

## Making the Efficient Use of Land – Optimising Housing Delivery 2018



## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 On Tuesday 8 May 2018 the Borough Council's Licensing & Planning Policy Committee received a report entitled "Making the Efficient Use of Land – Optimising Housing Delivery". The report outlined the material considerations that the local planning authority should now take into account when assessing planning applications involving changes in use, higher densities and taller building heights.
- 1.2 The Committee acknowledged that the new approach is an interim measure prepared in response to changes in National Planning Policy Framework. Its implementation will demonstrate that the Council was doing everything possible to boost housing delivery and give greater certainty to the local plan process.
- 1.3 The Licensing & Planning Policy Committee agreed the proposed new approach to this matter. The new approach has now been communicated to the Borough Council's Planning Committee, who will take account of it through their decision making. The new approach will be deployed to meet the national planning policy requirement to significantly boost housing delivery and optimise land for new housing.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 Nationally there is a much greater emphasis upon the delivery of appropriate, or higher densities from new housing developments. The draft revision to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) seeks to make the most effective use of development land. The most important change for the Borough comes at NPPF Para 123, which states –

*"Where there is an existing or anticipated shortage of land for meeting identified housing needs, it is especially important that planning policies and decisions avoid homes being built at low densities, and ensure that developments make optimal use of the potential of each site."*

- 2.2 The preparation and production of the emerging new Local Plan has identified a new challenge for the Borough. Following the publication of the Borough-wide Strategic Housing Market Assessment, the Strategic Housing Land Availability and Green Belt Study it is clear that the Borough has a high objectively assessed housing need, yet lacks a sufficient supply of available, developable and deliverable housing sites to meet that need in full. The Borough's constrained housing land supply, coupled with its high objectively assessed housing need has led to a position where the Borough Council is unable to demonstrate a 5 year housing land supply. The Borough Council has determined that these are key material considerations when assessing the planning applications against adopted policy.

- 2.3 The Borough Council's Core Strategy (2007) provides a strategic policy context to this issue. The overarching principle of Core Strategy is set out in Policy CS1, which states that the Borough Council will expect the development and use of land to contribute positively to the social, economic and environment improvements necessary to achieve sustainable development- both in Epsom and Ewell, and more widely.
- 2.4 Specifically, Core Strategy Policy CS7 commits the Borough Council to *"seek to ensure sufficient housing is provided to meet the Borough's housing requirements..."*. In addition, Core Strategy Policy CS5 seeks to protect and enhance the visual character and appearance of the Borough's built environment. This sets out to achieve this objective by securing high quality and inclusive design. Critically in respect of this issue it clearly states that all development should make efficient use of land and have regard to the need to develop land in a comprehensive way.
- 2.5 The Borough Council's approach towards housing density and taller residential buildings is set out under Development Management Policies DM11 and DM13 respectively. These policies seek to manage the intensity of new development by limiting new housing developments (in most cases) to densities of 40 dwellings per ha or fewer, and buildings heights up to a maximum of 12m. The exception to this being Epsom Town Centre, where Plan E Policy E7 allows for buildings up to a maximum height of 16m in certain locations. This could serve to restrict the 'capacity' of sites located within the existing built areas.

### **3. The new Approach towards Optimising Housing Delivery**

- 3.1 In order to achieve sustainable housing growth on those sites that are available, deliverable and developable, housing should be fully optimised to ensure that the Borough responds positively to the requirement to provide as a minimum for its objectively assessed needs for housing and other development. Ultimately, this is likely to result in developing some sites at higher densities and could involve taller buildings than those we would have been permitted under our existing planning policies.
- 3.2 The Members of the Planning Committee, as decision makers will attribute weight to the wider national and local material planning considerations when assessing residential development schemes against current local adopted policy. This will ensure that sound and balanced decisions on planning applications are reached and that future development in the Borough positively contributes to achieving sustainable growth.

- 3.3 In order to reach a balanced decision, the Borough Council's Planning Committee may attribute greater weight towards the need to deliver new additional homes – subject to conformity with other relevant policies.
- 3.4 The Borough Council highlights that a constrained land supply position may lead to conflicting demand from different uses. The local plan evidence base is demonstrably clear that the major need is for new homes. Consequently, the Borough Council's Planning Committee and Planning Development Management Officers (when making delegated decisions) will need to consider whether the proposed use of a site represents the most effective use of that site. The Borough Council acknowledges that such an approach may result in an increase in proposals for mixed-use schemes.
- 3.5 Alternatively, the Borough Council's decision makers may consider that those proposals that fail to optimise the potential capacity of a site, or prejudice the developability of a wider site area to be developed for housing should not be positively considered. In those cases, the decision maker will consider using Core Strategy Policy CS5, alongside the NPPF as grounds for refusal. Given the Borough's high objectively assessed housing need and limited supply of available, deliverable and developable sites this is considered a robust ground for refusal.
- 3.6 Members of the Borough Council and local residents (through the Issues & Options Consultation on the new Local Plan) have expressed a desire to consider opportunities to optimise capacity of development sites. This could include increased densities and building heights whilst responding to the Borough's special visual character and appearance. Potential locations for higher buildings and densities have already been identified through the recent Issues & Options Consultation and the draft NPPF. These locations include town centres, sites in proximity to railway stations; and sites located along transport corridors.

#### **4. The Transformation Masterplan**

- 4.1 During February 2018 the Borough Council commenced work on a Masterplan. It will function alongside the new Local Plan and provide a supplementary planning policy framework that will facilitate the transformation of Epsom & Ewell into the 2040s. It is anticipated that this project will take over twelve months to complete. The Masterplan was the subject of a report to the
- 4.2 The focus of the Masterplan will be on the delivery of new types of higher density housing development in appropriate and sustainable locations. This includes taller buildings.

- 4.3 It is envisaged that the Masterplan will initially sit alongside the Local Plan Pre-Submission Draft – potentially being used to demonstrate a range of issues – from the Borough Council’s commitment to responding to housing demand through to providing evidence of site capacity. However, ultimately the masterplan will function alongside the Local Plan in its own right – guiding the evolution of residential development in Epsom & Ewell.
- 4.4 The master planning process will include consultation and engagement with key stakeholders including residents, local community groups and the development industry. As work progresses, there will be opportunities for new development proposals (coming through the development management process) to learn and take account of the Masterplan. The Borough Council actively encourages developers to take advantage of the opportunity to do so – as the outcomes could be mutually beneficial.

## **5. Conclusions**

- 5.1 The Borough Council’s new approach to optimising housing delivery was considered and adopted by the Borough Council’s Licensing & Planning Policy Committee on Tuesday 8 May 2018. The Committee agreed that those development sites that are available, deliverable and developable should be fully optimised to positively respond to our objectively assessed housing need.
- 5.2 The Committee agreed that whilst every planning application will continue to be assessed on its own merits, the Borough Council’s decision makers will need to carefully balance the current policy requirements with the material planning considerations outlined in this report. This may result in development proposals seeking to optimise the capacity of a proposal site by developing to a higher density (greater than 40 dwellings per ha) or exceed the maximum building height being considered positively.
- 5.3 Following the Committee’s decision the Borough Council’s decision makers will apply this approach to development proposals.