

Braintree District Council

Braintree District Urban Capacity Study

Final Report

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1.1

Purpose of the Study

Braintree District Council commissioned Halcrow Fox (since renamed Halcrow) to undertake an Urban Capacity Study in October 2000. The purpose of this study is to provide objective advice to the Council on the housing potential within the three main urban areas of Braintree District, in order to assist its decision-making in respect of housing allocations in the current Local Plan Review. The study has surveyed Braintree, Witham and Halstead, but does not cover other settlements within the District.

Halcrow's approach to urban capacity studies is generally compliant with *guidance* produced by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) on urban capacity studies, entitled "Tapping the Potential: Best Practice in Assessing Housing Capacity" (December 2000), although some minor refinements have been necessary during the course of the study.

1.2

Important Notes

As with all urban capacity studies it should be noted that estimating the potential for urban housing indicates what is possible, not necessarily what will happen in practice. Estimates provided within this study reflect this situation and do not represent actual housing allocation figures.

Some discounting of identified sites has occurred, taking account of sustainable development and design criteria. All sites retained within the capacity estimates are considered by the Consultant to be suitable for future residential (or mixed use comprising an element of residential) development. Estimates are provided of the more realistic capacity of sites taking account of their physical characteristics, location and likelihood of being brought forward for development within the lifespan of the revised District Local Plan period. However, in discounting, access to detailed site information has been limited and therefore it is possible that some sites may not, in practice, come forward for development within that period due to practical or commercial reasons. As such the information obtained and methodology used is made as transparent as possible so that the assumptions behind the estimates are clearly visible.

The outputs of this study will assist Braintree District Council in making informed decisions on future development and within the District. In particular, the information gained will be critical to the Council's monitoring of housing land supply – the pivotal component of the Government's new "Plan, Monitor, Manage" approach to planning for housing. Site information, e.g. ownership, site conditions, can be updated as new data is made known to the Council.

As in all studies of this nature exploring urban capacity potential is a matter of judgement and choice. This report therefore reflects the findings and advice of the Consultant, and does not necessarily reflect the opinion or policies of Braintree District Council.

Overview of Report

This report contains:

- Background information on government guidance and policies which have formed the basis of the methodology adopted for this study;
- urban design principles which set the context for the design exercises undertaken;
- criteria agreed for selecting, retaining or eliminating sites in the site survey work;
- an overview of the methods and survey findings for incorporating or excluding sites within the urban capacity analysis together with a summary of the results;
- design exercises used for comparison purposes including their characteristics, density, parking and open space provision, building form and dwelling configuration;
- urban capacity estimates resulting from combining the site survey results with the design exercise density figures; and
- a brief commentary on the findings.

2 Background

2.1 *Government Policies and Guidance*

Since the adoption of the Braintree District Local Plan in February 1995, there has been sustained pressure from central government to recycle existing urban land for residential uses as part of an overall aim to achieve a more sustainable pattern of development and a 60% target for the re-use of brownfield land. Three key policy documents have been published by the DTLR (and its predecessors): “Planning for Sustainable Development: Towards Better Practice” (1998), the White Paper on the Future of Transport “A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone” (1998) and, most significantly, the Urban White Paper “Our Towns and Cities: The Future: Delivering an Urban Renaissance” (2000).

In addition, a number of more specific documents and guidance notes are particularly relevant to urban capacity studies; these include:

- Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (PPG3): Housing, *with particular emphasis on a sequential approach to housing development, density guidelines and monitoring requirements;*
- Planning Policy Guidance Note 11 (PPG11): Regional Planning, *with particular emphasis on requirements for monitoring housing at a regional level;*
- Tapping the Potential – Assessing Urban Housing Capacity: Towards Better Practice;
- Monitoring Provision of Housing through the Planning System: Towards Better Practice;
- Planning to Deliver – The Managed the Release of Housing Sites: Towards Better Practice; and
- Better Places to Live – A Companion Guide to PPG3/ By Design/ Places, Streets and Movement.

Urban capacity studies feature significantly in this backdrop of planning policy, acting as a critical tool in the Government’s Plan, Monitor and Manage approach to guide future housing provision.

2.1.1 *Tapping the Potential*

Of particular importance is the publication by the DTLR entitled “Tapping the Potential – Assessing Urban Housing Capacity: Towards Better Practice”. This

document advises on the steps to transparently and comprehensively explore the capacity of urban areas to accommodate residential and mixed use development. The four key steps outlined in the guidance – identifying capacity sources, surveying the capacity, assessing yield, and discounting potential – closely align with the approach developed by Halcrow.

A comparison between the DTLR's Better Practice Guide and the Consultant's approach is appended at ***Appendix A***.

2.1.2

Urban White Paper

The Urban White Paper "Our Town and Cities: The Future: Delivering an Urban Renaissance" presents the Government's holistic 'big vision', brings together the vast range of current initiatives affecting the urban environment and sets out proposed policy and fiscal measures to improve the quality of life in these areas. The aim is to achieve sustainable development, a high quality of life and opportunity for all, and thereby relieve the pressure for development in the countryside. Measures include extra resources to provide good quality services that meet people's needs, the production of new planning policy guidance putting urban renaissance at the heart of the planning system and a new drive to bring brownfield land and empty buildings back into use.

Urban capacity studies are central to enabling local authorities to assess the potential of their urban areas to contribute to a renaissance of urban living. Recommendation 55 of the Urban Task Force's Final Report, suggested that local authorities be obliged to carry out urban capacity studies on a regular and consistent basis. The White Paper refers to the inclusion of a sequential test in PPG3 and the publication of practical guidance on urban housing capacity and managing land release (i.e. the Better Practice Guides listed in para. 2.1), in response to this recommendation (see para. 4.24).

2.1.3

Overview

Combined with more detailed planning guidance, the above documents have clearly linked sustainable development and urban renaissance with re-using urban land, the need to reduce car dependency and promote more sustainable transport and development patterns. The four common sustainable development principles which underpin these concepts are:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
- effective protection of the environment;

- prudent use of natural resources; and
- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.

More specifically, objectives to re-use urban or brownfield land are:

- to provide a variety of land uses on vacant and under-utilised sites thus revitalising urban areas;
- to facilitate a more sustainable urban form by providing the opportunity for residents to make a choice about living closer to jobs, public transport, shops and leisure facilities; and
- to assist in the economic regeneration of towns through physical redevelopment and investment in existing urban areas.

Thus growth within urban areas is proposed to become more sustainable by focusing development which attracts a lot of trips in existing urban areas or in areas well served by public transport. Further, densities should be increased in areas with high public transport accessibility and in new public transport corridors.

A common theme within these objectives is accessibility – to jobs, services, public transport, community resources, and leisure facilities. The White Paper on the Future of Transport promotes accessibility, achieving this by better planning and co-ordinating transport and development. The location and form of residential development should incorporate public transport facilities, walking and cycling networks to reduce car dependency.

With regard to urban development, government policy supports reinforcing existing public transport facilities such as railway stations and increasing bus frequencies on key routes to the advantage of new development close to these resources. By identifying public transport corridors, land use planning policies can then contribute to the closer integration of transport and development which is an important element of urban capacity analysis.

The latest Planning Policy Guidance notes, especially PPG1: General Policy and Principles, PPG3: Housing, PPG6: Town Centres and Retail Development and PPG13: Transport, reflect the above concerns and objectives. They provide further guidance on implementation mechanisms to achieve sustainable development principles. PPGs 3, 6 and 13 incorporate the principle of a sequential approach to identifying land for development. This prioritises locating

development within existing settlements, and in close proximity to existing public transport corridors or in areas which could create an urban public transport corridor, and in areas with available utilities and social infrastructure capacity.

By implementing a sequential approach to developable land, land elsewhere would only be developed as urban sites are exhausted or found to be unsuitable for development. It thus helps to focus development on reinforcing town centres and making the best use of existing urban facilities.

The other form of development promoted in the PPGs is mixed use development. This has the advantages of making urban areas more attractive places to live, improving the viability and vitality of town centres, making them active places both day and night, and reducing the need to travel by providing a range of adjacent services. Mixed uses can also improve streetscape and townscape by generating visual interest and creating visual quality in the neighbourhood. Mixed use developments containing a residential component support the objectives of re-using urban land, developing on brownfield sites and revitalising existing urban areas.

2.1.4

Summary

In summary, government policies and planning advice promote reusing urban sites and buildings particularly in locations close to public transport facilities and town centres. This is seen as helping to achieve sustainable development by:

- reducing pressure to develop on greenfield sites thus helping to protect the countryside;
- improving and fully utilising public transport, existing services and facilities, and making better use of urban public transport corridors;
- increasing residential densities and population thresholds to support and enhance urban services; and
- contributing to urban regeneration by encouraging inward investment, increasing an area's viability and vitality and improving the urban environment.

Government guidance and policy has been acknowledged in the methodology adopted within this study, including that contained within "Tapping the Potential" (see **Appendix A**). Criteria used to retain and eliminate sites in the capacity estimates are based on the sustainable development principles embodied in recent Government guidance and UK Sustainable Development Strategy and the Site

Allocation Selection Criteria prepared for the District by Braintree District Council and Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners (July 2000).

2.2

Regional and Local Strategies

Sustainable development principles and urban capacity objectives have also been incorporated at regional and local levels. Revised Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG9, March 2001) incorporates these, while balancing the demands of the regional economy. While there is a continuing wide ranging debate on the amount of household growth in the South East and the location of such growth, the general thrust of concentrating rather than dispersing development has received less criticism and complements sustainability principles discussed above.

The Replacement Essex Structure Plan covering the period to 2011 requires 69,900 new dwellings to be provided in Essex between 1996 and 2011 of which Braintree District has been allocated 10,300. The District Council estimated, as at March 2000, that 3,659 dwellings had been provided in the District between 1996 and March 2000. This left a remaining housing provision required of 6,641. It calculated that 5,817 dwellings would be provided for on existing sources of land, including an estimated contribution from small sites. This left a balance of 824 dwellings to be accommodated on new sites.

While these figures represent *current* regional planning advice on housing provision, they *do not* indicate the potential for housing in the existing urban area, nor do they question the effect of current residential standards on housing potential. It is exploring and identifying this potential, using scenarios which can reflect and relax current standards, with which this study is focused. The need to provide criteria for selecting sites in the urban capacity estimates is therefore apparent.

3 Study Approach

3.1 *Methodology*

The approach to the study builds on previous studies undertaken by Halcrow, the site selection criteria already agreed by the Council for major development sites, and recent government guidance. We have refined our method over time and by experience, but the starting point is the principle of using a design-led approach to determine the theoretical maximum amount of housing that could be accommodated on sites within the existing urban area, given a presumption for housing development. Within this context sites and buildings selected for inclusion in the urban capacity estimates are based on their suitability with regard to:

- site or building's physical suitability for housing or mixed use development to create or enhance a residential environment;
- minimal impact to existing and/or surrounding uses and residents respecting their amenity and access requirements;
- the existing use (if relevant) being able to be accommodated into the scheme or moved to a more suitable location;
- the use of a design-led approach on the site which would create or enhance a residential environment; and
- the streetscape being enhanced by residential or mixed use development.

In more detail, the methodology involved seven steps as discussed below.

3.2 *Definition of the Study Area*

The urban area boundaries of Braintree, Witham and Halstead as defined in the Braintree District Local Plan have been used as the area of investigation. With the exception of the Maltings Lane urban extension site in Witham which has already been given outline planning consent, these boundaries largely reflect those of the existing built-up area of each settlement.

3.3 *Definition within the Study Area*

Using desk top surveys, sites considered unsuitable for development – such as historic or formal parks and gardens, schools and community uses where no change in usage is desirable or expected, environmentally sensitive land and nature reserves – were considered “inviolable” and therefore excluded from the initial

urban capacity analysis. The remaining land has been divided into four main categories for survey purposes, again via a desktop analysis:

- town centre *core* area which includes the prime retail areas of each of the three urban areas;
- town centre *periphery* area, being the interface between the retail core and the homogeneous residential areas containing a variety of land uses;
- *homogeneous residential areas* which have been further broken down into six typical areas based on plot layout, urban age and density characteristics; and
- *one-off sites* within the homogeneous residential areas which are not characteristic or typical of the residential areas.

3.3.1

Homogeneous Residential Areas

Within the homogeneous residential areas the six housing types reflect architectural style, plot layout and size and street pattern. Definitions are given below in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1: Housing Type Definitions

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>
H1	Mixed architectural style, large plots and housing located along main road corridors
H2	Close-knit historic or Victorian terraced housing
H3	Post-war suburban townhouses with curvilinear streets
H3A	Pre-war predominately semi-detached housing
H3B	Inter or post-war estates with longer plots
H4	Contemporary development from the 1980s and 90s
EMP	Employment/industrial zones

Figures 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 illustrate the housing type areas for Braintree, Witham and Halstead urban areas respectively.

FIGURE 3.1

FIGURE 3.2

FIGURE 3.3

3.4

Site Surveys

3.4.1

Definition of Site Suitability and Urban Design Criteria

Before surveys were undertaken criteria were set down to define the suitability of the site for residential development and to provide more definition of the urban design criteria to be used in the design exercises. The sustainable development criteria are discussed more fully in 3.4 below. Sustainability and urban design criteria were used to determine what sites should be included in the capacity estimates and provide an explanation as to why other sites were removed. The criteria were agreed by Council Members in advance of the “sieving” process.

3.4.2

Survey of Sites and Sample Areas

The surveys involved an initial desktop review to identify sites over roughly 0.5 hectares (ha) throughout the urban areas of Braintree, Witham and Halstead. In surveying sites, an inclusive approach was taken at the first stage. Site suitability was not based on designation within the adopted Local Plan and, as such, there was no difference in the criteria used for employment, retail or community use sites. Site suitability and selection was based on the site being physically able to contain residential development.

In order to ensure sites less than 0.5 ha were incorporated into the study and to check on sites identified in the desktop review, a detailed street survey was undertaken. This comprehensive survey involved a street by street survey of all areas within both the town centre core and periphery areas and a site visit to the one off sites identified from the desktop survey. The investigations also included conversions, particularly of vacant space located above shops. Further, a sample area of roughly ten per cent of each type of homogeneous residential area was surveyed on a street by street basis to identify infill sites and possible backland development.

Checks on difficult or marginal sites identified by each survey were made by the Consultants as far as physically possible, in order to determine if residential development was feasible. All sites surveyed were recorded on a spreadsheet and mapped on a Geographical Information System (GIS) using the Council’s computerised OS map base.

Maps of all surveyed sites for Braintree, Witham and Halstead are provided in ***Appendix D***.

3.4.3

Analysing the Site Survey Results

The site surveys were deliberately inclusive rather than exclusive so as to ensure all potential housing sites were identified in the study. Analysis of the sites was then necessary to determine:

- which sites would be retained and which would be removed;
- the reasons for inclusion or rejection;
- types or common forms of sites identified to select case study examples for the design exercises; and
- which development scenarios would suit the site.

The criteria used in this evaluation are discussed in Section 3.10 below.

Sites retained for the urban capacity estimates are documented in **Appendix B** of this report. Table B.8 of **Appendix B** sets out those sites which were excluded from the capacity estimates following the sieving process, and discussions with Council Officers and Members.

3.5

Input from the Development Industry

At this point in the process, a workshop was held in December 2000 and facilitated by the Consultant with sixteen representatives of housebuilders and estate agents with a current interest in the District. The purpose of the seminar was to inform the development industry about the study, its purpose and methodology, and to obtain information and generate debate on the following topic areas:

- housing needs and demand in Braintree District;
- trends in the local housing market; and
- ideas on planning mechanisms that could encourage, or which presently inhibit, residential development.

Key points raised are summarised below:

- The growth and buoyancy of the housing market has been enhanced by government policy promoting development within urban areas and at higher densities.
- Previously the perception has been that consumers and development financiers would resist higher density urban housing, but this has not

proved to be the case. Demand for urban housing has therefore, in part, been created by government policy.

- Marketing directors in the development industry, however, tend to be conservative but are now appreciating that urban housing sells and are thus more amenable to invest in more innovative, higher density or mixed use developments.
- The quality of development has improved over time, as this is being increasingly demanded across the range of urban housing types by consumer choice, competition and government initiatives.
- Currently in Braintree District what is built is sold – from five bedroom family dwellings to one bedroom flats.
- Different markets exist within Braintree District. For example, despite Witham having a better inter-urban rail service, housing development in Braintree is more in demand as the town is considered to provide a better village atmosphere which is popular with consumers. Braintree prices tend to be influenced by Chelmsford prices.
- There has been some resistance from property agents to urban housing; they have not been able to predict house prices for urban housing and have tended to undervalue the properties.
- Developers have obtained the financial benefits which higher densities generate; also giving an opportunity to improve design quality and specifications tailored to meet different lifestyles of consumers.
- Reductions in parking standards have been particularly beneficial to housebuilders, although some were concerned that at least in the medium term, this may cause parking problems due to the reluctance of people to reduce car ownership and use.
- The location of housing development should discourage car use and commuting wherever possible, as traffic congestion caused by new development does not help sell new homes.

- Despite a trend towards smaller households, this does not mean that one-bedroom properties will be in high demand. Rather, representatives argued that there is likely to be greater demand for two (or three) bedroom properties in the future.
- There was concern about some existing standards and planning mechanisms, which developers felt were overly prescriptive and reduced flexibility to deliver higher density housing and urban renaissance. In particular, private open space standards and the requirement for social housing provision in larger developments. These two factors combined with land assembly costs often reduced the commercial viability of more innovative, higher quality urban housing on brownfield sites.

These issues provided useful property market intelligence for the case studies, as well as important background information on the context to this study.

3.6

Preparation of the Design Exercises

Based on the property market intelligence, urban design criteria and the site analyses, fifteen urban design exercises were prepared. The exercises are representative of the types of sites found in the town centre core and periphery areas, and one-off sites within the residential areas, as these contained the most potential in terms of the number of sites and buildings suitable for residential or mixed use development. Design exercises were prepared within the site type groupings explained later in Section 5.

The purpose of the design exercises is to provide a “comparator” to use on other similar sites. Each design exercise contains housing density figures based on a range of assumptions, including dwelling type, amenity provision, car parking and mix of uses appropriate to the location. These density figures are then applied to similar sites.

The design exercises are outlined in further detail in Section 5 of this report.

3.7

Determining the Urban Capacity Estimates

The final step in the method involved applying the design exercise density figures to the identified sites in order to determine the urban capacity estimates under three different scenarios, a “best fit” and a standard comparator. The Consultant’s capacity estimates are contained in Section 6 of this report.

3.8

Use of Scenarios in Urban Capacity Estimates

The scenarios are a fundamental aspect of the approach we have adopted is to define the urban capacity potential. The scenarios are:

Scenario 1: Local Plan Led Development – includes sites designated for housing within the adopted Braintree District Local Plan 1995 or unconstrained (with respect to land use) by Local Plan policies. This scenario reflects current policies and standards regarding land use, density, off-street car parking and private open space. Scenario 1 does not include sites which, from an urban design perspective, would be better developed more intensively due to the scale of surrounding development and central location.

Scenario 2: Design Led Development – includes sites and buildings where relaxing existing land use designations and standards within the adopted District Local Plan may enable residential development to occur. Within this scenario sites and buildings have been included where higher densities are considered appropriate and where parking standards, open space and land use allocations have been re-evaluated so that a more appropriately designed development may occur. Sites that are allocated for uses other than residential within the Local Plan have been included in Scenario 2 as are sites that are under-utilised by their current occupant or user. Some sites identified in Scenario 1 have also been selected as suitable for higher density development in Scenario 2.

Scenario 3: Urban Area Development – includes sites and buildings where more than one site is included in the design-led solution and, by including additional neighbouring sites, a more suitable residential environment is created. This involves land swaps, road closures, land take and redefining land uses in a wider context compared to a site-specific solution. In some instances operational uses are moved to a more appropriate location freeing up more land for development. This scenario incorporates an innovative urban management solution to land use issues and areas rather than being constrained by existing property boundaries and uses. It is provided for comparison purposes and to indicate how an area-wide response to urban housing capacity can influence the estimates obtained.

Design exercises have been prepared which reflect the scenarios outlined above.

Standard Comparator – A density of 50 dwelling units per hectare has been applied to all identified sites. This acts as a useful comparison, indicating what

could be achieved by relaxing current planning standards and consistently applying a higher density figure.

Best Fit – The ‘Best Fit’ exercise applies the most appropriate scenario to each site, based on urban design criteria, location and realistic capability of being developed. This exercise does not always return the highest possible dwelling capacity. In the Consultant’s experience, the highest density figure possible is not always applied as more desirable environments may be achieved through applying lower density figures, particularly in more suburban or semi-rural locations within the study area.

For sites some distance from the town centre or public transport facilities – that is, those not located within a “ped shed” or urban transport catchment area (see next paragraph) – Scenario 1 exercises are generally identified as the most suitable application. Where sites are more suitable for higher densities, particularly in and around the town centre and along dense urban transport corridors, Scenario 2 exercises are likely to be applied (see 3.3 below for a further explanation). The partial use of Scenario 3 exercises are also appropriate within the best fit; the opportunities for these to be realistically achieved being more limited, unless owned by the same landowner or the local authority.

3.9

Accessibility and Urban Capacity

The methodology to determine urban capacity has been developed to incorporate government guidance on promoting more sustainable forms of urban development, to enable a closer association between urban development and transport networks.

In studies recently undertaken by Halcrow and others, a link has been made between catchment distances to town centres and public transport corridors and prioritising land within these catchments for development. These catchments have been used in part to select sites suitable for residential or mixed use development. The purpose and role of public transport corridors should also be clearly defined so that actions to link land use and transport can be mutually reinforcing.

3.9.1

Catchments

The “ped shed” concept developed by Kaufman and Morris in Australia prioritises pedestrian access to town centres and public transport. A walking distance of 800 metres, representing a less than ten minute walk, has been used to identify a catchment area around facilities which would give residents living within this

catchment a real opportunity to walk to community facilities. LPAC's "Sustainable Residential Quality: New Approaches to Urban Living" (1998) used ped shed catchment criteria to identify sites for inclusion in urban capacity estimates for town centres in Greater London.

The ped shed concept supports both sustainability principles and government guidance, and is applicable to Braintree, Witham and Halstead as all settlements have strong town centres linked to public transport facilities. Using the ped shed distance of 800m around the town centre and around the railway stations (where existent) brings the site selection process in line with government advice and guidance.

Other recent studies by Halcrow have refined the catchment distance around public transport facilities most notably along bus routes that link employment areas, town centres, railway stations and residential areas. These studies looked at individual settlements containing one or two stations and a town centre rather than a series of interlinking centres and rail facilities more typical of a large metropolitan area. Within individual settlements bus routes were identified as an important component of urban transport corridors.

The studies revealed that catchments to such services should be considered carefully. Research by Halcrow into employment related trips and non-local journeys in the South West of England Region indicated that a five minute walk (400m) to a bus corridor was a convenient distance for people to travel to access this mode of public transport. The frequency of the bus service along the corridor was the other key factor in influencing travel decisions.

Rather than use the ped shed 800m walking distance catchment around frequently served bus routes or a 400m catchment around a bus stop, a 400m isochrone representing around a five minute walking journey to an urban transport bus corridor is considered an appropriate assessment.

These isochrones assisted in the best fit exercise, by generally applying higher density solutions to sites which fall within the pedestrian catchment areas for town centre amenities, key bus routes and railway stations.

3.9.2

Urban Transport Corridors

The Transport White Paper discussed in Section 2, promotes the use of urban transport corridors especially those offering multi-modal transport services. By

improving public transport within such corridors a viable alternative to using the car would be provided.

Again, recent studies by Halcrow investigated the impact of bus frequency in defining the role of urban transport corridors particularly for settlements without an intra-urban rail service. Frequency of service of four buses an hour (one bus every 15 minutes) was considered to offer the passenger a reasonable level of service in medium sized towns of over 10,000 population. In larger urban areas (over 50,000) a service of six buses an hour (one every ten minutes) was considered reasonable.

Bus service frequencies in Braintree District rarely comply with these research findings at the present, but bus corridors have nevertheless been identified by Braintree District Council as part of work in connection with the Local Plan Review. Five corridors have been identified within Braintree, and two in Witham, each of which have high frequencies relative to the rest of the District. No readily identifiable, high frequency routes exist in Halstead; hence catchment isochrones have only been defined for Braintree and Witham.

3.9.3

Application of Ped Sheds to Urban Capacity Potential

Sites within ped shed catchments around town centres and public transport facilities have been prioritised for development. They may be more suitable for Scenario 2 or 3 development than one-off sites located outside ped shed areas. For sites located away from the ped shed catchments criteria for selecting these sites focused more on urban design (particularly townscape character) and land use suitability criteria. Thus if residential development was considered appropriate on a site by creating or enhancing a residential environment, it has been considered in the capacity estimates. The style of development on these sites would again be design led acknowledging the lower scale and more suburban character of surrounding development. In practice, this has meant Scenario 1 densities have been applied to sites outside ped shed or bus catchment areas in the Best Fit exercise.

3.10

Site Selection Criteria

Based on a review of current policy and guidance set out in Section 2 of this report and in the context of accessibility objectives outlined in Section 3.9 above, a set of criteria for retaining or eliminating sites was agreed with the Council. These site selection criteria are contained in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1 Agreed Site Selection Criteria

<i>Sustainable Development Objectives</i>	<i>Site Selection Criteria</i>
<p>Providing for a variety of uses within an urban area to maintain high and stable levels of economic growth and employment. (BDC/ NLP Objective: Social Progress.)</p>	<p>Sites should be retained in their present use if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The site is in a location and/or of a size which does not enable a good quality residential environment or residential amenity to be created; • The site is better suited to remain in its present use (e.g. multi-storey car park, open space, employment) due to location, need for present function or the impact of, or on, surrounding development; • The site is better suited to another use than residential or mixed use (parking, retail, employment); • Development of a site would detract from the existing character, urban form or urban context; • The surrounding development is not conducive to achieving a good quality residential environment (closeness to heavy industry, major infrastructure works or operations) or is impractical of achieving in the future through potential changes to the immediate area; • Additional residential development would lead to an over-development of the site and/or area, which would be unacceptable on design, traffic or 'town cramming' grounds; • New development would compromise the residential amenity enjoyed by existing residents particularly with regard to privacy, overlooking, lighting, noise, and open space; • There would be a significant net loss of shoppers' off-street car parking in the town centres; and • The site is environmentally or physically unsuitable for development due to geophysical conditions such as slope or is environmentally sensitive.
<p>Ensuring effective protection of the environment and using natural resources prudently. (BDC/ NLP Objectives: Protection of the Environment and Natural Resources.)</p>	<p>Open space and nature conservation areas should not be considered for development if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is a formal town park providing a significant recreational (passive and active) function to residents, workers and visitors to the area; • is integral to the context and setting of civic buildings, structures and amenities; • complements natural features within the town (for example, the parks and open spaces along the River Brain); • incorporates formal recreation facilities (sports fields, children's playground, informal active play areas); • contains formal gardens; • protects environmentally sensitive and ecologically valuable land; • are allotments which are accessible, secure and/or used well (over 40% let) by local residents now or in the foreseeable future;

<i>Sustainable Development Objectives</i>	<i>Site Selection Criteria</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on an defined 1 in 100 year floodplain; • has historical significance; and • forms part of a green link or chain through the urban area.
<p>Intensifying the use of urban land and buildings while maintaining and enhancing quality as well as encouraging long term quality in new housing design. (BDC/ NLP Objectives: Natural Resources and Planning Policy.)</p>	<p>Sites should be selected as suitable for residential or mixed use development if the following urban design criteria can be met:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A use should be appropriate for its location. In mixed use areas for example, other uses (than residential) may be more appropriate at ground floor level as residential habitable rooms would have little privacy. Street frontages should be retained both in terms of design and use and to provide active edges. • The privacy of existing residents should be respected so that new development should not have habitable rooms looking onto existing private open space. • Communal parking and open space areas should be overlooked by habitable rooms. • New development should respect the existing scale and form of surrounding development particularly with regard to building height and roofscape. • There should be no new development where it would restrict views or the amenity of existing residents. • There should be, where possible, a mix of dwelling unit sizes from one bedroom flats to larger three to four bedroom houses within new developments. • Access to the development should be clear and still respect the streetscape. • New development should recognise pedestrian networks and connections. • Off street parking should ideally be located on the periphery or rear of the site respecting the streetscape. • New development should define the street space wherever possible. • New dwelling units should maximise views and access to sunlight wherever possible. • Communal open space within new developments should be safe and usable.
<p>Improving and fully utilising public transport, existing services and facilities and making better use of urban transport corridors by giving as many people as possible an opportunity to walk to such facilities and public transport.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing urban transport corridors by identifying frequent bus routes of a minimum 4 buses an hour in either direction in Braintree and Witham. Once clarified concentrating on identifying sites within a reasonable walking distance of 400m of such corridors. • Maximising the use of railway stations and town centre facilities by identifying sites within 800m walking distance, in all three urban areas.

3.11

Summary of Urban Capacity Estimates

As described within this section, a range of capacity estimates will result from the application of the methodology:

- Scenario 1 estimates reflecting Local Plan designations and standards;
- Scenario 2 estimates reflecting an urban design led approach;
- Scenario 3 estimates reflecting an urban management/urban regeneration approach; and
- Standard comparator figures using a density of 50 dwellings per hectare for each site retained in the capacity estimates.

The other set of figures will indicate:

- Best fit estimates showing what scenario is considered the most appropriate for the site concentrating on ped sheds and accessibility to urban transport corridors, the town centres and railway stations.

4 Site Surveys and Definition of Catchment Areas

4.1 *Overview*

Extensive surveys were undertaken visiting all sites identified in the desktop review. An on-the-ground survey of sample residential areas, one-off sites and all areas within the core retail and peripheral town centre areas was undertaken to supplement the desktop survey. All sites visited within the three urban areas have been mapped and are contained within *Appendix D*.

Each site has been recorded and numbered with site characteristics documented. Mapping of the sites is on a GIS base which has provided site area details for the capacity estimates. The maps also provide a database for the Council to update and monitor in future years. A comprehensive list of all sites investigated is contained in *Appendix B*. Removed sites are set out separately in Table B.8.

4.2 *Site Survey Totals*

The site survey has resulted in 225 sites being investigated within Braintree, Witham and Halstead. These figures comprise the following as shown in *Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3* below.

Table 4.1 – Site Survey Results for Braintree Urban Area

<i>Location</i>	<i>No. of Sites</i>
Core Town Centre	18
Periphery Town Centre	40
Residential Homogenous Areas	1
Other One-Off Sites	29
Total Sites Investigated	88

Table 4.2 – Site Survey Results for Witham Urban Area

<i>Location</i>	<i>No. of Sites</i>
Core Town Centre	24
Periphery Town Centre	24
Residential Homogenous Areas	5
Other One-Off Sites	25
Total Sites Investigated	78

Table 4.3 – Site Survey Results for Halstead Urban Area

<i>Location</i>	<i>No. of Sites</i>
Core Town Centre	19
Periphery Town Centre	13
Residential Homogenous Areas	0
Other One-Off Sites	27
Total Sites Investigated	59

The key findings of the site survey and analysis are:

- Many of the sites identified are located in the town centre periphery areas with around 34% of sites investigated located within these areas.
- Of the sites located within the town centre core and periphery, many are used for surface level public parking or private parking, so their inclusion raises questions over parking provision. In applying the design exercises, care has been taken to suggest a number of alternative scenarios, ranging from maintaining existing levels of parking on site to removing car parking altogether. The former is more appropriate for main, well-used shoppers' car parks, and especially feasible where sites can be combined with others to create a more comprehensive redevelopment scheme possibly including a multi-storey car park facility. Further explanation is given in the following section.
- One-off sites within the homogeneous housing areas, employment areas and mixed use areas also contribute significantly to sites investigated for their urban residential capacity comprising 37% of all sites investigated. One-off sites contain a variety of non-typical sites such as under-utilised allotments, land in excess of school needs, vacant or under-utilised

employment sites, rundown and/or vacant garages, verges for roads and rail, under-utilised open space and sites used for storage.

- In the homogeneous residential areas, sample surveys were undertaken for each of the six housing types. Sample areas are shown as hatched on the maps in **Appendix D** and sites identified within these areas are listed in Table B.7(A) of **Appendix B**. Tables B.7(B to F) set out the corresponding capacity estimates for the homogeneous areas, based on the dwelling yield achieved in the sample areas.

4.3

Overall Summary of Site Surveys and Definition of Catchment Areas

As previously explained, the survey to identify all potential sites with urban capacity potential was inclusive rather than exclusive at the initial stage. Investigations of sites were comprehensive comprising desktop and on-ground surveys. All sites identified have been recorded on a GIS database for future reference (see **Appendix D**).

The 225 identified sites have been analysed using the site selection, retention and elimination criteria set out in Section 3.10 above. The results are explained in Section 6 of this report. Those areas within the catchment areas can be targeted for development encouraging higher density development.

5 Urban Design Exercises

5.1 *Urban Design Principles*

Section 3.10 addressed urban design criteria for retaining or eliminating sites. In order to provide a context for the urban design exercises for typical sites reflecting the three scenarios outlined in Section 3.8, other principles were set out to ensure the character, scale and dwelling type would be reflected in the comparator schemes prepared.

Standards and guidelines contained within the existing Local Plan, notably policy BDP17, and the Essex Design Guide have been acknowledged as well as other principles considered appropriate for residential and mixed use development. The principles are explained below. These principles have been incorporated into the 15 design exercises undertaken for typical sites within Braintree, Witham and Halstead.

Design exercises compiled as part of this study are contained in *Appendix C*. Each design exercise contains a plan of the existing site layout, housing concept schemes are different scenarios including explanatory annotations. A summary of dwelling types, parking spaces and densities achieved is also provided. All densities can be assumed to be net in accordance with the definition contained in PPG3, unless otherwise stated.

5.2 *Local Plan Standards*

The Local Plan sets out specific policies with regard to residential layout, garden layout and size, and public open space requirements. Such standards influence densities able to be achieved on site and are significant in determining urban capacity estimates, particularly in Scenario 1. Car parking standards which have been applied to Scenario 1 are in accordance with the Essex Planning Officers Association's "Vehicle Parking Standards: Consultation Draft December 2000" which have been supported by Braintree District Council.

These standards and policies do not alone, however, determine the type of residential development within the District. The latest "Essex Design Guide for Residential and Mixed Use Areas" (1997) sets out urban design principles and parameters that must be considered when designing housing developments. The key principles within this document relate to:

- street rhythm and the need to consider continuity of frontage including accommodating vehicular access without disrupting the terrace effect;
- the relationship of the dwelling to the road and the siting of the dwelling relative to the public footway, such that a loss of privacy and overlooking do not occur;
- designing the building within the street layout ensuring a more harmonious street scene (e.g. curving the building to match the curvature of the road, addressing the corner);
- acknowledging daylight and sunlight requirements for new and existing buildings;
- respecting existing conditions and using design to avoid overlooking and maintaining privacy;
- providing private open space and, if communal, ensuring that it is usable and accessible; and
- ensuring parking standards, access and road widths are acknowledged but do not dominate the development or streetscape.

These policies and standards have been recognised within the urban design exercises, particularly for Scenario 1, as discussed in Section 3 of this Report.

5.3

Typical Sites

In reviewing the sites identified in the survey process the sites were analysed to determine site types. Fifteen site types were identified and design exercises were then identified from this list to be used as comparators. Site types, design exercises, site numbers and site areas, and densities achieved are contained in **Table 5.1** below.

Table 5.1 – Explanation of Design Exercises and Typical Sites

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Design Ex. Ref. No.</i>	<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Density (units/ha)</i>
1	Very small, residential	1045i	1	36
2	Small, mixed, regular	3005ii	2	62
3	Small, residential, regular	5039i	1	48
		5039ii	2	73
4	Small, residential, irregular	6018i	1	20
		6018ii	2	40

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Design Ex. Ref. No.</i>	<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Density (units/ha)</i>
5	Small residential regular, conservation area, vacant, street frontage	1008i	1	105
		1008ii	2	141
6	Small residential regular, conservation area, vacant, no frontage	1009i	1	38
		1009ii	2	75
7	Small residential irregular, conservation area	4018i	1	19
8a	Small mixed (car park), (nr.) conservation area, no replacement of car parking	1017i	1	83
8b	Small mixed (car park), (nr.)conservation area, replace 50% of existing car park	1015ii	2	52
8c	Small mixed (car park), (nr.)conservation area, replace 100% of existing car park	1015, 1017iiia	3a	62
8d	Small mixed (car park), (nr.)conservation area, no replacement of car parking	1015, 1017iiib	3b	106
9	Small, residential, conversion, (nr.)conservation area	1021ii	2	82
		1021, 1026, 1060iii	3	78
10	Small, above a shop, conversion	5032ii	2	101
11	Small, residential, single row	4016i	1	10
		4016ii	2	55
12	Small, residential, backlands	5021i	1	40
		5021ii	2	70
13	Large, mixed use	3002i	1	32
		3002ii	2	72
14	Large conversion	2116i	1	38
		2116ii	2	53
15	Large residential	6013i	1	42
		6013ii	2	56

5.4

Explanation of Design Exercises

Each design exercise scheme is shown using a site layout plan, a smaller diagram indicating the dwelling mix and typical floor plans for the dwellings proposed within that exercise. Some annotations are provided to explain key features of the design scheme.

A summary table then explains the number of units, bedrooms, habitable rooms, and off-street parking spaces as well as site area, per scenario investigated. The total number of dwellings and habitable rooms for the exercise are then divided by the site area to gain the density figures. Density is provided in two forms – dwellings per hectare and habitable rooms per hectare. Where appropriate, the summary table also contains information on other uses within the development where a mixed use scheme is proposed. Each design exercise is clearly marked as either Scenario 1, 2 or 3.

Typically each design exercise reference number relates to the identification number of site which has been used for the case study, followed the scenario number, e.g. 2116i refers to a scenario 1 case study on site 2116, 2116ii refers to a scenario 2 on the same site.

5.4.1

Car Parks

Surface car parks, both private and publicly owned, can often be an inefficient use of valuable urban land, as indicated in paragraph 49 of PPG13. Under-used or poorly maintained car parks, or those in highly accessible locations, have been included in the range of sites identified in the capacity estimates. Due to concerns expressed by Council Members in connection with the vitality and viability of town centres and accessibility of railway stations, it was agreed that any potential housing capacity on such sites should not result in a significant net loss of available public car parking spaces for shoppers and commuters respectively.

Design Exercises 1017i, 1015ii and 1015/1017A and B demonstrate the circumstances under which the quantity of existing car parking can be retained on a given site. This useful case study found that considering an individual site, it was only possible to accommodate sufficient car parking for residents, in accordance with standards, under Scenario 1. Under Scenario 2, by using standards more flexibly, it was possible to accommodate 50% of existing public car parking spaces in addition to that considered sufficient for residents. Only by considering both sites together in Scenario 3, under a comprehensive redevelopment scheme, could 100% of public car parking be retained in addition to that sufficient for residents. In order to meet the objective of no net loss parking, then, only Scenario 3 met the criteria and a housing capacity was calculated accordingly.

This case study is also particularly relevant to the three car parks serving Witham railway station which, although physically separate, present an ideal opportunity for sustainable mixed use development served by high frequency public transport, if

considered in an integrated and comprehensive manner. In these, and other Scenario 3 situations, planning and development briefs which have undergone public scrutiny and support are recommended as useful tools to realise such development opportunities.

5.4.2

Urban Extension Sites

Another specific, bespoke case study was carried out for the Maltings Lane site in south west Witham (Site 6003/6004). In this instance, due to the sheer size of the site (approximately 55 hectares in total) and the existence of an approved Master Plan¹, density figures were only applied to the area designated for housing (27.30 ha gross, less 20% to gain a net area). Density figures in this case were derived from the new-build housing element of the case study for St. Michael's Hospital in Braintree (site 2116) which includes a range of different dwelling types and sizes representative of a large scale housing development (Design Exercises 2116/2A and 2116/2B). A breakdown of the make-up of this special case study is set out below in Tables 5.2 and 5.3.

Table 5.2: Design Exercise 2116/2A: Scenario 1

<i>Dwelling Type</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Size (sq. m)</i>	<i>Habitable Rooms</i>
3 bed house	2	90	4
2 bed semi	18	65	3
2 bed terrace	6	65	3
2 bed flat	10	65	3
1 bed flat	22	43	2
Total	58	3336	154
Gross Density (per ha)	40		105
Net Density (per ha)	49		131
Site Area (sq. m)	14666		
Parking Spaces	68		

¹ Although greenfield sites are not designed to be included in urban capacity studies, as per PPG3 and Tapping the Potential guidance, this site was deliberately included in this case because it is allocated in the Local Plan as a housing site and has outline planning consent and an approved Master Plan.

Table 5.3: Design Exercise 2116/2B: Scenario 2

<i>Dwelling Type</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Size (sq. m)</i>	<i>Habitable Rooms</i>
3 bed house	33	90	4
2 bed terrace	22	65	3
2 bed flat	50	65	3
1 bed flat	42	43	2
Total	147	9456	432
Gross Density (per ha)	48		140
Net Density (per ha)	60		176
Site Area (sq. m)	30748		
Parking Spaces	195		

6 Urban Capacity Estimates

6.1 *Application of Sustainable Development Criteria to Sites*

Before urban capacity estimates can be attained, sites and/or buildings for inclusion and rejection must be evaluated against the sustainable criteria set out in Section 3. It should be emphasised that, as previously mentioned, these criteria received the support and input from Council Members.

From the 225 sites investigated, 176 sites within the three urban areas are retained for the urban capacity estimates as evaluated by the Consultants. It should be noted that in the case of a very small number of those retained, Council Members have raised their concerns. In these circumstances, a note has been made in the “comments” column of the tables in *Appendix B*. However, for the purpose and objectives of an urban capacity study, the Consultant believes that these sites should, by definition, be considered in order to define a ‘theoretical’ and best fit urban capacity estimate.

6.2 *How the Design Exercises have been used in the Capacity Estimates*

The design exercises are used as comparators for the sites identified and maintained within the urban capacity site analysis tasks. The characteristics of the identified site, such as its location (retail core, periphery, residential, ped shed catchment area), scale of surrounding development, dwelling types in the surrounding development, shape of the site and existing access arrangements, are noted by the Consultant’s Urban Designer. A design exercise is then selected which would provide an appropriate scale of development on the identified site and has similar characteristics to the identified site.

6.2.1 *Applying the Scenarios*

If the identified site is allocated for housing, mixed use or is not defined for any use within the Local Plan, a Scenario 1 scheme could be used. If it is allocated for another use or a more dense development would be suitable given the scale of surrounding development or proximity to public transport facilities, then a Scenario 2 scheme can be considered.

If a group of identified sites are located together, a Scenario 3 scheme may also be appropriate. For one-off sites located in residential areas, a Scenario 1 scheme may be used even if the site is allocated for another use in the Local Plan. In the

capacity estimates however, the site would be recorded under a Scenario 2 estimate given that the use does not comply with the Local Plan. Each identified site can have a range of capacity estimates depending on the scenarios able to be achieved on the sites.

Using a spreadsheet containing identified site information, particularly the site area, the density figure from the comparator is used to determine the density figure for the identified site by multiplying the comparator's density figure with the identified site's area.

6.2.2

Residential Areas and Sub-division of Properties

Capacity estimates for the homogeneous residential areas in Braintree's urban area will also be devised by:

- using a sample area survey to identify typical situations;
- applying a relevant design exercise to the sites identified and classified as suitable for retention in the urban capacity estimates;
- determining a density figure for the whole of the sample area by dividing the dwellings obtained on the sites by the total site area of the sample area; and
- applying this density figure to the whole of the same homogeneous residential area.

Given the generally suburban nature of the residential areas, Scenario 1 densities have been applied to the housing type zones. Even so, a significant proportion of housing capacity is capable of being achieved in these areas, higher than may be expected. This is primarily because of the large amount of spacious, low density, urban expansion housing developed in the 1960s and 1970s.

It should be noted that the "Tapping the Potential" guidance suggests that consideration should be given to the potential of sub-division of housing. In Braintree District it has proved difficult to identify any readily recognisable areas within the three urban areas with a planning history or trend for sub-divisions. Moreover, due to the lack of any major presence of a further or high education establishment in Braintree, Witham or Halstead, there is demonstrably significantly less demand for such properties compared to neighbouring Colchester and Chelmsford. It is therefore considered appropriate to assume that any 'windfall' sub-division of residential properties, and the additional dwelling capacity that that may yield, is included in the capacity estimates for the homogeneous residential

areas. The Consultant believes this to be a more realistic assessment in the circumstances, and reduces the risk of over estimating the capacity overall.

6.3

Urban Capacity Estimates

A range of urban capacity estimates are provided below. The best fit estimates, which incorporates consideration of the public transport and pedestrian catchment areas and the realistic capability of Scenario 3 schemes being implemented, provides a more realistic composite estimate of urban capacity. The others are provided for comparison purposes. The Scenario 1 estimates demonstrate the relatively poor potential capacity of the urban areas for housing if the adopted Local Plan were to be continued to be implemented rigorously. The Standard Comparator provides a yardstick against which to judge sites in achieving higher density forms of housing throughout the urban areas.

Table 6.1 overleaf summarises the estimates as proposed by the Consultants for retained sites under the three scenarios and standard comparator of 50 dwellings per hectare plus, crucially, the Best Fit exercise.

Full schedules of sites and the application of design exercises are appended at ***Appendix B***.

Each schedule specifies:

- the site reference number (ID) which can be linked to the GIS database and maps;
- the address of the site;
- the type of site and zone within which it falls;
- site description and surrounding uses;
- OS map reference for ease of locating the site on a GIS system;
- site area per site;
- design exercise applied under each scenario;
- the density obtained from the application of the design exercises;
- additional notes and comments; and
- the total housing capacity obtained for all retained sites.

6.4

Summary of Estimates

These are broken down in Table 6.1 opposite.

Table 6.1: Breakdown of Capacity Estimates

Urban area	Zone	Net Dwelling Unit Capacity, by Scenarios						
		1	2	3	Best Fit	% sub-totals	% total	Standard
Braintree	Town centre core and periphery	357	609	743	718	27	11	476
	One-offs	172	977	984	978	37	15	758
	Homogeneous residential areas	932	1,235	1,235	932	35	14	1,114
	Sub-total	1,461	2,821	2,962	2,628	100	39	2,348
Witham	Town centre core and periphery	163	266	524	520	18	8	379
	One-offs	1,439	1,966	1,966	1,909	66	29	1,686
	Homogeneous residential areas	481	675	675	481	17	7	559
	Sub-total	2,083	2,907	3,165	2,910	100	44	2,624
Halstead	Town centre core and periphery	139	332	388	385	34	6	262
	One-offs	214	406	432	406	36	6	362
	Homogeneous residential areas	345	423	423	345	30	5	427
	Sub-total	698	1,161	1,243	1,136	100	17	1,051
TOTAL	Potential Dwelling Unit Capacity for Braintree, Witham and Halstead Urban Areas	4,242	6,889	7,370	6,674	100	100	6,023
of which:	Town centre core and periphery	659	1,207	1,655	1,623	24	24	1,117
	One-offs	1,825	3,349	3,382	3,293	49	49	2,806
	Homogeneous residential areas	1,758	2,333	2,333	1,758	26	26	2,100

NB: Figures are rounded up/down to the nearest whole dwelling unit.

7 Conclusions

7.1.1 *Key Conclusion*

The range of urban capacity figures obtained indicate that, even under the most cautious scenario and excluding the potential capacity of the residential areas (other than one-off sites), there is significant potential in the existing urban areas of Braintree, Witham and Halstead to accommodate additional housing development.

7.1.2 *The Effect of Local Plan Policies and Standards*

The urban capacity estimates indicate that in reflecting the Local Plan amenity, off-street parking and private open space standards, over 4,000 additional dwellings could be accommodated in the three urban areas. If standards are revised to focus on a flexible, design-led approach, a significant increase in capacity figures could be obtained (62% increase). These figures, as indicated within Scenario 2, could be achieved by still respecting urban design principles and avoiding town cramming.

Scenario 3 estimates indicate that an area-wide urban management approach further increases the capacity estimates in some locations (particularly the town centre core and periphery areas), marginally increasing urban capacity estimates overall (74% increase on scenario 1).

7.1.3 *The Consultant's Best Fit Estimate*

Under our Best Fit exercise a total dwelling capacity of 6,674 has been concluded, which is slightly less than under Scenario 2 (although significantly more than Scenario 1). This is due to the application of Scenario 1 densities to the homogeneous residential areas, which account for 26% of the total estimate. The homogeneous residential areas have yielded such a significant amount in Braintree District primarily because of the large amount of spacious, low density, urban expansion housing developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Even discounting the 1,758 dwellings that could be accommodated in these areas under the best fit, 4,916 dwellings are capable of being accommodated in the three urban areas, according to the Consultant's comprehensive assessment.

Of the total Best Fit estimate, 39% of the capacity is within Braintree, 44% in Witham (assisted greatly by the inclusion of the major Maltings Lane site ID 6003/6004) and 17% in Halstead, the smallest of the three settlements.

7.1.4

Balancing Planning Objectives

Many of the sites identified as suitable for inclusion in the urban capacity estimates are currently used for parking – both public and private car parks – or are under-utilised employment sites. Policies regarding these two activities cannot be considered in isolation from encouraging housing in existing urban areas, and will need to be reviewed therefore in more detail as part of the Local Plan Review.

Other key sites in central and accessible locations, particularly when considered comprehensively, provide a significant opportunity to diversify uses and contribute to a renaissance of urban living in provincial towns. In the case of those requiring an urban management approach, the Consultant recommends the use of development and planning briefs, design guides and competitions and strategic partnerships, as advocated by the Urban White Paper, to provide greater certainty to developers and enhance the ability of schemes being realised on the ground.

In defining a theoretical maximum and 'best fit' amount of housing that could be developed within the existing urban areas of Braintree, Witham and Halstead, in the context of a presumption for residential development, the impact of current Local Plan policies and standards has been significant in the estimates obtained.

The conclusion reached indicates what may be achieved through a rigorous analysis of unused and under-utilised land. Design-led use of such land can significantly reduce pressure on valuable open space outside the town and assist in the protection of green land within built up areas.

This urban housing capacity study will assist greatly in Braintree District Council's "Plan, Monitor, Manage" approach to the level of provision of new housing in its area, in accordance with the significant requirements of PPG3 (March 2001).