

Now regulated, Epsom and Ewell greenlights children home

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Plans to turn a 'quiet' family house into a children's home for vulnerable young people have been approved despite strong objections from neighbours, warnings from police, and a heated council debate.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's planning committee gave the green light on January 29 for a house in Holmwood Road to be turned into a home for up to three children with learning disabilities and/or emotional and behavioural difficulties. The children will be cared for by staff working shifts, and the home will be regulated by Ofsted.

The decision comes years after an unregistered children's home at the same address was shut down following serious problems in the area. A council report said the previous children's home was closed by police after several problems including antisocial behaviour, vandalism, drug use and noise and disruption.

Residents told councillors they were frightened history would repeat itself.

One neighbour, Lucy, said at the meeting: "People are genuinely scared and simply cannot endure this again. If you put this through, they're planning to move." She quoted Surrey Police as saying: "A children's home at this location, there would be a significant increase in antisocial behaviour and calls to emergency services."

She added: "This is not just about the welfare of three children who need a home. It's about the welfare of the well-being and safety of our elderly and vulnerable and our children."

Nonsuch ward councillor **Shanice Goldman** (Conservative Nonsuch) said she supports children's care in principle, but not at this address. She told the meeting: "Safeguarding children and protecting communities are not competing objectives. They are aligned." But she warned police concerns were "a serious and material planning consideration" and said the plan did not give enough reassurance.

Cllr **Christine Howells** (RA Nonsuch) said neighbours had previously faced "threats, intimidation" and that problems became so bad "the home was closed by the police." She said: "Not every location is appropriate."

But the company behind the new home, IMPACT Children's Residential Care, said this would be completely different. Director Javon Wilson said: "I must be absolutely clear that the unregulated provision previously closed by the police and the local authorities has no association whatsoever with IMPACT's children residential care." He added: "We have no intention of operating an unregulated service."

Some councillors were still unsure. Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) said: "You haven't really given me any confidence." He said he was unsure of the neighbourhood impact.

Others argued planning rules meant they had to focus on the property, not past behaviour. Committee chair Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) said members must separate the application from "the previous antisocial behaviour of the previously unlicensed home."

Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court) said: "I really don't see how it could be refused. It's a service to the community." In the end, councillors approved the plan, saying the need for children's homes and strict Ofsted regulation outweighed residents' fears.

Emily Dalton LDRS

139 Holmwood Road, Cheam, Surrey. (Credit: Google Street View)

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