



DECISIONS ON STAINES' FUTURE IN THE BALANCE BUT WHO'S IN CHARGE OF COUNCIL'S 'NEW DEMOCRACY'?

Decisions leading to potentially dramatic changes in the appearance and amenity of Staines are expected to be taken next week by a newly created Council Committee and Task Group charged with making recommendations. The Committee (Environment and Sustainability) will meet on 13 July to discuss and agree policy options and priorities.

"A thorough review of the Staines development plan is long overdue and the Council's year-long delay in getting to grips with this has already severely compromised the best interests of the town and its residents," says a spokesperson for the Riverside Residents (Staines) Coalition. "Achieving a reduction in the government's housing target for the borough is the overwhelming urgent priority and there are good reasons to believe this can be done. The burden of the target, whatever it ends up being, must be spread evenly across the borough. A key part of the strategy must be to limit the height of new developments in Staines, particularly near the riverfront and in the Conservation Area. It must be recognised that no-one yet knows whether the town's infrastructure can be improved or afforded to sustain the level of overdevelopment envisaged in the current draft plan. It may well prove to be more practical (if less profitable for developers) to build on all the available sites in the town to a height compatible with its existing skyline."

These critical decisions in setting the context for the future of the town will be taken as the Council deals with the consequences of two seismic changes in how it is administered. First, nearly 50 years of unbroken Conservative control of the Council was replaced in May by a coalition of 'opposition' political groupings with a wafer-thin majority. Second, the Council's largely discredited 'strong leader' system of governance has been replaced by the more conventional Committee system, albeit with bespoke terms of reference.

"These changes should lead to far greater openness and democratic accountability, and the early signs are that Councillors now have more incentive and determination to insist residents' interests and views are heard and respected," says the Residents Coalition spokesperson. "However, much will depend on a more balanced and productive relationship between Councillors and officers ... and the jury is definitely out on this! The new Environment and Sustainability Committee decided last week to bring in an independent consultant; but was told in no uncertain terms that only officers have the authority to hire consultants ... we wait to find out who is appointed and what terms of reference are agreed. The Decision Notice on a planning application the previous week for twin-towers of tiny flats overlooking the river, recommended by officers but rejected unanimously by the Planning Committee, was rushed out the next day by officers without consulting anyone on the Committee ... we question this and why the Decision Notice did not reflect the full strength of planning policy objections raised by the Committee. Earlier this week the Council's new Group Policy and Resources Committee approved a sub-committee to oversee the long-overdue inquiry into the highly controversial Arora hotel scheme ... but, due to constraints in the new Committee system's terms of reference, a good deal of authority and influence appears to be in the hands of the Chief Executive who was intimately involved in the provenance of the Arora scheme and its contract. Most in this position would recuse themselves. *The new system of governance is only going to work for the community if the principle of 'Councillors decide, officers advise' is respected by officers and adhered to, and if Councillors demonstrate collective resolve in meeting their pledge to fully represent the views and interests of residents.*"

Riverside Residents (Staines) Coalition – a working group of six residents' organisations both sides of the river. Supported by other residents' organisations across Staines and the Staines Town Society.

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