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Up hill struggle to stop oil drilling in Surrey – pays off?

28 October 2024



A clash between environmental advocates and oil developers at Horse Hill in Surrey has resurfaced as local campaigners question why oil production continues despite a lack of planning permission. The Weald Action Group, which represents numerous community groups opposing fossil fuel extraction across Southeast England, has raised concerns over ongoing operations by Horse Hill Developments Ltd (HHDL). The site, located in the Surrey Hills, is still producing oil even though the Supreme Court recently ruled that planning permission was granted unlawfully, citing omissions in the environmental impact assessment.

This summer, the UK Supreme Court upheld a challenge brought by environmentalist Sarah Finch on behalf of the Weald Action Group. The ruling faulted Surrey County Council for not considering indirect greenhouse gas emissions linked to the burning of the oil produced at Horse Hill when they approved the application. Consequently, the planning approval was nullified, marking a significant win for the environmental action group and setting a precedent that has since impacted other oil and gas sites across the UK.

In response to continued production at Horse Hill, the Weald Action Group's legal team has written to Surrey County Council, requesting clarity on whether HHDL's operations are indeed unauthorized and if the council intends to enforce a halt to production until retrospective planning permissions are secured. "It's not clear why UKOG are still producing oil at Horse Hill despite having no planning permission to do so," the group's spokesperson stated. Meanwhile, Chris Coghlan, the newly elected MP for Dorking and Horley, has also pressed the council for answers.

The council's statement confirmed it is aware of the issue, stressing that without planning permission, HHDL's production activities may indeed be unlawful. It stated: "Following the Supreme Court decision, there is no planning permission for oil production at the site… The County Council is continuing its enforcement investigation and will determine whether formal enforcement action is expedient." While the council refrained from offering a definitive timeline, it confirmed that formal enforcement remains a possibility, pending the ongoing investigation.

For the Weald Action Group and concerned residents, the situation underscores broader frustrations with fossil fuel projects in rural areas. Their efforts highlight a commitment to maintaining local accountability and environmental protections, especially in ecologically sensitive areas like the Surrey Hills.

UPDATE:

In a major development in the ongoing Horse Hill oil drilling controversy, UK Oil & Gas PLC (UKOG) has ordered the cessation of oil production at its Horse Hill site following intense public and political pressure. The decision comes after weeks of scrutiny, with mounting calls from local activists, national environmental groups, media outlets, and the newly elected MP for Dorking and Horley, Chris Coghlan, urging an end to operations that lacked valid planning permission.

The Weald Action Group, which represents a network of community groups opposed to oil and gas development in the Southeast, welcomed the decision but condemned the circumstances that led to it. "We are pleased that they have now suspended operations," they stated, "but we are appalled that it took protests by Extinction Rebellion, news coverage, questions from the local MP, and the threat of legal action by Friends of the Earth to bring them to this conclusion." According to the group, the suspension followed sustained pressure and widespread public outrage over UKOG's ongoing activities despite the Supreme Court's ruling that rendered Horse Hill's planning permission invalid.

Brian Alexander, Communications Director for UKOG, initially defended the company's position, claiming on Channel 4 that production at Horse Hill was compliant. "It's not unlawful. We would not be doing it if it was unlawful… We are of the understanding, certainly from Surrey, that we are doing what we should be doing," Alexander told the media.

In a statement issued after halting production, UKOG announced: "After recent discussions with Surrey County Council (SCC) and in keeping with the Company's strategic move from oil & gas into material scale clean hydrogen storage projects, we instructed our subsidiary Horse Hill Developments Ltd (HHDL) to voluntarily suspend oil production at the Horse Hill site." The suspension, effective as of Friday, October 25, reportedly aligns with the company's new focus on hydrogen storage projects, reflecting a shift away from oil and gas.

UKOG emphasized that its actions regarding Horse Hill had been lawful, adding that HHDL has maintained regulatory compliance throughout its six years of operations. The company noted that discussions with Surrey County Council had been ongoing since June 2024 and included a recent site visit by council officials on October 16. UKOG stated it will now work closely with Surrey County Council to ensure a thorough suspension process and to support the planning redetermination process. This includes safely securing and decommissioning the Horse Hill site in compliance with environmental regulations.

The Weald Action Group, meanwhile, remains vigilant, stressing that it will continue to monitor UKOG's activities and press for accountability at Horse Hill and other oil sites across the region. The group's focus now turns to ensuring that

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any future decisions align with environmental protections and the community's demands for transparency and local oversight.

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The Hills Are Alive With the Sound of Drilling… ?

Justice Stops Oil

Image is AI generated imaginary picture of oil drilling in hills.

Opposition Calls for Emergency Council Meeting Over Epsom and Ewell Local Plan

28 October 2024



In a move that underscores growing concerns over the future of development in Epsom and Ewell, nine opposition councillors from the borough council have requested an Emergency Full Council Meeting to accelerate the adoption of the Local Plan. The councillors—comprising four Liberal Democrats, three Labour members, and two Conservatives—are calling for the meeting to take place immediately after the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) on 20th November, or alternatively, on the evening of 21st November.

The opposition's objective is clear: to expedite the council's voting on the draft Local Plan to ensure that the next round of public consultation can proceed swiftly. Councillors are particularly concerned that any delays in finalising the plan could subject Epsom and Ewell to new government-imposed housing targets. These targets, outlined by the current Labour government, could increase the borough's required new dwellings to 817 per year, a significant rise from the existing figure.

One opposition councillor stated, "We all know that if the Local Plan fails or is found unsound or non-compliant, we will be subject to the Labour government's new targets, which are 817 dwellings per annum." The councillors are urging the council leadership to act now to avoid this outcome.

Council's Position: Balancing Housing Needs and Green Space

In response, the leadership of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, led by the Residents' Association, has emphasised the importance of balancing development with the preservation of the borough's character. Councillor Hannah Dalton, Chair of the Residents' Association, spoke recently about the challenge of providing much-needed housing—particularly affordable housing—while safeguarding the borough's treasured green spaces.

Councillor Peter O'Donovan, Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, has reiterated that the council is adhering to a clear timetable. The LPPC is expected to review the Pre-Submission Local Plan at its November meeting, following which the next public consultation phase will commence. O'Donovan stressed the need for a robust evidence base to ensure the Local Plan withstands scrutiny and avoids challenges that could delay or derail the process.

The council is also grappling with an increase in homelessness, which has risen by 95% over the past year, further highlighting the need for new housing, particularly for families. Councillor Clive Woodbridge, Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, outlined the council's efforts to mitigate homelessness, including working with private landlords and providing support to those at risk.

The Stakes: Higher Housing Targets and Green Belt at Risk

The backdrop to this debate is the government's proposed revision to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which includes higher housing targets and reduced protections for Green Belt land. If the Local Plan is not submitted for approval before these changes come into effect, the borough could face the new target of 817 homes per year. For many residents, this raises the spectre of large-scale developments encroaching on green spaces that are integral to the borough's identity.

At a previous LPPC meeting in October, tensions ran high as residents voiced concerns about the potential loss of Green Belt land. The Epsom Green Belt Group, a local campaign organisation, has proposed an alternative plan that focuses on developing brownfield sites instead. They argue that this approach would meet housing targets without sacrificing green spaces.

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What Next?

The requested Emergency Full Council Meeting, if granted, would allow all councillors to debate and vote on the draft Local Plan. Whether the meeting will be scheduled remains to be seen, but with growing pressure from both the opposition and the public, the council's next steps will be closely watched.

The stakes are high for Epsom and Ewell. The decisions made in the coming weeks will shape the borough's future, determining how it meets housing demands while preserving the community's much-loved green spaces.

Epsom and St Helier Hospitals in Desperate Need of Repairs

28 October 2024



Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals are in need of urgent repairs, with more than £150 million required to address crumbling infrastructure, according to the latest NHS data. Epsom and Ewell MP **Helen Maguire** has urged the Government to prioritise investment in the upcoming Budget to tackle these issues.

The data highlights that nearly £70 million of the required repairs are classified as 'high risk,' meaning a failure to address them promptly could lead to serious injury and significant disruption to healthcare services. Both hospitals have been struggling with deteriorating facilities for years, with St Helier Hospital facing particularly severe challenges, such as falling ceilings and condemned buildings.

One major issue is the division of emergency care teams across both sites, a problem that the proposed specialist emergency care hospital in Sutton is intended to resolve. However, delays in funding mean that these plans have not yet come to fruition, leaving local residents reliant on facilities that are increasingly unable to meet modern healthcare needs.

Ahead of the Autumn Budget, Liberal Democrat MP Helen Maguire has renewed her call for urgent financial support to clear the backlog of repairs and ensure that the hospitals can provide safe and effective care for local communities.

"It is scandalous that people in Epsom, Ewell, Ashtead, and Leatherhead are being treated in hospitals that need millions of pounds in repairs," said Maguire. "When someone goes to the hospital, they should expect to be treated in a building that is safe. This is the bare minimum. We need to do far better. It is now down to this Government to rescue our NHS, which is why, at the Budget, the Chancellor must urgently use any changes to the borrowing rules to invest in hospitals here in Epsom and Ewell."

NHS Response

A spokesperson for the **Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust** acknowledged the extent of the challenges, stating: "We've spent £60 million in the past five years improving the facilities in our ageing hospitals, which are deteriorating faster than we can fix them. Local people deserve better, and we're ready to build a new state-of-the-art hospital and upgrade our existing sites, but urgently need investment to make this a reality."

The spokesperson also highlighted the outdated nature of parts of the hospital infrastructure, some of which predate the founding of the NHS. "The age of our buildings means they flood regularly, and when our lifts break down, we can't fix them because they don't make the parts anymore."

Plans for the new specialist emergency care hospital in Sutton aim to address these issues by consolidating highly skilled medical teams, providing round-the-clock care. This would alleviate the strain on the existing Epsom and St Helier hospitals, which will continue to provide 85% of local services, including outpatient appointments and scans.

The Way Forward

The pressing need for investment in the local NHS infrastructure is clear, with both the MP and the hospital trust calling for urgent action. As the Budget approaches, the focus will be on whether the Government will step up and provide the necessary funds to ensure that residents of Epsom and surrounding areas receive the healthcare services they deserve in safe and modern facilities.

Local residents will be closely watching developments in the Budget announcement, hoping that long-awaited improvements to the area's hospitals will finally become a reality.

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Epsom & Ewell’s Green Belt controversy tightens

28 October 2024





Tensions flared during a heated meeting of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) in Epsom on October 17th, 2024, as residents voiced strong objections to the proposed housing targets and the perceived threat to the borough’s Green Belt. The meeting was marked by a series of public statements and a notable exchange between committee members and the public, revealing deep-rooted concerns about the future of Epsom’s green spaces and the transparency of the council’s planning processes.

Government’s Revised Housing Targets and NPPF Changes

At the heart of the controversy is the government’s proposed revision of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which includes significantly higher housing targets for local councils and reduced protections for Green Belt land. Epsom and Ewell face mandatory targets of 817 dwellings per annum—more than four times the current requirement of 181 dwellings per year as stipulated by the borough’s Core Strategy 2007.

Janice Baker, a resident who spoke at the meeting, expressed her dismay at the scale of the new housing targets, equating the requirement to building “50 football pitches of Green Belt land every year.” She warned that such development would irreversibly alter the borough, leading to increased traffic, overwhelmed public services, and environmental degradation. Baker urged the council to take swift action: “There are only a couple of weeks left for you to avert this disaster… the window of time is still there. It is in your hands.”

Public Frustration with Council Process

Several residents, including **Adrian Jones**, raised concerns over what they perceived as a lack of transparency and accountability in the council’s planning processes. Jones, in a pointed exchange with the committee, highlighted the delays in receiving responses to his queries about the local plan and questioned whether these were deliberate attempts to impede public participation. “Is this deliberate to stop me preparing or just a mistake?” Jones asked. His concerns were met with a promise from Councillor O’Donovan to investigate the delay, but the tension in the room was palpable.

Samantha Bentall, who was denied the opportunity to speak at the meeting, had her written statement rejected by the committee chair on the grounds that it was deemed “defamatory, offensive, vexatious or frivolous.” In an email exchange with the council, Bentall pressed for clarification on which elements of her statement were objectionable but received no detailed explanation. She accused the council of “gagging residents” and in a letter to the Epsom and Ewell Times, called for her concerns to be published, stating that they were in the public interest.

Epsom Green Belt Group’s Alternative Proposal

Adding to the public discourse, the **Epsom Green Belt Group** presented an alternative housing proposal that seeks to meet the borough’s housing needs without encroaching on Green Belt land. In a letter addressed to the council’s CEO, **Jackie King**, and leader of the Residents Association, **Hannah Dalton**, the group outlined a plan to focus development on brownfield sites and previously developed land (PDL), such as West Park Hospital and Hollywood Lodge.

The group argues that the borough’s housing requirement—calculated as 3,840 dwellings over the plan period—can be met entirely on brownfield and PDL land, avoiding the need to release Green Belt land for development. Their proposal includes detailed site-by-site figures, with 4,199 housing units proposed across various brownfield sites, of which 1,105 would be affordable or social housing.

“We hope that you can look on our proposals favourably,” the letter reads, “and utilise the suggestions to update the Local Plan then publish it for consultation as soon as possible to ensure it is submitted for examination in early January 2025.” The group also highlighted the public’s overwhelming opposition to Green Belt development, citing the 87% of respondents to the Regulation 18 consultation who rejected the idea.

Council’s Response and Timetable

Councillor **O’Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court) chair of the LPPC, acknowledged the public’s concerns but stressed that the council is constrained by legal requirements and external factors in the development of the Local Plan. In response to a question from Adrian Jones about the council’s timetable for submitting the Local Plan, O’Donovan explained that while the council is working towards a May 2025 submission, the timetable is dependent on the completion of external workstreams and the processing of public consultation responses.

“The timetable for progressing the local plan is as set out in our Local Development Scheme,” O’Donovan said, noting that public consultation on the Pre-Submission Local Plan is expected to begin in January 2025. He also reassured residents

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that the council is exploring ways to expedite the process but emphasised the importance of having a robust evidence base to avoid future challenges to the plan.

However, many residents remain unconvinced by the council's assurances. **Mark Todd**, chair of the local Labour Party, expressed his support for the Epsom Green Belt Group's proposals and urged the council to prioritise the protection of green spaces while delivering the housing the borough needs. "Local people want housing and green spaces," Todd said. "I commend the local Epsom Green Belt group's drive to engage with local politicians and highlight all the options available."

The Next Steps and the Community's Expectations

The clock is ticking for the council to submit its Local Plan before the anticipated changes to the NPPF come into effect in January 2025. Failure to do so could mean that Epsom and Ewell will be forced to meet the higher housing targets, putting vast swathes of Green Belt land at risk.

Nathan Chan and **Casper Grunwald**, two Year 8 students, delivered a poignant joint statement, reminding the council of its responsibility to future generations. "This is your past, our present, and many generations to come's future," Chan said. "Do you want to be remembered as the people who saved Epsom, or the people who ruined our Green Belt?"

The council now faces the challenging task of balancing the need for new housing with the community's desire to protect its cherished green spaces. As the debate over the Local Plan intensifies, one thing is clear: the eyes of Epsom's residents are firmly fixed on the council, and they expect nothing less than a transparent and equitable solution to the borough's housing crisis.

Conclusion

As the Local Plan moves towards its final stages, the council must navigate a complex web of legal obligations, public opinion, and environmental considerations. The decisions made in the coming months will have a lasting impact on the character of Epsom and Ewell, and the council's leadership will need to ensure that all voices are heard and that the best possible outcome is achieved for the community.

In the words of Nathan Chan: "This is your past, our present, and many generations to come's future." How the council responds to this challenge will determine whether Epsom's green spaces will be preserved for those future generations or lost to the demands of urban expansion.

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Epsom & Ewell Council Greenlights Local Projects

28 October 2024



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Licensing and Planning Policy Committee has given its provisional backing to over £2 million in Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding for a variety of local projects, following the council's annual funding round. The funding round, which ran between 7 May and 18 June 2024, saw a total of 28 bids submitted—five for strategic CIL funding and 23 for neighbourhood CIL funding.

Community Infrastructure funding derives from money provided to the Council by developers.

In a significant outcome, three strategic CIL bids, totalling £1.755 million, were recommended for approval. These include £1.25 million for public realm enhancements in Ewell Village, £405,000 for a full-size 3G football pitch at Priest Hill, and £100,000 for a new clubhouse at Old Schools Lane, Ewell. However, bids for Epsom Playhouse lighting replacement and increasing capacity at local GP surgeries were not successful. The latter was deemed "desirable" rather than "essential," with other bids seen as higher priorities.

In terms of neighbourhood projects, six bids, amounting to £331,966, received backing. These include £85,000 for a new community building at Glyn Hall and £78,644 for footpath improvements at the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve. Other successful bids include upgrades to playgrounds at Bourne Hall, Gateley Green, and Gibraltar, as well as street tree planting on Waterloo Road.

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Despite the committee's overall approval, 17 neighbourhood bids did not make the cut, with reasons ranging from failing initial assessments to not scoring highly enough in evaluations. This includes several bids that did not meet the "best value" criteria set out in the council's CIL Spending Protocol.

A key moment in the meeting came when Liberal Democrat Councillor **Julie Morris** (College Ward) successfully proposed an amendment to include the **Nam Yang Martial Arts** project for funding, which had initially been overlooked. Her proposal, seconded by Councillor **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington), was passed by a majority, ensuring that the martial arts project will be considered for £161,250 in funding by the Strategy and Resources Committee.

The council's decisions on the CIL funding allocations will now be subject to final approval by the Strategy and Resources Committee, as required by the Council's financial regulations.

Image Nam Yang Martial Arts Epsom figure courtesy https://martialartsepsom.com/

County pledge to Epsom charity's fight to end poverty

28 October 2024



In a significant move for the region, Surrey County Council (SCC) has signed Good Company's End Poverty Pledge, marking a bold step towards addressing the growing issue of poverty across the county. The pledge, which was approved on 8th October, coincides with the United Nations' International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. This year's theme of "acting together" underscores SCC's commitment to creating fairer and more inclusive communities.

Councillor Mark Nuti, SCC's Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, signed the pledge on behalf of the council. In doing so, SCC committed to developing a comprehensive, community-led Poverty Action Plan, working in collaboration with partners across the region. Councillor Nuti emphasised the urgent need to support both those already struggling to make ends meet and those at risk of falling into hardship.

"In signing the pledge, we are not only committing to support people who can't afford basic essentials like food and heating, but we are also standing with those who are on the brink of financial hardship. Poverty has a devastating effect on health and wellbeing, and the consequences ripple out into greater demand on public services," said Nuti. He highlighted the council's commitment to targeting welfare support where it's most needed and using its influence as a major organisation to "buy local," improve job opportunities, and advocate for essential changes to the benefit system.

This pledge is supported by the local charity Good Company, based in Epsom, and its East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission (ESPTC), a group working closely with individuals who have lived experience of poverty. Jonathan Lees, Founder and Managing Director of Good Company, hailed the pledge as a major step forward in the fight against poverty.

"Surrey is one of the wealthiest counties in the UK, yet we see people in our foodbank centres and pantries struggling daily to afford food and energy. Signing this pledge is an important move by SCC, and we hope that many more local organisations and individuals will join us in this fight. We can't tackle poverty alone—but together, we can make a difference," Lees stated.

SCC's Ongoing Efforts to Combat Poverty

This winter, SCC's health and welfare hub will serve as a crucial resource for those affected by rising living costs. It will provide information on Warm Welcomes and the Energy Advice Tool, grants for energy-efficient homes, and local foodbank locations. Last year, SCC's Warm Welcome venues saw 46,000 visitors, and 86,000 residents benefited from the Household Support Fund, which distributed much-needed assistance to those in financial crisis. This year, the council's Fuel Poverty programme has attracted nearly £1 million in funding, aimed at helping residents in or at risk of fuel debt.

Councillor Nuti acknowledged the strides made to help those in need but recognised the work ahead: "We'll continue to learn from those with first-hand experience of poverty, ensuring that our services respond more effectively in the future."

The Work of the East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission

The Good Company's East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission (ESPTC) has played a pivotal role in shaping the county's approach to poverty. Launched in 2019, the ESPTC brings together individuals with lived experience of poverty and senior representatives from civic and business sectors to work collaboratively towards solutions. The Commission has helped raise awareness of poverty's root causes, and its efforts have led to tangible changes in local services.

For example, after hearing first-hand accounts from residents, a local housing association shifted its approach to

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customer care, ensuring that tenants struggling with rent payments are treated with compassion. The ESPTC also initiated a laptop recycling project, addressing digital exclusion by providing over 360 laptops to students from low-income families.

As Good Company embarks on the second phase of the ESPTC, its focus remains on building relationships and addressing key issues identified by Community Commissioners. The charity is committed to amplifying the voices of those affected by poverty, ensuring they are central to decisions on how to tackle it.

Upcoming Event: East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission Celebration

On Wednesday, 27th November, Good Company will be hosting a special event to celebrate the work of the East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission over the past 18 months. The event, which will take place at Bourne Hall in Ewell from 11am to 1:30pm, will showcase the transformational journey of the Commission's members and explore the exciting ideas and plans for future change.

This celebration is a chance for the community to come together and hear about the Commission's work to create long-term solutions to poverty in East Surrey. Tickets are free, and all are welcome to register online.

With Surrey County Council's pledge and the continued work of Good Company, there is renewed hope for a future where poverty is no longer an invisible problem, but one actively tackled by local communities, organisations, and government alike.

For more information and to register for the event, visit the Good Company's Eventbrite page.

Image: Mart Production

Epsom and Ewell adopts new Climate Action Plan

28 October 2024



Tuesday 15th October Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Environment Committee approved a new five year Climate Action Plan (2025-2029).

The Plan outlines a comprehensive strategy to meet the Council's commitment to becoming carbon neutral by 2035. This second five-year plan builds upon the first Climate Change Action Plan, which ends in 2024, and introduces 52 key objectives across six main themes, aiming to reduce the Council's own carbon footprint and address Borough-wide emissions. The Plan also reflects input from cross-party groups and officers involved in climate change and biodiversity efforts.

The six themes include:

1. Council Leadership and Influencing Others: Focused on policy development, leadership, and collaboration with external partners to influence carbon reduction across the Borough.
2. Council Buildings and Energy Use: Aimed at reducing energy consumption in council-owned buildings and exploring renewable energy options such as solar panels and energy-efficient systems.
3. Transport: The plan includes strategies to reduce emissions from the Council's fleet and encourage electric vehicle infrastructure in public car parks and on streets.
4. Environmental Improvements: Objectives include increasing biodiversity, promoting local food production, and ensuring sustainable land management practices.
5. Waste Management: Targeting reductions in waste production and improving recycling rates across the Borough.
6. Technology and Information Systems: Leveraging data and new technologies to track carbon impacts and implement climate-smart solutions.

The plan incorporates specific performance indicators, financial costs, and the projected carbon impact for each objective, ensuring transparent monitoring of progress. Key initiatives include transitioning to a green fleet, enhancing energy efficiency in public buildings, supporting local energy projects, and promoting biodiversity and sustainable transport options. The plan stresses the importance of partnerships, particularly with Surrey County Council, to foster local and regional collaboration on environmental sustainability .

Here is a summary of ten interesting objectives from the 52 listed in the Climate Action Plan:

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Local Plan Development: Integrate climate change mitigation and adaptation into the Local Plan, focusing on low carbon design, energy-efficient buildings, sustainable transport, and environmental impact minimisation .

Green Procurement: Revise procurement policies to prioritise low-carbon products and services, thereby reducing the Council's total carbon footprint from supply chains .

Supplier Engagement: Identify the Council's most carbon-intensive suppliers and collaborate with them to reduce their emissions .

Energy Efficiency in Private Rentals: Support compliance with Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) in private rental properties, ensuring properties achieve an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of E or above .

Green Skills Development: Work with Surrey County Council to promote green careers and skills development, particularly in the areas of construction and retrofitting, to meet future workforce needs .

Tree Planting: Implement the Council's Tree Management Plan to increase tree cover in the borough, enhancing biodiversity and contributing to carbon sequestration .

Sustainable Energy Production: Explore options for larger-scale sustainable energy projects on Council-owned land, such as solar farms .

LED Lighting Replacement: Replace traditional lighting at Council assets, like Epsom Playhouse and Bourne Hall, with energy-efficient LED lighting .

Solar Energy Feasibility: Investigate the potential for installing solar panels, solar storage, and solar carports on Council-operated assets and land .

Government Funding for Green Projects: Actively pursue government and external funding opportunities for energy efficiency and decarbonisation projects across Council buildings .

These objectives exemplify the Council's comprehensive approach to addressing climate change, focusing on reducing carbon emissions, enhancing energy efficiency, and fostering community engagement in sustainability efforts.

Surrey County Council finances under the spotlight

28 October 2024



A recent Local Government Information Unit report presents a worrying picture of local government finances across the UK, with a particular focus on the impact of budget cuts on services for children, young people, disabled people, and broader council operations. This report gives context to Conservative Party run **Surrey County Council'**s current financial struggles.

The Local Government information Unit (LGiU) is a local government membership body, thinktank and registered charity.

Key Findings from the LGIU Report:

1. **Service Cuts Affecting Vulnerable Groups**: The report highlights that local councils are cutting essential services to balance budgets. Vulnerable groups, including children, young people, and disabled individuals, are bearing the brunt of these cuts, leading to long-term negative consequences. This is especially evident in cuts to children's social services, school transport, and support for disabled people.
2. **Savings Targets and Financial Shortfalls**: Local councils have collectively approved over £3 billion in savings for the current financial year but still face a predicted funding shortfall of more than £5.7 billion by 2026-27. **Surrey County Council** stands out as having the fifth highest savings target for 2024-2025, but also has the second highest predicted financial shortfall for 2026-2027, highlighting significant concerns about its sustainability.
3. **Surrey-Specific Context**: **Surrey County Council** is under immense pressure to meet high savings targets while facing a projected budget shortfall that indicates financial vulnerability in the longer term. Given the

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nationwide picture, Surrey's situation is part of a broader struggle that local governments face, attempting to maintain statutory services while cutting others. Surrey has a history of difficulties with funding, particularly in delivering adult social care and children's services, which have increasingly become the focus of cost-saving efforts.

4. **Impact on Services**: Specific areas of concern include reductions in spend on children's social care, safeguarding, youth services, support for care leavers, and independent living for disabled individuals. The report notes that many councils, likely including Surrey, are adopting measures such as reducing staff in children's social care and pushing for more "independence" among care leavers, which may ultimately reduce the quality of care available.
5. **Reserves and Exceptional Financial Support**: Councils, including Surrey, have been drawing on reserves to balance their budgets, but these reserves are not limitless. Nationally, 19 councils were granted Exceptional Financial Support (EFS), highlighting that more councils are approaching financial failure, a risk acknowledged by Surrey as it plans for the coming years.
6. **Broader Implications for Children's Wellbeing**: The Children's Commissioner and experts like Lynn Perry from Barnardo's have warned that cuts to preventative services for children could lead to a "lifetime cost" for the current generation. With Surrey's budget pressures, similar outcomes could be expected locally, particularly as youth services and early intervention programmes may face further cuts.
7. **Miscellaneous Cuts**: The report details examples of "almost comical sounding" cuts being made to balance budgets—such as changes to coffee suppliers, reduced support for coastal lifeguards, and reduced asbestos collections from households. These reflect the desperate measures councils are taking to preserve statutory services amidst financial constraints.

Councillor Responses:

Cllr **Bernie Muir**, Conservative Party, Surrey County Councillor – Epsom West Division and Epsom & Ewell Borough Councillor – Horton Ward, responded to the LGIU report:

"Our transformation over the last few years has given us a solid base and is helping us weather the storms encircling local government and indeed the global economy.

"That means that while the county council has a solid and robust budget thanks to many years of hard work and bold thinking, we face pressures like everywhere else.

"66% of our budget is spent on supporting young people, families and adults. This includes spend of £1.2m per day on Adult Social Care, £0.5m per day on Children's Social Care, and about £6m per month on Home to School Transport Assistance.

"Whilst the council's finances are stable, demand on our services continues to increase at a faster rate than our funding, and so our funding position is anticipated to remain challenging for the foreseeable future. We are working innovatively and reviewing the way we deliver some programmes of work to ensure we are fit for the future, continue to deliver the best outcomes for our residents and that no one in Surrey is left behind."

On behalf of four opposition Residents Association County Councillors, Cllr **Eber Kington** said:

"Epsom and Ewell Residents' Association County Councillors recognise that Surrey County Council continues to be penalised by Governments in terms of central Government grant funding despite the huge contribution that the Surrey economy makes to the national economy. There is also the assumption by Westminster that all Surrey residents are wealthy, which ignores both the pockets of deprivation in Surrey, but also the fact that Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Adult Social Care costs are not just related to poverty but are common across all communities.

"That said, SCC has not spent or borrowed money wisely and ignored our calls to adopt a different financial approach, including the funding of more early intervention and preventive measures to reduce future costs. In fact, SCC's inflated capital spending on infrastructure, not all of it high priority, has resulted in cuts to the planned SEND school building provision which is clearly a wrong option choice when you consider that SEND provision is one of the services that has the most pressing need.

"SCC also continues its spending on highly paid staff with 61 Directors now in the salary bracket of over £100k, including 11 of the highest paid Directors heading the Communications and Engagement Directorate. It has also been revealed that SCC has funded over 6,000 mobile phones for staff. A recent £17 million project to replace SCC's financial IT system was late and ran over budget, with the final cost acknowledged as £27m (although money is still being spent), an overspend of £10m and the equivalent of 1% on the overall SCC council tax bill.

"Currently, SCC is using a Government Bus Service Improvement Plan grant to fund a new Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) scheme that allows residents to book a convenient bus journey when they need it, focusing on rural areas without scheduled buses. However, the take-up is currently quite low and some journeys cost SCC anything from £12 to £104 per person. That is not sustainable when the Government grant runs out and SCC finds itself having to fund the DDRT system.

"Removing some of these high-cost items may not improve the budget gap very much given the overall SCC annual budget, but a clear change of policy to the funding of early intervention and prevention schemes, a capital programme that focuses on the essential services, better project management of high costing schemes and IT projects, and a leaner

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management structure will make a difference and are policies that Residents' Association and Independent County Councillors will continue to advocate in the coming months."

Conclusions:

The financial pressures on Surrey County Council are reflective of a broader, systemic problem affecting local authorities across the UK. Surrey's high savings targets and predicted budget shortfall for 2026-2027 illustrate a challenging future where further cuts to crucial services seem inevitable. This raises concerns for local residents, especially the most vulnerable, and suggests the need for urgent government intervention to ensure sustainable funding for local services.

A call from the Local Government Association (LGA) for financial stability and multi-year funding settlements is particularly relevant for Surrey, as it struggles to maintain a balance between mandated services and community needs.

Public meeting about Epsom Hospital future

28 October 2024



A public meeting has been scheduled for October 17th, 2024, at the **Epsom Sports Club**, located next to **Epsom Hospital**, to discuss the future of local healthcare services. The meeting, organized by the **Epsom and Ewell's Residents' Associations**, will be centred on the evolving plans for Epsom Hospital and the broader health services in the area. The keynote speaker, **James Blythe**, Managing Director of the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust, will provide an update on the trust's long-term plans, including the new Specialist Emergency Care Hospital (SECH) in Sutton and the modernization of both Epsom and St Helier hospitals. The event will be followed by a Q&A session, allowing local residents to voice their concerns and ask questions directly to the leadership.

This meeting follows recent developments within the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust, which is moving forward with a £500 million project to build the SECH in Sutton. This new hospital will centralize acute services such as emergency care and surgery, while 85% of other services will remain at Epsom and St Helier hospitals, ensuring local residents continue to have access to a wide range of healthcare services nearby. The new SECH, located on the Sutton Hospital site, is designed to enhance patient outcomes by co-locating with the Royal Marsden Hospital and the London Cancer Hub.

Epsom and Ewell's newly elected MP, **Helen Maguire**, has made healthcare a key priority in her first 100 days in office. Maguire has been an advocate for the new hospital in Sutton, meeting with the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust to see that the project moves forward without delays. In a press release marking her 100th day in office, Maguire emphasized her commitment to ensuring that the SECH is built and that Epsom and St Helier hospitals are modernized to better serve the local community. She has also scheduled a meeting with Health Secretary Wes Streeting to gain more insights into the government's broader healthcare strategy

Maguire's focus on healthcare comes at a time when the trust is also addressing other critical issues such as managing its financial constraints while improving patient services. Maguire attended the trust's recent Annual Public Meeting, underscoring the importance of the SECH in addressing long-standing challenges.

Local residents are encouraged to attend the public meeting on October 17th to stay informed about the future of their healthcare services and to have their say in the discussions about these transformative plans for Epsom and its surrounding areas.

Event Details:
Topic: The Future for Epsom Hospital and Local Health Services
Date: October 17th, 2024
Time: 7:30 PM
Venue: Epsom Sports Club, next to Epsom Hospital
Speaker: James Blythe, Managing Director, Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust
Format: Presentation followed by a Q&A session with refreshments

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Epsom and Ewell Council answers parking complaint immediately

28 October 2024

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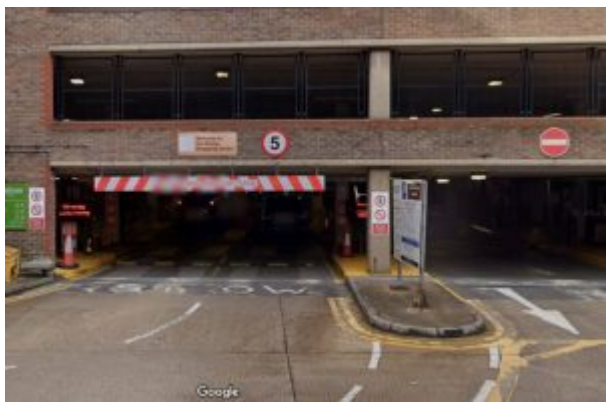

Charles Moseley of Hurstpierpoint complained in a letter dated 8th October to the Epsom and Ewell Times about the running out of Epsom Playhouse beer and the Ashley Centre Car Park during his visit to the Counterfeit Stones performance. Just five hours later (by coincidence) Epsom and Ewell Borough Council wrote to us with a new plan to improve the parking experience. They could not be expected to fix an unexpected peak in the demand for beer at the Borough's showpiece theatre venue. Here are the communications in full.

8th October 2024 10:28 hrs

Dear Sirs,

I am writing to say how much we enjoyed a gig by The Counterfeit Stones, who were really good. However we arrived fairly early and decided to have a drink in the theatre bar and were served by a very nice bar lady who proceeded to pour two pints of London Pride. But she only managed one and a half before running out! She was very apologetic in saying that she had no more bitter of any description, only lager, cider and spirits. Apparently this was due to the audience of the previous night's show supping all the bitter. What are about 400 mainly middle or above aged Rolling Stones fans supposed to do with no beer? We had to plunge the depths of Epsom's society pubs and eventually found, at the third attempt, something resembling beer in Wetherspoons. As for the car park, well that was something else with two queues out and at least one in each line that had not paid or lost their little yellow disc! It was chaos! And £5.00 for the privilege! So it's full marks for the band and bar lady, as for Epsom Council? Give me strength!

Charles Moseley

Hurstpierpoint

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council are installing a new Auto Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) parking system at the Ashley Centre car park in Epsom town centre this month. Work will begin from 14 October and is expected to take three weeks to complete.

The ANPR system will mean that car users can drive up to the barrier and enter the car park with their registration being used for identification and payment upon exit.

The new system will remove the need for tokens and the associated charges that are incurred when they are lost. Cash and card payment options will be available on all floors, as well as the ability to pay remotely.

Councillor Liz Frost, Chair of the Environment Committee, said:

"The works taking place at the Ashley Centre car park are a welcome upgrade to a more modern and convenient system. We know the tokens have been a cause of frustration to many drivers as they are small, difficult to find and easily lost (leading to penalties being issued).

"We appreciate that the necessary work may cause some inconvenience for drivers during the installation of the new ANPR System, and we apologise for this. However, we feel the upgrades will be a great improvement and make it easier and quicker for people visiting Epsom Town Centre to park.

"With Christmas just around the corner, we believe the upgrades to the car park support the ongoing work we are undertaking to boost the local economy by making Epsom Town centre a more hassle-free and therefore more attractive place to visit."

Epsom and Ewell Brough Council 8th October 2024 16:00hrs

Will Epsom get an even higher housing target if it misses the early boat?

28 October 2024

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The UK Government is preparing to release a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that could impose mandatory targets for housebuilding, including on Green Belt land, sparking concern among local councils. The revised framework, expected in December 2024, may dramatically increase housing targets for local planning authorities.

A recent consultation on the proposed changes, led by **Angela Rayner** MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, closed on 24 September 2024. One of the most significant changes being considered is a new "Standard Method" for calculating housing targets. For boroughs like **Epsom & Ewell**, this could have major implications.

Currently, Epsom & Ewell builds around 189 new homes per year. Under the borough's developing Local Plan, this would increase to about 300 homes annually, which would result in the loss of around 57 hectares of Green Belt land. However, the new NPPF could demand the construction of 817 homes per year. Any local authority whose housing target falls more than 200 homes per year below this number would be forced to revise its plans. Epsom & Ewell's current proposal falls short of this target.

Transitional arrangements proposed in the draft NPPF state that the new rules will not apply to Local Plans submitted before one month after the framework's publication, likely 20 January 2025. Therefore, Epsom & Ewell has a narrow window to submit its Local Plan and avoid being subject to the new higher housing targets.

However, the borough faces time constraints. The Local Plan consultation process takes about two months, and the council will need additional time to compile and respond to feedback. With meetings scheduled for late November and early December, there is concern that the borough may miss the deadline to avoid the higher targets, which would result in the loss of an estimated 21 hectares of Green Belt per year.

Other councils are moving quickly to avoid being caught by these new regulations. St Albans, for example, has begun a public consultation on its Local Plan even before receiving full council approval, to ensure it stays ahead of the anticipated NPPF changes.

If many Councils beat the deadline and enjoy lower targets, will their Government preferred share then be redistributed to those Councils tardy in submitting their plans?

Response from Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Cllr **Peter O'Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court) Chair of the Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee (LPPC), issued the following statement:

"The Council is preparing its Local Plan in accordance with the timetable set out within its approved Local Development Scheme, this is to ensure that the Regulation 19 Local Plan document is supported by the necessary evidence when it is considered by the Licensing and Planning Committee (LPPC) in November.

The LPPC will debate the Local Plan and make a recommendation to full Council, who will make the final decision on how it wishes to proceed with the Local Plan. This process is required by our constitution.

The Council has submitted a response to the recent 'proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system,' which was recently approved by the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (24 September 2024). We understand that a significant number of responses have been submitted to this consultation and that there may be delays in the revised NPPF being published by the government.

It will only be once the revised NPPF is published that we will know what the details are and what the implications are for the borough and our emerging Local Plan. This includes the transitional arrangements that will apply for Local Plans.

Subject to approval by Council, we intend to commence consultation on our Proposed Submission (Regulation 19) Local Plan in mid-January 2025."

Katherine Alexander of **Epsom Green Belt** raised serious concerns about the future of the borough, highlighting the delays in renewing the Local Plan, which dates back to 2007. In a statement, she said:

"Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has one of the 10 oldest, and most out-of-date local plans in the country. If Angela Rayner's proposals are rolled out, the borough's housing targets will more than quadruple to 817 dwellings per annum. This would fundamentally change Epsom, leading to increased traffic, strained infrastructure, and the loss of over 20 hectares of Green Belt land each year, equivalent to more than 50 football pitches.

Councillors have recognised that the proposed housing target is much too high, writing to Angela Rayner on 13 September 2024 stating 'these new numbers are immense and could destroy our historic district and market town.'

There is a solution, or at least a stay of execution, if the council accelerates the public consultation and submits the Local Plan to the planning inspector by early January 2025. Otherwise, none of the Green Belt would be safe, and the cost of the

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Local Plan could rise significantly as the council works to meet these targets."

Alexander also pointed to other councils, like Winchester and St Albans, that have expedited their processes in order to avoid being caught by the incoming planning reforms.

Related reports:

Epsom Local Plan controversy heats up

Challenges to Epsom and Ewell Council's Handling of Local Plan

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

Epsom and Ewell Brace for Government Housing Targets

Here we go again on the Local Plan?

and many more. Search "Local Plan."

Epsom pensioners gather less winter fuel pay this St Stephens

28 October 2024



Thousands of pensioners across Epsom, Ewell, Ashtead, and Leatherhead are facing the loss of vital winter fuel payments following cuts by the UK government, sparking fears that many will struggle to keep warm this winter.

Helen Maguire, the Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom and Ewell, has urged the government to reconsider its decision, warning that vulnerable pensioners could be left choosing between "heating and eating" during the colder months. Maguire opposed the cuts when they were voted on in the House of Commons on 10th September, but the measures were passed despite her concerns.

The cuts primarily affect pensioners over the age of 80 who are not in receipt of pension credit. Previously, these pensioners were automatically entitled to an additional £300 to help cover their energy bills in the winter. Now, many will lose this support unless they qualify for other benefits.

Data released earlier this week shows that in Epsom and surrounding areas, 5,788 pensioners aged over 80 who do not receive pension credit are at risk of losing their Winter Fuel Payment. In total, 18,261 pensioners in Epsom and Ewell could be affected by the government's decision.

Last winter, over £3.3 million in support was distributed to pensioners in the constituency, with £1,525,800 going to those aged over 80. These figures are expected to fall significantly this year due to the cuts.

"Thousands of pensioners here in Epsom and Ewell are desperately worried about how they will make it through this winter," said Ms Maguire. "These latest figures are deeply concerning. It is not too late for this government to change course, reverse their plans, and protect vulnerable pensioners here in Epsom."

In response, Chancellor **Rachel Reeves** has defended the government's decision, framing it as part of a broader strategy to stabilise public finances. "We are facing challenging economic times, and difficult choices must be made to ensure the sustainability of our public services," Reeves said in a recent statement. "However, we remain committed to supporting those most in need, and we have maintained targeted assistance for the poorest households."

Reeves also pointed to ongoing support measures, including the Energy Price Guarantee, which she says will help alleviate pressure on households most at risk. "We recognise the importance of protecting our pensioners, and our policies are designed to ensure that no one is left behind. But we must also take steps to manage public expenditure responsibly."

Despite this, charities and local advocacy groups have voiced concerns about the potential impact on older residents. Many fear an increase in demand for services such as food banks and emergency heating grants as pensioners struggle to afford rising energy bills without the additional winter fuel support.

As winter approaches, the situation remains uncertain, with many pensioners hoping for a reversal of the cuts or further government action to protect those most affected.

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Epsom Local Plan controversy heats up

28 October 2024



Epsom & Ewell Council's Tense Debate Over Green Belt Protections and Housing Targets: Key Decisions from the Licensing Planning and Policy Committee Meeting

On Tuesday, 24th September 2024, the LPPC of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council convened to deliberate on a highly contentious matter: changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and their potential impact on the borough's Green Belt and housing targets. Chaired by Councillor **Peter O'Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court) the meeting attracted public attention, with many residents filling the gallery, reflecting the importance of the issues under discussion. At the heart of the debate was the question of whether the council should uphold strict protections for the borough's Green Belt or adapt to the government's increasing pressure to meet housing demands.

Councillor Peter O'Donovan began by welcoming the public to the meeting, acknowledging the deep concerns of residents. He then proceeded with the formalities, including the adoption of the minutes from the previous meeting and a roll call of councillors and officials present. O'Donovan stressed the gravity of the evening's discussions:

"We have important decisions to make this evening that will shape the future of our borough for years to come. The government's proposed reforms to the NPPF are significant, and while we recognize the need for housing, we must balance this against our responsibility to protect the Green Belt, which is vital to both the environment and the identity of Epsom & Ewell."

Following his introduction, **Ian Mawer**, the council's Planning Policy Manager, provided an overview of the NPPF changes, particularly the impact on housing targets and Green Belt land. He noted that the consultation on these changes was closing later that evening, and the council needed to finalize its draft response.

"We are looking at a proposed increase in our housing needs," Mawer explained. "Based on changes to the standard method for calculating housing needs, our target could increase from 576 homes per year to 817. This would place significant pressure on both brownfield and Green Belt land, and we must carefully consider the implications of these changes."

A Call for Fair Tree Protection

One of the first substantive discussions centered on a seemingly smaller but crucial issue: tree protection applications. Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) argued that the council's response to the NPPF changes downplayed the importance of adequate funding for tree protection measures.

"We have always struggled with the resources to meet our tree protection needs," Woodbridge began. "Our current response underplays this issue. I think tree applications, especially those related to trees in conservation areas or subject to Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs), should be subject to a fee process that helps recover our costs. This would ensure we can meet our obligations without burdening the public purse too heavily."

Woodbridge's remarks sparked a broader conversation about local authority resources and the need for a sustainable fee structure that would help finance these vital environmental protections. "We must be tougher on this," he added. "It's not just about protecting trees—it's about ensuring we have the resources to do so effectively."

A Sharp Critique of Housing Targets

As the discussion turned to housing targets, Councillor **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) made an impassioned and controversial statement against further development in the borough, particularly on Green Belt land. Leach took a hardline stance, asserting that the borough had no need for additional housing.

"In my view, the housing need for this borough is zero," Leach declared, "We don't need more homes on Brownfield, Green Belt, or any other kind of land. The housing numbers we've been given are based on flawed calculations—a case of multiplying one wrong number by another wrong number and somehow thinking we've arrived at the right answer. But we all know that number is wrong. Our Green Belt is not negotiable."

Leach's speech took an unexpected turn when he criticized both the current Labour government and previous Conservative governments for their handling of migration policies, which he blamed for the housing crisis. "The population of the UK has risen from 45 million to 67 million in my lifetime, and almost all of that is due to migration," he said. "This housing crisis is a direct result of the government's failure to control immigration, and now we are being asked to sacrifice our green spaces to accommodate more people."

Leach's remarks met with mixed reactions. While some in the public gallery nodded in agreement, other councillors were quick to counter his assertions.

A Call for Balance and Realism

Councillor **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) was among those who pushed back against Leach's extreme stance, advocating

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for a more balanced approach. Neale acknowledged the challenges posed by increasing housing targets but emphasized the need for the council to take a pragmatic view.

“I understand the passion behind Councillor Leach’s remarks,” Neale said, “but the reality is that we do have a housing crisis in this borough. I have two sons who have had to move out of the area because they simply cannot afford to live here. And we have a growing homeless population that we are struggling to accommodate. To say we have no need for more housing just doesn’t reflect the reality on the ground.”

Neale went on to argue that while the Green Belt must be protected, the council must also find ways to meet its housing obligations. “We need to strike a balance. We can’t just say ‘no’ to everything. If we do, we risk losing control of our local planning decisions altogether.”

Addressing Climate Change and Housing Needs

Councillor **Julie Morris** (Lib Dem College) brought another crucial issue to the fore: the intersection of housing development and climate change. She criticized the NPPF reforms for failing to place sufficient emphasis on sustainable development and renewable energy.

“We’re facing a climate crisis, and yet, when I look at the government’s proposed changes to the NPPF, there is very little focus on sustainability,” Morris lamented. “We should be pushing for stronger commitments to renewable energy and green building standards. Our response should reflect this urgency. I’m disappointed that the government has missed an opportunity to make these reforms about more than just numbers.”

Morris also raised concerns about the type of housing being built, arguing that the borough’s needs were not just about quantity but also quality. “It’s not just about meeting a target of 817 homes per year,” she said. “We need to be building homes that meet the actual needs of our community, particularly affordable housing for young families and the elderly.”

The Question of Local Democracy and Transparency

As the meeting continued, the issue of transparency and local democracy emerged as a critical point of contention. Councillor **Kieran Persand**, (Conservative Horton) a vocal advocate for greater openness in the local plan process, questioned whether the council was doing enough to involve the public and ensure their concerns were heard.

“Residents have been left in the dark for too long,” Persand argued. “We’ve had consultations, but have we really listened? I’m hearing from residents across the borough that they feel shut out of this process. They want more say in what happens to their Green Belt, and they deserve that say. We should be leading the charge for more transparency, not hiding behind bureaucratic processes.”

Councillor Julie Morris echoed Persand’s concerns, adding that the council had missed opportunities to engage the public more effectively. “We’ve had chances to talk about this—whether it’s Green Belt protections or housing targets—but we haven’t taken them,” she said. “We could have held more public meetings, we could have been more open about the challenges we’re facing. Instead, we’ve been too closed off. That needs to change.”

Green Belt Protections: A Divisive Issue

As the meeting drew to a close, the committee faced a critical decision: whether to adopt the council’s draft response to the NPPF consultation, which supported increased housing targets while maintaining a cautious approach to Green Belt development.

Councillor Robert Leach made one last impassioned plea to protect the Green Belt: “I believe the housing need for this borough is zero, and I will say it again. We cannot afford to lose our Green Belt. It’s what makes Epsom & Ewell special, and we should be fighting to protect it, not handing it over for development.”

In contrast, Councillor Phil Neale urged his colleagues to think practically: “None of us want to build on the Green Belt. But if we don’t submit a local plan that meets the government’s requirements, we risk losing control over the process entirely. That’s a real danger. We have to be pragmatic here.”

The Decision: Moving Forward with Caution

In the end, the committee voted to approve the draft response to the NPPF consultation, which included support for increased housing targets but emphasized the importance of protecting high-performing Green Belt land. The decision was met with mixed reactions, with some councillors and members of the public feeling that more could have been done to safeguard the borough’s green spaces.

Councillor Peter O’Donovan closed the meeting by reassuring the public that the council would continue to fight for the best interests of the borough. “We’ve made a decision tonight, but this is not the end of the process,” he said. “There will be further opportunities for public input, and we will continue to work hard to protect what makes Epsom & Ewell such a special place to live.”

As the government’s NPPF consultation comes to a close, the residents of Epsom & Ewell will be watching closely to see how their council balances the need for housing with the imperative to protect their cherished Green Belt land. For now, the battle between development and preservation continues.

26th September Epsom and Ewell Council issued a press release stating its responses to the consultation on the NPPF. You may read it HERE.

The Surrey Campaign for the Protection of Rural England also issued a press release you may read HERE

Related reports:

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and many many more. Search “local plan”

Epsom Council dead set against the dead?

28 October 2024



Tuesday 17th September Epsom and Ewell Borough Council gave one minute of its time before discarding a motion to take steps to recover an Epsom cemetery of 9000 souls from a private property speculator. The matter came before Councillors sitting on the Strategy and Resources Committee.

Horton Cemetery Hook Road in Epsom, between 1899 and 1955, received the bodies of patient paupers from the Epsom cluster of five psychiatric hospitals. Sold in mysterious circumstances to Marque Securities in 1983 the five acre site has been neglected ever since. Relatives have travelled from as far as Australia to pay respects but cannot enter the private land that is now hazardous to tread. Surrounded by twisted iron railings, unkempt undergrowth and fallen trees.

In an officer’s report to the Councillors it was argued that a compulsory purchase order (CPO) could not be legally obtained.

The officer’s report acknowledged the status of the site as a Cemetery and the prohibition on its development. However, in the opinion of the report author the fact that the owner could walk about the Cemetery and enjoy it as a wood gives it an “amenity woodland ” value. Comparative valuations were provided to Councillors based on sales of woodlands (not cemeteries) in the South-East.

Lionel Blackman, Honorary Secretary to the **Friends of Horton Cemetery** responded to the latest setback to the aims of the Charity. “Some progress has been made. The “amenity woodland” description now sits alongside the Council’s recognition that the land is a cemetery. On the occasion of the Council’s previous refusal to contemplate a CPO “amenity woodland” dominated the thinking. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that Councillors were not advised of previous cases where CPOs have been used to acquire neglected cemeteries, including Arnos Vale in Bristol and West Norwood.”

He added: “It is in large part a question of money. Pure woodland valuations include the element of speculative development value. That cannot apply to a cemetery the report acknowledges cannot be developed. Where there is a will there is a way. One day the Council will find the will to correct this historic outrage.”

Related reports:

Petition to reclaim Horton Cemetery from property speculator

Local community gathered at Horton Cemetery

You are invited to commemorate the 9000 souls in Epsom’s forgotten cemetery

Council: Horton CPO debate shelved

Image: Horton Cemetery in 1952

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Housing Targets Spark Fierce Debate in Epsom and Ewell

28 October 2024



New Government proposals for housing targets have prompted a passionate response from local officials, community groups, and residents. The Government's recent consultation on planning reform suggests a dramatic 41% increase in the number of homes to be built in Epsom and Ewell, a figure that has alarmed many and sparked fears of irreversible damage to the borough's unique character and environment.

Councillor **Neil Dallen** MBE (RA Town Ward), Vice Chair of Licensing and Planning Policy, led the charge in voicing opposition to the Government's proposals in a letter addressed to **Angela Rayner** MP, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Cllr Dallen's letter paints a dire picture of the potential impact of the housing increase, emphasising that the proposed rise from 576 to 817 homes per year would place immense pressure on the borough's already-stretched infrastructure and services.

"We are happy to 'play our part' and accept that some new housing is needed," Dallen writes, acknowledging the need for development in line with local plans. However, he warned that the scale of the increase could "destroy our historic district and market town if they come to fruition." According to Dallen, the increased housing numbers would lead to "endless planning by appeal, change the character of the district, and entirely undermine the plan-led system of Local Plans."

Dallen also pointed to the significant challenges posed by the geography and heritage of Epsom and Ewell. "With around 50 per cent of the district as Green Belt," he noted, there is already limited space for development. Protected areas such as Epsom Downs, Epsom Common, and Horton Country Park add further constraints, leaving "few available sites" for development. Dallen concluded his letter with a plea for the Government to consider the borough's unique challenges and ensure that the final version of the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) "does not do irreparable damage to valuable and historic parts of the Country."

The sentiment expressed by Cllr Dallen has resonated with local residents and community groups, particularly the **Epsom Green Belt Group**, who have been vocal in their opposition to the housing targets. In a letter to the *Epsom and Ewell Times*, the group echoed Dallen's concerns, calling the proposed target of 817 homes per year "undeliverable" and warning that the borough could face severe consequences if the plans proceed unchecked.

"Once it's gone, it's gone forever," the group writes, referring to the potential loss of Green Belt land. They argue that the mandatory housing target would require building on 21 hectares of Green Belt land per year to achieve, an act that would "increase the housing in the Borough by 50% over the plan period," bringing with it traffic problems, pressure on schools, and strain on local healthcare services.

The group points to the example of Elmbridge, another borough facing similar housing pressures, as a potential model for Epsom and Ewell to follow. In Elmbridge, the council submitted a draft local plan that restricted development to brownfield sites only, with no Green Belt sites included. Although the planning inspector raised concerns about Elmbridge's plan, the Epsom Green Belt Group believes there are lessons to be learned. "Our draft Local Plan should be more prescriptive about what affordable and social housing is required from each site," the group argues, suggesting that council-owned sites like Hook Road Car Park could be earmarked for 100% affordable housing.

The group's letter also highlighted the importance of protecting the borough's Green Belt, arguing that there are "no exceptional circumstances" that justify the release of Green Belt land for development. They urge the council to resist any voluntary agreements that would allow Green Belt development, emphasising that planning officers should be guided by a strategy put together by elected councillors.

The open letter from Epsom and Ewell BC, addressed to all residents of Epsom and Ewell, calls on the community to unite in opposition to the Government's proposals. The group stresses that the scale of the housing increase could have devastating effects on the borough's heritage and environment, and they urge residents to take action before it is too late. "We need your help to meet this threat to the historic and market town of Epsom & Ewell," the letter states, encouraging local organisations and residents to respond to the Government consultation before it closes on 24th September.

Cllr **Hannah Dalton**, Chair of the Residents' Association (RA) Group, which currently leads the council, has also spoken out against the Government's housing proposals. Echoing the concerns raised by Dallen and the Epsom Green Belt Group, Dalton warned that the increased housing targets could "destroy our historic district and market town if they come to fruition." She acknowledged the need for new housing but described the proposed numbers as "immense" and unsustainable. "The previous housing figures were already difficult to achieve and unfairly distributed across the

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country," she said. "These new proposals make that even more difficult."

Hannah Dalton also pointed to the borough's high population density, noting that Epsom and Ewell is "over five times denser than the average in England." With half of the district protected as Green Belt or other types of protected land, the scope for development is extremely limited. She stressed the importance of submitting a strong response to the Government's consultation, outlining the "serious harm this scale of development will bring."

The Council's letter to residents, and the voices of councillors like Dallen and Dalton, underline the growing anxiety within Epsom and Ewell about the future of the borough. With the Government planning to publish a revised NPPF by Christmas, there is a palpable sense of urgency to the debate. The window for public consultation closes on 24th September, leaving little time for local residents and officials to make their voices heard.

As the consultation deadline approaches, many in the borough are calling for the Government to reconsider its housing targets and take a more measured approach to development. "You cannot squeeze a quart into a pint pot," Cllr O'Donovan remarked, a sentiment that seems to encapsulate the feelings of many in the community. The next few months will be crucial in determining whether Epsom and Ewell can preserve its unique character while still accommodating the need for new homes.

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