

**Minutes of Handforth Parish Council Meeting held on  
10<sup>th</sup> December 2013, 7:15 pm at the Youth Centre, Old  
Road, Handforth.**

Present: Cllr Barnes

Cllr Harrison

Cllr Pincombe (Chairman)

Cllr Thompson

Cllr Tolver

Also present Mr J Brooks Parish Clerk, Cllr Burkhill CEC and eight members of the public.

13/32/1 To receive apologies for absence.

Apologies were received from Cllrs

Martin and Samson.

13/32/2 To note declarations of Members' Interests- None.

13/32/3 Open Forum-

It was brought to the Council's attention by a member of the public that the pole mounted Christmas Lights outside St Chad's Church were not working. A second member of the public asked why the solar powered lights had not been installed in the trees as planned. The Clerk responded that problems had been experienced with this type of lighting. A question about the Handforth parish Council website was also answered by the Clerk.

13/32/4 To approve the minutes of the HPC meeting of the 12<sup>th</sup> November 2013.

Cllr Harrison proposed, seconded by Cllr Barnes that the minutes of the meeting of the 12<sup>th</sup> November 2013 be approved.

**Resolved: unanimously.**

13/32/5 To receive a report from the Clerk.

The Clerk provided the meeting with an update on the HPC website, the future of the Youth Centre and why it would be necessary to delay setting the precept until January 2014.

13/32/6 To approve accounts for payment.

Cllr Harrison proposed, seconded by Cllr Tolver that the accounts for payment of £9610.35 be approved.

**Resolved: unanimously.**

The Clerk was asked to investigate why a copy of the Local Plan update had not been delivered to Cllr Thompson and possibly other residents in the Knowle Park area.

13/32/7 To review the operation and future support of the Funside Club (Junior Youth Club).

This item was deferred until the January meeting of HPC as a Cheshire East Council officer was not available to answer questions.

13/32/8 To review the operation and future of the Village Handyman Service.

Cllr Pincombe proposed, seconded by Cllr Harrison that the current arrangement for the Village Handyman service be continued for a further three months and reviewed in March 2014.

**Resolved: unanimously.**

13/32/9 To consider a response to the current Cheshire East Council Local Plan consultation.

At the request of the Chairman, Cllr Tolver opened this item and made reference to a document he had written titled 'HPC Objection to Pre-submission Core Strategy'.

Cllr Thompson stated that he considered that the distribution of housing detailed in the CEC Pre-submission Core Strategy document

was politically motivated, rather than being based upon sound planning practice. Adding that there was no benefit for Handforth in the current CEC document.

Cllr Pincombe reminded the meeting that the response produced by Cllr Tolver was an overview and that in the next round of consultation detailed considerations could be addressed. It was agreed that Cllr Tolver's response to CEC be examined by councillors on a page by page basis and any comment or corrections noted.

Cllr Pincombe proposed, seconded by Cllr Harrison that the amended Pre-submission response be sent to Cheshire East Council.

**Resolved: unanimously.**

13/32/10 To consider the draft budget for 2014/15 and confirm in principle the list of projects agreed by the Finance Committee on 19/11/13.

Cllr Pincombe asked the Clerk to read through the draft budget, highlighting any significant changes from the 2013/15 document.

Cllr Harrison proposed, seconded by Cllr Barnes that the draft budget be adopted in principle.

**Resolved: unanimously.**

Councillors moved on to consider projects that Handforth PC may wish to support in the next financial year. Minor alterations were made to the document and Cllr Harrison proposed, seconded by Cllr Tolver that the list be approved in principle.

**Resolved: unanimously.**

13/32/11 To agree the date and time of the next meeting of Handforth Parish Council.

Cllr Pincombe proposed, seconded by Cllr Tolver that the next meeting of Handforth PC be held on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2014, 7:15 pm at Handforth Youth Centre.

The meeting closed at 9:15 pm

Chairman.....

Date.....

# HPC Objection to Pre-Submission Core Strategy

*This document was adopted by the full Council, unanimously, on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013*

Handforth Parish Council (HPC), having considered the Pre-Submission Core Strategy and accompanying documents and Evidence Base issued by Cheshire East Council (CEC) on November 5<sup>th</sup> 2013, now puts forward its views as follows.

## **1) The proposed Handforth East site is on perhaps the most valuable parcel of Green belt in the northern area of East Cheshire.**

It fulfils all five of the purposes for which Green Belt land is designated.

- a) *To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas:* the site is the single most important in CEC's area in preventing Manchester and Stockport from sprawling into Cheshire's towns and countryside.
- b) *To prevent neighbouring towns merging into each other.* The development here, on this scale, would in effect join up Manchester, Stockport, Woodford, and Wilmslow.
- c) *To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.* This area is the only remaining open countryside in Handforth, and is equally valuable to residents of Heald Green, Cheadle, Cheadle Hulme, Bramhall, Woodford, and Wilmslow. It has natural areas of meadowland, trees both young and mature, ponds, and good quality grazing for sheep, cattle and horses. Wildlife is extremely varied: some 50 species of birds including barn owls; amphibians including great crested newts; flora including marsh orchids; and many varieties of insects. In a recent study by CEC, the area was identified as having nature conservation value. The aspect outwards is clear all the way to the Pennines.
- d) *To preserve the setting and character of historic towns.* Handforth owes its name to Hanna's Ford, which dates back to Saxon times.
- e) *To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.* Manchester in particular, and Stockport, have benefited massively from significant regeneration in the past 40 years, and the 'corset' of the north Cheshire Green Belt has certainly played an important role here. There is still much regeneration to do: developing here would very much relieve the pressure on redeveloping brownfield sites comprising derelict land in Manchester and Stockport, especially when added to the 950 houses planned next door in Woodford.

## **2) Inappropriate Strategic Site selection:**

We believe that the Handforth East site is very poorly chosen, given how many alternatives there are.

- a) By CEC's own calculation, Handforth East amounts to only 1% of CEC's Green Belt. Given that it plays THE most important role in the fundamental purposes of the Green Belt around

Manchester/Stockport, it would be more rational to choose almost ANY other Green Belt site than this.

- b) Indeed, CEC have identified many such sites during the course of developing the Local Plan to its current level. Several sites were identified in Wilmslow which were clearly more appropriate: some of those have been most recently identified as safeguarded – if they are viable for developing in 2031, there is no clear reason why they cannot be developed now (and Wilmslow is the town claimed to be in need of additional housing, not Handforth).
- c) A significant site – Ryley’s Farm in Alderley Edge – was identified as a candidate, This serves only one of the five main purposes of the Green Belt, and yet it has been excluded from the Plan.
- d) Other land has been identified as safeguarded: areas around Poynton, for example, and a large area (3,500 houses) to the south-west of Macclesfield.
- e) In any event, there are large tracts of green fields in CEC’s area that are not Green belt land. Not all of them may be suitable or available, but it is beyond all rational belief that 80 hectares of such land (the size of Handforth East) cannot be found in northern East Cheshire.

### **3) Strategic view of Green Belt in the north of East Cheshire.**

The fundamental purpose of the sector of the Green Belt around the south of the Greater Manchester conurbation – extending many miles south, almost to the centre of East Cheshire – has since its inception, been to prevent urban sprawl from Greater Manchester into Cheshire. Indeed the Secretary of State, in conducting a strategic review of this Green Belt in the 1980’s, determined that if there were any changes to it, they would for the most part be to the south of Macclesfield.

Given that CEC have identified a large area (sufficient for 3,000 houses) to the south-west of Macclesfield to be safeguarded for development post-2030, it seems more rational to bring this forward 15 years to the current Local Plan cycle and use it now, rather than Handforth, which is the nearest Green Belt to Manchester.

Not only would this be more logical from the strategic point of view, it would be acceptable and even popular with a number of people in the Macclesfield area, as it would significantly help to regenerate and reinvigorate the economy of Macclesfield.

### **4) Inappropriate and excessive levels of housing for Handforth’s needs:**

The amount of proposed housing development is far beyond any needs of the residents of Handforth. The housing proposed for Handforth is almost entirely to serve the needs of other communities, but will take up virtually all of Handforth’s open spaces. This is contrary to CEC’s own policies, and will, according to CEC’s own strategy documents, be detrimental to the health of Handforth residents.

In their original projections of housing needs, CEC estimated that Handforth would require “up to 600 new homes between 2010 and 2030”, although 104 were already built / under construction / permission granted (net 496). Actually, CEC’s borough-wide target was 27,000, which would give Handforth proportionately to population, a target of 459 – less the 104, net 355.

In the meantime, sites adjacent to Handforth Hall have been given permissions, amounting to 295 additional dwellings. Another site for 20 homes is currently being considered by the planning committee. With the likelihood of 'infill' and redevelopment sites coming forward over the next 16 years, there is no case for Handforth to be compelled to take a large-scale development on its last remaining significant open space, even if the target of 27,000 were justified. Today, there are 64 properties for sale in Handforth, and 18 to rent.

This target is highly questionable in itself, since CEC have not reduced this target in line with revised DCLG forecasts (April 2013). HPC believes CEC should revise its targets downward to take account of a) the new DCLG forecasts b) the 9,000+ dwellings given consents by CEC since 2010 and c) should build in allowance – flexibility - for the 1,600 jobs of local people being relocated by AstraZeneca to Cambridge (a high proportion of these being in the local area, including Handforth).

#### **5) Wrong type of Housing:**

Handforth's needs for housing would be better served by radically increasing the proportion of Social Rented Housing being required in existing development plans. The more space that is 'lost' to developments under current patterns, the less there will be available for the Social housing that is actually needed.

#### **6) Inappropriate Location:**

The additional housing proposed would, in any event, not serve the purpose proposed by CEC, which is to absorb the housing growth needs of the northern part of East Cheshire. The great majority of people who buy houses in Handforth are from **outside** of East Cheshire (including many from the South-East of England), and we anticipate that few people from East Cheshire (as now) would buy houses in Handforth. That would mean the new housing would attract buyers from outside of East Cheshire, thus adding to the population of East Cheshire without helping to provide for the projected growth in CEC's households.

#### **7) Traffic Congestion and Transport:**

Handforth East is an unsustainable location for a large development, because of traffic problems. The only road onto which the estate can emerge is the A34 close to the junction with the A555. Projections of traffic volumes by the SEMMMS project team forecast a volume/capacity of up to 90% and even 100% during the peak hours. Additional flows from Handforth and Wilmslow have NOT been factored into these projections. A further 2,000 vehicles from Handforth would take those percentages up to perhaps 130% to 150%, even with all the design improvements (widening, traffic lights etc) factored in.

Furthermore, the A34 further north, in Stockport and Manchester's areas, is a very heavily congested commuter route, with many traffic lights and other obstructions. Something like 70% of workers in Handforth and Wilmslow commute outside of those communities, and the great bulk of them use this A34 corridor. Adding thousands of extra cars to the rush-hour traffic here would cause very severe problems and delays to residents of Handforth, Wilmslow, Alderley Edge, and other communities in the north of East Cheshire, as well as to residents of the Stockport and Manchester areas.

The SEMMMS (A6 Manchester Airport Relief Road) evidence base forecasts that traffic on the A34 will increase in the peak hour from today's 2,000 to 3,000 without taking Handforth East into account. This will load the junctions to virtually 100% of capacity.

Adding Handforth East (and other proposed developments in the Handforth/Wilmslow area) will increase that to about 4,500. The roads and the junctions simply do not have the capacity to cope with these levels: there will be serious congestion and queuing.

CEC suggests that as part of Strategic Priority 2 the transport links both current and in development will enhance the economic prospects of the Borough. In Handforth's case, all that is envisaged is the A555 extension which will make car usage from Handforth (and Wilmslow) much more congested and unhealthy; there are no plans for improvement of public transport.

## **8) Sustainability:**

Handforth East would also be unsustainable from the point of view of accessibility for its residents (and visitors). The only access is via two single roundabouts (one inaccessible to HGVs) onto the very busy A34. All access to the outside world would be channelled through the A34. There are no buses: the only way to get to trains is by car using this same A34 junctions. Thus all movements require cars, whatever direction the traveller wishes to go. For most journeys, that would also involve initially going north to the very over-loaded junctions to the immediate north (with the A555 SEMMMS road, and the A34/B5094 roundabout). So the community would be overwhelmingly car-bound.

## **9) Positively prepared and objectively assessed:**

CEC have claimed the Strategy meets these NPPF requirements, but this is demonstrably not so in the case of Handforth. Initial proposals for all the towns of east Cheshire shared the proposed growth in housing largely proportionately, but in late 2012, this pattern was entirely changed. Wilmslow's allocation of housing – 1,500 – was reduced by 1,100 and this was switched to Handforth East, more than quadrupling Handforth's allocation which was already disproportionately high.

Although this was dressed up as a way to minimise the damage to green belt in Wilmslow (and elsewhere), the concentration of development on Handforth's green belt – which performs the purposes of green belt far more effectively than does that of Wilmslow – undermines that argument. CEC claim “We are also proposing new settlements to mitigate some of the impact on existing Green Belt.” If building on one part of green belt to save another is assessed objectively, then the area to “save” would be that which most effectively performs the function of green belt – which would self-evidently be Handforth rather than Wilmslow. It is NOT an objectively assessed change: it is politically motivated. How can CEC's majority party demonstrate that it is NOT so? All of the areas in Cheshire designated for low levels of development are in majority-controlled areas: all the high-density proposals are elsewhere. This is one of the few consistent aspects of CEC's proposals.

Take, for example, the “justification” for an extremely small proportion of housing targeted at Poynton. Poynton's population is two-and-a-half times that of Handforth, but was allocated less housing than Handforth, because “Poynton Town Council feels a range of 200 to 400 homes delivered by 2030 is appropriate to meet the needs of the settlement” This, extraordinarily, remains the entire justification in CEC's eyes for this allocation. Based on population, if Handforth 'needed' 600 (CEC's claim in the Draft Strategy), then Poynton would need 1,500 -where are they in the Core Strategy? And Handforth has a much lower heads-per-household. Handforth has expressed a view that it would be prepared to accept up to 600 (500 net new), but has not been afforded a comparable option. This is NOT an objectively assessed strategy.

## **10) Handforth Public Opinion:**

CEC have underestimated the level of opposition to the development at Handforth East and the lack of support for the North Cheshire Growth Village. Indeed the level of opposition has grown where many residents who originally supported the development of 500 homes, no longer support a proposal that has grown to 2,500 homes yet *still* does not protect from over-development within Handforth village west of the Bypass.

In September 2012, in the Draft Town Strategy consultation, many residents requested extra time to complete the questionnaire upon finding out about the consultation phase late in the process due to inadequate publicity. Handforth residents did not receive the CEC Newsletter to households briefing them on their role in the Local Plan. Place Shaping Consultants only visited Handforth on one single occasion and went to an isolated park outside of the main hub of the Handforth Village. The library ran out of paper questionnaires and received lots of feedback that many residents were not able to use the online alternative. A request for an extension of time was denied.

In the February 2013 consultation, over 340 Handforth residents responded to CEC's consultation (twice the rate of responses per head of population compared to East Cheshire as a whole). Only 9 of those 340 were in support of the development. This is identical to a parallel questionnaire conducted by local residents – of almost 800 respondents, only 9 were in favour.

CEC have frequently claimed to be listening to residents, but that has not been the case with Handforth. All the objections raised by residents, through questionnaires, petitions (one of over 1,500 signatures) have been ignored, as have those of Ward Councillors, and Parish Councillors. At each successive stage, CEC have increased the amount of development targeted at Handforth, despite an extremely high negative feedback, and despite promises to the contrary by the most senior CEC members. The consultations have given all the appearance of being there simply to allow CEC to say they have ‘ticked the box’: not once has there been any dialogue, negotiation, or compromise.

### 11) Open Spaces and Health.

CEC acknowledge the importance of access to green infrastructure and open spaces for the health and also the prosperity of its citizens, indeed their professed policies emphasise the importance of it. Developing Handforth East on the last truly open space in Handforth – indeed the only one (other than middling-quality small-scale parkland) would remove this possibility from all Handforth’s citizens. Handforth would become the first village in Cheshire’s history to become built-up to all four corners. The only genuine open green spaces would be at such distances that residents would have to visit them by car, a really self-defeating position.

### 12) Biodiversity:

Handforth Meadows (known to CEC as “Sites M1, M2, and M3” then “Handforth East”, and most recently “North Cheshire Growth Village”) is an important area of several diverse habitats, some unusual, supporting a number of important species of flora, fauna (birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, insects), including some that are **rare and/or protected – barn owls, great crested newts**, for example. A recent very brief review by a Cheshire East conservation officer noted “The site is considered to be of local nature conservation value for its grassland habitats, breeding birds, ponds & amphibians and butterflies” (July 2013).

We considered that this review – although important – significantly underestimates the situation (it was conducted in a very short time on a single day). A fuller report has been commissioned from Evelyn Frearson, BSc Botany and Zoology, Christopher Hayward, BSc Botany and Zoology, and Adam Hayward, BSc Environmental Management, member of the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment, member of the Institute of Environmental Sciences. Although the report notes that a fully comprehensive assessment could only be made in the summer months, it draws some initial important conclusions, as follows. (**Emphasis** is made by ourselves.)

*The site contains a diverse range of habitats and of plant and animal species, from single cellular life to complex flowering plants and vertebrates. **Rare plants and protected animal species are to be found there.** The habitats match the descriptions of **priority habitats** described in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP) and the recently updated UK Biodiversity Framework including: Hedgerows, Lowland Meadows, Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland, Wet Woodland, and Ponds.*

*These habitats have **priority** as they support ecological networks and species which are becoming **increasingly rare** in the UK. For example, the UK BAP highlights the importance of meadows and pastures associated with low-input nutrient regimes, which host a **specialist group of scarce and declining plant species**. Every county in the UK is losing, on average, one species of wild plant every two years, the majority being **grassland species**.*

*The EU Habitats and Birds Directives are the cornerstones of the EU's nature legislation and which includes habitats such as woodland and meadow land. In addition, the 7th Environment Action Programme becoming law on 20th November 2013.*

*The wild unfarmed areas of the site support a profusion of wild flowers in the spring and summer, including **rare orchids**: *Dactylorhiza purpurella* (northern marsh orchid), *Orchis mascula* (early purple orchid) and *Dactylorhiza fuchsia* (common spotted orchid). These wild flowers support pollinator insects, including butterflies and bees.*

*Hedgerows are important habitats, providing conduits for wildlife movement, protecting soil, and helping to lock up carbon dioxide. The farmed areas of the site include many kilometres of mixed species hedgerow.*

*There are over 20 ponds on site, providing habitats for a wide range of plant and animal life, including the **protected Triturus cristatus (crested newt)**.*

*Woodland areas include mixed deciduous woodland and wet woodland with a wide variety of species. There are large numbers of mature specimens oak which have high conservation value. Oak trees provide a habitat rich in biodiversity, supporting **more life forms than any other** native trees, hosting over 280 species of insect, and supplying many British birds with an important food source.*

*It is clear from their Biodiversity website that Cheshire East Council is committed to protection of sites of nature conservation value from inappropriate or harmful development: "Cheshire is one of the least wooded counties in the country with only 4.4% of land area covered."*

*The site supports a large number of different bird species as evidenced by members of RSPB, including woodland species, waterside species, such as *Ardea cinerea* (heron) and birds of prey, such as *Falco tinnunculus* (kestrel), *Accipiter nisus* (sparrow hawk), *Buteo buteo* (buzzard) and protected *Tyto alba* (barn owl). Rodents, such *Apodemus sylvaticus* (mouse), *Microtus agrestis* (vole), and *Talpa europaea* (mole), and other mammals, such as *Vulpes vulpes* (fox), are well represented in the ecosystem on the site.*

*It is recommended that a full professional survey is conducted in the summer months in order to fully assess the ecology of the site and the habitats and species present.*

### **13) Protection of Biodiversity and Veteran Trees:**

The NPPF (Section 118) requires 'planning permission will be refused for development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats including ancient woodland and the loss of aged veteran trees outside ancient woodland, unless the need for, and the benefits of, the development in that locality clearly outweighs the loss'. It also states that 'to minimise impacts on biodiversity and geodiversity, planning policies should: plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale...; identify and map components of the local ecological

networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites...; promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species populations...; and aim to prevent harm to geological conservation interests'.

#### **14) Leisure Value:**

Handforth Meadows ("Handforth East") are used for a variety of leisure activities: rambling, angling, botany and zoology studies, photography, ornithology (over 50 species of birds have been identified and photographed on, and in the immediate vicinity of, the Meadows), and kite-flying: there is a model aircraft flying club (over 100 members) who use a leased space very frequently. The former authority, Macclesfield Borough, had planned to establish a golf course on the wild areas, but fortunately this was abandoned, allowing the improving biodiversity and wildlife to flourish.

The area itself would make an ideal country park space. The built area used, for now, by the MoD on the northern edge (beside Total Fitness) could be used for, e.g., a visitor centre, sports administration, sports centre, hotel, and other leisure. This could give long-term employment, rather than the short-term once-off work yielded by the building of housing.

#### **15) Public Health:**

CEC, as landowner, are required under the NPPF to ensure this would be a safe development area. The NPPF in section 120 states: "Where a site is affected by contamination or land stability issues, responsibility for securing a safe development rests with the developer and/or landowner." The aquifer of Handforth Meadows ("Handforth East") is very high (hence the number of ponds and the amount of wet habitats). The Leader of CEC has stated that the site is affected by contamination and "asbestos-filled pits" (although this is denied elsewhere by a CEC officer). CEC will need to assess this and resolve it, should they go ahead and develop it.

#### **16) Tranquility:**

The NPPF in section 123 requires that Planning policies and decisions should aim to: "... identify and protect areas of tranquillity which have remained relatively undisturbed by noise and are prized for their recreational and amenity value for this reason." Handforth Meadows ("Handforth East") have many excellent qualities: it is very much prized for its recreational and amenity value, and has been relatively undisturbed for half a century.

#### **17) Proper and Objective Assessments:**

It is evident from the above sections, that CEC have pre-determined that the Handforth East site will be developed without due care for all the proper assessments that they should have made before considering it. They failed to make an assessment of its value for strategic green belt purposes; the green belt assessment they made was purely Borough-based (it did not involve Stockport MBC) and was not objective; there was no landscape assessment; no ecological and biodiversity assessment; no assessment of contamination even though the Leader believes there to be an issue; no valuation of it for alternative leisure and tourist value; none for tranquillity. These and other considerations are plainly stated in the NPPF, but CEC have taken no account of them. The Plan is unsound for these reasons alone.

The entire approach to the Handforth East site is at odds with almost every part of Strategic Priority 3 (Protecting and enhancing environmental quality), and again, this demonstrates that the Core Strategy, at least in this instance, is unsound.

CEC have viewed this land as a unit in a spreadsheet: a place where X housing units can be fitted into Y hectares. This was not *spatial planning*: this was predetermination – the answers were selected (or ignored) to suit the intention.

## ***Conclusions***

HPC considers the Pre-Submission Core Strategy to be unsound for the reasons stated above. We believe the site at Handforth East is unnecessary- certainly, so far as Handforth's needs are concerned - and in the wrong place. It should be deleted from the Core Strategy entirely – both the Green Belt element and the Safeguarded element.

HPC considers that CEC should, in this final phase before the Public Examination, withdraw the proposal for Handforth East.

*This document was adopted by the full Council, unanimously, on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013*