

Chris Caswill, of CAUSE, tells us about

The threat to the Avon Valley near Chippenham

The Bristol Avon meanders southwards across open and picturesque North Wiltshire countryside towards Chippenham. As it approaches Chippenham the River Marden joins its left bank, coming from Calne and beyond. It passes close to the rising ground on which the north of Chippenham is built. Modern Chippenham's Monkton Park estate is built down to its right bank in places, but the left bank valley floor is open and stretches over towards Calne, to the Bremhill upland and the small villages at its foot. The Avon then takes a dramatic right turn through the splendid parkland of the former Monkton House through the centre of the town, and out towards Bath and its mouth in the Bristol Channel. The result is a large green left bank valley floor, shaped also by its Marden tributary, some of it flood plain, much valued for walking and cycling and for the green lung between Chippenham and Bremhill and Calne. It also hosts three working farms, two of which, the Hardens Farms, are original County farms, owned by the Council.

In 2009 Chippenham and North Wiltshire were absorbed into the physically large Wiltshire Council with its offices and decision making in Trowbridge, on the western edge of the County. In recent years this Avon Valley open space has been eyed up by developers, hungry for cheap land to take advantage of the Council's plans for a large expansion of Chippenham. At no time has the Conservative-dominated unitary Council expressed any

interest in the value of this land as green open space, nor in preserving the farms in its stewardship. Its thinking is dominated by a wish to see a huge expansion of Chippenham (seemingly as Wiltshire's answer to neighbouring Swindon) and it is currently working hand in glove with developers to achieve this. Nor has the Avon Valley a friend in the civic leaders of Chippenham Town Council, who have consistently favoured expansion and the increases in their tax income that it will bring, especially with the Government incentives (some say bribes) which give local authorities attractive percentage levies on new build.

The pressures to build on the river's left bank quickly became public. In 2009 the new Council produced published draft plans which identified Chippenham as 'strategically significant', and suitable for large housing growth. It proposed over 2500 houses, and a new 'link road', in and across the Avon valley. No mention was made of the loss of open space or environmental degradation. There was a storm of public protest, including the formation of a residents' campaign group (ECOS, which later morphed into CAUSE¹), with members from both sides of the river. After a formal public consultation in 2011, the Avon valley site and road were dropped from the final 2012 WC Core Strategy² submission to the Secretary of State. However development of grade 1 and 2 Rawlings farmland on the right bank of the river was still included.

¹East Chippenham Open Space then Campaign Against Urban Sprawl to the East

² As the Local Plan was then confusingly named

Is this about to disappear?



There followed two Examinations in Public (EiP) by Planning Inspectors, in 2013 and 2015/16. In both of these the developers who had invested in land options and plans for the east of Chippenham predictably opposed the revised plans. They claimed they could easily afford to build the Eastern Link Road which would be required for the Avon valley developments. The Council's traffic calculations were fatally challenged in the first of these. Chippenham housing allocations were referred on to a separate planning process, leading to the Chippenham Site Allocations Plan (CSAP) of 2015, and subsequent EiP. The CAUSE group submitted detailed written documents and oral contributions to this EiP, successfully opposing any reintroduction of building on the Avon valley. In 2017 the Inspector wrote his final report and the Avon valley left bank was preserved from the bulldozers in the formal Chippenham Planning Document. This became Wiltshire Council policy as part of its overall Local Plan, which runs up until 2026.

In the meantime the Government racked up the pressure on local authorities to build even larger amounts of housing, whether or not on green open space. In response, Wiltshire Council identified Chippenham as the location for a significantly larger expansion in the upcoming revision of the Local Plan, with minimal democratic input or public consultation.

Shortly afterwards, with zero public consultation, the Council made an unpublicised bid to the Government Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) for £75 million of public money. We now know this is for what are now described as 'distributor roads'³ around both the Avon valley in the East and also around the South of the town. It is to facilitate a massive 7500 more houses, a large chunk of which would be on the Avon valley. Apparently the developers can no longer afford to build the roads!

The bid was approved by the Homes England agency,

days before the December 2019 General Election. The details have not been made public, in spite of many requests from concerned residents. The fact that none of this is supported by the Council's own Local Plans, approved after searching public examination, did not weigh with Homes England. Nor with the Council, whose Cabinet have now committed *an additional £5 million* (sic) and significant numbers of unaccountable staff⁴ to preparing road building plans⁵. The Council intends to rush this scheme to its own planning committee (on which the ruling Executive has a large party majority), thus circumventing the obvious route of the next (and imminent) Local Plan review and its more open and democratic public examination.

Wiltshire Council has recently bowed to public pressure and declared a Climate Emergency. In response to public questions, it however sees no conflict between the climate emergency and building two large new roads across green countryside and adding cars from 7500 new to roads in and around Chippenham. Understandably local residents are not impressed, and opposition is growing both to the process and the renewed threat to the open spaces of the Avon (and Marden) river valleys. At the same time, there is growing evidence of the folly of building on flood plains, and of the health hazards of vehicle pollution. All of which challenges the WC case for this huge development, and loss of rural countryside. As a grim footnote, it appears the Council may still set up the public consultations in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, and the restrictions on public meetings.

CAUSE is working in collaboration with CPRE, Extinction Rebellion, other local environmental groups and many concerned individuals, with the shared goal of saving the Avon Valley. Work has started on a Facebook page and a website to promote the campaign. If you would like to support us, or more information, you can contact the CPRE office on admin@cprewiltshire.org.uk.

³ Note they are now not ring roads, and will bring no relief to town centre traffic, and may well make it worse

⁴ In a semi-detached organisation called Future Chippenham

⁵ At a Cabinet meeting on 24 March which defied the Government's proposal to prevent meetings of more than three people, and failed to include the Coronavirus crisis on its agenda.

