

OVERVIEW - ECONOMIC ANALYSIS GROUP.

1 Introduction.

The purpose of this review is to identify the economic factors that influence the ultimate objective of maintaining and enhancing the position of Chesham as a sustainable community that is an attractive place to live, work, play and visit. In the preparatory studies, worksheets were completed covering six separate sectors:-

- A. employment
- B. retail and town centre services
- C. training and education
- D. commercial and industrial property needs
- E. tourism and visitor services
- F. business support

From these worksheets an outline SWOT analysis was prepared (see appendix 1) and we have concluded that, although there were six worksheets, there are really just two major economic themes and that all of the sectors contribute to them. The two critical themes are:

- 1.1 Employment and employment facilities, with education and training and business support contributing.
- 1.2 Retail and town centre services, with tourism and visitor services contributing.

2 Employment and employment facilities.

- 2.1 Chesham has traditionally been a town with a high level of local employment, a tradition that it has valued. It is also environmentally desirable. Even today, there are 823 premises liable to pay business rates in the HP5 postcode area with 695 of them being in Chesham itself. As with most of the southeast region, unemployment is low and has recently been falling. Sixty percent of workers living in Chesham work in the Chesham and Amersham area and 90% travel no further than Wycombe/Watford/Hemel Hempstead. However, contrasting with this image of prosperity, it is striking that Chesham, when compared with the neighbouring areas, has pockets of relative poverty within the Town. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (from the ODPM) indicate that more than half the areas of Chesham show income levels in the third and fourth quintiles nationally, contrasted with only about 10% in the rest of Chiltern District. Associated with this, there is a relatively high proportion of households that have no access to a car or van - a factor of some importance when considering the ability to travel to a place of work – and these same areas tend to show high

levels of people with no qualifications and low levels of people qualified to degree level or above.

- 2.2 All of these factors make the retention and development of employment sites within Chesham a significant issue. There is constant pressure to re-zone commercial and industrial land for housing, as this is financially rewarding but it is essential that housing development and commercial development are kept in balance in order to maintain the social, economic and environmental equilibrium of the Town. This, after all, is more or less the definition of a sustainable community.
- 2.3 If Chesham is to remain a thriving business centre, there are three major requirements:
there must be adequate employment opportunities
there must be a sufficient number of people available to fill those employment opportunities and who have ready access to them
the people who are available must have the appropriate knowledge and skills to meet those opportunities.
- This brings the dilemma into sharp focus. It is inefficient to have people who wish to work locally but are frustrated from doing so because there are insufficient employment sites in the Town BUT it is also inefficient to have employment sites standing idle in the Town because there are insufficient people available to fill them. The first situation would lead ultimately to Chesham becoming a dormitory community – the antithesis of sustainability - the second to a failure to develop the Town's potential. Both are undesirable but the first is probably worse, as it is irreversible. It is relatively easy to build on employment land. It will be virtually impossible to recover it. It is said that the demographics of Chesham are tending towards the second problem but the magnitude of the risk to the well-being of the Town, if too much employment land is lost, demands caution. The possible environmental disadvantages stemming from too much reliance on travelling substantial distances unnecessarily also need to be considered.
- 2.4 As far as we know, there is a lack of good models that deal with the question of sustainable work/housing balances. This is clearly a multifactorial problem, in which many of the factors are unquantified. In any established situation, the development of employment land for housing will automatically increase the pressure on the remaining employment land as the new housing will potentially provide additional members of the work force. But does anyone know by how much? There are also many other imponderables. How many people wish to work from home? Chesham is a nice place to do it. It is often said that, in our fragmenting society, there is no need to build five bedroomed houses in Chesham. But, quite apart from matters of personal choice, it is probably true that people who work from home do require additional space and such people should perhaps be encouraged. Similarly, many claims are made about the need for more affordable housing, with the need to house key workers often being advanced as an argument. But key workers surely need to be housed close to the areas where they are needed to work and concentrating them in Chesham – or

anywhere else – would be damaging on many levels. Furthermore, Chesham already has a substantially greater than average proportion of social housing and the areas of greatest concentration are associated with relatively low incomes and relatively low levels of educational achievement – neither of which features is helpful in developing a modern commercial base.

- 2.5 This leads directly on to the point that the availability of suitably qualified staff is also an issue both for existing employers and for anyone thinking of establishing a business in Chesham. This in turn hinges on the educational structures and effectiveness of the three levels of education. At primary level the schools in the Town are moderate although the schools in the hinterland tend to be better. The secondary schools are relatively good. At the post 16 level outside the schools, where the vocational element should be strongest, there is no match at all between the needs of the Town and the course provision.

2.6 Proposals.

- 2.6.1 Work is required to formulate a logical argument for the retention of a sustainable level of employment land in the Town, probably based on the concept of a sustainable community. The uncertainty margins in the justification should err on the side of caution, as over provision of employment land can easily be rectified at a later stage while under provision is either irrecoverable or would involve erosion of the green belt. Without a strong rationale, it will be hard to resist the piecemeal but persistent pressures from developers.
- 2.6.2 Formulate proposals to attract new small businesses to the area. Such a strategy must recognise that start up businesses do not necessarily want or need high tech, high rental premises. They might, however, require simple accommodation with some level of centrally provided services. Self-employment can be lonely.
- 2.6.3 The standard of secondary education in the Town is good but action is needed to consider ways of improving achievement at the primary level.
- 2.6.4 Establish a liaison group to try to improve the match between the post-16 education provided locally and the needs of the Town.
- 2.6.5 Consider the additional provision and promotion of relevant adult education to rectify the educational deficits in parts of the Town. The recent decision, disproportionately to reduce the provision of library services in Chesham is, very much, a move in the wrong direction.
- 2.6.6 Investigate the potential for social enterprises to meet some of the childcare and other social needs.
- 2.6.7 Continue actions to bring support agencies to the Town, perhaps including a “Be your own boss” type event.
- 2.6.8 Re-evaluate a Town Manager appointment although there were mixed views on the benefits and the funding of such an appointment.

3 Retail and town centre services.

- 3.1 In the public consultations within the CCV programme, improvement of the High Street has consistently been seen as one of the major requirements. The “improvements” envisaged fall mainly into one of three categories:
- a need for additional shops
 - a need for changes to existing shops
 - a need for improvements in the ambience of the High Street.
- 3.2 With regard to the additional shops that might be attracted, there were frequent mentions of large chain stores, such as Woolworths and Marks & Spencer. This is probably not a realistic objective at present, due both to the lack of suitable sites and to the relatively low footfall in the Town. However, the challenge will be to turn this apparent problem into an opportunity by developing the individual character of Chesham and emphasising that it not just a clone of a hundred other High Streets across Britain but is an individual and attractive place in its own right. However, if the local shops cannot compete with larger centres and with internet shopping, in terms of price and range, they must emphasise the factors where they should be able to demonstrate an advantage, such as convenience, service and specialist expertise.
- 3.3 Still with additional shops that might be attracted to the Town, two other popular suggestions were for more specialist shops and for some restaurants other than the fast food and Asian restaurants that already exist. These both seem to be realistic objectives although the introduction of a wider range of restaurants is probably something that will follow an improvement in the High Street ambience, rather than lead it. There were also calls for fewer charity shops and more “ordinary” shops.
- 3.4 With regard to the changes required to the existing shops, some suggestions were concerned with accessibility but much of the need seems to be for cosmetic improvement; the High Street is not visually attractive. A concerted programme to reduce the litter would be beneficial.
- 3.5 The ambience of the High Street is a deep-rooted problem and beyond the reach of the tenants. The physical condition of the area is poor. The pedestrian surfaces are uneven, repairs are poorly executed and poorly matched and the whole High Street has an air that suggests a lack of concern. The responsibility for this must lie with the Town Council, the District Council and the County Council. There is also another, perhaps more serious problem in that the High Street is seen as an uninviting, even dangerous area at night. This image will not attract diners or even strollers to the Town and is a partly a matter of more effective policing. However, if more people can be attracted to the Town centre, this will, in itself, enhance the sense of security.
- 3.6 Chesham is in competition with many other centres for the available trade and it must be clear what it is offering to the buying public, use this clear vision to emphasise its advantages and then promote it strongly.

- 3.7 Another point that produced considerable comment was the cost of parking in the Town. An initial (short) period of free parking seemed to be a preferred option. This leads to a semi-philosophical point that the costs of services such as parking – and indeed, policing – fall upon the public purse while the benefits of increased trade fall to companies and individuals. This then exposes the assumption underlying this section of the study – that increased trade is a good thing for the town as a whole. On balance we believe that it is but this and other assumptions should not go unchallenged
- 3.8 It is important to note that business in shops and restaurants does not rely solely on people who live in the Town but also has a component due to the people who visit. These can be people who work in the town but live elsewhere, those who visit for business purposes and also people who visit for leisure reasons. For the overall prosperity of Chesham it is desirable to encourage those who visit for one reason to take part also in other activities. Promotion, again, is a major need and this is certainly true if tourism is to make a significant contribution to the Town. Chesham is a pleasant town set in an area of outstanding natural beauty and with a considerable number of minor attractions but with no major attraction that will specifically bring visitors into the Town. It is also in competition with other pleasant towns, also in the area of outstanding natural beauty, some of which do have major attractions. They are also, in the main, better provided with visitor accommodation. The need therefore is to develop a focussed tourism offering based on day visitors, that links together several of the minor attractions to give enjoyable day or half day visits to the Town itself.
- 3.9 As a final point, it must be recognised that the main retail area of Chesham is fairly diffuse, stretching from Red Lion Street, well up into the Berkhamsted Road. This is arguably too extensive for a town of this size. It might be reasonable to restrict the primary area somewhat and to be more flexible in the planning approach to premises on the edges. Some of these peripheral areas such as the Market Square are still prime parts of the town centre need to be used imaginatively.
- It is sometimes seen as a disadvantage that the town centre is linear, with little width. It might be possible to reduce this perceived problem by exploiting the yards or courts that run off the High Street, giving more width and more interest to the main retail area.
- All of this implies that the retail area of Chesham should become more concentrated. Clearly, if individual retailers wish to maintain shops outside the town centre to meet local needs and perhaps even to expand them, that is their personal choice but it is perhaps time for any presumption that all existing retail premises should be maintained, to be reconsidered.

3.10 Proposals.

- 3.10.1 Make a concerted effort to improve the physical condition of the Town centre, based on co-operation between the local authorities, the landlords and the tenants. Minor changes such as repairs to damaged shop fronts, new coats of paint and better shop lighting could do wonders. Improved accessibility might be more challenging in some of the shops. Another possibility would be to

develop the yards off the High Street to provide interesting and attractive byeways for shoppers and strollers.

- 3.10.2 Improvements to the state of the pedestrian surfaces should be started immediately even though they may need to be spread over two or three years. An improved system for monitoring the work of contractors should be developed.
- 3.10.3 Policing should be improved, particularly in the evenings. Even the perception that the Town centre is dangerous, is very damaging.
- 3.10.4 There is already a considerable number of good specialist shops in Chesham but nothing is done, in a co-ordinated way, to promote them. Action should be taken to produce a guide to specialist and locally owned shops in the Town, to be used to promote the existing and to attract newcomers.
- 3.10.5 Develop joint initiatives among all the shops for marketing activities such as late night shopping on one evening each week or co-ordinated sales events once or twice a year – and promote them.
- 3.10.6 Persuade shopkeepers to develop websites and link them into a common Chesham link.
- 3.10.7 Promote joint action by the Town Council, the Chamber of Commerce, individual businesses and the general public to produce a retailing strategy, or business model for the Town. Once developed it should be promoted consistently.
- 3.10.8 Evaluate the benefits and costs of instituting a 30 minute period of free parking or of making the Watermeadow car park free for long term parking at slack times.
- 3.10.9 Analyse the nature of Chesham's tourism offering and determine whether it is strong enough to provide benefit to the Town.
- 3.10.10 If the answer is "Yes", then identify grouped activities that will lead to visitors spending time in Chesham rather than just regarding it as a transport point, to be passed through as quickly as possible.
- 3.10.11 Support the Chess restoration project to provide an attractive environmental feature within the Town and other environmental enhancement schemes such as Britain in Bloom.
- 3.10.12 Develop Chesham-centred publicity promoting it both as an interesting destination in its own right and as an access point to the AONB, with identified routes starting or finishing (or both) in the Town.

4 Conclusions.

Looking again at the overall aim, that Chesham should be an attractive place to live, work, shop, play and visit it is clear that they are wholly entwined.

A good place to live is one where it is convenient and enjoyable to shop and with good and accessible leisure facilities. For an appreciable proportion of the population, access to good schools is a must. The ability to find satisfying work nearby is a major added advantage as well as being environmentally beneficial.

A good place to shop is one that can meet the routine needs of living but also offers a range of more specialist and interesting retailers.

A good place to play must cater for the needs of all age groups and ensure their safety. This covers places to meet and eat as well as opportunities for more active or cerebral pursuits.

Similarly, a good place to visit is one showing most of the attributes above plus some well organised attractions to bring people into the Town in the first place.

As all of the factors discussed in this overview are so interactive, it would suggest that one outcome of the CCV exercise should be the development of a ten year view of where we would like Chesham to be headed. The Vision from the CCV.

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Appendix 1 SWOT analysis.

Strengths.

Chesham is in an area of outstanding beauty.

It has reasonable transport links.

It has a wide range of shops that distinguishes it from the common clone of High Streets throughout the country.

Two national supermarket chains are represented in Chesham to attract shoppers.

There are regular markets and occasional specialist markets.

It has a wide range of employment within the Town and its hinterland, it is not just a dormitory suburb.

There are a wide range of commercial/industrial premises in Chesham, including small units that would support start-up activity.

At the secondary level both the local grammar school and the local upper school do appear to be thriving.

Chesham is broadband enabled and there are many public access points.

There is good non-vocational provision.

The old town is attractive and the river Chess could be a major attraction.

The Elgiva, the heated outdoor swimming pool, Lowndes Park and the leisure centre are all significant attractions.

The major banks are represented in Chesham.

There is an active Chamber of Trade & Commerce that organises at least one annual public trade event.

Weaknesses.

There is no integrated mechanism for promoting the Town as an economic centre.

The position of Chesham on the edge of the District and the County tends to make it expendable in Local Government eyes.

The town centre has not been consistently maintained as an inviting retail location.

The same is probably true of other public areas such as Lowndes Park.

Although the Town Centre Consortium has been active over the years in improving the appearance of the Town, there is no history of town centre businesses working together commercially to promote the Town.

The primary schools in the town are not high achieving. Their rolls are declining. Demographic studies suggest that the young and working age populations are declining generally.

Some areas of the town show very low levels of adult qualification when compared with the rest of Chiltern and South Bucks. This is also associated with areas with high levels of social housing.

There is no co-operation or liaison between the post-16 educational establishments and Chesham to identify and meet the needs of the town.

There is no major visitor attraction in Chesham and little visitor accommodation.

Chesham has no defined position on the importance of tourism to the town nor any strategy on how it might build on its strengths and compensate for the lack of accommodation.

No major attempt has been made to define Chesham's possible role as a (the) gateway to the area of outstanding natural beauty.

There is no dedicated town centre manager. This problem is exacerbated by the system of national business rates that makes it difficult for local authorities to use public funds to promote activity and development from which they receive no financial benefit.

The business support organisations tend not to have a presence in Chesham.

The road layout of Chesham leads to congestion problems.

There is a lack of firm information on the infrastructure capacity of the services in Chesham in the light of the level of housebuilding.

Opportunities.

The major opportunity is relentlessly to promote Chesham, both as it is and as it can be. The residents must have pride in their town.

Emphasise and develop the local character of the High Street. Encourage and promote specialist and local shops. Prepare and distribute a directory of the types of shops that are not found in every town. Make Chesham special.

Encourage the C of T&C to promote collaborative activities among retailers and other businesses.

Maintain the facilities to preserve a high level of employment in Chesham. Err on the side of too much provision rather than too little. The sustainable communities of the future will need to keep the living/working locations more closely together.

Promote Chesham as a start-up centre for small businesses of all kinds.

Establish a liaison group between the Town and the post-16 education establishments to try to align local needs with local provision.

Explore the problems of the local primary schools with a view to making joint representations to the LEA for appropriate provision of resources.

Redefine Chesham's approach to tourism and develop offerings based on the strengths of the Town. Develop a bid for Chesham to be the site for the "Gateway to the Chilterns" visitor centre. Everyone is trying to promote tourism. We must focus on what we can offer and what the town will get from it.

Take action to bring the business support agencies to Chesham on a regular basis.

Encourage the development of an integrated Chesham business website. Seek to market Chesham in Business plc.(or inc or ltd or gmbh or whatever.)

Threats.

The biggest threat is that Chesham should be overlooked and that we should do nothing about it.

Long term changes in the demographics of the Town, with increasing numbers of older people, falling numbers of young and working age people and the associated life style changes, will impact on all aspects of life in the Town and must be factored into all the future considerations.

Too much employment land being lost to housing.

That housing development outstrips the provision of services, the maintenance of law and order, road capacity and the facilities for a pleasant life

That the rail service to the Town should be reduced.

That the cycle of educational under-achievement and low income potential leads to social exclusion and threatens business and employment.

That poor educational results erode confidence in local schools and deter young people from coming to the Town.

An unattractive town centre will discourage both visitors and residents from using the town's amenities for any purpose.

Any perception that the town centre is unsafe is very damaging.

Increases in rents ahead of increases in business will damage the Town's viability.