

Councillors belted-up on Green Belt?

In a recent closed-door meeting held at the Town Hall, local councillors in the Borough of Epsom and Ewell, convened to *apparently* deliberate on potential areas for housing development, with a particular focus on the contentious issue of Green Belt land. The meeting, held on January 10, has stirred controversy and prompted reactions from concerned citizens, leading to a series of letters and press releases. Councillors were greeted at the entrance by a small and polite protest group.

Yufan Si, a prominent Green Belt campaigner, has expressed alarm over the secrecy shrouding the meeting. The council's decision to discuss Green Belt development in a closed setting has raised questions about transparency and adherence to government policies.

Ms Si highlights the Council's statistics, indicating that 84% of residents opposed development on Green Belt land during a prior consultation. The campaigner argues that the government's planning policies offer a choice to protect Green Belt areas, questioning the need for a clandestine discussion.

She has raised concerns about the council's sale of Green Belt land to a local business owner three years before the Local Plan's development, potentially leading to significant financial gains. The campaigner emphasizes the availability of brownfield sites capable of accommodating over 3,700 new dwellings, surpassing the projected household growth from 2022 to 2040. In her letter Yufan Si has urged councillors to prioritize environmental preservation and fulfill residents' wishes by excluding Green Belt land from the development plans.

Councillor **Julie Morris** (LibDem College) has stated that she challenged the decision to keep the meeting private. While acknowledging the legal standing of the private meeting, Councillor Morris called for greater transparency and public engagement. She emphasizes the need for progress reports on the Local Plan to address residents' concerns and combat misinformation circulating in the public domain.

She said "The ruling Residents Association party would do well to engage directly with the public on this matter, or at the very least, to explain exactly why these meetings are being held, have to be in private, and why there is no public statement after each meeting to keep local residents informed as to how things are moving forward. Our residents deserve no less than this."

Letters from concerned citizens to Councillors echoed the sentiment against Green Belt development. **Stephen Neward**, a voluntary warden at the Priest Hill nature reserve, expressed hope that the revised National Planning Policy Framework would prevent the inclusion of Green Belt sites in the Local Plan. Another resident, **Lynn Munro**, urged councillors to prioritize brownfield sites over Green Belt, emphasizing the irreversible impact on the borough's open spaces.

Tim Murphy, representing the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Epsom and Ewell Green Belt Group, shared the views of planning consultant Catriona Riddell. Riddell clarified that local authorities, including Epsom and Ewell, are not obligated to alter Green Belt boundaries to meet housing targets, challenging the notion that Green Belt sacrifice is necessary.

As controversy swirls around the closed meeting, residents, campaigners, and opposition councillors continue to press for transparency. The fate of Green Belt land in Epsom and Ewell remains a hot topic.

The meeting was not notified on the Council's calendar of meetings and therefore the press do not know if it was a formal or informal meeting nor whether any order was made about publicity. No part of the meeting, including any section excluding the public, has been uploaded to the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council YouTube channel.

Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) Chair of the Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee has responded to Epsom and Ewell Times:

"This was not a secret meeting; it just wasn't a public meeting. I stated publicly at the September LPPC Committee and extraordinary full Council on 24 October 2023 that Member briefings regarding the Local Plan would be taking place during this time period assuming the local plan was unpaused by full council, which it was.

Further clarification was given at the special LPPC meeting held in November when the Local Development Scheme (LDS) was an agenda item. I have given a statement at every council meeting allowing questions from all members. All members have been encouraged to attend each LPPC meeting whether they're a committee member or not. All members have been fully involved and engaged in the development of our local plan.

It is normal and expected practice when a Local Plan is being developed for Members to be able to discuss items of detail outside



of the public Committee Meetings. The information briefing for councillors held on 10 January 2024 was not a meeting of the Council or a committee and had no decision-making powers, and there was no right for public access under the Local Government Act 1972 or any other legislation.

There is currently a huge amount of work being done for our Local Plan, including considering the implications of the revised NPPF published in December 2023. Work will continue over the coming months before the next stage of public consultation (Regulation 19), which is due to commence in January 2025, if supported by LPPC in November 2024 and full council in December 2024."

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