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Epsom and Ewell's New Local Plan sites advance amid clash over scrutiny and cost

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Epsom and Ewell's Local Plan moved closer to public consultation on Tuesday 22 September, but cllrs clashed over proposed Green Belt development, decisions taken without committee debate and a government requirement to begin another plan before the borough council is abolished.

The Licensing and Planning Policy Committee voted **six to three** to recommend that Full Council approve a consultation lasting at least six weeks on modifications proposed by the Planning Inspector. Full Council has yet to make that decision; the council expects it to meet next month.

The modifications include **12 additional urban sites and four additional Green Belt sites**. Proposals for the latter include at least **530 homes at Downs Farm** and **275 at Priest Hill**. Planning officers said land south of College Road at Downs Farm would remain in the Green Belt for open space, routes and playing pitches. They said the Sutton and Epsom Rugby Football Club playing fields were outside the proposed Priest Hill allocation.

Who chose the additional sites?

Head of Planning Policy and Economic Development Ian Mawer told the committee that many changes to the plan's policies arose from examination hearings. Following a further hearing in July, he said, the Inspector's programme officer asked the council to draft modifications for 12 urban sites and subsequently confirmed which Green Belt sites to include.

"The main modifications are those that the inspector considers are necessary to make the plan sound," Mr Mawer said. "They must be consulted on as they are presented."

Cllr **Christine Howells** (Independent Nonsuch) challenged the absence of a further decision by elected members on the sites. "At no time did elected councillors agree to these material changes, both to the evidence base and the proposals for the local plan," she told the committee.

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) raised concerns about flooding assessments, school capacity and traffic. Cllr **Steven McCormick** (Conservative Woodcote and Langley Vale) criticised the opportunity members had been given to scrutinise the changes, calling them "an unprecedented sacrifice of our green belt".

The dispute concerned both the proposed development and the process that brought it before the committee. Officers said the Inspector had requested the draft modifications as part of the examination. Members were told they could recommend whether the modifications went out to consultation, but could not rewrite the Inspector's proposals beforehand.

The committee voted **seven to two** to note the modifications and **six to three** to recommend consultation. It then voted **five to four** on each of two delegations: allowing Mr Mawer, in consultation with the committee chair, to make further amendments required by the Inspector after consultation and to update the Local Plan timetable.

The Inspector will consider responses before issuing a final report. If the plan is found sound, Full Council will still have to decide whether to adopt it.

No affordable homes completed in 2025–26

The committee also agreed, by **eight votes to one**, to publish its Authority Monitoring Report. It records **37 homes completed in the borough during 2025–26, none of them affordable**. The council cannot demonstrate a five-year supply of housing land.

Cllr McCormick described the report as "an annual health check on our borough's planning performance" that showed a serious shortfall. Cllr **Julian Freeman** (LibDem College) focused on younger residents priced out of housing. "My own children can't even imagine owning their own home," he said.

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) agreed that delivery was a problem but said the council could not force developers to build homes for which they had permission. Mr Mawer also pointed to building costs, market conditions and the limited number of large sites ready for development.

Urgent decisions challenged

Earlier in the meeting, members examined EEBC's responses to Local Plan consultations by neighbouring Tandridge and

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Kingston. Both had already been submitted using urgent decision procedures. The committee was asked to note them afterwards and did so in each case by **five votes to three, with one abstention**.

Cllr McCormick called the Tandridge decision a “fait accompli”. He said its consultation had been open for weeks and asked why members had not been convened to consider a response. Cllr Kieran Persand (Conservative Horton) repeatedly questioned why a special committee meeting had not been arranged.

Committee chair Cllr **Peter O’Donovan** (RA Ewell Court) said he had been advised that the response needed to be submitted and had agreed to it. Asked why a meeting had not been called, he said: “Can’t give you an answer this evening.” He undertook to seek an explanation.

Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) acknowledged the frustration but argued that the summer holiday period and the unusual pressure created by reorganisation and the Local Plan made urgent decisions necessary in this instance.

The exchanges raised a question that extends beyond these two consultation responses: decisions made by councils shortly before they join East Surrey may affect the new authority, while members of the existing councils have limited time left to scrutinise them.

Government seeks work on another plan

The final item brought a further complication. Mr Mawer reported that new government rules placed EEBC among authorities expected to begin preparing another Local Plan, even though its **2022–2040 plan remains under examination** and the borough council is due to be replaced by East Surrey Unitary Council on **1 April 2027**.

He said the government recognised the resources involved in working on two plans at once but did not accept local government reorganisation as a reason to defer the new work. He estimated that taking a plan through to adoption under the new system could cost **about £1 million**, stressing that this was an estimate for a system no authority had yet completed.

Cllr McCormick criticised the absence of money in the budget for the work and called for a costed plan of action. Cllr Alex Coley (Independent Ruxley) asked why it had not been made a priority. Cllr O’Donovan said he would have to find out.

By **seven votes to two**, the committee agreed that officers should seek a meeting with the Shadow East Surrey authority’s chief executive and executive member for strategic planning and growth, then report back.

Surrey’s local government reorganisation is proceeding despite pauses announced elsewhere. That leaves EEBC facing the cost and staff demands of a new planning requirement during its final months, while East Surrey prepares to take over. The committee was given no assurance of additional government funding. How much work EEBC should commission before April, and who will pay for it, remain unanswered.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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