

Report to Overview & Scrutiny Committee



SCRUTINY



**Subject: Chelmsford City Local Plan Issues and Options
Consultation**

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Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To make the following comments on and responses to the consultation:

- (a) To note Chelmsford City Council's commitment to on-going co-operation with other Councils and key organisations on cross-boundary planning issues including housing provision;**
- (b) To note the approach being proposed for future provision for the travelling community in the light of the revised guidance "Planning policy for traveller sites" (August 2015), and to suggest that this should be included as a cross-boundary issue, particularly with reference to paragraphs 4(d), 4(h), 10(c) and 16 of the revised guidance;**
- (c) To support the City Council's intention to discount development growth in the Green Belt;**
- (d) To support the intention to meet the housing needs of existing and new communities including appropriate levels of affordable housing and of other specific groups at sustainable locations and including necessary supporting infrastructure;**
- (e) To support the spatial principles and the options (including hybrids) for accommodating future growth;**
- (f) To support the idea in principle of a potential western bypass to Chelmsford.**

Report:

1. Chelmsford's current Local Plan runs until 2021. The next Local Plan is intended to roll this forward to 2036. The Issues and Options consultation on the new Plan, which is the subject of this report, is the first of three such public consultation exercises – the ambitious programme suggests that Preferred Options consultation will take place in summer 2016 followed by Pre-submission consultation in spring 2017. Examination in Public is timetabled for winter 2017 with adoption following in spring 2018.

2. The Issues and Options consultation runs from 19 November 2015 to 21 January 2016 – longer than the normal six-week period, but allowing for the Christmas/New Year break. The consultation document includes 30 questions and can be found on <http://consult.chelmsford.gov.uk/portal>

3. Chelmsford shares boundaries with seven other Essex local authorities including Epping Forest District. It has an area of about 34,000 ha, 34% of which is in the Green Belt – this covering the south-west of the City Council area, including the boundary with this Council. It has a current population of 168,300 (with approximately 110,000 in Chelmsford Urban Area) and this is expected to increase to 192,000 by 2022.

4. Chelmsford includes about 12,000 businesses, providing 83,000 jobs – the second highest in Essex and over 63% of its working population (about 60,000) both live and work in

the City Council area. About 15% commute to London for work with other destinations including Basildon, Braintree and Brentwood.

5. There are 13 themes which make up the vision for the new Local Plan. From Epping Forest Council's perspective, the most significant of these are:

- protecting the Green Belt – there is no intention to undertake a strategic review (see also below);
- meeting the housing needs of existing and new communities (including appropriate levels of affordable and other specific forms of housing) at sustainable locations where supporting infrastructure will be provided;
- ensuring sufficient land is available to promote a wide range of employment and business opportunities, and continuing to support and encourage diversification within the rural economy;
- supporting development and improvement of the strategic transport network, including (inter alia) a potential western relief road for Chelmsford City; and
- retaining the town's status as the premier city centre shopping destination in Essex – this should be reinforced by the opening of the new Bond Street centre in 2016 (anchored by John Lewis).

6. The consultation document outlines how (i) housing need (including affordable housing) has been calculated at 930 new homes per year (totalling 13,950 over the period 2021 to 2036) and (ii) using Edge Analytics work, the need to make provision for an additional 887 new jobs per year is also to be tested through the consultation.

7. Mention is also made of future accommodation needs for travellers with the Essex Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA – 2014) identifying a need for an additional 55 pitches in the period 2013 to 2033. The consultation document suggests that (i) the revised Government Guidance (Planning Policy for Traveller Sites 2015) may reduce this figure, because of changes in the definition of a "traveller" for planning purposes, and (ii) the need can be broadly met by making provision on major housing sites.

8. Members will be aware that provision for traveller sites and pitches is a particularly difficult issue for this authority because of the 92% Green Belt coverage and the fact that permanent and temporary pitches are inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Paragraphs 4(d) and 4(h) of the 2015 guidance advise that "plan-making and decision-taking should protect Green Belt from inappropriate development" and that the Government's aims include increasing "the number of traveller sites in appropriate locations" with planning permission to address under provision and maintain an appropriate level of supply." Paragraph 10(c) further advises that local planning authorities should "consider production of joint development plans that set targets on a cross-authority basis to provide more flexibility in identifying sites, particularly if a local planning authority has special or strict planning constraints across its area".

9. Paragraph 16 of the 2015 guidance emphasises and strengthens the protection of the Green Belt when it comes to traveller provision – "Inappropriate development is harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved, except in very special circumstances. Traveller sites (temporary or permanent) in the Green Belt are inappropriate development. Subject to the best interests of the child, personal circumstances and unmet need are unlikely to clearly outweigh harm to the Green Belt and any other harm so as to establish very special circumstances." As this authority has a target of 112 extra pitches from the Essex GTAA 2014, one of the options for meeting this will be to discuss with neighbouring authorities the possibility of meeting some of this need through joint or shared provision. Chelmsford's consultation document does not mention this as a potential option.

10. The document proposes a hierarchy of four types of settlement in part to aid the process of allocating distribution of new development – (a) city or town – ie Chelmsford and South Woodham Ferrers; (b) key service settlements – nine named; (c) service settlements – ten named; and (d) small settlements – nine named.

11. The document also lists nine spatial principles to guide how future growth can be accommodated. The most important one from this Council's perspective is that protection of the Green Belt is seen as being fundamental to the new Plan, ie sufficient land has been identified so that housing and employment needs can be accommodated without any encroachment into the Green Belt. If this approach is continued through to the Adopted Plan, this means that the shared boundary between the two Council areas will not be threatened by development proposals.

12. Other principles include maximising use of brownfield land, continuing the renewal of Chelmsford's City Centre and Urban Area, and protecting the character and value of important landscapes, heritage and biodiversity.

13. Three spatial options are proposed for consultation, based on the principles, although the document acknowledges that there could be hybrids and welcomes other suggestions. All options include significant infrastructure provision – notably the (already planned) NE Chelmsford bypass, improvements to the A132 to South Woodham Ferrers (SWF), and possibly a western relief road for Chelmsford:

- Urban focus – 2,500 houses on brownfield sites within Chelmsford; 7,500 on greenfield sites adjoining Chelmsford; 2,000 north of SWF; and 2,000 north and east of Great Leighs (near Braintree). There would be some deliverability issues in the NE Chelmsford area where sand and gravel extraction is unlikely to be complete before the end of 2026;
- Urban focus and on key transport corridors (A130, A131 and A132) – 2,500 within Chelmsford; 6,250 on adjacent greenfield sites; 1,750 at SWF; 1,500 at Great Leighs; 1,250 at Rettendon Place (SE of Chelmsford); and 750 east of Great Baddow (E of Chelmsford);
- Urban focus and key villages – ie service settlements outside the Green Belt – more dispersed than the first two options, although still focuses most development within and close to Chelmsford, SWF and Great Leighs.

Other than the possible western bypass to Chelmsford, which is probably a welcome addition to the road network, these options and any possible hybrids do not raise issues of concern for this Council.

14. In addition to discounting development growth in the Green Belt, the consultation document has also vetoed the option of creating a large new settlement even although two locations have been suggested for such a proposal. Sites with the capacity in excess of 3,000 houses would be difficult to deliver within the Plan period – they require long lead-in times with substantial new infrastructure requirements. Of the two sites which have been suggested, one is an active minerals extraction site, active until at least 2026, so not available for the first five years of the Plan period, and the second is in the Chelmer Valley – an area of high sensitivity landscape and also partly within a Landscape Conservation Area designation.

Reason for decision: While the consultation document does not include issues of concern for this Council, it is considered important (a) to respond formally as a neighbouring authority and to satisfy Duty to Co-operate requirements, and in particular (b) to raise the issue of possible joint provision of sites and pitches for the travelling community.

Options considered and rejected: Not to respond to the consultation.

Resource implications: Consideration of this consultation has been undertaken within the existing resources of the Planning Policy Team.

Legal and Governance Implications: These could arise if there is agreement about, or even the production of a joint development plan for, shared provision of sites and pitches for the travelling community. The Council is a statutory consultee to the Chelmsford City Council Local Plan.

Safer, Cleaner Greener Implications: There are no such implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

Consultation Undertaken: None required – the recommendations of this report and the Council's response to the consultation will be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 5th January 2016.

Background Papers: Chelmsford Local Plan Issues and Options Consultation (November 2015); Planning policy for traveller sites (DCLG August 2015)

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management: There are no risk management implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

Equality: There are no equality implications arising from the recommendations of this report.