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When a meeting is not a meeting, in brief.

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The vexed issue of whether a “members’ briefing” is a “meeting” or not has received some attention of late. Anxiety was aroused by fears that a “confidential” meeting of **Epsom and Ewell** Councillors might effectively determine whether Green Belt land would remain in the Local Plan as potential sites for housing development. The “meeting” on 10th January was “met” by a small group of protestors who had caught wind of the event.

According to Cllr. **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford) “I did tell a friend that I was going to a member’s briefing. I didn’t realize that I was not to disclose that. I just gave that out because a friend asked me why I can’t come out. I don’t understand why they cannot be publicly declared as meetings.”

She revealed this at the meeting of the Strategy and Resources Committee of 25th January. This *was* a meeting and the press and public were allowed in as usual. During a debate about the Council’s new “Communication Strategy” Cllr Kelly also said: “we’ve recently faced accusations over secrecy with response to the Local Plan Green Belt members briefings and some legal guidance; we’ve also been asked to remain silent on some matters including the existence of a briefing meeting and we seem to have had quite a lot of part two sessions *[sections of Council meetings that are closed to the press and public]*. How does this strategy help us to address the issue of secrecy levelled at us by the residents?”

In response RA leader Cllr **Hannah Dalton** (Stoneleigh) said: “The purpose of member briefings is for members *[i.e., councillors]* to be informed and in a safe and confidential space to ask questions, to understand information, to obtain data from officers, whether from our council or other councils or the LGA *[Local Government Association]* or whomever. To then provide a steer to… what then comes to committee.”

The Council’s law officer advised: “I don’t think there’s problem actually saying that you’re coming to a council briefing. If you went further to say I’m coming to a council briefing on xxx subject then that is disclosing at times confidential information.”

Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley Vale) told the Epsom and Ewell Times 15th January: that the 10th January “members’ briefing”, “…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.”

Epsom and Ewell’s Member of Parliament **Chris Grayling** has weighed in and on 31st January told constituents: “The Council has now decided to press ahead with its plans, and while details of the updated proposals remain confidential, I understand from Councillors in the ruling group that they continue to include substantial green belt development in the area. This is despite the fact that existing brownfield sites can deliver most of what is needed.”

He urged residents to make their views known to the Council.

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Image: Cllr Alison Kelly at the Strategy and Resources Committee meeting

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