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Council getting belted by Green Group?

17 April 2024

The **Epsom Green Belt Group** has submitted a “complaint” to **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council**, expressing grave concerns over what they perceive as significant failures in the governance, oversight, and leadership of the **Local Plan**. The group’s submission outlines several key issues they believe have hindered the proper scrutiny and preparation of the plan, which will shape planning permissions for buildings in the future.

In their communication to the Council, the Epsom Green Belt Group emphasizes the importance of preserving green spaces and utilizing brownfield sites to deliver affordable homes within the borough. They express frustration at what they see as resistance from planning officers to cooperate with members of the **Licensing and Planning Policy Committee** (LPPC), hindering the committee’s ability to provide direction and challenge to the Local Plan.

According to the group, the LPPC, tasked with influencing and controlling the development and use of land in the Borough, has not fulfilled its obligations effectively. They argue that the LPPC should have been actively engaged in the preparation, adoption, and review of the statutory Development Plan, including Local Development Documents. However, their analysis reveals a concerning lack of involvement and debate on critical aspects of the plan.

Of particular concern, the Group argues, is the apparent absence of discussion or challenge regarding the Spatial Strategy, Plan policies, and critical decisions related to the Local Plan. Despite the completion of a public consultation, which garnered 1,736 responses, the Group asserts that none of the LPPC meetings addressed the results or expected impact on the Regulation 19 Local Plan. This lack of engagement is compounded by the cancellation of several LPPC meetings and a significant increase in the Local Plan budget without corresponding scrutiny or accountability.

The Epsom Green Belt Group urges the council to address these issues urgently and provide clarity on the timetable for scrutiny, challenge, and direction of the Local Plan by the LPPC. They demand assurance that the committee will have the freedom, opportunity, time, and resources necessary to fulfill its mandate without undue constraints or interference from officers. Additionally, they call for a contingency plan in case of further delays to the Local Plan timetable.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council were swift to respond with answers to **six** demands made by the Green Group:

1. **The detailed timetable for the scrutiny, challenge and direction of each significant element of the Local Plan by the LPPC**

The Proposed Submission Local Plan with a recommendation will come to Licensing and Planning Policy Committee (LPPC) in November 2024. Councillors can discuss, debate and if needed change the recommendation at this meeting. If supported, the recommendation would then go to full council in December 2024 for all Councillors to discuss and debate. If supported, this would then be put to public consultation in January 2025.

2. **The date on which the analysis of the consultation results, and proposed amendments arising from it, will be presented to the LPPC for adjustment and/or approval**

A Consultation Statement will be published as part of the agenda pack for the LPPC in November 2024 where the Proposed Submission Local Plan will be considered. The exact date of this meeting is to be confirmed.

The Consultation Statement will summarise the responses received on the Draft Local Plan (Regulation 18) and how they have been considered in producing the Proposed-Submission (Regulation 19) version of the Local Plan.

3. **That the LPPC will be given the freedom, opportunity, time and resources sufficient for it to fulfil its mandate, as set out it its Terms of Reference, without undue constraints or interference from officers**

Correct. In line with the Council’s constitution, officers advise Councillors in their professional capacity, and Councillors are responsible for decision making in respect of the Local Plan and its content.

The Council’s constitution can be accessed from the following link: https://democracy.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=205&MId=1619&Ver=4&Info=1

4. **That review, challenge and direction of the Local Plan will be included in the agenda of every meeting of the LPPC to be held until publication of the Regulation 19 consultation**

The Council’s Constitution provides the terms of reference for the LPPC, these are set out in Appendix 3 (p16-18). Agenda items coming to Council Committees are typically brought to arrive at a decision.

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The LPPC responsibilities include making decisions at key stages in the production of Local Plan documents as set out below:

- Considering and approving Draft (Regulation 18) Local Plans
- LPPC considered and approved the Draft Local Plan (Regulation 18) for consultation on 30 January 2023.
- Considering and recommending for approval to Full Council, submission versions of Development Plan documents
- LPPC will consider the pre-submission Local Plan in November 2024.

The next decision related to the Local Plan regards the Proposed Submission Local Plan (Regulation 19) at the November LPPC meeting.

5. **That there is sufficient time and budget to accommodate any and all changes the LPPC may recommend**

As has been reported to LPPC, the Local Plan timetable has a limited degree of flexibility to ensure that the Local Plan is submitted to the government for examination by the 30 June 2025 deadline, which is the deadline set by government for submission under the current Local Plan system. The scale of changes made will influence whether there is a delay to the programme- for example, minor typographical errors or clarification of wording will not impact the programme. However, changes that require amendments to the evidence base could lead to delays that result in the transitional arrangements deadline being missed.

6. **That a contingency plan is in place should the currently proposed Local Plan timetable slip for any reason, including matters arising from the review and challenge set out above.'**

There are elements of contingency in the plan, but if the Local Plan timetable slips and as a result it will not be possible to submit the Local Plan to the government by the 30 June 2025, we will prepare a Local Plan under the reforms set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. The government are due to publish further legislation in relation to plan making reforms that will need to be considered.

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