

Blot on Epsom Downs horizon to grow no more?

11 February 2023



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 designed, 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.'

Will Cathedral repairs threaten Canadian WW1 memorial?

11 February 2023



Plans to build 124 homes on undeveloped woodland next to **Guildford Cathedral** will threaten a memorial to Canada's First World War military sacrifice, a preservation society has warned. Guildford Cathedral needs to carry out an estimated £3.2million in repairs, but unlike other cathedrals in the UK, it says, has "never possessed endowments of any significance and has always struggled to fund repairs to the Grade II* listed building".

Image: Grahame Larter

To solve the issue, the cathedral sold a parcel of land to developers which, it says, will "enable the endowment to be secured for the cathedral which is vital for its survival" and secure its long-term maintenance.

The issue, says the **Vimy Foundation**, which oversees the public historical resources and modern perspectives on Canada's participation in the First World War, is that land is a memorial to the 650,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders who fought in Europe during the First World War, 66,000 of whom lost their lives.

Writing to **Guildford Borough Council's** planning committee, the foundation said: "This undeveloped wooded area was created on the initiative of **R.B. Bennet**, prime minister of Canada from 1930 to 1935, who lived near Guildford, to provide a place for reflection and remembrance of Canada's contribution during the conflicts that shook the first half of the 20th century."

They added: "While understanding the needs of the Guildford community, The Vimy Foundation wishes to reaffirm its commitment to the preservation of memorial sites honouring Canada's fallen soldiers. In recognition of the bravery and sacrifice of these men and women, their memory must continue to be honoured. The Vimy Foundation calls on decision-makers, Guildford Cathedral, Guildford Borough Council and developers, to preserve the commemorative and memorial dimension of this site and will support initiatives in this direction."

There are currently seven homes on the site and used by staff cathedral staff. It is designated as open space as part of the Cathedral land but earmarked for 100 homes within the council's local plan.

A previous planning application to build 134 homes on the slopes of the cathedral was turned down, despite officer recommendations, by Guildford's planning committee. Background papers to the application said it was due to the plans being "poor quality and out of character with the surrounding area".

This led to the cathedral working with developers **Vivid** to carry out what it described as a "comprehensive review" that included "extensive work to address the reasons for refusal in the 2015 scheme". The new plans would demolish the existing staff buildings to create 124 homes, 44 of which would be affordable. Cathedral staff would have use of 13 dwellings, with the remaining 111 consisting of 19 one bed units, 61 two-beds, 28 three-beds and three four-bed homes.

Matt O'Grady, chief operating officer at Guildford Cathedral, said: "The Charity Commission, the regulatory body responsible for these matters, was given the full details of the gift of land, including all associated historical correspondence. After a thorough assessment the commission approved schemes allowing the cathedral to sell the relevant land - allocated in Guildford's Local Plan - for development. R Bennet will always be acknowledged as the generous donor who enabled land to be purchased from the Earl of Onslow.

"His contribution is commemorated in a ledger stone on the south elevation of the Cathedral and the protection of this is encapsulated in the Cathedral's Grade II* listing and in the Care of Cathedrals Measure 2011. The Grade II* listed Guildford Cathedral doesn't benefit from a large income in the same way as many English cathedrals; because it is relatively new, it doesn't have any historic endowments. The sale of land to Vivid for new homes will safeguard the long-term future of the building.

"The income generated will be used to create an annual endowment that will provide for the long-term repair, maintenance, and improvement of the cathedral. The cathedral is proud of its community links and believes very strongly that it should play a part in contributing to new homes in Guildford."

The latest neighbourhood consultation expired in January. A date has yet to be set for the matter to appear before committee.

No Crawleys for Surrey's Downton Abbeys

11 February 2023



A lack of “Downton Abbey” type families to occupy abandoned mansions led to 112 homes at Headley Court (near Epsom) get the green light last night. The Mole Valley green belt site has previously been used by the Ministry of Defence, Help for Heroes and as a covid testing centre. It could now be turned into 12 two-bed homes within the converted mansion, with further 97 two-bed homes and three one-bed residents on the grounds.

Image: Headley Court mansion: Graham Harrison MoD

They were approved by a vote of 12 in favour and zero against, with three abstentions, by Mole Valley’s Development Management Committee on Wednesday, February 1. Attached to the approval was a list of conditions, including that homes should only go to people aged over 60 and assessed as requiring a care package, to make a publicly accessible restaurant and library available on site, as well as to agree to a travel plan.

The travel plan would include an on-call bus service and car club.

The green belt site does not require special circumstances as it is considered to be previously developed land, the committee heard. There is currently an ongoing appeal of a previously rejected planning application on the site, due to be heard in May, and a decision on whether to pursue that matter will be taken in due course by developers Audley Group.

Questions raised during the meeting surrounded public access, environmental protection matters and parking, with Councillor Tim Hall, who abstained in the vote, saying the plans were “not quite there” particularly as the current bus to the site only ran once every two hours.

The meeting began with chair Cllr David Preedy announcing an interest in the matter and leaving the chamber. As a ward member, a letter was read on his behalf where he highlighted issues of parking while deputy Rosemary Hobbs oversaw the discussion.

The site was formerly part of a larger parcel of land that had used by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) from the 1950s to 2018 and since subdivided and sold to different owners. The mansion house has been vacant since the departure of the MoD with the Jubilee Complex gardens used by the NHS and Surrey County Council during the pandemic.

Cllr Helyn Clack said: “We’ve been through a lot of papers for Headley Court and a lot of changes.

“It’s a very historic site not just in its past but the very recent past. Its held very dearly in the heart of residents across the whole of mv and wider still because of the work that it did for Help for Heroes, the Afghanistan war and also what it has done more recently supporting the NHS throughout the pandemic. Across the whole of Mole Valley there are lots, particularly in rural areas, of large country houses originally built in the late 19th century or 18th century, and then become completely unable to be used for their original purpose. You see them everywhere.

“We’ve had them here to discuss being converted into something where they can maintain their facial value but also be of use to the community going forward. We certainly wouldn’t want to see Headley Court left unoccupied or abandoned and people who want to go visit it are going to be able to do so in this plan. The fact that hundreds, maybe thousands of people will visit this site when it’s finished – it will be a memorial site, not just to the veterans who were mended here but also to the pandemic.”

She added that she was banking on the new residents demanding and setting up their own residents association

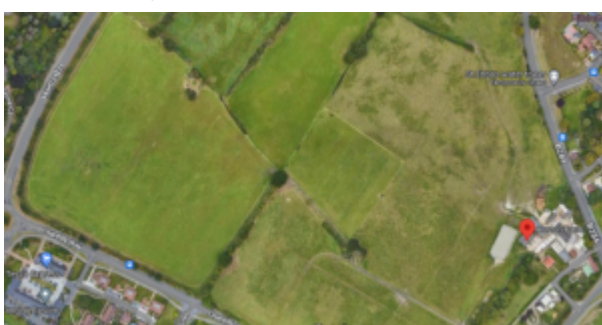
Cllr Clack said: “We don’t still have the sort of Downton Abbey type families anymore who can run these huge estates. It’s a shame the MOD pulled out, it was a wonderfully loved site.”

She had trust in the planning regulations to deliver on what they were asking for and to not let that not fall by the wayside because it’s ‘too difficult to do’.

A further item on the agenda, to grant listed building consent to develop the site, was approved unanimously.

Green-belters belted up and beltless

11 February 2023



Epsom and Ewell Borough Council’s (EEBC) Licensing and Planning Policy Committee voted unanimously yesterday (30

January) to publish its **Draft Local Plan** for public consultation, after the chairman rebuffed claims that councillors had not been given enough time to read it. The decision followed public opposition to suggestions of Green Belt development in the borough, including a petition with over 2,000 signatures.

Image - Google - Horton Farm, Epsom in Green Belt, that could get 1500 houses.

The meeting opened with questions from the public. The chair, Councillor **Steven McCormick** (RA - Woodote Ward) told the committee that members of the public could not ask questions directly related to the meeting's agenda items. This is in the Council's Standing Orders. **Steve Gebbett**, who has been campaigning to protect the borough's Green Belt, said: "My belt's a bit too tight. I hope you don't mind me taking off my green belt." In a symbolic gesture, he placed a green belt on a table, where it remained for the remainder of the meeting.

He asked: "Does the committee ever refer significant issues that affect the whole borough to the whole council?" Mr Gebbett then described a situation in which "councillors go home and tell their loved ones their legacy is: honey, I shrunk the greenbelt".

Councillor **Julie Morris** (Liberal Democrats, College Ward) asked the committee: "Am I the only person who hasn't seen this document before? Have you all been discussing it for a long time? The assembled public might think we've been cooking it up for months. But we haven't." Councillor McCormick told her that they'd tried "to be open and transparent with the whole process." He added that there had been many member briefings throughout the summer and autumn, and several statements to full council with opportunities to ask questions.

He also said that the Draft Local Plan had been presented to all members to be discussed in December, and said to Councillor Morris: "Maybe you missed some of those meetings?" Councillor McCormick added: "It's strange to disperse the idea that it has happened behind closed doors. I'm quite disappointed Councillor Morris, I'm afraid." Councillor Morris said that she meant that she had not seen the whole document together previously.

Councillor McCormick responded: "The items were presented on 7 December to all members. You've had ample opportunity to come forward to seek clarification." Councillor **Neil Dallen** (Residents' Association, Town Ward) said he had "sympathy" with Julie Morris' comments, adding: "This is the first time we've seen the 200-page document. Most of it we have covered in different places at different times. I can't say there's parts I wasn't aware of. I still think there's bits missing."

The Draft Local Plan sets out planning policies and sites that may be developed in the Borough up until 2040. It includes nine sites for potential development, on which it proposes that a significant proportion of its housing requirement will be built.

Four of these sites are in the town centre, on previously developed - 'brownfield' - land. However, the Council has said that they would be unable to meet housing requirements within urban areas alone. The Draft Local Plan states: "Whilst these sustainable locations are our preferred locations for new development, they do not deliver adequate housing to meet our social responsibilities for providing housing, in particular affordable housing." Therefore, the other sites put forward for development are located outside of the town centre and on Green Belt land.

Green Belt land includes areas of countryside that are protected from development in order to prevent urban sprawl and encourage development within existing built-up areas. National planning policy requires that Green Belt boundaries are only amended "in exceptional circumstances".

In the Draft Local Plan, the council says that it "considers that the scale of unmet development / housing needs in the borough that would result from pursuing a brownfield only approach provides the exceptional circumstances and justification to make changes to the Green Belt boundaries in the borough."

The Draft Plan also states that: "Through the release of less than 3.6% of the borough's Green Belt, the council will be able to deliver an additional 2,175 dwellings over the plan period".

Under the proposals, sites removed from the Green Belt for development would include:

- Land at West Park Hospital (for 150 homes)
- Horton Farm (for 1,500 homes)
- Land at Chantilly Way (for 25 homes)
- Land Adjoining Ewell East Station (for 350 homes)
- Hook Road Arena (for 150 homes)

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which the Local Plan should generally adhere to, is undergoing consultation, including on a revision that states that: "Green Belt boundaries are not required to be reviewed and altered if this would be the only means of meeting the objectively assessed need for housing over the plan period".



Mr Chris Grayling, MP for Epsom and Ewell, told the Epsom and Ewell Times: “The Borough’s proposal to simply build houses on 135 acres of green belt land, and not make any attempt to pursue the redevelopment of Kiln Lane and Longmead as a way of strengthening both the Borough’s economic future and meeting its housing need is a failure of momentous proportions.”

Mr Grayling has put forward his own proposals for development [reported in the Epsom and Ewell Times] on the Kiln Lane and Longmead estates. He told the Epsom and Ewell Times: “The kind of development that I proposed is happening elsewhere, but the Council thinks it is too difficult to do here. I think that is a cop out, and the result will be a massive loss of our green spaces in the area and real damage to biodiversity. It’s always easier just to build on a green field. But easy does not mean best.”

The Draft Local Plan, in reference to residential development on the Kiln Lane and Longmead estates, states that: “longer term opportunities for intensification for mixed use could be explored in time”.

The Council has said: “The Local Plan needs to protect our attractive and valued environment whilst reconciling the need to accommodate our development needs. The balance between protecting our environment and enabling development and supporting infrastructure, is at the centre of our spatial strategy.”

The borough’s housing need was calculated using the “standard method” in national planning guidance. The need was calculated as 576 dwellings per annum, equating to 10,368 dwellings over the Local Plan period. The Draft Local Plan, however, states: “Taking into account the borough’s constraints, the council is not planning on meeting its local housing need figure.” Instead, it has set a housing requirement of 5,400 dwellings over the Local Plan period.

Under another proposed addition, the NPFF will strengthen its existing point that local housing need is an advisory starting point for setting a local housing requirement. In an email on behalf of CPRE, (The Council for the Protection of Rural England), Surrey, to the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, **Mr Tim Murphy** said that there was “no justification” for increasing the number of homes in the borough by 5,400. He said that the standard method used to calculate housing need “relies on household projections from 2014 which are now widely recognised as significantly inflating household growth in areas such as ours”.

The Council’s Planning Policy Manager told the committee that there is “already an existing need in the borough” and that as of June 2022, there were 1,200 households on the list for affordable housing. He added: “We have a significant need for affordable housing in the borough, including for homelessness and people in temporary accommodation.”

However, the committee rejected a motion, proposed by Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Court Ward, Labour), to ensure that 40% of all new developments exceeding 10 units included affordable housing.

Councillors also raised questions in the meeting as to whether the Draft Local Plan could be altered following the public consultation. Councillor Morris asked whether, if a large number of people came forward to oppose Green Belt development, this would form part of the “evidence base” required for Local Plan policies.

The Council’s Interim Director of Environment, Housing and Regeneration, responded: “It is the content of responses, and what new evidence and information they direct us towards, not about the number of responses received, or the number of times something is said.” She said that the council would be required to provide a statement on the consultation, with key issues that were raised, and how they were addressed with changes to the Plan.

Councillor Morris said: “We’ve taken an awfully time to get this far; I’d hate to see it abandoned. So much of the document is really really important. There are bits that are just not right. If I were to support it, it would not be that I support the content, but the concept of it going forward to public consultation.” She added: “Green Belt has become massively important. [...] Keeping hold of what we’ve got has become the name of the game recently.”

Councillor Dallen added: “Can I request that we don’t have 200 pages to go through in one night in future?” Councillor McCormick responded: “It’s noted. We’ll try to do better next time.”

Just before the vote, Councillor Morris said: “I am somewhat reassured that there can be significant change if this document goes ahead. I expected to want to vote against. I felt we hadn’t given it enough thought and time.” She added: “This is clearly controversial. A lot of people are not happy about this.”

After almost two hours, councillors voted unanimously to go ahead with the Draft Local Plan. Public consultation will commence today at noon and conclude on 15 March. Go to Epsom and Ewell Times Official Notices page to see how you can respond.

After the meeting Cllr Steven McCormick, Chair of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, said: “We believe the Draft Plan provides a proactive framework for the borough to grow in a strong and positive way, so everyone will have the opportunity to live in an affordable, vibrant area with a growing economy. “The Draft Local Plan is our starting point and we strongly encourage local people to help shape the final Plan by responding to the consultation.”

[Ed: Even if the Green Belt proposals are removed after public consultation this Draft will still be of value in Planning Appeals pursued by Green Belt developers in the future].

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Local Plan battle heating up?

11 February 2023



A draft **Local Plan**, that will delineate **Epsom and Ewell Borough’s** planning framework for decisions on planning applications and development for the years ahead, has been published on the Council’s website. Out of 5,400 new homes proposed in the Draft Local Plan (2023-20240), some 2,175 homes (almost 41%) are earmarked to be built on the borough’s Green Belt land. EEBC councillors are due to take a final Section 18 publication decision on 30 January,

Of nine “Preferred Option” development sites proposed, five are Green Belt – with Downs Farm, where 650 homes were proposed, only narrowly missing the cut after a campaign by residents. Over 55 hectares – or some 137 acres – of Green Belt land could be sacrificed. The plans include one gigantic estate of some 1,500 homes on land around Horton Farm, which will have its Green Belt status stripped away.

The “Preferred Options” for Green Belt development are:

- 150 homes around West Park Hospital
- 1,500 homes around Horton Farm
- 25 homes next to Chantilly Way
- 350 homes on the sports fields by Ewell East Station
- 150 homes on sports pitches at Hook Road Arena (land owned by the Council)

A spokesperson for a local campaign group seeking to protect green belt land has responded: “*Given the Government’s “brownfield first” brief, it looks like the planners did not get the memo. They certainly did not get the new memo from*

Government saying that it is not necessary to review Green Belt for housing. And they appear not to have taken the hint from neighbouring Elmbridge, who creatively avoided any Green Belt destruction, and Mole Valley, whose councillors this month voted unanimously to remove all Green Belt sites from its Local Plan."

"Only on its own land can the Council specify 100% affordable homes - the rest will be about 40% , as developers have many canny ways to get round this stipulation and build more profitable higher end housing. The Plan is offering just around 1,000 homes in Epsom Town Centre until year 2040, with a similar number only on other brownfield spaces, plus also around 1,000 for planning permissions in the Borough already in the pipeline "

Appendix 4 of the draft Local Plan reveal other Green Belt sites that have been offered up by developers in a " Call for Sites."

Yufan Si, campaign leader for **Keep Epsom & Ewell's Green Belt** stated: *"So where is the real challenge taken up, to redevelop Epsom Town surroundings, which most commentators agree could do with some rejuvenation? The Kiln Lane and Longmead industrial areas are said to be off limits, according to consultants for EEBC, because of the 1,800 jobs there. So not a single new brownfield affordable home is put forward here, with no imaginative plan to mix housing with job creation and revitalise an area close to the station, shops and entertainment facilities that many people prefer."*

"We are left with the conclusion that the planners - and by extension our ruling Councillors - are in a "Call for Sites" trap. This has inhibited visionary thinking and pro-active engagement with urban developers on how much-needed affordable housing might be built in tandem with an exciting redevelopment programme that Epsom's brownfield areas so desperately need. All they seem able to do about it is to bulldozer yet another field of our Green Belt heritage" said Ms Si.

If Councillors vote at the special meeting of the Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee on January 30 for the Draft Local Plan (Section 18) to proceed, then it will be formally published by EEBC on February 1, followed by a six-week Public Consultation stage.

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Green-belters seeing red on Local Plan?

11 February 2023



A determined group of Epsom & Ewell residents, representing over 1,700 petitioners , took to the podium at last night's meeting of the Council's Licensing, Planning and Policy Committee (January 19th). They asked Councillors eleven questions about the threat of Green Belt sites being included as "Preferred Options" in the imminent Draft Local Plan.

[Official Council record: The Chair (Cllr **Steven McCormick** - RA Woodcote Ward)provided an oral response to each question. Eight supplementary oral questions were asked. The Chair, the Interim Director of Environment, Housing and Regeneration, and the Planning Policy Manager provided oral responses to seven of the supplementary questions. The Chair confirmed a written reply would be provided for one of the supplementary questions.]

Otherwise the business of the meeting was confined to approving increases between 6 and 10 % for 2023/2024 on a range of Council charges relating to Planning matters, private hire vehicle licensing, animals and scrap metal.

Given every indication that the Government no longer thinks Green Belt reviews are necessary with housing targets advisory only, and fresh from Mole Valley District Council's unanimous vote to remove Green Belt sites from its Local Plan, residents challenged the councillors and planners to seize the opportunity to save the Green Belt now and focus on brownfield sites for new affordable homes.

In answer to one question about whether planners had consulted HM Inspectors about Green Belt removal, council

officers confirmed that, as EEBC was at an initial stage of decision taking , they had no need to consult the Inspectorate at this time, unlike Mole Valley are now required to do.

Given this difference, residents believe that it will now be entirely the responsibility of Councillors – the majority of whom are Residents Association, if Green Belt land ends up being developed. According to the Council for the Protection of Rural England, over 99% of sites earmarked for development by local authorities eventually get built upon, so the campaigners say it is both crucial and necessary to ensure no Green Belt sites are included at the outset.

The group intend to return to make more representations at the final decision-taking meeting on January 30 before the EEBC Draft Plan is published on February 1.

Further details of this residents’ campaign petition can be seen on epsomgreenbelt.org

Chris Grayling MP for Epsom and Ewell has written to constituents: “There have been two new developments on the Local Plans which shape the future of housing development in our area – in Epsom and Ewell and Mole Valley.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is due to publish its draft plan in the next few days (sic), and this will show the degree to which it has decided to push for development on local green belt land. I very much hope they have chosen to focus on brown field sites and particularly on the potential for the Kiln Lane and Longmead areas.

Meanwhile in Mole Valley, the Council has asked the Planning Inspector to delay consideration of their plans, following the Government’s revision of its national planning policies. It is too early to know if this may affect the plans for Ashted, but I will keep you posted.”

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11 February 2023



Mole Valley councillors have been warned developers could have “a field day” if government inspectors reject plans to release green belt sites from the authority’s plan for homes.

[Ed: Epsom and Ewell Times is following this story as there maybe some parallels for the progress of our Local Plan expected to be published shortly for Council consideration. (For “release” read “remove”).]

At a specially-called meeting of the district council on Monday (January 16), members unanimously voted to write to the government inspector looking at the local plan to get an opinion on the proposals. The updates to the local plan, which outlines the authority’s plan for new homes in the district up to 2037, are being proposed because of changes to planning at central government level.

The changes include a consultation running until March on updating the National Planning Policy Framework.

Changes at central government level could mean lower housing targets for councils as they look at their local plans, meaning councils may not need to release green belt sites for homes. But the move would also mean a loss in the number of affordable homes built across the district, with officers saying around 625 affordable homes could be lost over the duration of the plan.

A warning was also issued in the meeting of what might happen if the inspector said no to the proposed changes to the plan, which went through an examination in public from January to October last year. Cllr David Hawksworth (Independent, Ashted Common) said in principle he welcomed the “brave move” but raised concerns on what might happen if the inspector did not accept any changes as a “major modification” and the plan needed to be started again. He said: “[There could be] a long period in which there would be a field day for developers that would be coming in and

trying to get some of the green belt sites because they'd be operating under our existing local plan."

The green belt sites which could be released from the plan, and therefore protected from future development unless there are very special circumstances, including land behind the Six Bells pub in Newdigate, Sondes Place Farm in Dorking and the former sewage works in Brockham. But the sites at Tanners Meadow in Bookham and Headley Court would remain part of the local plan because they already have planning permission granted on all or part of them.

The prospect of reopening the entire local plan again was rejected by the cabinet member for planning, Cllr Margaret Cooksey (Lib Dem, Dorking South), who described it as a "dangerous proposition". She rejected a call from one Conservative councillor to resign from her post, towards the end of a meeting that was heavy with party politics but nonetheless in which there was agreement on the final outcome.

Councillors also raised concerns about their own areas and the impact developments could have in different parts of Mole Valley. Charlwood Councillor Lisa Scott (Green) claimed a lot of people had already moved away from the area because of changes that were coming in the local plan, with villages such as Hookwood destined to see four green belt sites developed under the current draft plan.

Conservative Councillor Joanna Slater (Leatherhead South) said taking the green belt sites out of the local plan would mean half of all development would take place in the town, compared to 30 per cent under the plan currently under consideration. She added that the impact would be "huge" and affect school places, traffic and healthcare. She added: "You might as well rename the local plan 'building tower blocks in Leatherhead and other projects'.

Despite a meeting in which the chair said he would have to adjourn if members did not stop "all this shouting out", writing to the inspector was unanimously voted through by members, who will now await her reply.

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Crucial month for local Local Plans?

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Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's Licensing, Policy and Planning Committee meets Friday 19th January but the **Local Plan** does not feature on its agenda. Local **Liberal Democrats** are asking for the Local Plan timetable to be delayed following central Government indications of a relaxation of new build housing targets.

Liberal Democrat councillors are asking Epsom & Ewell Borough Council to delay the publication of the "regulation 18" part of its Local Plan from the current date of early February, so as to incorporate potential changes to the housing targets set by national government. It is expected that **Michael Gove**, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, will make changes to how local councils need to interpret housing targets, and the treatment of Green Belt land, and the implications of those changes are currently unclear. It is hoped to hear more from central government in the next few weeks.

"The original timetable for the draft Local Plan to go out to public consultation from early in February could well stand if there's an announcement quickly" says Cllr **Julie Morris**, [LibDem College Ward] member of the borough council's Licensing & Planning Policy Committee.

Liberal Democrats have previously been critical of Epsom & Ewell council's slow progress towards the production of a Local Plan. They now say that circumstances in which the Conservative Government, primed by a statement from PM **Rishi Sunak**, could change the rules around housing targets and Green Belt development could warrant a short delay so as to make the draft Local Plan more robust.

"We have often been critical of the delays in bringing this draft Local Plan forward for consultation but going 'live' in early February could rule out being able to swiftly incorporate government changes to housing targets or implement new

guidance on Green Belt development. We hope a delay won't be necessary but pausing for a few weeks could potentially save months and months of extra work in 2023 and a much longer delay in achieving the objective, which is to have local policies in place to guide development and protect our borough " says Cllr Morris.

A special meeting of Epsom and Ewell's Licensing, Policy and Planning Committee will be held on 30th January. The agenda has not yet been published. One authoritative inside source has told the **Epsom and Ewell Times** that the Local Plan will proceed along the existing timetable and be published in February.

Our partner at the BBC reports below on the latest position from neighbouring Mole Valley.

Changes to **Mole Valley's** plan for development in the district could lead to the loss of hundreds of affordable homes. The district council has paused its local plan, which sets out where 6,000 homes will be built up to 2037, while the government consults on possible changes to planning policy.

A specially-called meeting of **Mole Valley District Council** on Monday (January 16) will discuss asking the government inspector overseeing the plan about the removal of green belt sites included in the plan. The sites include land behind the Six Bells pub in Newdigate, Tapwood Workshops in Buckland, land at Chalkpit Lane in Bookham, Sondes Place Farm, Dorking and the former sewage works in Brockham and sites in Hookwood and Capel among others.

The removal of the green belt sites, if it goes ahead, would be as a result of a lower housing targets from central government, meaning the district council could aim to build fewer homes over the period of the local plan. But this also means a reduction in the number of affordable homes that would be built, with the council's policy at 40 per cent of new developments being affordable homes. Documents for the meeting said officers estimated the changes would mean the non-delivery of approximately 625 new affordable homes.

They went on to say the affordable housing policy itself would not be affected. Council documents show that one of the priority outcomes for the local plan is to: "Encourage the creation of affordable housing to meet local needs and explore innovative methods of delivery."

Surrey Community Action works with local communities to increase the amount of affordable housing in rural villages and small towns in the county. In Mole Valley the organisation has supported **The Poland Trust** on the development of 12 affordable homes to rent at social rent levels and five affordable self-build homes for people living in Brockham and Betchworth.

A Surrey Community Action spokesperson said: "Affordable housing continues to be a critical issue in Surrey. In rural areas of Surrey, the shortage of housing is particularly acute and this has been exacerbated by the increase in the number of people seeking properties with more outdoor space following the pandemic, causing house prices and rents to reach their highest levels of unaffordability for people on average salaries."

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All green belt sites could be removed from Mole Valley's plan for homes following proposed changes to planning at central government level. A specially-called meeting of the district council will be held this month to discuss asking the government inspector looking at the authority's local plan her opinion on removing the sites.

The council's local plan, which sets out where and when 6,000 homes will be built in the district up to 2037, was put on hold in December when **Michael Gove** announced changes to housing targets at central government level.

A consultation is now running on plans to update the National Planning Policy Framework, closing on March 2.

The council's leader Councillor **Stephen Cooksey** (Lib Dem, Dorking South) said along with four other members of the council's cabinet, he had called for an extraordinary meeting of the council on January 16.

The council will be asked to consider seeking the inspector's view on removing all green belt sites from the draft local plan. While many of the new homes were planned for towns like Dorking and Leatherhead, green belt sites had been released to ensure the authority could reach its housing targets set by central government.

Residents and councillors had raised concerns about developments in rural areas as well, and the impacts they could have on communities, roads and infrastructure.

The council's cabinet member for planning, Cllr **Margaret Cooksey** (Lib Dem, Dorking South) said changes to planning policy removed the "central direction" of housing numbers and the need to develop the green belt in order to meet them. She added: "If the inspector agrees with our proposed process, as we hope she will, this can be achieved by introducing a major modification, which would allow the plan to proceed to the next stage of consultation on all the proposed modifications."

BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service

[Ed: Epsom and Ewell Times hope to bring you an update on the position with Epsom and Ewell's Local Plan next week as we await news from the Borough Council.]