

Epsom & Ewell's Green Belt controversy tightens

18 October 2024



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

Government's Revised Housing Targets and NPPF Changes

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

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

Public Frustration with Council Process

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

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

Epsom Green Belt Group's Alternative Proposal

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

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

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

Council's Response and Timetable

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

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

18 October 2024



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 Leatherhead 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

18 October 2024



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?

18 October 2024



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

18 October 2024



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](https://www.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](https://democracy.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/documents/g1657/Public%20reports%20pack%2024th-Sep-2024%2019.30%20Licensing%20and%20Planning%20Policy%20Committee.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](https://democracy.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/documents/g1657/Public%20reports%20pack%2024th-Sep-2024%2019.30%20Licensing%20and%20Planning%20Policy%20Committee.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](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk))

Image: Google street view Epsom

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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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Housing Targets Spark Fierce Debate in Epsom and Ewell

18 October 2024



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

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

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

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

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

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

The group points to the example of Elmbridge, another borough facing similar housing pressures, as a potential model for Epsom and Ewell to follow. In Elmbridge, the council submitted a draft local plan that restricted development to brownfield sites only, with no Green Belt sites included. Although the planning inspector raised concerns about Elmbridge’s plan, the Epsom Green Belt Group believes there are lessons to be learned. “Our draft Local Plan should be more

prescriptive about what affordable and social housing is required from each site,” the group argues, suggesting that council-owned sites like Hook Road Car Park could be earmarked for 100% affordable housing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related reports:

Epsom and Ewell Brace for Government Housing Targets

Anchored in reason on local housing need?

Village divide on Parade

18 October 2024



Plans to demolish and rebuild a shopping parade in Oxshott, has been met with controversy among locals, with some residents decrying it as a “monstrosity” that would be “entirely out of place in a quaint Surrey village.”

Nearly 240 letters have been written to Elmbridge Borough Council (EBC) with around 190 against and 134 supporting the application. Oxshott locals agree the “tired, old and ugly” Heath Building could do with upgrading but they have opposing ideas about what the development should look like.

Built in the 1960s, the two-storey Heath Building is of a brick, modernist design with a flat roof. It currently hosts five operating retail units and five residential flats, three of which are occupied.

The application is seeking to replace the existing Heath Building parade with nine residential flats, four retail units with car parking and a gym. In redeveloping the site the applicant, Heath Buildings Ltd, hopes the “high quality buildings” will attract more footfall and “ensure the vitality and viability” of the High Street.

Locals support a development of sorts, but not at any cost. Residents argued the size of the building is “ridiculous” and would completely dominate and destroy the street scene, and look “entirely out of place in a quaint Surrey village”.

Comparing the development to the equivalent of a “Marriott Hotel being ‘dumped’ in our high street”, one man argued the development will have a profound impact on neighbouring residents living “in the shadow of this monstrosity”.

But a resident who was in favour said: “Oxshott High Street is the heart of the village but the buildings are ‘tatty’. [This development] would enhance the high street.”

Council officers have recommended the proposal for refusal due to the height, bulk and the architectural design being “incongruous” with the character of the area. They added the style of the development would result in a “harmful” loss of privacy, create an “unneighbourly and overbearing impact” to other properties.

A previous application was refused in December 2023. EBC also rejected the application because it did not fully show it could secure private refuse collection for the residential units or that there would be no loss of biodiversity like trees.

Planning documents detail the applicant’s vision of a “traditional” building which reflects the “imposing and often neo-classical/Georgian style houses” in the area. Responding to the previous refusal of the scheme, the applicant has designed a ‘pitched roof’ slanting from the centre, to lower the overall height of the building.

The three-storey development is proposed to be two metres taller than other buildings on the high street. But the applicant said there would be “no harm” in introducing a “slightly taller building” on the high street as there was not a consistent level.

But people have still taken opposition, one resident said: “The Real Voice of Oxshott has spoken and it’s a ‘NO’”. Others have voiced persistent concerns around the height and overall bulk of the proposal. One resident criticised the plans as “excessive and overwhelming” with “little architectural merit”.

Concerns were also raised about losing trees around the retail parade, some with tree protection orders (TPOs) like the walnut tree.

Although the council’s tree officer made no initial objections to the scheme, a late submission by Midgarth Residents’ Association (MRA) found the proposed development would result in a detrimental impact on protected trees. This is because it is claimed that the building’s height would reduce growing space and harm the survival of the trees. Taking the report on board, officers have added the concerns around tree preservation as an additional reason for refusal.

Those supporting the plans argue the high street and the building is in “desperate” need for renovation and the investment will spur on economic and business opportunities in the village. A resident argued that “as one of the richest postcodes in the country”, the “quality” upgrade plans was exactly what the residents of Oxshott “should expect”.

Others say the building “needs to be updated” and they would rather have a company which has already invested in the community than an outside developer or a national chain. A resident claimed residents will “lose [the] high street” with all the independent shops if the application is not approved, as national retailers or large-scale development will take over.

Councillors debated the proposal at the south area planning sub-committee on September 11, but referred it to be decided at full planning committee later in the year.

What are the solutions to Epsom’s homeless crisis?

18 October 2024



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, like many local authorities across England, is grappling with a growing homelessness crisis, as highlighted in a recent press release. [Click here for full press release]. The council, which is governed by the **Residents Associations** (RA), has laid out the stark realities of the situation, detailing the pressures it faces and the steps it is taking to address the problem. This has sparked responses from various political parties, local campaign groups, and concerned residents, each presenting their own perspective on how best to tackle the issue.

The council’s press release reveals alarming statistics, positioning Epsom & Ewell among the top seven boroughs outside of London with the highest number pro rata of homeless households in temporary accommodation. With more than £1.6 million spent on nightly paid accommodation last year, and many families placed outside the borough, the human and financial costs are escalating. Councillor **Hannah Dalton**, (RA Stoneleigh) Chair of the Epsom & Ewell Residents Association, highlighted the “enormous human impact” of this crisis, pointing out the disruption to education and the health challenges faced by those in temporary accommodation.

Councillor **Neil Woodbridge**, (RA Ewell Village) Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Committee, echoed these sentiments, stating, “The vast majority of homeless households are those who cannot afford suitable accommodation,” and he pointed to the council’s Homelessness Strategy as a key tool in mitigating the crisis. The council’s initiatives include a Rent Deposit Scheme, a Private Sector Leasing Scheme, and efforts to bring empty properties back into use. However, both Cllr Dalton and Cllr Woodbridge acknowledge that these measures are only partial solutions, and significant action is needed to achieve a sustainable resolution.

Opposition Parties Call for Central Government Support

In response to the council’s press release, opposition parties have voiced their concerns and offered their own solutions. Liberal Democrat Councillor **Alison Kelly** (College) criticised the council’s approach as “sticking plaster solutions,” emphasizing the need for central government to provide financial incentives for social housing development, particularly on brownfield sites. She pointed out that increasing local housing allowances would provide immediate relief for those struggling to afford rent, arguing that this would reduce the number of families pushed into temporary accommodation.

Cllr Kelly’s comments reflect a broader call for government intervention. “The rental increases and the continuing cost of living crisis mean many can’t keep a roof over their head without going into debt,” she said, urging the government to address these systemic issues to prevent homelessness in the first place.

Green Belt Protection vs. Housing Need

A significant debate centres around the use of green belt land for housing. The campaigning group **Epsom Green Belt**’s spokesperson **Katherine Alexander** criticised the council for failing to plan adequately for affordable housing, accusing it of prioritising expensive developments over genuinely affordable homes. They advocate for using brownfield sites to provide low-cost housing, arguing that this would meet local needs without sacrificing green spaces.

“Destroying our valuable Green Belt without providing truly affordable housing would be unforgivable,” she said, pointing to the council’s own evidence that identified the high quality of the green belt land. She called for creative use of identified brownfield sites, such as the Town Hall site and former gas works area, to accommodate affordable housing.

Conservative Councillors Criticise Council’s Approach

Conservative Councillors for Horton, **Bernie Muir** and **Kieran Persand**, also weighed in, accusing the council of systemic failures. Cllr Muir argued that the council’s focus on green belt development was a “lazy and short-termist approach,” and that the council had not adequately explored the potential of brownfield sites. “I completely accept that we need social and affordable housing,” said Muir, “but the council is opting for the easy option rather than the optimal solution.”

Cllr Persand highlighted what he saw as a lack of proper investigation into alternative development strategies, including multi-use and multi-purpose sites. He suggested that large-scale developments, common in other towns, could meet housing needs while also providing economic benefits, such as increased footfall for local businesses and opportunities for local graduates.

Labour Councillor Demands Immediate Action on Social Housing

Labour Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Court) was sharply critical of the Residents Associations’ handling of the housing crisis, “As the Residents Association boast they have had control of the council for over 80 years, it is absolutely astonishing that they have put out a press notice highlighting their own failures on housing and homelessness.” She added “When it comes to supporting homeless people, sending them to temporary accommodation away from friends, family and schools is highly damaging and the council is boasting about placing families in the private rented housing that it says itself is “expensive and insecure”.”

Cllr Chinn called for the Town Hall site [see Epsom and Ewell Times report HERE on Town Hall development] to be used for social housing, insisting that the council should ensure 40% of any new homes built there are for social rent. She pointed to the successful development of mixed affordable and social housing in Hollymoor Lane as a model to replicate, advocating for an immediate start on building more council houses.

“The council needs strong leadership and a Community and Wellbeing committee that has a laser focus on housing and homelessness,” she stated, calling for more resources for the housing team to manage the increasing demands placed on them.

Public Sentiment Reflects Diverse Concerns

Residents also voiced their opinions, questioning how Epsom & Ewell ended up among the worst boroughs for homelessness. Some suggested that the borough might be seen as a “soft touch” for homelessness registrations, while others pointed out that the affordability criteria used for new housing developments do not realistically address the needs of those facing homelessness. “A 20% discount on a £750k home on Green Belt does not help with homelessness,” said one informant, advocating for lower-cost housing solutions on brownfield land.

The Path Forward

The council’s press release and the responses it has provoked highlight the complexity of the housing crisis in Epsom & Ewell. While the council has implemented a range of initiatives, there is a clear consensus that more needs to be done, both locally and at the national level. The debate over green belt versus brownfield development, the call for greater government support, and the need for genuinely affordable housing options are central to finding a sustainable solution.

As Councillor Woodbridge remarked, “This is a situation which requires significant action to bring about a long-term and sustainable solution.” With various stakeholders advocating different approaches, the challenge for Epsom & Ewell Borough Council will be to find a balance that addresses the immediate needs of homeless residents while planning for a future that includes both affordable housing and the preservation of the borough’s natural environment.

Related reports:

Epsom and Ewell Press Release on Homelessness

Stoneleigh library flats for homeless

Council Grapples with Rising Cost of Homelessness

Do good intentions square with homeless savings?

Council targeting the homeless

Image – Street View Google and added persons with suitcases at Epsom’s Travelodge (frequently used by Epsom and Ewell Council for temporary accommodation for the homeless)

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

18 October 2024



As reported in the magazine Local Government Lawyer (19/08/24) several local councils in England are accelerating the development of their local plans in response to proposed amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that could substantially increase their housing targets and require reviews of green belt boundaries.

The proposed changes, detailed in a recent government consultation, include the reintroduction of mandatory housing targets and the possibility that a council’s failure to meet its housing needs could justify revising green belt boundaries. Additionally, the consultation suggests alterations to the standard methodology for calculating housing need, which would likely result in most councils being required to plan for significantly more new homes.

Under the current proposals, local plans submitted for examination before June 2025 will be assessed under the existing NPPF rules. This has prompted councils like Winchester and Uttlesford to expedite their plans to avoid the more stringent requirements that could be imposed by the new NPPF.

In Winchester, the council’s planning officer emphasized the urgency of submitting the local plan due to the potential increase in the housing need figure from 676 to 1,099 dwellings per annum. Similarly, Uttlesford District Council, which currently operates under one of the oldest local plans in England, is also moving quickly to submit its plan before the deadline.

Not all councils are in favor of the proposed changes. Wirral Council, for example, is set to hold an extraordinary meeting to express its concerns, particularly regarding the potential impact on its green belt. The council’s draft plan focuses on brownfield development, but under the new proposals, it could be required to deliver an additional 14,000 homes, potentially affecting large areas of its green belt.

Councillors in Wirral have expressed strong opposition, with motions being tabled to challenge the proposed standard method for housing calculations, which they argue could undermine local regeneration efforts.

Epsom and Ewell Times asked **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** if it had any plan to accelerate the Draft Local Plan process. Councillor **Peter O’Donovan**, (Residents Association – Ewell Court) Chair of the Licensing & Planning Policy Committee responded: “Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is currently interrogating the documents for the Government’s consultation on proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and will prepare a response to the consultation to be submitted within the timeframe. We are dedicated to the development of a Local Plan that meets the needs of current and future residents of Epsom & Ewell. We will continue to consider the implications for the borough following the Government’s consultation, when more detail becomes available.”

Cllr **Julie Morris** (Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group) (College Ward) said “Unfortunately the ruling Residents Association seems to have only one speed, DEAD SLOW, when it comes to the Local Plan which is already around 12 years late. It has never been a priority for them. We can’t see any possibility of speeding things up now and recent progress is mostly unknown : there has been no open debate on the matter since last year. There is a meeting on 24th September which might throw some light on what’s happening. Even councillors from the ruling group believe that an update on progress and potential changes to the Plan, in the run up to Regulation 19 and (hopefully) final adoption of the document, is long overdue.”

A spokesperson for the campaigning group **Epsom Green Belt** commented on the Council position: “The NPPF proposals were published a month or so ago online. Without proposals it would not have been possible to launch the consultation, which runs until 24 Sept. The government’s stated plan is to issue the new NPPF in Dec, applicable immediately.

Waiting until the changes are published and applicable would miss the current, and brief, window of opportunity to avoid their impact, which is why other (more enlightened and forward thinking) councils are choosing quickly to act. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council should be acting immediately to capture this opportunity.”

The Epsom Green Belt spokesperson added: “The current NPPF, issued in Dec 2023, remains in force until or unless replaced by a new version. The Dec 2023 version does not require the release of Green Belt, specifically providing the option not to review any Green Belt boundaries. The Council therefore can retain the existing Green Belt boundaries and focus all housing on identified brownfield sites which, according to the Regulation 18 draft Local Plan can accommodate 3,700 dwellings. If they fail to take the opportunity to accelerate the Regulation 19 process, the target house building will exceed 14k.”

Related reports:

[Epsom and Ewell Brace for Government Housing Targets](#)

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