

LOCAL PLAN CONSULTATION - QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Introductory Comments

Chesham Town Council is of the view that should Chiltern District Council be obliged to provide the total numbers as outlined in the HEDNA, (even working on the assumption that the provision was spread equitably across the District), Chesham, with its well documented infrastructure shortfall, would be left with significant problems in terms of the built environment, highway infrastructure, education, transport, health, water and sewerage.

However, on the housing numbers currently proposed, again on the basis they are fairly distributed, we believe the housing needs in Chesham can be met significantly by:

- Building on brownfield, under-utilised employment sites listed in the response below.*
- Building higher density housing and developing dwellings accommodating up to four storeys in and near the town centre, (principally flats, smaller houses and affordable homes), as this better meets residents' needs.*
- Utilising a significant part of the current car parking area in and around the town centre, whilst maintaining at least the same number of parking spaces or, ideally, more, in multi-storey car parks. Such parking needs also to take into account the current parking pressures at the railway station.*
- Replacing outdated employment sites with modern facilities reflecting the digital age, accepting that some of these may need to relocate to the edge of town, relieving congestion in the town centre.*

If any Green Belt land is required, e.g. to allow the relocation of employment sites to the edge of Town, this should not be on AONB land and should be near ready access routes out of town e.g. to the A41, to minimise industrial traffic flowing through the town. Appropriate housing for employees near those employment sites is also important to reduce traffic congestion.

Question 1: Do you have any comments on the definition of housing and functional economic market areas being used, on the draft Buckinghamshire HEDNA or on the needs assessment work planned during the next stages of the Joint Local Plan process?

We don't agree that there are no significant market relationships between the Chiltern area and Hertfordshire. Chesham lies very close to the border, and: people often shop in Watford or Hemel Hempstead, go to restaurants in Berkhamsted, and buy cheaper property in Tring or Hemel. Conversely it appears people in Berkhamsted are buying properties in this area being cheaper than their town. Moreover people in Chesham look to Aylesbury Vale and Dacorum Districts for employment opportunities.

For Chesham, there is high demand for flats and starter homes, plus smaller properties for older people to downsize and therefore we believe there is a case for Chesham to support a greater housing density than the average for the District, providing the bulk of it is in or near the Town centre rather than at the outskirts.

On employment land, current employment land in Chesham is under-utilised so it is questionable if the town needs an additional 2 hectares. However, we accept that we may need some additional employment land on the edge of town in order to release employment land in the more central areas of Chesham for housing.

Question 2: Do you have any comments on the draft HELAA, particularly in relation to whether included sites are likely to be deliverable by 2036 and whether additional sites should be added?

It's impossible to know exactly which sites will become available by 2036, but a lot of them certainly will be if they have development potential and therefore offer financial return possibilities. However we accept the conclusions as presented at the present time.

Question 3: Are there existing uses not currently identified in the HELAA and within the built-up areas that may be surplus to requirements or where the existing use could be consolidated or re-provided elsewhere such as open spaces, sports and leisure uses?

No, unless further sites come forward unknown to us.

Question 4: Do you agree with the approach to the Joint Local Plan Vision and Objectives and if not what changes or additions do you consider are needed? Please explain your reasoning for suggesting any alterations.

We agree with the approach though express concern on the reference to possible Green Belt development when the proper assessment was only completed a few days before the closure of the consultation period.

Local business organisations (Better Chesham, Chiltern Chamber, Federation of Small Businesses and Buckinghamshire Business First) have identified the need for a small business incubation and innovation centre in Chesham as a top priority. The need for a hotel in Chesham was also identified. Two regional commercial property agents have the opinion that although present growth demand is dormant, any future economic growth would lead to shortages, particularly of office space within the centre of the town.

Question 5: What spatial strategy option or options do you think the Council should consider and what should be the priority order? Are there any other spatial strategy options that the Joint Plan should consider and why?

We would prioritise 'Investigate all the options', which is Option L. Looking at the other options, we would have reservations in regard to Options B, C and F.

With regards to Option J, we have reservations that this would be most attractive to those moving out of London and not fully address local need in terms of those established residents looking for reasonable accommodation to allow them to stay and work within the town.

Regarding Option K, we need to be assured of the actual employment space demand within Chesham and the Chilterns, and that such employment site development would reflect the

changing dynamics of working practices, e.g. the change from light industry production to IT led and home working businesses.

When considering all options, we believe the following should be adhered to:

Protect the AONB

Fulfil the wishes of the majority of our residents by protecting the Green Belt as much as practicably possible. Where it is considered unavoidable to develop the Green Belt, we believe it would be better served earmarking the area predominantly for community, sporting and educational use (or employment sites as previously stated) rather than simply wholesale housing development

Development should not lead to the town coalescing with neighbouring villages and creating suburban sprawl most obviously with Botley and Ley Hill.

There should be a fair distribution of development across the District

Develop older, industrial sites into higher density dwellings e.g. Chilton Road, Bellingdon Road and Phoenix Business Park, Townsend Road, Springfield Road, amongst others identified in the report by GL Hearn Ltd to CDC (2013). It should be noted that these sites suffer from a lack of parking. For this reason the Town Council is undertaking a Parking Review to establish Resident Parking Areas to maintain what parking there is for the current established residents only. It may be necessary for the District Council to consider the need for a new public car-park for lower Townsend Ward roads.

Develop some higher density housing provision generally, including some upward development, though this needs to be in carefully chosen locations and mutually agreed acceptable design

The conservation areas of the High Street and the Old Town should be protected.

If necessary, there is potential for the development of a small scale business park on the edge of town, close to the A416

Look to provide smaller sites if the larger indicated area for development in the Green Belt is not supported.

Question 6: Do you have comments on individual options generally or specific settlements/site options that could be part of these options?

Option A - The large cleared site on Asheridge Road would be very suitable for residential development and could accommodate a large number of dwellings. Although scheduled as an employment site, no one has worked there for many years so it is doubtful whether it would need to be replaced by another employment site elsewhere. Indeed we would question whether the

District Council should continue to rigorously pursue its 'mixed use' development policy when often there seems little evidence of employment need on a site and where, historically, these mixed use have occasionally led to conflict. There is precedence for conversion to residential use in the area; the size of this site does, however, raise serious concern over infrastructure and particularly school places as existing facilities at Elmtree School are at full capacity. Perhaps consideration could be given to a land swap.

Option F - We have significant concerns that the Local Plan Document looks at a site considerably larger than the Countywide Green Belt Review proposals for Nashleigh Hill/Lycrome road 13A site, extending it over Lye Green Roads to link up with Botley. This extension leads to direct coalescence with Botley. There are also strong objections on highway grounds because of the restricted access to the Town Centre using White Hill or Eskdale Avenue, which on school mornings can have tailbacks into Lye Green Road. The alternative route via Berkhamstead Road goes through the area of Poor Air Quality. We therefore strongly object to the extension of the site across Lye Green Road which is not supported by the Countywide Green Belt Review.

It is important that a Green Corridor is maintained for wildlife and recreation from Brushwood Road to Lycrome Road along the wall established recreational footpath, and also between Lye Green Road and Nashleigh Hill. There will be a need to allow for an extension to Brushwood School.

Question 7: Do you have comments on the suggested level of unmet needs in Chiltern/South Bucks?

Given the infrastructure, Green Belt and AONB constraints in Chiltern, there is likely to be a considerable level of unmet need. As already indicated, we are concerned on the pressures from those relocating from London and the (anecdotal) evidence of many of our new smaller dwellings being bought as 'buy to let' properties to accommodate this group. This removes them from the affordable market for local residents based on local wages.

Question 8: Do you have any comments or suggestions on how the councils can meet its local affordable housing need?

We believe that the Government's current policies are putting severe constraints on Housing Associations and other organisations to provide a reasonable and proportionate amount of affordable housing so would welcome policies to redress this.

The provision of affordable and economic housing in Chesham is coming under pressure through increasing numbers of residents moving into Chesham from outside the District. A 2015 report from TfL indicated that Chesham Station recorded the third highest increase in footfall of all stations across the London Underground. This is a clear indicator that Chesham is viewed as an affordable commuter town; there is anecdotal evidence that this effect has driven up local housing prices.

Question 9: Do you have any comments on the above options to meet the needs of Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Showpeople?

We would support options A and B but of course are aware that this in itself may not be sufficient to meet need.

Question 10: How do you think the Joint Local Plan can best meet specialist elderly accommodation needs, both in term of general and affordable needs?

There does seem to be an increasing supply of assisted housing, care home accommodation, etc., but, as increasingly provided exclusively by the private sector, affordability is proving a problem. Moreover it should be borne in mind, many older persons' friends and relatives are often in the same age-group and have transport and mobility issues, so it is important these accommodation needs are met locally where possible.

Question 11: Do you have a view on the Heritage Strategy – for example views on our local heritage assets, how heritage contributes to quality of life and our sense of place and community?

This is, in itself, deserves a large piece of work involving the Historic Buildings Officer, but Chesham highly values its Conservation Areas of the Old Town and the High Street, both of which are seen as an important part of our status as an Historic Market Town..

Question 12: Are you aware of any currently unprotected local heritage assets that should be identified and if so why is the heritage asset important locally?

Cemetery chapel and buildings. Chesham cemetery is an emotive place for many Chesham people, and these nineteenth-century, flint-faced buildings are very much part of its identity. They have no current protection.

The town centre has many historic buildings and, while in a conservation area and having some properties in Market Square and the High St which are of Grade II Listed Building status, there are other properties worthy of protection. Some consideration also needs to be given to the protection of the skyline in the town centre. The White Hill Centre and the Quaker Meeting House both have historical merit.

Question 13: Local Green Space designations can be made as part of the Local Plan and so local residents, community groups and other local stakeholders are asked to identify areas that they would like to be considered. Importantly any nomination should include supporting evidence.

If not already designated, then Botley Field, Co-op Field, Nashleigh Recreation Ground, Berkhamstead Field, the Moor, Captains Wood, Francis Wood ought to be considered. (Botley Field and Francis Wood are both included in the areas being tested for possible housing and employment land respectively.) The same would apply to the town's allotment sites.

Question 14: Do you have any nominations for Local Measures?

Due to the cost and resources required for a town the size of Chesham, we have decided not to currently embark on a Neighbourhood Plan but will reconsider after the adoption of the Local Plan. We would welcome support in future from CDC to develop local measures where appropriate in due course.

Question 15: Do you have a view on the scope of policies proposed set out in Appendix 7.

We would prefer to consider this in further detail as the Local Plan progresses. However we believe that critical local agencies such as Highways, Education and Health should have the capability and funding to respond to significant changes which could occur over the next 20 years. All planning must ensure that upgrading of infrastructure takes place in advance of expansion plans.

Question 16: Do you have any comments on the Settlement Infrastructure Capacity Study, infrastructure needs or issues and CIL?

Some of Chesham's infrastructure is already under a large amount of pressure and will certainly need major upgrading before further development takes place. Particular concerns are: sewerage capacity for increased housing provision and the eradication of overflows into the River Chess; over-abstraction from River chess; the A416 congestion management corridor; the Air Quality Management Area in Broad Street and Berkhamstead Road; schools, (in particular, primary schools), at capacity; G.P.s and dentists close, or full, to capacity; station car park near capacity; older Chesham estates with no further room for on street parking; lack of cycle routes into town. Town Cemetery becoming close to capacity.

We are concerned that no detailed analysis of infrastructure needs has taken place, nor is there any coherent and detailed mapping. We are also concerned that maintenance and upgrading has historically been insufficient, leaving flood control, traffic density, water supply and drainage in poor condition; we also recommend that the Local Area Plan take account of the Surface Water Management Plan for Chesham and High Wycombe (2011 – Ref 1) which contains the proposal to reroute the Vale Brook Culvert into Star Yard.

Infrastructure before development is an imperative for Chesham, therefore private funding will be crucial and a CIL or similar mechanisms for obtaining monies should be central to this. We would also like assurance that monies raised locally will be reserved to be spent locally. The CIL would also give opportunity for this Council to determine where such funds should be invested in the town's infrastructure.

The Council may look to support a large scale project in the wider Town Centre as being more likely to deliver the necessary infrastructure than would small scale, piecemeal developments scattered around the town.

Question 17: Do you have any other points you would like the Council to take into account in the preparation of the Joint Local Plan? For example are there any challenges or opportunities you think the new Joint Local Plan will need to address?

The Council is keen to ensure a lively and vibrant High Street, with a good mix of shops, cafes and other facilities and for this to be reflected in the Local Plan.

The Local Plan must also consider Chesham's sporting, leisure and cultural needs and ensure that current provision is protected and enhanced. There is a pressing need for a full-sized artificial sports pitch. Moreover, the Elgiva remains the only theatre in the District and the Chesham Moor Gym and Swim Centre provides the only open air swimming pool in the District and both are therefore worthy of support to develop and expand where practicable.

As already mentioned, the buying up of affordable smaller properties for the 'buy to let' market has added to cost pressures in the local housing market. We would wish to see proportionate development which will support local needs for existing residents, and, as a counter to investment property development, some larger emphasis on residential provision for older people, who are forming a greater proportion of Chesham's population.

We believe there is merit in pressing for renewal of some of the town's more deprived estates and housing stock.

We are of the view that Chesham clearly needs a comprehensive Traffic Survey to highlight the weight of traffic it needs to contend with and the pressures on infrastructure thereof, and particularly, to tackle the poor air quality as highlighted in the Air Quality Management Area Plan for Broad Street and Berkhamstead Road.

We will be encouraging the River Chess Association and Chesham Flood Action Group to submit responses also, as we have particular concerns in respect to pressures on water supply, the sewerage system and abstraction from the River Chess.