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Epsom’s neighbour cracks on with its Local Plan

23 October 2024

More than 6,000 new homes will be built in the Surrey borough of Mole Valley, with Leatherhead taking on the largest share after the district council approved its long-term planning bible.

Mole Valley District Council has agreed to build an average of 336 homes a year between 2020 and 2039 with town centre sites in Leatherhead, such as Bull Hill, and Dorking being set aside for large scale housing-led redevelopment.

Office complexes in Ashstead and Dorking have also been earmarked for regeneration, and green belt land in Ashstead, Bookham, Dorking and Leatherhead released so developers can build homes.

The council has also agreed to hand over green belt land for housing within and around Hookwood to “complement” economic growth near Gatwick.

Villages within the green belt, namely Beare Green, Brockham, Capel, Charlwood, and Westcott will have their boundaries amended to allow “appropriate development” after Mole Valley District Council formally adopted its local plan last week (October 15).

In all, Leatherhead is expected to take on 30 per cent of the new homes (1,914), followed by the areas around Dorking 23 per cent (1,467) , Hookwood, 15 per cent (957) , Ashtead, 11 per cent (701) and Bookham, seven per cent (446).

The remaining 14 per cent (893) will be spread across the rest of the district.

In Leatherhead the council wants to create what it calls, a Riverside Quarter, at Claire House and James House in Bridge Street. This would go alongside an Urban Quarter at the redevelopment of the Bull Hill.

For Dorking, the Pippbrook House refurbishment remains its flagship development as well as plans to redevelop the Foundry Museum and Church Street workshops.

More locally, housing requirements for neighbourhood areas are as follows:

- Ashtead – 652 net new dwellings
- Bookham – 513 net new dwellings
- Capel Parish – 198 net new dwellings
- Ockley Parish – 135 net new dwellings
- Westcott – 123 net new dwellings

Mole Valley District Council, which passed its local plan by 28 votes to five with one abstention, said that 40 per cent of all new units would be affordable, and all come with at least one EV charging point.

The meeting heard that about 76 per cent of Mole Valley land was designated as Metropolitan Green Belt and protected from most forms of development.

Under its new plan, it said it has been able to deliver sites for housing while relinquishing less than one per cent of that.

Had the local plan not been agreed, developers would have had carte blanche to build without restrictions.

Cllr Margaret Cooksey, portfolio holder for planning on the Liberal Democrat run council, said: “It gives me enormous pleasure to be able to bring the local plan to this council for adoption at last.

“The local plan is about much more than a document about meeting housing need but a good deal of time and effort is taken up by worrying about specific development sites, particularly green belt sites,

“It’s worth noting again that only 0.65 per cent of the existing green belt in the district has been identified to be released for future development.

“There are sites in most of our wards that we wish were not there however I did say, that I felt that it was a fair plan in as much as what could be seen as pain was spread as evenly as possible across the district.”

Local plans go through long drawn-out processes before they are formally adopted, requiring sign off from planning inspectors.

Councils need to identify land for development and demonstrate it can meet housing targets. Often there is a trade off between town centre intensification or protecting green belt.

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As well as the housing, the Mole Valley plan creates 230 new locally listed buildings and grants 27 parks and open spaces extra protection.

Dissenting voices in the chamber felt the council could have gone further to limit the impact on green belt while Cllr Chris Hunt (Independent, Ashtead Lanes and Common) said more could be done to curb building heights to stop town's from becoming the next Woking.

He told the meeting: "This is not a sugar coated pill for us to take, it's got some very good things, affordable housing, the commitment for better health and education facilities, those are very positive things.

"But it's also got some really hard to agree things.

He added: "There is still quite a lot of uncertainty about whether a key site in our key town of Leatherhead can actually be developed or not."

Adding: "It's effectively saying that the plan's foundations are uncertain in that regard and unfortunately it does echo something else, that there are no clearly defined density agreements.

"It has lots of good things but if I was on Strictly [Come Dancing] it would not be 10 out of 10, it would be a seven."

Cllr Cooksey said: "We're not Woking, Mole Valley is not Woking and we don't want to look like Woking but there's the dilemma between do we build in the green belt (or in the towns?)"

Cllr Leah Mursaleen-Plank (Liberal Democrat, Mickleham, Westcott and Okewood) said her ward has been hit by uncontrolled development "again and again" and called out at those asking to delay the plan's adoption in order to protect more green belt.

She said: "There is no alternative here.

"We have been in a position in my ward where we haven't had a local plan and we've had uncontrolled developments going through over and over again.

"We're losing green belt by delaying further.

"To say that we need more time just means more development on green belt sites, the opposite of what you would like to achieve."

Summing up Cllr Cooksey said: "I'm disappointed that we can't say that it's the overwhelming view of the whole council, it would have been very much stronger if we could have had support from the whole chamber.

'However we have an excellent plan here, I truly believe it and really think it's probably the best we could probably have come up with under all the circumstances that we've had to deal with over the years."

Mole Valley covers 25,832 hectares, 16 per cent of Surrey as a whole and is the third largest borough in the county.

Its population of 87,245 accounts for seven per cent of Surrey's total, while the average house price of £505,000 makes it second most expensive district in the county.

The ratio of house prices to residents' salaries was 14:1 in March 2020, the fifth most unaffordable district in Surrey.

Between 2014 and 2019, 1,265 new homes were completed in Mole Valley – 230 of which were affordable.

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Artistic Impression Of The Arrival Square from North Street, south east corner. (Credit: Mole Valley District Council and Keir Property)

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