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Blot on Epsom Downs horizon to grow no more?

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Ever wondered where are those tower-blocks on the west horizon from Epsom Downs? Our LDRS journalist reports on Woking Council's consideration of the height of its buildings:

Plans to limit high-rise development in Woking is akin to slamming the stable door shut after the horse has bolted, Surrey County Council's ex-head of planning has said. On Thursday February 2, Woking Borough Council's executive committee agreed to press ahead with its goal to create a masterplan that would "provide a long-term vision" for the town centre's skyline.

It continues work that began in 2021 that included a six-month consultation which garnered more than 850 responses from about 450 individuals and organisations. According to council documents, though, there remain several legal issues the borough must overcome before it adopts the full masterplan, including the fallout of the Planning Inspectorate decision on the Crown Place from December 3 2022 that granted planning permission three towers of 23, 25 and 28 storeys respectively.

The appeal decision has had a "clear implication" for the Masterplan, the report read, "in that it has changed the nature of the townscape" and that "as a minimum, the design principles for this site, including what prospective heights may be appropriate, will need reconsidering."

Furthermore, the report states, during the public consultation phase, Woking Borough Council received representations from developers regarding the possibility of legal challenges if it were to be adopted. There is also the financial risk with officers identifying "significant" cost implications and suggesting the only way to "avoid unnecessary additional expense to the taxpayers purse" is not to proceed to adopt the Town Centre Masterplan in its current draft form.

This has caused the council to seek legal advice on how to proceed. Whether the masterplan can ever have the impact the council desires – fewer high rises in the town centre is debated.

Catriona Riddell is a former head of planning at Surrey County Council and current director at Catriona Riddell & Associates. She said: "Woking is a very tiny, very constrained borough with a lot of debate about how high up the developments go. Anywhere from Surrey you can see Woking. Some love it, some hate it. It's very much Marmite.
"The Government is trying to help local authorities restrict the number of high rises but with Woking, it is going to be difficult as it already has so many. The local plan is in place in Woking and is up to date – that's what developers will look at. Any supplementary planning won't have the same status. Developers are used to playing this game. It's going to be difficult for the council to change this."

According to council papers, the masterplan will establish an "overarching vision for the town centre to enable designled, sustainable development, such as building new homes, cultivating a thriving retail and business environment and strengthening Woking's cultural and leisure offer".

The report said that the "ambition and need for a clear and robust plan to guide development in the town centre, to give certainty to developers wishing to invest, and provide officers with an effective tool to assess planning applications and defend decisions on appeal remains".

This, Ms Riddell says, may be the best way for the authority to move forward. She added: 'It will be about how to make the area a good place to live and work and the only way is through a masterplan so they are right to go ahead with it but it will be difficult with developers looking to build highrises. It will be very difficult for the council to argue its out of character. Woking has changed massively over the years, that horse has bolted."

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