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Cllr Persand intervenes ahead of Local Plan debate

Opinion from Councillor **Kieran Persand** (Conservative Horton Ward) on the Local Plan business.

Tonight, at 7:30pm, your Epsom & Ewell Borough Councillors will be meeting to decide on whether or not to unpause the Local Plan.

However, this meeting holds greater significance than just the unpausing. It is about the future of our community, and whether we want to protect what makes our borough unique, both for us now and for future generations.

Being born and raised in Epsom and Ewell, I have cherished memories in every corner of the borough. Whether that is playing football at Gibraltar Recreation Ground in Ewell on a cold Sunday morning; walking our dog on a sunny Wednesday afternoon on Hook Road Arena; or my parents buying me an ice cream as a treat on the Downs. Our green spaces and their protection are vital for our community.

And so, it saddens me that since the meeting to pause on 22 nd March, there has been no change, nor even a commitment to change from the Council on the direction of the Local Plan. As it stands, there is still an inclusion of over 50 hectares of greenfield, Greenbelt land.

We are probably in a worse position than we were seven months ago as fewer sites have come forward than anticipated in the call for sites process.

It is clear what residents want and need. You made your voices heard. Over 11,000 of you signed a petition demanding for the removal of Greenbelt land from the Local Plan. It is a shame that you haven't been properly listened to. Since being elected in May, I've been determined to change that and build on the work of Cllr Bernie Muir and Chris Grayling MP.

You may have heard people say that it is because of the Government that the Council must build on Greenbelt land, and that there isn't a choice. This is untrue. There is no mandatory housing target, there are only guidelines which provide a starting point for considering local needs. It's clearly stated in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that it is not a requirement to build on Greenbelt land in order to meet specific housing levels.

It is a misguided and hopefully short-lived choice, that Epsom & Ewell Borough Council have taken to propose building on Greenbelt land. If Worthing Council can gain approval from the government's Planning Inspector when they met only 25% of their target, why can't Epsom and Ewell achieve a similar result? We already have ample evidence to support us in planning for a realistic and achievable target of 3,800 homes, including truly affordable homes for those in greatest needs, which can be achieved solely using brownfield land. This is the direction we should take.

The current NPPF guidance gives us the ability to remove Greenbelt land. This is stated in Para. 11. We don't have to wait for any changes to the Framework, we can be proactive now.

There is a need for housing in Epsom and Ewell but nothing in the current Local Plan addresses that need. What is needed is truly affordable housing for key workers and young people, and the possibility of housing stock for local Housing Associations to provide for those who cannot otherwise reach the first rung of the housing ladder. 'Affordable homes' are not £500,000 -£1m properties, as these will never be affordable for the average worker.

We need a plan that maximises our current urban brownfield space, not a plan that wants to build in fields and woodland, in critical drainage areas, or areas in which there is insufficient infrastructure. We need a plan that is creative and forward-thinking.

At the Full Council meeting on 25th July, I submitted a motion, seconded by Cllr Muir, for the removal of Greenbelt land from the Local Plan and the protection of Greenbelt boundaries. However, this was rejected by the Council, with no adequate reasoning provided, and so didn't go in front of Councillors to debate.

After that, I quickly realised that for real change to happen with the Local Plan, we all needed to work together. And so, myself and a group of like-minded Councillors from across the political spectrum have been working collaboratively together with the intent to set the Local Plan on the right course. It's been incredible and reaffirms what local politics should be about – doing the best for residents.

We have now submitted an amendment for the meeting today, calling for the removal of Greenbelt land; protect the existing Greenbelt boundaries; and for there to be commitments to have truly affordable housing.

I want residents to remember – if Councillors do vote this amendment down. They are effectively voting against the protection of

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our greenbelt land; they are voting against having truly affordable homes for people who need them; they are voting against protecting the character of our unique area; and they are voting against the people they serve.

If the Local Plan is to be unpaused, there needs to be guiding principles that provide clear direction for the Local Plan over the coming months, we cannot be in a position where nothing has changed. This would be a waste of resources and taxpayer money.

So, I urge all my colleagues in the Council chamber tonight, whether Residents' Association, Liberal Democrats, or Labour, to work proactively and collaboratively together to realign the Local Plan to address the needs and concerns of residents and provide the strong direction you deserve by voting for the proposed amendment.

Local Plan Battle: early skirmishes on Downs Farm

As **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** is expected to publish a draft **Local Plan** in February 2023 **Epsom and Ewell Times** carries below an opinion piece authored by the **Keep Epsom & Ewell Green Belt Group**. We cannot confirm these campaigners' contentions but we are happy to stimulate public discussion and interest through our pages. The Local Plan will shape for several years to come the decisions on new housing development locations in the Borough.

Opinion Piece:

Alarmed by well-sourced leaks, residents have decided to come out fighting early against joint landowner and developer discussions with Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) to build hundreds of homes on the 110-acre Downs Farm, destroying forever one of the closest Green Belt sites to London.

Other Green Belt sites near Epsom's Hook Arena and Horton Farm are also believed to be earmarked housing in the Local Plan process, and it is even feared that other areas within Epsom's 42% of Green Belt land could also have been offered up and included.

Residents in Surrey's already highest populated borough are so concerned that they are not waiting for what they say could be a flawed consultation process, expected in February.

Under Government pressure to deliver nearly 700 homes for each of the next 20 years, planning officers and councillors should instead be prioritising developer partnerships for an imaginative alternative "brownfield" core scheme, claims the residents' campaign group.

However, following much-publicized Government climbdown guidelines announced this week by Secretary of State, Michael Gove, that top-down housing targets were to be "advisory only" and could be challenged by local authorities if the character of their area would be irrevocably changed, EEBC should be in no doubt, say residents, that Green Belt sites should be now removed from its Draft Local Plan.

By redeveloping the Kiln Lane/Longmead area closer to town centre facilities, "more starter and lower cost young family homes could be built – and bring much needed rejuvenation and job opportunity benefits. Yet there is little sign that the planners are engaging with developers on this opportunity, preferring the easier, but devastating, option of

building higher end housing on Green Belt fields."

The borough-wide residents' campaign, *"Keep Epsom and Ewell Green Belt" involves* social media, mass leaflet drops, a new petition (https://www.change.org/EpsomGreenBelt) and its own website(https://epsomgreenbelt.org/). Some residents may well stand as independent Green Belt candidates in the May elections.

'Our advice is that once a site has been publicly designated as suitable by the Council in the Local Plan, public consultations rarely change what are perceived as "done deals" – and we are not simply prepared to stand by and let that happen. In 2019, EEBC listed Downs Farm as a Green Belt site not suitable for development, yet it now appears to conveniently ignore this just because the site has been offered up to them' said Yufan Si, campaigner of Keep Epsom and Ewell Green Belt.

Downs Farm is a rare chalk grassland habitat for protected species such as skylarks and bats, with regular sightings of deer, redkite and pheasant.

"Destroying forever high quality Green Belt sites will result in mainly luxury houses. We are deeply disappointed that the Residents Association controlled EEBC appear set to prefer Green Belt desecration over redeveloping a core brownfield scheme in central Epsom. Properly phased, this could be promoted as a creative industries hub, focussed on the town's University of Creative Arts centre for excellence. As well as a much better mix of around 5,000 affordable starter and rented homes for young

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families, this would provide job opportunities in a much-needed Epsom rejuvenation."

The campaign group also points out keeping Green Belt spaces also helps sustainability and the UK commitment to net zero by 2030.

The Elmbridge Council Local Plan is cited as an example where the council and residents challenged unrealistic top-down government housing targets. It proposes redeveloped brownfield sites without any Green Belt destruction – despite having a greater proportion of Green Belt land (57%) than Epsom.

The residents' campaign urges EEBC planners to quickly engage with brownfield developers using a £75,000 grant recently announced by the Government. Given its overriding remit to only prefer Green Belt development in "exceptional circumstances", *and the recent Government policy rethink on housing*, this should be done before the draft Epsom Local Plan is issued in February, say residents.

"Keep Epsom and Ewell Green Belt" Campaign Group – for further information contact epsomgreenbelt@gmail.com

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UK Shareholders' visit to BP PLC: Local accountant shares his insight

I am a member of the UK Shareholders' Association, the main benefit of which is visiting companies to ascertain what their strategy is and to evaluate what the future might hold. Due to Covid, we have been unable to visit companies for the last two years, but our first visit this year was to BP plc on 10 May. As usual, they made us very welcome and provided an excellent lunch. Due to climate change and the need cut emissions the management of BP concluded that demand for their basic products of oil and gas would decline by 50% over 50 years. Because of this, a strategy was devised to transform the company into an integrated energy company. They concluded they would focus on their hydrocarbons business. They would grow their convenience and mobility businesses. Finally, they would build with discipline a low carbon energy business.

Their 2021 annual report was headed 'Performing while transforming'. Their main speaker told us that their good performance in

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2021 (7.6bn of earnings and $23.6bn of cash inflow from operating activities) was due to their strategy. Of course, their exceptionally good result in 2021 was nothing to do with their strategy, as it was simply a result of windfall profits due to very high prices of oil and gas primarily due to the crisis in Ukraine that is causing so much pain for so many people. In fairness, part of the windfall made up for low prices in 2020 when the company declared a loss of ($20.7bn), compared to a profit of $4.0bn in 2019. Cash flow was also impacted in 2020 as cash inflow was only $12.2bn compared to $25.8bn in 2019.

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The good fortune, in cash terms, continued in the first quarter of 2022 so they were able to reduce debt to $27.5bn. They were swimming in cash. When companies generate a lot of cash but lack a strategy for growth and have no idea what to do with such cash, they resort to share buy-backs. In short, they buy their own shares in the open market and cancel such shares. At the end of the buy-back earnings per share (eps) have automatically increased as the number of issued shares has decreased. We can deduce that BP has no strategy for growth; what they have in a strategy for survival given their main market is contracting. The speaker responsible for transforming the company told the meeting that his task was extremely difficult as it meant negotiating with many countries to get their cooperation. He said the biggest problem was how to reduce the use of aviation fuel.

We were told that BP had committed $18bn of investment to meet their survival strategy and $2.5bn (£2.03bn) for share buybacks. At the current price of 420p per share, they could buy back nearly 500 million shares (the actual number is obviously dependent upon the actual price of the purchases) but as there are 20,778 million shares currently in issue this will have little impact. What this should do though is hold the share price up as the market knows that collectively 2,500 million shares are waiting to be bought. Institutions like the idea as it gives them time to think. Individual investors should think hard as if the oil price falls at the exact time the share buy-back is complete then this share will fall, possibly significantly. When share buy-backs are in progress it is rather like a bubble; knowing when it will burst is key.

The problem with share buy-backs is that it is an artificial mechanism that never benefits shareholders in the long term. Buying shares at the high end of their range is never a good idea. If companies like BP don't know what to do with their surplus cash, then a windfall tax is definitely justified.

READ MORE: Witness appeal following collision in Ewell

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

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.

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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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