



Top-Down Power, Bottom-Up Pain: How Central Control is Killing Local Communities

When I was a child growing up in rural Surrey, I could never imagine why anyone wouldn't want to preserve the wondrous landscapes of Britain, only to replace them with concrete and tarmac for roads, houses, and airports. As I've gotten older, this disbelief has only grown stronger.

Take Ashted, for example — a small town not far from where I live. The local council wants to build 270 new homes on green belt land, despite furious local opposition. Even the council themselves are divided on the issue, pushing it through due to fear of top-down reprisal. In nearby Langley Vale Village, there's talk of potentially 110 homes being developed on equally green agricultural land that has been part of the local farming area for generations.

These are just two examples of dozens from my area alone. These plans are unpopular and have sparked fierce backlash and debate in the community. People wonder: Why do we have so little say in decisions that transform our neighbourhoods? Why do we often feel powerless against developers and top-down mandates?

Now, as I did then, I believe that Britain is still (at least for now) a beautiful country. However, my view of our island has matured to balance what I feel we have lost alongside what we've gained.

At 29 years old, many assume my generation is full of pro-modernist, latte-sipping, avocado toast-eating, Netflix-bingeing apathetics who don't value the past and would bulldoze anything if it meant lowering house prices. This stereotype is not just wrong — it's dangerous. Many of us care about more than just house prices; we care about landscape, beauty, nature and history. We want to preserve what was, and we think seriously about what is to come.

Many young people hear the mood of the nation and agree that things are broken. But I don't believe that a centralised, managerial approach with top-down policies is the way to fix this or make the country happier.

A big reason why Brits feel broken is that they have no control over their futures. Stagnant wages, rising living costs, and soaring house prices force many to delay milestones like having children, marriage, or retirement. But I believe the problem runs deeper. This apathy — and misery — comes from a lack of local agency, community, and belonging. Money is necessary, but the soul of a community comes from local decision-making, not cash.

Nowhere is this absence of local control clearer than in the planning system. Central London Starmerites (and many others before them) claim that communities, especially in the Home Counties, are just NIMBYs blocking progress to boost the economy. But it's far more complicated than this.

Today's planning process is little more than a tick-box exercise. Communities are asked for input, then routinely ignored. When a local council rejects a development, it's often overturned on appeal by higher authorities. Councillors face political backlash but have little real power to protect their communities. What looks like democracy is, in practice, centralisation.

This suppression of local democracy breeds apathy and resentment. People feel decisions are imposed on them, not made for them.

So here's an alternative — one I doubt either major national party would support, but let's dream.

In Switzerland, local communities decide their fate through direct democracy, sometimes gathering in town squares to vote on local issues. Local infrastructure, zoning, education, and some taxation are set at the local level. The central government only plays a guiding role in essential services and national taxes.

You might ask: won't richer areas just set tax rates low to outcompete poorer ones, increasing inequality? Two mechanisms prevent this. First, Swiss local tax rates operate within regulated bands, maintaining rough parity. Second, a redistributive model transfers wealth from richer to poorer areas, ensuring local empowerment without worsening inequality.

I would love to see this model brought to Britain. It would shake up the old, sclerotic national parties and restore real power to local people. Local councillors represent diverse parties and interests but are currently toothless. A Swiss-style local democracy would change that.

"But what if they don't build enough houses? What if businesses move to areas with better tax rates?" Then communities will respond accordingly. Challenges would remain, but at least people would be deciding their own trade-offs and paths forward.

Unfortunately, the UK is moving away from local democracy. Surrey provides a stark example. Our 11 boroughs are slated to merge into 2 or 3 "super authorities," with a directly elected mayor gaining sweeping powers over the county. How is this real



devolution? It centralises power into a system locals had no say in creating — allowing the government to push through top-down housing targets, often against local wishes.

In a Swiss or similar system, we'd live in a country truly made for the people, by the people — with agency, dignity, and hope for the future. I believe that Brits are capable of running their own communities, and it is patronising to suggest otherwise.

I wait with bated breath to see the fallout that is yet to come from this government's drive towards centralisation, continuing a tradition in this country that has hollowed out local communities for decades.

I can only hope we the people see the light before it's too late.

Matthew P. Dunn

Who will pay for Epsom's leisure centre “better deal”?

Dear Editor,

Your excellent article on the Council's decision to appoint a new operator for the Rainbow Leisure Centre raises important questions about what residents can expect. One crucial point not yet disclosed by the Council is that prices for residents are likely to rise — because the new provider, Places Leisure, has agreed to pay the Council more for the right to operate the Centre, and this additional cost will almost certainly be passed on to users.

The decision-making process, described by the ruling Residents' Association as “transparent”, was anything but. It began with a now-familiar request for councillors to enter confidential session, shutting the public out of a decision that affects thousands of local families.

At consecutive meetings of the Community and Wellbeing Committee — on which I sit — and then the Strategy and Resources Committee, councillors were asked to approve the administration's preferred supplier, Places Leisure, over the incumbent GLL/Better and another bidder. We were told that failure to agree would result in the Centre's closure from 1 October. This ultimatum was presented as a matter of legal necessity under procurement law, but no explanation was provided as to why earlier action had not been taken to avoid such a stark choice.

The selection process itself raises concerns. A confidential paper outlined how bids were scored. Quality and commercial factors were supposedly given equal weight. On quality, GLL/Better scored higher than Places Leisure, with clear criteria applied. Yet for the “commercial” element, GLL was given a score close to zero — with no explanation offered for how this figure was reached. The absence of transparency on such a critical aspect of the scoring process undermines confidence in the outcome.

It was made clear that Places Leisure would pay the Council more for the right to run the Centre and would commit to making some “investment”. However, this came with a catch — a “change to the fees which the operator would look to charge”. In plain terms, residents will be paying more so the Council can generate more income from the Centre.

This is not how important decisions affecting public services should be made. Epsom and Ewell residents deserve better than secretive processes and rubber-stamped choices. I urge the new Leader of the Council to reflect on this episode, and to commit to greater transparency, genuine scrutiny, and open debate on future decisions — especially those involving public assets like the Rainbow Leisure Centre.

Cllr Rob Geleit

Labour, Court Ward

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Editor's Note: *This letter reflects the views of the author, an elected councillor. While it refers to matters that may or may not have been discussed in a closed session of the Council, we have published it in the public interest, given the implications for public services and local accountability. We invite the Council to respond if it wishes to clarify any aspect of the decision-making process.*

Related report:

Epsom and Ewell will judge change at their leisure



Parishing Epsom and Ewell is unholy?

I enjoyed your write-up of the latest meeting of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, where you asked “Will the doomed Epsom and Ewell Borough Council rise from the ashes in other forms?” I would however suggest that the intention of the Residents Association (RA) clique that runs the council is to seek to continue its own existence as a relevant political force.

The RA has run the council since its creation and as Cllr Robert Leach (now the mayor) recently observed, feels that its dominant position means that it can do as it likes. [Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Faces Scrutiny Over Constitutional Reforms](#) > Epsom & Ewell Times

With the anticipated abolition of Epsom and Ewell as a borough council and effective merger with three or more neighbouring boroughs, the RA can see that its stranglehold will be broken. Its representatives may well be elected to a new unitary council, but they will likely be in a minority.

The paper at last week’s meeting that proposed what is called a Community Governance Review noted that “Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is one of the few District Councils within Surrey that is unparished”, meaning that there are no civil parishes or parish or other community councils.

Having been in charge for all these decades, the RA may wish to explain why this is the case. The answer to the *why now* question is obvious – to give the RA another host body to move to when its current host expires. Not that the RA clique doesn’t already have its fingers in a lot of pies locally.

There is also the *why not now* question, which the administration has skipped past. The report from last week notes that statutory guidance advises councils like Epsom and Ewell to avoid starting a community governance review if a review of local electoral arrangements is being, or is about to be, undertaken – i.e. the current situation.

Your article cites me as one of the councillors at the meeting who expressed doubts about whether information being given to residents will allow them to make an informed decision. I was specifically concerned that residents will only be consulted on the RA’s preference for new councils, despite recognition in the report that the government recently expressed a preference for the establishment of Neighbourhood Area Committees, which would operate within the auspices of a new authority.

Clearly these have been rejected as not suiting the RA’s purposes. For now we have to accept that the RA clique that runs the council can do what it likes, including spending £300,000 of desperately short funds on a process framed around its need to perpetuate its own relevance.

Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court Ward)

Look to your own party’s dictatorship

Sir,

I reply to Cllr Ames’ letter attacking Residents Association councillors in general and me in particular.

It is a pity that he chose to quote me selectively. I did say that the RA Group could put through anything it wished – that is a simple fact as we hold 25 of the 35 seats. However I went on to say that we value the contributions of members from other parties. .

A council may use either the cabinet or committee system of government. We use the committee system under which all councillors may partake in all decision making, as Cllr Ames has done. Unlike many other councils, all councillors are involved.

It is also a pity that Cllr Ames did not mention the subsequent meeting of the Standards and Constitution Committee on 16 April of which he is a member. This was a long but amicable meeting where much of the two and half hours was spent dealing with suggestions from Liberal Democrat leader Cllr James Lawrence. Some of his proposals were accepted. On all the motions, James was congratulated on the effort he had put in to serve the council and the constructive way he worked with RA members. This is hardly the attitude of a dictatorial ruling group.

In contrast, let us look at the Labour government of his party. Last year in the general election it got about a third of votes on a



60% turnout. This means that only one in five electors voted Labour. Another two voted for other parties, and the remaining two did not vote at all. Subsequent opinion polls suggest that Labour has lost support since the election.

On the basis of getting just 20% support from the electorate, the Labour government has dictatorially decreed that the borough should provide more than 800 new homes each year building on Green Belt, and that the borough council should be abolished in 2027. On neither of these issues has the government consulted anyone to ask if they want all this extra housing or if they want the council abolished. I have yet to meet any resident who supports either policy. The Labour government does not listen to any voices other than its own, and sometimes does not even listen to its own voices.

I like Cllr Ames as a person, and I respect his right to criticise me and RA councillors. However I believe that this should be done fairly, and not by selective quotation wrapped up in bluster. If Cllr Ames does not like dictatorial government, he would be better advised to direct such views to his own party.

Cllr Robert Leach

RA councillor

Nonsuch Ward

Labour decries Residents' Associations' unfettered power on Epsom & Ewell Council

Dear Editor,

Thank you for your excellent reporting of last week's meeting of Epsom and Ewell Council's Standards and Constitution Committee, which highlighted some important and contentious issues about how councillors represent our residents.

Your analysis that public trust and democratic scrutiny hang in the balance is spot-on. In my two years so far as a councillor, I have frequently sought to highlight these issues, often in conjunction with other opposition councillors and sometimes with the support of more independent-minded Residents Association (RA) councillors.

In this light, I would like to highlight Cllr Robert Leach's comment concerning the committees that decide the bulk of what the council does, that "The RA group can put through anything it likes".

This shocking comment goes to the heart of issues of democratic scrutiny and appears to reflect the approach of the ruling party and many RA councillors to a situation where it has two-thirds of councillors. Despite its councillors purporting to represent residents at a very local level, the RA can often operate as a monolithic block.

One major change that the RA administration has attempted to implement is to neuter the Audit and Scrutiny Committee, of which I am also a member, which should play a key role in scrutinising what the council does in the name of residents.

Despite, or perhaps because of this, the administration has proposed to remove the committee's scrutiny function, on the grounds that scrutiny should take place on the committees that make policy and spending decisions.

Cllr Leach's blunt assessment that "The RA group can put through anything it likes" on such committees should represent the death knell for this proposal, which the administration has already had to "pause" in the face of fierce opposition.

While Cllr Leach's words represent the numerical reality, they neglect the role that opposition councillors can play in raising questions and challenges and, on occasion, influencing how other committee members vote.

Last month, for the second year running, the Audit and Scrutiny Committee amended its own annual report, as drafted by the administration, to record that it had carried out "limited scrutiny" over the past year.

While this is an unfortunate situation, to say the least, it does show that some RA councillors have an appetite for a stronger scrutiny role and, despite what Cllr Leach says, can vote according to their own individual judgement.

Democratic scrutiny of what the council does in the name of residents is essential to maintain the public's trust in it. We need more of it - and less of a ruling party that thinks it can put through anything it likes.

Councillor Chris Ames - Labour - Court Ward



Epsom's Horton Cemetery gets attention of two kinds

Just as **The Epsom and Ewell Times** was about to publish a letter concerning Council efforts to tidy and make safer the boundaries of Horton Cemetery (Hook Road / Horton Lane) a motor car struck railings near the roundabout and knocked over the Memorial to the near 9000 patients buried and neglected in the privately owned 5 acre cemetery.

Surrey Police issued a statement: "We were called to Horton Lane, Ewell at around 7:10pm on Wednesday 19 February after reports of a single vehicle collision at the location. Officers responded and found that the collision had resulted in damage to a fence and cemetery stone. The driver was not arrested and did not require medical treatment."



It is understood that Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is responsible for the Memorial after former Labour Mayor of Epsom and Ewell, **Alan Carlson**, raised the money for its installation through a public appeal in 2004.

The charity The Friends of Horton Cemetery continues its campaign to restore the Cemetery to community ownership following the bizarre NHS transfer of the asset to a property speculator in 1983. **Michael Heighes** of Marque Securities has taken away the tombstones and all the crosses on each grave have gone. The cemetery is barely recognisable as a cemetery and relatives cannot enter without trespassing.

Recently, the Charity has made a submission to the Law Commission, which is considering reforms to cemetery law. It has submitted that the opportunity to update the laws should include a duty to maintain and allow access to cemeteries in private hands.

The charity has also sent a letter to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council in connection with the current Local Plan arguing any



development of neighbouring **Horton Farm** for housing should seek developer's funds for the restoration of the Cemetery as an amenity of peace and remembrance open to the public.

Mr **Lionel Blackman**, Secretary of the Charity, said "The existence of the largest asylum cemetery in Europe is not going to disappear. With relatives coming forward every week and our research team publishing the lives of over 600 patients so far, it is only a matter of time and whichever local government takes over, that action will redress this historic outrage."

Sam Jones - Reporter

Letter from Matthew Walters, Epsom.

Dear Sir,

I would like to draw attention to recent developments concerning Horton Cemetery in West Ewell, Epsom.

For many years, concerns have been raised about the lack of respect shown to the 9,000 individuals buried there, whose graves are no longer marked. More recently, attention has also turned to the safety risks for road users on the busy Hook Road.

Until yesterday, the grass verge alongside the cemetery was largely inaccessible due to overgrown brambles and tree branches extending from the cemetery, as well as significant fly-tipping, including building waste.

It is therefore welcome news that Surrey County Council and Epsom and Ewell Borough Council have worked together to clear the area, improving both its appearance and safety, as evidenced in the accompanying photographs.

While the decision to classify Horton Cemetery and its 9,000 graves as an "amenity woodland" remains a point of contention, the recent clearance has ensured that the surroundings are now more in keeping with a cemetery. However, the public should be aware that sections of the perimeter railings remain unsafe, with some sharp railings protruding towards Hook Road at dangerous angles, none of which are currently marked with hazard tape.

Falling branches from trees inside the cemetery continue to pose a risk to road users, and it is hoped that Surrey County Council will monitor this issue and take necessary action, as indicated in previous communications.

In the meantime, cyclists, motorcyclists, and motorists should exercise caution when travelling along Hook Road near the cemetery. Furthermore, steps should be taken to ensure that the cost of maintaining overgrown vegetation from within the cemetery does not fall upon Council Tax payers.

Horton Cemetery remains in private ownership by a property developer, and the recent clearance now allows for greater visibility into the site. This presents an opportunity for the public to assess whether greater care and respect should be afforded to those buried there.

Out of sight should not mean out of mind.

Yours faithfully,

Matthew Walters

Will planners say "Sori, mun moka"? *

Dear Editor,

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

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

The objections focus on several key issues:

1. **Architectural Incompatibility:** The proposal's replacement of the turreted Café Moka with a stark, utilitarian design



would disrupt the character of Ashley Square, a blend of brick facades and tiled roofs. The original design, which still stands the test of time, complements the adjacent Market Place and reflects the history of the area. The turreted Moka unit, along with the similarly turreted (but now sadly spoiled) High Street entrance, are carefully considered features that referenced the sadly lost King's Head Hotel coaching inn, which once stood on the site of Boots.

2. **Impact on Views:** The turreted structure helps screen the expansive service area behind the café, shielding views of the unattractive back facades of buildings on South Street. Its demolition would expose these eyesores and diminish the square's architectural integrity.
3. **Negative Impact on Waterloo House:** Most importantly, the removal of the turreted Café Moka would harm the setting of Waterloo House's historic carriage entrance. The building is a rare surviving example of a 17th-century spa town assembly rooms and has been sensitively restored (and appropriately renamed) by Wetherspoons. An ill-suited modern development next door would undermine this significant restoration.

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

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

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

Yours faithfully,

Simon Alford

Epsom

Related reports:

Heritage at Risk: Epsom Town Centre Conservation Area Faces Challenges

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

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

Celebrating 50 Years of Epsom and Ewell Talking Newspaper

Dear Editor,

I am writing on behalf of Epsom and Ewell Talking Newspaper (EETN) to share some wonderful news following our 50th Anniversary celebration this past November.

Helen Maguire, our local Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom and Ewell, has kindly recognised EETN's invaluable contribution to the community in her recent newsletter. She congratulated us on this significant milestone and commended the tireless efforts of our volunteers who ensure visually impaired residents in Epsom and Ewell remain connected through vital access to news and local information.

Moreover, we are proud to announce that Helen Maguire has submitted an Early Day Motion (EDM) in Parliament in honour of our 50 years of service. This EDM reads as follows:

"That this House congratulates Epsom and Ewell Talking Newspaper on its remarkable achievement of 50 years of service; recognises the charity's outstanding commitment to supporting visually impaired residents in Epsom and Ewell by providing vital access to news and local information; commends the volunteers whose dedication, effort, and time have made this invaluable"



service possible; acknowledges the critical role such services play in fostering inclusion and community connection; and wishes the charity continued success in its future endeavours supporting those in need."

For those unfamiliar, Early Day Motions are a way for MPs to bring attention to specific causes or achievements. While few are debated, they often attract public interest and media coverage.

We are deeply grateful to Helen Maguire for her continued support and advocacy for EETN, and we look forward to many more years of serving our local community.

Yours faithfully,

Judy Sarssam

Chairman

Epsom & Ewell Talking Newspaper

Epsom and Ewell Council response to Local Plan criticism

Dear Editor,

Government's English Devolution White Paper

We are working through what the Government's English Devolution White Paper means for Epsom & Ewell. Our commitment is to do what's right for our residents, local businesses, and visitors; and to ensure that the high-quality public services that our residents need and deserve continue to be delivered.

Proposed Submission Local Plan (Regulation 19)

The Proposed Submission Local Plan seeks to address the balance between meeting development needs and protecting the borough's environment. Consultation on the proposed submission local plan commenced on the 20 December and will close on the 5 February 2025.

This consultation provides the opportunity for those with an interest in the borough to comment on whether the local plan is legally compliant or sound. Guidance on legal compliance, soundness and how to respond to the consultation can be found on the council's website and on the consultation website(link is external).

The Council has considered the responses received during the consultation in the Draft local Plan undertaken in early 2023 in developing the Proposed Submission Local Plan. Information on the changes made is detailed in the Consultation Statement published alongside the Proposed Submission Local Plan.

The borough has a high level of need for affordable housing for a range of property types and sizes, including family homes, with over 1,350 households being on the council's housing needs register. The greatest need is for affordable rented homes (which includes social rented housing) and the affordable housing policy in the Local Plan reflects this, whilst having regard to the national policy and viability evidence.

Consultation over the Christmas and New Year period has been necessary in order to meet the new deadline imposed by the National Planning Policy Framework for submission of Local Plans under the 'old' system. Our previous intention was to wait until January 2025 but that could cause us to miss the deadline.

The Local Plan will be submitted before the 12 March 2025 and examined against the December 2023 version of the NPPF which makes it clear that it is at the discretion of local authorities as to whether Green Belt boundaries should be amended. This flexibility is to reflect that Green Belt authorities (such as Epsom and Ewell) have their own unique characteristics, challenges and requirements, and that local plans must address competing and conflicting demands for land.

In terms of changes to green belt land, the Local plan proposes that:

- 52.6 ha of greenfield green belt land is removed from the green belt (site allocations SA33-SA35), this equates to 3.36 % of the boroughs Green Belt.



- 85 ha of previously developed green belt land, including the hospital clusters and part of the NESCOLT estate is removed from the green belt, this equates to 5.44% ha of the boroughs Green Belt.
- Less than 0.4ha of land is removed from the green belt following minor boundary amendments.

Following the consultation, we will submit the Local Plan, supporting evidence and all responses received to the consultation to the Secretary of State who will then appoint a Planning Inspector to undertake an independent examination. As part of the submission the council can propose changes to the local plan, however it is at the discretion of the planning inspector as to how these are dealt with.

Yours faithfully,

Councillor Peter O'Donovan, Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee.

Read the full Epsom Green Belt Group letter [here](#).

The Christmas present nobody wanted

Dear Editor,

With the threat of the dissolution of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council hanging in the air (under Angela Rayner's proposals for unitary authorities), residents might expect the RA-led council to demonstrate the value of local government by strongly championing local interests and defending the highly valued Green Belt. Instead, they are putting forward a plan that pleases no-one and will have repercussions for generations to come.

Tomorrow the council is due to issue its Regulation 19 consultation on the proposed Local Plan.

Here's what the Director of Environment, Housing and Regeneration, Vicki Potts, and RA Cllr Woodbridge said about the Regulation 19 consultation process in the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee meeting held on 22 Nov 2023:

Vicki Potts: 'Your Reg 19 document... you can't make any major changes to it following [the Reg 19] consultation. If you want to make major changes at that stage, you can do, but you got to go back and do another consultation on your Regulation 19.'

Cllr Woodbridge: 'From our residents' perspective, when they're being asked to be consulted on the Reg 19, they don't really have much chance then to actually affect it. That is it then, really... I don't want to say we're going through the motions, but that consultation [Reg 19] is a less meaningful consultation than the one we've been through now [Reg 18].'

So the consultation is not an opportunity to amend the plan that so many residents reject, rather it is part of a statutory process that must be completed, however unpopular the plan's content may be.

The Regulation 19 documentation for consultation

Just in time for Christmas, the council is planning to distribute a lump of coal to each residents' Christmas stocking in the form of a consultation on a highly unpopular Local Plan.

In a rebuff to local democracy, following residents' responses to the Reg 18 consultation in early 2023, the council have failed to make changes to the local plan either to provide the truly affordable housing needed to resolve the borough's homelessness issues, or to protect the Green Belt. These are two strategic issues, and both of them featured heavily in responses from the borough residents and statutory consultees to the Regulation 18 consultation.

The council is proposing to redesignate or release over 175 hectares, or c.12% of the borough's Green Belt (see analysis below).

The current National Planning Policy Framework (Dec 2023) gives councils the option not to revise Green Belt boundaries. Since Dec 2023:

- The Epsom Green Belt Group has highlighted this option and strongly encouraged its use.
- The council received legal advice at the start of 2024 which stated that it was legally acceptable to choose not to release Green Belt for development.
- Angela Rayner and Matthew Pennycook have repeatedly stated their expectation that it is previously developed land



and 'greybelt' that should be released for development, not high performing Green Belt.

Justin Turvey, 'Head of Place Development' for Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and central to this borough's Local Plan wrote, in response to the Sutton Borough Local Plan consultation in September 2024:

'We note that under the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2023) there is no requirement on local authorities to review or amend their Green Belt boundaries through the plan making process and that any amendments must demonstrate 'exceptional circumstances'.'

[Note: This response, dated 26 September 2024, was obtained through a Freedom of Information request to Sutton Council (see attached) as it was not made publicly available in Epsom & Ewell.]

Despite the clear option to remove undeveloped Green Belt from the Local Plan under the Dec 2023 NPPF, despite opposition to Green Belt development from across the political spectrum, despite government advice to protect high performing Green Belt, despite highlighting this option to a neighbouring borough, and despite overwhelming public opposition to the development of Green Belt, the council has continued to include housing development on the high performing Green Belt sites of both Horton Farm and Hook Road Arena in the Local Plan.

Turning to the newly released NPPF (Dec 2024), it states:

'148. Where it is necessary to release Green Belt land for development, plans should give priority to previously developed land, then consider grey belt which is not previously developed, and then other Green Belt locations.'

The local plan proposals have not prioritised previously developed land (e.g. Hollywood Lodge is not included in the plans). The council has not provided an assessment of greybelt sites in the borough and has not prioritised them for development. The council has instead included the high performing Green Belt sites.

The excuse, or rationale, provided for giving up this high performing Green Belt land for development (despite not having followed the priority order in para 148, above) has been the provision of much needed affordable housing. Whilst there is widespread support for this objective, the reality is very different.

The council has not made any commitment to the provision of truly affordable homes on either of these sites. According to the Local Plan policies, the majority of the so-called 'affordable housing' will be priced at a 20% discount to the market price of the housing in the area.

Likely outcome of examination by planning inspector

Perversely, because of the decisions the Epsom & Ewell borough council has made, particularly the choice to amend Green Belt boundaries, there is a high likelihood that the current plan, if taken forward, will be found unsound and that further Green Belt release will be required.

To stand the best chance of being found sound and to protect the high quality Green Belt, the Local Plan should not amend Green Belt boundaries, should instead focus solely on brownfield and previously developed land, and should be submitted by 12 March 2025 (following Regulation 19 consultation). This can still be achieved, but becomes more challenging every day.

Sticking with an unpopular and unsound local plan may be the Christmas gift the borough residents would prefer not to receive.

Yours faithfully,

Katherine Alexander of Epsom Greenbelt Group

Read the full Epsom & Ewell Borough Council letter [here](#).