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Epsom Local Plan controversy heats up

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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.

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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.

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The Surrey Campaign for the Protection of Rural England also issued a press release you may read HERE

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