Another Surrey borough's Local Plan agony

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 Counci**l 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

Call to Epsom and Ewell Council to speed plan denied

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

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

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

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

Council's Position: Balancing Housing Needs and Green Space

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

Councillor Peter O'Donovan, Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, has reiterated that the council is adhering to

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

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

The Stakes: Higher Housing Targets and Green Belt at Risk

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

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

What Next?

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

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

Epsom's neighbour cracks on with its Local Plan

More than 6,000 new homes will be built in the Surrey borough of Mole Valley, with Leatherhead taking on the largest share after the district council approved its long-term planning bible.

Mole Valley District Council has agreed to build an average of 336 homes a year between 2020 and 2039 with town centre sites in Leatherhead, such as Bull Hill, and Dorking being set aside for large scale housing-led redevelopment.

Office complexes in Ashstead and Dorking have also been earmarked for regeneration, and green belt land in Ashstead, Bookham, Dorking and Leatherhead released so developers can build homes.

The council has also agreed to hand over green belt land for housing within and around Hookwood to "complement" economic growth near Gatwick.

Villages within the green belt, namely Beare Green, Brockham, Capel, Charlwood, and Westcott will have their boundaries amended to allow "appropriate development" after Mole Valley District Council formally adopted its local plan last week (October 15).

In all, Leatherhead is expected to take on 30 per cent of the new homes (1,914), followed by the areas around Dorking 23 per cent (1,467), Hookwood, 15 per cent (957), Ashtead, 11 per cent (701) and Bookham, seven per cent (446).

The remaining 14 per cent (893) will be spread across the rest of the district.

In Leatherhead the council wants to create what it calls, a Riverside Quarter, at Claire House and James House in Bridge Street. This would go alongside an Urban Quarter at the redevelopment of the Bull Hill.

For Dorking, the Pippbrook House refurbishment remains its flagship development as well as plans to redevelop the Foundry Museum and Church Street workshops.

More locally, housing requirements for neighbourhood areas are as follows:

- Ashtead 652 net new dwellings
- Bookham 513 net new dwellings
- Capel Parish 198 net new dwellings
- Ockley Parish 135 net new dwellings
- Westcott 123 net new dwellings

Mole Valley District Council, which passed its local plan by 28 votes to five with one abstention, said that 40 per cent of all new units would be affordable, and all come with at least one EV charging point.

The meeting heard that about 76 per cent of Mole Valley land was designated as Metropolitan Green Belt and protected from most forms of development.

Under its new plan, it said it has been able to deliver sites for housing while relinquishing less than one per cent of that.

Had the local plan not been agreed, developers would have had carte blanche to build without restrictions.

Cllr Margaret Cooksey, portfolio holder for planning on the Liberal Democrat run council, said: "It gives me enormous pleasure to be able to bring the local plan to this council for adoption at last.

"The local plan is about much more than a document about meeting housing need but a good deal of time and effort is taken up by worrying about specific development sites, particularly green belt sites,

"It's worth noting again that only 0.65 per cent of the existing green belt in the district has been identified to be released for future development.

"There are sites in most of our wards that we wish were not there however I did say, that I felt that it was a fair plan in as much as what could be seen as pain was spread as evenly as possible across the district."

Local plans go through long drawn-out processes before they are formally adopted, requiring sign off from planning inspectors.

Councils need to identify land for development and demonstrate it can meet housing targets. Often there is a trade off between town centre intensification or protecting green belt.

As well as the housing, the Mole Valley plan creates 230 new locally listed buildings and grants 27 parks and open spaces extra protection.

Dissenting voices in the chamber felt the council could have gone further to limit the impact on green belt while Cllr Chris Hunt (Independent, Ashtead Lanes and Common) said more could be done to curb building heights to stop town's from becoming the next Woking.

He told the meeting: "This is not a sugar coated pill for us to take, it's got some very good things, affordable housing, the commitment for better health and education facilities, those are very positive things.

"But it's also got some really hard to agree things.

He added: "There is still quite a lot of uncertainty about whether a key site in our key town of Leatherhead can actually be developed or not."

Adding: "It's effectively saying that the plan's foundations are uncertain in that regard and unfortunately it does echo something else, that there are no clearly defined density agreements.

"It has lots of good things but if I was on Strictly [Come Dancing] it would not be 10 out of 10, it would be a seven."

Cllr Cooksey said: "We're not Woking, Mole Valley is not Woking and we don't want to look like Woking but there's the dilemma between do we build in the green belt (or in the towns?)"

Cllr Leah Mursaleen-Plank (Liberal Democrat, Mickleham, Westcott and Okewood) said her ward has been hit by uncontrolled development "again and again" and called out at those asking to delay the plan's adoption in order to protect more green belt.

She said: "There is no alternative here.

"We have been in a position in my ward where we haven't had a local plan and we've had uncontrolled developments going through over and over again.

"We're losing green belt by delaying further.

"To say that we need more time just means more development on green belt sites, the opposite of what you would like to achieve."

Summing up Cllr Cooksey said: "I'm disappointed that we can't say that it's the overwhelming view of the whole council, it would have been very much stronger if we could have had support from the whole chamber.

'However we have an excellent plan here, I truly believe it and really think it's probably the best we could probably have come up with under all the circumstances that we've had to deal with over the years."

Mole Valley covers 25,832 hectares, 16 per cent of Surrey as a whole and is the third largest borough in the county.

Its population of 87,245 accounts for seven per cent of Surrey's total, while the average house price of £505,000 makes it second most expensive district in the county.

The ratio of house prices to residents' salaries was 14:1 in March 2020, the fifth most unaffordable district in Surrey.

Between 2014 and 2019, 1,265 new homes were completed in Mole Valley - 230 of which were affordable.

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Mole Valley Plan Paused

Artistic Impression Of The Arrival Square from North Street, south east corner. (Credit: Mole Valley District Council and Keir Property)

Epsom & Ewell's Green Belt controversy tightens

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

Government's Revised Housing Targets and NPPF Changes

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

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

Public Frustration with Council Process

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

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

to be published, stating that they were in the public interest.

Epsom Green Belt Group's Alternative Proposal

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

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

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

Council's Response and Timetable

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

"The timetable for progressing the local plan is as set out in our Local Development Scheme," O'Donovan said, noting that public consultation on the Pre-Submission Local Plan is expected to begin in January 2025. He also reassured residents that the council is exploring ways to expedite the process but emphasised the importance of having a robust evidence base to avoid future challenges to the plan.

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

The Next Steps and the Community's Expectations

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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Mole Valley 'won't bend' to petitioners

The fight to protect the green gateway into a Leatherhead goes on after campaigners seeking to stop a popular park from being turned into high rises were told the council would not "bend the knee" to their petition.

Mole Valley District Council heard from residents representing the 1,500 people who joined the call to stop the "unnecessary" development at Leatherhead 's Red House Park by Bull Hill.

They argued the open space could be saved if the council instead redeveloped the raft of empty offices or unused industrial estates in the town.

The petition, discussed at the Tuesday, October 15 full meeting of Mole Valley District Council read: "This park is used by many people and also home to lots of wildlife and historical trees.

"The plans are to build high rise flats and apartments which would look unsightly. The town has barely enough space in schools, and doctors and dentists have waiting lists so understandably very concerning for local residents."

The plan, part of Transform Leatherhead, seeks to redevelop the land within the existing one-way system known as Bull Hill, including the Red House Gardens.

The council and its development partner Kier say this is to complement the retail and leisure quarters of the town.

Bull Hill is currently made up of office space, public car parks and open space.

It was originally earmarked for retail but after work to the Swan Centre and transport studies, as well as the trend away from high street shopping, the decision was made to go for a mixed development.

In October 2023 the council and Kier Property signed the legal agreements and the joint venture is now working to develop the project.

Presenting the petition, the speaker said: "If we destroy everything that makes Leathehead a destination in favour of becoming a carbon copy of London then people will leave."

Campaigners pressed for the use of alternative sites and said there was 140,000 square metres of empty office space in Leatherhead – enough for 190 two-bed family homes.

However this was quickly shot down as they were told the council was powerless to force private landowners to hand over vacant properties -and were restricted to sites identified in its local plan.

Instead they want the campaigners to work with the council to make the site the best it can be for the town – while understanding the council needs to build on the land to hit its housing targets.

Cabinet member Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson (Liberal Democrat; Leatherhead North) praised the strength of feeling but said the council can only put forward sites their owners put forward for development.

She said the new local plan has put in restrictions and that developments with high rise buildings have to prove their worth, and that play and open spaces must be provided.

The council also expected the redevelopment to increase biodiversity in the town by at least 20 per cent.

Cllr Vyvyan-Robinson told the meeting she hoped residents would continue to be involved in the process as the plans continued to be revised.

Cllr Ben Wall (Liberal Democrat; Leatherhead North) dismissed fears the project would turn the town into the next Woking or Croydon. He said: "The tallest building in Croydon is 150metres tall, you can see that for miles, we're suggestion a building that's

maximum 20m, you are not going to see it from Leatherhead North.

He added: "We've been talking about this for the best part of a decade, we've had countless opportunities for residents to talk to us. We are listening. Listening is not the same things as bending the knee entirely to a petition. We will listen to a petition, it doesn't mean we have to come to the same conclusion as a petition.

"Leatherhead has suffered from a chronic lack of investment for decades it's not the time to start throwing out multimillion investment and investment opportunities without fully assessing their potential benefits.

"I'm cautiously optimistic that these proposals incorporating public feedback can be successful.

"I'm not saying that we will come to a perfect solution but we can not let perfect be the enemy of good."

Cabinet member Cllr Claire Malcolmson (Liberal Democrat; Holmwoods and Beare Green) added: "We are listening these are not the final designs."

Hampton's Jolly Boatman has more to be jolly about

Hampton Court and its historic views will be forever changed after the secretary of state approved controversial Jolly Boatman plans to build 97 homes together with an 84 bed hotel and restaurant on the banks of the River Thames.

The landmark ruling on the long-running saga was confirmed this week when Lisa Nandy, Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published her formal decision on Friday, September 27.

The decision comes as welcome for developers who have been battling to regenerate the area around Hampton Court station but is a slap in the face to the campaigners who have fought for decades to stop it.

It comes at the end of a nine week consultation that ran between April and June this year in call for new evidence.

The majority of responses focused on the impact the huge development would have on Hampton Court Palace and surrounding area given its cultural status.

However, much of the evidence presented had already been considered during an earlier planning appeal when inspectors overturned Elmbridge Borough Council decision 2022 and green lit the development, Mrs Nandy said.

Instead the focus on the government's decision related to changes in planning law and the listed statuses of Cigarette Island Park and the Coal Office – as well as arguments over maximum heights of buildings on railway land.

Issuing her decision, the Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport said she gave "consent to build the residential-led mixed use scheme on land around Hampton Court Station, specifically the former Jolly Boatman and land adjoining Hampton Court Station, Hampton Court Way, the Western part of Cigarette Island, east of Jolly Boatman and Hampton Court Station site."

She said that since the apeal, Elmbridge Borough Council's supply of deliverable housing had declined, and failure to proceed with the site would be make the problem worse

The government also considered the council's local heritage listing of the land opposite the palace was not a sufficient reason to not approve the development and plans.

The former Jolly Boatman site is next to the River Thames and overlooks the palace.

Elmbridge Borough Council rejected the original application which received more than 1,800 objections due to "excessive height and bulk" and "harm to numerous heritage assets".

However, its decision was challenged and overturned after the planning inspector ruled it fit with surroundings while the hotel, retail units and riverside restaurant would improve the experience for those using the station to visit the palace.

The inspector added that the plans would also support the rest of the town.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Response from Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

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

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

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

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

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

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

Katherine Alexander of Epsom Green Belt raised serious concerns about the future of the borough, highlighting the delays in

renewing the Local Plan, which dates back to 2007. In a statement, she said:

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

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

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

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

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Epsom's Master plan to walk and cycle

On 24 September, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's Licensing and Planning Policy Committee approved the Epsom Town Centre Masterplan. The Masterplan sets out clear and comprehensive guidelines for the development of Epsom Town Centre. The Committee also endorsed the Epsom & Ewell Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan that aims to increase walking, wheeling and cycling across the borough. Together, the plans feed into the vision of the borough and form part of the evidence base for the borough's Draft Local Plan.

Epsom Town Centre Masterplan

The Masterplan sets out a vision to make Epsom Town Centre a place that attracts, connects and inspires people, with a strong sense of community, commerce and creativity. Climate change is the cornerstone of the Masterplan with a comprehensive approach to transport, low carbon development, green infrastructure and health. The Masterplan also identifies site locations where regeneration and improvements could take place, subject to planning permission being granted.

The Masterplan was subject to two rounds of public consultation, with over 2,000 individuals or organisations responding to the consultations, highlighting interests, attachments and aspirations.

Epsom & Ewell Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

The Plan aims to provide a safe, attractive and convenient infrastructure to encourage residents, visitors and workers to walk, wheel and cycle. Plans include expanding the existing network and improving connectivity to key destinations within the borough.

The Epsom and Ewell LCWIP is part of Surrey's broader LCWIP programme to develop LCWIPs county-wide. Following endorsement of the LCWIP, Surrey County Council can formally adopt the document.

Cllr **Peter O'Donovan**, (RA Ewell Court) Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee said: "The Town Centre Masterplan and Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan provide Epsom & Ewell with a fantastic opportunity to bring wide ranging benefits to our community.

Our lifestyles and working patterns have changed dramatically over the last few years, especially since COVID-19, and I'm proud that these plans allow us to strategically improve areas for residents to enjoy, and help us to provide solutions for broader issues

that we, as a borough, face including housing and climate change, which is at the heart of the Masterplan and supports the transition towards zero-carbon transport throughout the borough. The Masterplan will also help in the process of assessing planning applications."

He added: "I would like to thank all the residents who took part in the public consultations and feeding into our vision for the borough. We want our community and visitors to be proud of Epsom & Ewell and through these plans, we are in a position to deliver!"

About the Epsom Town Centre Masterplan

The Town Centre Masterplan forms part of the evidence base for the Draft Local Plan and will be taken into consideration for decision-making, however it will not be a statutory planning document. Local Plan FAQs | Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (epsom-ewell.gov.uk)

The Town Centre Master Plan was approved at the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee on 24 September 2024. The responses received to the consultation have been published on our consultation portal and a summary of the responses received is attached as Appendix 3. Epsom *Town Centre Masterplan information starts from p.169* –

 $democracy.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/documents/g1657/Public \ reports \ pack \ 24th-Sep-2024 \ 19.30 \ Licensing \ and \ Planning \ Policy \ Committee.pdf?T=10$

Epsom & Ewell Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

The Epsom & Ewell LCWIP was approved at the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee on 24 September 2024. *E&ELCWIP information starts from p.421* – democracy.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/documents/g1657/Public reports pack 24th-Sep-2024 19.30 Licensing and Planning Policy Committee.pdf?T=10

In 2017 the Government produced a Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS) outlining its ambition to make cycling and walking a natural choice for shorter journeys or as part of longer journeys by 2040.vSecond cycling and walking investment strategy - July 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

The Epsom and Ewell LCWIP is part of Surrey's broader LCWIP programme to develop LCWIPs county-wide. These have been considered during development of the Epsom & Ewell LCWIP for greater connectivity across political boundaries.

Plans to improve walking and cycling - Surrey County Council (surreycc.gov.uk)

Image: Google street view Epsom

Epsom Local Plan controversy heats up

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Call for Fair Tree Protection

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

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

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

A Sharp Critique of Housing Targets

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

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

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

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

A Call for Balance and Realism

Councillor **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) was among those who pushed back against Leach's extreme stance, advocating for a more balanced approach. Neale acknowledged the challenges posed by increasing housing targets but emphasized the need for the council to take a pragmatic view.

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

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

Addressing Climate Change and Housing Needs

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

"We're facing a climate crisis, and yet, when I look at the government's proposed changes to the NPPF, there is very little focus on sustainability," Morris lamented. "We should be pushing for stronger commitments to renewable energy and green building

standards. Our response should reflect this urgency. I'm disappointed that the government has missed an opportunity to make these reforms about more than just numbers."

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

The Question of Local Democracy and Transparency

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

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

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

Green Belt Protections: A Divisive Issue

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

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

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

The Decision: Moving Forward with Caution

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

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

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

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

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

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