



## Epsom and Ewell's Draft Local Plan goes to Full Council

21 November 2024



The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** met on 20th November 2024 to consider the draft Regulation 19 Local Plan amid a storm of public opposition and internal division. The meeting, attended by residents and a significant complement of councillors, highlighted the deep tensions over the inclusion of Green Belt sites for development.

After nearly seven years of delays, the draft Local Plan was endorsed by the LPPC, sending it to the Full Council for final approval in December. However, the debate exposed significant disagreement among councillors about the cost of achieving housing targets and the risk of sacrificing valued green spaces.

### Public Pleas to Save the Green Belt

Three public speakers opened the meeting, delivering impassioned critiques of the draft Local Plan. **Janice Baker** accused councillors of abdicating their responsibility by deferring to officers' recommendations. Quoting directly from the meeting papers, she said, "Paragraph 3.46 states that removing Green Belt sites would significantly increase the risk of the plan being found unsound. In other words, you're being told not to think about changes. But I ask: where is democracy in this process? Stand up for residents, stand up for your duties."

**Tim Murphy**, a member of the Council for the Protection of Rural England, highlighted Horton Farm's ecological and strategic importance, labelling it "one of the highest-performing Green Belt sites in the borough." He challenged the committee directly: "The decision lies with you, not officers, not inspectors. You will be held responsible by residents for either protecting or destroying our Green Belt."

Finally, **Yvonne Grunwald** reminded councillors of the 11,000-signature petition submitted during the Regulation 18 consultation. "Eighty-seven percent of residents opposed building on the Green Belt," she said. "What happened to their voices? This plan will forever change the borough's character."

### Councillor Perspectives: Frustration, Reluctance, and Division

The councillors' deliberations revealed starkly contrasting views, with many expressing unease about the Local Plan but accepting its necessity. Chair Cllr **Peter O'Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) opened by praising the officers' efforts, describing the plan as a delicate balance. "Our task," he said, "is to tread carefully between safeguarding the borough's unique character and ensuring future generations can thrive."

However, dissenting voices were prominent. Cllr **Christine Howells** (RA Nonsuch) passionately opposed the inclusion of Horton Farm and Hook Road Arena. "This is our Green Belt," she argued. "Once it's lost, there's no going back. Horton Farm is a critical environmental buffer and a floodplain. Its removal would set a precedent for the destruction of every other Green Belt site."

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) expressed broader discontent with the central government's housing targets. "Epsom has a population density five times the national average," he said. "Why must all the burden fall on us? We're being treated as a branch office for Westminster, not as an independent council."

In contrast, Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) reluctantly supported the plan, acknowledging the compromises it entailed. "I wrestled with this decision," he admitted. "Horton Farm is high-performing Green Belt, but without it, the plan will almost certainly be found unsound. If we exclude it, speculative developments could wreak havoc across the borough."

### Motions and Proposals: Protecting the Green Belt

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) questioned the land allocated for Gypsy and Traveller sites, suggesting higher densities to reduce the footprint. "If we increase the density from 16.5 to 25 or 30 per hectare, could we not meet the full need on a smaller site?" he asked. Planning Policy Manager Ian Mawer responded, explaining that the lower density reflects cultural and practical requirements for Gypsy and Traveller communities, including space for caravans, vehicles, and utility blocks.

Cllr **Julie Morris** (LibDem College) called for stronger environmental commitments, particularly around climate change and biodiversity. "Why are climate and biodiversity issues always buried at the end?" she asked. "These should be front and centre of the plan."

Meanwhile, Cllr **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton) vehemently opposed the inclusion of Horton Farm. "This is not a balanced plan," he declared. "Including Horton Farm doesn't protect other Green Belt sites—it puts them at greater risk. The planning inspector will see this as justification to include more Green Belt land."

Despite these objections, motions to remove Horton Farm and other Green Belt sites were defeated, with officers warning that such changes would undermine the plan's soundness. "Without Horton Farm, we simply cannot meet housing needs or provide Gypsy and Traveller pitches, which are legal requirements," said Ian Mawer.

### Difficult Decisions: Reluctant Support for the Plan

As the debate continued, councillors wrestled with the plan's broader implications. Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington), reflecting the prevailing mood, said, "None of us like this plan, but what's the alternative? Without an up-to-date Local Plan, we're at the mercy of speculative developments. We cannot afford to start from scratch."

Cllr Woodbridge echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the risks of delay. "This plan is far from perfect, but it's the best chance we have to protect the majority of our Green Belt while meeting our obligations. If we fail, the consequences could be far worse."

However, not all councillors were resigned to compromise. Cllr Persand insisted that rejecting the plan would force the council to find alternative solutions. "We don't have to accept this bad plan," he argued. "There is still time to come up with something better."

### Press Release and Public Reaction

Following the vote, EEBC issued a press release reiterating the importance of adopting the Local Plan. "The Proposed Submission Local Plan strikes the optimal balance between development and preservation," said Cllr O'Donovan. "It will deliver affordable housing, protect biodiversity, and secure infrastructure improvements while safeguarding the majority of the borough's Green Belt."

The press release also emphasized the risks of not adopting a plan, including unplanned and speculative developments. Residents were encouraged to participate in the upcoming Regulation 19 consultation, set to begin in early 2025.



Public reaction, however, remains overwhelmingly critical. Campaigners accused the council of ignoring residents' views and bowing to government pressure. "This is not a balanced plan," said Janice Baker. "It's a capitulation."

## Looking Ahead: Full Council Debate

The draft Local Plan now moves to the Full Council for debate on 10th December 2024. With opposition among councillors and residents showing no signs of abating, the future of Epsom's Green Belt hangs in the balance.

While some see the plan as a necessary compromise, others view it as a betrayal of the borough's character and environmental heritage. The upcoming Full Council meeting promises to be as contentious as the LPPC debate, as Epsom grapples with the challenge of balancing growth and preservation.

## Conflict on Epsom's Green Belt plans of another kind?

21 November 2024



On the eve of an important meeting of the Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee on the future of the Borough's Local Plan, housing and Green Belt development, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) is under fire following allegations of inadequate handling of a perceived conflict of interest involving its planning consultant, Mr. **Derek Stebbing**, and his employer, **Strutt & Parker** (S&P). The controversy centres on Mr. Stebbings' advice to permit housing development on Green Belt land in the borough while S&P maintains a business relationship with the Church Commissioners (CC), significant landowners of Green Belt land in the area.

EEBC has also been accused of silencing public concerns. Campaigner **Sam Bentall** was barred from addressing a key council meeting after being accused of making defamatory claims about the alleged conflict. Emails exchanged between Ms. Bentall and the council reveal a contentious and somewhat opaque process.

Ms. Bentall attempted to raise her concerns at a meeting of the council's Licensing, Planning, and Policy Committee (LPPC). However, she was refused the opportunity to speak. The council justified its decision by claiming her assertions of a conflict of interest were defamatory. In an email exchange seen by the Epsom and Ewell Times, Ms. Bentall expressed frustration, stating, "I am being silenced for highlighting genuine concerns about transparency in the planning process."

The crux of the controversy lies in Mr. Stebbing's dual roles:

As a consultant to EEBC, Mr. Stebbing has advised on the Local Plan, including housing developments on Green Belt land such as Horton Farm. Strutt & Parker's website states it "has appointed Derek Stebbing as planning policy consultant to advise its national development and planning team in assisting clients in navigating the planning process."

S&P have the Church Commissioners, owners of Horton Farm, as one of its clients. During a telephone interview with Epsom and Ewell Times, Mr. Stebbings denied any direct advisory role to CC, stating: "I do not advise the Church Commissioners at all, whether in Epsom & Ewell or elsewhere." He acknowledged, however, that CC is a major client of S&P and asserted that "Chinese walls" within the company prevented any conflict of interest.

One Councillor, who asked not to be named, confirmed that the consultant advised Councillors of the need to allow Horton Farm to be developed for housing. "I accept that he may not have known the owner of the land was a client of his employer but the perception of a risk of a conflict of interest cannot be ignored."

The Council was invited to comment and replied it had no comment.

Some local groups have sharply criticized the council's draft Local Plan, which includes proposals to develop nearly 60 hectares of Green Belt land. In a letter to the Epsom and Ewell Times, the Epsom Green Belt Group challenged the council's justification for building on high-quality Green Belt areas like Horton Farm.

"The draft plan proposes the loss of almost 60 hectares of Green Belt land, of which 87% is ranked as High Quality. Horton Farm is one of the highest-ranked areas and unsuitable for development due to flooding risks, traffic impacts, and lack of infrastructure," the group wrote. They argue that the plan unnecessarily sacrifices pristine Green Belt land when alternative solutions exist.

The council has faced widespread criticism for delays in finalizing the Local Plan, now eight years overdue. While the Epsom Civic Society has urged swift adoption to prevent speculative development, other voices, including the Green Belt Group, caution against rushing a flawed plan.

"Submitting a bad plan, unnecessarily and inappropriately destroying huge areas of Green Belt, would be unforgivable," the Green Belt Group warned. They advocate revising the plan to remove high-quality Green Belt sites like Horton Farm before submission.

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## Epsom Civic Society say Local Plan should be agreed on Wednesday

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The **Epsom Civic Society** (ECS) (motto being "Shaping the future, safeguarding the past") has urged councillors to support the borough's draft Local Plan,



warning of the risks associated with further delays. In a press release issued yesterday, ECS Chair **Margaret Hollins** emphasised the importance of progressing the Plan to protect Epsom from speculative and inappropriate development.

"For the past eight years, our newsletters have chronicled the ongoing saga of Epsom's efforts to adopt a new Local Plan," Ms Hollins stated. "Without an up-to-date Plan, the Borough remains vulnerable to developments that may not align with the character and needs of our community."

The Society acknowledges the challenges posed by central government planning reforms, which have increased housing targets and tightened timescales for Local Plan updates. While the draft Plan falls short of fully meeting housing targets, ECS believes it represents the borough's best chance of success in the face of these constraints.

In a letter to members of the council's Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, ECS highlighted the consequences of rejecting the draft. "Having no meaningful Plan to take forward to the next stage is significantly more threatening," the letter warns. "Without an up-to-date Plan, the Borough faces prolonged vulnerability to speculative development, which could lead to inappropriate urban projects and greater threats to the Green Belt."

The letter acknowledges the difficult compromises required in the draft Plan, including limited encroachments on less strategically important Green Belt land. However, ECS views this as a necessary trade-off to protect higher-value areas and secure much-needed housing. The Society is urging councillors to act swiftly, particularly given anticipated changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which may increase housing pressures further in the new year.

"Some compromise now is the best way to defend the rest [of the Green Belt]," the press release concluded. ECS is advocating for the adoption of the Plan as recommended in the council's report, emphasising the risks and costs of restarting the process.

The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee will meet tomorrow to consider the draft Local Plan. The decision could shape the future of development in Epsom for years to come.

Councillors now face the challenging task of balancing housing needs with the preservation of the borough's character and natural assets, while navigating increasingly stringent national planning policies. All eyes are on Wednesday's meeting to see how they respond to the Civic Society's call for decisive action.

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## Pods off in bricks grant for Epsom homeless

21 November 2024



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) will receive £1,493,250 in one-off funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to help tackle its spending on homeless families. The Council will use it to buy five properties and one to be used for helping Afghan families resettle.

The grant was initially hoped to be spent on Epsom and Ewell council's recently approved temporary housing pods but it was refused by the government. Cllr Hannah Dalton told the committee on November 12: "They turned us down because they want us to invest in bricks and mortar."

Council documents state the programme will reduce local housing pressures by providing better quality housing, reduce emergency accommodation costs and reduce the impact on those waiting for social housing. It adds that the initiative will also provide sustainable housing for Afghan citizens on the resettlement scheme so they can "build new lives in the UK, find employment and integrate into communities."

Following the unanimous approval of the scheme, EEBC will receive the first payment in January 2025, with three instalments spread out over two years.

EEBC is also contributing £75,000 from Section 106 contributions, contributions from developers, to pay for the scheme. Section 106 is put towards community and social infrastructure projects, this can include social housing.

The new scheme will still cost the taxpayer £35,000 a year for the maintenance of the properties. However, it is a smaller sum than the £115,000 the Council was spending on the equivalent accommodation costs. Saving an estimated £80,000 in total, it would take just over nine years for the council to be paid back from buying the properties.

Around £2.34m was forked out on temporary accommodation by the council last year alone. EEBC said the new funding to purchase houses will help it reduce the annual cost of expensive nightly accommodation with permanent homes.

The two-three bedroom houses would be owned by the council and located within the borough of Epsom and Ewell. Officers told the committee they had already identified a couple houses suitable for the scheme before they have been put on the market. Conditions set by the ministry mean that the properties have to be either freehold, or minimum leasehold of 125 years.

## Epsom and Ewell Green Belt battle lines drawing near

21 November 2024



The latest draft of the Local Plan has just been revealed. The headline news is that the housing target has been significantly reduced by omitting the Ewell East Station Green Belt site but the Horton Farm and Hook Road Arena Green Belt sites have been retained.

Decision time is coming with the key Council committee meeting to deliberate on the Local Plan on 20th November and Full Council due to meet on 10th



December.

The campaigning group Epsom Green Belt has sent to the Epsom and Ewell Times a detailed analysis criticising delays, costs, and lack of transparency in the ongoing development of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Local Plan. The findings highlight that a six-month "pause" in 2023, frequently cited by the ruling Residents' Association councillors as the reason for the current tight schedule, didn't halt progress entirely. During this period, some work continued, including transport assessments, suggesting that time lost was minimal and that the pause alone doesn't fully explain the prolonged delays in the Local Plan's timeline.

The study notes that, after work resumed in December 2023, the Council extended the Local Plan timetable by 11 months, meaning there was effectively a five-month gain rather than a loss. Statements made by Councillors Peter O'Donovan (Chair of the Licensing Planning and Policy Committee) and Hannah Dalton (Leader of the RA Group) that the pause led to delays which prevent the Council from accelerating the current timetable to avoid higher housing targets are challenged.

The review shows that delays have, in fact, compounded over years: since 2017, the Local Plan timeline has stretched by an additional seven and a half years, while budget overruns now exceed £1.7 million. A portion of this funding, nearly £742,000, was reallocated from the New Homes Bonus Grant—intended to reflect community priorities—without consulting residents.

Meanwhile, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has issued a press release reaffirming its commitment to a comprehensive and balanced Local Plan, which will be discussed at the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) meeting on 20 November. At this meeting, the LPPC will make its recommendation to Full Council, which is scheduled to vote in December. Councillor O'Donovan, Chair of the LPPC, described the Local Plan as a "vital and cross-cutting document" that will influence all areas of local development, from supporting the economy and creating affordable housing to protecting the environment and enhancing biodiversity.

Acknowledging that residents may have mixed reactions, Councillor O'Donovan stated, "There is now a full suite of Evidence Base reports to support the Proposed Submission Local Plan, including feedback from last year's Regulation 18 consultation." He encouraged residents to review these reports and attend the LPPC meeting, highlighting the council's aim to create a Local Plan that secures a "thriving future" for the borough.

The Epsom Green Belt analysis further reveals that reporting on Local Plan progress largely ceased after 2019, raising questions about accountability. A 2018 agreement to regularly update councillors on the Local Plan's status appears to have lapsed, leaving minimal scrutiny over the plan's extended timeline and growing costs. The Group urges the council to enhance transparency and engage more actively with the public, particularly on spending decisions like the New Homes Bonus Grant, which it is contended was reallocated without community input.

With the next public consultation (Regulation 19) anticipated to open following Full Council's approval, residents have another chance to voice their opinions. Councillor O'Donovan encourages those interested to register for updates on the Council's website.

The coming weeks will be critical in determining the future development and preservation of Epsom and Ewell.

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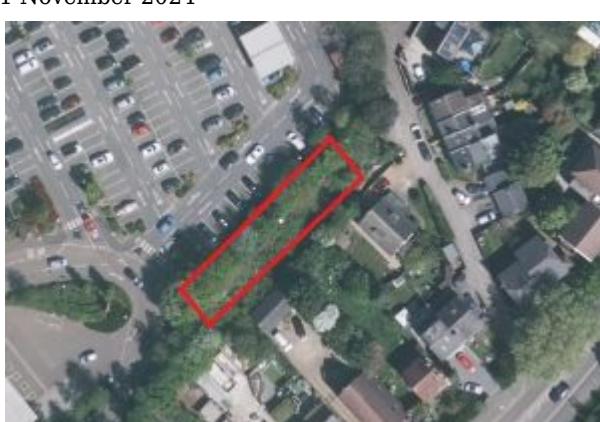
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## Did a fair view prevail on Epsom's modular homes for the homeless?

21 November 2024



The decision by Epsom & Ewell Borough Council 7th November to approve three modular homes for temporary accommodation on Fairview Road has ignited a fierce debate. The council framed this decision as a compassionate and financially prudent response to an acute housing crisis, while residents, local leaders, and some council members aired strong concerns about road safety, infrastructure, and the integrity of the planning process.

### A Much-Needed Solution, According to the Council

The council has justified the development as a crucial step in addressing homelessness in the borough, where families are often displaced to temporary accommodations outside Epsom, causing significant disruptions to their lives. With over 160 households in temporary housing and 90 more in costly nightly-paid accommodation outside the borough, the need for local temporary housing solutions is undeniable.

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee, remarked in the council's press release, "Epsom & Ewell has proportionately one of the highest numbers of homeless households living in temporary accommodation in England. Increasing temporary accommodation provision for local families will not only be life-changing for those being housed now and in the future but will also have a positive impact on the borough as a whole."

The council also highlighted the economic benefits of the modular homes. According to their press release, the development could reduce the need for expensive nightly-paid accommodation, generating long-term savings. Funding for the project includes £75,000 from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' Brownfield Land Relief Fund. "This project is a decent thing to do," Councillor **Humphrey Reynolds** (RA West Ewell) noted during the meeting. "We need to find somewhere for families to live."

### Road Safety and Infrastructure Concerns Dominate the Meeting

The Planning Committee meeting, was chaired by Councillor **Steven McCormick**, (RA Woodcote and Langley) and the meeting revealed divisions on the issue. Many residents and councillors raised significant concerns about the state of Fairview Road, a narrow, privately maintained road with limited pedestrian pathways, which is already busy with schoolchildren and local traffic.

The Principal Planning Officer, introduced the application, clarifying that the site has existing access from Fairview Road and is currently overgrown, having previously served as a builder's storage yard. She explained that the modular buildings would "meet a significantly higher standard of temporary accommodation" than current options in the borough.

However, Fairview Road residents, represented by **Debbie Ransom**, voiced fears about the impact of the development on local traffic and safety. "The road is already hazardous, narrow, and below minimum width standards," Ransom asserted. "With this development, traffic on Fairview Road could increase by 50%, and the road simply cannot sustain that increase. It is already dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists due to insufficient lighting and narrow paths."

This sentiment was echoed by **Jo Garrod**, Headteacher of nearby **Glyn School**. "Fairview Road is extremely narrow, with no dedicated pavement and poor lighting, which makes it difficult for our students to walk safely," Garrod said in a formal objection. "Any increase in traffic will heighten the risk of accidents."



## Legal Challenges and Community Impact

The legal right of the council to use Fairview Road as an access point was also questioned. Residents claim that the council lost its legal right to access the site via Fairview Road when it sold an easement to Sainsbury's for access through an adjacent car park. "The council no longer has the right of access through Fairview Road, and we as residents have refused to grant such an easement," Ransom stated on behalf of residents. She argued that any additional wear and tear on the road, already funded by resident contributions, would be unacceptable.

Councillor **Alison Kelly** (Liberal Democrat Stamford) queried whether alternative access routes had been considered, such as Kiln Lane, but the officer responded that the council could only assess the application as submitted. "It's up to the applicant to propose alternative access, not the council," she said, adding that Surrey County Council had raised no objections based on road safety.

The discussion revealed frustrations among councillors who felt limited by what they saw as procedural obstacles. "If this was an adopted road, we'd be looking at solutions like yellow lines or even street lighting to improve safety," Councillor **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley) said. "But with this private road, we're stymied. Surrey County Council has done nothing to mitigate these issues, and I find it difficult to believe that they wouldn't see a problem here."

## Balancing Homelessness Needs and Community Safety

While the safety issues were widely acknowledged, some councillors, including **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court), stressed the need to consider the positive impact of the development on the borough's homeless families. "For many families facing eviction through no fault of their own, the option to stay within the borough is critical," said Chinn. "These modular homes could offer stability and security, allowing children to stay in their schools and families to keep local support systems."

Councillor **Lucy McIntyre** (RA West Ewell) also voiced support, stating, "I understand the residents' objections, but I believe these units represent a positive step for the borough overall, especially with the council's focus on homelessness."

However, other councillors, such as Jan Mason, remained sceptical. "It's all very well to support homelessness initiatives, but this road simply isn't suitable for further development," Mason argued. "Adding three units to this unsuitable road will only make matters worse, and we've got no way to improve the infrastructure to make it safer."

## Conditions and Approval Amid Ongoing Concerns

The committee approved the development on a temporary five-year basis, subject to several conditions, including amendments to conditions to reflect a review of the scheme's necessity and to ensure parking spaces were allocated to individual units. The council stipulated that after five years, a review would assess if there remained a need for such temporary accommodation.

During the discussion, Councillor **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) queried the proposed red colour of the modular units in the CAD drawings, expressing concerns that it might clash with the neighbourhood's character. Planning officer clarified that the colour was a default setting in the drawings, not the intended final appearance, and that materials and finishes would be selected to harmonise as much as possible with the area.

In the end, the vote carried with seven members supporting the application, zero opposing, and one abstention. Councillor Phil Neale, reflecting on the vote, stated, "We know this is a tough decision, but as councillors, we live in the borough, we know the people, and we understand the difficulties of homelessness. We have to be both compassionate and professional in our decisions, and I believe this project warrants support."

## A Divisive Outcome

The approval of these modular homes highlights a difficult balancing act in Epsom & Ewell, where urgent social needs clash with established community concerns and limited local infrastructure. While the council aims to address a pressing homelessness crisis, residents worry that Fairview Road lacks the capacity and infrastructure to absorb additional traffic and maintain safety.

As this project proceeds, the council will need to navigate ongoing concerns about road access, safety improvements, and potential legal challenges from residents. For now, the decision stands as a testament to the challenges councils face in balancing local development with the needs of vulnerable populations.

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Epsom's homelessness crisis

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## There is another way to save Epsom's Green Belt

21 November 2024



Dear Editor,

My 12 year old son spoke at the last local council planning meeting, about the importance of not building on the green belt, and I am writing to you, as an Epsom and Ewell Stamford ward resident, to echo my agreement. I've gone through the Land Assessment and the Draft Local Plan regulation 18, and am very concerned about the future of our green spaces in Epsom and Ewell.

While I realise there are many ways to work out how many houses to build in Epsom and Ewell, I believe it should be based on how much brownfield space we have, rather than what is possible if we build on the green belt. We obviously need to build social houses (my understanding is that there are about 1,300 families on the waiting list in Epsom and Ewell), and we must do our part with helping to build a proportion of the houses likely to be needed nationally (which the office of national statistics estimates at about a 10% increase over 15 years). The local plan suggests an increase of about 14.5% (on top of 1,300 needed for social houses), so arguably more than we need to build.

I believe an alternative local plan has been sent to the council showing that it is possible to build all the houses we need on brownfield sites identified in the Land Assessment, plus there will be more spaces that become available over the next 15 years. This means that there are no exceptional circumstances in order to justify changing green belt boundaries.

A Reigate and Banstead Green Party councillor, who is also a town planner, gave a talk earlier in the year explaining that if you build on many small brownfield sites (instead of thousands of houses on one green site), you get small, local firms tendering for the work, instead of big developers, so increasing local employment.

I am also concerned that the council is not listening to residents, with their own consultation showing that 87% of respondents are opposed to building on the green belt. And a 12,000 signature petition has been ignored. While I realise there was a concern that not all the people who signed it definitely live in Epsom and Ewell, I think it is very likely that a huge proportion of them do.

Additionally, I feel I cannot leave out how disappointed I am that the Local Plan does not specify energy standards to be met for residential house building. I believe the excuse/explanation for this is the 2022 Local Plan Viability Assessment, which includes some analysis of estimated additional costs to building if various environmental standards are adhered to. I believe that this data is incomplete as it isn't clear whether it considers the lower cost of running an energy efficient house and the resulting potential impact in the sale price of the property. It also doesn't compare these figures to the cost of retro-fitting houses, and doesn't mention the financial cost to the country if we fail to protect ourselves against the worse effects of climate change.



With not acting to remove green belt following the consultation, and dragging the process out, we are now at a point where if we delay any longer, new government rules will mean drastically higher number of houses required to be built in Epsom and Ewell, and could almost wipe out all the green spaces (except The Common) over the next 15 years. Please act quickly to avoid this!

And I cannot stress enough to please remember the importance of increasing green and re-wilded spaces across the UK in order to help mitigate the worst effects of the climate crisis. Green spaces are needed for free and natural carbon sequestration, reducing air pollution, natural flood management, and for our declining wildlife. They are also used as important community spaces, and children's' sports, as my son and his friend pointed out in the last planning meeting.

Yours faithfully,

Yvonne Grunwald - Stamford Ward Epsom.

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## Another Surrey borough's Local Plan agony

21 November 2024



More than 800 homes will be built on Surrey green belt land as part of a 15 year plan for 9,270 new properties in the north of the county.

It comes after **Spelthorne Borough Council** agreed, last week, to reinstate 13 green belt sites it had removed from its local plan in February.

Opponents have said delays to the borough's planning bible, which sets out where and the types of development that can go ahead for the next 15 years, has turned Spelthorne into "clarion" to be picked off by "vultures".

The council said it changed its position in order to get its housing plan approved under lower targets of 618 a year versus potentially the 700 plus that could come in under national changes to planning law.

Councillor Darren Clarke (Conservative, Laleham and Shepperton Green) spoke out against the hold ups saying residents were "sold a pup" and councillors unable to stop unwanted development.

He said: "The lack of a local plan means that we don't have a five year housing supply.

"This tilts decisions in favour of development, and away from not developing so when we are lobbied by residents to oppose builds we are told by officers that we have no reasons to object.

"We can reject it as the committee and do because we know what good looks like, however the planners can and do apply those with the most money know they will win and we need to pay their expensive legal costs as well

"So we not only end up with buildings which we do not want, lived in by people from potentially outside the borough, hindering, not helping the borough but also a legal bill for us and them, and who pays this, yes the residents.

"We are in a time of planning approval by appeal with developer vultures circling looking at us like carrion.

"What this short sighted administration has done is harm the borough make us look like a laughing stock and cost the residents in hard pounds.

'It's been almost fingers in ears and la la la'

His speech was rebutted by borough leader, Cllr Joanne Sexton who said the so called "pathetic excuse" to delay the local plan had been to protect residents from flooding rather than any quarrels over green belt.

She told the meeting that she was proud and delighted with the work that had gone in to ensure "that now have a statement of common ground with the Environment Agency, who is a key stakeholder, and knows exactly what it is that they needed from us, and I am extremely proud today to be here to be able to take this forward."

Officially the council paused the inspector's examination of its local plan in December 2023 "to allow for training of newly elected councillors" and to consider potential changes to national planning policy.

In February 2024, the council asked the inspector to remove all green belt allocations, with the exception of the two sites for Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpeople.

The council has now decided to return the 13 protected green belt sites back into the plan so they can be used for housing - before going back to the planning inspector with any proposed changes.

The saga dates back even further with the Secretary of State ordering the council to not pause its plan in September 2023 after councillors asked for a hiatus in June - just a month after examination hearings had started at the end of May.

In all, there will be 855 new homes built on Spelthorne's green belt, of which 438 will be affordable.

Spelthorne Borough Council offices in Knowle Green, Staines. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

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## Is Delay Defensible in the Fight to Protect Epsom's Green Belt?

21 November 2024



As Epsom and Ewell Borough Council deliberates its Local Plan in the face of imminent, significantly higher government housing targets, the council's slow-paced approach raises crucial questions about its strategy to protect our borough's green spaces. Led by the Residents' Association, the council is balancing on a tightrope between procedural rigour and an increasingly urgent need for action. But with higher housing quotas looming, is this balance tipping too far towards delay, at the cost of our precious Green Belt?



Nine opposition councillors have proposed an Emergency Full Council Meeting, arguing that swift action is essential to avoid a target increase to 817 new homes annually—double the current requirement. They rightly point out the risks to Epsom's character and environmental integrity. With development pressure escalating, the loss of even a small proportion of green spaces would have lasting consequences, affecting not just our landscape but also the local ecology and community fabric.

Residents' Association leaders, meanwhile, cite the need for strict adherence to regulatory procedures, with Councillor **Peter O'Donovan** (Chair of the Licensing Policy and Planning Committee, RA Ewell Court) cautioning against shortcuts that might render the plan "unsound" in the eyes of government inspectors. RA Leader Councillor **Hannah Dalton** (Stoneleigh) echoes this sentiment, emphasising the need for quality and robustness in the plan to withstand scrutiny. But, does adherence to every procedural step outweigh the immediate urgency to avoid a government-imposed target that could open up the Green Belt for development?

If every councillor claims to prioritise the protection of our green spaces, it's difficult to justify the RA's slow and careful approach. What would be lost by speeding up the process, even at the risk of minor regulatory issues? The Local Plan's objective is clear: it must serve the community's best interests by ensuring sustainable development, but without jeopardising the green spaces that make Epsom unique. Rushing to complete this plan before the higher targets take effect doesn't mean compromising on quality—it means acknowledging the urgency of our current position.

The RA's insistence on caution may reflect their commitment to procedural integrity, but in the face of a looming housing target that threatens everything they aim to protect, this stance appears increasingly illogical. The stakes are high, and with public consultation already delayed due to a halt in 2023, it is hard to see what further delay achieves. As **Janice Baker** of the Epsom Green Party rightly points out, legal pathways exist to expedite the consultation phase, saving precious weeks and potentially allowing the community to dodge the higher target.

In the end, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council must decide if this cautious approach truly serves our borough's best interests. Every resident who treasures our green spaces deserves a council that can act quickly and decisively in their defence. The council's commitment to procedural correctness is admirable, but it must be weighed against the real and immediate threat of intensified development. It's time to ask, "What are we willing to risk?" Because in this case, the greatest risk might just be the price of waiting.

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

## Call to Epsom and Ewell Council to speed plan denied

21 November 2024



Nine opposition councillors on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council are calling for an Emergency Full Council Meeting to fast-track the final stages of the borough's Local Plan amid looming concerns over potential new housing targets set by the central government. The councillors—comprising members of the Liberal Democrats, Labour, and Conservative parties—are urging swift action, fearing that delays could lead to increased housing quotas that would place significant pressure on the borough's cherished green spaces.

The councillors' proposal, initially set out in a formal request dated 24th October, has stirred considerable debate across the council. They propose that the emergency meeting be held immediately following the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) meeting on 20th November or, failing that, on the evening of the 21st November. In doing so, they hope to expedite the draft Local Plan's approval, enabling the next public consultation phase to commence before the year's end.

### The Case for Urgency: New Housing Targets and Local Development

At the heart of the opposition councillors' concerns are potential changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which could soon enforce a higher housing target of 817 new homes annually—over double the borough's existing requirement. One opposition councillor highlighted the urgency, warning, "If the Local Plan fails or is found unsound, we will be subject to the Labour government's new targets, which are 817 dwellings per annum."

These new targets, if implemented, could lead to development encroaching on the borough's green spaces, a possibility that has mobilised both councillors and local residents. This anxiety is reflected in the recent appeals from local groups, including the Epsom Green Belt Group, which advocates for focusing on brownfield sites rather than encroaching on protected land.

### Council's Response: A Call for Procedural Compliance

In response, council leaders from the Residents' Association majority group have expressed concerns about rushing the Local Plan process, citing the necessity of adhering to legal and procedural requirements. Chair of the LPPC, Councillor **Peter O'Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court) emphasised the importance of a comprehensive review process to ensure that any amendments to the draft Local Plan comply with regulations before it proceeds to public consultation. He stated, "The documents which will form the Regulation 19 consultation must be prepared in accordance with the regulations, including the legally required Sustainability Appraisal and Habitats Regulations Assessment."

O'Donovan added that should any changes be proposed during the LPPC's 20th November meeting, additional time would be necessary for council officers to update the documentation. Failure to address these requirements, he warned, could result in the plan being deemed "unsound" by government inspectors.

### Residents' Association View: Balancing Timeliness and Quality

Residents' Association Leader Councillor **Hannah Dalton** (Stoneleigh), in her response to the opposition's proposal, reiterated the council's commitment to both transparency and quality in the Local Plan's development. Dalton acknowledged the delay caused by a temporary halt in 2023 but argued that accelerating the current schedule could compromise the quality and legal robustness of the plan. "We can't simply 'speed up' to replace six months of lost time," she remarked, noting that the council remains committed to commencing the Regulation 19 public consultation "at the earliest possible opportunity after the November meeting of the LPPC."

In a letter addressing a recent call from the Epsom Green Party, Dalton also noted that bypassing the LPPC's role could undermine the Local Plan's overall integrity. She explained, "Circumventing the LPP meeting... bypasses LPP, which has been tasked with the development of the Local Plan." Any changes agreed upon by Full Council would still require further work to comply with legally mandated procedures, she added.

### Epsom Green Party's Intervention: Legal Pathways to Expedite Consultation

Meanwhile, **Janice Baker**, Chair of the Epsom Green Party, recently suggested an alternative approach. In a letter to Dalton, Baker proposed a legally permissible pathway for Full Council to assume the LPPC's role, potentially scheduling a Full Council meeting in place of the LPPC's 20th November session. This approach, she argued, could save several weeks and allow the Regulation 19 consultation to conclude by early January 2025, ahead of the potential NPPF changes.

"Many residents have been frustrated by the lack of open discussion," Baker stated, adding that the proposed approach "provides a chance to avoid this disaster." She further urged that any potential legal impediments to this plan be swiftly addressed by the council's legal team, emphasising that delays could lead to increased housing requirements that would place "extremely significant environmental, financial, and social costs" on the borough.

### Residents and Environmental Campaigners Express Growing Concern



The debate has galvanised local community groups and residents who are deeply invested in the borough's planning future. The Epsom Green Belt Group has argued for prioritising brownfield sites to protect greenfield areas and prevent the urban sprawl that they fear could follow under new NPPF guidelines. Their concerns were echoed during the LPPC's October meeting, where residents spoke passionately against any development that could jeopardise the area's green spaces.

Adding further weight to the opposition's argument, local Liberal Democrat leader Councillor **Julie Morris** (College) criticised Mayor **Steven Bridger**'s (RA Stamford) refusal to consider an Emergency Council Meeting (ECM) for 21st November. Bridger had stated that an ECM would not allow sufficient time for officers to finalise the necessary documentation and for councillors to adequately review it. However, Morris rebutted that the ECM was intended "to allow Council as a whole to sign off the draft Local Plan AND any amendments agreed on 20th November," thus expediting the consultation's start before the end of the year.

The opposition councillors are now considering other procedural avenues to press forward with the Local Plan, underscoring their commitment to avoid the looming 817-unit target.

#### What's Next? A Community on Edge

The path forward for Epsom and Ewell's Local Plan remains uncertain, as councillors and community members await the LPPC's 20th November meeting. The stakes are high for the borough, with questions about housing supply, environmental conservation, and procedural integrity all coming to the fore. The decisions made in the coming weeks will not only determine the scale of future developments but will also shape the borough's character for years to come.

In the words of Councillor Dalton, "Balancing development with the preservation of our borough's character is challenging but essential." With the pressure mounting from opposition members and concerned residents alike, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council faces critical choices as it navigates the complex and often conflicting demands of local governance and sustainable growth.

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