

The London Metropolitan Green Belt: "Safe Under Us"? report launch

Councillor Jackie Wren, Tandridge District Council - speech

Four months ago, I was elected as a Residents Councillor to Tandridge District Council unseating the Conservative Council leader who had represented the ward for 28 years.

I won with a large majority and a big increase in voter turnout. Those voters came from across the political spectrum, many of them staunch Conservatives....and you probably know that East Surrey is as staunchly Conservative as it gets..

I was elected because of the Green Belt... because of widespread concern that Tandridge District Council is unjustifiably and unnecessarily putting it at risk by ignoring the Green Belt protection that is such an important part of national planning policy.

For anyone who doesn't know it, Tandridge is a rather beautiful, largely rural and unspoilt District on the eastern edge of Surrey. It has no big towns, no business parks, no large shopping centres, but it does have one very precious thing – Green Belt.

Every weekend, the trains to Tandridge have walkers arriving from London to enjoy the countryside.

Cyclists, horseriders, ramblers come in large numbers to make use of the Tandridge Green Belt.

It's a green lung for London and for Croydon and for Crawley. It's a national resource with far wider benefits than just those for local residents.

It is hugely valued by so many people, both in Tandridge and outside it, who find relaxation and enjoyment in the open countryside and the high quality landscapes not too far from their crowded doorstep.

This Green Belt strongly and obviously fulfills the five purposes of the Green Belt set down in the National Planning Policy Framework. And yet, it is under tremendous threat.

The story of Tandridge District is very unusual because, for years now, the local authority has brought forward massive amounts of house-building on brownfield sites.

Other districts did not build and so Tandridge ended up meeting the unmet needs of those other areas, but without adding to local jobs or to infrastructure.

As a result, all of the available brownfield land has been used up and there is only Green Belt left.

Despite that, in its new Local Plan, the Council proposes to carry on building at an even greater rate than before. To do so, large areas of Green Belt will need to be released.

Tandridge Council is one of the smallest local authorities in England and Wales with few sources of income. The money it has received from the New Homes Bonus for so much building has not been spent on new infrastructure. Instead, it has gone into the general fund.

It is my view that the Council is building simply to ensure its own survival.

Its Local Plan documents threaten large swathes of the Green Belt and would create a dormitory district where large numbers of residents travel out of the area to work, mostly by car.

This is unsustainable and totally contrary to the objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework.

My residents association - that is the Oxted and Limpsfield Residents Group - commissioned legal, planning and demographic experts to review the Council's Local Plan proposals. One of those experts is a leading planning QC.

Their 90 page report makes clear that the proposals fly in the face of national planning policy.

As well as my own association, this expert opinion document is supported by 11 of the District's Parish Councils and 7 other community groups – together representing a very sizeable proportion of the District's population.

The Council has taken no external advice on the experts' document.....and yet it has stated that in the view of its Planning Department, the document has not *"identified any significant flaws in the process."*

Residents have done everything they can. They have paid for expert advice to try to ensure the Local Plan complies with national policy, they have demonstrated their views very clearly at the ballot box, and yet they have been met by an intransigent Council seemingly hell-bent on building on the Green Belt, regardless.

It should not be for one cash-strapped, short-term thinking local authority to give away this Green Belt, unjustifiably and unnecessarily, treating it as some kind of personal fiefdom. It is a national resource, not a local cash-cow.

It should not be for communities like mine to have to pay for lawyers and planning consultants to try to stop this happening.

We need to have a national and cohesive policy for housing, rather than unsustainable, piecemeal development that unjustifiably destroys the Green Belt.

I fully agree with comments made recently by the Chief Executive of the Town and Country Planning Association who called for a national strategy about what goes where.

He said that Liverpool has lost half its population since the war and so has Belfast. Those cities need to have a future and, at the same time, it is not possible or reasonable to try to cram everyone into the South East of England.

We should think strategically, about the nation as a whole, so that house-building happens in a co-ordinated and sustainable way to create the places we need to live across the country - rather than in a random way and for the wrong reasons.