

# Renaissance or stagnation – is this plan fit for purpose?

## Andrew Ketteringham, a director of Chesham Renaissance CIC takes a look at the proposed Local Plan and its failings for our community...

It's been a long time since Chiltern District Council's draft local plan was thrown out by the government inspector. So, the much delayed publication in May by Chiltern and South Bucks district councils of the new draft was met with many expectations.

It started well. In the foreword to the plan it states that to deliver the required number of new homes "we are focussing development on our built-up areas and previously developed land but will need to supplement this with Green Belt" and then that the plan "will put in place necessary infrastructure to support development". Sadly, the plan fails to meet either of those promises.

The plan makes it clear that we will be building 15,000 homes in the area covered by the two district councils. Almost 7,000 sites have already been identified for new homes. Of these 1,700 are on brownfield sites, 5,200 on Green Belt – hardly a supplement. Where will the remaining 8,000 homes be built?

Once again our town planners are resorting to building isolated settlements on the outskirts of a town while ignoring the heart of those towns. Those 8,000 homes will not be predominantly on brownfield sites.

As for infrastructure, there's a wish list of unfunded projects and that's it!

Make no mistake, this is not a plan for a better place to live and work. It's nothing more than a plan to build houses on the Green Belt. There's nothing about employment, environment, infrastructure, transport or the local economy. The National Planning Policy Framework states that these plans should provide a positive vision for the future of each area. This plan fails in every respect to do this. A huge opportunity missed at a cost to all of us living here.

The plan also fails to mention anything about deprivation despite the high levels in at least two of our wards. Another own goal!

**"Make no mistake, this is not a plan for a better place to live and work. It's nothing more than a plan to build houses on the Green Belt."**

In an isolated mention of Chesham, Star Yard, Darvell's bakery and the station car park are mentioned for possible retail development but no alternative parking sites are identified! If any of our councillors and their officers would care to take a walk down Chesham High Street they will find empty and failing shops. It's not more shops we need in the town centre it's more people – living close to public transport and those currently empty shops.

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## yourChesham comment

**Obviously with a growing population new homes are needed across the country and I would suggest most people are aware and understand this.**

However, just grabbing land and cramming in houses is not the answer, especially on Green Belt.

Before any work starts on building homes, the infrastructure has to be put in place first.

Due to Chesham's location running along the valley floor, infrastructure is even more important.

**Sewage:** We already have had instances of raw sewage being released into the river Chess because the Sewgre Works can not cope.

**Schools:** The area will need new schools to cope with the demand of new housing. Ironically the houses at the top of Nashleigh Hill were built on the site of a former school, Cestreham Secondary School (so much for forward planning!)

**Doctors/Hospital:** We have already seen the closure of the Accident and Emergency at both Wycombe and Hemel hospitals while appointment times at local doctors surgeries is growing.

**Emergency services:** Chesham relies on a retained Fire Service while the HP5 postcode has the slowest ambulance response time for urgent calls for the Chiltern district exceeding the national average, with 13 minutes and 57 seconds.

**Roads:** Chesham already suffers severe traffic congestion at certain times during the day while parking is a major issue. More houses equals more cars and local roads are already struggling to cope.

The Local Plan should not make life harder for the people who already live and work in the area, it should help to improve the lives of the local community and for those taking up the new homes when they are finally built.

The Editor

We want to hear your views.

e-mail us at: [edit@yourchesham.co.uk](mailto:edit@yourchesham.co.uk)

# Obligated to vote 'for' the Plan only because it was the 'least worst option'

**T**wo important meetings that will affect all our lives took place without fanfare or publicity; one was held on Tuesday 14th May at South Bucks Council offices near Denham and the other on Wednesday 15th May at Chiltern District Council offices in Amersham.

Despite the absence of publicity, the public galleries at both Councils were packed to capacity with many signs and banners also on display outside calling for councillors not to endorse the draft new Local Plan with its flawed proposals for removing 13 sites in the combined districts from Green Belt for development.

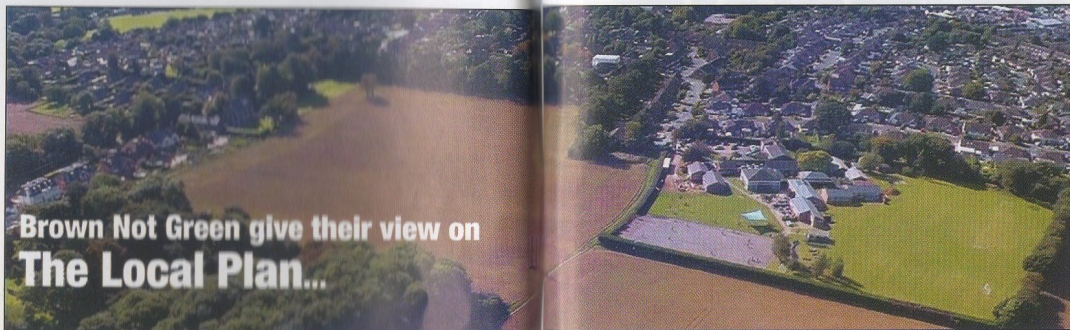
Sadly, but not unexpectedly, very few councillors opted to break ranks and akin to a herd of pack animals, they chose instead to follow their leaders and sheepishly approved the draft new Local Plan for Chiltern & South Bucks District for publication in what is known as the Regulation 19 process.

There will now follow a relatively short period of 6 weeks public "consultation" on the Plan's documentation commencing on 7th June, during which the Councils will only "consider minor amendments" before then submitting the Plan to an independent Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State.

These were auspicious meetings as they marked the end of any democratic process of the Plan's development. Not that many of us thought that there had been anything democratic about this during the tortuous five years they have spent on it so far, but the Council's joint resolution this week now means that councillors have absolved themselves of any further discussion or responsibility, and have handed the Plan to a third party. This means that any effective representation at a future Public Planning Examination Inquiry will now require expensive legal & professional input.

Brown Not Green had lobbied hard right up to these meetings but again most councillors chose not to listen to our concerns. Namely, that we feel their officers' process of Green Belt site selection was flawed and that evidence justifying the proposals, certainly at Chesham and probably elsewhere, was incomplete and unsound. Although BNG never dreamed we would see the Plan voted down in the Council Chambers, we were frankly disgusted at the acquiescence demonstrated by many councillors, particularly given that so many had expressed "serious reservations" about the Local Plan yet voted for it anyway!

Most councillors who spoke in favour "for" the Plan repeatedly remarked about how Green Belt release was "inevitable" and "only" represented a loss of about 2.7% of the District's Green Belt area, yet few of them addressed our concerns that we had



consistently made about the locations of these sites especially as the Chesham site was so sensitive and potentially an Asset of Community Value, or whether the Council really had explored all possible alternatives, or had questioned the planning officers about the methodology that had been used for site selection despite serious concerns voiced by some of the Council's own expert consultants.

Several councillors remarked that they felt obliged to vote "for" the Plan only because it was the "least worst option"; hardly a glowing endorsement for such an important policy document that will shape the lives of all of us and our children for the next 20 years!

The sentiments repeated almost by rote by many councillors were that if they did not approve this Plan the Council would lose the ability to resist planning applications made by predatory developers because the existing Local Plan is now so out of date. That seems disingenuous given that it is the Council's fault for not updating a Local Plan well before now.

Also other development constraint policies would still prevail and we regularly read of appeal decisions where the absence of an up to date Plan does not always assure developers success at planning appeals.

Sadly, most councillors missed the point, namely that if just one or two of the Green Belt sites they are now reliant upon to deliver their housing figures are rejected by the Planning Inspector at the Inquiry, the whole Local Plan may then be at risk of being declared unsound. If that happens the new Unitary Authority that comes into effect from April next year must inherit this mess. Hardly a responsible legacy!

BNG contend that the best strategy is to get the Local Plan right first time and ensure it is sound. During both Council Meetings we heard assurances that important details particularly in respect of development of the Green Belt sites on matters

such as highways improvements, access, traffic mitigation, sustainability, drainage, design standards and landscaping, are yet to be developed in conjunction with developers and will be enshrined in a future "Masterplan" for each site.

Councillors addressed the public gallery with lame assurances that the public will be consulted and will have their ability to give input on these issues; hardly reassuring in light of what little notice has been taken so far of previous public consultations. Frankly, this was akin to asking a condemned man how he would like to be executed.

One voice of sanity within Chiltern Council came from Councillor Murray Harrold who spoke eloquently, and he alluded to the fear that many councillors present were reciting as their justification for approving these flawed planning proposals despite the many reservations being raised by some councillors.

He mocked the notion that the Local Plan must be sound because "many years of professional research and work" had gone into it and he drew comparisons with similar claims which are still being made in support of other troubled projects such as Crossrail & HS2 that had also claimed to have been well researched.

He added that just because someone has come up with 13 Green Belt sites does not ensure they are the right sites or even the right solution.

By repeating an assertion often enough it is eventually perceived as factual and councillors are not immune to the perils of cognitive dissonance either. One does not want to think that local policy is being advanced in such a many anymore than by collective ignorance or arrogance but BNG have long held the view that this Local Plan was being advocated by Planning Officers and Cabinet members who justified their unsound recommendations by using Project Fear to persuade Councillors this was the only way forward.

It is regrettable that most Councillors did not listen to their voters apart from Cllr Murray & Cllr Garth, who were the only members in Chiltern Council who commendably broke ranks and voted against the Local Plan though with about four other Chiltern Cllrs absent.

At South Bucks Council it was a similar scenario though there they had five Cllrs voting against the Local Plan (namely Cllrs P Griffin, B Harding, J Lowen-Cooper, R Reed and G Sandy with abstentions from Cllrs: P Bastiman, S Chhokar and D Saunders). BNG will publish the list of names of who voted for this Local Plan on our website shortly as many councillors will doubtless be seeking election onto the new Bucks Unitary Authority next year and we feel the public may wish to consider this when contemplating their future voting preference!

This fight is far from over. It is essential that the community now prepares to make many persuasive submissions to the Planning Inspector who will now be the sole arbiter on this matter. BNG will be further updating its website soon with advice on how you can participate in making submissions to the Inspector and we hope to hold some public meetings on this topic in early June. Please visit [www.brownnotgreen.com](http://www.brownnotgreen.com) for details. The end date for the consultation period is 19th July.

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The Plan also fails to identify the nature of the dwellings to be built. There is reference to 40% of them being affordable but where is the recognition of the need to build homes needed by young people as they depart the parental home? And where is the recognition of the need for homes suitable for older people who wish to downsize - freeing up many 3 and 4 bedroom homes.

Those of us who want to develop in town centres have to be realists. We cannot build all the homes we need on brownfield sites. Some Green Belt will be sacrificed where that Green Belt might not now fulfil its purpose and where development can be shown to be sustainable. But our local authority has started with the presumption that Green Belt is easier to develop. The 5,200 homes that have already been identified to be built within the Green Belt can in no way be regarded as a 'supplement'.

We have waited a long time for this draft plan. Our wait has been in vain and our councillors should understand that many will regard this as a failure on their part. In the meantime, the directors of Chesham Renaissance, which commissioned the Chesham Masterplan, are determined to go ahead and win the argument that we need much, much more.

It is disappointing that the words of encouragement we have received from Chiltern District councillors have come to naught. We will be seeking to meet them now to see how this position can be reversed. Anything else is a totally missed opportunity.

**For advice on how you can participate in making submissions to the Inspector visit [www.brownnotgreen.com](http://www.brownnotgreen.com)**

**The end date for the consultation period is 19th July.**

# Your Green Belt – Places that people love

The Green Belt that surrounds Lye Green is under threat from Council plans to extend the town. These rolling, arable and pasture fields to the North-East of Chesham could soon be replaced by 900 homes. Indications are that the planners' 'direction of travel' is to take the whole 60 hectare site out of the Green Belt and 'safeguard' it for future development in their new Local Plan. This is the second article from Chesham resident Michael Shea who will be following these plans for yourChesham over the coming months...

In my first article in the last issue, I said that I would compare the continuing possibility of building up to 900 homes on Lye Green, a Green Belt area, with the principles outlined in Jordan Yin's book 'Urban Planning for Dummies'.

The chapter on how to make our community a better place to live, work and play provides the focus. First up is the idea about 'Making Public Places That People Will Love'. Jordan Yin suggests four strategies: 1) Find out what people want; 2) Plan great neighbourhoods; 3) Provide public space; 4) Preserve the past.

Public places need to be places where people will find it worthwhile to leave the couch and go to them – meeting other people, relaxing, or simply enjoying the scenery. Lye Green is already meeting this criterion; anecdotally recent surveys suggest that over a hundred people a day use it for all sorts of reasons – dog-walking, accessing Brushwood School, getting fresh air, enjoying nature. Their use is plain to see for anyone who walks there. So, Lye Green already meets the requirement as being a place people love.

That's now. But how would plans to build 100, 500 or 900 homes on Lye Green measure up? Obviously this place that people love would be eradicated, smothered in concrete – a move diametrically opposed to making the community a better place. Who would choose, on a Sunday afternoon, to go to the Lye Green Housing Estate for a stroll?

**What people want:** Find out what people want is a principle of building good communities. Local people – we – should be asked what it is we want the community to offer. I don't recall being asked if I would like to have 900 homes being built on Lye Green, do you? This possibility is mentioned in obscure documents that only planners use (hidden in plain sight on the web of course) but not readily accessible or understandable.

**Plan great neighbourhoods:** For a neighbourhood to be great, it needs to have everything that people

need within easy reach. Should there be such a massive development on Lye Green, would easy reach be delivered? All shops, medical facilities and most public transport is only reachable by car in the town centre, where there is hardly enough car-parking space as it is. What would that mean to the occupiers of the 900 homes on Lye Green? That they would have a great community in which to live? No, this does not achieve a great neighbourhood. **Provide public space:** Public space needs to be provided for people to gather and to help build social relationships. Building on Lye Green removes such a space, thereby weakening the community. Whose town is it, anyway?

The possibility of up to 900 homes (get ready for

that number to be sanitised down to 500 or fewer, but prepare for more to be added once the wall is breached) runs counter to the principle of providing public space to socialise.

**Preserve the past:** Retaining what people love, the history of a place and its memories for long-standing residents, helps to

build a sense of stability, social cohesion and reassurance for the future.

Lye Green has a history and is held fondly in many memories. To build upon it is to relegate its value to the name of a housing estate – 'there used to be a place here where people could touch the countryside, it used to be called Lye Green. It used to be Green Belt, but now it is brownfield'.

Preserving the past is not sentimentality, it is a way of paying tribute to those who have gone before and who have shaped the community in which we now live. The proposition to build on Lye Green does not preserve the past.

The possibility of building on Lye Green does not satisfy the requirement to 'Make Public Places that People Will Love'.

The Brown Not Green non-profit organisation is a place to go to for updates on planning development affecting the Lye Green Green Belt site, at [www.brownotgreen.com](http://www.brownotgreen.com) and it also has a link to a sample letter you can send to the Head of Planning at Chiltern District Council. Make your voice heard.

