

Joint response from Cheshire Community Action (CCA) and Cheshire West Voluntary Action (CWVA) to the Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan consultation (Issues and Options Paper June 2025)

CCA and CWVA welcome the opportunity to comment on the Local Plan and stress that, for the plan to achieve its goals on climate change, wellbeing and inclusive growth, **community buildings must be treated as core social infrastructure**. Community halls, social clubs, youth centres, faith venues and recreation grounds are integral to health, inclusion, local identity and climate resilience. They need strong policy protection and direct investment if they are to serve the growing population and enable voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise groups to continue delivering social value each year.

Summary of key recommendations

1. Protect and enhance existing community facilities (policy OS 2)

- **Require a local viability test before any loss is permitted.** Privately owned venues are sometimes declared “surplus” or “incapable of use” without exploring community management or asset transfer. A **Community Asset Viability Test**—including marketing the asset for community management—should be added so that a facility cannot be released without verifying that no local group is willing to run it.
- **Avoid “infrastructure drift” by mandating like-for-like replacement within the same settlement.** Where facilities are lost through redevelopment, the plan should insist on a replacement of equal or better quality within the same community to prevent gradual erosion of neighbourhood amenities.

2. Ensure adequate community open space (policy OS 1)

- **Lower thresholds for on-site provision.** In many rural developments the current “major” threshold is rarely met, leading to a reliance on off-site contributions. The threshold for requiring on-site community open space should be reduced for Key and Local Service Centres.
- **Support shared “community hub” models.** We encourage flexible designs that co-locate a village hall, play area and health outreach services on a single parcel of land—an efficient use of space that fosters multi-generational interaction.

3. Recognise community infrastructure as essential (policy STRAT 11 and Infrastructure & Developer Contributions)

- **Elevate community halls and centres to “priority infrastructure”.** The policy should list village halls, youth and adult learning centres, volunteer hubs and social-enterprise spaces alongside schools and transport as priority items.
- **Introduce a phased delivery schedule.** On large sites, community buildings should open by the occupation of the first **50 %** of dwellings so that new residents have immediate access to communal space.

4. Embed social value in viability assessments (policy ID 1 – Viability)

Evidence shows that early investment in community facilities improves cohesion and wellbeing and ultimately reduces pressure on health and policing services¹. Viability re-negotiations should therefore apply a **social-value weighting**, ensuring that community facilities rank immediately after affordable housing when trade-offs are considered.

5. Demonstrate climate leadership through community buildings (Design & Net-Zero)

Community buildings are ideal demonstrators for net-zero retrofit and low-carbon technologies. The Local Plan should therefore:

- Support new or refurbished community buildings that achieve **high energy-efficiency standards**.
- Integrate electric-vehicle charge points and high-speed broadband infrastructure as part of a future-ready hub.

6. Spatial implications and strategic options

Regardless of which spatial option is chosen, the Local Plan should be underpinned by a **borough-wide Community Asset Audit** to map gaps and over-provision before allocating growth. If Green Belt release (Option B) or new settlements along sustainable transport corridors (Option C) are pursued, on-site community buildings must be mandated so that loss of open land is offset by new social value. New settlements along transport corridors must include **rail-adjacent community hubs** that are secure, visible and accessible on foot or bicycle.

7. Delivery and co-design

We urge the Council to work with voluntary, community and faith organisations from plan-making through to site build-out to co-design delivery mechanisms and ensure that developer contributions, the Infrastructure Delivery Plan and Community Infrastructure Levy are harnessed for community benefit. Long-term maintenance and running costs should be considered from the outset so that assets remain viable after construction.

Conclusion

CCA and CWVA are committed to helping shape a Local Plan that embeds **community assets as essential infrastructure**, ring-fences developer contributions for their creation, retrofit and long-term maintenance, strengthens policy tests against unjustified loss and co-designs delivery with the voluntary sector. We look forward to working with Cheshire West and Chester Council as the Plan progresses towards the Publication Draft stage to ensure every neighbourhood—urban, rural or edge-of-Green-Belt—has the resilient community infrastructure it needs to thrive.

¹ Research commissioned by the UK government shows clear links between investment in community infrastructure and improvements in health, wellbeing and social outcomes:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rapid-evidence-review-of-community-initiatives/rapid-evidence-review-of-community-initiative>