

Epsom and Ewell Local Plan EIP – Stage 2

Matter 4: Green Belt

Issue 5: Is the Plans approach to the Green Belt justified and consistent with national policy?

5.1 The Framework is clear on a number of steps which need to be followed before reaching this conclusion. These are set out at paragraph 146 of the Framework. I have set these out below with my understanding of the evidence base in relation to these matters: Please could the Council review these and explain where within the evidence base the following assessments have been undertaken:

a) Make as much use as possible of suitable brownfield sites and underutilised land – did the Council revisit sites discounted through the LAA exercise and when did this take place?

For council.

b) Optimise the density of development in line with the policies in chapter 11 of the Framework, including whether policies to promote a significant uplift in minimum density standards in town and city centres and other locations well served by public transport - TP02 responds to this point at paragraph 3.9 – and HB01a draws a conclusion on this point at paragraph 4.14 however where is the evidence to support the conclusions drawn? Reference is made to document HB06a and HB06b however the only reference here I can see is to a masterplan principle of pursuing mainly low and mid-rise high density housing. Is there anything additional to this which the Council are seeking to rely upon?

This is for the Council to answer. While there may be opportunities to increase some densities this must be set against the fact that the LAA identified sufficient sites over the plan period to deliver just 34% of the borough's housing needs. It is unlikely that increases in density will address the shortfall in housing supply and remove the need to amend Green Belt boundaries. This does not remove the need for the Council to show that it has looked to optimise the density of sites allocated in the local plan and seek to ensure densities are optimised in appropriate locations elsewhere, but the level of shortfall provides sufficient evidence to consider whether exceptional circumstances exist to justify changes to the Green Belt boundary.

c) Has been informed by discussions with neighbouring authorities to meet needs Statement of Common Ground have been prepared to address this point

This for the Council to answer. However, on page 7 of DTC3 the Council states that once the work on the LAA was largely complete they wrote to neighbouring authorities in November 2022 to seek their support to address some of their housing needs. The outcome of this was unsurprising, given that these authorities face the same constraints, with no other authority willing to accommodate any of the Council unmet needs.

5.2 The LAA (September 2024) indicates at paragraph 4.14 that it is 'unlikely' that increasing the density of potential sites is likely to yield a sufficient amount to address the shortfall. TP07 states at paragraph 5.30 that the Council have explored a and b above through a desk based study as part of the LAA process, call for sites exercise and development of the draft Epsom Town Centre Masterplan. Can the Council identify where in the evidence base I can find this assessment?

For Council.

5.3 A number of concerns have been raised that the Council have failed to address this point correctly or have severely underestimated the capacity of the urban sites which could be achieved whilst balancing the quality of the urban environment – are these concerns valid and where is the evidence base to address these points?

This is for the Council. However, HBF do not consider the Council to have underestimated the capacity of it allocated urban sites.

5.4 Are the exceptional circumstances outlined within paragraph 3.3 of TP02 to justify changes to the Green Belt boundaries suitably robust and do they justify the approach taken? A number of representations have stated that the Green Belt boundaries should not be reviewed as the Council has not done enough to optimise densities on brownfield sites. Are these concerns valid?

The Council have shown that there are exceptional circumstances to justify amending Green Belt boundaries. As noted by the Council there has been an acute shortage of housing supply over many years. The Epsom and Ewell Core Strategy was adopted in 2007, and its housing requirement has been out of date since 2012 when the NPPF was first introduced. In 2016 the Council commissioned a SHMA alongside Kingston and Elmbridge which identified a housing need in Epsom and Ewell of 418 dpa. In 2018 the introduction of the standard method saw this need increase to 577 dpa. Change to the base period and affordability ratios have resulted in the LHNA for this local plan of 569 dpa. However, the housing delivery has fallen well short of these assessments of housing need. The latest AMR provides evidence of delivery in Table 6 and 7. Over the last ten years the Council delivered an average of 183 homes per annum and substantially lower than what would be required over the same period using the relevant assessments of housing need.

As we note in our matter 3 statement the impact of low levels of housing delivery and the focus of development in the urban area has impacted on the delivery of affordable housing and the growing need for this type of housing. The latest AMR sets out these difficulties in delivering affordable homes with Table 9 showing that over the last 5 years affordable housing delivery has averaged just 20 homes – around 2% of the homes built. This will have had an impact on the need for affordable housing in Epsom and Ewell which is currently estimated to be 652 dpa (574 dpa for rent and 78 dpa affordable home ownership). The acuteness of the need for new market and affordable homes alongside the lack of available development land elsewhere in the Borough is considered by HBF to be more than sufficient to justify the Council's decision to amend the Green Belt boundary in Epsom and Ewell.

As set out above HBF do not consider the Council to have underestimated the extent to which housing needs can be met in the urban area. When considering the density of development, it is still necessary for the Council to maintain

consistency with paragraph 128 of the NPPF which requires the Council in considering the density of development to also consider market conditions, viability, the availability and capacity of infrastructure and the desirability of maintain the character of an area. While development density should be optimised it must be still be appropriate and deliverable.

5.5 Paragraph 147 of the Framework states that where it has been concluded that it is necessary for the release of Green Belt land for development, plans should first give consideration to land which has been previously developed and/or is well served by public transport. Has the Council taken this approach and where is the evidence to support this? GB01 appears to indicate 4 assessments at paragraph 1.9 which do not include how well the site is served by public transport.

No comment.

5.6 The Framework states that the Plan should also set out ways in which the impact of removing land from the Green Belt can be offset through compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of remaining Green Belt land. Has this been done and where is the evidence to explain this?

No comment

5.7 Paragraph 3.31 of document TP02 concludes that the Plan proposes a limited amount of land for Green Belt release and the same position would be unlikely in the event of a much larger release. How is the Council defining much larger' in the context of this Plan and where is the evidence base to support this conclusion?

For Council.

5.8 GB01 (Green Belt Study Update 2024) and GB02 (Green Belt Technical Note 2023) present the remainder of the evidence base in relation to the Green Belt boundaries within the borough. It identifies a scoring system for sites based on selecting sites with the least harm to the Green Belt purposes. Has the Council applied the criteria in a consistent manner? A number of representors have outlined how sites which have been discounted have scored less in Green Belt terms. Is the Council clear in the reasons they have discounted sites and where is this information provided within the evidence base?

HBF do not consider the Council to have fully and robustly considered on both a strategic and a site by site basis whether the benefits of releasing more sites from the Green Belt are significantly outweighed by adverse impacts. As we note in our representation there are sites that are considered to have similar or lower impact on the Green Belt but have not been released but with no justification as to why. Given the pressing need for more homes, and in particular affordable homes, in Epsom and Ewell it appears to be counterintuitive not to release these sites based on the evidence presented. While the Council have undertaken assessments in GB01 and GB02, as well as TP02 as to the impact of each site the conclusions reached in the assessments in TP02 remains opaque as to why sites have been rejected. HBF would have expected a more detailed commentary as to the reason for this position as well as detailed consideration as to the benefits from each site. Without this consideration it would appear that the Council have not taken a balanced view as to whether, as required by paragraph 11a of the NPPF, the application of policies in the Framework provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type of distribution of development. This leads us to the conclusion

that in fact, as is highlighted in paragraph 7.2.1 of the SA, that a key reason for rejecting options that would deliver a higher growth strategy are the significant local objections rather than a balanced assessment of the benefits of allocating more sites against the adverse impacts of doing so.

5.9 Could the Council be doing more to address the 5500 dwelling shortfall?

Yes.

5.10 In light of the representations made by Epsom College, should the land be allocated to reflect the potential for enhanced education facilities at the site? The Council have stated that the site has been assessed as part of the LAA. Please could the Council provide the page/paragraph references for this?

No comment.

5.11 The transitional arrangements confirm that policies in the NPPF 2024 apply to planning applications from the day of publication. Footnote 58 indicates that the golden rules contributions in paragraph 156 do not apply if sites were released from the Green Belt in a plan which was adopted prior to publication of the NPPF 2024. As this Plan is in the process of being examined, this exception would not appear to relate to new Green Belt release sites within this Plan. Does the Plan need to be modified to include requirements for development on housing allocations removed from the Green Belt relating to the contributions (Golden Rules) referred to in NPPF 156 (affordable housing, infrastructure and accessible green spaces)?

HBF would agree that NPPF24 would require sites released from the Green Belt by this local plan to comply with the Golden Rules and as such it is not strictly necessary to amend policies to reflect the current policy. If policies are amended, then it will be necessary, as set out in paragraph 67b) of NPPF24 to consider the impact on the viability of the affected sites of requiring 50% of housing delivered to be affordable and, therefore, whether it is justified to set a policy requirement at that level.

5.12 If so, how would such requirements affect the viability of development on the relevant allocations?

For Council.

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