

Local Plan Representations

For Bloor Homes, Diane Martin, Peter Martin & Brunel Trustees Limited | 24-544

Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan – Issues and Options



Project: 22-502
Site Address: Weaverham South
Representor: Bloor Homes, Diane Martin, Peter Martin & Brunel Trustees Limited
Date: August 2025
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This statement sets out the representations of Bloor Homes and the landowners (Diane Martin, Peter Martin & Brunel Trustees Limited) to the Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan Review: Issues and Options consultation, specifically in relation to Weaverham South (Growth option: NOR10). We propose the site as an allocation in the new Local Plan for residential development. Bloor Homes welcomes the opportunity to work collaboratively with the council and key stakeholders throughout the Local Plan preparation process.
- 1.2 Weaverham South represents a highly sustainable location that offers an exceptional opportunity for meeting housing needs in Northwich and Cheshire West. The site is in single ownership and is subject to an exceptionally low level of constraint. It can deliver approximately 900 – 1,100 dwellings, as well as community facilities, extensive open space and green infrastructure, and (if required) 1.8ha of land for the potential expansion of Weaverham High School. The site offers the opportunity to create an exemplar urban extension that threads into the existing community.
- 1.3 These representations are accompanied by a comprehensive vision document (Appendix **EP1**) which has been prepared by Planit on behalf of Bloor Homes. The vision document provides:
- An analysis of the site and its surroundings;
 - A masterplan and vision that articulates and illustrates the opportunities presented by the site;
 - A demonstration that the site is deliverable, available and achievable; and
 - A summary of the key benefits of the site.
- 1.4 These representations are also supported by supporting technical statements in respect of the following matters:
- Sustainable Transport Strategy report by Eddisons (Appendix **EP2**)
 - Landscape and Visual Technical Note by FPCR (Appendix **EP3**)
 - Ecological Feasibility Assessment report by UES (Appendix **EP4**)
 - Technical Note on Flood Risk and Drainage by Betts Associates (Appendix **EP5**)
- 1.5 These representations firstly address strategic policy matters and questions within the Issues and Options consultation (Sections 2-5), before turning to question SS29 and our proposed allocation of Weaverham South (Section 6).



2. Response to Section 1: Introduction

Plan period

Question IN 3 Do you have any comments or views on the proposed plan period for the new Local Plan?

- 2.1 Paragraph 1.23 sets out that the Local Plan should plan for a period of 15 years.
- 2.2 Paragraph 22 of the Framework makes clear that strategic policies are those which make provision for housing, employment and other types of growth:

“Strategic policies should look ahead over a minimum 15 year period from adoption¹⁴, to anticipate and respond to long-term requirements and opportunities, such as those arising from major improvements in infrastructure. Where larger scale developments such as new settlements or significant extensions to existing villages and towns form part of the strategy for the area, policies should be set within a vision that looks further ahead (at least 30 years), to take into account the likely timescale for delivery¹⁵”

- 2.3 It also requires strategic policies to cover a 15-year plan period **from adoption**:
- 2.4 The Council’s proposed timetable for the adoption of the Local Plan is set out in the 2025 Local Development Scheme which is as follows:

- Consultation Pre-Submission Plan (Publication stage) – Autumn 2026
- Submission to Planning Inspectorate – by December 2026
- Examination in Public – Spring/Summer 2027
- Adoption – Summer/Autumn 2027.

- 2.5 On the basis of the Council’s LDS, assuming adoption in Autumn 2027, the minimum plan period will be the 31st March 2043 so that there is a full 15-year period at adoption. However, this assumes that there are no delays between now and then, which in our view is unrealistic. It is also important to note that Local Plan examinations have historically taken multiple years. Specific examples include the Cheshire East Local Plan Strategy which took over 3 years and the Halton Delivery and Allocations Plan which took 2 years. More recently, Planning Inspectors have paused public hearings being held as part of the examination into the Charnwood Local Plan 2021-2037. This demonstrates the issues and delays can take place during the examination process. This issue has also been recently by the Inspectors for the Wiltshire Local Plan and in their letter dated 27th February 2025 state:

“The revised spatial strategy topic paper (SD/16) shows the Plan period of 2020-2038 commencing in advance of the date of the most up-to-date calculation of Local Housing



Need. In that regard, the plan period would look forward around 13 years from the current date which the Council seeks to justify as being 15 years from the date of the assessments of housing and employment needs. However, paragraph 22 of the Framework (September 2023) expects strategic policies to look ahead over a minimum of 15 years following adoption of the Plan. As a result, the submitted Plan would not appear to look sufficiently far ahead to anticipate and respond to long-term requirements and opportunities.

We identify this matter to you at this early stage as it is clearly a matter of concern and one which will have implications for the rest of the examination, including our consideration of whether the Plan is positively prepared and consistent with national policy with respect to the overall amount of housing and employment land to be identified.”

2.6 We consider that an element of flexibility is built in at the outset and the plan period should be to 2045.



3. Response to Section 2: Vision

Question VI 3 - Do you agree with the approach of establishing concise visions for the key places identified in the new Local Plan? Or do you have an alternative suggestion?

- 3.1 We support the proposal for the larger settlements to have an individual vision. For Northwich, this vision should reflect the potential of the settlement to accommodate significant levels of growth to meet the development needs of the borough.



4. Response to Section 5: Spatial Strategy

Policy SS1 Housing needs

Question SS 1 Is there any reason for the Council not to plan for delivering a minimum of 1,914 new homes each year?

- 4.1 No. The publication of the revised Framework in December 2024 and the new Standard Method sets out a minimum need for 1,914 dwellings per annum. Paragraph 62 of the Framework states:

“To determine the minimum number of homes needed, strategic policies should be informed by a local housing need assessment, conducted using the standard method in national planning practice guidance. In addition to the local housing need figure, any needs that cannot be met within neighbouring areas should also be taken into account in establishing the amount of housing to be planned for.”

- 4.2 Local Housing Need is defined in Annex 2 of the Framework:

“The number of homes identified as being needed through the application of the standard method set out in national planning practice guidance.”

- 4.3 Paragraph 003¹ of the PPG states:

“Is the use of the standard method for strategic policy making purposes mandatory?”

The standard method should be used to assess housing needs. However it is recognised that there are some specific circumstances in which an alternative approach could be justified, for example as explained at paragraph 014 below.”

- 4.4 Paragraph 14 of the PPG states:

“Where strategic policy-making authority boundaries do not align with local authority boundaries, or data is not available, should the standard method be used to assess local housing need?”

Where strategic policy-making authorities do not align with local authority boundaries (either individually or in combination), or the data required for the model are not available such as in National Parks and the Broads Authority, or local authority areas where the samples are too small, an alternative approach may have to be used.

Such authorities may continue to identify a housing need figure using a method determined locally. In doing so authorities should take into consideration the best available evidence on the amount of existing housing stock within their planning

¹ Reference ID: 2a-003-20241212



authority boundary, local house prices, earnings and housing affordability. In the absence of other robust affordability data, authorities should consider the implications of using the median workplace-based affordability ratio for the relevant wider local authority area(s).

For local authorities whose boundaries cross National Parks or Broads Authority areas, the proportion of the local authority area that falls within and outside the National Park or Broads Authority area should also be considered – for example where only a minimal proportion of the existing housing stock of a local authority falls within the National Park or Broads Authority area it may be appropriate to continue to use the local housing need figure derived by the standard method for the local authority area.”

- 4.5 Paragraph 14 is not applicable in Cheshire West as the authority boundary aligns with the local plan boundary. Therefore, the standard method is mandatory in Cheshire West. As to whether the housing requirement can vary from the standard method, paragraph 040² of the PPG states:

“What is a housing requirement?”

The housing requirement is the minimum number of homes that a plan seeks to provide during the plan period.

Once local housing need has been assessed, as set out in this guidance, authorities should then make an assessment of the amount of new homes that can be provided in their area. This should be justified by evidence on land availability, constraints on development and any other relevant matters.

The government is committed to ensuring that more homes are built and supports ambitious authorities who want to plan for growth. The National Planning Policy Framework explains that the housing requirement may be higher than the identified housing need, and authorities should consider the merits of planning for higher growth if, for example, this would seek to reflect economic growth aspirations. Where authorities plan for higher growth this should not normally have to be thoroughly justified at examination.”

- 4.6 Paragraph 40 states that authorities, once they have made an assessment of need, then need to consider land availability, constraints on development and any other relevant matters. The only meaningful policy restraint in Cheshire West has been Green Belt around Chester, but the Government is clear that *“authorities should review Green Belt boundaries in accordance with the policies in this Framework and propose alterations to meet these needs in full, unless the review provides clear evidence that doing so would fundamentally undermine the purposes (taken together) of the remaining Green Belt, when considered across the area of the plan”*. That is an ongoing process as part of the evidence base but the Government is clear that a Green Belt review must be undertaken. With the potential exception of the Green Belt around Chester, we do not consider that there are any constraints that would result in a

² Reference ID: 2a-040-20241212



conclusion that the standard method cannot be met once the HELAA and Green Belt review has been undertaken given the availability of land around the settlements in the Borough.

- 4.7 With the standard method as a minimum, the only other alternative in the PPG is a higher requirement which is expressly set out in paragraph 14³ of the PPG and paragraph 69 of the Framework which states:

“The requirement may be higher than the identified housing need if, for example, it includes provision for neighbouring areas, or reflects growth ambitions linked to economic development or infrastructure investment”.

- 4.8 As part of the local plan evidence base, a Housing and Economic Needs Assessment will be undertaken and that should form part of the Council’s consideration as to the final housing requirement and that should be the subject to consultation.
- 4.9 Therefore, at this stage the housing requirement should be a minimum of 1,914 dwellings per annum with the potential for a higher requirement based on economic development or infrastructure investment.

Question SS 2 Do you think the Council should consider a stepped housing requirement that plans for a lower level of housing delivery earlier in the plan period?

- 4.10 No. With the substantial shortfall in housing supply at present there will be an uplift in housing delivery as the local plan progresses so that the full annual requirement can be met in the early years with larger strategic sites that are to be allocated increasing supply throughout the plan period. In the period after the adoption of the local plan in 2015, annual completions were:

- 2015-2016 – 1,769 dwellings;
- 2016-2017 – 2,017 dwellings;
- 2017-2018 - 2,542 dwellings;
- 2018-2019 – 1,849 dwellings
- 2019-2020 – 1,849 dwellings.

- 4.11 That level of housing completions was against a requirement of 1,100 dwellings. Therefore, as the new local plan will allocate land for a higher number, we see no reason based on previous delivery that there should be a stepped requirement.

³ Reference ID: 2a-014-20241212



Flexibility/Buffer

- 4.12 We consider that there should be a buffer of at least 10% which is based on the Local Plans Expert Group report to the Communities Secretary and to the Minister of Housing and Planning where a 20% buffer was recommended. The report recommends at paragraph 11.4 that the Framework should make clear that local plans should be required to demonstrate a five year land supply but also focus on ensuring a more effective supply of developable land for the medium to long term, plus make provision for, and provide a mechanism for the release of, sites equivalent to 20% of their housing requirement, as far as is consistent with the policies set out in the Framework.
- 4.13 The Guildford Local Plan 2019 is relevant to the issue of releasing Green Belt to provide flexibility in the housing land supply. A supply of 14,602 dwellings was provided against a housing requirement of 10,678 dwellings, equating to a flexibility allowance of 37%. Of supply, some 6,742 dwellings were to be provided on sites to be released from the Green Belt. The plan was subject to an unsuccessful Challenge⁴ which specifically addressed this point. The Judgment draws the following conclusions under Issue 2: Was the conclusion that there were exceptional circumstances justifying the allocations of housing land, released from the Green Belt, to provide headroom of over 4,000 dwellings above the 10,678 OAN lawful, and adequately reasoned?
- Once meeting the OAN is accepted as a strategic level factor contributing to “exceptional circumstances”, it follows that the provision of headroom against slippage and for flexibility to meet changes, “future-proofing” the plan, as the Inspector put it, would also contribute to such circumstances (paragraph 91).
 - The headroom figure was a judgement based on the sites which were available to meet a requirement figure somewhat over 10,678, and to do so in such a way that, over the initial and subsequent years of the plan, the rolling five year housing supply, with a 20% buffer for some years, would be maintained (paragraph 96).
 - As part of the total supply, the Inspector was entitled to conclude that the plan should allocate additional sites, that may be sequentially less preferable than other sites, because they were necessary allocations in order to provide the initial five year housing land supply (paragraph 101).
- 4.14 We consider that the above key points are broadly applicable to Cheshire West and the Plan must provide sufficient flexibility and there is a need to release additional deliverable sites to provide a five-year housing land supply and ensuring the requirement is met in the plan period. Even if there were to be a degree of

⁴ Compton PC vs Guildford BC [2019] EWHC 3242 (Admin)



over-provision, there would be wider benefits of providing a level of housing in excess of the minimum requirement, namely improving affordability and meeting affordable housing needs.

Conclusion

- 4.15 Option B under SS5 states that “the government’s new housing target of 28,170 homes” which is the 1,914 dwellings multiplied by 15 years. However, based on the above, the plan period should be longer as the start date for a plan (which should be 2025) is not the adoption date and with the need for a plan period to 2045 in our view, the housing requirement that this Plan should be meeting is for a 20 year period and should be 38,280 dwellings. With an added buffer of at least 10%, then the Plan should be meeting at least 42,000 dwellings.

Policy SS4 Settlement Hierarchy

Question SS5 - Do you agree with the suggested policy approach towards the settlement hierarchy, as set out in SS 4 'Settlement hierarchy' above? If not please suggest how it could be amended

- 4.16 STRAT2 (Strategic development) of the adopted Local Plan sets out the settlement hierarchy, which is:
- i. edge of the city of Chester and towns/urban areas of Ellesmere Port, Northwich and Winsford
 - ii. key service centres of Cuddington and Sandiway, Farndon, Frodsham, Helsby, Kelsall, Malpas, Neston and Parkgate, Tarporley, Tattenhall and Tarvin.
 - iii. An appropriate level of development will also be brought forward in smaller rural settlements which have adequate services and facilities and access to public transport.
- 4.17 The top tier of the settlement hierarchy is broadly similar to the settlement hierarchy in the current Local Plan Part 1. Paragraph 55 of the Local Plan Part 1 Inspector’s report (December 2014) stated:
- “The Plan seeks to locate the majority of new development at Chester, Ellesmere Port, Northwich and Winsford. Approximately 80% of new housing in the Borough is intended to be developed in these main urban areas. **They are the largest settlements in the Borough by some way, provide the main opportunities for employment, retailing and social and community facilities and act as focal points for public transport. They possess the greatest capacity to accommodate new development.**” (our emphasis)
- 4.18 Whilst there is a need to provide housing in the rural areas to ensure that villages can grow and thrive, the Inspector’s conclusions on Chester, Ellesmere Port, Northwich and Winsford are still applicable now in that they are the largest settlements and possess the greatest capacity to accommodate new development.
- 4.19 Turning to Northwich, Section 5 of the Places Background Paper – Introduction identifies that:
- Northwich accommodates 204 retail units – second only behind Chester in the borough.



- As of 2021 there were 27,010 jobs provided in Northwich - second only behind Chester in the borough.
- The economically active population in Northwich is 31,050 – third highest in the borough behind Chester and just behind Ellesmere Port (32,233).

4.20 Northwich is also highly sustainable in terms of sustainable transport options, with frequent bus and rail services available to Chester, Manchester, Crewe, Frodsham, Knutsford and Winsford.

4.21 It is therefore entirely appropriate that Northwich is identified within the top tier of the settlement hierarchy, and that it accommodates a very significant level of development as part of meeting the overall development needs of the borough.

Policy SS5 Spatial Strategy Options

4.22 The three initial options for growth that the Council have identified are as follows:

- Option A – Retain the Green Belt
- Option B – Follow current Local Plan level and distribution of development
- Option C – Sustainable transport corridors

Question SS 9 - Have circumstances changed since the adoption of the Local Plan (Part One), that would now justify Green Belt release?

4.23 Yes. There are exceptional circumstances for the release of the site from the Green Belt.

4.24 At the strategic level, there is a significant need for new housing across Cheshire West and Chester. Under the Government's standard method, the local housing need in the borough is 1,928 dwellings per annum. The Issues and Options consultation sets out three options for growth, and under Options B & C - the only options which comply with the requirement in national planning policy to meet local housing need in full – the Council's stated position is that between 11,000 and 12,000 need to be delivered on sites which are currently in the Green Belt.

4.25 In terms of Northwich, the Issues and Options document identifies that there is a need to accommodate at least 5,000 dwellings in Northwich under any of the three options consulted upon. Whilst there are some non-Green Belt options around Northwich, the Council needs to consider holistically how it can meet development needs in the most sustainable way, having regard to paragraph 148 of the Framework and the need to promote sustainable patterns of development.



4.26 We set out the site-specific exceptional circumstances applicable to Weaverham South (growth option: NOR10) in our representations on the site at Section 6 of this statement.

Question SS 11 - Please select the option which is the most appropriate spatial strategy for Cheshire West and Chester:

4.27 These representations focus on Weaverham South (Growth option: NOR10), which falls within Northwich. The options for Northwich are as follows:

- Option A - 5000+ dwellings
- Option B – 5000+ dwellings
- Option C - 5000+ dwellings

4.28 Under all three options, Northwich is proposed to accommodate at least 5,000 dwellings. This is logical because Northwich is a key settlement in the borough and under any scenario it should be a significant focus for development.

Potential growth areas

Question SS 29 Which of the identified potential growth areas around Northwich do you consider to be the most suitable?

4.29 Bloor Homes is promoting Weaverham South, which is identified within the consultation as growth option NOR10. Details of the site and the proposed allocation are provided in Section 6 of these representations.



5. Response to Section 8: Northwich

Policy NO1 Northwich

Question NO 1 - Do you agree with the suggested policy approach towards Northwich, as set out in NO 1 'Northwich' above? If not please suggest how it could be amended?

- 5.1 We generally support the proposed policy approach. However, we do not consider that it is justified to retain policies from the current Part 2 Local Plan when there have been material changes in circumstances, both in relation to the policy context and development needs for the new Local Plan, and also in relation to the latest position on the sites referenced in those policies. For example, we understand that the proposals for Wincham Urban Village have altered considerably since the site was allocated in the Part 1 Local Plan. This should be reflected in an up-to-date suite of policies, which also considers the deliverability of those sites over the plan period.
- 5.2 We note that the draft policy is still being developed in relation to key allocations and related infrastructure. Our client proposes Weaverham South (Growth option: NOR10) as an allocation for residential development in section 6 of these representations. The site is capable of making a significant contribution towards meeting the housing requirements of Northwich and the wider borough, and we consider that its allocation should form a key part of the strategy for Northwich.

Question NO 2 - Do you have any comments on the suggested key allocations/sites?

- 5.3 The sites identified as key allocations already benefit from policy support in the current development plan. However, the Council should not pre-judge the allocation of these sites, and they should be subject to the same site selection and sustainability assessment process as other prospective allocations. The should also carefully consider the latest position in relation to the deliverability of those sites.
- 5.4 As set out above, we propose Weaverham South (Growth option: NOR10) as a key allocation / site in Section 6 of these representations.

Question NO 4 - Are there any infrastructure requirements required to support the suggested policy approach set out above?

- 5.5 Highways infrastructure relevant to the proposed allocation of Weaverham South (Growth option: NOR10) is discussed in the Sustainable Transport Strategy report by Eddisons (see Appendix **EP2** of these representations).



Question NO 5 - Should the settlements that make up the wider Northwich urban area be retained?

- 5.6 Yes. In the current adopted Local Plan, Northwich is defined as the town of Northwich and adjacent settlements of Anderton, Barnton, Davenham, Hartford, Lostock Gralam, Lower Marston, Lower Wincham, Rudheath and Weaverham. Having regard to the strategic importance of Northwich, the close physical, social and economic interrelationship of the constituent settlements, and their combined population and service provision, Northwich should continue to be defined as it is in the current adopted Local Plan.
- 5.7 It can be noted that this matter was considered in detail through the examination of the Local Plan Part 1. The Inspector's report stated at paragraph 118:

"118. For strategic purposes the Plan considers Northwich to consist of the town itself along with a number of adjacent settlements. This follows on from the principle established in the Vale Royal Borough Local Plan. In preparing the Plan, the Council has taken the opportunity to review the settlements concerned and concluded that Cuddington and Sandiway is more appropriately identified as a separate Key Service Centre given its function, level of services and the physical separation from Northwich. It has also concluded that Moulton and Higher Wincham should not be included as part of Northwich given the degree of physical separation from the town. **I consider that the Council's approach is justified. It reflects the physical and functional relationships between the town and surrounding settlements and results in a logical definition of Northwich for strategic purposes.**" (our emphasis)

- 5.8 Our client's specific interest is at Weaverham. The Local Plan Part 1 Inspector concluded at paragraph 120 of his report:

120. I consider that **whilst Weaverham is separated from the town of Northwich by Green Belt, it is closely related physically and functionally and is appropriately included within the definition of the wider built up area.**" (our emphasis)

- 5.9 There have been no significant changes in circumstances which suggest that a radically different approach would be appropriate for the new Local Plan, particularly in light of the significant increase in local housing need and the continued need for Northwich to accommodate development through the emerging Local Plan.



6. Weaverham South (Growth option: NOR10)

- 6.1 Question SS 29 of the consultation seeks views on the Northwich Growth Options, as shown in map 5.6. Bloor Homes is promoting Weaverham South, which is identified within the consultation as growth option NOR10.
- 6.2 Bloor Homes propose the site as an allocation for residential development. The site can deliver approximately 900-1,100 dwellings, as well as extensive green infrastructure, community facilities and (if required) land for the expansion of the adjacent Weaverham High School.
- 6.3 Weaverham South represents a highly sustainable location that offers an exceptional opportunity for meeting housing needs in Northwich and Cheshire West. The site is in single ownership, under sole control of Bloor Homes and is subject to an exceptionally low level of constraint. The site is flat, subject to a very high level of visual containment, predominantly of low ecological value, and suitable access is readily available.
- 6.4 These representations are accompanied by a comprehensive vision document (Appendix **EP1**) which has been prepared by Planit on behalf of Bloor Homes. The vision document provides:
- An analysis of the site and its surroundings;
 - A masterplan and vision that articulates and illustrates the opportunities presented by the site;
 - A demonstration that the site is deliverable, available and achievable; and
 - A summary of the key benefits of the site.
- 6.5 These representations are also supported by supporting technical statements in respect of the following matters:
- Sustainable Transport Strategy report by Eddisons (Appendix **EP2**)
 - Landscape and Visual Technical Note by FPCR (Appendix **EP3**)
 - Ecological Feasibility Assessment report by UES (Appendix **EP4**)
 - Technical Note on Flood Risk and Drainage by Betts Associates (Appendix **EP5**)
- 6.6 Further of details of the site and the proposed allocation are provided below.



The site

Description of the site

- 6.7 The site is located to the south of Weaverham, which lies to the west of Northwich and forms part of the built-up area of Northwich.
- 6.8 The site comprises a series of arable fields to the south of Walnut Avenue and Northwich Road, which generally slope in a southerly direction from the existing housing towards the West Coast Mainline Railway. The railway is generally bounded by a belt of mature woodland, as well as a young community planted woodland, Thorn Wood, to the southeast.
- 6.9 Existing housing at Walnut Avenue and associated roads form the northern boundary of the site. This is 20th century estate development, and generally just meets the fields, with some housing backing on to the site and some overlooking from frontages with drives. The existing housing is on land at the top of the slope, and encloses the site from the wider area of Weaverham. There is currently virtually no landscape treatment along this boundary.
- 6.10 Within the site there are a number of field boundaries, mostly formed by hedges, and a small number of mature trees. The playing fields associated with Weaverham High School are adjacent to the site to the north-west.
- 6.11 Two public rights of way (PROW) cross the site. Weaverham FP9 crosses the northern part of the site and extends between Lime Avenue and Gorstage Lane. Footpath Weaverham FP10 crosses the central part of the site from Walnut Avenue to cross the mainline railway to the south on an overbridge south of the woodland.
- 6.12 There is a smaller part of the site identified north of Northwich Road. This comprises an enclosed parcel of farmland, wrapped around by a woodland, Beach Hill Wood. Beach Hill Wood is designated as a Site of Biological Importance (SBI). This land is proposed for biodiversity enhancements, and potentially sustainable transport infrastructure.

Accessibility

- 6.13 The site's two proposed access points are located approximately 650m and 750m from the centre of Weaverham (less than 10 minutes walking distance), which provides a range of services and facilities to meet the day-to-day needs of residents including a doctor's surgery, dentist, library, community centre, pharmacy and convenience stores. The site is also well-served by existing schools in Weaverham including



St. Bede's RC Primary School, Weaverham Forest Primary School, University Primary Academy Weaverham and Weaverham High School, which all fall well within 2km walking distance of the site.

- 6.14 The site is also located approximately 3.5km to the west of Northwich town centre (approximately 12 minutes cycling distance or accessible by public transport), which provides employment opportunities, additional retail, service and leisure facilities including the Barons Quay retail and leisure hub.
- 6.15 Bus services connect Weaverham with two direct connections to Northwich town centre including Route P9 and Route 48. A bus 'loop' created by the services bolsters connectivity between the surrounding villages of Cuddington and Hartford to the south.
- 6.16 Two train stations serve the site. Greenbank train station is the most accessible station to the site. It can be accessed via a 10-minute bus journey on the no. 49 bus service, or a 29-minute walk from the site's eastern access point.
- 6.17 National Cycle Network Route 5 intersects the site at the northernmost corner, directly connecting it to Northwich town centre and a wider area network of 590km of cycle ways.
- 6.18 PROWs also serve the site well with three key routes emerging from Weaverham into the surrounding landscape. Through the PROWs, pedestrians can gain access to the blue infrastructure of the River Weaver tow path, public transport provision of Acton Bridge station and the wider urban area of Northwich.
- 6.19 Accessibility is reviewed in further detail in Section 3 of the Sustainable Transport Strategy report by Eddisons (Appendix **EP2**). This provides further details of service provision and an analysis of sustainable transport provision. The report concludes:
- The site is accessible on foot and these provisions will be improved as part of the works at the development site.
 - The services from the bus stops on Northwich Road and Lime Avenue connect the site with retail, employment and leisure facilities within the remainder of Northwich and Frodsham. It can therefore be concluded that the proposed development can be accessed by bus.
 - There is the potential for the site to be directly accessed by bus using the future spine road which will be designed to accommodate buses and bus stop infrastructure.
 - The site is accessible via rail with Greenbank and Acton Bridge stations easily accessible by walking or public transport.
- 6.20 The site therefore comprises a highly sustainable and accessible location for new development, and accessibility can be enhanced further through the proposed development.



The proposed development and vision

6.21 The site offers the opportunity to create an exemplar urban extension that threads into the existing community. The vision document and enclosed masterplan (Appendix EP1) demonstrate that the site can deliver:

- 900 – 1,100 dwellings.
- 9.6ha of varied open spaces structured within existing landscape character and pattern. Inclusion of a linear parkland, recreation, play, natural amenity spaces, woodland pockets, allotments and orchards for the new and existing community within walking distance enabling sustainable, social and healthy lives.
- 2.3km of enhanced Public Right of Way through the middle of the site to provide direct connectivity to the new community hub to serve the new and existing community.
- A community Hub at the centre of the site to include a shop and/or cafe along with community uses to create a heart to the new development, serving both new and existing residents.
- 1.8ha of land (if required) to enable the potential expansion of Weaverham High School.
- The extension of the Beach Hill Wood from Thorn Wood to the south into the most northern parcel of the site, creating 8.5ha of new nature reserve area, supporting the BNG requirements of the site.
- Provision of natural green links throughout the site, connecting retained habitat- hedgerows, trees and ponds to provide ecological corridors for wildlife and naturally integrate SuDs.

6.22 Full details of the proposed development and vision for the site are provided within the Vision Document.

Green Belt considerations

Exceptional circumstances

6.23 The exceptional circumstances for the release of the site from the Green Belt are both strategic, taking into account the borough-wide need for housing, and local / site-specific, taking into account the significant range of local benefits of releasing this site for development.

6.24 We address the exceptional circumstances at the strategic level in our response to question SS 9. In summary, there is a need to release Green Belt across Cheshire West to meet the overall housing requirement, and in Northwich there is a need to meet development needs in the most sustainable way, having regard to paragraph 148 of the Framework and promoting sustainable patterns of development.



6.25 In terms of site-specific exceptional circumstances, Weaverham South represents a highly sustainable location and an exceptional opportunity for meeting housing needs in Northwich and Cheshire West. There would be a range of local benefits associated with delivering the site, namely:

- The delivery of significant levels of market and affordable housing to meet significant identified needs;
- The delivery of extensive areas of open space and green infrastructure across a strategic site, for the benefit of both new and existing residents;
- The provision of new community facilities, for the benefit of both new and existing residents;
- The provision of measures to enhance accessibility and sustainable transport, for the benefit of both new and existing residents;
- The provision of 1.8ha of land (if required) to enable the potential expansion of Weaverham High School;
- Significant ecological benefits through the creation of 8.5ha of new nature reserve area; and,
- Significant economic benefits during the construction and lifetime of the development, particularly through increased spending in local services and amenities in Weaverham and Northwich.

6.26 Furthermore, as these representations demonstrate, the site is subject to few technical constraints to development. This is highly unusual for a site of this size. This means that:

- The vision and quantum can be delivered sustainably, with environmental impacts minimised; and,
- There can be a very high degree of confidence that the site can be delivered viably and in short order.

6.27 Therefore, in addition to the strategic exceptional circumstances and the borough-wide need to release Green Belt, there are clear local and site-specific exceptional circumstances for the release of the site from the Green Belt.

Grey belt assessment

6.28 Paragraph 143 of the Framework identifies that the Green Belt serves the following five purposes:

- a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;



- d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

6.29 Paragraph 148 of the Framework states:

“Where it is necessary to release Green Belt land for development, plans should give priority to previously developed land, then consider grey belt which is not previously developed, and then other Green Belt locations. However, when drawing up or reviewing Green Belt boundaries, the need to promote sustainable patterns of development should determine whether a site’s location is appropriate with particular reference to paragraphs 110 and 115 of this Framework.”

6.30 The Framework defines Grey Belt as follows:

“For the purposes of plan-making and decision-making, ‘grey belt’ is defined as land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and/or any other land that, in either case, does not strongly contribute to any of purposes (a), (b), or (d) in paragraph 143. ‘Grey belt’ excludes land where the application of the policies relating to the areas or assets in footnote 7 (other than Green Belt) would provide a strong reason for refusing or restricting development.”

6.31 We hereby assess the site against the provisions of paragraph 155 of the Framework below with reference to the recently published National Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) on ‘grey belt’ (paragraphs 64-001 to 012) below. In particular, paragraph 64-005 of the PPG sets out considerations for informing judgements on the contribution that assessment areas make to Green Belt purposes a, b, and d.

6.32 For the purpose of our assessment below we have regarded Weaverham as part of the urban area of Northwich, as per its identification in the current and emerging Local Plans.

Green Belt Purpose (a) – To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas

6.33 The PPG states that assessment areas that contribute ‘strongly’ are likely to be free of existing development, and lack physical features in reasonable proximity that could restrict and contain development. They are also likely to include all of the following features:

- be adjacent or near to a large built up area
- if developed, result in an incongruous pattern of development (such as an extended “finger” of development into the Green Belt)

6.34 Weaverham is a settlement which forms part of the built-up area of Northwich. However, the site is extremely well contained by substantial existing physical features, namely the extensive woodland belt around the site’s south-western and south-eastern boundaries. As such, the site comprises a highly logical



extension to Weaverham. Its development would certainly not result in an incongruous pattern of development, such as an extended “finger” of development into the Green Belt.

6.35 Having regard to the guidance in the PPG, we consider that the site makes, at most, a moderate contribution to purpose (a).

Green Belt Purpose (b) – Prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another

6.36 The PPG is very clear that this purpose relates to the merging of towns, not villages.

6.37 The site is located to the south of Weaverham, which lies to the west of Northwich. The site does not play any role in preventing the merger of Northwich with Winsford, which is to the south-east of Northwich.

6.38 Cuddington falls to the south-west of Weaverham, but Cuddington is a village and not a town, and in any event the site only forms a minority part of the gap between Weaverham and Cuddington, which is circa 1.8km from the south-western boundary of the site. As discussed above in relation to landscape and visual matters, the site is extremely well contained visually. Therefore, notwithstanding that Cuddington is a village, the development of the site would not in any way result in the physical or perceived merger of the settlements.

6.39 Therefore, the site does not form part of a gap between towns, and it makes no contribution to purpose (b).

Green Belt purpose (d) – to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns

6.40 The PPG states that this purpose relates to historic towns, not villages. Whilst Northwich is recognised in the consultation document to be a historic town, Weaverham is not. But in any event, the site is sufficiently distant from the historic core of Northwich (some 3.5km away) such that it can be concluded that:

- the site does not form part of the setting of the historic town of Northwich; and,
- the site has no visual, physical, or experiential connection to the historic aspects of the town.

6.41 Therefore, having regard to the guidance in the PPG, the site makes no contribution to purpose (d).

Impact on the remaining Green Belt in the plan area

6.42 The site adjoins Weaverham and is extremely well contained by substantial existing physical features, namely the extensive woodland belt around the sites south-western and south-eastern boundaries. It also only represents a very small fraction of the total Green Belt in Cheshire West. Therefore, the development of the site would not affect the ability of all the remaining Green Belt across the area of the plan from serving all five of the Green Belt purposes in a meaningful way.



Golden Rules

6.43 Paragraph 156 of the Framework states:

“Where major development involving the provision of housing is proposed on land released from the Green Belt through plan preparation or review, or on sites in the Green Belt subject to a planning application, the following contributions (‘Golden Rules’) should be made:

- a. affordable housing which reflects either: (i) development plan policies produced in accordance with paragraphs 67-68 of this Framework; or (ii) until such policies are in place, the policy set out in paragraph 157 below;
- b. necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure; and
- c. the provision of new, or improvements to existing, green spaces that are accessible to the public. New residents should be able to access good quality green spaces within a short walk of their home, whether through onsite provision or through access to offsite spaces.”

6.44 Bloor Homes is fully committed to ensuring that the Golden Rules would be met through the proposed development of the site, including through the provision of affordable housing in line with local requirements and any necessary improvements to infrastructure. Highways infrastructure relevant to the proposed allocation of the site is discussed in the Sustainable Transport Strategy at Appendix **EP2**. The vision document at Appendix **EP1** also demonstrates that the site would deliver extensive new publicly accessible open space on site, for the benefit of both new and existing residents.

Conclusions on Green Belt

6.45 The site does not strongly contribute to any of purposes (a), (b), or (d) in paragraph 143 of the Framework. Therefore, the site comprises ‘Grey Belt’ for the purposes of the Framework. Bloor Homes is fully committed to ensuring that the Framework’s ‘Golden Rules’ are met as part of the proposed development. As such, it is suitable for release from the Green Belt to meet development needs.

Technical considerations

6.46 The site is subject to few technical constraints to development. This is highly unusual for a site of this size. As stated above, this means that:

- The vision and quantum can be delivered sustainably, with environmental impacts minimised; and,
- There can be a very high degree of confidence that the site can be delivered viably and in short order.



6.47 This Vision Document at Appendix **EP1** has been informed by a series of design studies which have been commissioned by Bloor Homes to demonstrate that this site is suitable to accommodate residential development and can offer facilities for the existing Weaverham community. The results of these initial studies are summarised within the Vision Document. Key technical matters are discussed further below, with reference to the technical reports appended to these representations.

Highways and access

6.48 The site comprises a highly accessible location.

6.49 The proposed development would maximise the potential for sustainable travel choices through good design and placemaking, and it will do so based on the prioritisation of sustainable travel users which will start with pedestrian and cyclists and end with the use of the private car. The scale of the site brings with it the potential to provide infrastructure and measures which can enhance sustainability.

6.50 A Sustainable Transport Strategy report by Eddisons is provided at Appendix **EP2**. This sets out the transport vision and strategy for the proposed development. The strategy focusses on the future mobility of the site and responds to changing trends in attitudes towards mobility and how technology, investment and also constraints are changing the face of accessibility, travel and transport.

6.51 The Sustainable Transport Strategy report draws the following conclusions:

- The proposals will include some 'day to day' amenities to provide as sustainable a site as possible.
- The proposals could provide an on-site Mobility Hub.
- There are existing bus services that run within close proximity to the site.
- There is potential for buses to be diverted to directly access the site.
- There are everyday facilities that are within a short walking and cycling distance.
- The traffic likely to be generated by the proposals will be dispersed across the local highway network in a number of different directions.
- There are no locations within a short drive of the site that suffer from sustained peak period congestion.
- The proposals are likely to be able to be accommodated at all key junctions on the local highway network with the implementation of some potential off-site mitigation.

6.52 As such, there are no material highways or transport reasons which would prevent the allocation or delivery of this site as a residential led development.



Landscape and visual impact

6.53 Owing to the prevailing topography and the presence of extensive woodland around its perimeter, for a site of this scale it is exceptionally well contained visually. Development of the site would result in a negligible impact on landscape character beyond the site itself, and any landscape and visual effects would be limited and localised.

6.54 A Landscape and Visual Technical Note by FPCR is presented at Appendix **EP3**. A summary is provided below:

- The site and its immediate context are not covered by any landscape designations such as National Parks, National Landscapes or Special Landscape Areas.
- The site itself comprises an area of arable farmland surrounded by mature woodland, which generally slopes from north to south, with the existing residential edge of Weaverham forming the northern boundary. Within the site itself there are a small number of mature trees and some hedgerows, but the site generally has few landscape features. The woodland that borders the site is a significant landscape feature, providing visual enclosure and limiting views to the settlement or to the site from the south.
- The illustrative masterplan shows one way in which the site could be developed. This shows a mix of residential development and green space on the land between Walnut Avenue and the rail line, with an area of new green infrastructure to the north of Northwich Road. The existing rights of way could be maintained within attractive, but different, routes through the site and new paths and recreational routes and areas can be established where there is currently no formal access.
- The existing mature trees and most of the hedgerows could be maintained within the site and supplemented with new tree and hedgerow planting. This would be in accordance with guidance in the Chester Cheshire West Landscape Strategy. The residential development would mostly take place on arable land, of limited landscape value in itself.
- In terms of any potential visual impact, this would be limited to views from the houses that border the site to the north, views from the two paths that cross the site, and from limited sections of Northwich Road and Gortstage Lane, where access would be provided.
- Views from the existing houses could be addressed by careful detail design. The illustrative masterplan shows some areas of green space on the highest parts of the site, close to the existing houses. In other areas development would be closer, but in all cases, it would be possible to protect the residential amenity of existing residents, even if the outlook changes.
- Views from footpaths FP9 and FP10 would inevitably become more enclosed, but the rights of way could be retained in areas of greenspace providing attractive routes for users. Views from the two roads that border the ends of the site would be very limited, mainly just views around the new access points. No notable visual effects are expected.



- Overall, the site comprises a highly enclosed parcel of land, comprising mainly of arable land, with some trees and enclosing woodland. The features of landscape value, namely the woodlands, trees and hedges could be largely retained with any development and supplemented with areas of new greenspace and planting. Whilst the site itself would inevitably experience a complete change of character, there would be a negligible impact on landscape character beyond the site itself. This is highly unusual for a site of this size.
- The site comprises an appropriate one for potential residential development and could be developed with very limited and localised landscape and visual effects.

Ecology and trees

- 6.55 An Ecological Feasibility Assessment report by UES is provided at Appendix **EP4**. This identifies the key ecological constraints with a view to ensuring that any high-quality habitats are retained as part of the proposals.
- 6.56 The site comprises fields of homogeneous cereal crops which are actively farmed, and are of predominately of low ecological value. The Ecological Feasibility Assessment report identifies that around 90% of all habitats affected are unequivocally of ‘low ecological distinctiveness’.
- 6.57 The masterplan for the site allows for significant habitat retention, enhancement and creation. It has been designed to be ecologically sympathetic and ensures that the retained and proposed green infrastructure creates effective links with existing ecological networks off-site, promoting the natural distribution of species.
- 6.58 The Ecological Feasibility Assessment report concludes that the site can be developed with minimal impacts on priority habitats, with existing habitats along the field boundaries to be retained and enhanced where possible. Early adoption of the mitigation hierarchy, such as retaining the ponds, trees, hedgerows and woodland, would ensure impacts on protected species, if present, are minimised. Furthermore, the development also presents an opportunity to enhance the habitats available to wildlife on site, through the creation of a new nature reserve and securing the long-term management of Beach Hill Wood SBI.
- 6.59 Further surveys undertaken as part of any planning application will identify any mitigation and compensation measures required to minimise any potential impact on ecology and nature conservation. Any planning application will also be supported by a biodiversity net gain (BNG) assessment, which will ensure the site achieves a 10% BNG.



Flood risk and drainage

6.60 A Technical Note on Flood Risk and Drainage by Betts Associates is provided at Appendix **EP5**. A summary is provided below:

- The flood risk to the site can reasonably described as low from all sources with the exception of surface water and groundwater which vary.
- The groundwater risk is limited and subsurface and is often encountered during construction phases of development and is dealt with by dewatering and appropriate construction methods.
- The surface water risk is varied with the Environment Agency mapping showing that whilst the majority of the site is at low-very low chance of flooding there are some areas of medium and high chance. A site-specific direct rainfall model is being constructed to determine the extent of surface water flood risk enabling areas of greater risk more accurately to be avoided.
- Drainage of surface water should be to watercourse mimicking the existing drainage regime but at restricted greenfield runoff rates with stormwater storage being provided for the 1 in 100-year return period within surface-based sustainable drainage features where at all possible.
- There are no flood risk or drainage reasons why the proposed site cannot be developed for residential use.

Deliverability

6.61 The site is deliverable and can make a significant contribution to meeting development needs over the plan period. Subject to achieving an allocation and/or planning permission, it is anticipated development will commence and homes delivered comfortably within the first 5 years of the plan period.

6.62 The Framework states that to be considered deliverable, sites for housing should be available now, offer a suitable location for development now, and be achievable with a realistic prospect that housing will be delivered on the site within five years. We hereby address those criteria.

Suitability

6.63 The suitability of the site is addressed above with reference to the Vision Document and the various technical assessments underpinning it. The site is proposed as an allocation through the emerging Local Plan. However, as grey belt, there is also an opportunity for the site to come forward via an early application.



Availability

6.64 The site is controlled and promoted by Bloor Homes, a developer with extensive experience of bringing sites forward for housing development across England and Wales. There are no legal or ownership impediments to development. The site is available now.

Achievability

6.65 The site is greenfield, and the supporting technical evidence demonstrates that the site is subject to a very low level of constraint. Therefore, there can be a very high degree of confidence that the site can be delivered viably and in short order. Whilst the Council will prepare its own Whole Plan Viability Assessment, Bloor Homes can confirm that its own internal appraisals indicate that the site is viable based on having regard to the need to provide affordable housing and other anticipated infrastructure requirements, in accordance with the Framework's Golden Rules.

6.66 In terms of the developer's capacity to deliver the site, it is anticipated that there would be at least two sales outlets on site at any one time, in accordance with phasing plans which can be agreed with the Council. It is anticipated that development will commence within 5 years, and that the site can be completed in full during the plan period.



Weaverham South: summary and conclusions

- 6.67 The site is proposed as an allocation for residential development. The site can deliver approximately 900-1,100 dwellings, as well as extensive green infrastructure, community facilities and (if required) land for the expansion of the adjacent Weaverham High School.
- 6.68 Weaverham South represents a highly sustainable location that offers an exceptional opportunity for meeting housing needs in Northwich and Cheshire West. The site is in single ownership and is subject to an exceptionally low level of constraint. The site is flat, subject to a very high level of visual containment, predominantly of low ecological value, and suitable access is readily available.
- 6.69 The site does not strongly contribute to any of purposes (a), (b), or (d) in paragraph 143 of the Framework. Therefore, the site comprises 'Grey Belt' for the purposes of the Framework. Bloor Homes is fully committed to ensuring that the Framework's 'Golden Rules' are met as part of the proposed development. As such, it is suitable for release from the Green Belt to meet development needs.
- 6.70 The site offers the opportunity to create an exemplar urban extension that threads into the existing community. The vision document and enclosed masterplan (Appendix **EP1**) demonstrate that the site can deliver:
- 900 – 1,100 dwellings.
 - 9.6ha of varied open spaces structured within existing landscape character and pattern. Inclusion of a linear parkland, recreation, play, natural amenity spaces, woodland pockets, allotments and orchards for the new and existing community within walking distance enabling sustainable, social and healthy lives.
 - 2.3km of enhanced Public Right of Way through the middle of the site to provide direct connectivity to the new community hub to serve the new and existing community.
 - A community Hub at the centre of the site to include a shop and/or cafe along with community uses to create a heart to the new development, serving both new and existing residents.
 - 1.8ha of land (if required) to enable the potential expansion of Weaverham High School.
 - The extension of the Beach Hill Wood from Thorn Wood to the south into the most northern parcel of the site, creating 8.5ha of new nature reserve area, supporting the BNG requirements of the site.
 - Provision of natural green links throughout the site, connecting retained habitat- hedgerows, trees and ponds to provide ecological corridors for wildlife and naturally integrate SuDs.
- 6.71 Bloor Homes welcomes the opportunity to work collaboratively with the council and key stakeholders throughout the Local Plan preparation process.



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