

CCA supports the Council's ambition to develop a new Local Plan that delivers sustainable growth, meets housing needs and protects the character of rural West Cheshire. As an organisation working with rural communities across Cheshire we welcome this opportunity to comment on the consultation with a particular focus on rural, affordable and community-led housing. Our comments also highlight the implications for neighbourhood plans and for rural services and infrastructure.

1. Rural and affordable housing

CCA's position is informed by evidence from the **Cheshire West Affordable Housing Needs Survey Summary Report 2021–24**. These parish-level studies, covering thirteen areas, identifies a need for **844 additional homes**, split **363 affordable (43 %)** and **481 market (57 %)**, with need highest in **Neston (281 homes)**, **Frodsham (135)** and **Davenham, Bostock & Moulton (100)**.

The surveys showed that **smaller dwellings dominate demand: 2-bed homes account for 44 % of total need (369 homes) and 47 % of affordable need (167 homes)**, while **1-bed homes represent 21 % of total need (176 homes) and 29 % of affordable need (111 homes)**. Three-bed and 4-bed homes together comprise around one third of total need, with a higher share in the market sector. This evidence underpins our view that rural housing policies should prioritise **small, energy-efficient homes**, particularly 1- and 2-bed properties, to address concealed households, downsizers and affordability constraints.

Tenure patterns vary by parish. Some places have majority-affordable profiles—for example **Neston (55 % affordable)**, **Tilston (53 %)**, **Farndon (70 %)** and **Dunham Hill & Hapsford (55 %)**—while others such as **Christleton & Littleton** and **Malpas** are market-dominated (more than 75 % market housing). This variation underscores the need for a **tailored housing mix** by parish, rather than a one-size-fits-all target.

- **Affordable housing thresholds and tenure mix.** The consultation proposes a borough-wide affordable housing policy that includes at least 50 % affordable housing on Green Belt sites and requires affordable housing on schemes of 10+ homes, with a lower threshold of three or more dwellings in designated rural areas. We support a policy that requires affordable homes in smaller rural schemes, as rural wages are low and market housing is often unaffordable. However, delivering affordable units on schemes of only three or four dwellings can be challenging for small builders; policies should be flexible enough to accept off-site contributions or small clusters of affordable home ownership housing where on-site provision is not viable. A tenure mix that includes social rent, affordable rent and affordable home ownership tenures is needed to meet the variety of rural needs.
- **Design and integration.** CCA agrees that affordable homes should be indistinguishable from market housing and dispersed throughout the development. Policies should ensure that smaller schemes maintain rural character and that dwelling sizes reflect local needs (smaller homes for young families and older residents). The plan should encourage community-led design standards and the use of local materials.

- **Rural exception sites.** National policy allows small sites next to rural settlements to be developed for affordable housing in perpetuity. The consultation suggests retaining the existing rural exception policy but potentially limiting its application to settlements more remote from large urban areas. We caution against restricting rural exception sites to remote parishes; affordable need exists in villages close to towns, and rural exception policies provide one of the few ways to deliver truly affordable homes where land values would otherwise make this impossible. We support the requirement for parish-led needs assessments and for schemes to remain affordable in perpetuity. The proposed local connection criteria (residents living in the parish for five years, those working locally, or people with close family ties or previous long-term residence) are appropriate but should be widened to include young people who grew up in the parish and wish to return.
- **Essential rural workers dwellings.** The plan proposes to retain the existing policy for rural worker dwellings, including a 106 m² limit and a condition that dwellings should remain as affordable housing if the need ceases. We support this approach as it prevents such homes being lost to the open market and ensures they remain available to the farming and forestry community.
- **Older households and accessible homes.** The housing needs surveys offer a granular view of the needs of residents aged 65 +. Across the parishes, older households still favour market purchase, but in affordability-pressured areas such as **Neston and Frodsham** there is a discernible need for **affordable/social rent options**. Housing type preferences are unambiguous: older respondents overwhelmingly chose **bungalows or other level-access homes**, most frequently with **two bedrooms**. The vast majority reported **no formal support need**, yet the surveys highlighted a notable minority—particularly in **Neston, Frodsham and Saughall & Shotwick Park**—who require **mobility or disability adaptations or warden-assisted schemes**. These findings underline the need to deliver **age-friendly, energy-efficient bungalows and accessible dwellings** across tenure types to enable older residents to ‘right-size’ locally and free up family homes. Schemes should also incorporate flexible support and high energy performance standards to support independent living and reduce fuel poverty.

2. Community-led housing

The consultation asks whether a specific policy for community-led housing is needed and notes that any policy should not allow schemes larger than national size limits and that community-led homes will not be appropriate in all settlements. Evidence from the affordable housing needs surveys demonstrate that communities favour **small, design-led schemes with Local Connection emphasis** and are sensitive to traffic, parking, landscape and Green Belt impacts. Respondents also express a **preference for energy-efficient, accessible homes located within easy reach of shops, health services and bus routes**.

These findings strengthen the case for community-led models, which allow local residents to shape design, tenure and allocations and help ensure new housing meets local needs. CCA therefore strongly supports a dedicated community-led housing policy. Community land trusts, co-operatives and self-build groups can deliver affordable homes that remain in community ownership and help younger residents stay in their villages. We recommend that:

- The Local Plan actively supports community-led housing in both small and larger villages, not only in ‘remote’ settlements. Flexibility on scheme size will be important; some parishes may need schemes larger than the one-hectare national limit to meet local demand.
- The policy should set out how the Council will work with community organisations to identify sites (including the use of Rural Exception Sites) and provide technical assistance.
- Community-led housing should count towards meeting local affordable housing targets and be exempt from standard developer contributions where they demonstrably meet a local need.
- **Design quality, sustainability and Local Connection.** The policy must ensure that community-led schemes are **design-led and energy-efficient**, incorporating accessible layouts, low-carbon materials and good links to local services. Design codes should manage traffic and parking impacts and safeguard landscapes and Green Belt settings, while Local Connection criteria will ensure that homes go to people with a demonstrable link to the parish.

3. Implications for neighbourhood plans

Neighbourhood plans are an essential tool for capturing local aspirations. The consultation notes that neighbourhood plans must be in conformity with strategic policies and that communities may need to review their plans once the Local Plan is adopted; however, much of their detailed content will remain relevant. CCA urges the Council to:

- Clearly identify which policies in the new Local Plan will be ‘strategic’ so neighbourhood plan groups can plan accordingly.
- Encourage and support communities to review existing neighbourhood plans to incorporate new policies on rural exception sites, affordable housing thresholds and community-led housing.
- Ensure that neighbourhood plans retain the ability to allocate small sites for housing, set local design codes and include criteria for local connection on rural exception schemes. Where a neighbourhood plan includes a housing site allocation and meets a local need, this should be afforded significant weight in decisions.
- Draw on the housing need summary report’s **policy and delivery implications** when shaping neighbourhood plan policies. The survey recommends tailoring the housing mix by parish rather than applying a one-size-fits-all target, retaining a visible affordable component even in market-led areas, prioritising smaller homes (especially 2-bed bungalows/level-access options) and phasing delivery in higher-need locations such as Neston and Frodsham. Neighbourhood plans should embed these principles—planning phased schemes with strong affordable proportions, prioritising age-appropriate housing and using Local Connection criteria in allocations—to ensure that housing growth supports local communities and infrastructure. Policies should also set out **design codes** that promote **high energy performance, accessible layouts and sustainable materials**, manage traffic and

parking impacts and safeguard landscape and Green Belt settings. Partnership working between parish councils, registered providers, landowners and housing enablers should be reflected in neighbourhood plans to help identify sites, secure funding and deliver community-led schemes.

4. Rural services and infrastructure

The proposed settlement hierarchy recognises that smaller settlements with fewer services could accommodate infill development and small previously developed sites but states that development should be appropriate in scale, conserve character and not exceed the capacity of existing services and infrastructure. While this cautious approach is sensible, it must be flexible enough to support **the revival of very small rural villages** where a lack of development over many years has led to declining populations, under-occupied housing and the loss of community facilities.

Carefully planned housing growth—delivered alongside investment in services and infrastructure—can help these settlements contribute to overall housing numbers and restore the critical mass needed to sustain shops, buses and social networks. We welcome the recognition of service capacity but emphasise that, in some places, **new housing and infrastructure will need to be delivered in tandem** to regenerate ageing communities. We therefore emphasise that:

- **Service capacity and investment.** Many rural communities have limited GP services, schools, bus services and digital connectivity. Any additional housing must be matched with investment in services and digital and transport infrastructure. The infrastructure chapter notes that local plans should set out the contributions expected from development for education, health, transport, flood and water management, green and digital infrastructure. It also proposes embedding net-zero goals, improving sustainable transport links, requiring EV charging and renewable energy connections, and clarifying that developers are expected to deliver or fund all necessary infrastructure on site. CCA supports these principles and stresses that developer contributions in rural areas must prioritise community infrastructure (GP surgeries, schools, community buildings) and public transport enhancements alongside affordable housing. Infrastructure delivery should be aligned with **high-quality, energy-efficient housing**—for example by ensuring new homes include EV charge points, heat-pump readiness and broadband connectivity—and by securing active travel routes to services and bus stops to reduce car dependence.
- **Revival of small settlements.** In **very small villages with few or no services**, decades of under-investment have often resulted in a shrinking population, a dominance of larger homes and a lack of affordable or age-appropriate dwellings. A modest **program of revival housing**—focused on small, energy-efficient homes across tenures—can rebalance the housing stock, attract younger households and give older residents an option to downsize locally. To be successful this must go hand in hand with **targeted investment in infrastructure and services**, such as the reinstatement of bus services, small community hubs and improved digital connectivity. The Local Plan should therefore allow these settlements to accommodate carefully phased growth even where existing service capacity is limited, provided that developers and landowners commit to delivering the necessary infrastructure.

- **Viability and prioritisation.** The consultation acknowledges that there may be instances where viability is an issue and asks for views on how infrastructure requirements could be prioritised. We believe that affordable housing and critical services (health and education) should take precedence over optional infrastructure, but viability assessments must be transparent and should not be used to justify substandard infrastructure in rural communities.
- **Phasing, local lettings and partnerships.** The affordable housing needs survey highlights the importance of **phasing delivery** with robust affordable proportions in higher-need areas to avoid displacement and manage infrastructure impacts. It recommends **age-appropriate provision** (especially 2-bed bungalows and accessible homes) and **Local Connection allocations** to ensure that homes reach people with a demonstrable link to the parish. Successful delivery will require partnerships between parish councils, registered providers, landowners and planning officers to identify sites and secure funding. Neighbourhood plans and the Local Plan should reflect these recommendations so that infrastructure and housing growth proceed hand in hand.

5. Summary

CCA welcomes the Council's commitment to addressing housing needs and supports many of the suggested approaches in the Issues & Options document. We emphasise that:

1. **Affordable housing policy** should include lower thresholds for rural areas but allow flexibility in how very small schemes deliver affordable homes. Evidence from parish surveys shows that **small dwellings dominate demand**—2-bed homes account for nearly half of total and affordable need and 1-beds form a further one-fifth. Policies should therefore prioritise **small, energy-efficient homes**, particularly **2-bed and 1-bed dwellings**, and ensure a robust affordable component across all settlements. Age-friendly bungalows and level-access homes should be encouraged to allow older residents to downsize locally and free up larger homes for families.
2. **Rural exception sites** must remain available in all rural settlements, not just remote ones, and should be underpinned by parish-led needs assessments, strong Local Connection criteria and affordability in perpetuity. Rural exception policies should be flexible enough to accommodate community-led schemes and to deliver **age-friendly bungalows and level-access homes**, with a focus on 2-bed and 1-bed properties, across both affordable and market tenures. Design quality, high energy performance and accessibility should be integral to these schemes to maximise community benefit.
3. **Community-led housing** warrants a supportive policy that enables community groups to deliver affordable homes at a scale that meets local needs. Surveys indicate that communities favour **small, design-led schemes with Local Connection emphasis**, and they want **energy-efficient, accessible homes within walking distance of shops, health services and bus routes**. A dedicated policy should therefore promote community land trusts, co-operatives and self-build groups, require robust design codes that manage traffic and parking impacts and embrace high energy performance, and ensure that community-led schemes count towards local affordable housing targets.

4. **Neighbourhood plans** should continue to have a strong role; the Council should provide clarity on strategic policies and support communities to review their plans. Evidence-led policy and delivery implications—including tailoring the housing mix by parish, retaining a visible affordable component even in market-led areas, prioritising smaller homes and age-appropriate bungalows, phasing delivery with robust affordable proportions and using Local Connection lettings—should inform neighbourhood plan updates. Neighbourhood plans should also set out design codes that promote **high energy performance, accessible layouts and sustainable materials** and should foster partnerships between parish councils, registered providers and landowners to deliver community-led schemes.

5. **Rural services and infrastructure** must be upgraded alongside new development; developer contributions should prioritise affordable housing, education, health care and sustainable transport, and the Council’s Infrastructure Delivery Plan should identify rural infrastructure needs. Policies should provide **flexibility for very small settlements with limited services** to accommodate modest revival housing where this is essential to sustain their communities. In such cases, housing growth must be accompanied by **simultaneous investment in infrastructure**—from community hubs and bus links to broadband and digital services—to rebuild a critical mass of residents and support local services. To align with net-zero goals the plan should require **EV charging, renewable energy connections, heat-pump readiness, and broadband connectivity** on all rural schemes and secure active travel routes and public transport links. Phasing delivery and collaboration between parish councils, registered providers, landowners and public bodies will help align infrastructure investment with housing growth and ensure that new homes are delivered hand-in-hand with essential services and high energy performance.

CCA looks forward to working with Cheshire West and Chester Council and local communities to refine these policies. By combining **place-sensitive delivery, high-quality, energy-efficient design, age-friendly housing** and **robust Local Connection allocations**, the new Local Plan can deliver genuinely affordable homes, thriving rural communities and sustainable infrastructure across the borough and help residents remain independent, connected and secure.

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