

Guildford Greenbelt Group (GGG) Press announcement 11 June 2014

RESTORING DEMOCRACY

GUILDFORD GREENBELT GROUP TO SEEK PUBLIC REFERENDUM TO REMOVE GUILDFORD COUNCIL'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE AND RESTORE DEMOCRACY

Move is result of Executive Committee's failure to follow procedures and respond to its own Scrutiny Committee's demands for revisions on housing numbers ahead of Guildford Plan consultation

Guildford Greenbelt Group (GGG), the organisation representing residents concerned by Guildford Council's plan to build major developments on Surrey's Green Belt, is to petition for a referendum to remove the council's Executive Committee and restore a more democratic system.

The Group says it has been left with no alternative following the Executive Committee meeting on Wednesday 4 June which ignored demands by the council's own Scrutiny Committee to revise the Plan's inflated required housing number of 652 per year before the Plan goes to public consultation.

Instead the Executive Committee went ahead and approved the current Plan for public consultation – meaning that the public will be told that 652 is the required figure for housing each year.

Susan Parker, Chair of GGG, said: "The Executive Committee has ignored calls from the council's own Scrutiny Committee to review the housing target and the housing requirement calculations it is based on.

"As a result, we feel we have no option other than to petition for a Referendum to return the Council to a more democratic structure which will better respond to residents' and councillors' concerns.

"Guildford area residents who want to ensure the Council's decision making process is more accountable and transparent, and that the law protecting the Green Belt law is properly applied, can start now by signing this petition which will be posted on our website at <http://guildfordgreenbeltgroup.co.uk/> "

The Metropolitan Green Belt was created in the public interest by national planning policy to prevent urban sprawl and stop towns merging into each other. An inflated housing number is not in the public interest and jeopardises the permanence and credibility of our Green Belt.

Under the Localism Act, councils have to hold a referendum if five per cent of the electorate sign a petition calling for one - in the borough of Guildford, that would require 5243 signatures.

The referendum will enable the people of Guildford to choose to support either the Executive system in place at present or a committee structure where the decisions of committees shape policy.

At present, the Council is governed by an Executive system, which means the Leader (appointed by the largest party) and nine other councillors (appointed by the Leader) make all the significant decisions.

Under the committee system all elected councillors are able to participate in the process of local government, which would mean that the decisions of councillors would be followed and respected.

Since 2011, when the Localism Act came into force, nine councils have scrapped the executive for a committee system and at least seven others are considering it. If enough signatures are collected in the borough of Guildford, a referendum vote must be held.

BACKGROUND

On Wednesday 4 June, the Guildford Borough Council (GBC) held an Executive Committee meeting which unanimously approved the Local Plan for public consultation with an unchanged housing requirement figure of 652 houses per annum, which, backdated to 2011, gives a minimum new housing number of 13040. Over the next 17 years that would result in the housing stock in the borough increasing by approximately 25%.

On 15 May, GBC's Scrutiny Committee voted to revise the housing number. It was agreed that this revision should take place before the Executive Committee meeting on 4 June. GGG therefore considers that Executive governance has ceased to work in Guildford.

Cllr Phillips, who proposed the formal recommendation from the Scrutiny Committee that the numbers in the draft Local Plan be revised, asked at the Executive Committee meeting as the first speaker in the Councillors' part of the debate:

"I was pleased that the joint Scrutiny Committee accepted my suggestion... to have another look at the housing numbers. ...It was hoped that we would have an answer by today. Can you tell me, has this happened? Have you looked at this yet? If you have, what is the housing number and has it reduced as we were hoping it would be?"

It was confirmed that the meeting had not yet taken place. Cllr Juneja indicated that a meeting would take place on Friday 6 June, that the number had not been reduced at present but would be "challenged" by the Executive.

That meeting has now taken place and there is still no change to the proposed housing number. It seems that 652 will be included as the housing target in the draft Local Plan.

GGG is concerned that the Executive Committee has chosen to ignore the valid recommendation from its own Scrutiny Committee in terms of the plan process.

Councillors at that committee appreciated constituents' and residents' groups' genuine concerns at the calculation of the housing numbers, and argued cogently for a consequential revision.

The figure for Housing Need is set out in the Local Plan Evidence base in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment or SHMA prepared by GL Hearn. Following public demands for a review of the evidence base, Edge Analytics have reviewed GL Hearn's original SHMA, and only given it "an amber tick". Residents and campaign groups have questioned the calculations behind the housing number, and noted specific errors. Despite this the housing target number has only gone down by 18 houses per annum (from 670 to 652).

As a result the extent of the reliance that can be placed on the Executive's challenge is limited.

This is not the first time that the process of democratic decision-making within the council has been set aside as a result of the decisions of the Executive.

Previously, on 13 January 2014, GBC agreed by formal vote that

“The Council will enable full public involvement in this reappraisal of the evidence base, especially the Green Belt and Countryside Study, by holding a special joint meeting of the two Scrutiny Committees”.

In response to this on 4 March 2014 GBC held the Local Plan Scrutiny Forum to discuss the evidence base.

The Forum consisted of two parallel mass workshops, each lasting around 2 hours, with no formal record of the comments made. GGG does not consider that this met the undertaking of full public involvement in the reappraisal of the evidence base, but instead represented a measure of tokenism which has been previously displayed in the consultation process.

As a result, GGG is calling for a change in the operations of local government and will present a petition calling for a public referendum on the governance of Guildford Borough Council. This formal petition is available to download from <http://guildfordgreenbeltgroup.co.uk>, and arrangements will be made to set up an online petition in parallel.

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