

Guildford Greenbelt Group Press announcement

22 April 2014

Petition launched on excess housing plans

GGG has launched a petition on the Guildford Borough Council website which calls on the Council to reject its pro-development, pro-building strategy. GGG's members believe the proposals to date would mean building more housing than we need. Guildford Borough Council still isn't listening. So GGG are launching another petition to make the point again.

Guildford Borough Council has just published its summary of the responses to the Issues and Options Consultation that finished last November. It replied to points made by respondents (misinterpreting some comments and making some basic errors) and has summarised its conclusions. GBC has confirmed that the first full Local Plan draft will be issued soon and the responses give some indication of what this may contain.

GGG chair Susan Parker said "When you read the summary and responses, it seems clear that the Council still wants to build on the Green Belt, take villages out of the Green Belt, and expand settlement boundaries. Nothing has changed. Residents are still being ignored. We recognise that there is political pressure to build - but our Council is embracing the incentives to build, not resisting them, and the extent is disproportionate. Too many houses - and too much building - could damage the Green Belt and our countryside. This country doesn't need to build on our most beautiful countryside. Growth doesn't have to come from building."

You can sign our petition, by using this link:
<http://petitions.guildford.gov.uk/excesshousing/>

Guildford Borough Council agreed after a formal vote that there should be full community involvement in the scrutiny of the evidence base. Some residents were allowed to address the committee (although this is a standard democratic right, not needing any council amendment) but no members of community were allowed any involvement in the scrutiny process, so GGG considers that the motion for "full community involvement" in that scrutiny has been set aside.

Housebuilders and developers were allowed to comment on the issues and options consultation, and their views have been taken into account in the formal summary, but other stakeholders (cyclists, ramblers, users of our countryside, members of the National Trust) were not allowed to express a view. Why not? Why should housebuilders and developers have a right to influence our Local Plan? The people of Guildford are not being listened to, and their comments are being ignored.

GGG members are concerned about conflicts of interest. In addition to permitting direct comment from housebuilders, the Enterprise M3 LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) has housebuilders and developers on its planning committee. Members are also concerned that the Council Executive are more influenced by the prospect of the New Homes Bonus (money from government for building new housing estates) and the Community Infrastructure Levy (money from developers on larger estates) than they are about damage to our countryside. Susan Parker added "*Our countryside is not for sale to the highest bidder.*"

Nick Norton of GGG, the petition organiser, said: "*Consultation seems to have gained a high level of importance recently as a result of the Local Plan process and I'm disappointed that a document like the Corporate Plan, that has such widespread community importance, has not been subject to a similar consultation process.*"

Personally, I'd like to know in advance - and have some input into - how the Council proposes to direct itself and our council tax over the forthcoming years of the Corporate Plan and what impact that is likely to have on the community in which I live, rather than the Council simply publish plans developed behind closed doors, and be damned; of what are they afraid? Why not consult with residents as part of the process and build a stronger shared plan of the future?

If the result of a closed corporate policy formation process is support for the potential building of thousands of unnecessary new houses that will swamp borough villages to the detriment of the Green Belt and the built environment, then councillors that fail to recognise the immediacy of today's connected world and fail to consult the evolving wishes of those that elected them last time round, who might not share the councillors' apparent boom-and-bust property-building economic growth aspirations, should not be surprised if they find themselves no longer councillors when the electoral cycle catches up with them."

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. Petition wording

“We the undersigned petition the council to reject their current aggressive pro-development pro-building strategy. The current strategy would mean building more housing than we need (and also more commercial buildings than we need) because of an incorrect perception that economic growth can only come from building. This strategy is unsustainable and must be rejected.”

Guildford Borough Council’s strategy is to build more housing than the population needs (or are likely to need in the foreseeable future) and also more commercial buildings than businesses in the borough require. There is no recognition of the constraints that must be applied in order to preserve the environment we live in, and no recognition of the legal obligation to make sure growth is sustainable. This strategy seeks economic growth by an aggressive building programme, irrespective of its impact on residents. This is expressed in the 2013-16 Corporate Plan, in the Enterprise M3 Local Enterprise Partnership minutes and elsewhere, becoming a key element in the Council’s strategic thinking. The 2013-2016 Corporate Plan informs the decision making processes of the Council and has been incorporated in the evidence base for the Local Plan but there has been no public consultation as to whether this is what the residents of Guildford actually want.”

2. Key facts re Guildford

Thirty seven per cent. of our borough is AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty); eighty-nine per cent. is Metropolitan Green Belt. This is precious for everyone - it is not just building land.

3. Enterprise M3 LEP

Our Local Plan and our Corporate Plan are substantially influenced by the strategic views of our regional LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership). The LEPs are a shadowy group – part replacement for the previous development agencies, or maybe the regional planning authorities (ie like SEEDA or SEERA), holding the purse strings for government infrastructure contributions (but not very much). Our LEP is the Enterprise M3 LEP covering all of Surrey and Hampshire – Basingstoke to Gatwick. There is no democratic accountability.

The board of this quango includes council members, representatives of the University of Surrey, and local company representatives. It has enormous influence. We have come to know that Surrey University is very involved in planning - advised on the SHMA, sits on the LEP board and was the author of the Guildford Economic Strategy 2009- and of course is now proposing to develop 3000 homes. And it’s clear why Crest Nicholson would want to be involved (a house builder, who has permission to build a large number of houses in Cranleigh - <http://www.crestnicholson.com>) or Wilky Group (property investment - see <http://www.wilky.co.uk>) Crest Nicholson is on the main LEP board and both Crest

Nicholson and Wilky Group representatives sit on the Land and Property Committee, together with other developers and builders, and are involved in influencing local and national strategic policy decisions. (See <http://www.enterprisem3.org.uk/uploads/fde2a979807eae56a8386707b1d74264148fd84.pdf>)

These are commercial companies answerable only to their shareholders, but they are helping to determine national policy without reference to the electorate. The target strategy of the LEP (stated) is to “seek support for housebuilding” and “to influence planning and economic policy at both the strategic level and through the local delivery process”. No self-interest there, then. Minutes in January 2014 propose that “a relaxation on the use of Green Belt land could be included in the Government asks”. See <http://www.enterprisem3.org.uk/uploads/66968558ead226d6fd47e47c685d44649b330811.pdf>

4. Guildford Borough Council Issues and Options Responses

The full consultation, together with responses, is available online. The responses are given by this link:

<https://getinvolved.guildford.gov.uk/consult/ti/IOSS.Q.2013/>

We feel that there is little movement in the response from the Council, which seems to have a predetermined agenda in terms of wanting to build on the Green Belt.

5. New homes bonus and infrastructure levy

The leader of the Council, Stephen Mansbridge, has commented publicly (Surrey Advertiser February 2014) that the New Homes Bonus is a key element in the Council’s financial planning. This is only available for large housing estates, not for small infill. Carol Humphrey commented at the Scrutiny Committee debate that the Community Infrastructure Levy can only be received if the plan is in place next year, and that this was a major incentive for speed in the process (see webcast dated 3 April 2014).

http://www.guildford.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/132643)

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