

# Will planners say “Sori, mun moka”? \*

15 January 2025



Dear Editor,

The report in the Epsom & Ewell Times (9th January) about Historic England placing the Epsom Town Centre Conservation Area on its ‘at risk register’ is extremely timely, given the current application to demolish **Cafe Moka**, Unit 60 of the Ashley Centre and the damaging impact this would have on the setting of what is undoubtedly one of Epsom’s most important listed buildings.

So far two formal objections have been lodged against the proposed demolition of the current turreted Café Moka – both highlighting the architectural reasons why its removal and replacement with a modern, glass and steel unit would not only spoil the visual harmony of the square but also negatively affect the setting of Waterloo House.

The objections focus on several key issues:

- Architectural Incompatibility:** The proposal’s replacement of the turreted Café Moka with a stark, utilitarian design would disrupt the character of Ashley Square, a blend of brick facades and tiled roofs. The original design, which still stands the test of time, complements the adjacent Market Place and reflects the history of the area. The turreted Moka unit, along with the similarly turreted (but now sadly spoiled) High Street entrance, are carefully considered features that referenced the sadly lost King’s Head Hotel coaching inn, which once stood on the site of Boots.
- Impact on Views:** The turreted structure helps screen the expansive service area behind the café, shielding views of the unattractive back facades of buildings on South Street. Its demolition would expose these eyesores and diminish the square’s architectural integrity.
- Negative Impact on Waterloo House:** Most importantly, the removal of the turreted Café Moka would harm the setting of Waterloo House’s historic carriage entrance. The building is a rare surviving example of a 17th-century spa town assembly rooms and has been sensitively restored (and appropriately renamed) by Wetherspoons. An ill-suited modern development next door would undermine this significant restoration.

Only a couple of years ago a highly questionable decision was made by Epsom & Ewell Borough Council to approve the recladding of the Ashley Centre’s main entrance in blatantly fake stone – a move that already detracts from the original architectural concept of the 1980s shopping centre and the local history it subtly references.

Losing the turreted Café Moka would be another regrettable step backward, diminishing the area’s historical and aesthetic value – and it’s therefore vital that the Council doesn’t inadvertently support another proposal that would further compound Historic England’s current concerns.

I encourage all those who care about preserving Epsom’s heritage to voice their opposition to this unnecessary and damaging proposal.

Yours faithfully,

**Simon Alford**

Epsom

Related reports:

Heritage at Risk: Epsom Town Centre Conservation Area Faces Challenges

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council response to Historic England’s Report on local heritage

\*“Sori, mun moka” is a colloquial term meaning “Sorry, my bad”. “Moka” is also a coffee pot.

## Blot on Epsom Down’s west horizon to grow?

15 January 2025



The “Croydonisation” of Woking will continue after a 26-storey town centre tower block on the former BHS site was approved. The plans for the 272-home 85-metre-tall building are nearly identical to those previously rejected in March 2024 but have been signed off following changes to Woking Borough Council’s housing targets and further clarifications from the developers. Donard Real Estate will demolish the former store to create the Crown Gardens project. The build-to-rent project will include 28 affordable homes as well as retail and commercial zones on the ground floor of the Commercial Way site. There would also be public space landscaping to improve the area around Christ Church.

Approving the plans – which were also under a separate appeal – would help the council meet its new, higher housing targets and help take pressure off green belt sites. The meeting was also assured the building would be predominantly made of brick, limiting the potential of weather damaging external cladding. The town centre had to be closed off after cladding fell from the Hilton Hotel building this year due to storms. Speaking on behalf of the developers was Mervyn McFarland. He said, “Crown Gardens will deliver 272 high-quality build-to-rent homes addressing the growing need for housing and helping Woking’s residents, particularly young people and families, to stay in Woking and contribute to the town’s vitality and growth. It will help alleviate pressure on traditional housing stock while also contributing to meeting housing targets. It will free up homes better suited to families and other demographics, contributing to a more balanced housing market in

Woking. Crown Gardens will support Woking’s regeneration, bringing up to 700 new residents to the town centre. This is expected to bring in around £10m expenditure annually in local spending, boosting businesses.”

The limited parking at the site was no longer considered a valid reason to object to the plans given its proximity to Woking Railway Station and active travel options. The January 7 planning committee also noted that a similar high-rise application at Technology House was allowed on appeal, with the Planning Inspector saying parking options were sufficient. Councillor Rob Leach (Liberal Democrat, St Johns) said: “It’s clear that the development will help meet the housing needs that we have and the new government target building levels, to a significant extent, are helped by this. I’ve always been resistant to skyscrapers in Woking, what I’ve called the Croydonisation of Woking, in the past, but I think this has to be preferable to incursions on the green belt where that can be avoided.”

Related report:

Blot on Epsom Downs horizon to grow no more?

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## Epsom Green Belt Debate Intensifies

15 January 2025



The ongoing debate surrounding Epsom & Ewell Borough Council’s Proposed Submission Local Plan has escalated as the Epsom and Ewell Times publishes two sharply contrasting letters – one from the Epsom Green Belt Group (EGBG) and the other a formal response from the Council itself. At the heart of the dispute lies the proposed development of Green Belt land, the availability of affordable housing, and the transparency of the consultation process.

### ***Epsom Green Belt Group: A Call for Change***

The Epsom Green Belt Group’s letter criticises the Council for failing to heed public sentiment and expert advice during the Regulation 18 consultation earlier this year. Despite overwhelming opposition to the proposed release of over 175 hectares (around 12%) of the borough’s Green Belt, the Council has pressed ahead with plans that include development on high-performing sites such as Horton Farm and Hook Road Arena.

The EGBG highlights a key inconsistency: while the Council advised neighbouring Sutton Borough in September 2024 that they were under no obligation to review Green Belt boundaries, they have not followed this guidance themselves. Furthermore, the EGBG argues that prioritising brownfield and ‘grey belt’ land, as outlined in the updated National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) of December 2024, has been neglected.

The group also casts doubt on the Council’s promises of ‘affordable housing,’ pointing out that discounts on market prices still place homes out of reach for many. Flats on brownfield sites, they argue, offer a more viable path to genuinely affordable housing.

A looming concern raised by the EGBG is the likelihood of the Local Plan being deemed unsound by the Planning Inspectorate. They warn that if the plan proceeds in its current form, it could pave the way for further Green Belt loss.

*Read the full Epsom Green Belt Group letter here.*

### ***Council’s Response: Balancing Competing Priorities***

In their formal response, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council defends the Proposed Submission Local Plan, arguing that it strikes a necessary balance between meeting housing needs and protecting the borough’s environment.

The Council acknowledges the high demand for affordable housing, with over 1,350 households on the housing register. They stress that their policies reflect both national guidelines and financial viability assessments.

Regarding the consultation process, the Council points out that Regulation 19 is a statutory stage primarily focused on assessing the plan’s legal compliance and soundness. They also address concerns over the timing of the consultation—spanning the Christmas and New Year period—explaining that it was essential to meet the submission deadline of 12 March 2025 under the current NPPF.

On the contentious Green Belt issue, the Council offers specific figures: 52.6 hectares of greenfield Green Belt land (3.36% of the total) and 85 hectares of previously developed Green Belt land (5.44%) are earmarked for development. They maintain that these changes are necessary to meet housing targets while acknowledging the flexibility offered by the NPPF.

The Council concludes by noting that while changes can still be proposed following the consultation, the Planning Inspectorate ultimately determines their validity.

*Read the full Epsom & Ewell Borough Council letter here.*

### ***Diverging Priorities, Uncertain Outcomes***

Both letters reveal deep divisions not only in policy direction but also in trust between the Council and sections of the local community. While the Council presents its plan as a pragmatic response to national housing targets and local affordability issues, the EGBG sees it as a short-sighted and flawed approach.

Key questions remain unanswered:

- Why hasn’t brownfield land been prioritised more explicitly?
- Will the Local Plan survive scrutiny by the Planning Inspectorate?
- Are the proposed ‘affordable homes’ truly affordable for local residents?

The coming weeks will be crucial as the consultation progresses and residents have their final opportunity to submit their views. One thing is clear: the future of Epsom’s Green Belt hangs in the balance, and both sides are prepared to stand their ground.

*Residents can participate in the consultation process until 5 February 2025 via the Council’s consultation portal.*

Related reports:

Can the green light to Epsom’s Green Belt housing turn red?

Council minority vote Local Plan to next stage with Green Belt in

Conflict on Epsom’s Green Belt plans of another kind?

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and many more. Search “local plan” in search bar.



## River Mole to attract visitors to Leatherhead?

15 January 2025



Mole Valley District Council’s dream of “improving” and “enhancing” Leatherhead has taken a step forward after plans to regenerate Claire House and James House were submitted.

The site is part of the council’s vision for a new riverside area to attract visitors to spend time in the town centre.

The plans, submitted by McCarthy Stone the council’s preferred partner for regeneration, is for 37 one and two-bed retirement homes, a ground floor café and community space.

Developers McCarthy Stone said: “While the development is built around people in their later years this is not a development that offers care as you would find in extra care developments or care homes.

“Retirement living creates safe and secure environments for homeowners to continue to live an active, independent life and caters for downsizers who are typically selling or vacating their former family home and moving to a smaller apartment.

“Homeowners are generally the more active elderly rather than those who are in need of care or have more significant issues around mobility.”

McCarthy Stone also plans to improve the car park and landscaping the area to the front of the building. The work is part of the wider Transform Leatherhead project.

Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson, Mole Valley District Council cabinet member for property and projects, said: “The Claire House and James House project aims to create a landmark mixed-use riverside development that will improve the western gateway to the town and enhance the area around the River Mole.

“The application marks the next step towards the regeneration of the area and enhancement of the riverside area, a key project of Transform Leatherhead.

According to Mole Valley District Council, Leatherhead town centre is being re-invented, expanded and transformed.

It says the overall project, which also includes work on the retail and leisure quarter and Bull Hill, will “fully realise its potential as a distinctive, enterprising and highly regarded market town” adding that the “town’s character, history and environmental setting will be celebrated and complemented by new and revitalised uses.”

Not every aspect of the council’s vision has proven popular however. A petition calling on the authority to reconsider plans to build hundreds of homes in high rise blocks on the popular Bull Hill park gained 1500 signatures.

Some fear the plans will destroy the green gateway into the town, potentially turning it into another Croydon or Woking and causing people to leave.

Related report:

Leatherhead town on the way up?

## Epsom and Ewell’s new housing targets in Surrey perspective

15 January 2025



Housing targets in Surrey are set to skyrocket, with some areas expected to deliver double the number of homes under new Government plans. On December 12, the long-awaited update to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published, setting out what councils and developers can and cannot do – leaving boroughs and districts “disappointed” and “deeply concerned.” Across Surrey, the number of new homes expected each year has risen by 4,635 to a total of 10,981, with some areas bearing a significantly heavier load than others.

Worst affected is Elmbridge Borough Council, where housing targets have more than doubled, from 653 to 1,562. This increase comes alongside the prospect of having no local plan, giving developers greater freedom over where and what to build. A spokesperson for Elmbridge Borough Council said they were “reviewing the new NPPF and its implications for Elmbridge’s Local Plan.” The council was told in November that its housing strategy must be withdrawn and restarted or risk being deemed “unsound.” A decision on next steps will be made in February 2025.

Other boroughs facing substantial increases include Waverley, where targets have risen from 710 to 1,481, and Reigate and Banstead, which sees an increase from 644 to 1,306. Woking, the only council to see its figure drop, still faces a significant rise from 436 to 794. These adjustments align largely with July consultation targets. However, Woking residents hoping for a break in town-center skyscraper developments and green belt preservation will be disappointed, as the reduction amounted to just one unit from the earlier proposal.

Housing targets for Surrey boroughs under the new NPPF are as follows:

		Old housing target	New NPPF target	% increase
1	Elmbridge	653	1562	139
2	Surrey Heath	320	684	114
3	Waverley	710	1481	109
4	Reigate & Banstead	644	1306	103
5	Woking	436	794	82

6	Mole Valley	460	833	81
7	Guildford	743	1170	57
8	Epsom & Ewell	569	889	56
9	Tandridge	634	843	33
10	Spelthorne	631	793	26
11	Runnymede	546	626	15
	SURREY	6346	10981	73

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council’s executive member for planning, Councillor Rich Michalowski, described the Government’s decision not to heed their feedback as “disappointing.” He said, “The borough’s housing target in the new NPPF of 1,306 homes per year is nearly three times higher than our current local plan target of 460 and more than double the previous NPPF target of 644 homes. These changes will have severe implications for Reigate and Banstead’s green belt and the character of our towns and villages. The standard methodology for calculating housing is flawed, as it doesn’t account for environmental and infrastructure constraints.” He emphasized the council’s commitment to exploring all urban development options but acknowledged that a Green Belt Review might be unavoidable.

Waverley Borough Council echoed these concerns, particularly regarding the methodology and its impact on green belt. Cllr Liz Townsend, Waverley’s portfolio holder for planning, called the more than two-fold increase “unrealistic and uncalled for.” She noted that the requirement for 1,481 new homes annually is two and a half times the current target and could increase the borough’s population by 50% over 20 years. “There is simply no evidence of this level of demand, nor that building this many homes would make them more affordable,” she said. Cllr Townsend highlighted the borough’s existing issues, including water supply disruptions, sewage overspills, a crumbling rural road network, overstretched health services, and power shortages stalling new developments.

All councils must now face the new reality as their starting points for planning new homes. Each borough will need to demonstrate to Independent Planning Inspectors that they have explored all possible avenues for delivering these targets. This challenge will require balancing housing needs with environmental, infrastructure, and community considerations.

Related reports:

Can Epsom and Ewell get more dense?

The Local Plan plot thickens after revised NPPF

Can the green light to Epsom’s Green Belt housing turn red?

Campaigners have set up a petition against the new targets:

<https://www.change.org/p/excessive-targets-for-new-homes-in-surrey>

## The Local Plan plot thickens after revised NPPF

15 January 2025



The Government’s revised **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**, published on 12 December, has set ambitious new housing targets, requiring local councils to accelerate their housebuilding efforts. This move coincides with Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) updating its **Local Development Scheme**, which outlines the timetable for the borough’s Local Plan.

Under the updated scheme, EEBC’s **Regulation 19 Consultation** will take place from **20 December 2024 to 5 February 2025**, before the Local Plan is submitted for examination in March 2025. The council aims to complete the public examination by July 2025. The Proposed Submission Local Plan (2022-2040), which Councillors approved on 10 December, is intended to shield the borough from ad hoc developments and ensure sustainable planning decisions.

Councillor Peter O’Donovan, Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, emphasised the importance of meeting these deadlines:

*“We are determined to meet the Government’s deadlines and will do everything within our power to achieve them. I strongly urge residents and businesses to read and follow the consultation guidance so that their feedback can be sent to the Planning Inspectorate.”*

### Government Targets: “Builders Not Blockers”

The Government has set a bold target of building **1.5 million homes by 2029**, with councils expected to contribute to a new annual quota of **370,000 homes**. Prime Minister Keir Starmer highlighted the urgent need for reform, stating:

*“For far too long, working people graft hard but are denied the security of owning their own home... Our Plan for Change will overhaul the broken planning system and deliver the homes and growth this country desperately needs.”*

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner added:

*“We must all do our bit to tackle the housing crisis. Local councils must adopt plans to meet housing needs, ensuring homes are built alongside the necessary public services and green spaces.”*

Key measures in the updated NPPF include:

- **Mandatory housing targets** for all councils, with increased expectations in high-growth areas.
- A “brownfield-first” approach to prioritise development on previously used land, followed by “grey belt” areas of lower-quality greenbelt land.
- Developers required to meet strict “golden rules” for infrastructure, including affordable housing, GP surgeries, and transport.

### Boosting Council Resources

To support these changes, councils will receive an additional **£100 million** in funding and **300 more planning officers** to expedite decisions. The Government is also exploring “brownfield passports” to fast-track urban developments and offering local authorities the option to increase planning fees.

## Local Impact and Next Steps

The **Regulation 19 Consultation** represents the final chance for residents to provide input before the plan is examined by an independent inspector.

To participate in the consultation or register for updates, visit **[epsom-ewell.inconsult.uk](https://epsom-ewell.inconsult.uk)**.

With the new planning framework demanding rapid progress, councils across the country face the challenge of balancing ambitious housing targets with preserving the character of their communities. Epsom & Ewell's ability to meet these demands will serve as a critical test of the Government's commitment to delivering for "hardworking families" while addressing the nation's housing crisis.

Related reports and letters:

Can the green light to Epsom's Green Belt housing turn red?

Council minority vote Local Plan to next stage with Green Belt in

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

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## Council minority vote Local Plan to next stage with Green Belt in

15 January 2025



On 10th December 2024, the **Full Council of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** convened to debate the proposed Local Plan, a pivotal document that will shape the borough's future planning, housing, and Green Belt policies until 2040 and beyond. Central to the debate were contentious issues regarding housing targets, the timetable for the Local Plan submission, and the potential release of Green Belt land for development. The controversial Local Plan, including some Green Belt development, was voted through by 16 votes from a Council that consists of 35 Councillors.

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### Presentation of the Petition

The meeting began with the presentation of a petition organized by **Yvonne Grunwald**, titled "Remove Green Belt from the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Local Plan." Mrs. Greenwald argued the case against developing on Green Belt land:

*"Over the last few years, residents have repeatedly told the Council that they do not want building on the Green Belt. They have held rallies, protests, they have spoken at council meetings. This includes secondary school children. They've sent emails to councillors and their MP... The results showed that 87% of respondents were opposed to building on the Green Belt."*

She criticized the council's perceived disregard for public opinion:

*"Why consult with the residents if you are going to ignore the result and actively undermine them?"*

Mrs. Greenwald also pointed to an alternative plan that relied solely on brownfield sites:

*"In November, opposition parties and the Green Party, together with residents, submitted an alternative plan, which showed that enough houses can be built on brownfield sites already identified by the Council."*

Concluding her speech, she urged the Council to act quickly to amend the plan:

*"You must make sure that the Local Plan doesn't include Green Belt... This should happen as quickly as possible so that it can be submitted to examination before the new NPPF rules come into force."*

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### Council Debate

Councillor **Peter O'Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, responded to the petition. He acknowledged the concerns raised but defended the inclusion of Green Belt land in the Local Plan as a necessary compromise:

*"The proposed submission plan... aims to strike the right balance of meeting development needs, including much-needed affordable housing, against protecting the borough's Green Belt and character of the urban area, both of which are important to our residents."*

He warned of the risks of removing Green Belt sites from the plan:

*"Officers consider that removing sites from the Local Plan would significantly increase the risk of the plan being found unsound at the examination stage. If our Local Plan is found to be unsound, we will have to restart the process again, meaning we will be without an up-to-date Local Plan for longer."*

Councillor **Julie Morris** (Lib Dem College) expressed her sympathy for the petition's intentions but highlighted the challenges of late-stage changes:

*"The problem with this petition is that it's quite late in the day. Whilst I have every sympathy with its intentions and what it says, it's actually quite difficult to implement that right now. You know, 12 months, 18 months ago, it would have been a different scenario."*

Councillor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) strongly opposed the inclusion of Green Belt land in the Local Plan, emphasizing the importance of protecting such spaces:

*"Releasing high-quality Green Belt should be avoided at any time... Without this housing, our homeless levels will grow, not reduce. Releasing high-quality Green Belt without achieving a very significant benefit by doing so would be contrary to the NPPF and totally unacceptable."*

Councillor **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) cautioned against removing Green Belt sites, citing the experience of Elmbridge Council:



*“Elmbridge... submitted a Local Plan with no Green Belt and a multiplicity of smaller brownfield sites. They are now faced with the option of either withdrawing it or having it found unsound. The inspector argued that the brownfield-only approach adopted would fail to deliver anything near the level of need for the planned period.”*

**Final Debate on the Draft Local Plan**

When the draft Local Plan was introduced, Councillor **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) summarized the difficult position faced by the Council:

*“Nobody wants to build on Green Belt, but there is not enough brownfield land. The risk is that this won’t be accepted, and we’ll be in even bigger trouble.”*

Councillor **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley) criticized the concentration of development in certain areas:

*“You’re talking about the most densely populated part of this borough. This isn’t well thought out... There will only be harm.”*

Councillor **Chris Ames**, (Labour Court) condemned the lack of affordable housing:

*“This plan... will only deliver just over 1,000 affordable homes... fewer than 400 social rented homes by 2040. This is not sound.”*

**Clive Woodbridge** defended the plan as a balanced approach:

*“It delivers badly needed homes while protecting most of the Green Belt and maintaining the character of our borough.”*

**Outcome of the Vote**

The Council ultimately voted on the draft Local Plan without amendments. The majority supported the plan, although several councillors abstained or voted against it. Councillor **Peter O’Donovan**’s remarks highlighted the Council’s predicament:

*“This is the plan we have in front of us, and this is what we need to vote on today.”*

Those opposing the plan, like Councillor Jan Mason, stood firm in their dissent:

*“I’m personally against this plan... This isn’t something that will suit Ruxley and West Ewell.”*

**Conclusion**

The Full Council’s debate underscored deep divisions over the Local Plan. While the plan’s supporters argued it represented a necessary compromise to meet government targets and protect the borough’s future, its critics condemned the perceived sacrifice of Green Belt land and insufficient affordable housing. The council’s approval of the draft plan marked a critical step forward, but the contention surrounding it suggests continued challenges as the plan progresses to examination.

The Voting: 16 FOR, 8 Against and 7 Abstentions.

**Councillors Who Voted FOR:**

- Arthur Abdulin, Residents’ Association, Town Ward
- Steve Bridger, Residents’ Association, Stamford Ward
- Neil Dallen, Residents’ Association, Town Ward
- Liz Frost, Residents’ Association, Woodcote and Langley Vale Ward
- Shanice Goldman, Residents’ Association, Nonsuch Ward
- Rachel King, Residents’ Association, Town Ward
- Robert Leach, Residents’ Association, Nonsuch Ward
- Steven McCormick, Residents’ Association, Woodcote and Langley Vale Ward
- Phil Neale, Residents’ Association, Cuddington Ward
- Peter O’Donovan, Residents’ Association, Ewell Court Ward
- Humphrey Reynolds, Residents’ Association, West Ewell Ward
- Alan Williamson, Residents’ Association, West Ewell Ward
- Clive Woodbridge, Residents’ Association, Ewell Village Ward
- John Beckett, Residents’ Association, Auriol Ward
- Hannah Dalton, Residents’ Association, Stoneleigh Ward
- Chris Watson, Residents’ Association, Ewell Court Ward

**Councillors Who Voted AGAINST:**

- Rob Geleit, Labour, Court Ward
- Christine Howells, Residents’ Association, Nonsuch Ward
- Alison Kelly, Liberal Democrat, Stamford Ward
- James Lawrence, Liberal Democrat, College Ward
- Bernie Muir, Conservative, Horton Ward
- Kieran Persand, Conservative, Horton Ward
- Julie Morris, Liberal Democrat, College Ward
- Jan Mason, Residents Association, Ruxley Ward

Councillors Who ABSTAINED:

- Chris Ames, Labour, Court Ward
- Kate Chinn, Labour, Court Ward
- Christine Cleveland, Residents’ Association, Ewell Village Ward
- Bernice Froud, Residents’ Association, Woodcote and Langley Vale Ward
- Tony Froud, Residents’ Association, Stoneleigh Ward
- Darren Talbot, Residents’ Association, Auriol Ward
- Graham Jones, Residents’ Association, Cuddington Ward

Procedural criticisms and more:

The **Epsom Green Belt Group** has raised significant concerns regarding the procedural handling of the Local Plan by the Residents Association-led council. They argue that the process lacked transparency and adequate opportunities for scrutiny.

In their press release, the Group stated:

*“For almost two years, since the regulation 18 consultation in early 2023, the public has been waiting to see what would be included in the Local Plan, whilst lobbying for the protection of the Green Belt, submitting a 10,000-member petition, holding rallies and writing to councillors. Requests were made to discuss the Local Plan and the treatment of Green Belt in the fourth quarter of 2023, in July 2024, and in September 2024. Nothing was shared, and nothing debated until November 2024.”*

This lack of earlier discussion and public involvement was also echoed during the Full Council meeting. Councillor **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) highlighted the limited opportunities for councillors to engage in substantive discussions:

*“There have been cases where we could have been involved, such as after the briefings. There’s nothing wrong with having briefings, but those were never brought into the public domain until a few weeks ago.”*

The Group also pointed to restrictions on questioning during the December 2024 Full Council meeting, which they argued severely limited proper scrutiny of the Local Plan. They noted that only five questions were permitted in total, with some councillors, such as Councillor Mason, restricted from raising further queries, and others, like Councillor Lawrence, unable to pose any additional questions. Councillor Mason’s frustration was evident:

*“I had more to ask about the Green Belt allocations and the housing numbers, but I was told I had used up my chance. How is this adequate scrutiny for a plan that decides the future of this borough for 16 years?”*

Additionally, the Group criticized the Residents Association for missing the opportunity to submit the Local Plan under the existing National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) guidelines, which would have allowed for greater flexibility in protecting the Green Belt. They claim that the refusal to expedite the Local Plan’s preparation has exposed the borough to heightened housing targets under new rules.

Councillor **Hannah Dalton** (RA Stoneleigh) expressed the challenge of navigating a rapidly changing regulatory landscape but stopped short of endorsing the Group’s criticism of delays:

*“We’ve got numbers that have changed. We’ve got new government ambitions. We want to build affordable and social housing. Whatever we do, it’s not going to satisfy everybody. That is the nature of Local Plans.”*

The Group also accused the council of opening the floodgates for further Green Belt development by including high-quality Green Belt sites in the Local Plan. Councilor O’Donovan, however, defended the approach as a necessary trade-off:

*“By including a small portion of Green Belt in the plan, we ensure protections for the rest. Without a Local Plan in place, developers will have greater freedom to target any Green Belt site.”*

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## Local Plan lessons from our neighbour?

15 January 2025



“Four more years?” is the resounding cry after a Surrey council has been moved back to square one with its plan for 8,000 new homes, potentially at a cost of £1m. Local plans are a crucial framework for councils as they set out where and what type of development is allowed in the borough. Without one, developers effectively have a free-for-all to build where they wish and the council could struggle to defend it.

A planning inspector told Elmbridge Borough Council (EBC) in September to reconsider its local plan, especially to increase the number of affordable housing. Despite asking for a 12-15 month extension to straighten out its plan, after six years working on the proposals, the council was given a firm ‘no’ by the inspector.

Christa Masters, the independent planning inspector, judged that Elmbridge could not prove it had five years’ worth of housing for residents. The inspector has also labelled the borough – which includes Cobham, St George’s Hill and Weybridge – as one of the “least affordable in the country”.

The two choices in front of the council are to withdraw the plan and start again, or accept the inspector’s findings of the report being ‘unsound’ and leave the borough open to speculative development. A report will be presented to the council in February 2025 for the council to decide.

“It is clear to us that building new homes is not this government’s priority,” a statement read from three senior councillors. They said: “Instead, it seems intent on forcing Elmbridge Borough Council and our residents to restart the lengthy 3-4 year process of developing a new Local Plan, with the significant additional costs (potentially £1million) this will bring to the council.”

Council leader Mike Rollings, deputy leader Simon Waugh, and leader of Hinchley Wood Residents’ Association Janet Turner, who wrote the statement, said they

have been left with no choice by the government than to start again.

A Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government spokesperson said the decision was up to an independent inspector who found the council’s plan ‘unsound’. They said: “We are in a housing crisis and all areas of the country need to play their part in building more and delivering the homes that communities need. We want to see every council have a local plan as soon as possible, but it is for an independent Inspector to examine a local plan to ensure it is sound and legally compliant.”

But not everyone has been so forgiving of the update on the Local Plan. Cllr John Cope, leader of the Conservative opposition on the council, said: “It’s now clear years of work and millions of pounds of local people’s money have gone down the drain – and an acute shortage of affordable housing allowed in Elmbridge.”

He added that the borough will “have to accept the Labour government’s 121% increase in top-down development targets meaning a huge loss of green belt and loss of local democratic control of planning – but with no new roads, GPs, or schools to support the development.”

Dr Ben Spencer MP (Runnymede and Weybridge) and Cllr Cope have also written a joint letter to Planning Minister Matthew Pennycook MP, urging him to review the situation. The pair ask him to grant the council an extension “so this can be resolved with minimal further financial drain on the council’s resources”.

In the letter, Dr Spencer and Cllr Cope also requested for Elmbridge residents to “not pay the consequences” of the failed Local Plan through “higher council tax and reduced local services”.

“As a Council, we have done everything right,” said Cllr Rollings, speaking to the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS). He said the council has worked to prepare a Local Plan “that meets its responsibilities” but the government has “have constantly changed and shifted the goalposts”. He explained that mandatory housing targets have kept replacing each other and national planning policy is constantly being tweaked.

Cllr Rollings said: “As a Council leadership we will continue to work for the best outcomes for our residents. And we will do everything we can to protect the green spaces we all love.”

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

15 January 2025



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.

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### 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.”

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### 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.”

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### 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.

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## 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.”

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## 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.”

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## 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.

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

15 January 2025



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.

Related reports:

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