

“They’ll hear us even if they won’t listen”: Campaigners to make their voices heard outside council meeting

Campaigners opposed to St Helens Council's plan to build on the borough's green belt will make their voices heard outside the next full council meeting.

Groups from across St Helens will gather in Victoria Square outside the March 1 meeting and make as much noise as they can because they don't feel the council is listening to their concerns.

The consultation on the controversial Local Plan has closed. But before the responses have even been counted, the council has made clear its intention to press on with the plan unchanged.

The senior councillor in charge of the Local Plan, Councillor John Fulham, has made repeated public statements in the press and on social media that the council will pursue the plan in its current form.

Since the consultation closed and before responses have even been assessed, he has described the plan as a “win-win” and vital for the borough’s future. Council leader, Councillor Barrie Grunewald, has also stated on social media that he is “very much in favour of it all”.

Groups from across St Helens have tried to engage with the council and have questioned why it seems to have prejudged the outcome of the consultation. The council has not responded. A full consultation is a statutory requirement of producing a Local Plan.

A letter sent to the council from all the groups, representing thousands of St Helens residents, questioning the council’s position has been ignored.

During the consultation period, the groups asked council representatives and local councillors to attend their meetings but the invitations were declined.

James Wright, chair of Rainford Action Group, said: "It’s clear now St Helens Council doesn’t want to listen to residents or engage with those who have concerns about their plan.

"So we're going to stand outside the next full council meeting and make as much noise as we can. It will be peaceful in one sense but loud in another. We want people to bring horns, musical instruments, loudspeakers, vuvuzelas; anything that makes a noise.

“They’ll hear us even if they won’t listen.”

Groups from Billinge, Eccleston, Rainhill, Garswood, Newton and Haydock will join Rainford campaigners.

The meeting takes place at St Helens Town Hall on Wednesday March 1. The groups will be gathering in Victoria Square from 5:30 pm. The meeting starts at 6:15 pm.

St Helens Council wants developers to build on 15% of the borough's green belt - building 4,000 houses on currently protected land.

That's despite there being more than 3,500 empty properties in St Helens and the fact the borough's population has been falling for more than three decades.

The council has not made publicly available its brown field register therefore it is unknown if all alternative options have been exhausted.

The full council meeting will discuss the council's budget for the year ahead, with cuts to vital public services a possibility because of the council's dire financial position.

James Wright said: "We should all be concerned about the unfair cuts the government is inflicting on St Helens Council. But building on the green belt is not the answer to the council's financial troubles. The green belt should be maintained for important agricultural, environmental and social reasons.

"The huge impact the proposed cuts will have reflects the council's long term failure to revive the borough's economy in the way neighbouring boroughs have successfully done.

"What St Helens needs is a sustainable, innovative plan for development that will help the council overcome its financial challenges and provide a better future for all residents."

Ends

Notes to editors:

St Helens Council wants to take seven large sites in Rainford out of the green belt. One site would be used for an industrial unit. The other six will be used to build at least 1,140 houses.

The prices of the new houses would be out of reach to most buyers as they would cost at least £250,000. The council cannot make developers build affordable houses.

Most of the land in Rainford the council wants to build on is rare grade one farmland – the highest possible quality in agricultural terms.

St Helens' population has been falling since 1981, according to official census data.

Home ownership in the borough is above the regional and national average. There is no housing crisis in St Helens to justify building on the green belt.

Government and council policy is clear – development on the green belt is only allowed in "exceptional circumstances" and as a last resort.