EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

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Unstable world, religious discrimination, the Local Plan and trains

28 March 2024



We live, sadly, in an increasingly unstable world. The situation in Israel and Gaza has been and continues to be horrendous. There is a huge international diplomatic effort, involving the UK and other European countries, the US and countries across the Middle East, working to try to find a way of bringing both a short and long term resolution to the conflict. I really hope it succeeds.

At the same time the situation in Ukraine seems increasingly difficult, with Russia starting to make ground again in the conflict. In the short term at least there seems little prospect of peace – and my heart goes out to all of the Ukrainian families here in Epsom as they fear for their friends and relatives there.

But at Easter time I would also like to remember another group facing violence and persecution around the world. Every week I receive a newsletter from a member of one of our local Churches about what seems to be an endless stream of violence against Christian communities around the world. In Nigeria and Pakistan in particular attacks on Churches and Christian homes happen all too regularly, and in Nigeria thousands of Christians have been killed or kidnapped by extremists in recent years.

Christian communities are not alone. Ahmadiyya Muslims, a minority group in the Muslim faith, are another example of a group which faces persecution around the world.

In Epsom where different faiths live side by side, and where Church communities are strong and free to worship, we should never forget how fortunate we are compared to many in the world.

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As I enter my last few months in Parliament, so the debate over the local plan in Epsom is beginning to heat up again. I will no longer be MP by the time it is finalised, but as a local resident as well I have a very strong interest in making sure it is done in the right way.

At the same time we can be in no doubt that we need new homes to be built. We cannot continue with a situation where so many people are struggling to get into a home of their own.

That’s why I have always argued that we need substantial smart development in this area, making best use of existing developed land, and mixing commercial and residential buildings in a way that is carefully and thoughtfully designed.

What this area does not need is more substantial family homes built on green belt land away from existing public transport. We need starter homes and affordable homes close to local centres.

I hope that even at this late stage the Residents Association councillors who control the Borough Council will change tack and look at the very real opportunities for smart brownfield development in the area. We can build substantial numbers of new homes without creating a new urban sprawl on the farm land to the East and West of Epsom.

With development, it is always much easier just to build on a green field. But the easy option is not always the best one. And in Epsom and Ewell it is certainly not.

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If you travel by train into London, you have probably seen the new trains for our network lined up in sidings at Clapham Junction. They have been there for some time. And not in service.

There are a variety of reasons why our line is suffering from worsening overcrowding at the moment – and I am pushing South Western Railway very hard on this. Last year I got some extra semi-fast trains added to the evening peak timetable. Now I am working to do the same at other times of day.

But a lot of the problems would be solved if the new 10 coach trains were coming on stream. But it seems pretty clear that the main reason they are still parked in the sidings is because the unions are still dragging their feet on allowing them to be used. The reason – they are new, modern trains which work in a different way to the old ones. And the changes are still being resisted.

Perhaps one day the union leadership will put the passenger first. I am not optimistic.

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Epsom and Ewell MP’s Christmas message

28 March 2024



This has been a particularly challenging year for many people locally, and so in my Christmas message I want to pay particular tribute to all of those working for local voluntary groups who do so much to help those who are struggling. We are very fortunate to have so many people locally who are willing to give up their time to help the multitude of local charities and other groups who make such a difference.

You may remember last year that I worked with Citizens Advice and the Good Company, which runs the local foodbank, to provide extra support for people struggling with high energy bills. Thanks to the generosity of local people we raised around £50,000 to help those who needed it. The Epsom and Ewell Energy Support Scheme provided help to local families who were struggling with energy bills to make their homes more energy efficient. In total so far the scheme has helped nearly a thousand people with short term financial help, energy advice and the purchase of low energy appliances. This is what some of those who took part said afterwards.

- *“I found the workshop very helpful and really enjoyed talking to the other participants, sharing tips on how to save energy. The takeaway tips are also very informative. Thank you so much for your kindness and giving me really useful information about the cost of energy and how to reduce usage and keep warm and safe this winter, which like many people has been scaring the life out of me.”* (Denise, group workshop)
- *“The scheme is very helpful and opened my eyes to certain areas of wasted electricity in my home. I certainly think more about what appliances are on and what we don’t need to use…. Have already used air fryer and not had oven on for a few days. Great help, thank you.”* (Tim, 1-to-1 consultation)
- *“I found the consultation very helpful – definitely more conscious of how you can save money… Because of my mental health, I find phone calls to these big companies very daunting, and they kindly offered to sign me up to a friendlier way of getting through with a specialist team if I need to get in touch… Thank you also for the top up and offer of appliances to help me save on my bill. So grateful for the opportunity.”* (Michele, 1-to-1 consultation)

We are running the scheme again this winter, and would be very grateful for contributions, however small. Details of the scheme and how to contribute are at www.justgiving.com/campaign/epsomewellenergysupportscheme

This will be my last Christmas message as your local MP, as I am not standing again at the election. But I will be there doing what I can to help with local issues right through to the election as always.

In the meantime, though, I hope that you and your family have a good Christmas and that 2024 proves to be a good year for everyone.

With best wishes

Chris Grayling

Chris Grayling MP on new homes and biodiversity

28 March 2024



Now that the local elections are out of the way, we all wait with interest to see what the Borough Council is planning to do about its controversial plan to build all over the green belt. I hope they will now think again.

The loss of green belt is not just about the loss of character in our area. It would also have a huge impact on local

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biodiversity. The loss of Horton Farm would have a knock on impact on the Common and Horton Country Park, with the loss of habitat for birds and animals which range across the whole area.

And that would come at a time when local authorities are expected to play a much more active role in the restoration of nature.

For half a century we have seen a sharp decline in native species in the UK. While a few have thrived, and nature is to blame for some of the decline – have you noticed how many more magpies there are around to empty the nests of smaller birds – the reality is that continuing development and the loss of habitat, alongside the use of pesticides, has made a huge difference.

I hope and believe that is now beginning to change. There are firm Government targets for the restoration of nature. Councils are obliged to have a Local Nature Recovery Strategy with real action plans in it. Developers will, from November, be obliged to build a plan for biodiversity net gain into their developments. That means if they take a way a habitat, they need to invest in developing another elsewhere. I hope that will narrow the cost gap between building on brownfield sites and just building on open fields.

The new system of agricultural support will also make a difference. Outside the European Union we have been free to develop an entirely different approach to supporting farmers, away from the constraints of the Common Agricultural Policy. The new UK approach will reward farmers for achieving a better balance between production and nature – for example by restoring hedgerows that were ripped out in the past, or by leaving much wider margins around fields where insects and small animals can flourish. Or by restoring the copses that so often stood in the middle of their fields, or the ponds that have so often disappeared.

In particular it will help the growing number of Nature Friendly Farmers around the country, who are taking an entirely different approach to agriculture with far fewer pesticides and by using what are called cover crops to stimulate the soil instead. Those who have already gone down this route are finding their costs fall, and often their profitability rises while they produce the same amount or even more food. A combination of more traditional methods with modern technology is really making a difference.

But in an area like ours where farming is only present on a limited scale, the importance of the open spaces as corridors through which animals can pass is of particular importance. From the borders of London in West Ewell to the M25, and across to the far side of the Downs and beyond, there are wide areas where local wildlife can roam. Deer in particular are thriving locally. You can often see them grazing in the fields between Epsom and Ashtead in the early evening.

We do need new homes. But we cannot just build at the expense of biodiversity. And in an area like ours, where there is an alternative to the Council's controversial plan, we would be crazy not to take a different route.

MP's housing solution for Epsom and Ewell

28 March 2024



Epsom and Ewell and indeed the whole country has a real shortage of homes. We cannot go on with a generation of young people who aspire to home ownership but have little hope of achieving this. And we must have more affordable homes locally.

As a country we are already now building more homes than at any time for decades, but there is still more to do. Locally precious little has happened in recent years. Four years ago, just before the local elections, the Borough Council was due to publish its plan for housing and for the area for the future. It was postponed then, and only now is the Council in the process of publishing and developing its local plan for the area for the next 10-15 years.

Every local authority is obliged to do this, and to explain how it will meet housing need, look after its local economy and protect its local environment.

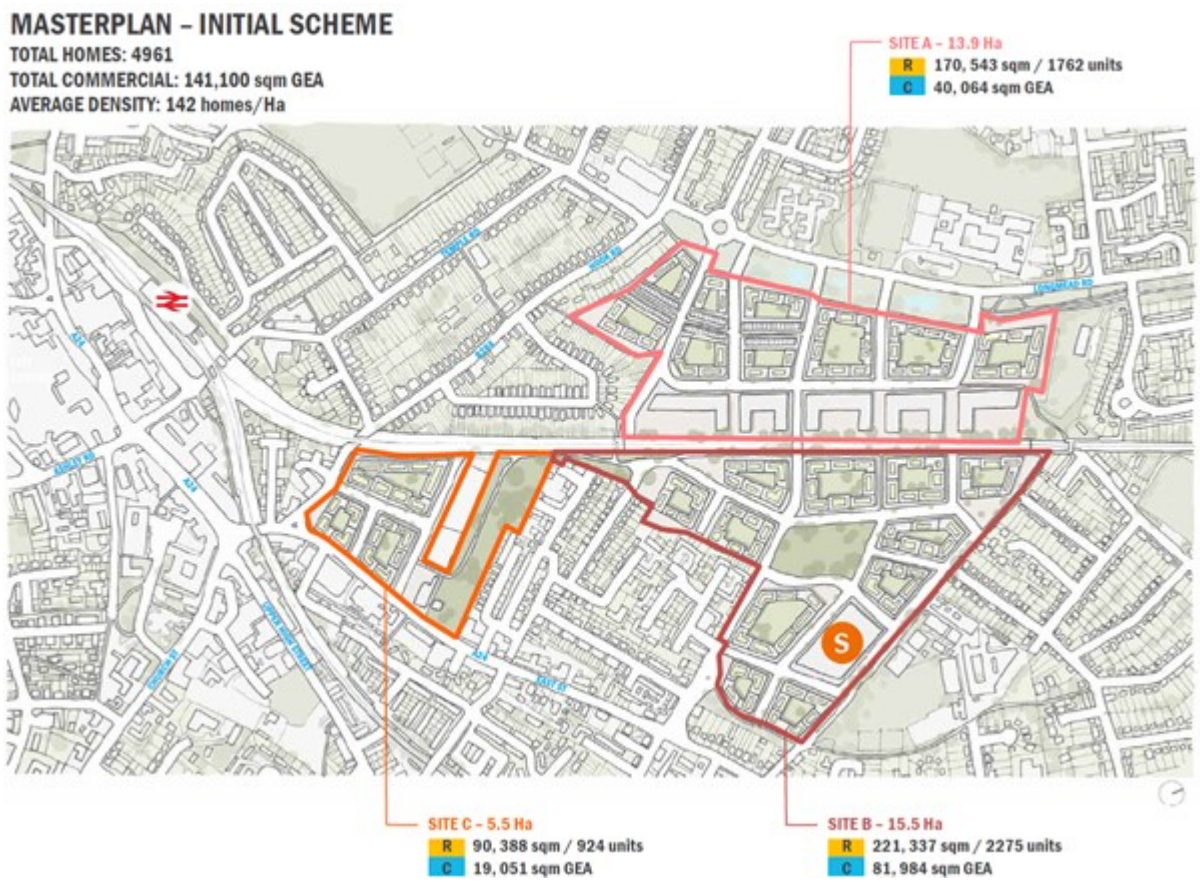
Each council has also prepared an assessment of local housing need, based on national guidance of how to do this. The housing assessment for Epsom and Ewell is though impossibly high – as it is in some other places. It would mean building more than 10,000 homes locally, and inevitably would mean much of our green belt disappearing.

That is why on a national level I have been saying to Ministers that there has to be more flexibility for Councils based on the reality in their areas.

But here we do need to do all we can to meet the housing need and not nearly enough has been done on this locally in recent years. That's why I have proposed a comprehensive redevelopment of the **Kiln Lane** and **Longmead** areas to achieve this without building all over our green belt.

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My plan, which has been developed together with a leading firm of architects, involves the construction of a mixed use area of well-designed developments, with businesses on the lower floors and flats above, with some terraced housing on the site as well. This kind of mix is typical of what is being done elsewhere. The buildings would be no higher than those already in and around the town centre.

The scheme provides a similar amount of commercial space to the present plus nearly 5,000 homes. The plan would be to have car showrooms and parking areas built upwards rather than at ground level across large areas of land. But over time I would expect the commercial space to attract more creative businesses, given the presence in Epsom of the **University of the Creative Arts** which is now one of the country's leading institutions of its kind. It would also aim to provide more homes for younger people, meaning more could afford to stay locally and work here, rather than simply building more executive homes for commuters on open land.

And being close to the town centre, I hope it would provide a much needed boost to the businesses there.

I hope that as the local plan develops the Council will adopt this plan. I think it's the best way forward for our area.

The View from Westminster: Chris Grayling MP on Military aid to Ukraine, Energy levy and the Queen

28 March 2024



The situation in Ukraine remains appalling and the brutality that has been wreaked on its people defies understanding. I think that most of us thought that this kind of war was a part of European history and that a military strategy that involved blasting cities to pieces one shell at a time was a part of the past. It will take decades to rebuild the damage.

I am glad that the UK has been at the forefront of helping the Ukrainian people. We were the main country to provide them with military equipment and training after the Russians seized Crimea and have supported them through the build-up to the War and as they try to resist the invasion. It is vital that this support should continue.

The conduct of the Russian leadership has been a brutal reminder of the real consequences of aggressive dictatorship, and of tight state-run media propaganda machines. For all of the frustrations that people may level at our democracy from time to time, the alternative is much much worse. No system of Government will ever be perfect, but the Ukraine War has been a timely reminder to the democratic world of just how important our values and our systems are, where Governments can be removed at the ballot box and where their decisions are subject to real scrutiny and open debate.

I want also to thank our fantastic team of volunteers locally who have been raising funds, sending goods and providing support to the refugees arriving here. Also to the families that have taken them in. I know that the system has been much too slow, though there are genuine safeguarding issues that have needed to be taken into account. But there is some great work being done in Epsom for the refugees and I am very grateful to all of those involved.

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The cost of living issue remains a huge challenge for many people locally. The surge in energy costs particularly is unprecedented in recent years. The last time that there was anything like this was in the oil crisis of 1974.

I hope that the measures announced by the Chancellor last week will help those worst affected. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies said after the announcement that it should insulate the poorest families from the impact of this year's increases.

But I can't pretend that things will be easy still, with a combination of the continuing impact of the pandemic in Asia, and the impact of the war in Ukraine having major consequences around the world. As big as the worries here though are the potential implications for people in the developing world. Ukraine has been a big supplier of food to many African countries, and with rising prices and short supplies, the risks are that there will be real shortages there too.

My view is that we will need to step up food production in this country wherever we sensibly can, and provide the right support to farmers to invest in that extra capacity. And we will need to be ready to target our aid budgets on those areas in the developing world that risk being worst affected.

I was hugely privileged in my time in Government to serve as both Lord Chancellor and Lord President of the Council, chairing the Queen's Privy Council. In both those roles, I had regular contact with and meetings with the Queen.

This weekend's Platinum Jubilee is an extraordinary national event, celebrating one of the most distinguished reigns this country has ever seen. She is someone that we should all be extremely proud of, and grateful to.

But I have also been fortunate enough to see her first-hand as a person. So I know her not just to be a great figurehead for this country, but as an incredibly smart, decent and likeable person. No one else could possibly have done the job that she has done, and done so with determination, kindness and a smile. She is quite simply extraordinary.

The View from Westminster: Local MP Chris Grayling has his say on Ukraine, Railway Services and the Cost of Living crisis.

28 March 2024



In today's 'View from Westminster' The Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP presents his thoughts on important national and local issues

UKRAINE

The situation in Ukraine is beyond awful. It may be the first time that a war like this has been fought in such a public way given the ready availability of mobile phone cameras and social media. But we are seeing the realities of wars that have been fought in the past happening again now in the 21st century in a way we thought would not happen again in Europe.

We can take some consolation in the way in which the Ukrainians are fighting back, and from the fact that the United Kingdom has done as much as any other country in helping them to do so. But it's hard to see how the trail of human misery and atrocity does not continue for months to come.

I know how frustrated many people here are that we cannot do more, but equally starting a direct conflict between NATO and Russia would be a quantum worse even than what we are seeing now.

But the local effort here to do something at least to help has been tremendous. The volunteer team in the Ashley Centre who have raised both funds and donations of medical and other equipment for Ukraine have been fantastic.

So have all the local families who have offered to host refugees, and are now starting to do so. I know it has all taken much too long, and I have told those managing the process so. But equally there do have to be some checks both for safeguarding reasons and also because those coming here are being given full access to public services, so we need to know who they are and where they are going.

Let us hope that those who do come here are able to make a return journey home before too long, and that a way is found to bring this dreadful conflict to an end.

THE RAILWAY SERVICE

The situation on our local rail routes remains unacceptable, even though the industry faces big challenges. I am doing what I can to get the situation improved.

The difficulties have been exacerbated by the number of staff off sick, but essentially the core problem is this.

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The railways almost all run at a loss and are subsidised by the taxpayer. During the pandemic, with a dramatic drop in the number of passengers, this subsidy went through the roof. Now that things are back to normal, far fewer people are travelling and are working from home much of the time. So Ministers want to adjust the subsidy back to a normal level but to support a timetable that fits with the new normal in terms of passenger numbers.

The problem we have is that our lines, particularly the route into Waterloo, have recovered faster than most but the timetable has not changed to reflect that. I am working on trying to get that situation resolved.

THE COST OF LIVING

The cost of living crisis is really starting to bite, and I know that things are very difficult for many people. The rise in energy prices is now on a scale last seen during the Oil Crisis of 1974, and it is affecting countries around the world.

We are at least in a position where very little of our energy comes from Russia, unlike some other European countries which are wholly dependent on Russia. Nor are there easy solutions to this, as we are already taxing too much in this country and there aren't easily available ways of financing a big cut for consumers.

Some people have called for a windfall tax on energy companies, but they already pay a much higher rate of tax than other businesses. And while I would like to see VAT on fuel cut, it is true that this disproportionately benefits those who are bigger users of energy and so are generally the better off. More will need to be done though before we get to next winter to ease the pressure on many families.

But I have to be honest and say there are no easy solutions in the short term. We have to make sure that we are as immune as possible from this kind of issue in the future. That means a big investment in wind and solar energy, and in nuclear as back-up for when the sun doesn't shine and the wind doesn't blow.

But we also need more gas now while we make the transition to low emission generation. And it should be produced here. The carbon emissions from gas that is shipped in from the Middle East are estimated to be twice as high as those from gas coming from the North Sea. It makes no sense to ignore what we have here as a way of making us more secure against energy shocks in the future.

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