APPENDIX G

New local plan for Cheshire East

Town centres and retail topic paper (draft)

March 2024

Open Fair Green

Cheshire East Council

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

Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 This topic paper provides further information to support the 'Town centres and retail' section in the new local plan issues paper. For ease of reading, it uses the same headings that are set out in the issues paper for this topic.

1.2 The services and facilities that town centres and other retail centres provide are vital for local communities. Thriving and diverse retail centres with a range of shopping, services and leisure facilities enable vibrant and sustainable communities, providing the facilities and services that people need, in sustainable locations that can be easily accessed.

1.3 Cheshire East has a diverse retail offer. There are many town centres of varying sizes and each with its own character, local neighbourhood parades of shops, and a number of dedicated retail parks and supermarkets. There are also several markets in our larger centres.

Town centres and planning

1.4 In accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the planning system should support the role that town centres play at the heart of local communities, by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and adaptation.

1.5 The local plan will need to define the network and hierarchy of centres, promoting their long term vitality and viability by allowing them to grow and diversify, responding to rapid changes in retail and leisure. It will also need to define the extend of town centres and set primary shopping areas as part of a positive strategy from the future of each centre.

1.6 When preparing the plan, the evidence base will need to consider whether there is a need for any new retail provision and, if there is, the plan will also need to allocate a range of suitable sites in town centres to meet the scale and type of development likely to be needed. The plan will also continue to promote a “town centre first” approach to retail development (other than for local shops), leisure, entertainment, many indoor sport and recreation uses, offices, and arts/culture/tourism development. This means that there is a preference for these types of development to be located within town centres wherever possible. Town centres are usually the most accessible locations, and locating these types of developments in them helps to:

- Concentrate activity within them, increasing footfall and supporting their diversification.
- Provide the most equitable access to services and jobs for all groups.
- Increase demand for public transport, walking and cycling, and reducing single trip car journeys and reducing congestion, pollution and carbon emissions.

2 Future of town centres

2.1 Town centres across the whole country are facing unprecedented challenges. Changes in how we shop, including the growth in online shopping, the increased popularity of retail parks, and other technological changes (such as online banking) have contributed to significantly decreased footfall in town centres and the closure of numerous stores and other important services, such as banks. These trends have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with a further increase in online shopping and an increased number of people working at home for all or part of the week leading to a decline in office workers in many town centres. The results are that many centres are struggling to maintain footfall and their retail offer, and they need to find other ways to attract people.

2.2 Despite these dynamic changes, town centres remain the focal point for much retailing, leisure and commerce. There are currently 27 defined centres in Cheshire East that meet the definition of a "town centre" in the glossary to the NPPF. These centres differ greatly in their sizes and characteristics, ranging from the smallest with 7 units (Chelford, Goostrey, Haslington) to the largest with 519 units (Macclesfield).

2.3 The town centres are further categorised in the current plan as:

- **Principal town centres:** the main focus for high quality comparison retail, supported by a range of retail, service, leisure, tourism, office and other town centre-type uses, including residential (Crewe and Macclesfield)
- **Town centres:** focus on the improvement of the convenience and comparison retail offer, with the potential to strengthen and enhance the retail offer, where suitable, as well as diversification to other uses such as offices, services, leisure, cultural and residential, as appropriate (Alsager, Congleton, Handforth, Knutsford, Middlewich, Nantwich, Poynton, Sandbach, Wilmslow)
- **Local centres:** focus on convenience and comparison retailing of an appropriate scale, plus opportunities for service uses and small-scale independent retailing of a function and character that meets the need of the local community (Alderley Edge, Audlem, Bollington, Chelford, Disley, Goostrey, Haslington, Holmes Chapel, Mobberley, Prestbury)
- **Local urban centres:** support the sustainability of larger centres and provide access to local day to day shopping needs (Chapel Lane, Wilmslow; Dean Row Road, Wilmslow; Nantwich Road, Crewe; Welsh Row, Nantwich; West Heath Shopping Centre, Congleton; West Street, Crewe)

2.4 The Table below shows the number of units and percentage of vacant units in each centre.[1] Overall, the vacancy rate across all Cheshire East centres is 10%. Whilst this is less than the Great Britain All Vacancy Rate (13.8%),[2] the rates in Congleton (19.8%), Crewe (19.3%) and Macclesfield (14.3%) are higher.

1 Data from the CEC Shopping Survey Database; surveys carried out April 2023.
2 FY 2022 Retail and Leisure Trends Analysis., Local Data Company, March 2023.

Table 2.1 Number of units and vacancies in town centres

Centre	Type	Total units	% vacant
Alderley Edge	Local centre	106	11.3
Alsager	Town centre	100	6.0
Audlem	Local centre	26	3.8
Bollington	Local centre	24	4.2
Chapel Lane (Wilmslow)	Local urban centre	41	0.0
Chelford	Local centre	7	0.0
Congleton	Town centre	283	19.8
Crewe	Principal town centre	243	19.3
Dean Row Road (Wilmslow)	Local urban centre	18	5.6
Disley	Local centre	44	9.1
Goostrey	Local centre	7	0.0
Handforth	Town centre	78	3.8
Haslington	Local centre	7	0.0
Holmes Chapel	Local centre	56	1.8
Knutsford	Town centre	253	8.3
Macclesfield	Principal town centre	519	14.3
Middlewich	Town centre	92	4.3
Mobberley	Local centre	9	0.0
Nantwich	Town centre	257	4.7
Nantwich Road (Crewe)	Local urban centre	182	5.5
Poynton	Town centre	125	3.2
Prestbury	Local centre	35	8.6
Sandbach	Town centre	205	5.4
Welsh Row (Nantwich)	Local urban centre	29	10.3
West Heath Shopping Centre (Congleton)	Local urban centre	16	0.0
West Street (Crewe)	Local urban centre	30	6.7
Wilmslow	Town centre	287	11.5
Total		**3,079**	**10.0**

2.5 Further analysis of the data shows that the overall vacancy rates vary significantly between the different types of town centres:

- Principal town centres: overall vacancy rate 15.9%
- Town centres: overall vacancy rate 8.9%
- Local centres: overall vacancy rate 6.9%
- Local urban centres: overall vacancy rate 5.1%

2.6 This suggests that smaller centres serving a more local community role may be faring better, whilst those larger higher order centres serving a wider catchment generally have a higher vacancy rate.

2.7 Without interventions, it is likely that town centres will face a period of decline in their retail offer, footfall and their general vitality and vibrancy. In Cheshire East, there are regeneration frameworks for the principal town centres of Macclesfield[3] and Crewe,[4] plus town centre vitality plans[5] for Alsager, Congleton, Handforth, Knutsford, Middlewich, Nantwich, Poynton, Sandbach and Wilmslow town centres.

2.8 Common themes across many of the regeneration and vitality plans are:

- Growing and diversifying the leisure, cultural and evening offer of centres.
- Improving the town centre environments.
- Enhancing the retail offer.
- Re-purposing underutilised assets and/or areas of the centres.
- Improving connectivity within centres.
- Improving access to centres.
- Increasing the number of people living in and around the town centres.
- Promoting the distinctiveness of centres and their historic buildings.

2.9 At the national level, the government's policy paper 'Build Back Better High Streets' has the intention of creating "vibrant high streets where communities are at the heart of place-making; where a mix of commercial and residential uses complement each other; and where businesses large and small feel welcome. This has led to various initiatives including the Future High Streets Fund[6] to fund transformative and structural changes to overcome challenges in town centre, plus changes to the Use Class Order and Permitted Development Rights to increase the flexibility to re-use redundant retail buildings for alternative uses. Within Cheshire East, Crewe has received Future High Streets funding (alongside Town Deal funding) to deliver a variety of projects seeking to improve the environment and accessibility of the town centre.

3 See https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/business/major_regeneration_projects/town_centre_vision/macclesfield-town-centre-regeneration.aspx

4 See https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/business/major_regeneration_projects/crewe-town-centre-regeneration-programme/crewe-town-centre-regeneration-programme.aspx

5 Available at https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/business/major_regeneration_projects/town-centre-vitality-plans.aspx

6 See https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-high-streets-fund

3 Other retailing

Local retailing

Neighbourhood parades of shops

3.1 Small neighbourhood parades of shops have an important role in providing for the day to day needs of people in their local area. They can usually be easily accessed on foot and by bicycle, and are a focus for interaction by local people, supporting the vibrancy of communities.

3.2 Changes in lifestyles over previous decades (such as the increase in car ownership and the emergence of large supermarkets) mean that many people can now travel further and more easily to shop for food, other goods, and to access services. However, local facilities continue to play an important role for day to day convenience, particularly for those residents who have difficulty accessing the town centre or out of town superstores. In some cases, they also provide opportunities for more specialist retailers and other services/facilities due to lower rents than those in larger centres.

3.3 The Table below shows the number of neighbourhood parades, total number of units in those parades and the vacancy rates for each settlement.[7]

Table 3.1 Number of neighbourhood parades, units and vacancies

Settlement	No. of neighbourhood parades	Total units in neighbourhood parades	% vacant
Alderley Edge	1	5	0.0%
Bollington	1	10	0.0%
Congleton	1	14	7.1%
Crewe	6	42	7.1%
Handforth	1	5	0.0%
Haslington	1	5	0.0%
Knutsford	3	9	0.0%
Macclesfield	10	85	5.9%
Nantwich	1	5	0.0%
Poynton	1	6	16.7%
Sandbach	1	6	0.0%
Wilmslow	2	13	0.0%

7 Data from the CEC Shopping Survey Database; surveys carried out April 2023.

3.4 The overall vacancy rate in neighbourhood parades is 4.9%. This further emphasises that those smaller centres serving a local catchment and need tend to be faring better than the larger centres.

Village shops

3.5 Similarly to neighbourhood parades of shops, village shops have an important role in providing for the day to day needs of people in their local area, improving the sustainability of smaller settlements and are often important community facilities providing a vital service to those who are not able to easily access larger retail centres. As with neighbourhood parades, changes such as the increase in car ownership and the emergence of large supermarkets has led to the closure of many village shops but there are signs that a renewed focus on local amenities, such as community run shops, and offering other services such as parcel collection, may help to retain village shops in the future.

3.6 Whilst changes to the Use Class Order and increased permitted development rights mean that in many cases, village shops can be converted to other uses without the need for planning permission, the local plan should encourage the retention of important community assets wherever possible.

Retail parks and supermarkets

3.7 The presence of out of town retail also has a part to play in the overall retail offer and historically, out of town retail parks have provided for access to more specialised retail such as hardware and DIY stores, warehouse retailing, garden centres, furniture stores etc. where a larger store footprint is required and car use to transport goods is more essential due to the nature of the items purchased.

3.8 However, in more recent years some of these out of town locations have begun to offer more general retail functions, often involving existing retailers relocating away from town centres. This has consequences for the health of town centres, but as out of town locations are often less accessible by public transport, walking and cycling, it also disadvantages those without access to a car and encourages more single trip car journeys, increasing congestion, pollution and carbon emissions.

3.9 Whilst the preference remains for retail facilities to be located within town centres (as required by national policy), there will remain a role for many of those existing out of centre retail parks and supermarkets. Within Cheshire East, there are notable out of centre retail parks at Congleton, Crewe, Handforth, Macclesfield. In addition, there are also out of centre supermarkets at Congleton, Crewe, Handforth, Holmes Chapel, Macclesfield, Middlewich, Nantwich and Wilmslow.