homeless residents while planning for a future that includes both affordable housing and the preservation of the borough's natural environment.

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Council targeting the homeless

Image – Street View Google and added persons with suitcases at Epsom's Travelodge (frequently used by Epsom and Ewell Council for temporary accommodation for the homeless)

Time to press the gas on Epsom's Local Plan?

30 September 2024



As reported in the magazine Local Government Lawyer (19/08/24) several local councils in England are accelerating the development of their local plans in response to proposed amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that could substantially increase their housing targets and require reviews of green belt boundaries.

The proposed changes, detailed in a recent government consultation, include the reintroduction of mandatory housing targets and the possibility that a council's failure to meet its housing needs could justify revising green belt boundaries. Additionally, the consultation suggests alterations to the standard methodology for calculating housing need, which would likely result in most councils being required to plan for significantly more new homes.

Under the current proposals, local plans submitted for examination before June 2025 will be assessed under the existing NPPF rules. This has prompted councils like Winchester and Uttlesford to expedite their plans to avoid the more stringent requirements that could be imposed by the new NPPF.

In Winchester, the council's planning officer emphasized the urgency of submitting the local plan due to the potential increase in the housing need figure from 676 to 1,099 dwellings per annum. Similarly, Uttlesford District Council, which currently operates under one of the oldest local plans in England, is also moving quickly to submit its plan before the deadline.

Not all councils are in favor of the proposed changes. Wirral Council, for example, is set to hold an extraordinary meeting to express its concerns, particularly regarding the potential impact on its green belt. The council's draft plan focuses on brownfield development, but under the new proposals, it could be required to deliver an additional 14,000 homes, potentially affecting large areas of its green belt.

Councillors in Wirral have expressed strong opposition, with motions being tabled to challenge the proposed standard method for housing calculations, which they argue could undermine local regeneration efforts.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** if it had any plan to accelerate the Draft Local Plan process. Councillor **Peter O'Donovan**, (Residents Association – Ewell Court) Chair of the Licensing & Planning Policy Committee responded: "Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is currently interrogating the documents for the Government's consultation on proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and will prepare a response to the consultation to be submitted within the timeframe. We are dedicated to the development of a Local Plan that meets the needs of current and future residents of Epsom & Ewell. We will continue to consider the implications for the borough following the Government's consultation, when more detail becomes available."

Cllr **Julie Morris** (Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group) (College Ward) said "Unfortunately the ruling Residents Association seems to have only one speed, DEAD SLOW, when it comes to the Local Plan which is already around 12 years late. It has never been a priority for them. We can't see any possibility of speeding things up now and recent progress is mostly unknown : there has been no open debate on the matter since last year. There is a meeting on 24th September which might throw some light on what's happening. Even councillors from the ruling group believe that an update on progress and potential changes to the Plan, in the run up to Regulation 19 and (hopefully) final adoption of the document, is long overdue."

A spokesperson for the campaigning group **Epsom Green Belt** commented on the Council position: "The NPPF proposals were published a month or so ago online. Without proposals it would not have been possible to launch the consultation, which runs until 24 Sept. The government's stated plan is to issue the new NPPF in Dec, applicable immediately.

Waiting until the changes are published and applicable would miss the current, and brief, window of opportunity to avoid their impact, which is why other (more enlightened and forward thinking) councils are choosing quickly to act. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council should be acting immediately to capture this opportunity."

The Epsom Green Belt spokesperson added: "The current NPPF, issued in Dec 2023, remains in force until or unless replaced by a new version. The Dec 2023 version does not require the release of Green Belt, specifically providing the option not to review any Green Belt boundaries. The Council therefore can retain the existing Green Belt boundaries and focus all housing on identified brownfield sites which, according to the Regulation 18 draft Local Plan can accommodate 3,700 dwellings. If they fail to take the opportunity to accelerate the Regulation 19 process, the target house building will exceed 14k."

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Epsom and Ewell Brace for Government Housing Targets

30 September 2024



In a significant policy shift, the newly elected Labour government has reintroduced mandatory housing targets, a move that is set to have far-reaching implications for communities across the UK, including Epsom and Ewell. The ambitious plan aims to deliver 1.5 million new homes over the next five years, following the scrapping of such targets by the previous Conservative government. This sweeping reform has sparked debate over its potential impact on local areas, particularly in relation to the use of green belt land.

Among the key changes introduced by the Labour government is the reinstatement of mandatory housing targets for local councils, which must now be met based on a recalculated assessment of local housing needs and affordability. This approach differs from previous national metrics, focusing on areas where housing is less affordable relative to income. Consequently, regions like Epsom and Ewell, where property prices are high, may face increased pressure to deliver more housing.

Another controversial aspect of the policy is the introduction of the so-called “grey belt” land. This term refers to lower-quality land within the green belt that could be considered for development, in an effort to balance the need for new homes with the preservation of high-quality green spaces. Furthermore, the government has mandated that at least 50% of the homes built on grey belt land must be affordable, with a strong focus on social rent, addressing the UK’s chronic shortage of affordable housing.

For Epsom and Ewell, traditionally resistant to large-scale development, particularly within the green belt, these changes could mark a significant shift. The new mandatory targets might require the local council to approve more housing projects than previously anticipated, including the controversial use of grey belt land. This could lead to tensions with residents keen to maintain the area’s character, but it also presents an opportunity to address the local housing shortage, especially in terms of affordable homes.

The exact impact on Epsom and Ewell will depend on the specific targets assigned to the area and the availability and suitability of grey belt land for development. Local planning authorities with existing Local Plans may now be required to revise these plans to align with the new government mandates.

Tim Murphy of the local Council for the Protection of Rural England expressed his concerns, stating, “I think the new target is 821 new homes per annum. The figure is unattainable—we don’t have the required skills available in this country to build all the homes the Government wants, and there will be widespread opposition across large swathes of the country to the loss of so much countryside. I calculate that the Borough, with a current population of just over eighty thousand, will need to accommodate a further 32,000 people if this target is to be met over the eighteen-year period of the Local Plan.”

The **Epsom Green Belt Group** also voiced their concerns, highlighting the discrepancy between the current housing build rate and the new targets. A spokesperson for the group stated, “The current annual build rate (based on the 2007 Core Strategy) is 181 dwellings per annum. The current NPPF standard method figure (based on 2014 data) used in the regulation 18 draft Local Plan was 576 dpa. The new government proposals for a revision to the standard method would result in a target of 817 dpa. This is over four times the real need in the borough and almost triple the council’s current proposals.”

Cllr **Bernie Muir**, (Conservative) representing Epsom West Division and Horton Ward, acknowledged the need for more housing but raised concerns about the strategic approach. “I believe that we do need homes as we have a huge homeless

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issue in Epsom, plus we are desperately short of homes for key workers and those that support our care, retail, and hospitality sectors. However, the Local Plan will almost certainly end up building the wrong homes in the wrong place, primarily on Greenbelt land, with serious negative consequences," she warned. Cllr Muir advocated for the development of town centre brownfield sites instead, arguing that this would provide the right homes in significant numbers, support the local economy, and improve the socio-economic prospects for the borough.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has responded to the recent reinstatement of mandatory housing targets by the UK Labour government, highlighting the challenges posed by its outdated Core Strategy. The current Core Strategy, adopted in 2007 and covering the period up to 2022, is now considered out of date, particularly as it predates the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) introduced in 2012.

In its statement, the Council pointed out that its historic housing completions, detailed annually in the Authority Monitoring Report (AMR), show a consistent shortfall when compared to the significantly higher requirements generated by the standard method for calculating housing needs. For the 2022/23 monitoring year, the Council reported a notable deficit against these figures.

The draft Local Plan, which was subject to public consultation earlier this year, proposed a supply-based housing requirement of 5,400 homes over the plan period, equating to 300 dwellings per annum. However, the Council acknowledged that this figure does not meet the actual housing need calculated using the standard method, which suggests a much higher need—576 dwellings per annum based on 2022 data, with projections potentially rising to 817 dwellings per annum under the government's proposed revisions.

Councillor **Peter O'Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court Ward) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee said "The draft Local Plan (Regulation 18) that was subject to consultation in February and March 2023 proposed a housing requirement for the borough of at least 5,400 homes of the plan period (which equates to 300 dwellings per annum). This was a supply-based requirement and is not a reflection of need which is calculated using the standard method (see above).

The Draft Local Plan identified supply exceeding this minimum requirement to provide flexibility for non delivery of sites included in the supply."

He added: "The government are currently consulting on Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system to which the council will be responding. The consultation is open to all and we would encourage those with an interest in planning to respond to the consultation.

One of the proposals is to amend the standard method for calculating housing needs. As part of the consultation, the government have published the housing need that would be generated using the revised method for all English Local Planning authorities and calculates the housing need for the borough to be 817 dwellings per annum."

The consultation ends 24th September 2024 and the Council intends to take a report to its scheduled Licensing and Planning Policy Committee on that date which sets out the implications for the Borough and the Council's suggested response to the consultation.

As the debate continues, residents and local officials in Epsom and Ewell will be closely watching how these new housing targets and policies unfold, weighing the potential benefits of increased housing against the risks to the borough's character and green spaces.

Image: License details Credit:David Wright

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Local football feel the blues from Chelsea FC

30 September 2024



The **Epsom and Ewell Colts**, a longstanding community-led grassroots football club, are facing a crisis after the abrupt cancellation of their primary training venue at Blenheim High School. The school's decision to make way for the Chelsea FC Foundation has impacted 170 girls from the under-8s team and upwards, leaving them without a place to train or play.

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Founded in 1971, the Epsom and Ewell Colts have been a cornerstone of the local community, providing young people with opportunities to develop teamwork skills and forge lifelong friendships. Community football offers far more than the possibility of turning professional or enhancing physical fitness and skills. It strengthens community bonds, offering young people a productive outlet that teaches important life lessons and steers them away from negative influences. Players, coaches, volunteers, and supporters collaborate towards common goals, fostering mutual respect and understanding. This inclusive environment breaks down social barriers and contributes to the community as a more welcoming and integrated place for all.

With the Epsom and Ewell Colts now displaced from their core training ground at Blenheim High School, both players and parents are left feeling disappointed and concerned for the future of their club. Elsie, the vice-captain of the U18 girls' team, voiced her frustration, stating, "So much for encouraging girls football. How disappointing." The disappointment was echoed by the manager of the team, **Steve Luff**, who stated: "It's a grave mistake to prioritise commercial interests or go for the cachet of a professional club over the development of local athletes, who represent the true future of football."

Pauline Russell, the Chairwoman of Epsom & Ewell Colts, claims that Blenheim School's decision to displace the team in favour of a professional club "goes against the objectives and aims of the school listed in their last annual report." This refers to Blenheim School's objective 'to promote for the benefit of the inhabitants of Epsom and the surrounding area the provision of facilities and recreation'.

Rob Williams, Director of Finance and Operations at Blenheim School responded "Blenheim made the decision to offer their 3G pitch to Chelsea FC on Tuesdays and Thursdays to further develop their existing relationship with Chelsea FC and in support of the work they are doing to develop grassroots youth football opportunities in the local community, particularly with girls. This change was not the fault of Chelsea FC or Chelsea Foundation.

"Blenheim have offered several alternative days and times for Epsom and Ewell Colts to move their Thursday booking to and are delighted that they have made additional bookings on Mondays, Saturdays and Sundays to use the newly installed 3G pitch which has seen unprecedented demand.

In the face of a possible crisis at the club, Pauline Russell is making an attempt to rally the community, stating: "We are calling on the community, local authorities, and Chelsea FC to recognise the importance of grassroots sports and to work with us to find a solution that allows these 170 girls to continue their training on Thursdays without disruption."

While the club searches for alternative venues and potential collaborations with other local organisations, they have put forward an online petition for the public to show their support.

East Street development not off the Hook

30 September 2024



On Tuesday, 16th of July, the Environment Committee at Epsom and Ewell Council sat down to discuss the possibility that there might be considerable environmental issues at the Hook Road Multi-Story Car Park.

It was decided in principle to release the Hook Road Car Park to facilitate wider redevelopment of the gas holder site. Hesitation is largely due to the lack of information on the severity of the level of contamination in the area.

In the report provided by council officer Mark Shepard, it was stressed that the issues of contamination are based on what is underneath the car park, that there is no present risk to people's health, and it is safe to use for its intended purpose.

The Hook Road Car Park sits on top of a water aquifer and operates directly adjacent to a former gas works that has been in operation since circa 1870 (which can be seen on the historical land use map). Given the lack of environmental research into the soil and water of the gas holder site, it's not known to what extent the Hook Road Car Park is dealing with a ticking time bomb of contaminants. Gas sites are generally considered some of the most contaminated sites across the United Kingdom, especially ones that have been in operation from the 19th to 20th century, when there were next to no regulations for the disposal of industrial waste.

The byproducts of coal gasification include tar and pitch, which contain toxic and potentially carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). Ammonia, another byproduct, can contaminate soil and groundwater. Other harmful substances, such as toxic phenolic compounds, spent oxides, and sulphur compounds, also pose contamination risks to soil and water. Additionally, the process involves toxic chemicals that contribute to heavy metal pollution, including lead, arsenic, mercury, and chromium. These byproducts pose significant environmental and health risks due to their persistence and toxicity. As for the gas holder site at Hook Road, council officer Mark Shepard stated in the committee meeting that "we don't yet know the level of contamination."

There is the additional factor of Thames Water's Epsom Water Works, located a short distance away. The East Street

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drinking water boreholes are in close proximity (less than 200m) to the former gas works site. This means that if there are any attempts for a clean-up at the former gas works site, it would necessitate thorough monitoring by the Environment Agency on account of its potential risk for contamination. In the meantime, the council's decision remains provisional as they await more detailed environmental assessments to determine the appropriate course of action.

Image: Hook Road Car Park and gasworks – Google

Paving the way to better regulation?

30 September 2024



The Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has voted to dispense its current pavement licence policy, rather than it being updated to copy the .GOV guidance. This change comes as part of a broader review conducted during an Environment Committee Meeting held on July 16th. Instead, Officers of the council will continue to determine applications under delegated authority, with the Council's website linking to the .GOV guidance.

[This post corrects an earlier post that incorrectly inferred that applications would no longer be processed by EEBC.]

The original pavement licence policy, introduced under the Government's Business and Planning Act of 2020, was a temporary measure designed to assist the hospitality sector amid the economic turmoil caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It allowed cafes and similar businesses to place removable tables and chairs on adjacent council-owned highways for a capped fee of £100, a significant reduction compared to the more cumbersome procedures under the 1980's Highways Act.

As part of the 2024 Levelling Up agenda, this temporary policy was transformed into a permanent measure. However, the cost cap was raised, allowing councils to charge up to £500 for new licences and £350 for renewals. This shift aimed to provide local authorities with greater financial flexibility.

The decision has sparked a range of reactions. Some view the licence fee as an additional financial burden on small, independent cafes striving to thrive in a challenging economic environment. However, proponents argue that the policy plays a crucial role in ensuring pedestrian safety and accessibility, preventing removable furniture from obstructing pathways and ensuring compliance with accessibility standards.

During the committee meeting, concerns over the cost of the licence fees were voiced. Councillor Robert Leach criticised the high fees, particularly the notion of paying £555 to process a form and issue a licence, suggesting it seemed "ridiculous" and speculating that the figure was derived using a "different unit of currency." However, it was clarified that the actual cost of processing a new application exceeded the fees charged, necessitating the higher rate to break even, though this remains capped by the government.

However, doubts were also raised regarding the renewal fee of £350, with some committee members questioning the justification for this amount, given that most of the necessary work is completed during the initial application process

Image: Cafe tables outside Zig Zag Epsom High Street – Google

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