

Guildford Greenbelt Group (GGG)
Press announcement 11 November 2014

**GUILDFORD GREENBELT GROUP (GGG) APPROVED AS AN
INDEPENDENT POLITICAL PARTY**

Guildford Greenbelt Group (GGG) is delighted to announce that the Electoral Commission has given permission for it to stand in future elections.

Political party status means that GGG can campaign, endorse candidates and will not be prevented from commenting on political matters in the run up to an election. GGG has a local emphasis, and is not a national party. It is not affiliated with any other party. While many of the issues that are faced in the borough of Guildford and in the surrounding areas are being experienced by other communities across the country, GGG's focus is on helping to resolve these issues from a local perspective and is completely committed to the borough of Guildford and its people.

The GGG constitution states that:

- Brownfield land should be used for building before any green fields
- Housing numbers must reflect real local need, not developers' wishes
- Existing legal protection for the Green Belt and the AONB should stand
- Green fields matter - they are not just building land
- The Metropolitan Green Belt is for the benefit of all

GGG is supported by many individuals and a large number of campaigning groups, residents' associations and some parish councils across the whole borough of Guildford, in both the rural and the urban area.

GGG was formed in December 2013 in response to the Issues and Options document prepared by Guildford Borough Council. It has led the most coherent and vocal protest against the draft Local Plan and has led a number of public petitions resulting in public debates in the council chamber. These have varied from topics relating to the protection of the Greenbelt, discussion of the council's strategy, consideration of specific sites, traveller housing and elements of the local plan, including the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) and the housing number proposed for the borough. These petitions have led to a more informed level of debate both among existing councillors and in the wider public domain.

Since its foundation GGG has campaigned against the basis on which the SHMA was constructed (the terms of reference included prior consultation with house builders but not local communities) and the conclusions of that report (which inflated the calculations of need beyond the national statistics for growth). GGG has complained, in conjunction with other local groups, about a number of errors in calculation within the SHMA, and these complaints were confirmed by written

comments by the Office of National Statistics which recommended adjustment. This resulted in an undertaking to correct the errors from Guildford Borough Council. It appears from recent GBC publications that the housing numbers are almost unchanged and those errors remain uncorrected.

GGG has also campaigned about other flawed areas within the evidence base of the local plan, including the Greenbelt and Countryside Study, which the consultants concerned have stated was for the purposes of “rolling back the Green Belt” and which indicated that the “openness” of the Green Belt was limited by the presence of trees. GGG has presented detailed criticism of the Settlement Hierarchy and the Sustainability Analysis, neither of which are fit for purpose.

GGG campaigned for Guildford Borough Council to withdraw and correct its draft local plan (subject to consultation over summer 2014) prior to its issue, on the basis that it was in breach of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and ministerial guidelines, based upon inadequate evidence, and had not met the duty to cooperate. The Executive ignored the Council’s own scrutiny committee which recommended revision of the housing number prior to issue of the plan. Despite this, the full Council voted to proceed with a consultation on the inadequate and flawed first draft, at very considerable public cost and consequential delay.

GGG encouraged members to write to comment on the local plan, provided information to assist members of the public to consider the issues, and is delighted to learn that the draft local plan over the summer had over 19500 responses . Guildford Borough Council noted the level and quality of these responses and it has now withdrawn that draft of the local plan, with a proposed reissue date of June 2015, after the next election.

However, Stephen Mansbridge, the Leader of Guildford Borough Council, has made public statements, after withdrawal of the local plan draft, noting that the “trajectory” of the local plan is unchanged.

Members of GGG have formed the view that it is necessary to stand as a party at the next local council elections because it is only the political process that will allow GGG to participate in decision-making, present detailed views within the council chamber and influence the preparation of the local plan. A formal application to stand as a political party was submitted in July 2014 and has now been approved.

Because the current political structure allows for the Executive model of local council management, overall control being held by the largest party. GGG considers that it is more democratic for all councillors, from all parties to have equal voting rights on decision making, and has started a petition for a referendum, run by a separate company Local Democracy Ltd, for a return to the committee system. If 5243 local voters sign this petition then there will be such a referendum, and it is likely to be most cost-effective and administratively convenient to hold this at the next election (and it appears that Guildford

Borough Council are starting to plan for this). GGG have been informed that this petition must be presented in paper form and members of the public, whatever their views on GGG, are invited to sign this petition in order to support more democratic accountability. A copy of the petition can be downloaded from the website or is attached to this press release.

It is important to stress that GGG does consider that there is a need for local affordable housing, to meet local needs. GGG supports the building of a number of homes in the Borough (including affordable housing). GGG would consider that around 300-325 homes per annum for the life of the Plan (ie until 2031) might be sustainable (this is comparable with the number approved by Guildford Borough Council's High Court action against the Labour Government's regional plan in 2010). The plans proposed by GBC, which seem to be still in place, are for 652 homes per annum (or indeed more, since that figure is being backdated by GBC to 2011). This proposal would ruin the rural nature of Guildford borough's Green Belt and countryside irrevocably. The more moderate housing target for which GGG is campaigning (comparable with other areas in the home counties) will satisfy local housing need whilst protecting the Borough from being overwhelmed by development pressure and unchecked demand.

However, the view of the membership is that there is definitely sufficient brownfield land to meet all genuine local need. The draft plan has inflated demand assumptions in order to create pre-determined justification for greenfield building, which would generate profits for developers in the local area. GBC have commented that there is indeed considerable brownfield land, especially in the urban area – and this is sufficient to meet even its own inflated housing target. GGG doesn't want to build so many homes, but the point is that GBC's housing target does not create any justification under current guidelines and law that will permit it to use Greenbelt land. However, GBC submits that the available brownfield cannot be used as part of the five year supply (although their own consultants disagree) and therefore that Greenbelt land needs to be used. GGG considers that this is unjustifiable.

GGG has members and supporters throughout the borough. GGG will now start the process of considering candidates who will stand in the elections in May 2015. New members will be able to put themselves forward for candidacy provided that they support GGG's aims and values. New members are welcome and more information on GGG can be found on its website, and information for new members is also available at GGG's public meetings. The intention is to field candidates in all wards where existing councillors do not already have a history of acting and voting to protect our countryside and where councillors have supported the discredited draft local plan.

The very recent by-election in Lovelace ward, held towards the end of the consultation on the draft plan, shows the strength of public feeling on the Greenbelt. This was won by a significant margin by Colin Cross, overturning a historical Conservative majority; and his campaigning stressed that he was a GGG supporter; clearly he has not yet had an opportunity to vote on or influence the drafting of the Local Plan.

Guildford Borough Council have announced that a new local plan will be issued in June 2015. It is unclear that this will be substantially different (see notes to editors). Unless we see a radically different draft soon, with a substantially reduced housing number, that Local Plan constitutes a silent manifesto for all existing councillors. Any councillor that did not oppose that plan is implicated by its proposals.

GGG argues that it is necessary to change the local political framework so that local councillors listen to local people.

Voting for GGG will enable voters to get:

- Local interests represented
- Protection of our countryside
- Probity in planning
- High quality rational analysis by councillors
- Better decision making in the council chamber
- Realistic appraisal of infrastructure (including roads and schools) in planning
- Recognition of the importance of the environment in decision making

Susan Parker, GGG leader, commented:

"We are delighted that we can now stand for election as GGG candidates.

"We believe in protection of our countryside. This will benefit all members of society, whether they live in the town or countryside, or in the London metropolitan area. The beautiful countryside in which Guildford is set makes it one of the best places to live in South East England, and it is a wonderful place to visit and for those in the urban area to come to for relaxation. But it is subject to enormous development pressures. In all our interests we need to protect our countryside.

"Very few existing local councillors or elected representatives have spoken up for the countryside, and none have done so effectively.

"We need to stand up for our countryside and so we will be standing at the next election."

Enquiries:

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Notes for editors

1. Further information on GGG is available on the GGG website
<http://guildfordgreenbeltgroup.co.uk>
Or on its facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/Guildfordgreenbelt>
2. GGG public meetings, open to all members of the public, will be held as follows:
 - 17 November 2014 -Send Social Club -7.30pm
 - 9 December 2014 -St Albans Hall Wood Street Village -7.30pm
 - 28 January 2015 -Fairlands Community Hall -7pm
3. For details on the current housing numbers proposed by GBC see documents published in November 2015, after supposed withdrawal of the draft Local Plan. However, this document only refers to the Local Plan being in draft, not subject to complete revision:
<http://www.guildford.gov.uk/media/18112/Draft-Guildford-Borough-Housing-Strategy-2015-20/pdf/HOUSING STRAT 2015-20 DRAFT STRATEGY Nov14.pdf>
In particular see p10 which refers to proposed development per the Local Plan of 652 homes per annum
See also Appendix 1 to that housing strategy:
<http://www.guildford.gov.uk/media/18113/Draft-Guildford-Borough-Housing-Strategy-2015-20---Appendix-1/pdf/Hsg Strat 2015-20 DRAFT Appendix 1 - General statistics Nov14.pdf>
this states that the objectively assessed housing need is for between 650 and 780 homes per year
4. A copy of the referendum petition is attached to this press release on the next page.