

Press Release

**Re - Public Open Meeting held at Chesham Town Hall on Saturday 14th October
Chaired by the Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP**

Public Flock to Local Meeting and offer funds to fight Green Belt plans in Chesham

An open meeting had been arranged by Brown Not Green (BNG) on Saturday 14 October which was chaired by the Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP. The MP praised the efforts of Brown Not Green and said the turnout at the Meeting was equal to many of the HS2 meetings she had attended.

Mrs Gillan declared her opposition to the proposals to remove 53 hectares of land from Green Belt to the northeast of Chesham with the purpose of allocating the land for development of 900 new homes. This is one of several proposals emerging in the new draft Local Plan currently being prepared jointly by South Bucks and Chiltern District Councils. Although the MP cannot endorse the fundraising campaign launched by Brown Not Green for political reasons she declared her support for finding more thoughtful ways of accommodating housing in Chesham rather than releasing Green Belt.

The Town Hall was packed to capacity with many people standing in the hallway or sitting on the floor and over 250 people were in attendance with many more being disappointed by not being able to get in. However, in anticipation of the meeting being over subscribed, Brown Not Green had arranged for the presentations to be filmed and they have advised anyone who was disappointed at not being able to get into the Town Hall that a video recording of the presentation should be available on the BNG website (www.brownotgreen.com) within the next week. Organisers said over 200 donor forms were taken by people as they left the meeting and thousands of pounds are now being donated to fund legal representation against the Councils proposals if necessary.

Cheryl Gillan MP advised the meeting of a number of developments and explained the recent changes that are coming to the methodology that Local Councils use when calculating the housing needs of an area. She explained that the new methodology is still a consultation and comments are invited on this national standard methodology that is proposed and the consultation will conclude on the 9th November this year. She explained that if Chiltern and South Bucks District Council are required to adopt the new methodology, it will probably result in an extra 1,600 homes to be incorporated into the district in addition to the 7,600 already calculated under existing methodology. This will place further threats to the Green Belt. Phillip Plato explained that the Chesham Society and the Renaissance Community Interest Company they founded have a more sustainable vision for new homes in Chesham that will not place such strain on local infrastructure and will provide significantly more homes in Chesham than the number being proposed on the Green Belt site NE of the town.

Cheryl Gillan also explained that there is a draft Brownfield Register that has recently been published seeking consultation from the local community and that that consultation runs until the 10th November.

Phillip Plato for Brown Not Green explained the significance of the Brownfield Register as for many years the principle of new development has been that Local Authorities should look to brownfield land first. He questioned why the brownfield register has only just been published in the last 10 days when the community has been asked to debate Green Belt sites for more than two years.

Phillip Plato provided a detailed presentation to those present at the Town Hall at which he explained what BNG has been doing in the last 10 months and where the Local Plan process was at this time. He also explained some of the more recent evidence that has appeared on the Council's Evidence Base by the Chiltern and South Bucks District Councils and specifically the plans that BNG are developing to combat the ongoing threat to the Green Belt in Chesham. This included the launch of a fund raising campaign in order to raise funds to hire a specialist planning barrister to not only advise the community and BNG but if necessary to represent them at the Local Plan Inquiry known as an Examination In Public.

Within his presentation, Phillip Plato explained that the Green Belt land to the northeast of Chesham is still under threat as shown by some of the more recent documents the Council have added to its Evidence Base including a suggestion by one consultant to the Council that the land could be acquired by compulsory purchase given that the main land owner and farmer there is reluctant to release additional land for housing.

Phillip Plato explained that this location is unsustainable in planning terms and he highlighted the fact that the Councils own current Adopted Policy for sustainable locations require new houses to be 1.5 km or less from main access points of public transport and he demonstrated that the site at Lye Green to the northeast of Chesham is actually 2.26 km away from Chesham Town Station & Town Centre and involves negotiating a steep hill in the process. He questioned therefore how the Council could regard this as a sustainable location and that if developed it would encourage additional highways traffic. He highlighted the fact that the County Council Highways Officer estimates a 400% increase in traffic waiting times in the whole of the town if these proposals are moved forward with an inevitable adverse impact on the air quality particularly along Berkhamstead Road which is already the subject of an air quality assessment.

Mr Plato also highlighted the strain on the towns infrastructure that prevails already particularly with regards to drainage of surface water and sewerage and questioned how the development of a Green Belt site which would take high quality agricultural land could only put further strain upon the existing infrastructure in the whole town.

He explained that Brown Not Green acknowledged that Chesham needs to do its part in contributing to the supply of new housing but that developing Green Field and particularly Green Belt sites is not the answer. He commended the efforts of the Chesham Society and particularly the Chesham Renaissance Community Interest Company for whilst it is acknowledged they still have work to do on their vision for Chesham, they appear to be capable of providing significantly more homes than those being proposed to the northeast of the town on the Green Belt, yet in a location that would aid regeneration of the High Street and improve the vitality of the town as a whole.

Mr Plato highlighted the threat from one private landowner whose company is registered in Gibraltar and also the suggestion in the Councils Evidence Base that the land could be acquired by compulsory purchase if necessary.

He explained that this was the reason why Brown Not Green had decided to initiate a fund raising campaign and had registered itself as a not for profit company limited by guarantee so that donations could be sought from the public to fund the retention of a specialist planning barrister.

He reported that an overall target of £20,000 had been set for the fundraising campaign and announced that in the first few days they had achieved over £5,000. In response at the meeting,

over 200 copies of the fundraising request form were taken by members of the public when leaving the meeting.

It is hoped that an announcement will be made by Chiltern Council on the 7th November as to whether the Lye Green site will nor will not be included in the final draft Local Plan. Mr Plato advised that if common sense prevails and the Chesham site is not included, that Brown Not Green will continue to monitor the situation but any funds donated to BNG could hopefully then be refunded in full to all the donors.

The presentation was followed by a lively question and answer session. Mr Plato posed a question to Cheryl Gillan MP following the suggestion by a Chiltern District Councillor that the proposals to build on the Green Belt were only in response to a Central Government directive. Phillip Plato went on to say that as he could find no evidence of this in the Evidence Base he asked Cheryl Gillan MP whether she might care to comment on whether it is in fact Central Government driving the Local Plan.

Cheryl Gillan emphatically denied the assertion that Central Government set housing targets or has required Councils to develop homes in Chesham or anywhere else in the Chiltern district. She reiterated the strain that is being placed on all Local Authorities at this time but in her capacity as President of CPRE Bucks she agreed that brownfield options should be considered before Green Belt and acknowledged the concerns raised by Mr Plato and BNG including the affect on local schools and health care provision by the expansion being proposed for Chesham at this time.

Further details of the meeting together with copies of the slides are on the BNG website www.brownotgreen.com. A full video recording of Phillip Plato's presentation should appear on the BNG website shortly.



Chesham residents struggle to find space to stand for the packed meeting