

Guildford Greenbelt Group (GGG) Press announcement 23 June 2014

GUILDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL PUSHES THROUGH LOCAL PLAN

On Thursday, 19 June, Guildford Borough Council agreed to approve the draft Local Plan for consultation purposes.

Guildford Greenbelt Group (GGG), the organisation representing residents concerned about Guildford Council's plan to build major developments on Surrey's Green Belt, is disappointed by the decision of the Full Council not to amend the draft Local Plan.

Campaigners asked that

- the decision of the Scrutiny Committee to review the housing numbers be implemented
- that the Master Vision document, with proposed brownfield development, be included in the plan
- that the government initiative for brownfield development rather than use of green fields be reflected in the plan
- that the ONS (Office of National Statistics) corrections in relation to Guildford's housing numbers (among others) should be put through.

GGG argued that this would mean a very slight delay in the plan process now, but would mean a workable and useable plan that would be less controversial and would result in a better and faster plan.

There were 10 public speakers. These included campaigners, but also a Vice President of the University of Surrey, an employee of the University of Surrey, and a professional consultant advising the University of Surrey who refused to confirm whether or not he lived in the borough.

Councillors were given the opportunity to challenge the public speakers and they were particularly merciless in attacking a student who lived in the borough, but is at university elsewhere. She explained that she did not want to see the countryside destroyed in order to build homes for the young because she loved it and thought it was beautiful. She also said she did not think that potential affordability would be increased by building more homes. Councillors grilled her savagely for more than ten minutes, asking deliberately technical and intimidating questions. Then several councillors said that they chose to ignore what she had told them because they wanted to build houses for young people anyway.

After a long debate of more than 4½ hours, councillors voted 27 to 14 to approve the plan going to consultation. The debate was at times bad tempered with councillors protesting that their opportunity to express their views was limited and that the Executive members were being given too much opportunity to respond. Councillors were not given the opportunity to make factual corrections to statements made by the Executive. Most councillors agreed that the housing numbers were too high and most said that they would not support the plan in its current form. But many councillors voted for it just the same, following the instructions of the Executive Committee.

Most of the Liberal Democrat councillors opposed this plan, and, in an important cross-party move four Conservative councillors also voted against what they called the "flawed" Plan, challenging the Executive. They are: Bob McShee, Jenny Wicks, Jennifer Powell and Andrew French. Cllr John Garrett also sent a written message noting that he was too unwell to attend but he would also have voted against. Cllr

French said that that it was the first time in his 20 years on the council that he had voted against his party, but that he was forced to do so because he believes the Local Plan is fundamentally flawed.

In response to the approach of this Executive to the Local Plan process, the release of a draft Local Plan that does not have a firm housing number identified within it and that has other inconsistencies and omissions (including the approach to brownfield land), and that uses incorrect Office of National Statistics data to inflate the housing need of Guildford Borough (statistics that have been amended by the ONS but NOT Guildford Borough Council), GGG will be spearheading a referendum on the local democratic process.

Susan Parker, chair of GGG said: “We are very disappointed that councillors did not choose to amend the plan before putting it out for consultation. In our view, it would have been preferable to have a good draft plan that people could comment on and could refine. It is very hard to see how people can comment constructively on a draft plan when even the housing number is still undecided. We have been discussing the housing number since January; the Office of National Statistics has since agreed that Guildford’s calculations are wrong and that their own predictions are also overstated; but there has still be no real change in the housing number.

“We will of course comment on the draft Local Plan, and we will provide resources on our website for people to use to help them comment too. We won’t tell people what to say, but can help them make points that will be relevant in planning terms. We can also give information about the planning process and the rules that are applied. Everyone should comment on the draft Plan, even if they have commented before.

“We hope that GBC will listen to what people say this summer. If not, then we have the ability to express a view at the next election. We can also seek to change the nature of local government through our proposed referendum to replace the Executive system with the committee system of local government. We want to give people the ability to influence the democratic decisions made in their community, so that their voices can be heard and their views respected,”

BACKGROUND

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/ Those decisions don't need to be approved by other councillors.

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.

This formal petition is available to download from <http://guildfordgreenbeltgroup.co.uk>. It must be completed in paper form and can then be sent to the address on that form.

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