

Re: Cheshire East Local Plan Review - Proposed Housing Allocation at Ashley

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to submit the following comments regarding the proposed allocation of approximately 165 hectares of land in Ashley for housing development as part of the Cheshire East Local Plan.

I recognise the significant challenge facing the Council in meeting housing needs across the borough and the importance of maintaining an up-to-date Local Plan. However, given the scale of development proposed at Ashley, I have serious concerns as to whether this location represents a sustainable and appropriate option when considered against its likely impacts on the Green Belt, settlement separation, transport infrastructure, public services, environmental assets and rural character.

The scale of the proposed allocation is substantial and, in my view, requires particularly robust justification. At present, it is not clear that the evidence demonstrates that a development of this magnitude can be accommodated without causing significant harm to the character, function and sustainability of the area.

Green Belt Function and Settlement Separation

The land surrounding Ashley plays an important role within the Green Belt. In particular, it contributes to maintaining the separation between the urban areas of Greater Manchester and the rural communities of Cheshire East.

The countryside between Trafford and Cheshire East provides a clear physical and visual distinction between settlements including Hale Barns, Ringway, Ashley, Mobberley and Wilmslow. This separation contributes significantly to the individual identity and character of these communities.

While some development within the Green Belt may be considered through the Local Plan process, the scale of the proposed allocation gives rise to significant concerns about the extent to which the existing openness and separation between settlements can be maintained. There is a significant risk that development across such a large area would weaken the effectiveness of the remaining green gap and permanently alter perceptions of where one settlement ends and another begins.

Given the strategic importance of this area, the Council must clearly demonstrate why the release of land in this location is necessary and how long-term settlement separation would continue to be protected.

Impact on Rural Character and Landscape

Ashley is characterised by its rural setting, agricultural landscape, mature hedgerows, open views and relatively low-density pattern of development.

A housing allocation of approximately 165 hectares would represent a significant change in the scale of development within the area. While development can bring benefits, including additional homes and investment, it is difficult to see how a scheme of this magnitude could be accommodated without fundamentally changing the character of the village and surrounding countryside.

The Council must therefore demonstrate that landscape impacts have been comprehensively assessed and that full consideration has been given to whether alternative locations could accommodate growth with less impact upon rural character and landscape quality.

Agricultural Land

The proposed allocation would involve the development of a substantial area of agricultural land.

Agricultural land forms an important part of the local landscape and rural economy and contributes to wider objectives relating to food production and environmental management. The loss of such a significant area of farmland should therefore be carefully justified.

Where agricultural land is proposed for development, consideration should be given to its quality, productivity and the availability of alternative sites capable of meeting housing needs while avoiding comparable losses.

Infrastructure Capacity and Deliverability

A key consideration is whether existing infrastructure can support development on the scale proposed.

Ashley is a relatively small rural settlement and does not currently possess the range of facilities and infrastructure typically associated with major growth locations. Significant concerns therefore arise regarding the capacity of transport networks, healthcare services, educational facilities, utilities and community infrastructure to accommodate a substantial increase in population.

While infrastructure improvements may be proposed, it is important that these are evidenced, funded and deliverable within the timescales of development. The Local Plan must clearly demonstrate that infrastructure provision will keep pace with growth and that existing residents will not experience a deterioration in access to services.

Given the size of the allocation, there is a strong argument that the proposal would function at a scale more comparable to a new community than a modest extension to an existing village. This increases the importance of ensuring that infrastructure planning is proportionate to the scale of development being considered.

Highways and Transport

The surrounding highway network already experiences congestion at various times of the day, particularly on routes connecting Cheshire East with Greater Manchester and Manchester Airport.

Key corridors likely to be affected include:

- The A538
- The A34
- Routes serving Manchester Airport
- Roads connecting Ashley with Hale Barns, Wilmslow and Mobberley
- Local rural lanes

Additional housing would inevitably generate additional travel demand. Given the location of the site and the distribution of employment and services across the wider area, there is concern that a significant proportion of journeys would be made by private vehicle.

Public transport provision also appears insufficient for a development of this scale. Rail services in the area operate only every hour for much of the day, which is likely to limit the attractiveness and practicality of rail travel for many residents. This gives rise to further concerns as to whether future residents would have realistic alternatives to private car use for commuting, education, healthcare and other daily activities.

The Council should therefore provide robust evidence demonstrating how sustainable transport objectives will be achieved and how traffic impacts can be appropriately mitigated.

Manchester Airport and Cumulative Impact

The proximity of Manchester Airport offers economic opportunities and access to employment. However, it also means that local transport infrastructure already accommodates significant levels of passenger, freight and employee traffic.

It is important that the cumulative impact of airport-related growth, development in neighbouring authorities and any major housing allocation in Ashley is fully assessed. The interaction between these various pressures should be clearly understood to ensure that infrastructure capacity is not overstretched.

Healthcare Provision

Healthcare infrastructure is an important consideration when assessing the suitability of large-scale housing allocations.

Additional housing would increase demand for GP services, dental provision, community healthcare, mental health services and hospital facilities.

While such impacts may potentially be mitigated through investment and additional provision, the Local Plan should clearly identify how these requirements will be met and whether sufficient capacity exists within the wider healthcare system.

Education

The proposal also has significant implications for school capacity.

Significant growth would likely increase demand for both primary and secondary school places. The Council should therefore demonstrate whether existing schools can accommodate this growth or whether additional educational facilities will be required.

Where new schools are necessary, evidence should be provided regarding site availability, funding mechanisms and delivery timescales.

Utilities, Drainage and Flood Risk

Development at this scale would place increased demands on water supply, wastewater treatment, electricity networks, telecommunications infrastructure and drainage systems.

The land currently performs a natural role in absorbing rainfall and managing surface water. The replacement of large areas of agricultural land with buildings, roads and other hard surfaces has the potential to alter drainage patterns and increase runoff.

It is therefore important that flood risk and drainage assessments are robust and that infrastructure providers can demonstrate sufficient capacity to accommodate future growth.

Biodiversity and Environmental Considerations

The countryside around Ashley contributes to local biodiversity and provides habitat connectivity across a wider area of Cheshire East and Greater Manchester.

Development has the potential to affect hedgerows, trees, wildlife corridors and other environmental assets. Although mitigation and biodiversity net gain measures may be available, the extent to which they can offset impacts across such a large site should be carefully examined.

Consideration should also be given to the wider contribution that open countryside makes to climate resilience, carbon storage and environmental quality.

Conclusion

I recognise the need for Cheshire East to identify sufficient land to meet future housing requirements. However, the proposed allocation of approximately 165 hectares at Ashley raises a number of significant planning concerns which, in my view, have not yet been adequately justified through the evidence currently available.

These include:

- The role of the site in maintaining the Green Belt gap between Trafford and Cheshire East.
- The preservation of settlement separation between Hale Barns, Ringway, Ashley, Mobberley and neighbouring communities.
- The impact on rural character and landscape quality.
- The loss of a substantial area of agricultural land.
- The capacity of roads, schools, healthcare facilities and utilities to accommodate growth.
- The sustainability of a location where rail services operate only every hour for much of the day.
- The potential for increased car dependency and traffic congestion.
- Environmental, biodiversity and drainage considerations.
- The deliverability of infrastructure on a scale commensurate with a development of this size.

Taken together, these issues call into question whether Ashley represents the most sustainable and appropriate location for development on the scale proposed. In particular, I remain unconvinced that exceptional circumstances have been sufficiently demonstrated to justify the release of such a significant area of Green Belt land, or that the necessary supporting infrastructure can be delivered in a timely and comprehensive manner.

While I acknowledge the need for additional housing across the borough, I consider that the Council must provide considerably stronger evidence to demonstrate that this allocation is justified, sustainable and capable of being delivered without unacceptable harm to the character and function of the area.

Unless these concerns can be satisfactorily addressed through a robust evidence base and a credible infrastructure delivery strategy, I do not believe that the allocation has been shown to be sound in its current form and I would urge the Council to give full consideration to alternative options that may result in less harm while still meeting identified housing needs.

Yours faithfully, **Councillor Hannah Moss**

