

Response to Warrington Draft Local Development Plan 2021

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1.0 Introduction and preamble

This document is submitted in response to the publication of the Draft Local Development Plan (The Plan). Sections 1.0 to 3.0 refer to the plan as a whole, and why it is **unsound**. Sections 3.1 to 5.0 refer specifically to the South East Urban Extension, although that does not preclude the possibility that these comments are equally applicable to other parts of the plan covering areas of Warrington with which I am less familiar and therefore should not be considered as an endorsement of the plan in those areas.

The following sections identify in detail why The Plan is **unsound** and form an integral part of the response but to aide reading, in summary:

- The consultation process is **unsound** and **not justified** as it does not meet the requirement of the Statement of Community Involvement
- The Objective Assessment of Needs over-states the likely number of dwellings required and does not adequately consider alternatives to the standard method target taking into account the specific nature of the Warrington conurbation it is therefore **not justified** and therefore **unsound**
- The requirement for infrastructure in support of the development is inadequately developed, unfunded and phased for delivery after the majority of housing has been built. Developer funding is not ring-fenced for the infrastructure identified as required and has not been made a condition of detailed planning. The Plan is **not effective** and therefore **unsound**
- In particular the transport plan makes no mention of required improvements immediately outside of the plan area ie Stockton Heath and Higher Stretton to allow for the North/South and West/East flows of traffic into the area of the plan. The Plan is therefore **un-deliverable, inconsistent** and therefore **unsound**
- The delivery of other required infrastructure (schools, medical centre and local community hub) is not guaranteed through ring-fenced developer funding as a condition of local planning. Furthermore the

- phasing of these items as with roads will leave current and future residents without the requisite infrastructure to support the community
- Significant areas of green belt land are identified for development, and are phased for early development; this is contrary to recent government statements. The justification is commercial to release developer funding, this short term gain is contrary to the aims of The Plan and is therefore **unsound**
 - There is a loss of green amenity space (per capita) making the increased use of amenity green space unsupportable and therefore **unsustainable** and The Plan **unsound**
 - The planned and existing green space has insufficient connectivity to encourage biodiversity and wildlife and **does not meet best practice** for wildlife corridors it is therefore **unsound**
 - The overall phasing of The Plan cannot be **justified**, is **un-deliverable**, and **in-effective** and The Plan as a whole is therefore **unsound**. In particular the use of green belt land before the need is established and before the use of brownfield sites. Furthermore the building of housing before the required infrastructure is complete, funded or guaranteed is ill conceived and **unsound**.

The following sections identify The Plan's shortcomings in more detail and along with this preamble form the response to The Draft Local Development Plan.

2.0 Consultation and Process

The planning process, in particular the requirements of the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) and the "Objective Assessment of Needs" have not been met and The Plan is therefore **unsound and not Justified**.

2.1 Statement of Community Involvement

The Draft Plan takes as its starting point for the SCI the representations received in response to its discredited 2019 plan that was quashed by the High Court. It bases its justification (not least in the light of the impact of Covid 19 [*see below*]) of making changes to the 2019 plan in response to the 3200 representations received however, as demonstrated in court, many responses focused on the gross inadequacies of the plan. Failure to comment on other no less important issues does not equate to acceptance and falls far short of the requirement that "Involvement in the planning process should enable the local community to say what sort of place they want to live and work in the initial stages of plan production". The base plan of 2019 in itself demonstrably fell short of this requirement. To meet the requirement and therefore be sound The Plan should have been based on a new round of early involvement consultation and as noted below needed to be on a broader more accessible and inclusive basis as required by Government Guidance.

The council states that "due to Covid 19 restrictions" they "were unable to meet the commitments of the SCI" whilst some mitigations were put in place

they were wholly inadequate for meaningful community engagement to inform The Plan, that is they relied heavily on electronic communication and “web” presence particularly unsuitable for the demographic of specific areas addressed by the plan. The council have therefore failed to “front load” the planning process as required by Government Guidance.

As an example, one consequence of this failure is evident and clear. The Council state that the majority of representations to the March 2019 plan related to maximising the use of “Brownfield Sites” and avoiding the use of “Green belt” land, yet the new plan still prioritises the early use of “Green belt” land resulting in a loss of 5% of the “Green belt” The representations made to the 2019 plan did not in general state that 5% loss would be acceptable, but that The Plan should avoid its use entirely (*see also below comments regarding the estimation of housing requirements*)

2.2 Objective Assessment of Needs

The Objective Assessment of Needs, that is the number of new dwellings required is weak, it contains widely varying estimates (for example job creation estimates ranging from 490 to 874 pa). Where the data varies arbitrary mid point estimates have been used along with many assumed values. So whilst the methodology no doubt follows Government guidelines the input data and assumptions are far from justified and not based on proportionate evidence. Furthermore it does not consider alternatives to derive sensitivity data or error margins. As a result the Objective Assessment of Needs is **not justified** and as this forms the primary input to The Plan, The Plan itself is **unsound**.

The Objective Assessment of needs, flawed as it is, shows that the need will be met by an additional 816 dwellings per year as derived from the standard assessment method. Throughout the plan this figure is referred to as a minimum required by Government. By definition the standard assessment relies on averages, normalised data and methodology. However, this fails to take full account of the town’s unique spatial position. Warrington is bounded by three major motorways to the North, South and East (M6, M56, M62) and the encroaching conurbations of Liverpool and its suburbs to the West. Perhaps more importantly this constrained area contains three West to East linear restrictions namely The Mersey (and its flood plain), The Manchester Ship Canal and in the south the Bridgewater Canal. The standard assessment therefore results in a housing target that takes no account of the constrained nature (and the resulting “requirement” to use Green belt land), and the limited North South connectivity resulting in unsupportable pressure on the finite, already overused, crossings of the Mersey, Manchester Ship Canal and Bridgewater Canal. The 816 figure should be taken as guidance and sensibly mitigated downwards considering Warrington’s specific constraints.

3.0 Infrastructure Requirements in Support of The Draft Local Plan

The Plan describes the infrastructure required to support the additional population in The Plan. In fact the poster sessions at public events to promote The Plan (eg Halliwell Jones stadium) state that development will be supported by additional infrastructure, the infrastructure plan lists many infrastructure requirements essential to the development. However from the plan and supporting evidence it is clear that these infrastructure improvements are not guaranteed, merely a wish list of improvements. Many remain un-costed in the supporting documentation and there is little to justify cost estimates where they do exist. In many cases funding is not identified and many have no funding allocation at all. Most rely on “developer funding” and will be a condition of detailed planning permission being granted to developers – **however this is not a guarantee**, developers will negotiate to the lowest figure possible to be set against a poorly estimated cost. It is highly unlikely that adequate funding will be found for all these infrastructure improvements whilst at the same time stating they are “essential” and “will” happen is misleading. It is not evident that the plan, including the required infrastructure improvements can be effectively delivered and The Plan is therefore **not effective** and **unsound**.

For example - South East Warrington Urban Extension Community Hub is listed as required with zero cost estimate, zero committed funds and consequently a zero funding gap (Page 10 Infrastructure Delivery Plan). Perhaps more concerning - Sankey Brook Flood Risk Management Scheme where the cost estimate is 20.2m with a funding gap of 19.2m (Page 8 Infrastructure Delivery Plan). There are many, many such incidences, which make the whole Infrastructure Delivery Plan unreliable and undeliverable yet is seen as “essential” to and part of the Local Development Plan.

There is little confidence in the community that developer funding, particularly front end loaded will be ring-fenced and spent on infrastructure projects in some cases 10 or even 15 years in the future. Experience shows that funding will be diverted to other projects and ultimately the **required** infrastructure will not be built due to lack of funding. Such an approach is only acceptable if developer funding is ring-fenced and the requirement for infrastructure made a **condition** of detailed planning consent rather than in the gift of WBC planning.

3.1 Transport Infrastructure

(The following refers specifically to the South East Warrington Urban Extension element of The Plan)

The transport plan for the South East Warrington Urban Extension Draft Local Plan shows, largely unfunded, improvements to the roads infrastructure around Appleton and its environs in particular improvements to the Lyons Lane and Stretton Road junctions, and the completion of the “D” road linking Longwood Road and Wytherwin Avenue, with a spur leading to the proposed new employment area. Although as with all the infrastructure plan’s these are not guaranteed they are needed, but without improvements to Stockton Heath

and the pinch points created by the Manchester Ship Canal they are largely pointless.

The traffic flow through Stockton Heath (and Upper Stretton from the other direction) is already unacceptable with heavily polluting delays at many times of the day. The new employment area will increase the flows of traffic from, for example, Latchford, Wilderspool and other new developments North of Stockton Heath. Without planned traffic relief across the Mersey plain and Ship Canal, traffic will not even reach the improved junctions. The most likely use of the new employment area will be logistics and from that point of view its position seems ideal and will aide the movement of HGV's to an improved motorway junction, however employees are likely to come from the town to the North and West i.e. across the Mersey, Ship Canal and Bridgewater Canal through the newly built South East Urban Extension which in itself will add significantly to traffic (also generally moving South and Eastward to the motorway junctions in the morning and vice versa in the evening).

The failure to consider and identify necessary road improvements outside the immediate plan area namely Stockton Heath and the Ship Canal crossings make the plan **inconsistent, undeliverable** and therefore **unsound**.

Furthermore the failure to improve routes from the South to North is contrary to WBC's stated aim of "making Warrington town centre more affluent and vibrant". Many, affluent, residents of South Warrington already choose to shop in Northwich or Knutsford as the journey is easier and quicker than travelling North to the town centre. Further loading the already overloaded roads infrastructure with the occupants of new housing developments without improving these pinch points will be counter productive, driving business away from the new market development and town centre amenities and those in the North of the town (Junction 9, Gemini) effectively inaccessible to those South of the Ship Canal.

It is also to be regretted that the roads infrastructure development is not scheduled until 2038 in some cases. Which, even if successful means 15 years of congestion and pollution of the area. Whilst clearly developer funding is ultimately required, despite reservations about it being forthcoming, for The Plan to be deliverable these improvements should be implemented in advance of significant house-building and again renders The Plan **unsound**.

Other fanciful plans such as a rapid/mass transit corridor, or large-scale modal shifts are frankly laughable as is their delivery in the period of The Plan, let alone fundable. Their **undeliverable** nature again renders The Plan **unsound**

3.2 Social Infrastructure (Schools, Community Hubs, Retail, Recycling etc) *(The following refers specifically to the South East Warrington Urban Extension element of The Plan)*

As with transport infrastructure social infrastructure depends on developer funding and where it is defined in The Infrastructure Plan it is ill defined, not

costed and will not be available for the majority of the plan period (if indeed any of it). Primary healthcare and community leisure facilities are already overwhelmed in the area of The Plan. The phasing and uncertainty surrounding these facilities will place an intolerable burden on existing facilities until new facilities can come on stream (say 10 years), in which time, without over-dramatising, will put the health and indeed lives of existing residents at risk during that time.

The Plan recognises the need for additional waste and recycling centre capacity south of the Manchester Ship Canal but does not identify any specific location or area for such a facility, again as with other infrastructure any such facility will require developer funding and will only be available after the majority of other development has taken place.

4.0 Use of green belt land, reduction in green spaces and biodiversity in the Draft Local Development Plan.

(The following refers specifically to the South East Warrington Urban Extension element of The Plan)

4.1 Use of green belt land

The case for the use of green belt land for housing (notably at Thelwell Hays) is not convincing and relates not to the ultimate need for its use but for the releasing of developer funding and meeting the largely arbitrary requirement for development in the early years of The Plan (see also phasing below). The number of houses to be built on green belt land is comparatively small, consequently it is well within the error band of the Objective Assessment of Need, but because it is phased first (to release funding and meet the arbitrary early years target) it will be lost whether or not that need materialises. As per Messrs Johnson and Gove's recent comments Government does not support the use of green belt unless absolutely necessary. There is little evidence in the plan that viable alternatives to its use have been explored and its inclusion in The Plan is **unsound**.

The use of green belt land should be a last resort both in planning and delivery. There is little evidence of either in The Plan.

4.2 Loss of green space and biodiversity

Notwithstanding the loss of green belt land, The Plan shows a relative increase in the amount of accessible green amenity space. This is disingenuous and misleading, whilst the absolute area of amenity green space might increase, simple assumptions based on house numbers shows the per capita amount of amenity green space is reduced. The existing green space, such as The Dingle, Fords Rough and Lumb Brook Valley is already badly degraded by its heavy use. Even with the modest improvements proposed this increased usage will lead to further degradation and reduction in its value as amenity green space or protecting biodiversity. Anybody looking at these existing areas will see extensive erosion and an almost complete lack of understory contributing to flood risk and reducing the value of

this amenity green space to resident's well-being. The basic tenant of the draft plan should be to provide at least the current level if not more per capita green space than currently exists. If it does not it is **unsustainable** and **unsound**

4.3 Wildlife and biodiversity

The green spaces, whether amenity or green belt, are insufficiently connected. Along with the severe degradation of existing spaces, which can only increase under the draft plan, this will lead to reduction in biodiversity and wildlife. The green space that does remain in the plan needs to be increased, **and** to be reconfigured to create more integrated wildlife corridors in line with current best practise. The significant green spaces for example Millennium Green, Lumb Brook and The Dingle need linking together and to the remaining green belt, agricultural land and woodland by green corridors, of sufficient width to prevent isolation of wildlife populations. The current level of green space in The Plan is **unsustainable** in terms of biodiversity and wildlife and is therefore **unsound**

5.0 Phasing and timeline of the Draft Local Development Plan

(The following refers specifically to the South East Warrington Urban Extension element of The Plan)

The phasing of The Plan **cannot be justified** and is therefore **unsound**. Firstly the phasing of early build being on green belt land is a commercial decision, it aims to release developer funding. The Plan contains insufficient evidence that alternatives have been considered to meet the early years' target (which in itself is unjustified). The Objective Assessment of Needs exceeds the expected natural population growth, meaning the total number of dwellings in the plan may not be built. It is irresponsible in the extreme to sacrifice the long-term amenity of the green belt for short-term commercial gain. In line with recent government statements the use of green belt land should be a last resort and not considered until all brownfield sites have been utilised.

The phasing of the infrastructure "required" by The Plan roads, community hubs and medical centre is unsupportable. Notwithstanding the lack of confidence that these improvements will ever be delivered even as planned they subject current and future residents to lack of critical infrastructure for many years. Few, if any, of the infrastructure projects required appear to be a condition to be met before building can commence. As a minimum the funding of these infrastructure projects should be a pre-condition to any building commencing, preferably construction of the infrastructure should be completed in advance of building commencing. Failure to guarantee infrastructure in advance of building and The Plan offering no alternatives is **not justified** and **ineffective**, rendering The Plan **unsound**.

J A Garratt 12th November 2021