

The Chesham Masterplan an explanation

The idea that a central government requirement for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of new homes to be built in or around Chesham was always going to set pulses racing. The track record for such developments in rural towns has been for a green site to be selected and most of the homes built there – often with little regard for infrastructure and even less for the impact on those already living and working there.

The Chesham Masterplan has been inspired by a vision to embrace new residential accommodation, not in the Green Belt around the town but within the town itself. It accepts an increase in population density, and welcomes capital investment and long term inward investment which will result from this.

The alternative is to have isolated and remote hilltop settlements surrounding the decaying original core of the town located in the bottom of the valley, ignoring the physical working and living environment which must change from a rather tired legacy of a largely industrial manufacturing past, to become a significant outwardly focused town. It must welcome new businesses and new residents resulting in substantial inward investment of capital and revenue. This inward capital investment must go towards renewing some of our public and private assets as well as the ageing and deficient infrastructure which must be expanded to accommodate substantial commercial and residential growth.

But the focus cannot be entirely on additional residential accommodation. There is already



a thriving industrial and business sector in Chesham. It is an attractive place for people and new businesses to locate because of its location and its transport

connections. However, there is already a need to update or create new business premises or locate commercial enterprises out of the town to meet the needs of new conventional and higher technology businesses and provide adequate access. In addition, the imposition of higher density residential accommodation in and around the urban core of the town will gradually require the relocation of those industries currently located in this area. Residential accommodation will gradually displace commercial.

The Chesham Masterplan recognises the current perilous state of some of the smaller commercial enterprises located in and around the town centre and the retail offering which is available. Census data illustrates all too clearly the root of the problem with insufficient disposable income to sustain a growing, vibrant and demand led retail offering.



Chesham Masterplan

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Market Square



St Mary's Way

The Masterplan was commissioned by a newly formed company, Chesham Renaissance. It commissioned Allies & Morrison, who are at the forefront of work of this nature and have produced many such masterplans of urban developments for settlements like Chesham. The Masterplan is being produced in 3 stages. Stage I has been completed and was essentially a scoping exercise, although it did produce the basis for the stage II Masterplan which has now been completed. These 2 stages combine to provide the draft Masterplan for Chesham.

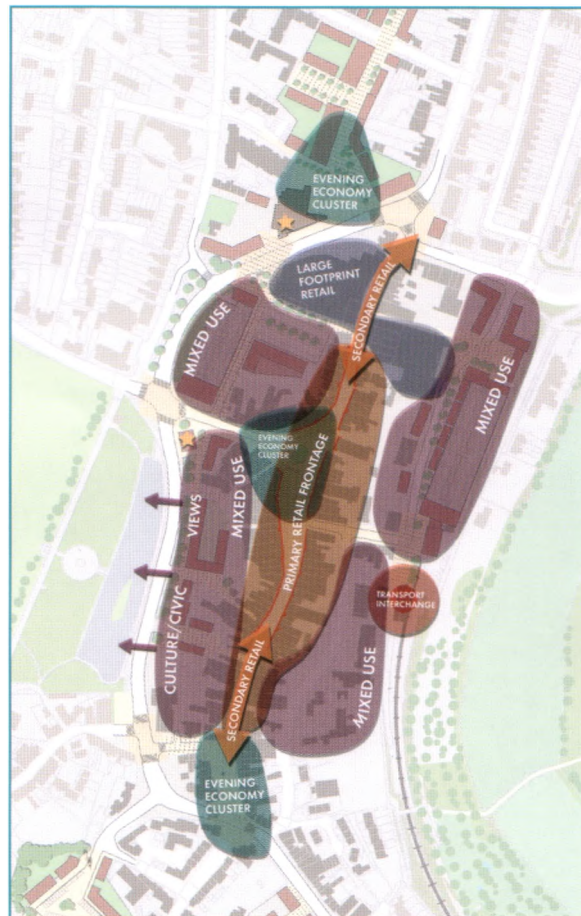
For some years the town's population has been growing, in part because of the location of the Metropolitan line underground station and the increase in small business employment. This is gradually increasing the population of the town which in turn means that the available space inside the AONB or in green belt is becoming severely constricted. The result is a gradual increase in the price of land and house prices.

The Chesham Masterplan addresses five principles for growth. The first concerns town life. This like many market towns, has changed shopping patterns and has led to gaps in Chesham's retail provision.

Consolidating shops in a central area will ensure this area is active and successful. This will be enhanced by bringing people back to live in the town centre.

The focus on shops in this way will also help to generate the second principle which is developing the evening economy. Chesham has a potential evening economy which is now largely underutilised. It is possible that these future uses will be clustered in areas which will be attractive to those who operate and use them.

The third principle concerns the civic buildings, scattered around the town, and the theatre. The Elgiva Theatre it is proposed should be integrated better with the town centre with strong pedestrian connections and preferably a front door



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presence to the street. Creating a group of related civic buildings in a way which is both recognisable and easy to access is an important consideration. The Masterplan is proposing that those which need regenerating are provided in a way which groups most if not all these buildings together as a coherent whole.

A common principle of urban design in many towns is to provide space for pop-up uses. The Masterplan considers that the popular market in the town provides a good base for enabling this activity in the town centre through events and performances. This can be focused on the High Street, but also on sites identified for development in the short term. It may be that this can be related to a revival in craft industries. The beer brewing and fabric weaving and joinery industries are all part of Chesham's industrial heritage and are all crafts which are being revised as cottage industries across the country. This is something which the Masterplan encourages.

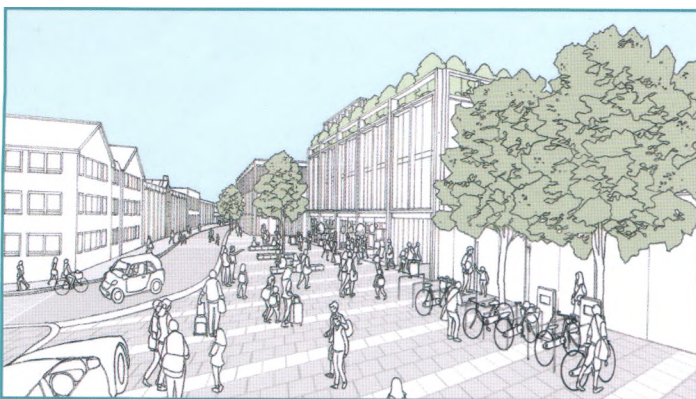
The last two principles for growth are related to commercial enterprise. The Masterplan regards it as important to retain some SME knowledge-based businesses in the town centre and to encourage others. There are many buildings identified in the Masterplan for encouraging this, many of which are successful and others hold huge potential for similar adaptation.

Finally, the Masterplan suggests that where current large employers are embedded, in and around the town centre, land be released, to enable housing development on a scale not seen in Chesham for a long time. The Masterplan's proposal therefore is for the gradual relocation of many large industries, and the transport arrangements necessary to support them, towards the periphery of the town.

The provision of new homes is a central part of the Masterplan and the provision of new homes is based on the following seven principles:

- **prioritise homes in the town centre;**
- **redevelop poor quality buildings;**
- **make use of former industrial sites;**
- **promote living above the shop;**
- **exploit background and parking areas;**
- **ensure a broad mix of homes;**
- **and provide homes for older people.**

The character of Chesham is also referred to in the Masterplan and makes the conventional point of having to work with the historic urban grain and re-establish and recognise some of the



Chesham station



Broadway



Chesham Masterplan

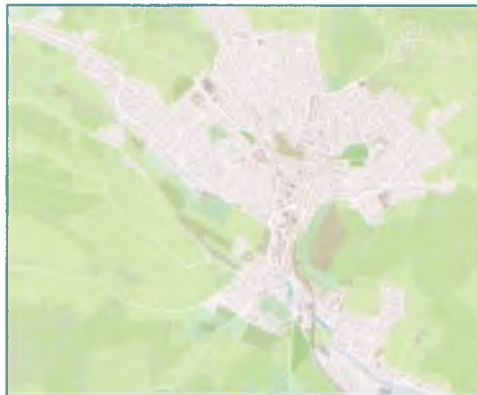
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historic approaches to the town. It advocates the rejuvenation of historic yards and lanes and most particularly safeguarding the historic buildings and settings. An important element of the town which is emphasised is to retain views of the Chiltern Hills and Lowndes Park, and to reflect the materials which have been used over many centuries in creating some of the older buildings which still exist.

The streets and spaces in the town are also recognised in the Masterplan. It advocates consolidating parking to create more space for homes and businesses, and to change the character of St Mary's Way, which has become a barrier between the centre of the town and Lowndes Park. This is in addition to another important characteristic related to streets and spaces, that is the need to strengthen the links to and from the town centre and relate these to the underground station and the bus network, and to invest in a network of public spaces which are currently fragmented and unconnected within the town centre.

The St Mary's Way proposal is one of the most significant changes. The Masterplan refers to the development of St Mary's Way which was instrumental in taking the pressure of traffic away from the High Street, creating a much more attractive town centre environment. However, over time the Masterplan acknowledges that this new road introduced further problems of its own to the town including cutting off historic connections to the park, the parish church and the wider residential area.

Approaches to road design have changed considerably since St Mary's Way was built. The Masterplan makes proposals which provide opportunities to address some of them whilst recognising that the road has an important part to play in the national highway network.



This approach also includes the Backs. The Masterplan makes proposals for consolidating parking for the station and the Waitrose store and introducing new street frontage development. The provision of accommodation in a central

place for buses adjacent to this transport hub is also considered.

In addition to these proposals others are made for some more distant sites. For example, Water Meadow car park and some of the areas to the south are considered for residential development, as are some other sites further to the north.

What is proposed is a comprehensive introduction to the possibilities of regenerating the central part of Chesham, providing an increase in housing growth on a regulated basis for market sale and affordable homes; and providing for small businesses to thrive and prosper. It recognises Chesham as an historic market town and the industrial legacy on which it is built.

For Chesham Renaissance it is a vision that the Chesham of tomorrow will be very different from the Chesham of today; much improved because of the implementation of this Masterplan.

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