

# Crucial month for local Local Plans?

15 January 2023



**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.

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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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