

## **A New Local Plan for Cheshire East Parish Council Briefing and Recommendations - May 2024 (Item 8)**

The existing Local Plan runs to 2030 and because it is important to have an up to date Local Plan Cheshire East have decided to replace the existing plan. The final plan will take some years to complete however this Issues Paper consultation is the first step in the process. Any responses to the Issues paper must be submitted to the Council by 5pm on Monday 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024.

One significant change under the new, reformed planning system will be the publication of National Development Management Policies by the government. These will cover planning considerations that apply regularly in planning application decision- making across the country, such as general policies for conserving heritage assets, and preventing inappropriate development in the Green Belt and areas of high flood risk. These more general policies will no longer need to be included in individual local plans.

In addition, the Council are also seeking views on some supporting reports which will cover the following topics;

- Proposed land availability assessment methodology
- A Call for sites
- Draft sustainability appraisal report
- Proposed settlement hierarchy

The issues paper is organised under a number of subject areas supported by a background topic paper. The subject areas listed include;

- Response to climate change
- Healthy and safe communities
- Design
- Natural environment
- Homes for everyone
- Town centres and retail
- Jobs, skills and the economy
- Transport and infrastructure
- Historic environment
- Towns and villages
- Rural matters
- Minerals
- Waste

The plan asks various questions on each subject area to which consultees are invited to respond. Full details of the Issues papers etc can be found at

<http://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/newlocalplan>

### **Time Scales**

A key element of preparing a new local plan is deciding how long it should run for. The current local plan has a 20 year plan period, running from 2010 to 2030. Local plans take several years to prepare due to the extensive engagement and public examination processes involved. Current national planning policy says that local plans should have a minimum period of 15 years still to run once they are completed. Based on this, the earliest possible end date for the new Cheshire East Local Plan would likely be 2043. Other options could involve linking the plan period to greenhouse gas net zero commitments. The government has made it a legal requirement for the UK to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050 and Cheshire East Council has adopted the more aspirational target for the borough to be net zero by 2045. In the future, local plans will also need to be updated regularly - at least every five years.

The Council have asked how long the plan should run for and why we think such a period would be appropriate?

We are asked to comment on the supporting reports as well as the background topic and issues papers and whilst many of these are technical documents there are in my view some areas where we should respond.

## **Settlement Hierarchy Topic paper.**

There is no specific requirement in national policy to include a settlement hierarchy in a local plan, but it is a common approach to do so. The settlement hierarchy will form a fundamental part of the future plan strategy and will help to inform other matters (such as the spatial distribution of development, the approach to site allocations, and the definition of individual settlement and/or infill boundaries).

The definition of a settlement hierarchy will assist in achieving sustainable development by:

- Improving accessibility: locating development in locations that can be accessed by active and sustainable travel modes.
- Delivering sustainable patterns of development: identifying locations that offer a range of facilities, services, employment opportunities and infrastructure.
- Tackling climate change: promoting self-sufficient settlements where community needs for jobs, housing, services and facilities are provided and reducing the need to travel.
- Improving the viability of services: the provision of existing services can be supported by new development.
- Promoting vibrant communities: improving the environment and raising the quality of life of residents by promoting inclusive and locally distinctive places and communities.
- Make the best use of land: by encouraging the re-use of brownfield and urban land.

### ***Higher order services***

These are the services and facilities that serve a large population from a wide catchment area and would mainly be found only in principal towns, settlements in the top tier of the hierarchy:

Cinema/theatre.

Hospital/accident and emergency department. University or further education college.

Key services - These services and facilities serve the population of the settlement in which they are located, as well as drawing people from surrounding areas. They would mainly be found in settlements in the top two tiers of the settlement hierarchy (principal towns and key service centres):

- Bank/building society.
- Leisure centre/sports hall/swimming pool.
- Library (permanent).
- Supermarket or large convenience store (greater than 280sq.m GIA, which is the max size of a shop for local community use in use class F2).
- Post office.
- Public park.
- Secondary school (state funded).

### ***Local services***

These services and facilities have a more local focus, but may also serve people from nearby smaller settlements. They would mainly be found in settlements in the top three tiers of the settlement hierarchy (principal towns, key service centres and local service centres).

- Dental Surgery
- GP surgery
- Local shop (convenience retail)
- Mobile library service. Nursery/crèche
- Optician
- Pharmacy
- Primary school (state funded)

### ***Other services***

These other services, with a very local focus, may be found in all types of settlement, but mainly in settlements in the top four tiers of the settlement hierarchy (principal towns, key service centres, local service centres and infill/sustainable villages).

Community centre/village hall/church hall/local meeting place.

Children's play area

Post box

Public house/ café/

Place of worship

Outdoor sports facility

restaurant.

### ***Sustainable transport***

Sustainable and inclusive access to services, facilities and jobs by modes of transport other than the private car is important in the creation of sustainable communities. The presence of regular bus and rail services as well as other sustainable transport options will give an indication of a settlement's functionality in terms of its sustainable transport options. Higher levels and frequency of service are generally linked to higher order centres within a settlement hierarchy. Data should be collected on:

Bus services (presence or not of a bus service; daytime frequency; principal destinations; whether the service is a commutable service; evening/weekend frequency).

Rail services (presence or not of a railway station; daytime frequency; principal destinations; whether the service is a commutable service; evening/weekend frequency).

Other transport options (cycle route or regional/national coach services).

### ***Population***

Population size has an important influence upon the functionality and role of a settlement. A larger population is generally able to sustain a greater level of services and facilities, retail provision, public transport and employment provision within a settlement. Data should be collected on the usual resident population of each settlement.

### ***Employment***

The number of jobs within a settlement provides a good indication of the strength of its employment role, with higher order settlements usually providing a stronger employment role. The level of self-containment (people who both live and work in the same settlement) can also provide further information on the employment role of the settlement, particularly with regard to its functional relationship with other settlements.

However, the travel to work data comes from the 2021 Census which took place during the coronavirus pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change (the national lockdown, associated guidance and furlough measures will have affected the travel to work topic). Therefore, whilst useful to 'supplement' the data on number of jobs, the travel work data should be treated with caution.

Data should be collected on the number of jobs and level of self-containment

### ***Retail***

The presence of retail-based shops and services is another factor which can be used to determine a settlement's role or function within a geographical area. The larger the level of provision the greater the sphere of influence a settlement is likely to have over its surrounding area and the more sustainable or self-contained it will be in meeting the shopping needs of its own residents. To determine a settlement's retail role, the number of units in designated retail centres should be looked at. For smaller settlements without a defined centre, these are unlikely to have a significant retail role but it will be appropriate to consider whether there is a limited local retail role despite the lack of defined centres. Data should be collected on the number of retail units.

### ***Spatial form***

When looking at the smaller, lower-order settlements, there are often differences in their spatial form with some forming clear, coherent settlements, whilst others are more dispersed in nature, or lack the critical mass to function as a village. By implication, there will also be a correlation between the level of services and public transport provision and the coherence of the settlements. A critical mass of development/clear cluster(s) of development/ clear centre to the settlement would indicate a coherent spatial form whilst small clusters of houses/sparsely located properties/lack of any critical mass would indicate the lack of a coherent spatial form. This measure is only likely to be useful for differentiating settlements

in the lower tiers of the hierarchy as all higher-order settlements are likely to have a critical mass of development and a coherent spatial form.

Based on these criteria it is likely that Bunbury will be retained as a Local Service Centre in the hierarchy however I believe that we should point out, as we frequently do, the very poor public transport, the lack of local employment and the loss of a local shop, the increase in on-line shopping which changes the criteria set out by the Council and, the excessive demands put onto 'local' health and education facilities by new development with no additional provision. In Bunbury's case this is exacerbated by the pressure from new housing development in Cheshire West (The Auction Site and The Wild Boar) which is not taken into account in the CE Local Plan. We should also comment upon the scale of recent development in the village since the Local Plan was approved in 2017 (some 110 new homes) and the need to retain the rural context and form of the village in accordance with the policies in the 'made' neighbourhood plan.

### **Recommendation**

We suggest that CE refine their criteria for defining Local Service Centres reflecting the range of facilities available in particular public transport, local employment and the role of those settlements in the wider area. They may also wish to create a two-tier Local Service Centre policy where new development is considered for those LSC's that meet the majority of the policy criteria first.

### **Issues papers**

Turning to the Issues papers I would suggest that we comment on the following: Homes for everyone; towns and villages and rural matters.

#### **Homes for Everyone**

As set out in the Written Ministerial Statement on 19th December 2023, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has confirmed that some local authorities may wish to deliver more homes than the standard method calculation. However, where a local authority considers the standard method outcome unachievable, robust evidence must be provided for departing from it.

For Cheshire East the standard method calculation is currently 1,014 dwellings per annum. National policy tells us that there may be exceptional circumstances which justify a different approach and such circumstances could include the demographic characteristics of an area, making provision to meet the housing needs of neighbouring areas or reflecting growth ambitions linked to economic development or infrastructure investment.

The new local plan will consider the need for housing and a new local housing needs assessment will be prepared.

### **Recommendation**

That the standard method calculation of 1.104 new homes per annum is adopted in the New Local Plan.

#### **Housing Types and Sizes.**

Cheshire East produced evidence on housing mix in 2019 in the Cheshire East Residential Mix Assessment (2019). This evidence included an assessment of the size and tenure of dwellings needed in the borough to 2030. The Residential Mix Study under-pinned Table 8.1 of the SADPD which provides a breakdown of the size of new homes needed in Cheshire East and is currently the starting point for the analysis of housing mix in housing planning applications.

Completions across all tenures of homes between 2010 and 2023 show that the number of 4+bedroomed homes completed accounted for around 37%, 3 bedroomed homes 33%, 2

bedroomed homes 21% and 1 bedroomed 9%. It is emphasised that the majority of homes constructed during this period will have been permissioned prior to the adoption of SADPD Policy HOU 1. Insufficient time has passed to reach any conclusions on the extent to which the policy has influenced the mix of dwellings achieved. There is an opportunity to take forward housing mix policies again in the new local plan. However, different approaches could also be looked at to encourage a mix of housing to meet local needs. A new local housing needs assessment will be prepared to provide an up-to-date assessment of housing needs across Cheshire East and it is expected that this evidence will help guide how we address housing mix in new developments.

The demographic profile of the borough is expected to change over the next 20 years as a result of an ageing population. This change will give rise to the need for proposals for different forms of housing including adaptable homes and specialist accommodation such as retirement or sheltered accommodation, extra care or housing- with-care, residential care and nursing homes.

Given that it is likely that future demographic changes will result in greater demands for housing suitable for older people and those with disabilities, there will be a clear need for the inclusion of policies for older persons and specialist accommodation in the new local plan.

### **Recommendation**

**It is recommended that we support the inclusion of policies for older persons and specialist accommodation.**

Diversifying the housing market is a key aspect of the Government's housing policy and the White Paper 'Fixing a broken housing market' (2017) set out plans to boost the supply of new homes in England, including measures to build homes faster and diversify the housing market. The NPPF includes the requirement to accommodate at least 10% of the housing requirement on small and medium sized sites.

Increasing the supply of small and medium sized sites can make an important contribution to meeting the area's housing requirement. They can be developed more quickly, since they may have fewer constraints and require less supporting infrastructure. They can help provide a greater choice of available homes and can also support local builders in a market which is often dominated by a small number of national developers.

The new local plan will need to include policies to optimise the use of land through the use of a range of density standards for new housing in town centres and other parts of the borough and this work will be used to help inform the future options for site allocations in the new local plan. The next local plan will have to consider the requirement to accommodate at least 10% of the housing requirement on small and medium sized sites when considering options for meeting our development needs.

The topic paper then looks at a variety of residential development options including;

- Self and custom build housing
- Community led housing
- Affordable Housing
- First Homes
- Rural Exception sites

In relation to First Homes the council will be preparing a new housing needs assessment, and this will consider the need for different types of housing, including First Homes. The new local plan could set additional eligibility criteria for instance, setting lower maximum income thresholds, a local connection test or a higher minimum discount from the market price of an equivalent home if it can be demonstrated that there is a need for this, and the development will remain viable.

First Homes can also be delivered as exceptions sites which are small sites brought forward outside of development plans in order to deliver affordable housing. National planning policy

says that councils should support the development of First Homes exception sites unless the need for such homes is already being met within the local authority's area. The local plan will need to consider the need for First Homes and how delivery of this form of affordable housing could be supported.

### **Recommendation**

We strongly support the preparation of a new housing assessment for the plan area and the requirement to demonstrate a need for First Homes together with the establishment of very clear tests as part of any policy going forward particularly in relation to any 'rural exception site'

### **Rural Exception Sites**

People in village communities can face significant housing challenges having an impact on social and economic wellbeing, productivity and infrastructure. Young people who have grown up in village communities are often unable to buy or rent a home there if they wish to stay local. Older residents can face difficulties too, with a shortage of accessible or specialist supported housing making it hard to downsize to suitable homes that meet their evolving needs.

One way of helping to meet the need for affordable homes for local people is through the construction of housing on a rural exceptions site. This is land where housing would not normally be given planning permission. NPPF paragraph 82 states that local planning authorities should support opportunities to bring forward rural exception sites that will provide affordable housing to meet identified local needs, and consider whether allowing some market housing on these sites would help to facilitate this.

The current local plan includes a policy for rural exceptions sites (LPS Policy SC 6 'Rural Exceptions Housing for Local Needs') and this places a limit on site size (no more than 10 dwellings) and location – sites must be adjacent to a Local Service Centre or settlements within the Other Settlements tier of the settlement hierarchy. The new local plan will also need to consider how the provision of new homes on rural exceptions sites could be supported.

### **Recommendation**

That each rural exception proposal is looked at in relation to the local situation, particularly the sustainability of any proposals and, importantly, the ability of any settlement to accommodate additional development outside of its established boundaries and the effect that this could have on the open countryside and setting/approaches to the village as well as the existing development, highways, access etc.

### **Towns and Villages**

Although there is no specific requirement in national policy to set a hierarchy of settlements through the local plan, it is a very common approach to do so. In a borough like Cheshire East, with a large number of very different types of settlements, setting a settlement hierarchy will form an integral part of the future planning strategy.

A settlement hierarchy itself is simply a classification of settlements. However, it will help to inform other issues in the plan, such as the spatial distribution of development, the approach to site allocations and the definition of individual settlement and/or infill boundaries.

Developing a settlement hierarchy helps to direct different types of development to different types of places, and help to achieve sustainable development by:

- Improving accessibility: locating development in locations that can be accessed by active and sustainable travel modes.

- Delivering sustainable patterns of development: identifying locations that offer a range of facilities, services, employment opportunities and infrastructure.
- Tackling climate change: promoting self-sufficient settlements where community needs for jobs, housing, services and facilities are provided and reducing the need to travel.
- Improving the viability of services: the provision of existing services can be supported by new development.
- Promoting vibrant communities: improving the environment and raising the quality of life of residents by promoting inclusive and locally distinctive places and communities.
- Making the best use of land: by encouraging re-use of brownfield and urban land.

**Local service centres** (Alderley Edge, Audlem, Bollington, **Bunbury**, Chelford, Disley, Goostrey, Haslington, Holmes Chapel, Mobberley, Prestbury, Shavington and Wrenbury): small scale development to meet needs and priorities will be supported where it contributes to the creation and maintenance of sustainable communities.

The new local plan will need to consider the approach to reviewing and updating the settlement hierarchy. There is no specific guidance in national policy or guidance to inform the approach to determining a settlement hierarchy and there have been a variety of approaches taken to inform different local plans. Common themes looked at include the availability of services, facilities and public transport in settlements. Other factors considered in some reviews looked at the retail role, population size, the Office for National Statistics classification, and the distance from other settlements. It can also be seen that some studies take a more comprehensive approach than others, depending on the local circumstances.

Cheshire East is a large borough, covering a wide geographic area with a large number of different settlements, which vary greatly in their size, character, function and form. The setting of a settlement hierarchy will be an important part of the plan strategy and will help to inform other matters (such as the spatial distribution of development, the approach to site allocations, and the definition of individual settlement and/or infill boundaries). As a result, it may be appropriate to follow a relatively comprehensive assessment process to make sure that all the relevant factors are considered for all the different types of settlements.

A draft methodology has been produced, which proposes to assess the function, size and sustainability of settlements, looking at the following factors for each settlement:

- Level of services and facilities
- Availability of sustainable transport options
- Population size
- Spatial form (whether the settlement is a clear cluster of development or whether it is more dispersed and sparsely populated).
- Employment role and the number of jobs
- Retail role and the number of retail units

The draft methodology proposes to use similar names to the current tiers of the hierarchy: principal towns, key service centres, local service centres, infill villages/ sustainable villages, and rural areas. However, we recognise that these are rather technical labels and not easily understood. We would be interested in hearing suggestions for naming the proposed five tiers in the settlement hierarchy.

The draft methodology proposes to look at all of these factors across all settlements (large and small) to assess them all on a consistent basis. As set out above, the current plan includes four tiers in the settlement hierarchy, but the final tier (other settlements and rural areas) includes the defined 'infill villages' plus the other rural areas. The draft methodology proposes to categorise settlements into five tiers, which would enable the new plan to include the equivalent of the current 'infill villages' as a separate tier in the hierarchy. This would enable the new plan to define the type and scale of development appropriate in those settlements as part of its overall strategy.



## **Recommendation**

We submit comments on the settlement hierarchy drawing attention to the fact that the current approach is too broad brush and does not consider such matters as;

- Size and makeup of the existing settlements
- Local housing demand and availability.
- House prices and affordability ratios (ratios of average house prices compared to average earnings).
- Need for affordable housing.
- Need for housing of different types, such as that for first time buyers and young families, or specialist housing for older people).
- Number and availability of jobs.
- Commuting patterns.
- The capacity of local service provision.
- Landscape character and designations.
- Biodiversity and presence of nature conservation sites, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest.
- Historic environment and heritage assets.
- Flood risk.
- Agricultural land quality.
- Open space and green infrastructure
- Green Belt and strategic green gap areas.

## **Rural Matters**

The current local plan defines settlement boundaries for all our major towns and villages. In planning terms, all areas outside of these settlement boundaries are considered to be “open countryside”. This includes a number of smaller villages that have defined infill boundaries, but remain within the open countryside.

National policy requires local plan policies to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, but recognises that some types of development should be allowed in rural areas. It requires the local plan to enable development to support the rural economy (including development for businesses, tourism, leisure and community facilities), support opportunities to bring forward rural affordable housing and allow homes for essential rural workers, such as those employed in agriculture or forestry.

As a result, the current local plan establishes a more restrictive approach to development in the countryside than within defined settlements. However, to support the rural economy and the livelihoods of those who live and work on the countryside, it does allow for certain forms of development, including:

- development associated with agriculture and forestry, including farm diversification and dwellings for essential workers
- outdoor sport, leisure and recreation facilities
- essential development for existing businesses, or for new businesses where the nature of the business means that a countryside location is essential
- Visitor accommodation where the type of accommodation is intrinsically linked with the countryside.
- Equestrian development.
- Essential infrastructure.
- Infill development: in villages “limited infilling” is allowed, and outside of villages “the



infill of a small gap with one or two dwellings in an otherwise built-up frontage” is allowed.

- Small affordable housing schemes where there is an identified local need.
- Dwellings that are exceptional in design and sustainable development terms.
- The re-use or replacement of existing buildings.  
Limited extensions to existing buildings.  
Development for the conservation and enhancement of heritage assets.

### **Recommendation**

Recommend that we support a strengthening of the open countryside policy to include the loss of agricultural land, the impact on local wildlife and biodiversity and that any ‘affordable housing scheme must clearly identify a local need and be based upon an up to date ‘Borough wide housing needs survey’.