



New local plan for Cheshire East

Design topic paper (draft)

March 2024

Open

Fair

Green

Front cover images (clockwise from top-left):

- Crewe Market Hall and Municipal Buildings
- Arclid north plant site and lake (image supplied by Bathgate Silica Sand Ltd)
- Jodrell Bank Observatory
- Lamberts Lane Bridge, Congleton
- Tabley Park, Northwich Road, Knutsford

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1 Design in Cheshire East

1.1 This topic paper provides further information to support the 'Design' section of the issues paper.

1.2 Design is a cross-cutting discipline that permeates all development decisions and is crucial to securing positive outcomes across a range of indicators subject to their own policy areas (environmental improvements, transport and movement solutions, inclusive spaces and so on).

1.3 Good design is central to the creation of attractive, accessible, inclusive, successful, and sustainable places. High-quality, well-designed developments, including the design of buildings, contribute positively to the quality of place in the borough and make the best use of land. Development should be inclusive, creating places and spaces where everyone can access and benefit from a full range of opportunities available to members of society. Thoughtful, responsive design can enable all people to fully participate in the built environment through consideration of not only the aesthetic of development but its layout, orientation, the space dedicated to private and public arenas, transport connections and the integration of natural features that support habitats and manage the effects of climate change.

1.4 Good design should respond to the local character of an area reinforcing the special qualities of place whilst seeking to address the challenges of urban and rural living.

2 National planning policy

2.1 Chapter 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) stresses the importance of design in making high quality places and highlights the importance of responding to local character. It also strongly encourages the use of plans, design policy, guidance, and codes, to provide clarity on local design expectations.

2.2 The NPPF sets out guidance including the following key paragraphs:

Paragraph 131: The creation of high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities. Being clear about design expectations, and how these will be tested, is essential for achieving this. So too is effective engagement between applicants, communities, local planning authorities and other interests throughout the process.

Paragraph 132: Plans should, at the most appropriate level, set out a clear design vision and expectations, so that applicants have as much certainty as possible about what is likely to be acceptable. Design policies should be developed with local communities so they reflect local aspirations, and are grounded in an understanding and evaluation of each area's defining characteristics. Neighbourhood planning groups can play an important role in identifying the special qualities of each area and explaining how this should be reflected in development, both through their own plans and by engaging in the production of design policy, guidance and codes by local planning authorities and developers.

Paragraph 133: To provide maximum clarity about design expectations at an early stage, all local planning authorities should prepare design guides or codes consistent with the principles set out in the National Design Guide and National Model Design Code, and which reflect local character and design preferences. Design guides and codes provide a local framework for creating beautiful and distinctive places with a consistent and high quality standard of design. Their geographic coverage, level of detail and degree of prescription should be tailored to the circumstances and scale of change in each place, and should allow a suitable degree of variety.

3 Local plan policy

3.1 The county of Cheshire is well known for its rolling pastoral landscapes, plains, and historic market towns. No landscape in Cheshire is truly natural, all have been influenced by humans over millennia. In Cheshire East, these influences can be seen from the upland Peak District fringe in the east to the plains, rolling landscapes and sandstone escarpments in the west. Farming, geography, natural resources, geology, and the industrial revolution have all impacted upon the landscape, location, growth of and form of the settlements within it.

3.2 The way settlements have evolved, responding to their location, to growth and changing human needs over centuries have made each of them unique today. The layers of history are physically displayed in the buildings, streets, and spaces, all of which add depth to their sense of place and providing us with an emotional response to inanimate bricks and mortar.

3.3 The Local Plan Strategy (LPS) seeks to secure high quality design and the importance of good design is outlined in a number of the LPS's strategic priorities:

3.4 Strategic priority 2 focusses on the need to create sustainable communities and outlines mechanisms for how this will be delivered. It prioritises locating new housing in sustainable locations and ensuring that there is an appropriate mix of house types, sizes and tenures including affordable housing. It also seeks to ensure that new development promotes healthier lifestyles (for example through provision of high-quality green infrastructure), makes appropriate connections with existing neighbourhoods, promotes walking, cycling and public transport and is well designed, sustainable and energy efficient.

3.5 Strategic priority 3 concerns protecting and enhancing environmental quality. It focusses particularly on the need to reduce the borough's impact on climate change, for example by promoting renewable energy, encouraging water efficiency, providing new and maintaining high quality green infrastructure and the sustainable management of waste. It also stresses the importance of respecting the character and distinctiveness of places, buildings and landscapes through the careful design and siting of development.

3.6 Strategic priority 4 relates to reducing the need to travel, managing car use, and promoting more sustainable modes of transport. The implication for the design of new residential areas is the need to: build homes that are close, or easily accessible, to where people work, shop, access services and enjoy recreational activities; ensuring development gives priority to walking, cycling and public transport; and supporting safe and secure access for mobility and visually impaired people.

3.7 The strategic priorities form the basis of the council's approach to design in development and are articulated in Policy SD 1 'Sustainable Development in Cheshire East', which sets out several key design principles to be used at a local level to achieve sustainable development including:

- Ensuring that development is accessible by public transport, walking and cycling.
- Providing appropriate infrastructure to meet the needs of the local community, including landscaping and open space.
- Providing safe access and sufficient car parking.

- Supporting the health, safety, social and cultural well-being of the residents.
- Providing a locally distinct, high quality, sustainable, well designed, and durable environment.
- Using appropriate technologies to reduce carbon emissions and create a low carbon economy.
- Incorporating sustainable design and construction methods.
- Contributing to protecting and enhancing the natural, built, historic and cultural environment.
- Making efficient use of land.

3.8 Policy SD 2 'Sustainable Development Principles' expands on these key principles of sustainable development, applying them to new development proposals. It places particular emphasis on the need for all development to contribute positively to an area's character and identity, creating or reinforcing local distinctiveness through appropriate choices around height, massing, materials, external design features, relationship to neighbouring properties and response to landscape character. The design, construction, insulation, layout, and orientation of developments is encouraged to promote the efficient use of natural resources. In terms of residential development in particular, Policy SD2 emphasises the expectation for quality open space, accessibility by public transport, and measures to encourage travel by sustainable modes of transport such as walking, cycling and public transport.

3.9 Policy SE 1 'Design' emphasises the need for design quality and requires that development proposals make a positive contribution to their surroundings, delivering a sense of place, respecting local distinctiveness and heritage assets, designing for pedestrian priority and quality public realm are all key. Developments should have regard to sustainable design principles including passive environmental design, adaptability and future proofing, water conservation, renewable energy/ low carbon technologies and green infrastructure. Policy SE 1 also stresses the importance of liveability: issues of internal/external space, privacy, storage, waste management and access for all. Much of which is also dealt with in BfL12, and, as the policy states there is a need to evidence good design in applications which can thus be addressed through the use of the BfL12 assessments.

3.10 Policy SE 1 also encourage developers to consider measures for designing in safety, including high levels of passive surveillance and lighting of streets, spaces, and parking, incorporating secured by design principles, and ensuring that site layout and design minimises the opportunity for crime.

3.11 Policy SE 4 'Landscape', is also an important policy that shapes the design of development in Cheshire East, requiring development to 'conserve the landscape character and quality and should where possible, enhance and effectively manage the historic, natural, and human-caused landscape features that contribute to local distinctiveness of both rural and urban landscapes.

4 Cheshire East Design Guide

4.1 Following the adoption of the LPS, the council produced a Design Guide supplementary planning document (SPD)¹ that provides further detail on how a design led approach should be applied in Cheshire East, based in an analysis of the context of the site and the local characteristics of landscape, character, layout and materials that that contribute to establishing distinctive places across the borough.

4.2 The Design Guide SPD, adopted just ahead of the LPS in May 2017, provides some analysis of the character of Cheshire East recognising that the county of Cheshire is well known for its rolling pastoral landscapes, plains, and historic market towns. The guide provides analysis to demonstrate that the varying character of the area is shaped by the interaction of people with the landscape giving rise to distinct character areas from the upland peak district fringe in the east to the plains, rolling landscapes and sandstone escarpments in the west. The Design Guide SPD recognises that farming, geography, natural resources, geology, and the industrial revolution have all impacted upon the landscape, location, growth of and form of the settlements within it.

4.3 The way settlements have evolved, responding to their location, to growth and changing human needs over centuries have made each of them unique today. The layers of history are physically displayed in the buildings, streets, and spaces, all of which add depth to their sense of place and providing us with an emotional response to inanimate bricks and mortar.

4.4 The Design Guide establishes five settlement character areas:

- North Cheshire Fringe.
- Gritstone Edge.
- Silk, Cotton & Market Towns.
- Salt & Engineering Towns.
- Market Towns & Estate Villages.

4.5 Providing further policy direction, the Site Allocations and Development Policies Document (SADPD) sets out Policy GEN 1 'Design principles' that focuses on:

- sense of place;
- managing design quality;
- sustainable urban, architectural and landscape design; and
- safety, inclusivity and accessibility.

4.6 Policy ENV 3 'Landscape character' also has a focus on ensuring development responds to the distinct features of its location by requiring that development 'respect the qualities, features and characteristics that contribute to the distinctiveness of the local area.

¹ https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/planning/spatial-planning/cheshire_east_local_plan/supplementary_plan_documents/design-guide-supplementary-planning-document.aspx

5 Design coding

5.1 Successful design responds to the unique characteristics of a site within its wider place context and should seek to align multiple factors toward an optimum solution. The layout, orientation, and aesthetic quality and character of buildings can provide a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging whilst wider design considerations can address how development supports active and healthy lifestyles, how buildings can work with the landscape and how the natural environment can be supported through integrating habitats and sustainable drainage. Good design is a holistic outcome from a process that incorporates multiple different needs, constraints, ambitions, and requirements of development.

5.2 A design code is a set of design requirements for the physical development of a site or area that helps applicants respond to the specific circumstances of a site. It is made up of rules that are clear, specific, and unambiguous, and it should normally include extensive graphical illustrations. A design code should build upon a design vision, such as a masterplan or other design and development framework for a site or area.

5.3 Design codes may be produced at various levels of detail and once in place, applicants will be required to submit their own detailed site design codes demonstrating how their design approach aligns to the design code for the borough.

5.4 Under planning reform proposals set out by the government, it is anticipated that design codes will be prepared as stand-alone development plan documents, alongside, or outside of, the local plan process.

5.5 The approach that each local authority takes to design coding will vary and respond to the unique design issues arising from place to place. In Cheshire East, rather than refresh the existing Design Guide SPD we anticipate producing a design code alongside the new local plan. Taking this approach will allow the council to use the emerging design code to inform development of the local plan and any site selection that may be necessary.

5.6 The council intends to follow guidance set out in the National Model Design Code (NMDC) when producing its own design code. The NMDC sets out various themes that should be addressed in a design code including nature, environment, built form, identity, public space, movement, use, resources, and lifespan. The council expects to address the themes set out in the NMDC in its own design code and is considering what an appropriate level of detail would be for the borough. The council needs to consider how to involve the community at all stages of preparation and whether the code should be a strategic level code, whether it should include area specific guidance, whether it should address design by area type or use type, or whether a combination of approaches would be best.