

Environment & Transport Select Committee 11 September 2013

Item 4: Public questions

Submitted by: Andrew Telford, Campaign to Protect Rural England

On 19/3/13 SCC unanimously resolved, without condition, to use its power to protect the Green Belt.

CPRE Surrey asked a written question at the Cabinet meeting of 25/6/13 regarding the proposed action of SCC in prosecuting this resolved policy, in the light of Runnymede Borough Council's proposal to remove the land at the DERA site from the Green Belt.

The Cabinet Member for Highways Transport and Environment, in his response, did not answer the question. As is clear from the papers, he answered two questions that were not asked, namely "What did SCC resolve on 19/3/13?", and "Which Authority is responsible for setting the Green Belt boundary in Runnymede and how does it do this?" The answers to these questions are widely known and uncontroversial.

CPRE Surrey, after a preamble, asked the Cabinet the following supplementary question:

"Why is [the Cabinet] not attempting to protect the Green Belt as SCC unanimously resolved to do in March, by making a representation to RBC to that effect?"

To which the Cabinet Member's response was:

"First of all, I've stated very clearly the County's position in the first part of my answer to you. With regard to LPAs it is clearly in their hands as to how and what they propose for any development in the Green Belt. We cannot control what they are suggesting (sic), however be assured that we are a consultee and we will obviously therefore comment on what we consider that (sic) we need to."

Which, although a response, is not an answer to the question.

As the questions were not answered, CPRE asked a similar written question of the Surrey Heath Local Committee on 4/7/13 and Mr Eastment asked a similar question of the Runnymede Local Committee on 8/7/13. Both these questions were given an identical written response to the question of 25/6. These responses, again, did not answer the questions asked.

These public written questions were not asked lightly. In CPRE's view they were perfectly reasonable questions regarding SCC resolved policy, and they should be answered directly to the point. In CPRE's view, it is simply not acceptable, that having enshrined the mechanism of asking written public questions within the Constitution, it should be dismissed in this way.

Per the wording of the resolution of 19th March, SCC has unanimously imposed on itself a duty, not to consider using its power, but to actually use it. Surrey residents can reasonably expect SCC to prosecute their resolved policies, but six months on, in spite of three direct questions, no one is any the wiser as to what SCC will do to prosecute its resolved policy of using its power to protect Surrey's green belt in light of the clear and present threat to it presented by Runnymede Borough Council.

It appears that SCC is prepared to act contrary to its own resolved policy. SCC engaged NTR Planning, on 28/3/13 – only 9 days after the resolution, to make representations to RBC to alter draft Policy LP01, to take the SCC owned Runnymede Centre out of the Green Belt, and thereby destroying rather than protecting it. See enclosed.

Whereas:

1. SCC unanimously resolved on 19/3/13 to use its power to protect Surrey's Green Belt.
2. Runnymede Borough Council has threatened the green belt by stating their intention to remove over 300 acres from the Green Belt at the DERA site in their draft Local Plan.
3. Notwithstanding that SCC's resolution was made before the closing date of RBC's Local Plan Consultation (14/2/13-28/3/13), no action was taken to prosecute SCC's resolved policy.
4. Not only did SCC take no action to prosecute its resolved policy regarding RBC's draft Local Plan consultation, but, wholly contrary to SCC's resolution of 19/3/13, SCC engaged NTR Planning, only 9 days later on 28/3/13, to make representations to RBC to alter draft Policy LP01, to take the SCC owned Runnymede Centre out of the Green Belt, and thereby not protecting the Green Belt. See enclosed.
5. No record regarding a decision to engage NTR Planning to make the representations referred to in point 4 appears in any Committee Papers available on the SCC website.
6. Public questions regarding the prosecution of SCC policy on the Green Belt have consistently not been answered.
7. The Cabinet member for Transport, Highways and Environment's portfolio responsibilities are to "Preserve and enhance the natural and built environment" including "the maintenance of biodiversity in Surrey".
8. RBC are re-consulting on their Local Plan from 22/8/13-3/10/13 and so far as is known, no action has been taken to prosecute SCC's resolved policy.

Question:

In light of the clear and present threat to the Green Belt presented by RBC, what action does this Committee propose taking to ensure that SCC prosecutes its resolved policy of using its power to protect Surrey's Green Belt, and will this include a recommendation that SCC should make a representation to RBC during the current additional Local Plan consultation, raising a 'strong objection' to removing the land at the DERA site from the Green Belt, and will this Committee seek to establish why SCC acted contrary to their resolved policy on 28/3/13 by making representations to RBC to remove land from the Green Belt and thereby not protecting it?

Response:

Decisions about the designation of Green Belt are the responsibility of the local planning authority for the area. In this case, the local planning authority is Runnymede Borough Council.

It is not within Surrey County Council's responsibilities to judge whether Runnymede Borough Council's amended draft Local Plan Core Strategy is consistent with national policies on the protection of the Green Belt. It is not self-evident that the borough council presents a "clear and present threat to the Green Belt."

On 28 March 2013, Surrey County Council made representations to Runnymede Borough Council about the removal of some of its land from the Green Belt. This is entirely consistent with the County Council's duty under section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972. It is for Runnymede Borough Council to decide whether there are exceptional circumstances to justify removing this land from the Green Belt in line with National Planning Policy Framework policies on the protection of the Green Belt.

David Harmer

Chairman of the Environment & Transport Select Committee

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