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Local Plan to move forward after passionate debate

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Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillors voted to “un-pause” work on a new Local Plan for the district at an extraordinary meeting held in the Town Hall chamber on Tuesday 24th October.

Introducing the motion to un-pause **Cllr Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley) said “what is brought before you this evening is a recommendation from Licensing Planning Policy Committee members to unpause the local plan immediately to restart work on the spatial strategy, site selection, and policy development. If this recommendation is supported tonight, workshop sessions will be set up with all members to discuss the results from the call for sites that finished at the end of July. Updates on what sites have come forward and, more importantly, what sites did not come forward will be shared. Discussion and debate based on up-to-date data and evidence with all members, not just those on the LPPC, on which sites would or could be included in our next version of the local plan.”

Cllr **Christine Howells** (RA Nonsuch) proposed a lengthy amendment that opened with the following wording:

“The Council is asked to note the work that has been undertaken in line with the decision by the full Council on the 22nd March 2023 to pause the local plan, to note that while the current version of the national planning policy framework (NPPF) requires the council to start with the standard method housing number, the NPPF also allows for a lower number to be used if that starting point is unachievable in light of local Green Belt, flooding, or other specific constraints.

To note that the current draft local plan has already set a precedent by using a much lower target. However, this target was only achieved under proposals to build on high-scoring Green Belt land and sites subject to flooding. The available evidence base clearly demonstrates constraint-trying factors and provides strong reasons for excluding these sites from housing development.”

In summary the amendment focused on resuming the local planning process with a set of guiding principles that emphasize sustainable development, housing affordability, and the efficient use of available land resources.

Cllr Howells said “Mr. Mayor, I have brought the motion before you today as I am passionate in my belief of the need to protect and preserve this Borough’s Green Belt land for the benefit and enjoyment of our current population and to secure a heritage for future generations. But most importantly, I believe I’m speaking on behalf of so many of our residents who are equally passionate to preserve our unique Borough and who have made their voices heard in so many ways.”

“Seven months ago, councillors voted with an overwhelming majority to pause the draft local plan following the huge public outcry at the proposed use of green belt land identified for development. Nothing has changed in the interim period to make it any more acceptable now than it was then. However, we can’t afford to wait for the government to change direction. We must unpause and set our own conditions. But it remains vital that we continue to safeguard our green belt.”

Cllr **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) spoke on the amendment “The housing target should be …. achievable solely through the use of brownfield and previously developed Green Belt land with a determined focus on the art of the possible. Brownfield sites and previously developed sites are the answer, and this includes maximizing council-owned land. I have been calling on this council for years to get advice from large-scale developers as to what can be done to address the alleged barriers put forward by the council to using brownfield sites and, in particular, council-owned land, and as yet, they have resolutely refused to do so. They must do so as a matter of urgency.”

Cllr **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) called out the amendment: “ I must put on record this is not a cross-party motion, although it appears to have some merit. Labour councillors cannot support it as it’s so disingenuously drafted as to constitute a NIMBY charter. I’ve attended the same briefings as other councillors, seen the same lobbying from those behind this motion, and I know its main purpose is to minimize the number of homes built in the borough by citing excuse after excuse for not building to tie officers’ hands while purporting not to do so. It’s not a cunning plan; it’s actually very transparent. Labour is in favour of using brownfield sites, not in favor of uncontrolled and unnecessary building on the borough’s Green Belt, but we are strongly in favor of building the homes that residents need. This motion is designed to prevent that.”

“Councillor **Persand** (Con. Horton) is a strong supporter of the motion, writing in the **Epsom and Ewell Times**. He correctly pointed out that what are called housing targets are, in fact, “guidelines which provide a starting point for considering local needs.” He then wrote, “If Worthing Council can gain approval from the government’s planning

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inspector when they met only 25% of their target, why can't Epsom and Ewell achieve a similar result?"

"The motion puts forward a list of so-called local constraints, exceptionalism, providing a list of reasons not to build homes for our residents. Then there's just sloppy language dressed up as wishful thinking.."

"Finally, does anyone think that promising significant levels of proposed housing should be truly affordable to local workers has any meaning? They're just adjectives that mean different things to different people, which will melt away at the first sign of opposition from developers."

Cllr **Persand** spoke in favour of the motion: "This amendment is an opportunity, an opportunity for us to finally do the right thing for residents. We, as councillors, need to be strong in supporting this amendment. Point 2.1 of the officer report says officers seek confirmation for members as to what to do next. It is our role to guide policy, so let's do that. It is important that we don't go full circle again with this local plan and that we do learn from our mistakes. These guiding principles will ensure that we are back on the right path, delivering for residents and our community. We need a local plan that is aspirational but deliverable. This amendment lets us do that."

Cllr **Alison Kelly** (LibDem Stamford) said " It is clear that if we do not unpause a local plan, there are two serious consequences: developers will run with their plans on appeal, and we'll miss the 2025 deadline and have to start from scratch, wasting money and effort. This would leave us with no control over location, density, nor social housing provision in Epsom. We are spending £1.5 million on temporary housing, and we cannot afford to let this continue. We had good feedback from residents during the consultation, and we must take their views into account, specifically with the use of the brownfield sites and the retention of the green belt."

Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) weighed in: "I think I have to start by rebutting what Labour colleagues have said. The reason that we have problems in accommodating people is because of Labour policy, not current policy. No, you may laugh; it was the Rent Act of 1977 under Harold Wilson.…All over the country, lodgers were evicted. One of them was one of my uncles;… It was absolutely a dreadful piece of legislation. Perhaps our Labour friends haven't actually listened to what was said at the Labour conference, which was only about a week or two ago, where Keir Starmer actually said, and I commend him for his honesty, that they don't intend taking any notice of local authorities."

Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) " I think if we adopted this amendment, I cannot see a path that gets us to a sound local plan. What was before us tonight is the decision whether we want to unpause this local plan to allow LPPC and officers to digest the results of the consultation and take the necessary measures from that."

Cllr **Liz Frost** (RA Woodcote and Langley) also spoke against the amendment: ".. if it were to be approved, …. we are likely to tie the officers up in knots."

The amendment was defeated by 14 votes to 12 with 3 abstentions.

The Council then proceeded to debate the main motion to un-pause the work on the Local Plan (as reported in Tuesday's Epsom and Ewell Times). The motion was approved by 21 votes for the motion and eight abstentions from the motion. There were no votes against the motion.

Related reports:

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