SOUTH & NORTH CHESHIRE
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Strategic Planning Team
Cheshire East Council
New Local Plan Scoping Consultation

1st September 2026

Dear Sir or Madam

Cheshire East Local Plan Scoping Consultation 2026: response on behalf of the local business community

We are writing on behalf of the local business community in response to the current Local Plan scoping consultation. We welcome the opportunity to contribute at this early stage and believe the new Local Plan must provide a clear, long-term framework for sustainable economic growth, infrastructure-led development and meaningful engagement with businesses across Cheshire East.

South & North Cheshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry is the British Chambers of Commerce accredited Chamber for the area, trading as South Cheshire Chamber and North Cheshire Chamber. Our members span the whole of the borough, from Crewe, Nantwich, Sandbach, Alsager, Congleton and Middlewich in the south to Macclesfield, Wilmslow, Knutsford, Poynton, Handforth and Alderley Edge in the north. We are also the designated Employer Representative Body for the Cheshire and Warrington Local Skills Improvement Plan.

We recognise that this is a scoping consultation rather than a consultation on a draft Plan. At this stage our priority is to ensure that the evidence base and the plan-making methodology properly reflect the economic needs of the borough before spatial options and allocations are developed. Our comments are therefore directed at what the Plan should contain, what evidence should underpin it, and how the Council should engage as it is prepared. We do not comment on the merits of individual sites, and nothing in this letter should be read as support for or opposition to any submission made through the call for sites process.

1. Housing, employment, infrastructure and skills must be planned together

Our overarching point is one of methodology rather than politics. Cheshire East cannot plan its housing, employment land, infrastructure and skills separately and expect a coherent outcome. The new Local Plan needs to join them together.

We support the Council in planning for the homes the borough needs. The housing requirement of around 2,530 homes a year is nationally set, and we do not question it. Our point is that the economic consequences of a housing figure of that scale have to be planned for as deliberately as the housing itself.

There is no nationally set requirement for employment land equivalent to the standard method for housing. Employment land provision is therefore a matter of local judgement, informed by local evidence. If that judgement is not made explicitly, the practical outcome is that housing growth proceeds on a nationally mandated trajectory while

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employment land provision stands still by default. The consequences would be increased out-commuting to Greater Manchester and the Potteries, a weaker local business and tax base, and employers competing for a workforce that increasingly works elsewhere.

We would therefore ask that the spatial strategy is informed by employment growth and workforce requirements as explicitly as it is by housing need, and that the Plan's vision and measurable outcomes include a jobs and employment land measure alongside housing delivery.

2. A structured role for employers: the North and South Cheshire Business Councils

We welcome the proposed engagement strategy, and in particular the commitment to four or five community assemblies of around twenty-five residents, selected to be demographically and geographically representative and aligned to each stage of plan-making. That is a serious and well-conceived mechanism.

We note, however, that businesses appear in the draft strategy only within a general list of stakeholders. Residents will be engaged in a structured, repeated and representative way through to adoption. Employers will not. We do not think this is intentional, but the effect is that the Plan risks being tested continuously against resident opinion and only intermittently against employer experience.

Rather than ask the Council to create something new, we would point to a mechanism that already exists. The Chamber operates Business Councils in both North Cheshire and South Cheshire. These are established standing forums of member businesses, drawn from across sectors and from the different towns in each part of the borough, which meet regularly to consider policy and place issues affecting the local economy.

We would be pleased to place the North and South Cheshire Business Councils at the Council's disposal to act as the employer equivalent of the community assemblies, at no cost to the Council. Specifically, we propose that:

a) The Business Councils are convened at each stage of plan-making, aligned to the same timetable as the community assemblies, to consider and respond to the material being consulted on.

b) The two Councils meet separately, so that the genuinely different conditions facing businesses in the north and the south of the borough are captured distinctly rather than averaged into a single borough-wide business view.

c) Officers are invited to attend and to put questions directly to employers, and that the output of each session is provided to the Council in writing to form part of the auditable engagement record supporting Gateway assessments and examination.

d) South & North Cheshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry is added to the stakeholder register as a named body to be notified and consulted at each stage of the Plan, under both brands.

We would also encourage town-specific business discussions in Crewe, Macclesfield and the key service centres, and sector roundtables where particular evidence is being prepared, for example on employment land, town centres or transport. The Business Councils can help convene these.

3. The evidence base: employment growth scenarios

The consultation contains a striking piece of evidence. The current plan was based on average annual jobs growth of 0.7%, and sought at least 380 hectares of employment land on that basis. Actual jobs growth has averaged 1.3% a year, close to double the planning assumption.

That gap between assumption and outturn is the single most important economic finding in the consultation document, and it should shape the methodology of the new Plan rather than sit as a monitoring footnote. We would ask that the Economic Development Needs Assessment and Employment Land Review model, as a minimum:

- Housing growth on the standard method requirement.
- Resulting population and workforce growth, including the age profile of that workforce given the borough's ageing population.
- Historic employment growth, including the 0.7% assumption against the 1.3% outturn and the reasons for the divergence.
- A range of future employment growth scenarios, including one that continues recent performance rather than reverting to a lower trend assumption.
- Commuting patterns, both current and as projected under each scenario.
- The employment land requirement arising from each scenario, expressed by use class and location.

Publishing that analysis would allow the Council, businesses and residents to see the relationship between housing numbers, workforce and employment land, and would give the spatial strategy a defensible economic foundation at examination.

4. Employment land: deliverability, not headline quantity

The consultation reports a remaining employment land supply of 375 hectares as at 31st March 2024, with over 112 hectares developed since 2010. That headline is reassuring, but it says nothing about whether the land is serviced, viable, in the right location, or in the format the market actually requires.

Much of the recorded supply is likely to be long-standing allocation that has not come forward, and in many cases has not come forward for good reasons. If the Employment Land Review counts hectares rather than testing them, the Plan will conclude there is no problem and allocate nothing new. We would ask that the review:

- Tests the existing supply for genuine deliverability, applying the same rigour to employment land that the land availability assessment will apply to housing sites.
- Segments supply and need by use class, plot size and market geography, recognising that North Cheshire and South Cheshire are distinct property markets with different constraints, values and occupier requirements.
- Assesses demand for smaller units and managed workspace, where the shortage is most acute for our SME members and where the market is least able to deliver speculatively.
- Considers the condition and future of ageing industrial stock, and what policy support is needed to fund renewal and intensification.

We would also ask the Plan to include a policy that resists the loss of employment land and premises to residential and other higher-value uses, and that positively supports the renewal, intensification and reuse of existing employment sites.

5. Viability and deliverability

The consultation rightly notes that viability and deliverability will be relevant to housing standards and other policy requirements. We would ask that this is applied cumulatively rather than requirement by requirement.

The Plan is likely to consider affordable housing requirements, accessibility standards under Building Regulations M4(2) and M4(3), tighter water efficiency standards, nationally described space standards and potentially biodiversity net gain above the national minimum. Each may be justified individually. Together, in the current cost environment, they can stall delivery and raise the cost of the commercial and residential premises our members depend on.

That environment is materially tighter than when the current plan was adopted. Rising business costs, including business rates, are a real challenge for businesses. Access to finance remains difficult, with lenders applying risk-averse loan-to-value requirements that constrain the ability of local businesses to invest in premises and expansion. Reduced employer incentives for apprenticeships, particularly following increases in the National Living Wage, are making it harder for businesses to invest in training the next generation of skilled workers, which in turn bears on the labour supply assumptions underpinning any growth scenario.

We would therefore ask that a whole-plan viability assessment tests the combined effect of all policy requirements, that it covers commercial and industrial development as well as housing, and that its assumptions on build costs and finance are current rather than carried forward.

6. Infrastructure

Highways and connectivity remain ongoing barriers to business growth in the area. The lack of a coherent public transport network is a recurring concern among our members, particularly where it affects access to employment sites, town centres, and education and training opportunities.

We support investment in active travel and recognise its health, environmental and economic benefits. Our point is one of integration rather than opposition. Active travel investment should be planned alongside public transport provision, highway capacity and access to employment sites, rather than considered in isolation. Where schemes are brought forward, we would ask that access for goods vehicles, customers, and staff travelling from outside walking and cycling range is assessed as part of the same exercise, so that the overall effect on access to employment is understood before delivery rather than after.

Mobile phone connectivity is also a practical obstacle for many businesses, affecting day-to-day communications and automated systems. Digital connectivity should be treated as core economic infrastructure alongside transport, utilities and public services, and considered in the Infrastructure Delivery Plan on the same footing.

Utilities and grid capacity

We note that the proposed evidence base includes highways network modelling, flood risk assessment and an infrastructure delivery plan, but no study of electricity grid or water capacity. For manufacturing, food production, logistics and any energy-intensive investment, grid connection capacity and lead times are now frequently the binding constraint on growth, ahead of the availability of land itself. A site with planning permission and no viable connection date is not deliverable employment land.

We would ask that a utilities and grid capacity study is added to the Local Plan evidence base, prepared with the relevant network operators, and that its findings inform both the spatial distribution of employment growth and the Infrastructure Delivery Plan.

Infrastructure first

More generally, the Plan should take an infrastructure-first approach, ensuring that new housing and employment growth are supported by the necessary roads, public transport, utilities, schools, health facilities, digital infrastructure and community services at the point they are needed, rather than after pressure has already built up.

7. A long-term masterplan and roadmap

We believe there is a clear need for an overarching, long-term masterplan and roadmap that aligns individual projects across transport planning, housing, employment, town centre regeneration and health infrastructure. Without this, individual schemes risk appearing disconnected or reactive, making it difficult for businesses and residents to understand the Council's overall direction of travel and how separate projects fit together.

We would ask the Council to provide clearer detail and communication around the Crewe 360 programme and the "Best Small City" ambitions, showing how these proposals connect with the wider Local Plan, transport investment, employment growth and town centre regeneration.

We would also welcome early clarity on the relationship between the Local Plan and the sub-regional Spatial Development Strategy being prepared in the developing Combined Authority context. Business needs certainty about which document governs what, and confidence that the interface between the two will not delay adoption of the Local Plan.

8. Skills and the economic evidence base

We note that the wider strategies listed as informing the new Local Plan include the Cheshire and Warrington Sustainable and Inclusive Economic Strategy, the Local Industrial Strategy and the Strategic Economic Plan, but do not include the Cheshire and Warrington Local Skills Improvement Plan.

We would ask that this is corrected. Employer skills demand is inherently spatial. Where employers cannot recruit, and for which occupations, is direct evidence about where employment land and housing should be located and how they should be connected to education and training provision. As the designated Employer Representative Body, the Chamber holds this evidence and is willing to make it available.

We also note that the Cheshire Business Survey 2017 appears among the wider strategies informing the Plan. That evidence is now nine years old and predates the pandemic, significant changes to the transport proposition at Crewe, and the current cost base facing our members. We would be pleased to make current Chamber member survey and Quarterly Economic Survey data available to help refresh the economic baseline, and our Business Councils could assist in designing and distributing any new business survey the Council wishes to commission.

9. Town centres

We welcome the Council's recognition that town centres now depend on a broader mix of uses, including leisure, entertainment, community facilities, food and drink, and residential development, and that centres which have diversified have generally performed better than those that remain heavily dependent on traditional retail.

We would ask the Plan to follow that evidence through into policy. In particular, the Plan should avoid rigid land-use distinctions and tightly drawn primary and secondary frontage designations that prevent centres adapting to changing demand. Policy should enable the reuse of vacant units, support meanwhile and temporary occupation, and allow the mix of uses in each centre to evolve without requiring repeated policy exceptions.

We would also ask that parking policy is set with the trading position of town centre businesses explicitly in mind. Parking standards are identified in the consultation as a matter for the Plan, and for many of our town centre members parking cost and availability is the single most significant determinant of footfall.

Finally, we would ask that the town centres study recognises that Crewe, Macclesfield and the key service centres face materially different challenges and should not be addressed through a single borough-wide policy prescription.

10. Priorities for South Cheshire

- Crewe as a national rail hub. Land around the station and the rail engineering cluster should be safeguarded, and Crewe station and the wider rail network should appear explicitly in the Infrastructure Delivery Plan. The work of the Crewe Rail Forum is available to the Council as supporting evidence.
- The strategic green gap. We welcome the commitment to produce evidence on the role and function of the current strategic green gap around Crewe. We would ask that it is genuinely reviewed against evidence of its function rather than rolled forward by default, so that it does not sterilise otherwise deliverable employment land.
- Leighton Hospital and the New Hospital Programme should be named in the Infrastructure Delivery Plan, with the site, its access requirements and its supply chain implications properly recognised.
- The M6 junction 16 and 17 corridor, and the food manufacturing, engineering and logistics base that depends on it.
- Salt and the Middlewich resource. The consultation notes that Cheshire accounts for around 85% of UK salt production and that former caverns offer potential for hydrogen and carbon storage. This is a nationally significant asset and a genuine growth opportunity for South Cheshire. We would ask that the Plan actively supports its development, not merely safeguards it.
- Skills and deprivation. The consultation records low qualification levels and persistent deprivation in parts of Crewe. The spatial strategy should be linked to skills provision and to local employment and training commitments on major development sites.
- Rural business to the south and west of Nantwich, including farm diversification, rural workspace and the digital connectivity issues set out above.

11. Priorities for North Cheshire

- Green Belt and grey belt. Macclesfield, Wilmslow, Knutsford, Poynton and Handforth are tightly constrained and employment land is scarce. We would ask that the assessment of exceptional circumstances and the identification of grey belt land weigh economic and employment need, not housing need alone.
- The life sciences and advanced manufacturing cluster. AstraZeneca at Macclesfield, Alderley Park, Waters and Bespak at Holmes Chapel represent a nationally significant concentration of activity. The Plan should

identify expansion land and support the intensification of existing campuses rather than relying on constrained sites elsewhere.

- Ageing industrial stock, of which Hurdsfield Industrial Estate is the clearest example. A policy resisting the loss of industrial land, coupled with positive support for estate renewal and investment, would materially assist the businesses on these estates.
- Housing affordability as a recruitment issue. In North Cheshire this is a business problem as much as a social one. Employers cannot recruit or retain staff at entry and mid level when those staff cannot afford to live within reasonable reach of the workplace. We would ask that the Housing Needs Assessment considers affordability explicitly in labour market terms, and that housing mix policy responds to the needs of the working-age workforce as well as the ageing population.
- The Manchester Airport corridor, airport-related development, and the management of noise constraints so that they do not unduly restrict legitimate commercial activity.
- Jodrell Bank. The World Heritage Site buffer zone and wider setting will constrain development around Goostrey, Chelford and Holmes Chapel. We would ask that the extent of that constraint is scoped clearly and early, so that businesses and landowners understand it in advance.

12. Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to respond at this early stage. If the Council takes three things from this response, we would ask that they are these:

1. Plan housing and employment together. The economic consequences of a housing requirement of 2,530 homes a year must be planned for as deliberately as the homes themselves, with employment growth and workforce requirements explicitly informing the spatial strategy.
2. Build the evidence around deliverable employment land and infrastructure capacity. Test employment land for deliverability rather than counting hectares, model a range of employment growth scenarios against the 1.3% outturn, and add a utilities and grid capacity study to the evidence base.
3. Give employers a formal role in the continuing plan-making process. The North and South Cheshire Business Councils already exist and can act as the employer equivalent of the proposed community assemblies, at no cost to the Council and on the Council's timetable.

The new Local Plan will shape the conditions in which our members invest, recruit and grow for the next twenty years, and we are keen to be a constructive partner throughout its preparation. We would be pleased to discuss any of these points further, and in particular the Business Council proposal set out in section 2. We look forward to contributing to the plan content and evidence stage in due course.

Yours faithfully



Paul
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South & North Cheshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry
Employer Representative Body, Cheshire and Warrington Local Skills Improvement Plan