### Climate motion sparks energetic debate in Council

In a lively session at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Tuesday 16th April, councillors engaged in a debate over a motion proposing a significant environmental mandate for future housing developments.

Councillor **James Lawrence**, (LibDem College) the initiator of the motion, emphasized the urgency of addressing climate change through stringent environmental standards in housing. He argued that aiming for the highest energy efficiency rating, Grade A of the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) for all new house builds, would not only align with climate goals but also save residents money in the long run.

"I believe that this ambitious policy would allow us to more effectively design the housing of the future, both saving residents money and meeting our climate goals and saving energy in the long run," Councillor Lawrence asserted.

However, concerns were raised regarding the practicality and affordability of such a mandate. Councillor **Alex Coley** (RA Ruxley) queried the feasibility of implementing the requirement and its potential impact on housing affordability.

"How much would these homes cost and to what extent would that mean that less affordable and social housing is built because of the cost of these elite homes?" Councillor Coley questioned.

Councillor **Phil Neale**, (RA Cuddington) drawing from a construction background, echoed similar sentiments, highlighting the challenges developers would face in meeting such stringent standards without significantly increasing housing costs.

"In reality...to provide housing of above A, which is what is being asked in this motion, is impossible," Councillor Neale argued, stressing the need for practical solutions to address the housing shortage.

Amidst the debate, Councillor **Kim Spickett** (RA Cuddington) urged a nuanced approach, emphasizing the importance of considering the impact on families and advocating for a stable efficiency metric in EPC ratings.

"The focus of an EPC headline metric needs to be on reducing demand through a stable efficiency metric," Councillor Spickett remarked, urging caution in setting overly ambitious standards.

Despite the spirited discussion, Councillor **Julie Morris** (LibDem College) urged the council to aim high, citing the potential benefits of setting ambitious environmental standards.

"It's much easier to negotiate downwards than it is to negotiate upwards," Councillor Morris asserted, advocating for bold action to combat climate change.

However, Councillor **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley and Chair of the responding Licensing Planning and Policy Committee) cautioned against rushing into decisions without considering the economic viability and broader implications of the mandate. He stressed the importance of evidence-based decision-making and cautioned against jeopardizing housing affordability.

Councillor Lawrence concluded by urging the council to consider the motion's underlying sentiment, even if it failed to pass, highlighting the growing momentum for stringent environmental regulations.

The motion was defeated on a show of hands.

Image: Oakton Developments - new houses in Epsom

# Floods with silver linings for Guildford's housing targets?

Guildford has been given the "biggest opportunity" to transform itself in a century. The Environment Agency is looking into an expanded flood prevention scheme that would save homes and businesses from rising waters – and open up previously unusable town-centre land for new housing. Supporters say the upshot of this is huge.

Councils have to identify land for housing in order to meet Government set targets, but Guildford Borough Council had to recently disregard 50 sites because they were subject to flooding – 30 of which were in the town centre, the Local Democracy Reporting Service was told.

If the expanded flood alleviation scheme goes ahead it would instantly increase the amount of land in the town and in a swoop

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take pressure off green belt villages.

Former councillor John Rigg said that the town has been waiting affected by floods for almost 100 years and that it would only get worse if nothing was done. He said: "The Environment Agency's planning period anticipates a 72 per cent increase in rainfall in the Guildford area. Not steady rain, big downpours."

He said the problem was compounded as towns upstream - for example in Waverley - pressed on with their own developments.

Mr Rigg said: "When the Government said Guildford had to deliver 10,000 homes, they had to all go in the green belt and the villages, because nobody got the flooding scheme underway and released the brownfield sites. When Guildford was looking at land for development as part of its local plan, there were 50 sites that had to be disregarded because they were subject to flooding, 30 of them in the town centre."

Among those are the Millmead and Millbrook car parks.

He said: "We have got to get the flood alleviation plan adopted. The EA has said there is £7bn allocated to areas that deliver economics and social benefits. This ticks all the boxes. It's an important town, it's a county town and it needs homes and businesses. The previous scheme was a minimum, just to stop a couple of streets flooding, but this does it properly, it frees up brownfield sites. It's the biggest opportunity for Guildford since about 1900. Last week, by the cinema it flooded, it was up to people's knees, as far as this town is concerned, they need to wake up."

Guildford has a long history of flooding from the River Wey, and the Environment Agency, working with the borough council and Surrey County Council, are looking to reduce the high level of flood risk to the town centre.

The project is still in its appraisal stage, but the EA has confirmed it is looking to create a larger protection zone than initial plans from 2018. It expects to take up to three years to finalise the scheme as it undertakes assessments, surveys and public engagement – the first of which takes place at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre on Thursday April 18, from 2pm to 7pm.

Jon Mansbridge, Guildford Flood Alleviation Scheme project director at the Environment Agency, said: "The feedback we gather from communities during our engagement is really valuable in helping to inform the preferred option." He added: "The flood defences will be visually integrated into existing and regenerated areas of the river corridor, reducing flood risk to even more of the town centre."

Councillor Joss Bigmore, former co-leader of Guildford Borough Council said: "Finally the Environment Agency is supporting the council by backing a flood alleviation scheme. "We've been patient, nobody has the money to do these things, and its positive that we are at the top of the gueue.

"Hopefully we can come up with a comprehensive solution and hopefully we can eradicate the risk of flooding for the centre of Guildford for the next century." He added: "For existing residents it very important – and if there is a solution it will unlock a lot of regeneration opportunities on former flood risk areas."

Flooding in Guildford Feb 2020 (image Environment Agency)

# Stoneleigh library flats for homeless

Two flats above a library are set to be used as temporary accommodation for homeless people, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council decided yesterday (March 26).

Demand for temporary accommodation is "acute", according to the council. It is currently predicting an overspend of £200,000 of its £1.5m temporary accommodation budget, according to the Local Democracy Reporting Service.

Two self-contained, two bedroom maisonettes that sit above the Stoneleigh Community Library in Epsom that are accessed through the back of the building are earmarked for use.

Surrey County Council, who commercially lease the empty flats, have reportedly refurbished the maisonettes to a "high standard" and will require "minimal preparation" to be used as temporary accommodation.

Emergency and temporary accommodation is provided to housing register applicants whilst their claim is being investigated. Homeless people currently sit in Band A of the council's housing allocations.

Around 235 homeless 'households' (i.e individuals or families) were accommodated by the council in 2021, with 155 in temporary accommodation and 80 in nightly-paid accommodation, costing up to £140 a night.



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Meeting documents state the decision will create a real cost saving of £30,920 pa for the two maisonettes combined to the council.

A budget of £15,000 was agreed to cover the development of the site, with £5,000 covering legal and/or surveyor costs to the council and contributing to SCC for landlord approval costs. An additional £10,000 is set aside for a maisonettes preparation contingency.

Owned by a private landlord, the borough council will under lease from SCC who currently commercially lets the property. SCC and Epsom and Ewell Borough Council lease will co-expire in just under three years. The terms will then be renewed or renegotiated.

Stoneleigh Community Library (Credit Google Maps)

### A Green Group that won't belt up

In a comprehensive critique of **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**'s handling of the Local Plan, a local environmental advocacy group, known as **Epsom Green Belt**, argues there are shortcomings in the council's approach.

In a response to the council's Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) (reported by the Epsom and Ewell Times HERE) they assert that the council's failure to provide clear and timely information about changes resulting from public consultation leaves residents in the dark about crucial decisions that will shape the borough's future.

One of the group's key contentions centres around the council's delay in analyzing consultation responses. Despite assurances of ongoing analysis, no outcomes have been made public, leaving residents to speculate about the fate of their feedback. This lack of transparency, the group argues, undermines the democratic process and erodes trust in local governance.

Furthermore, the Group criticizes the council's handling of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC), highlighting concerns about the committee's apparent exclusion from significant decision-making processes. By sidelining the LPPC, the council risks bypassing important checks and balances, raising questions about the integrity of the Local Plan's development.

A central focus of the group's critique is the contentious issue of Green Belt development. They accuse the council of disregarding public opinion and pressing ahead with plans to build on protected Green Belt land without adequately demonstrating the exceptional circumstances required by National Planning Policies. This, they argue, not only threatens valuable green spaces but also reflects a disregard for community sentiment.

In addition to these overarching concerns, the Group points to specific discrepancies in the council's representation of housing needs and affordability. They highlight the council's reliance on inflated housing figures and failure to explore alternative solutions, such as maximizing brownfield sites. This, they argue, calls into question the accuracy and integrity of the data informing the Local Plan.

Epsom Green Belt calls for immediate action from elected councillors to address these concerns and restore public confidence in the Local Plan process. They emphasize the need for transparency, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making to ensure that the interests of residents and the environment are adequately represented.

The full case being argued by Epsom Green Belt can be accessed HERE.

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### Here we go again on the Local Plan?

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has launched a dedicated FAQ section on its website to inform residents about the ongoing development of the borough's **Local Plan**. According to the Council this initiative aims to provide transparency and dispel any misinformation circulating regarding the plan's objectives and progress.

The Local Plan holds significant importance in shaping the future of the borough, covering various aspects such as job creation, environmental conservation, leisure facilities, housing sites, and infrastructure enhancements. The Council states that no final decisions have been made regarding policy formulations or site selections. Currently, the council is in the process of reviewing feedback received during the initial public consultation on the draft plan and gathering additional evidence to inform its development.

Councillor **Steven McCormick**, Chair of the Licensing & Planning Policy Committee, (RA Woodcote and Langley) emphasized the complexity and necessity of the Local Plan's development, stating:

"The development of our Local Plan is as complex as it is vital. We want to make sure that all those who live in, work in and visit the borough have access to the latest information about the Local Plan, to ensure that they are informed and to dispel rumours and myths about the Plan. We encourage everyone to take a look at the FAQs, either on our website or by coming in to the Town Hall and asking for a copy at reception."

On the key areas of most interest to residents the Council's position is stated and Epsom and Ewell Times summarises:

#### **Local Plan Decisions Still Pending**

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) has yet to finalize decisions regarding policy formulation and site allocations for the upcoming edition of the Local Plan. Despite ongoing efforts to adhere to the government's planning framework and reviewing feedback from the Draft Local Plan consultation, no definitive choices have been made at this juncture. The council is actively engaged in compiling a comprehensive evidence base essential for the development of the Proposed Submission Local Plan, also known as the Regulation 19 Local Plan.

#### **Spatial Strategy Uncertain**

Concerns loom over the confirmation of a Spatial Strategy crucial for guiding development across the borough. Originally slated for submission to Surrey County Council for transportation modeling by January 2024, the Spatial Strategy's confirmation has encountered hurdles. Following member briefings earlier this year, the council has been unable to solidify the strategy, prompting a reevaluation of available options.

#### **Timeline for Local Plan Decisions**

With the evidence base still under development, decisions regarding the Local Plan's content are slated for later this year. The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) is expected to receive recommendations on the Proposed Submission Local Plan, incorporating site allocations, by November 2024. Subsequently, the LPPC will forward its recommendations to the Full Council for deliberation. Only upon Full Council approval will the plan proceed to another round of public consultation, marking a critical juncture in the decision-making process.

#### **Data Informing Local Plan Preparation**

EEBC has relied on a diverse array of data sources to inform the preparation of the Draft Local Plan. Evidence spanning various thematic areas was gathered and published to support the consultation process. Additionally, ongoing efforts are underway to gather further evidence, with updates expected to be made available on the council's website upon completion.

#### **Housing Needs and Requirements**

Calculating the housing need for the borough involves employing the Government's 'Standard Method,' which utilizes 2014 Household Growth Projections data. While recent updates to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) have reaffirmed the use of this method, the draft Local Plan aims to address just over half of the calculated housing need. This draft plan will undergo extensive scrutiny during the independent planning inspector's examination.

#### **Current Housing Needs and Challenges**

The borough faces challenges in meeting its housing targets, with housing delivery falling short of expectations. Despite efforts to address housing shortages, the Council's Authority Monitoring Report highlights a deficit in housing delivery. Moreover, the increasing number of households on the housing needs register underscores the urgent need for affordable housing solutions.

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#### **Brownfield Sites and Development**

While brownfield sites play a crucial role in meeting development needs, there are concerns about their sufficiency. Although a range of brownfield sites has been considered for development in the next stage of the Local Plan, it is deemed insufficient to meet the borough's housing and economic requirements.

#### **Preservation of Industrial Estates**

Industrial estates such as Longmead and Kiln Lane are integral to the borough's employment landscape and are safeguarded against housing development. Recognizing their importance in providing employment opportunities, the draft Local Plan designates these sites as Strategic Employment Sites, prioritizing their protection for employment-generating uses.

#### **Green Belt Protection**

The Green Belt, governed by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), enjoys robust protection against development. However, authorities have the discretion to review and alter Green Belt boundaries under exceptional circumstances, subject to stringent conditions. Despite this flexibility, any proposed changes must demonstrate adherence to outlined criteria, ensuring the enduring preservation of Green Belt land.

The FAQs can be accessed on the council's website at www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/local-plan-faqs.

Members of the public can sign up to receive an alert for future consultations by completing the form at https://epsom-ewell.inconsult.uk/.

#### **Opposition Voices Express Frustration Over Lack of Transparency**

Cllr **Julie Morris**, Liberal Democrat group leader (College), expressed frustration over what she perceived as a lack of transparency and decisive action in the development of the Local Plan. She stated: "Some many months after several public protests about the inclusion of sites within the Green Belt, do we finally have some information about the status of our Local Plan, relatively bland though it is. Weasel words 'no decision has been made on site selection' need to be read alongside answers to a FAQ on the council's website, where it quite clearly says that site options have been given to Surrey County Council (SCC) who are currently completing their transport modelling. These options may not be the final decision, but most councillors in Epsom & Ewell are not even aware of what these options are, so at this point in time SCC probably know more than us. The Liberal Democrat group of councillors remain frustrated and very concerned at the lack of transparency in decision-making from the party in control of the council - the Residents Association group."

Cllr **Kate Chinn**, Labour group leader (Court), acknowledged the council's recent efforts to inform residents about the Local Plan's progress but criticized what she described as a history of secrecy surrounding decision-making processes. She stated: "It is good to see that the Residents Association (RA) councillors are finally starting the process of keeping residents informed on the progress of the local plan. The confidential briefings, which are shrouded in secrecy and leaks of information have fuelled the rumours, myths and conspiracy theories that prevail. With such a huge majority the ruling group should be able to develop a vision to present to residents that enables homes to be built to meet residents' housing needs. Instead the borough continues to face uncertainty with the RA's divisions, dither and delay meaning decisions are not made. As the webpage notes 'Following member briefings in early 2024, a Spatial Strategy was not able to be confirmed and therefore options are being considered.'

Without a spatial strategy the local plan is in effect paused. The lack of progress is endangering meeting the deadline to present a plan to the planning inspectorate by the 30th June 2025 leaving the council at the continued risk of unplanned, speculative development. The Labour group would happily contribute and work collaboratively to produce a local plan that sensibly addresses the borough's acute housing need."

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## New housing around Surrey's cathedral in contention

A developer is arguing the benefits of 124 new homes next to **Guildford Cathedral** outweigh the potential harms to the heritage and green space.

Vivid Homes is appealing for a public inquiry to consider its planning application which was unanimously rejected by the council in March 2023.

The Cathedral, along with developer Vivid Homes, proposed to demolish the existing staff housing and create 124 homes in a mix of flats and housing – 54 of which would be affordable properties – on undeveloped woodland.

Officers at the Council in March 2023 recommended refusing the plans for a host of reasons including its harm to the heritage setting including the "visual prominence of the apartment blocks", the impact on the "green collar" and the effect on the "silhouette" of the landmark.

Councillors decided it was ultimately not the right location for the development, even if the scheme offered affordable homes. Vivid Homes' appeal contends that any harm identified has been minimised and should be balanced against the benefits.

The main appeals argue the visual prominence of the development will blend with the heritage asset. Apartment blocks and roofscapes will "sit within the landscape". Reducing building heights, landscaping and tree planting were also cited as ways to keep the green collar and "longer-distant views" towards and around the Cathedral.

A council report noted that the submitted design proposals would "harm the landscape character and the visual experience of the site to the east", but would "benefit" the approach to the cathedral from the west.

The council concluded that the proposals would "still result in moderate adverse landscape and visual effects" concerning Surrey Hills as an area of natural beauty.

The proposed development as submitted would "continue to harm 'important views'" in relation to the character and heritage assets of Guildford Town Centre, the council added.

The Guildford Society, a civic group promoting high standards in planning and architecture, said it was "disappointed" at hearing the news that the developers had appeal the decision, in late October 2023.

The urban planning organisation said it had two major concerns: the visual impact of the development on Guildford's iconic skyline and the infrastructure supporting the development.

A spokesperson said: "The classic view of Guildford Cathedral from the south with its grass area is not really replicated in any of the planning documents."- There is "very little information" on how the development will look when viewed from afar.

Starting 5 March, the public inquiry will be conducted by a planning inspectorate and last ten days.

Vivid homes is footing the bill for the appeal, despite the application also made on behalf of Guildford Cathedral.

The acting dean, **Stuart Beake**, said when the appeal was announced: "[The] decision is crucial for us financially – if planning permission is granted it will mean that our reserves will receive some much needed funds as we can recoup all the money we have spent on fees. An endowment will be established which will provide funds for the routine maintenance and upkeep of the cathedral and that in turn means that our annual budget will start to break even or be in surplus."

Guildford Cathedral has been operating with a financial deficit for several years which has exacerbated with the coronavirus pandemic and the refusal of planning developments. The cathedral said it was selling land surrounding its Grade II listed site to create an endowment fund to pay for maintenance costs.

A spokesperson from The Guildford Society said: "Planning applications should be viewed without prejudice of its financial background. Whether the cathedral is making money out of it or making a thundering loss is not a matter for the review."

The application would have raised a £10m endowment for the cathedral, which it said would help fund the future of the cathedral.

However, it was highlighted during a public presentation that cash from this sale would only last five years. When combined with a separate sale, planners said, this would only raise 23 per cent of the budgeted maintenance costs.

According to Vivid Homes documents, the cathedral's deficit at the end of 2022 was £116,000. It was predicted to reduce the deficit slightly to £100,000 in 2023 by looking at ways to increase income and reduce expenditure. Details of repairing costs provided by a Quinquennial Inspection have identified repairs costing a total of £3,585,000.

Guildford Cathedral and Vivid homes were invited to comment.

Related report:

Surrey County's Cathedral citadel conserved...

Image: Grahame Larter

# Epsom 3rd in a 2024 "Best Places to Live"

In the latest edition of national estate agents "Garrington's Best Places to Live" index for 2024, Epsom has clinched the third spot after an assessment of rankings in a range of categories.

Garrington's evaluation of **over 1400 locales** across England and Wales underscores Epsom's strengths in various key aspects, including heritage, wellbeing, educational opportunities, employment prospects, and housing affordability.

With its longstanding association with the prestigious Derby and a rich historical backdrop, Epsom ranks high in heritage, landing at 90th place. Its commitment to community wellbeing, supported by a serene natural environment, earns it a respectable 282nd position in this category.

Moreover, Epsom's strategic location near London, coupled with its excellent schools and robust job market, positions it favorably in terms of employment prospects and connectivity, securing the 99th spot in Garrington's evaluation.

While property prices in Epsom reflect its status, with the average family home costing £810,809, a modest 0.4% increase in the past year underscores its resilience amidst market fluctuations.

According to Garringtons: "As the real estate landscape evolves, Epsom maintains its reputation as a stable and desirable locale, offering residents a blend of tradition, convenience, and quality of life."

Jonathan Hopper, CEO of Garrington Property Finders, emphasizes the practical significance of the 2024 ranking, stating, "As the market stabilizes and borrowing costs decrease, buyers are re-evaluating their options. Garrington's guide offers insights to help individuals identify locales that meet their needs and preferences."

"Epsom remains attractive to homebuyers with its solid fundamentals and promising prospects for a fulfilling lifestyle."

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# Red, blue and orange go Green in belt protest

Epsom High Street Saturday 3rd February witnessed political parties unite against housing development on the Borough's Green Belt. The Labour Party, Conservative Party, Liberal Democrat Party, Gina Miller's True and Fair Party and the Green Party assembled outside the Metro Bank.

Carrying banners and making speeches, the protestors rallied against the Council's apparent rejection of previous demands to remove Green Belt land from the list of potential housing development sites in the draft Local Plan.

Amid controversy surrounding claims of confidential briefings and secret legal opinions influencing Councillors the protestors called for full transparency.



**Gina Miller** leader and Parliamentary candidate for True and Fair Party said: "The plan being progressed by the Council to build on precious greenbelt is not based on truthful data, facts, housing requirements, environmental or full brownfield audits.

Once greenbelt is gone, it's gone forever. People across all wards that make up the Epsom and Ewell constituency deserve 100% transparency and honesty and to be assured that decision-making that affects their lives, homes and area are not tainted by conflicts of interest, incompetence or shortermism"

Conservative Parliamentary hopfeul **Mhairi Fraser** said: "I will fight to the end to save Epsom's Green Belt, just as your Conservative councillors Bernie Muir and Kieran Persand have tirelessly done alongside Chris Grayling MP – and that is in addition to the thousands of residents who have signed petitions, written to their councillors, and protested in public to make their voices heard. Once the Green Belt is gone, it is gone forever; that would be an absolute travesty, given our entire actual housing need can be met by building on brownfield sites. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is there to serve *us*, and it is unacceptable that they are ignoring the very clear will of residents, operating in secret, and threatening to irreversibly destroy the place all of us have chosen to make our home."

Mark Todd, Chair of Epsom and Ewell Constituency Labour Party said "Over eighty per cent of local residents responded to the recent Council survey saying that they want Epsom and Ewell's green belt preserved. I have talked to thousands of residents over the past eight years on the street and on the doorsteps of Epsom and Ewell and I believe that figure is accurate.

I have looked in great detail at Council documents and plans including all the brownfield sites currently available, enough for 3,700 homes. Another 150 can be added by redeveloping West Park Hospital giving us an extra 3,850 homes in the borough. Then there are the Longmead and Kiln Lane industrial estates that can also be redeveloped. These areas could become a mix of residential, retail and office space, generating many more jobs and homes per square foot.

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I believe there is a clear path to preserving Epsom and Ewell's green belt and building lots of social and truly affordable homes for residents and key workers on these brownfield sites. By truly affordable I mean apartments of varying sizes costing £200-£400,000 rather than houses typically costing £600,000 to £1 Million in Epsom and Ewell that never can be truly affordable."

**Helen Maguire**, Prospective Parliamentary Candidate in Epsom and Ewell for the Liberal Democrats said: "Local Liberal Democrat councillors have consistently argued that old ONS data is being used to determine the number of houses required but this is falling on the deaf ears of this Conservative Government. If up to date data was used, fewer houses would need to be built in Epsom & Ewell. Not only is Epsom & Ewell Borough Council being forced to use old data, but we know that despite Conservative government promises to allow local Councils to decide what is best for their area and to exclude the Greenbelt if they wish, this is simply not the case!

Local authorities are being forced to build on the Greenbelt because of successive and cynical conservative policies. In neighbouring Mole Valley (where Ashtead and Leatherhead form part of the new constituency), the Liberal Democrat run council have managed to save 99.3% of the Greenbelt. Last week Mole Valley Liberal Democrat councillors were faced with a stark choice between either continuing with the Local Plan as it is with 0.7% in the Greenbelt or to remove the Greenbelt sites which could put the local plan back another year and expose more Greenbelt sites to planning applications from developers.

Simultaneously the Conservative housing minister Lee Rowley sent them a letter informing them they must not withdraw the plan or delay further. An impossible decision! The Conservatives are deaf to local communities and their housing needs. It's time for them to go!"

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When a meeting is not a meeting, in brief.

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# Minister gets heavy on a Local Plan delay

A Surrey borough where the house prices are "amongst the highest in England" has been ordered not to delay its home building programme. The Epsom and Ewell neighbour borough of **Mole Valley District Council** was ready to pull the plug on its planning bible – which sets out the development it would allow to meet its housing targets.

The council was to debate informing the planning inspector of its decision to withdraw its draft local plan but a last minute intervention by the Department of Levelling up, Housing and Communities has ruled this out. Instead the council agreed to continue working to set out clear guidelines for developers.

In a letter to the council outlining his decision, **Lee Rowley, Minister of State for Housing**, Planning and Building Safety, said: "I am writing to you over concerns that Mole Valley District Council may withdraw the emerging local plan from examination. The Government is clear that local plans are at the heart of the planning system, and it is essential that up-to-date plans are in place and are kept up to date."

He said: "Each local planning authority must identify the strategic priorities for the development and use of land in the authority's area, and policies to address those priorities must be set out in the local planning authority's development plan documents such as the local plan."

The last time the council had an up-to-date plan was in 2009 and work on its replacement has begun in earnest. Withdrawing now, Mr Rowley said would extend the council's time in limbo. He said: "Withdrawing the plan from examination would be a clear failure by the council."

Since Mole Valley District Council's last masterplan, more than 90 per cent of all English local authority plans have been updated – pulling out now would leave the borough with "one of the oldest adopted local plans in the country". It has left the council operating under out-of-date policies, given the amount of change in the 14 years since it was adopted.

Mr Rowley added: "Housing affordability is a significant problem in Mole Valley and the ratio of average house prices to average wages is amongst the highest in England. I can therefore conclude that there is higher housing pressure. Considering the average time taken to prepare a local plan is seven years and we are approaching the phased introduction of a new planning system,

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withdrawing the plan at this stage could only lead to significant further delay whilst a new plan is prepared. Intervening would therefore accelerate plan production given the current plan is submitted and at examination."

The order to proceed with the plan will remain in force until formally withdrawn by the secretary of state.

Councillor **Margaret Cooksey**, Cabinet Member for Planning said: "The Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Building Safety has today [January 25] issued Mole Valley District Council with a direction not to withdraw its local plan from the examination-in-public at the Council meeting tonight. Previous to the new direction, three options had been available to MVDC: Withdrawal of the plan; continuation of the plan, as submitted (including Green Belt sites); request that the planning Inspector change the plan to remove all Green Belt sites.

"This new direction takes option A away from us and requires Mole Valley District Council to report monthly to the Minister's officials on the progress of the examination. It will remain in force until the examination concludes with the Inspector's report."

# Councillors belted-up on Green Belt?

In a recent closed-door meeting held at the Town Hall, local councillors in the Borough of Epsom and Ewell, convened to *apparently* deliberate on potential areas for housing development, with a particular focus on the contentious issue of Green Belt land. The meeting, held on January 10, has stirred controversy and prompted reactions from concerned citizens, leading to a series of letters and press releases. Councillors were greeted at the entrance by a small and polite protest group.

**Yufan Si**, a prominent Green Belt campaigner, has expressed alarm over the secrecy shrouding the meeting. The council's decision to discuss Green Belt development in a closed setting has raised questions about transparency and adherence to government policies.

Ms Si highlights the Council's statistics, indicating that 84% of residents opposed development on Green Belt land during a prior consultation. The campaigner argues that the government's planning policies offer a choice to protect Green Belt areas, questioning the need for a clandestine discussion.

She has raised concerns about the council's sale of Green Belt land to a local business owner three years before the Local Plan's development, potentially leading to significant financial gains. The campaigner emphasizes the availability of brownfield sites capable of accommodating over 3,700 new dwellings, surpassing the projected household growth from 2022 to 2040. In her letter Yufan Si has urged councillors to prioritize environmental preservation and fulfill residents' wishes by excluding Green Belt land from the development plans.

Councillor **Julie Morris** (LibDem College) has stated that she challenged the decision to keep the meeting private. While acknowledging the legal standing of the private meeting, Councillor Morris called for greater transparency and public engagement. She emphasizes the need for progress reports on the Local Plan to address residents' concerns and combat misinformation circulating in the public domain.

She said "The ruling Residents Association party would do well to engage directly with the public on this matter, or at the very least, to explain exactly why these meetings are being held, have to be in private, and why there is no public statement after each meeting to keep local residents informed as to how things are moving forward. Our residents deserve no less than this."

Letters from concerned citizens to Councillors echoed the sentiment against Green Belt development. **Stephen Neward**, a voluntary warden at the Priest Hill nature reserve, expressed hope that the revised National Planning Policy Framework would prevent the inclusion of Green Belt sites in the Local Plan. Another resident, **Lynn Munro**, urged councillors to prioritize brownfield sites over Green Belt, emphasizing the irreversible impact on the borough's open spaces.

**Tim Murphy**, representing the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Epsom and Ewell Green Belt Group, shared the views of planning consultant Catriona Riddell. Riddell clarified that local authorities, including Epsom and Ewell, are not obligated to alter Green Belt boundaries to meet housing targets, challenging the notion that Green Belt sacrifice is necessary.

As controversy swirls around the closed meeting, residents, campaigners, and opposition councillors continue to press for transparency. The fate of Green Belt land in Epsom and Ewell remains a hot topic.

The meeting was not notified on the Council's calendar of meetings and therefore the press do not know if it was a formal or informal meeting nor whether any order was made about publicity. No part of the meeting, including any section excluding the public, has been uploaded to the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council YouTube channel.



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Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) Chair of the Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee has responded to Epsom and Ewell Times:

"This was not a secret meeting; it just wasn't a public meeting. I stated publicly at the September LPPC Committee and extraordinary full Council on 24 October 2023 that Member briefings regarding the Local Plan would be taking place during this time period assuming the local plan was unpaused by full council, which it was.

Further clarification was given at the special LPPC meeting held in November when the Local Development Scheme (LDS) was an agenda item. I have given a statement at every council meeting allowing questions from all members. All members have been encouraged to attend each LPPC meeting whether they're a committee member or not. All members have been fully involved and engaged in the development of our local plan.

It is normal and expected practice when a Local Plan is being developed for Members to be able to discuss items of detail outside of the public Committee Meetings. The information briefing for councillors held on 10 January 2024 was not a meeting of the Council or a committee and had no decision-making powers, and there was no right for public access under the Local Government Act 1972 or any other legislation.

There is currently a huge amount of work being done for our Local Plan, including considering the implications of the revised NPPF published in December 2023. Work will continue over the coming months before the next stage of public consultation (Regulation 19), which is due to commence in January 2025, if supported by LPPC in November 2024 and full council in December 2024."

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