

# Planning for the Future

---

## **A RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION, BY THE CHESHAM SOCIETY**

Chesham is the third largest town in the Chilterns, surrounded by Green Belt and the AONB. It is the last stop on the Metropolitan Line, and so has (or had) significant London bound commuter traffic, while also supporting a variety of local industries. It is a retail centre for the surrounding area.

The town lay in the Chiltern district ( prior to the creation of the Bucks Unitary Authority) which ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in mean house price to mean earnings ratio ('Affordability') in 2019. This is to a large extent a consequence of families moving out of London to take advantage of the space available in the AONB, a process which the Covid epidemic can only accelerate. The town contains some of the cheaper housing in the district, but is heavily constrained by geography which limits further expansion beyond the existing borders. The local infrastructure has failed to keep pace with development – a major failing of the current planning regime.

## **COVID-19**

We note that there are a couple of references to COVID-19 in the Foreword and Introduction, and a couple more in the final section, 'Delivering Change'. This does suggest that the proposals themselves were developed without considering the impact of this epidemic on housing preferences – commuting, access to green space etc – which will affect housing demand and pricing for the foreseeable future.

We suggest the proposals be reviewed and revised where necessary, once these changes become clearer.

## **Sustainability**

Since 'Sustainability' is put forward as one of the major goals of the new system, it is unfortunate that the report neglects to define the term. We adopt the definition put forward by the Sustainable Development Commission<sup>1</sup>, and in particular the requirement for

### **Living within environmental limits :**

*"Respecting the limits of the planet's environment, resources and biodiversity – to improve our environment and ensure that the natural resources needed for life are unimpaired and remain so for future generations"*

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/the\\_principles.html](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/the_principles.html)

It is clear that the existing 'standard method for establishing housing requirements' based on affordability takes no account of sustainability, and unclear whether the introduction of 'land constraints' into the formula<sup>2</sup> will be sufficient to remedy this situation. There are many other constraints to be considered, and a significant probability that these will be incompatible with the established housing requirements.

**The major weakness of these proposals is that this possibility has not been explored, and that no method of resolving such conflicts has been proposed.**

Examples of unsustainable impacts on resources from our local area show that there are constraints on development which cannot realistically be resolved by additional infrastructure expenditure -

### **Water**

Unreliable summer rainfall and increased population has lead to over-abstraction of water from the Chiltern aquifer, causing prolonged drying of the local chalk streams.

### **Flooding**

Flooding from surface water runoff is becoming more frequent in the town centre, a problem exacerbated by building on back garden land on the hills surrounding the town.

### **Sewage Treatment**

The local treatment works is at capacity, and the pipe network admits ground water, resulting in the discharge of raw sewage into the River Chess (a chalk stream) following moderately intense rainfall

### **Transport Infrastructure**

Chesham forms a bottleneck on the A416 link between the M25 (at Amersham) and the M1 (at Hemel Hempstead). Buckinghamshire highways have no plan to mitigate this problem, due to geographical constraints.

### **Parking provision**

It is unrealistic to expect people to transport shopping on foot or by bicycle in a hilly area, and so parking provision is essential to maintain the businesses on our local High Street, however unfashionable this view may be. The surge in online shopping during the epidemic makes it more

---

<sup>2</sup> PftF, 2.29

important to maintain convenient access to local shops, if they are to compete.

The (unlamented) Chiltern and South Bucks local plan proposed redeveloping many Town Centre car parks as residential or retail space, a recipe for closing down the existing shopping centre.

### **Local Green Space**

The epidemic has shown the importance of access to local green space for recreation, and properties without such access will become less desirable in future. This limits the attractiveness of high density developments on Town Centre Brownfield sites, and consequently the number of dwellings which can be accommodated.

A sustainable planning system must recognise and accommodate these and similar constraints, and ensure that money from planning gain is used to mitigate them, where possible. This is a particular problem when resources controlled by private monopolies (Water, Sewerage) are inadequate to support future developments.

A radical reform of the planning should address these problems directly, unlike the present system.

### **The Chilterns AONB**

This document considers the planning proposals in relation to Chesham, but planning in the AONB is a major concern for Chesham residents, both as a recreational resource, and for its effect on the local economy. We support the submission made to this consultation by the Chiltern Society regarding how best to preserve the AONB.

## Pillar One

### Questions

1. *What three words do you associate most with the planning system in England?*

**Ponderous, Byzantine, Inequitable**

2. *Do you get involved with planning decisions in your local area?*

**Yes**

3. *Our proposals will make it much easier to access plans and contribute your views to planning decisions. How would you like to find out about plans and planning proposals in the future?*

**Online news**

4. *What are your top three priorities for planning in your local area?*

**More or better local infrastructure**

**Protection of green spaces**

**Supporting the local economy**

5. *Do you agree that Local Plans should be simplified in line with our proposals?*

**Yes**, provided that an appropriate level of control was maintained in each category, to ensure a suitable variety of local development, and that protected areas remain in that category, irrespective of any housing allocation deficit

**Question**

*6. Do you agree with our proposals for streamlining the development management content of Local Plans, and setting out general development management policies nationally?*

**Not sure.** To what extent could a local plan modify the NPPF framework ?

**Questions**

*7(a). Do you agree with our proposals to replace existing legal and policy tests for Local Plans with a consolidated test of "sustainable development", which would include consideration of environmental impact?*

Only if the replacement test was at least as far reaching as the existing Sustainability appraisal

*7(b). How could strategic, cross-boundary issues be best planned for in the absence of a formal Duty to Cooperate?*

**No idea.**

## **Questions**

*8(a). Do you agree that a standard method for establishing housing requirements (that takes into account constraints) should be introduced?*

### **Not sure.**

Constraints *must* be taken into consideration, but the nature of the constraints will differ in different localities. A standard method is unlikely to give appropriate weight to local requirements

*8(b). Do you agree that affordability and the extent of existing urban areas are appropriate indicators of the quantity of development to be accommodated?*

**Strongly disagree.** These factors may have some role to play, but are a totally inadequate basis on which to construct a model of the housing market, leading to the statistically illiterate proposals recently consulted on.

## **Questions**

*9(a). Do you agree that there should be automatic outline permission for areas for substantial development (Growth areas) with faster routes for detailed consent?*

### **Not sure.**

Automatic permission should be limited to developments below a certain size, and of specified type (residential, commercial, industrial) in each growth area, to ensure an appropriate mix and be compatible with existing or proposed infrastructure.

*9(b). Do you agree with our proposals above for the consent arrangements for Renewal and Protected areas?*

**No** The proposals for Renewal areas are vague and ill-defined, and do not appear to provide for any community engagement

*9(c). Do you think there is a case for allowing new settlements to be brought forward under the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime?*

### **No idea.**

**Question**

*10. Do you agree with our proposals to make decision-making faster and more certain?*

Agree with the aim, but implementation must preserve democratic accountability.

**2.39**

- Standard national conditions for common issues would ignore local variations and concerns
- Professional planning judgement is not infallible, and should be subject to democratic interrogation

**2.40**

In this case the clock should restart, if the developer submits additional material to an application in progress.

**2.41**

This would further limit the powers of LPAs, who are already liable for developers costs if an appeal succeeds, and weight the system even more against local objectors to an application

**Question**

*11. Do you agree with our proposals for accessible, web-based Local Plans?*

**Yes** – but we are more concerned with the plan contents than presentation

**Question**

*12. Do you agree with our proposals for a 30 month statutory timescale for the production of Local Plans?*

**No** – a statutory timetable is overly prescriptive. A target would be more appropriate, with interventions if it seems likely that the target will be missed.

There seems to be no allowance for problems – for example, if the call for suggestions does not provide resources to meet the assigned need

*13(a). Do you agree that Neighbourhood Plans should be retained in the reformed planning system?*

**Yes** they provide some opportunity for local input.

*13(b). How can the neighbourhood planning process be developed to meet our objectives,*

Facilitate collaboration with the Local Planning system, by providing appropriate software and access

**Question**

*14. Do you agree there should be a stronger emphasis on the build out of developments? And if so, what further measures would you support?*

**Yes.** Restrict consideration of new proposals from developers with a backlog of unbuilt applications

## **Pillar Two – Planning for beautiful and sustainable places**

### **Questions**

*15. What do you think about the design of new development that has happened recently in your area?*

It has been of variable quality, as you might expect. A common feature of residential development has been overdevelopment of sites, particularly building many small estates on 'back garden land', thus avoiding any contribution to infrastructure and social housing.

*16. Sustainability is at the heart of our proposals. What is your priority for sustainability in your area?*

See comments in the introduction. Your understanding of sustainability appears far too narrow, and will perpetuate existing problems.

### **Question**

*17. Do you agree with our proposals for improving the production and use of design guides and codes?*

#### **Yes but ...**

- Obtaining local participation in the preparation of a design guide will not be easy; few people comment on planning decisions more than a few doors away from their homes.
- Developers may claim to be complying with a design guide, to obtain fast tracking, when this is not the case. Who will assess compliance, and how ?

**Question**

*18. Do you agree that we should establish a new body to support design coding and building better places, and that each authority should have a chief officer for design and place-making?*

**Yes**

**Question**

*19. Do you agree with our proposal to consider how design might be given greater emphasis in the strategic objectives for Homes England?*

**Yes**

**Question**

*20. Do you agree with our proposals for implementing a fast-track for beauty?*

**Not sure**

The proposals are vague, and it is not clear that 'beauty' can be captured in "a set of simple 'co-ordinating codes'" As in Q17, developers will claim to comply with the letter of the code, even if the resulting proposal is far from beautiful.

## Pillar 3

**Question 21.** *When new development happens in your area, what is your priority for what comes with it?*

Better Infrastructure, as detailed in the introduction

### **Questions**

*22(a). Should the Government replace the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 planning obligations with a new consolidated Infrastructure Levy, which is charged as a fixed proportion of development value above a set threshold?*

**Yes;** The threshold should be set at zero, to avoid avoidance by construction of multiple small developments

*22(b). Should the Infrastructure Levy rates be set nationally at a single rate, set nationally at an area-specific rate, or set locally?*

**Locally,** with a national 'minimum rate'

*22(c). Should the Infrastructure Levy aim to capture the same amount of value overall, or more value, to support greater investment in infrastructure, affordable housing and local communities?*

**More value**

*22(d). Should we allow local authorities to borrow against the Infrastructure Levy, to support infrastructure delivery in their area?*

**Not sure**

**Question 23.** *Do you agree that the scope of the reformed Infrastructure Levy should capture changes of use through permitted development rights?*

**Yes**

These developments also require infrastructure support

*Questions 24(a). Do you agree that we should aim to secure at least the same amount of affordable housing under the Infrastructure Levy, and as much on-site affordable provision, as at present?*

**Yes**

24 b,c,d

**Not sure**

**Question 25.** *Should local authorities have fewer restrictions over how they spend the Infrastructure Levy?*

**No** – the amount spent in the development area should be increased

*25(a). If yes, should an affordable housing 'ring-fence' be developed?*

**Yes**, this percentage might be varied to reflect local affordability

26. Do you have any views on the potential impact of the proposals raised in this consultation on people with protected characteristics as defined in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010?

**No**

---

Dr James Conboy, for  
The Chesham Society

29-Oct-2020

