

Lessons for Epsom in Mole Valley's "shouty" Local Plan struggle?

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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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