

## HEARING POSITION STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF CPRE CHESHIRE BRANCH (ID 1227334)

### Matter 2 – Planning for Growth:

#### Development at Local Service Centres (Policy PG8)

##### *Position statement in response to Q.11*

There has to be some doubt over the soundness of Policy PG8 as it is not entirely consistent with the Local Plan Strategy (LPS). It is not apparent how it takes into account the need to “improve the natural environment” as demanded by ‘The Case for Growth’ on page 36 (penultimate bullet point), nor ‘Strategic Priority No. 3’ (Protecting and enhancing environmental quality) on pages 45 and 46.

It would appear to be the case that the principal deciding factor in the spatial distribution of development at the Local Service Centres (LSCs) was the ‘Call for Sites’ exercise. Cheshire East Council’s (CEC’s) priority should have been sourcing and identifying the most appropriate sites from an environmental perspective as required by the NPPF, chapters 11 and 13-17 inclusive and as quoted in paragraph 6 of our previous submission on the revised publication draft, dated December 16<sup>th</sup> 2020. It also needs to be noted that CEC has not set a target for the use of brownfield sites and, as we pointed out in paragraph 8 of our previous submission, only a third (34%) of new and converted dwellings were provided on previously developed land in 2018/19.

As far as disaggregation is concerned, we would contend that it is too late for that now in view of CEC’s housing delivery figures and the number of sites with planning permissions. In CEC’s response to the inspector’s initial questions (CEC/01), which was logged onto the examination website on July 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, they highlighted their just published housing monitoring data up to the base date of March 31<sup>st</sup> 2021. That data revealed that the total number of completions and supply for LSCs was 3,193, including 10 housing allocations in the neighbourhood plan of one of the LSCs – Wrenbury.

This figure is only 307 short of the 3,500 homes allotted to LSCs and CEC itself is more than confident that the difference will be made up from windfalls, based on past experience. Especially as there are nine years of the existing Plan to run. Also, this needs to be seen in the context of the fact that the Borough as a whole has already provided 42,002 completions and commitments to supply. This is 6,000 more houses than the minimum that the LPS requires and the Local Plan period is only a little over half way through.

- b)** Policy PG8 should not include a disaggregation. The whole point of neighbourhood plans is that they give local communities the freedom to set such figures for themselves. Neighbourhood plan groups are required to accept what is in their adopted Local Plan and cannot argue for less housing than the Plan states. However, they do have the right to indicate

where development should go and not to supplement the agreed housing figures. We would not wish to see any measures introduced which limit what decisions neighbourhood plan groups can make. It should also be flagged up here that the majority of the LSCs have either completed or are in the process of completing neighbourhood plans.

Relying on existing commitments and windfalls can be justified in this case because of the exceptional level of housing delivery in what is generally regarded as a desirable place to live. The total number of existing completions and commitments throughout the Borough has already been exceeded even though we are only 55% of the way through the Plan period and the housing figure for LSCs had almost been achieved as of the end of March 2021. It is apparent from the latest housing monitoring data (CEC/01) that CEC is on course to deliver more housing in the LSCs than is indicated in Policy PG7. It needs to be recognised that if there is over-development, then the very attributes which make the general area and the LSCs in particular attractive become threatened.

12. There is sufficient flexibility in the LPS to allow for housing development in the LSCs to be met from windfalls.

The LPS inspector specifically asked CEC to include an allowance for windfalls (they had not previously) because there was such strong evidence of so many occurring. This they did by adding a “*small sites allowance*” of 1,375 to the housing land supply (to cover the 20-year period of the Plan). As Table 8.2 illustrates, this action actually took the housing total to 39,560, 3,560 over the oft-quoted figure of 36,000 (para. 8.18, page 55, BD 01). However, it needs to be recognised that this is merely described as “an allowance”. It is not a target or a ceiling figure. And, based on the previous number of windfalls which have come forward, (569 between 2016 and 2021), it is a very modest allowance.

Both Policy PG8 and its supporting information (on page 6 of the revised publication draft of the SADPD) leave it very much open to happenstance as to the contribution that windfalls will make, but the fact is that they have made quite a significant contribution in the past and there is no reason to suspect they will not in future. In any event, in order to meet the 307 housing shortfall yet to be made up in the 11 LSCs (Goostrey is excluded because of its proximity to Jodrell Bank and Mobberley is excluded because of aircraft noise), there would only need to be an average of 34 houses supplied each year of the remaining Plan, ie. 3 houses per LSC.

13. There is no need for further site allocations in the LSCs and it is clear that CEC does not believe there is a case for further housing allocations within the period of this Local Plan.

Initially, CEC allocated more sites in LSCs, including those closely bounded by Green Belt, but it has now withdrawn them, explaining that Policy PG7 merely set “indicative levels of development” (para. 2.4, of the revised publication draft of the SADPD). And they introduce this section under ‘Planning for Growth’ with these words in paragraph 2.1:

*“The need for new development to meet social and economic objectives must be weighed against environmental and other constraints. Achieving the right balance of development in rural areas is a particular challenge; providing too much risks adversely affecting the character of the countryside, whilst too little will undermine the sustainability of rural settlements. The local plan attempts to moderate these competing considerations by enabling some development to progress, proportionate to the scale of the settlements concerned”.*

14. CPRE did not comment on this site in its previous submission.

### **Safeguarded Land at LSCs (Policy PG 12)**

15. Identifying additional safeguarded land in the LSCs cannot be justified.

The expectation in terms of housing is tackled in strategic priority no. 2 in the LPS and is:

*“Providing for the full, objectively assessed housing need for the borough to support economic growth and to meet housing needs”* (page 45, BD 01).

This stance is further endorsed in Policy PG 1: Overall Development Strategy, which says:

*“Sufficient land will be provided to accommodate the full, objectively assessed needs for the borough of a minimum of 36,000 homes between 2010 and 2030. This will be delivered at an average of 1,800 net additional dwellings per year”* (page 52, BD 01).

These policies were based on the population growth predicted at the time - which has since been reduced by the ONS – and by the predicted level of economic activity - which is also not materialising. And the objectively assessed housing need figure included a ‘flexibility allowance’ of 9.9% according to table 2 in the report ‘Provision of Housing and Employment Land and the approach to Spatial Distribution’ (ED05).

Also, according to the justification under ‘Homes’ in LPS paragraph 8.19, the figures took into account the need to redress previous shortfalls. It is now apparent that any previous shortfalls have been more than made up and, with nine years of the Local Plan period left to run, over 42,000 houses have already been delivered, according to the housing monitoring data (CEC/01).

Housebuilding in Cheshire East has reached extraordinary levels and it is difficult to predict how many will in fact be delivered by 2030. However, LPS paragraph 16 on page 54 reveals that the 1,600 sites considered ‘suitable’ for development could provide nearly 50,000 homes. In addition, CEC’s 2018/19 Monitoring Report revealed that the percentage of empty homes had risen to 2.5%, representing some 4,322 dwellings (para. 12.10).

It is worth noting that the revised 2020 MHCLG ‘standard method’ for calculating housing need, published in December 2020, resulted in a figure of 1,068 houses pa for CEC as against the 1,800 approved in the LPS (<https://lichfields.uk/grow-renew-protect-planning-for-the-future/how-many-homes-the-new-standard-method/#section3>) and (<https://lichfields.uk/blog/2020/august/7/setting-a-higher-standard-a-new-method-for-assessing-housing-needs/>). But the fact of the matter is that average new supply in the three years between 2017 and 2020 has been more like 2,800 pa according to CEC’s own media release of March 11<sup>th</sup> 2021.

([https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council\\_and\\_democracy/council\\_information/media\\_hub/media\\_releases/council's-latest-land-supply-figure-gives-further-boost-to-home-seekers.aspx](https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council_and_democracy/council_information/media_hub/media_releases/council's-latest-land-supply-figure-gives-further-boost-to-home-seekers.aspx)).

This revealed a three-year delivery figure of nearly 8,500 houses.

It needs to be recognised that the standard method of 2020 was based on Office of National Statistics 2014 population data which was founded on high growth rates. The government announced that it was pursuing the delivery of 300,000- dwellings pa, although this figure has not been justified and more up-to-date population data in fact demonstrates a need for less than 200,000 houses pa nationally.

It may be the case, when CEC next reviews its Plan that it does not see the need to release further Green Belt over and above that it released for Part 1 of the current Plan. It is inappropriate that, nine years ahead of the start date of the next Local Plan, there should be a presumption that there will definitely be a need to release Green Belt in LSCs for housing – especially as it looks like there may be a surfeit of employment land.

The selection and distribution of safeguarded land was not a robust process. In our response to the revised publication version of the SADPD, we were critical of a number of factors. In summary, these were:

- The LSCs Safeguarded Land Distribution Report (ED53) does not question whether or not there is a need for safeguarded land, it merely addresses the spatial distribution of it
- Nor does ED53 record what ‘exceptional circumstances’ are attached to the individual land parcels identified, it simply asserts that there is a need to allocate sufficient land for housing
- The inspector who ran the LPS examination made it quite clear he was expecting a report to justify the release of further Green Belt land at the next Local Plan stage. (There is none).
- Six parcels of safeguarded land in LSCs selected for removal from Green Belt are rated as making a ‘significant contribution’ to Green Belt purposes. The other two originally had higher ratings than they do now.

We note that CEC’s preferred density figure for new build is 30 houses per hectare (although they recognise that this should not automatically apply everywhere) and that there is existing safeguarded land of 186.4 ha. Roughly speaking, however, 186 ha. of land would be sufficient to supply over 5,000 new houses in North Cheshire. Taking this together with the under supply

of housing on strategic sites such as the South Macclesfield Development Area and the potential for housing on surplus employment land, we contend that sufficient land is already allocated.

The NPPF is quite clear that Green Belt should only be sequestered “where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified” (para. 140) and that “Where it has been concluded that it is necessary to release Green Belt land for development, plans should give first consideration to land which has been previously-developed and/or is well served by public transport” (para. 142). No evidence has been presented to show that either apply in the cases of the Green Belt land parcels in LSCs which have been identified for safeguarding.

17. There are a number of omissions and inaccuracies in the settlement reports and the assessments that were carried out and the traffic light system used for judging matters such as accessibility are questionable. They have the appearance of being the opinion of an individual doing a desktop exercise. In addition, some of the parcels of land recommended for removal from Green Belt for ‘safeguarding’ have been downgraded from their original rankings without explanation and, similarly, there is no explanation offered as to why sites in areas which were previously categorised (by Cheshire County Council) as having special landscape value should not be protected.

To begin with, none of the ‘Landscape Character’ sections of the settlements reports reference Natural England’s characterisations. Disley straddles the Dark Peak and White Peak (characterisation areas 51 and 52) and Bollington sits on the border of the South West Peak Fringe (area 53) and part of both areas lie within the Peak District National Park. The other LSCs are in the Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain (61).

Also, the Cheshire East Local Plan has progressed with the local authority dropping the local landscape designations (LLDs) that previously existed.

The evidence document ‘Cheshire East Local Landscape Designation Review’ (ED10) explains (in paragraphs 1.9 and 1.10) that Cheshire County Council had identified some areas as being ‘Areas of Special County Value’ (ASCVs). These had included the Bollin Valley (which incorporates much of the LSC of Prestbury) and the Peak Park Fringe (which includes Disley and Bollington). As the authors explained: “The inherited LLD areas (former ASCVs) in Cheshire East are, at the time of writing, taken forward in the Cheshire East Local Plan Strategy (2010-30) under Policy SE4” and it quotes from the adopted LPS:

*“In Local Landscape Designation Areas, Cheshire East will seek to conserve and enhance the quality of the landscape and to protect it from development which is likely to have an adverse effect on its character and appearance and setting” (paragraph 1.15).*

Yet, although some of the land parcels proposed for safeguarding fall within former ASCVs and will clearly have impacts on landscape and settings, eg. PRE 2, these factors appear to have been ignored.

Historic assets have been casually and improperly recorded, eg. references to 'several' listed buildings when, in the case of Prestbury, there are over 50 in and around the village and also Prestbury is wrongly described as having one conservation area when it has two.

The traffic light assessments about distances between sites and the LSC centres have clearly been map based and make no allowances for circumstances on the ground such as country lanes with no footpaths. Public transport is poor in all the LSCs and Bollington has no railway station. Alderley Edge and Prestbury experience in-commuting for work.

One of the two land parcels identified for safeguarding in Prestbury has been inexplicably downgraded from making a 'significant contribution' to making 'a contribution' and the one which appears to have not changed in its assessment in recent times was formerly part of a bigger parcel of land which, in the original 2013 Green Belt assessment, was rated as making a 'major contribution'.

18. As already explained in response to question no. 16, exceptional circumstances have not been proved and fully evidenced and justified for the removal of Green Belt sites.

On the one hand, CEC recognised the need to provide this evidence. It says, in its evidence document 'The provision of housing and employment land and the approach to spatial distribution' (ED05): *"It also is recognised that the allocation of further sites at LSCs may require Green Belt release and exceptional circumstances would have to be demonstrated"* (para. 4.34, page 23).

And yet the evidence document 'Local Service Centres Safeguarded Land Distribution Report' (ED53) fails to highlight what the 'exceptional circumstances' are.

Under the heading 'Exceptional circumstances' (on pages 7-9 inclusive), the first argument it puts forward is "the need "to reduce the level of out-commuting" (quoted from Policy PG2 in paragraph 1.22). However, as the settlement reports make clear, neither Alderley Edge nor Prestbury suffer from out-commuting. Both have high levels of home working. And, even in the other LSCs, the out-commuting figures are low.

ED53 next quotes the LPS, paragraphs 8.42-8.49, as setting out the evidence base. It should be noted that these paragraphs in the LPS do not make the case for 'exceptional circumstances' for the parcels of land in question. Paragraph 8.42 merely references a general need for sufficient housing. Paragraph 8.44 quotes the NPPF statement that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances.

Paragraph 8.45 references the Green Belt Assessment update of 2015 which, as reported in response to question 16, explains that six of the eight land parcels identified for safeguarding still have the classification of making a 'significant contribution' to Green Belt purposes, one was downgraded from making 'a significant contribution' to just making 'a contribution' without explanation and the other which is now classed as just making 'a contribution' was

originally part of a bigger parcel of land that had the classification of making 'a major contribution' in the original Green Belt report of 2013.

Meanwhile, paragraphs 8.46-8.49 inclusive speak in general terms about what a successful instrument Green Belt has been, the demand for housing, the importance of allocating land for development needs and a Green Belt site in the south of the Borough. Nowhere is there a justification the particular parcels of Green Belt land selected to be removed from Green Belt in the north of the borough.

ED53 then goes on to say that, whilst it accepts that there is no need to build on more Green Belt than was identified in the LPS during the period of this Local Plan, there is a need to safeguard land for the period that follows on. But CEC still fails to explain, in this section headed 'Exceptional circumstances', (or anywhere else), what the exceptional circumstances are that identify the parcels of land they have selected for removal from Green Belt – albeit for use after 2030. Consequently, CPRE maintains its objection to this selection and stands by its previous declaration that the relevant policy on safeguarding is not sound.