

WARRINGTON LOCAL PLAN - UPDATED PROPOSED SUBMISSION VERSION - REGULATION 19 SUBMISSION



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1.0 Introduction

This is a formal submission of representations to the Regulation 19 public consultation stage for the Updated Proposed Submission Version of the Warrington Local Plan (2021). This submission is made by SLR Consulting Limited on behalf of SSE Thermal owners of the Fiddlers Ferry Power Station site at Widnes Road, Warrington, WA5 2UT.

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1.1 Context for the submission and nature of the interested party

SSE Thermal owns the Fiddlers Ferry power station site on Widnes Road in west Warrington. Measuring some 324 hectares, the redevelopment of the former power station site has a significant role to play in the delivery of the Warrington Local Plan strategy for sustainable residential, employment and green infrastructure development - the site represents the largest brownfield regeneration project within the Local Plan area.

- SSE welcomes the proposals for the zoning of land within the Local Plan
- SSE recognises the socio-economic potential that the re-zoning of the land can help deliver for Warrington and the wider region
- As a company committed to a 'Just Transition', we recognise the need to protect workers and communities as the UK moves towards net zero and believe work delivered under the vision/masterplan/Local Plan will help secure a fair future for the site.

The proposals for the regeneration of the Fiddlers Ferry Opportunity Site following the closure of the power station in March 2020 are the product of a Task Force convened by SSE and comprised of officers and members of Warrington Borough Council and Halton Borough Council. The Task Force was convened to provide high level technical and policy guidance on the emerging regeneration proposals for Fiddlers Ferry and contributed to the development of the site vision and masterplan in the 9 month period between June 2020 and April 2021.

The Updated Proposed Submission Version of the Warrington Local Plan positions the Fiddlers Ferry site to deliver the following:

- 1300 homes within the plan period (and a further 450 homes beyond the plan period); and
- 101 ha of employment land (mixed industrial and distribution uses)

This scale of development makes SSE a significant stakeholder within the Warrington Local Plan and an interested party in the aspects of the local plan process addressed in these representations which relate to the housing and employment land topics and the suite of supporting policies for green infrastructure, transport provision and sustainable development.

The comments below are offered in general support for the Regulation 19 Submission Version of the Warrington Local Plan. They are set out to follow the content order of the Local Plan. As an interested party and a significant stakeholder, SSE would welcome an opportunity to be invited to attend any relevant topic hearings held at the Examination in Public.

2.0 Vision and Spatial Strategy

2.1 Positive Planning for Warrington's Future

SSE welcomes the Local Plan long term vision as expressed in section 3.1 of the plan. SSE takes confidence from the extension of the vision statement beyond the 18 year plan period. This long-term vision will be important to the realisation of the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan and ensuring that the revised Green Belt boundaries are capable of enduring beyond the plan period.

2.1.1 Vision

The 11 points of the vision statement are well balanced and proportionate. The vision statement recognises Warrington's position as an important employment hub for the region. It recognises Warrington's position within the Northern Powerhouse and the importance of strategic connectivity. Notable references are welcomed that refer to the Authority area's new housing requirements with an emphasis on affordability and the needs of special groups such as the elderly. Green space, active travel and the importance of high quality walking and cycling infrastructure are emphasised within a clear recognition of the need to nurture the area's built and natural heritage assets. The commitment to support Warrington town centre is evident and strong and a commitment to renewable energy sources and decentralised networks is embedded within the climate change agenda.

2.1.2 Plan Objectives

SSE welcomes the six objectives set out on page 43 of the plan (Para 3.2.3). In respect of objective W1, SSE would suggest that the sustainable growth objective would be strengthened by the inclusion of a specific reference to the importance of brownfield site redevelopment within the borough and the preference within the NPPF that brownfield redevelopment should be prioritised.

2.1.3 Spatial Strategy and Key Diagram

SSE supports the spatial strategy as set out in Figure 3- Local Plan key diagram - and restates its commitment to delivering the employment gains alongside a new sustainable residential community and a major ecological and recreational resource envisaged at the Fiddlers Ferry Opportunity Site in paragraphs 3.3.8 and 3.3.11. As alluded to in para 3.3.17 in respect of the range of alternatives for Greenbelt release, SSE supports the Plan's position that none of the alternatives (including in particular the South West Urban Extension) "*enable the brownfield regeneration benefits of Fiddlers Ferry*". These benefits are established in the Fiddlers Ferry Regeneration Vision (SSE) and the Economic Development Needs Assessment (EDNA 2021) which form part of the Plan evidence base).

2.1.4 Exceptional Circumstances for Green Belt Release

Section 3.4 of the Plan fully accords with the NPPF (Para 141) in its consideration of options for Greenbelt release to meet development needs and SSE commends the analysis of exceptional circumstances set out in paras 3.4.7-3.4.10 and the underlying Green Belt Assessment and Site Selection evidence base. SSE is aware of the contribution that Fiddlers Ferry plays in this analysis and is committed to its delivery in accordance with the timescales set out within the Regulation 19 Submission Version of the Warrington Local Plan.

3.0 Strategic Planning Policies

3.1 Objective W1

Objective W1 of the draft local plan is to *“enable the sustainable growth of Warrington through the ongoing regeneration of Inner Warrington, the delivery of strategic and local infrastructure, the strengthening of existing neighbourhoods and the creation of new sustainable neighbourhoods whilst:*

- *delivering a minimum of 14,688 new homes (equating to 816 per year) between 2021 and 2038, and*
- *supporting Warrington’s ongoing economic success by meeting the need for 316.26 hectares of employment land between 2021 and 2038.”*

SSE would suggest that the sustainable growth objective W1 above would be strengthened by the inclusion of a specific reference to the importance of brownfield site redevelopment within the borough.

3.1.1 Policy DEV1 (Housing Delivery)

The housing delivery targets in Policy DEV1 are robustly Justified on the basis of the Housing Needs Assessment evidence base. SSE considers that the phasing of The Fiddlers Ferry Opportunity Site in the Appendix 1 Trajectory is realistic and so likely to be Effective in terms of delivery over the development plan period. The combined evidence base explains why the level of housing requirement and sites selected to meet it as envisaged in the Trajectory is an appropriate strategy, taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence.

It is therefore considered that the principle of the Policy Dev 1 will prove effective, facilitating both an appropriate and necessary housing strategy that will ensure the proper planning and sustainable development of the local area. It further reinforces point 5 of the ‘Vision’ which states: *“New housing development will support Warrington’s economic growth and will be focused on creating attractive, well designed, sustainable and healthy communities. New homes will meet a wide range of needs including those of families, those struggling to afford their own home, elderly people and disabled people.”* It is acknowledged that the housing allocation at Fiddlers Ferry has a key role to play in the provision of housing for both the existing and future population of the area in the manner set out in the draft local plan.

We note in relation to DEV1 3b. that the extent of Greenbelt release is demonstrated as needed to deliver the identified benefits of the wider Opportunity Site. The DEV1 3b could be clarified to reflect the 'minimum of 860 homes' which are allocated on the release Greenbelt area (consistent with 10.3.5).

3.1.2 Policy DEV2 (Meeting Housing Needs)

There is a clear need for substantial new housing supply in Warrington and Policy DEV 2 is considered a critical component of the draft local plan and plays a key role in translating national housing policies and housing supply responses to the local level. It informs the policies and objectives of the local plan and provides details in relation to housing provision and its location and requirements for different house types, sizes and tenures and the requirements for residential zoned land.

The policy ensures that the homes provided are suitable for this affordable housing for families with children, older people, students, those with disabilities, service families, people who rent their homes those wishing to commission or build their own homes. SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards these objectives. This policy is in line with national planning policy, specifically the NPPF’s aim to achieve sustainable development by providing a robust evidence base to inform decision-making

around the current and future housing supply and investment in housing related infrastructure and services.

3.1.3 Policy DEV4 (Economic Growth and Development)

Policy DEV4 seeks to ensure that there is a sufficient amount of employment land within the borough to support Warrington's economic growth over the plan period. The policy also provides a basis to protect and enhance existing employment locations and local businesses. SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this. It is considered that this policy is in line with national planning policy, specifically the NPPF's aim to build a strong, competitive economy. It is further believed that the current draft policy objectives will allow for the proposed masterplan and the overall area of designated land at Fiddlers Ferry to unlock its potential socio-economic benefits, not only for Fiddlers Ferry [landbank] but also the wider Warrington area by providing a framework and linkages for employment development supported with a mix of alternative land uses such as residential and recreation. This in turn ensures a holistic and co-ordinated approach is taken to the development of the land. In this regard, it is endeavoured that the Fiddler Ferry Opportunity site will provide a positive example of brownfield regeneration.

3.1.4 Policy DEV5 (Retail and Leisure Needs)

Policy DEV5 sets out to ensure that centres at all levels in the hierarchy provide and retain a range of shops, services and facilities to provide a high quality environment to enable them to compete more effectively. This policy is in line with national planning policy, specifically the NPPF's aim to ensure the viability of town centres. The local centres designated at Fiddlers Ferry will play an important role in delivering sustainable neighbourhood facilities within the masterplan area of the former power station.

3.2 Objective W2

Objective W2 of the draft local plan is to *"ensure Warrington's revised Green Belt boundaries maintain the permanence of the Green Belt in the long term"*. In this respect, the proposed redevelopment of the Fiddlers Ferry site will contribute and support this objective by ensuring a defensible boundary is formed to an area which is currently poorly defined and industrial in nature.

3.2.1 Policy GB1 (Green Belt)

The extent of green belt release identified in Policy GB1 and the revised Green Belt boundaries are sound, in terms of being Justified by reference to the underlying Green Belt evidence base which includes robust options and green belt assessment. The exceptional circumstances referred to at 10.4.10 in relation to the Fiddlers Ferry Opportunity Site are fully detailed in the evidence base (including the Green Belt Assessment - Fiddlers Ferry - April 2021). The extent of release is therefore supported in light of the specific sites included as being Positively Prepared, Justified by reference to robust assessment and Effective.

It is acknowledged that it is not possible for Warrington to meet its development needs without releasing some Green Belt land for development. It is further noted that the land proposed for release equates to around 5% of Warrington's total area of Green Belt. This is significantly lower than the 1,210 hectares proposed to be removed from the Green Belt in the previous proposed submission version local plan which equated to 11% of the total amount of Green Belt in the borough. This reduction between draft plan iterations can be attributed to the inclusion of the Fiddlers Ferry site which has replaced previously proposed Green Belt releases. Nonetheless, the 'Spatial strategy for meeting our need for new homes' highlights the requirement to release Green Belt land to accommodate additional housing provision. SSE is in support of the council's greenbelt policy and its aim to provide the required housing within the borough as detailed in Policy DEV1.

The underlying evidence base demonstrates why the revised Greenbelt boundaries within the Fiddlers Ferry

Opportunity Site will be robust. They are designed around new parkland spaces that will see over 50% of the former power station site devoted to green infrastructure which will provide long term secure and defensible green space. They have also factored in development beyond the end of the plan period based on a robust assessment of likely development needs at that stage so that they are Justified and Effective.

3.3 Objective W3

Objective W3 of the draft local plan is to *“strengthen and expand the role of Warrington Town Centre as a regional employment, retail, leisure, cultural and transport hub, whilst transforming the quality of the public realm and making the Town Centre a place where people want to live”*.

3.3.1 Policy TC1 (Town Centre and Surrounding Area)

Policy TC1 aims to maximise the number of people living in Warrington Town Centre and focus its future as a vibrant hub of culture, leisure and entertainment, sustainable transportation, business and living. The policy aims to positively support retailing and high streets. SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this by making provision for public transport and active travel links to the town centre as the areas primary cultural and retail hub. This policy is in line with national planning policy, specifically the NPPF’s aim to achieve sustainable development and ensuring the viability of town centres.

3.4 Objective W4

Objective W4 of the draft local plan is to *“provide new infrastructure and services to support Warrington’s growth; address congestion; promote safer and more sustainable travel; and encourage active and healthy lifestyles”*.

3.4.1 Policy INF1 (Sustainable Travel and Transport)

Policy INF1 sets out how the council aims to meet its objectives of improving the safety and efficiency of the transport network, tackling congestion, reducing carbon emissions and improving air quality, promoting sustainable transport options.

SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this through provision to upgrade active travel links connecting it to Warrington Town Centre, the Mersey river corridor, Widnes Waterfront in Halton and linking its employment and residential centres to neighbouring communities. It will also make significant contribution to local public transport network improvements. This policy is in line with national planning policy.

3.4.2 Policy INF2 (Transport Safeguarding)

Policy INF2 ensures that the land requires to enhance the transport network is safeguarded and protected from development until suitable transport improvements can be delivered in an appropriate and timely manner. SSE supports this policy in principle and will positively engage with Warrington Borough Council on appropriate transport safeguarding provisions in the preparation of the Development Framework for Fiddlers Ferry.

3.4.3 Policy INF3 (Utilities, Telecommunications and Broadband)

Policy INF3 seeks to ensure the provision of new and supporting utilities, considering connections to existing utility infrastructure and future proofing telecommunications infrastructure. SSE welcomes the opportunity for

the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this albeit that the site is already well provided for in terms of utility support. This policy is in line with national planning policy.

3.4.4 Policy INF4 (Community Facilities)

Policy INF4 seeks to ensure that adequate new facilities are provided, where necessary, in both existing and new communities, in line with the draft local plan. The policy also seeks to protect existing facilities and services. SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this through the identification of land two new local centres, one new primary school and three new parks which will provide public access to the impressive Mersey estuary. This policy is in line with national planning policy.

3.4.5 Policy INF5 (Delivering Infrastructure)

This policy sets out how sufficient and appropriate infrastructure can be delivered. The provision of appropriate infrastructure is also essential to Warrington’s continued growth which underpins the local plan development strategy. SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this.

3.5 Objective W5

Objective W5 of the draft local plan is to *“secure high quality design which reinforces the character and local distinctiveness of Warrington’s urban area, its countryside, its unique pattern of waterways and green spaces and its constituent settlements whilst protecting, enhancing and embracing the Borough’s historic, cultural, built and natural assets”*.

3.5.1 Policy DC1 (Warrington’s Places)

This policy sets out the unique attributes of these spatial areas, details the strategy for each one over the plan period and promotes the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans to provide more detailed local policies for these areas. SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this. The Fiddlers Ferry Regeneration Vision document demonstrates an assessment of local distinctiveness in the approach to the masterplan design of new residential neighbourhoods. This policy is in line with national planning policy, specifically the NPPF’s aim to achieve sustainable development.

3.5.2 Policy DC3 (Green Infrastructure)

Policy DC3 aims to protect and develop the borough’s considerable green infrastructure network, its countryside, river corridors and parks and green spaces. SSE supports this policy in principle with the Local Plan allocating over 50% of the land asset at Fiddlers Ferry to new parkland space which will deliver a major new green infrastructure asset with public access to the Mersey riverside and improved links to the Transpennine Trail and the St Helen’s Canal. (Ref Para 8.3.5 and 8.3.8)

3.5.3 Policy DC4 (Ecological Network)

This policy sets out how the council will work with partners to conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity, secure biodiversity net gain and to enhance public access to nature across the plan area. SSE is in support of this policy and the Fiddlers Ferry Regeneration Vision will play its part in allocating extensive new public parkland assets for the borough.

3.5.4 Policy DC5 (Open Space, Sport and Recreation Provision)

This policy sets out how the council will work with partners to ensure that a comprehensive range of sport and

recreation facilities will be provided across Warrington to meet the needs of the existing and proposed population. SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this. This policy is in line with the NPPF Para 98.

3.5.5 Policy DC6 (Quality of Place)

Policy DC6 the design principles to be met by all development proposals within Warrington. SSE welcomes the opportunity for the Fiddlers Ferry masterplan to positively contribute towards this. The Fiddlers Ferry masterplan is anticipated to be in line with the design principles and standards set out within the draft local plan and national planning policy.

3.6 Objective W6

Objective W6 of the draft local plan is to *“minimise the impact of development on the environment through the prudent use of resources and ensuring development contributes to reducing carbon emissions, is energy efficient, safe and resilient to climate change and makes a positive contribution to improving Warrington’s air quality”*.

The release of the Fiddlers Ferry site for redevelopment supports this overarching objective given that the site is brownfield in nature and its remediation and re-use will see the transformation of its licensed network of ash deposit facilities at the site into new housing and parkland uses fully consistent with NPPW Para8

3.6.1 Policy ENV1 (Waste Management)

Given the industrial legacy of the Fiddlers Ferry site, SSE welcomes the aftercare provisions of the ENV 1 and the emphasis within the policy on beneficial afteruse. The Fiddlers Ferry Masterplan delivers on this requirement and will be fully aligned to NPPW Para 8 and the provisions of ENV6 below.

3.6.2 Policy ENV2 (Flood Risk and Water Management)

The Fiddlers Ferry Regeneration proposals have been fully assessed within the Local Plan’s Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) and SSE fully supports ENV2 with its strong alignment with the NPPF and the accompanying ‘Planning Guidance on Flood Risk and Coastal Change’.

3.6.3 Policy ENV3 (Safeguarding of Minerals Resources)

Whilst welcoming the principle of this policy SSE would request that Figure 14 be amended to remove the Sand & Gravel Safeguarding annotation from the Fiddlers Ferry site. It is understood that these are broad brush illustrations of sand and gravel deposits within the Borough but given the strategic contribution of the redevelopment of the Fiddlers Ferry site in its entirety, its inclusion within a safeguarding area in this Figure 14 would appear misleading.

3.6.4 Policy ENV6 (Restoration and Aftercare of Mineral and Waste Sites)

SSE welcomes policy ENV6 with its focus on enhanced biodiversity and geodiversity in restoration projects of former waste and mineral sites. The alignment of the policy to Para 146 of the NPPF which encourages LPAs to take opportunities to upgrade the landscape and provide for recreation and wildlife around towns and cities through the National Forest Strategy and Community Forests -in Warrington’s case the Mersey Forest. The Fiddlers Ferry Regeneration Vision aligns fully with this and will ultimately allocate over 50% of the site to new parkland use.

3.6.5 Policy ENV7 (Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Development)

SSE welcomes the Councils policy and approach to renewable and low carbon energy development within the borough. The Fiddlers Ferry masterplan has the potential to utilise part of its employment area for innovative low carbon projects which can avail of the site's proximity to national grid connectivity. Policy ENV7 provides a positive policy context should an opportunity arise in this regard.

The rationale supporting Policy ENV7 provides a reminder of the UK's commitment to the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. It highlights the fact that the 2008 Climate Change Act commits the Government to reducing targeted UK greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% in 2050 from 1990 levels. This commitment by the UK Government has since been enhanced, with a target for at least 100% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, otherwise known as a net zero target. SSE would encourage this increased commitment to be considered within the Local Plan, especially the need for low carbon power generation. In addition, it points out that in April 2021 the Government announced its sixth Carbon Budget and its plan to cut emissions by 78% by 2035 (and to net-zero by 2050).

In response, the policy facilitates a scope for proposals for development that would produce, store and/or distribute low carbon or renewable energy, including the retrofitting of infrastructure to existing development/buildings. It is described that such projects will be permitted provided that they satisfy the requirements of other relevant Plan policies and would not result in unacceptable harm to the local environment. It is described that proposals will be assessed in consideration of their environmental, social and economic benefits against any effects on the local area. In this regard, and in support of Policy ENV7, it is submitted that dependant on proposed project characteristics, demand and appropriate planning and environmental considerations, the existing utilities and energy infrastructure at Fiddlers Ferry offers potential for low carbon energy projects, which if realised as part of its employment land reserve may result in beneficial socio-economic effects including employment opportunities in the local area.

3.6.6 Policy ENV8 (Environmental and Amenity Protection)

The Fiddlers Ferry site allocation MD3 will deliver transformational impacts across its 324 hectares removing a coal powered power station from the skyline and replacing it with a new mixed use development set within an extensive remediated landscape setting, with the potential to provide air quality, visual impact, biodiversity, habitate development and general amenity net benefits.

4.0 Site Allocations

4.1 Main Development Areas and Site Allocations

SSE has restricted its comment on this section of the plan to MD3 only. However, by virtue of its submissions on DEV1 and DEV2 in section 3 above, SSE reserves the opportunity to comment further at the EiP on the wider development areas and site allocation strategy of the plan, should this be necessary.

4.1.1 Policy MD3 (Fiddlers Ferry)

SSE has prepared the Fiddlers Ferry Regeneration Vision to articulate and support the transformation of the Fiddlers Ferry site from a former coal powered power station to a new sustainable mixed-use community. SSE therefore welcomes the inclusion of site allocation MD3 within the Local Plan.

The development of the regeneration vision for Fiddlers Ferry has followed an extensive multi-disciplinary technical assessment of the site by SSE in 2020/21 to address the sites suitability to be fully cleared and remediated from its former use to create a viable and deliverable regeneration project on this brownfield site. The scope of this work has been extensive covering detailed engineering, geotechnical, viability and environmental assessments which have informed and shaped the planning strategy and vision for the site that has been expressed within MD3. The combination of site specific technical assessment and options analysis, green belt assessment and the specific requirements of MD3 and the Appendix 1 Trajectory demonstrate that the allocation of the Fiddlers Ferry Opportunity Site is justified as an appropriate approach, likely to be effective in meeting needs consistent with national policy and therefore sound.

SSE is keen to restate its commitment to the delivery of site MD3 (Fiddlers Ferry) and is confident that the requested Development Framework, the demolition of the power station and the initial required infrastructure requirements to allow a phase one development to commence on site by 2025/26 in line with the Local Plan Trajectory, can be delivered.

SSE is happy to support the EiP with more detailed technical evidence to support this site allocation should it be required.

ENDS

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