

What we need to know now



Five key questions for us to discuss:

1. Housing:

- What could be the benefits of building extra homes?
- If up to 8,000 homes were to be built, where should they go?
- What should be done to make a large increase in new homes acceptable?

2. Green Belt:

- Why is it needed? Do we need it all?

1. Housing

What could be the benefits of building extra homes?

- Would create economic activity in the construction itself.
- Would help to satisfy unmet demand for affordable homes.
- There is a need to increase the proportion of affordable homes (current target 35% of permitted new housing, latest monitoring report actual achievement 29%).
- Extra affordable homes would help to satisfy the need for community services to house employees in the Borough – but these homes need to be genuinely affordable for those on low income.
- There was a need to house people who work in London or elsewhere who treat Epsom as a dormitory town but for whom local housing is unaffordable.
- There is a need to increase the proportion of affordable homes (current target 35% of permitted new housing, latest monitoring report actual achievement 29%).

If up to 8000 homes were built where would they go?

- 8,000 is too high and equals 25% increase in the Borough's current total (c31,000).
- Use of Green Belt is not favoured: a leafy suburb sort of town is greatly preferred, although this is probably not practicable.
- There was reluctance to pin down a figure, which is understandable in the absence of more evidence of land availability). Where they would go remains a problem.

What should be done to make a large increase in new homes acceptable?

- Good design, low rise and low density (*cf question 5 below*)
- Protect the Green Belt as far as possible. The 1500 homes built on the Hospital Cluster made our contribution to Green Belt development.

2. Green Belt

Why is it needed? Do we need it all?

- Prevents sprawl, keeps us as a community.

- Promotes healthy living, enjoyment of open spaces, uses for recreation.
- ‘Green lungs’ for the town.
- Supports biodiversity, provides wildlife corridors. A ‘belt’ preferred to green ‘wedges’ which break up the continuity of wildlife corridors, with associated adverse impacts.
- Important to retain the Green Belt for future generations.
- Value of Nonsuch Park’s contribution to the above.
- No support for development on the Green Belt, though the possibility of swapping sites might be considered in an appropriate case, ie if a site in the Green Belt is developed, an alternative parcel of land could /should be identified for Green Belt designation elsewhere.
- Support for Epsom as a national centre for horseracing, recognition of the contribution to the local economy, and need to make better use of Green Belt land in this context.

What we need to know now



3. Design and Controls:

- What are the issues?
- The height/density of new buildings?
- Or their design/scale and setting?

4. Heritage and Conservation:

- Which buildings and/or areas of Epsom should be preserved for their heritage value?

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3. Design and Controls

- Enforcement of adequate maintenance of the more than 400 heritage assets in the Borough (mostly Grade II listed) needs improvement to preserve the assets.
- Protection of locally listed buildings (about 100 in the Borough) from threatened development should be strengthened.
- The 21 Conservation Areas have special features and are generally well protected by special provisions. There is nothing, however, to prevent a planning application for a development which caused some astonishment, but any development must conform to the conditions applied.
- The provocative figure of 8,000 + new dwellings caused much conversation, even though this was not actually the actual target, but there was little agreement as to where they might go. There was some support for a particular area, for example the gas holder site, that could support higher buildings than the designated standard.
- There was no support for encroaching into certain areas of the green belt.

4. Heritage and Conservation

- In terms of design there was agreement about the need for ‘good’ design. We did not get very far in deciding what that meant, apart from the need to fit into the surroundings and using locally typical materials.
- There was no obvious or fundamental objection to ‘modern’ design.
- In terms of building height, it was felt that current standards seemed ok.
- However, a review might be suggested to see if there are any other areas where a greater height might be tolerated, perhaps including a surrounding transitional area, although the group at first felt it was unlikely that this would reveal any such areas.
- Then an interesting idea that the area around Ashley Road as it nears the Downs might be suitable - tall buildings could be acceptable where the height was made less obvious by the height of the Downs behind them and they would not be seen against the skyline.
- Infill building in gardens is often unsatisfactory, especially in the many Conservation Areas in Epsom. We felt that such development is unlikely to produce anything more than a small fraction of the 8,000 new houses contemplated for Epsom.
- This naturally led on to the Green Belt and, while there was a strong desire to protect it, the need for a review and some possible changes did not seem to create too much angst.
- The big issue seems to be infrastructure. We were keenly aware of the issues here in the sense that it includes not only roads, but also schools, medical facilities, the availability of utilities, etc. We know SCC is wildly behind in highway investment. It is no good building schools or medical facilities if the relevant authorities are unable to finance their subsequent operation. Similar comments relate to utilities etc especially drainage and sewerage. Infrastructure availability needs to be an essential part of our future comments on site identification and allocation.

5. Quality of Life

The main theme that emerged was the desire to retain Epsom’s character as a country market town, and to avoid it becoming another Sutton or Croydon.

In detail, quality of Life in Epsom could be improved by more:-

- Green belt
- Better trains & Crossrail 2
- Retail diversity – more one-off specialist retail outlets rather than chain stores, fewer charity shops (we noted that in 30 years Upper High St had lost most of its “village” shops – baker, fishmonger, greengrocer, chemist, bank branch – with only the butcher hanging on tentatively)
- Employment – the idea of centres of excellence met with approval, with horse-racing being one to retain and develop, possibly at the cost of some stable expansion in the green belt
- Inward investment
- Use of the Market Square
- Cheaper parking to encourage Epsom becoming a “destination of choice” from the surrounding area

- Trees in streets and benches in the town centre
- Cycling provision and possibly pedestrian precincts
- New infrastructure – schools, doctors, dentists
- School transport policy and provision to reduce to/from school car journeys
- Affordable housing
- Co-ordinated development – e.g. Plan E being realised rather than endlessly postponed. Possible use of compulsory purchase to ease multi-owner site developments.
- Multi-generational living: demographics may be driving Epsom to be a town of retired people on the one hand and under-30's on the other, some with young children; the risk is that these two groups may form two separate communities living side by side but never meeting or living together. Can we find ways of getting the retired community to be surrogate local grandparents for the young children, thus helping the parents to spend more time on economic activity which will benefit their families and the town itself?

Two particular approaches to the issues were raised which may be worth pursuing:-

- a) Is there another successful market town with best practice ideas to adopt in Epsom for heritage retention, character retention and town centre regeneration?
- b) Where is the nearest “retirement village”? This is characterised as a village with shops, post office, doctor and a community centre which can be used for mutual support by the retired residents. Housing would typically be bungalows or flats/maisonettes with lifts, but in an environment that fosters mutual support with some medical care locally available.

The theory goes that if this were available somewhere with good bus links to Epsom then many of the four-bedroom houses currently being blocked by one or two retired people could be made available for the families with children for which they were originally built.

The only things we really wanted less of were traffic and flat roofs on three or four-storey buildings.