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Drafting of Epsom and Ewell Local Plan “unpausing”?

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Tuesday 26th September Epsom and Ewell Borough Council’s Licensing and Planning Policy Committee met to decide whether to recommend to the Full Council to restart work on the submission of a new Local Plan for the Borough. The motion to do so was carried after a lengthy debate.

Chairing the committee Councillor **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) stated that following the Full Council decision of 22nd March to pause the work on the Local Plan if “unpaused” its submission for approval by the Government could be expected in May 2025.

A member of the public, who was not identified, opened the debate with the following detailed appraisal: “I am pleased to see from the 15th of June meeting of this committee’s agenda…. that you have now calculated the actual need for new dwellings. When you replace the out-of-date 2014 household projections with the more recent 2018 projections and exclude the flawed affordability uplift, this results in a much more realistic figure of 2664 new dwellings over the plan period.

“To comply with the current version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), you still need to begin with the standard method number of 10,368. However, it can be easily demonstrated that this number is unachievable in light of local constraints. The point where that version of the Local Plan went so horribly wrong was in selecting an arbitrary target of 5,400 new dwellings and rushing into sacrificing Greenfield and Greenbelt sites to bridge the gap between the identified 3,700 Brownfield sites and the council’s arbitrary target.

“If the council were to set a new dwelling target of 3,700 plus this 150 (West Park site), then that would result in a target that is 45% above the actual need for new dwellings over the plan period.

“If the council agrees to a target of 3,850 new dwellings with no development on Greenfield or Greenbelt sites, then I am confident that it will be possible to develop a Local Plan that is acceptable to local residents. Furthermore, the council would have a compelling rationale for why a target of 10,368 is not achievable given local constraints and that its proposed target is 45% more than the actual local need.

“If the planning inspector subsequently insists on developing some Greenfield or Greenbelt sites, then he or central government will be blamed by local residents rather than Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.”

Cllr **Muir** (Conservative Horton) a non-member of the committee was given three minutes to make a statement and said: “It is critical when deciding whether or not to unpause the local plan drafting process … that council has clarity over the objectives for the next draft and the key changes required to achieve those objectives. So, what do we need to decide before unpausing?

“The most controversial of the recommendations put forward in …draft local plan was the proposal to build on the borough’s protected Greenbelt Land. Using the council’s figures, 84% of those who used the questionnaire to reply to the consultation were opposed to building on our protected Green Belt. …The large majority [of] elected councillors, stood in May’s local elections on a platform of protecting the green belt. We are morally obliged to protect this land and the environment for future generations.

“How many houses do we need to build in Epsom? Epsom is already the most densely populated borough in the county. There has been discussion about the need to meet the government target calculated using the standard method. This is not a mandatory target. The published local plan proposals do not attempt to meet the target of 10,478 dwellings over the plan period. For context, this is more than three times the target in the Epsom annual 2007 plan and more than four times the need indicated using the government’s 2018 household growth projections. The plan instead included a target of 5,875 dwellings, although no calculation was provided to support this.

“NPPF paragraph 11 states, “Following strategic policy should provide the objectively assessed needs for housing unless the application of policies in this framework that protect land designated as Greenbelt, local Green Space, and areas at risk of flooding. These provide a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type, and distribution of development.” We in Epsom have exactly those strong reasons listed and should use them to protect the borough. The plan identified

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Brownfield sites that could accommodate 3,800 dwellings without any use of Greenfield Greenbelt sites. Importantly, using this figure as the housing target complies with the existing NPPF paragraph 11 and exceeds the housing need derived from the latest government data.

“In conclusion, I support the unpausing of the local plan if and only if we commit to the objectives of protecting our environment and green spaces through excluding development of the Greenfield Greenbelt sites and including realistic housing targets. And that this Council commits to speaking to large-scale developers to learn what can be done to address the alleged barriers put forward by this Council to pursuing the Kiln Lane and Longmead proposal.”

Cllr **James Lawrence** (LibDem College) also spoke as a non-member of the committee and said:

“I very much do want to see houses built. We have a definitive lack of affordable housing, i.e., first-time buyer housing, ……., which our draft plan is not adequately addressing. Urban density on our Brownfield site should be increased with an aim for gentle urban density around six stories max. These units should be mainly single and double-bedroom apartments located within 20 minutes’ walk or cycle of existing infrastructure.

On these grounds, I would like to see the local plan unpaused with a recommendation to be enacted to increase urban density and remove the inappropriate Green Belt developments.”

Earlier **Cllr Julie Morris** (LibDem – College) suggested that if the motion was passed the next Full Council being scheduled for 12th December, she may make moves to convene an extraordinary Council to consider the proposal to “unpause” the Local Plan process on an earlier date, to avoid delay.

Six members of the eight strong committee voted in favour of the motion to recommend to the Full Council the unpausing of the drafting of the Local Plan.

The Epsom and Ewell Times can confirm that Chairman of the Committee Steve McCormick has secured support from the requisite number of Councillors to convene an Extraordinary Meeting of the Full Council. Date to be confirmed but likely to be 24th October.

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