

# Epsom Civic Society

formerly Epsom Protection Society

shaping the future, safeguarding the past

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16 December 2019

Dear Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillors,

## **Council Meeting 18 December: Current Concerns About Epsom's Future**

We are writing to you all as the Committee of Epsom Civic Society, which has over 1800 members and is now in its 61<sup>st</sup> year of existence having started in 1959 as Epsom Protection Society. We are most concerned at the renewed threat to Epsom as a result of national housing policy imposed by Central Government and by the partial solution being implemented by our own Borough Officers. Even our local Conservative MP has failed to support their plan, and published his own counter-proposal, although it is not clear that this would be either feasible or compliant.

The approach for Epsom mandated in May 2018 by the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee has led, unbeknownst to the majority of residents, to pre-implementation (under the guise of “optimising housing delivery”) of a policy immediately to force maximum possible new build density on all new development sites without regard to any maximum height provisions in the 2007 Local Plan. If built, these would clearly have a major adverse impact on some of the aspects of Epsom that once made it the 4<sup>th</sup> best town in England in which to live.

Until very recently, this policy has not been widely known or publicised, and the full impact of what is being done has only become apparent to local residents through a number of current and imminently anticipated planning applications for major high-rise developments (The Wells, Stoneleigh Station Approach, West Street Epsom, and the Epsom hospital site, the Church Street police and ambulance station sites) and the publication (to date without public consultation) of the draft Epsom & Ewell Masterplan.

These proposals have led to hundreds of individual objections, mostly to “tower blocks” more than twice the height of any existing building in the Borough, and the e-petition by College Ward RA to have the approach to revising the Local Plan debated in a full council meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> December.

The Society believes, for reasons set out below, that the meeting must seek to re-prioritise the work of the Borough Planning team to prepare a plan which meets other priorities than mere numbers and which has a realistic chance of being achieved in practice.



Our view is that the housing numbers for Epsom mandated by the National Planning Policy Framework and the standard methodology for calculating housing need will not be achievable even if the Masterplan is implemented in combination with 118 hectares of equally dense development in the Green Belt part of the Borough. In attempting such a plan, it is likely that the character of the Borough will be irretrievably changed, the green ambience destroyed, leading to the Borough being subsumed into the urban sprawl of London – an outcome emphatically rejected by the residents of Epsom in 1963, whose present-day successors are likely to take the same view.

We therefore would ask you to:

- a) challenge the Borough Officers to describe the circumstances under which 579 new dwellings per annum can be achieved over the plan period and spell out in full the implications of such circumstances;
- b) support the very strong case that Epsom has to argue with HMG for a drastic reduction in our housing target, based on the high proportion of green belt and other primarily constrained land (flood plains, SSSIs, wildlife reserves and other open spaces needed for amenity and further tree planting to mitigate CO2 emissions, etc) and the extent to which the existing urban space is already built out with largely homogeneous housing;
- c) consider the alternative priorities proposed in the accompanying attachment for revising our Local Plan, and support as many of them as possible in issuing guidance to the Officers of the Council; and
- d) instruct the Officers to suggest a lower housing target number which they feel would be achievable in the context of the existing constraints and any revised priorities you propose.

The Society's Committee would be willing to meet with any of you, jointly or individually, to discuss any aspect of this letter or the attachment, since in our opinion, a failure to direct the Local Plan revision along achievable lines acceptable to the residents of the Borough represents an existential threat to the Epsom Borough we know and love, and even to its very existence as a discrete Borough or an area which can be distinguished in any way from the urban suburbs to the north of us.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Hollins, Chair

for and on behalf of Epsom Civic Society Committee

