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Local Planning Matters

4 November 2022



Tim Murphy’s opinion piece on Epsom and Ewell’s Local Plan. An up-to-date Local Plan is a necessity. It indicates to those proposing new developments or conversions to properties just what they are allowed or not allowed to do. It is also the yardstick by which locally elected councillors assess whether a particular planning application should be permitted.

The current Epsom and Ewell Local Plan was approved as long ago as 2007. It does not meet the requirements of the most recent planning legislation. In particular, it is failing to deliver the type of housing that is needed locally – affordable and in close proximity to a range of retail and social facilities and public transport. By contrast, the current Plan has been very largely successful in protecting the Borough’s much valued Green Belt from inappropriate development. Two reports commissioned by the Council have confirmed that our Green Belt is performing as it should against the five criteria set out in planning legislation.

A new draft Local Plan is very likely to be discussed by the Council’s Licensing and Planning Policy Committee on 21 st November. The preparation of the Plan has been overshadowed by a quite unrealistic housing target of nearly seven hundred new homes to be provided every year in the Borough.

Where does this target come from? It is set by central government and is based on outdated projections about how fast our number of households will grow in the future. Astonishingly, the number is so high because it incorporates what is known as an ‘affordability’ uplift – because house prices locally are so high, it is assumed these will fall markedly as more houses are built. There is no evidence that this is how our housing market operates.

Our councillors have a choice to make. They can try to meet most, and maybe all, of the centrally-determined housing target. The Borough has only limited built-up areas that would lend themselves to redevelopment for housing so, inevitably, extensive areas of our Green Belt would be sacrificed. Judging by the type of housing that has been approved over the past few years in the Borough on what are called greenfield sites, it is unlikely that the homes that are provided will meet local needs.

What guarantees will be in place to ensure that such significant increases in population will be matched by more educational and medical facilities and better transport provision? Alternatively, as in neighbouring Elmbridge, our councillors could decide not to meet the housing target but rather prioritise the provision of those types and sizes of housing most needed locally, including affordable homes, on existing built-up areas so that no valuable Green Belt need be lost.

The comprehensive redevelopment of existing commercial estates to incorporate a significant element of new housing should be a component of this way forward. Excellent design standards will be essential. Recent statements by our new Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Communities, Michael Gove, support this approach.

What will our councillors decide?

Tim Murphy

Tim Murphy has worked as a Chartered Town Planner in local government in London, and as an environmental specialist both with WS Atkins and Partners, the Epsom-based engineering consultants, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) where he was responsible for examining the environmental and social impacts of the EBRD’s investments in Eastern Europe. Since retiring, Tim chaired the Surrey Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) for several years, and he is currently Chair of CPRE’s South East Region and heads up CPRE’s Epsom and Ewell local group, campaigning to protect the local Green Belt and other open areas.

If you have views and opinions on “Local Plan Matters” – do write to us admin@epsomandewelltimes.com

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Housing: What can be done, nationally and locally, to address the affordability crisis?

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We hear much about the housing crisis in this country. This is often synonymous with the assertion that we have too few homes. In fact, overall, there is no shortage of homes in the UK – the total number of residences is approximately the same as the number of households who want a home, even taking into account those 'hidden households' where, for example, young people want to move out of the family home but cannot afford to do so. However, there are significant issues regarding the cost of housing in some parts of the country, and there are issues with the way that housing is distributed, particularly between the generations.

Housing in places such as Epsom and Ewell is unaffordable for many, particularly the young and key workers in sectors such as health and care. House prices are driven upwards because of the relatively high salaries and other wealth of many in the region and also by the historically low-interest rates that currently prevail. For many, a home is an investment as well as somewhere to live. Residential accommodation in this country is particularly poorly distributed by comparison, say, with many of the countries of continental Europe. It is not in the interests of housebuilders to put sufficient housing on the market that prices will drop – they prefer to hoard land to maintain their share price.

What can be done, nationally and locally, to address the affordability crisis? Much more genuinely affordable housing needs to be provided, including social housing for subsidised rent. A relatively recent study by Herriot-Watt University suggests that we need around 150,000 additional genuinely affordable homes per annum for the next ten years. Not all of these, of course, need to be 'new build' – some could come from our existing housing stock, acquired by local authorities and housing associations to meet genuine housing needs.

Second homes and properties left unoccupied for more than a few months should be highly taxed to encourage higher occupancy rates. Fiscal incentives should be available to encourage downsizing, especially given our ageing population, and more housing should be designed for the active and not so active elderly. Authorities such as Epsom and Ewell need to encourage the release of as many brownfield sites as feasible. For example, the potential for mixed uses, including residential, on large car parks and current commercial estates, such as Kiln Lane and Longmead, needs to be investigated. Authorities need to require house building at considerably higher densities than has been achieved in the past, employing high standards of design.

What is not needed is the very high and indeed unrealistic housing targets imposed on local authorities like Epsom and Ewell by the central government. There is no requirement, unfortunately, that most of these homes should be genuinely affordable. Epsom and Ewell have only very limited potential to build new homes on previously developed brownfield sites. Consequently, there is a danger that councillors will see no alternative to losing some of our much valued Green Belt and other countrysides. Be clear, significant areas of Green Belt and other open space in Epsom and Ewell – around Horton and Stamford Green, near Langley Vale, on and close to Priest Hill, and close to The Downs and the College – could be lost forever.

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