

Local Plan Colchester Borough: Issues and Options

West Mersea Town Council Perspective

OVERVIEW

This consultation response is our initial comment on the Colchester Borough Plan as i) the Vision etc. have not yet been drafted and ii) there has only been limited opportunity for public consultation. We expect there to be further opportunities for both public consultation and discussion/negotiation with CBC...

Our infrastructure and essential services are at or near capacity any further development would no doubt be very costly 'per capita' i.e. requiring improved, additional or extended facilities compared to other locations. (This is true both because of our nature as an island and because alternative sites allow for economies of scale).

In light of the above we do not support any additional/accelerated development in West Mersea (as set out in all Growth Options) as we do not believe that CBC can undertake to fund the necessary improvements. S106 monies would be entirely insufficient for all but the most basic amenities and would not require or meet the costs incurred by utility companies, NHS, Borough and County Council to improve essential infrastructure and services e.g. sewage, health centre/surgery, school, traffic, transport etc.

Furthermore, accelerated development would make it impossible to meet the Core Strategy promise that 'the historic character and distinctiveness of these settlements and other villages will be protected and enhanced'.

We must ensure only sustainable development that will support West Mersea residents balancing the needs of People, Place and Profit.

Local Plan Issues and Options

There are four key issues

1. Whether the proposed plan period is appropriate i.e. to 2032 and beyond?

This would seem an appropriate period to allow for longer term planning. However, we are concerned that all Growth Options seem to propose 'accelerated' development in District Centres to meet the Boroughs immediate needs at the cost of these communities.

2. Whether the scope of the evidence base is appropriate and sufficient i.e. the list of source policies and documents on p7

Please see the attached documents in support of our response and comments regarding West Mersea:-

- Communities_Facilities_SPD_July_2013.pdf
- Mersea Island Designations
- Mersea Island Designations Key
- Mersea Ward Profile.pdf
- Open_Space_SPD_July_2006.pdf

In addition, you will no doubt have a copy of the CBC report regarding Area of Special Character and Conservation Area in the historic 'Old City' bordering Coast Road and The Lane.

3. Whether the issues and option paper has covered all of the key issues that the Local Plan should seek to address Inc. strategic cross-boundary issues

There are a number of issues specific to District Centres and West Mersea in particular that the Parish Council would like to discuss with Colchester Borough representatives as we feel the body of this document does not sufficiently reflect the character of our community. Mersea Island is isolated but has a long history of meeting local need through voluntary services and providing community facilities funded by subscriptions and bonds. At just under 7,000 the residents expect to be engaged in any future plans to ensure only sustainable development.

4. Whether there are any other issues or considerations that CBC need to take into account

As in our response above there has not been sufficient opportunity for discussion with CBC or consultation with residents and so we reserve the right to add issues and evidence as part of this continuing dialogue.

Local Plan Vision

We note that the Current Vision is set out in the Core Strategy (2008) and includes the following of direct relevance to West Mersea:-

'Tiptree, Wivenhoe and West Mersea will be key district settlements that provide essential services and facilities to their rural hinterland. The historic character and distinctiveness of these settlements and other villages will be protected and enhanced.'

The natural environment, countryside and coastline will be conserved and enhanced and strategic green spaces will be secured to meet the recreational and health needs of Colchester. Sustainable development will also help protect the biodiversity, cultural and amenity value of the countryside and coast and will minimise use of scarce natural resources.

Whilst we cannot disagree with the stated aim that the future vision is 'aspirational yet achievable' and 'fit for purpose' we are concerned that the (as yet undrafted) CBC Strategic Plan 2015-2018 is too short term and unlikely to reflect the needs of this community. We therefore anticipate consultation regarding both the CBC Strategic Plan and Local Plan as it relates to West Mersea.

Local Plan Themes

Housing

Obviously, housing development cannot be sustained without adequate infrastructure and services. For transport and emergency services constraints please see below. However, we also note

Education

The current “Issues and Options” document rightly identifies education on the Island as a problem. West Mersea School is one of the largest junior schools in Essex and is at capacity now with 450 children. There is also a need for pre-school facilities in cases where both parents are working. From age 11 all Mersea children bus to schools in Colchester or Tiptree with all the additional transport difficulties that entails.

The Mersea School saw an increase in enrolment following development at Wellhouse Green and based on that experience they would anticipate a need for an additional classroom per 100 additional housing units. Facilities for pre-school provision are severely limited. Children age 11+ rely on a limited bus service (including a service arranged by parents) to access schools and Higher Education facilities in Colchester.

Sewerage

Since the last major development at Wellhouse Green on East Road, there have been problems with the local sewage farm reaching capacity; in the summer when all the caravan sites are full, or in winter due to an excess of rain and surface water in combined sewers.

Anglian Water have promised details of current treatment and storage capacity (including flood tanks) but we understand that these were last extended in the 1980s based on historically low levels of development.

Furthermore, as indicated on the attached West Mersea Designations (Water Recreation and Holiday Caravans), West Mersea is dependent on Tourism, Leisure and Commercial fishing and so Bathing and Shellfish water quality are essential to the local economy. Our current sewage plant has been put under additional pressure by the recent extension of licences for caravan sites connected to public sewers and private outflows.

Centres and Employment

West Mersea is dependent on Tourism, Leisure and Commercial fishing is essential to the local economy. See the attached West Mersea Designations for Employment Zones.

The public amenities such as Mersea Centre (MICA) and the Glebe/pavilion are already close to capacity. The MICA was built in the late 70’s and has two hireable halls that are more or less permanently booked, and although the building has squash courts and a fitness centre, indoor gym facilities are very limited indeed. The Glebe now caters for two Football clubs, Rugby and Tennis and has good facilities for these sports, however, car parking is insufficient and there is no provision for indoor training activities. If there are more young people on the Island then parking and indoor sports facilities would be essential.

Rural Colchester

In many emergencies Mersea has to rely on volunteer “First Responders”, often on the Air Ambulance, and sometimes even the lifeboat. Flooding of the beach and saltings is a frequent occurrence with high tides often covering the Coast Road. In the event of a serious or prolonged flood then evacuation by water could be required.

Already emergency services (Coastguard, Police, Ambulance and Fire) have had to ‘stand by’ during several high tides as they recognise that they could not otherwise access the island.

We are all aware of reductions in the police service and the removal of PCSO’s and closure of the on island station.

Promoting Healthy Communities

The ambulance service has to undertake the most difficult journey to and from the hospital well north of the town. The journey necessitates the Strood, the 9 miles to Colchester, across the town centre, and out north through the heavily congested Avenue of Remembrance and North Station roundabouts.

The current Medical Centre is far too small for the existing population and it is already agreed with the NHS that it is a top priority for replacement, (it was built in 1974 for a community half the current size). A new site, most likely outside the current town envelope, will be essential to meet current demand. In addition to this must be added the severe strain on the General Hospital’s facilities which in our view is caused more by the ever growing size of local population rather than any lack of effort by hospital staff.

Sustainable Transport and Accessibility

West Mersea is regularly cut off by high tides and our bus service has been severely restricted in the last 2-3 years yet many residents are dependent on public transport to access the hospitals, secondary schools and higher education establishments.

The B1025 is the main road to Colchester and becomes very busy at commuter times and holiday weekends. The southern approach to Colchester is the only artery into the town, or indeed to routes around the town, and these roads will not be improved under any of the proposed developments. The whole concentration is on Tollgate, Greenstead or the ‘new park and ride’ scheme to the north of the town. Mersea will have to rely on current roads and the existing car parks, using private cars, or the bus service that currently takes a pretty circuitous route to the town and takes 40 minutes. There is also a great problem for bus users finding anywhere to park their cars in West Mersea when using the bus since, for many, the bus stops are not a walking distance from home. This in turn clogs up the only town centre car park and surrounding roads.

There is a pressing need for a dedicated “park to ride” car park with a corresponding bus lay-by and a more direct route to Colchester centre.

Heritage and Townscape

Please see the attached West Mersea Designations plus your own report regarding Area of Special Character and Conservation Area in the historic 'Old City' bordering Coast Road and The Lane.

European, National and Regional designations include:-

- Area of Special Character
- Ancient Monument
- Conservation Area
- Special Area of Conservation

Natural Environment

There is no site above the coastal protection belt that could accommodate development proportionate to Colchester Borough's aim of 10%.

The Coastal Protection belt is well defined around West Mersea. South and west are bounded by mudflats and saltings, to the north there is a swathe of farmland stretching between the current building boundaries of the footpath from Brickhouse Corner to The Lane, down to the Strood Estuary. It is important to restrict building on these fields for topographical reasons. Along this section the land drops away rapidly from the path to the estuary and is in plain sight when looking towards the island from the north or the Strood. Any building down that slope would change the character and unique natural habitats irretrievably.

European, National and Regional designations include:-

- Countryside Conservation Area
- Coastal Protection Belt
- Marine Conservation Zone (since 2013 – not marked)
- RAMSAR
- Site of Special Scientific Interest
- Sites of Important Nature Conservation
- Special Protected Area

Growth Options/Development Strategy and preferred options

As set out in the Themes above there are significant infrastructure and service constraints on any additional or accelerated development in West Mersea. Much of the infrastructure is in need of maintenance or improvement to accommodate existing load and services are at or near capacity so that even a modest increase in population would require significant investment. Costs 'per unit/per capita' are likely to be far greater than development to the East or West of Colchester as West Mersea is isolated (an island) and there are no economies of scale.

Our emergency services (Coastguard, Lifeboat, First Responders and PCSOs etc.) are all voluntary or based 'off island' and it is unlikely that this voluntary provision could (or would wish to) cope with supporting more calls.

The costs of all these essential facilities could not be met from S106 monies received from developers and so the costs would be borne by West Mersea Town Council, Colchester Borough Council and Essex County Council plus providers of these services e.g. Anglian Water, NHS Trust etc. Ultimately, the development would therefore be subsidised by existing tax payers and customers.

We note that all the Growth Options in the paper include development of Rural District Centres such as West Mersea. However, West Mersea differs from other centres in that we are unable to 'provide essential services and facilities to our (sic) rural hinterland' (Core Strategy 2008) as we are regularly cut off by the tide; most of our emergency services are voluntary or off island and the surgery, school etc. are already at capacity. Finally, we have by definition, as an island fringed by low lying beach and saltings, extremely limited supply of suitable land for development. There is no site above the coastal protection belt that could accommodate development proportionate to Colchester Borough's aim of 10% over 17 years.

From 2001 to 2011 population of West Mersea has increased by 262 or 4% and current constraints mean that we could not accommodate any additional or accelerated growth. Even at this level (or shared with surrounding villages as per option 1B) we would need significant investment, far in excess of what is available from S106.

Finally, with reference to our Neighbourhood profile E05004144 (attached) our population and housing profile clearly indicate that any future development needs to include affordable homes for local people. There are 10% residents on benefits and 16.8% in fuel poverty yet only 6.3% social/affordable housing. This has led to a 'waisted' (wasted) population profile with many aged 20-40 having to move elsewhere in the borough.