

Sustainability Appraisal Background Note

Date: October 2021

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 AECOM has been commissioned by Warrington Borough Council (the Council) to undertake a sustainability appraisal in support of the Local Plan Review. There have been three main sustainability appraisal reports including:

- Sustainability Appraisal: Interim SA Report (Aecom, July 2017) which was published alongside the Preferred Development Option Regulation 18 Consultation document. The Interim SA Report does not constitute an 'SA Report' as defined by the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Regulations, but it does document the stages of SA that were undertaken to help influence the plan-making process.
- Sustainability Appraisal: SA Report (Aecom, March 2019) which was published alongside the Proposed Submission Version Local Plan 2017-2037 (the first draft Regulation 19 WLP (March 2019)); and,
- Sustainability Appraisal: SA Report (Aecom, August 2021) which was published alongside the Updated Proposed Submission Version Local Plan 2021-2038 (the second draft Regulation 19 WLP (September 2021)).

1.2 This note provides a critique of the sustainability appraisal process which has been undertaken for the Local Plan Review. It draws out and provides further details of the main point that are raised in the representations, which results in a process which does not pass the legal requirements because:

1. It fails to provide adequate weighting across the three strands of sustainable development;
2. It fails to consider 1,113 homes per annum as a reasonable alternative in the 2021 SA Report, when this was previously preferred;
3. It fails to provide adequate reasons to discount 945 homes per annum in the 2021 SA Report, when this was previously preferred; and,
4. It fails to test a less dispersed pattern of development (a larger Garden Suburb and South West Urban Extension) as a reasonable alternative.

1.2 It is also clear from reviewing the sustainability appraisal process that:

5. Green Belt release for 8,791 homes (at 1,113 homes per annum) could be achieved without unduly adverse social or environmental impacts;

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6. Green Belt release for 7,064 homes (at 945 homes per annum) could be achieved without unduly adverse social or environmental impacts;
 7. Green Belt release for 4,372 homes (at 816 homes per annum) performs less well in terms of socio-economic objectives when compared to the previously preferred high level distribution options.
- 1.3 Given these failures, the sustainability appraisal process which follows is also fundamentally flawed insofar as:
8. It fails to provide sufficient justification for a smaller Garden Suburb (otherwise referred to as the South east Warrington Urban Extension);
 9. It fails to test a larger Garden Suburb as a reasonable alternative to the South East Warrington Urban Extension; and,
 10. It fails to provide sufficient justification to discount the previously preferred larger Garden Suburb.
- 1.4 In addition, there are discrepancies in the 2021 SA Report:
11. Sites are omitted from Figure 6.1 of 2021 SA Report including the Consortium Land and this should be rectified since it would provide a clear indication of land in Warrington Garden Suburb; and,
 12. Separate reports that are referred to in the 2021 SA Report including proforma, are missing, and need to be provided with the submission documents so that can be considered by all interest parties and the Local Plan Inspector.

2. SUMMARY OF STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND PREFERRED OPTIONS

2.1 **Table 1** provides a summary of the sustainability appraisal process including the strategic objectives and the preferred options for the high level growth, distribution and development locations throughout the Local Plan Review.

Table 1: Summary of Strategic Objectives and Preferred Options throughout Local Plan Review

	2017 Interim SA Report Preferred Development Options (Regulation 18)	2019 SA Report First Draft Regulation 19 WLP	2021 SA Report Second Draft regulation 19 WLP
Strategic Objectives	22,260 new homes (equating to 1,113 per year) between 2017 and 2037 (20 years). 381ha of employment land between 2017 and 2037.	18,900 new homes (equating to 945 per year) between 2017 and 2037 (20 years). 362ha of employment land between 2017 and 2037.	14,688 new homes (equating to 816 per year) between 2021 and 2038 (18 years). 316ha of employment land between 2021 and 2038.
Growth Option – Housing	1,113 homes per annum	945 homes per annum	816 homes per annum
Distribution Option – Housing	Green Belt release adjacent to main urban area with incremental growth in outlying settlements 8,791 homes Green Belt requirement	Green Belt release adjacent to main urban area with incremental growth in outlying settlements 7,064 homes Green Belt requirement	Green Belt release adjacent to main urban area with incremental growth in outlying settlements 4,372 homes Green Belt requirement
Development Locations – Housing	6,000 homes at Garden Suburb 2,000 homes at south west of Warrington Homes in the outer settlements not stated	4,200 homes at Garden Suburb to south east of Warrington 1,600 homes at south west of Warrington 1,100 homes at outer settlements	2,400 homes to south east of Warrington 1,700 homes at Fiddlers Ferry 310 homes at Thelwall Heys 801 homes at outer settlements
Options for Employment	252ha Green Belt requirement	215ha Green Belt requirement	215ha Green Belt requirement
	117ha at Land at Junction 9	116ha at Land at Junction 9	145ha at Land at Junction 9
	100ha at Warrington Waterfront 30ha at Omega extension (within St. Helens)	100ha at Warrington Waterfront 30ha at Omega extension (within St. Helens)	100ha at Fiddlers Ferry

Source: 2017 Interim SA Report, 2019 SA Report and 2021 SA Report

3. CRITIQUE OF SUSTAINABILITY APPRAISAL PROCESS

Scope of the Sustainability Appraisal

3.1 The themes and objectives of the sustainability appraisal has remained constant throughout the Local Plan Review. The themes and objectives are set out at Chapter 2, Table 2.2 of each of the SA Reports and include:

- Economy and regeneration
 - Strengthen the local economy and ensure sustainable economic growth
 - Improve the education and skills of the population overall
 - Reduce poverty, deprivation and social exclusion and secure economic inclusion
- Health and well-being
 - Improve physical and mental health and reduce health inequalities
 - Reduce crime, disorder and the fear of crime
 - Enable groups to contribute to decision making and encourage a sense of community identity and welfare.
 - Provide, protect or enhance leisure opportunities, recreation facilities, green infrastructure and access to the countryside
- Accessibility
 - Reduce the need to travel, especially by car, improve choice and the use of more sustainable modes
 - Protect and enhance accessibility for all the essential services and facilities
- Housing
 - Ensure access to good quality, sustainable, affordable housing
- Natural resources
 - Protect, manage and improve local environmental quality including land, air and controlled waters and reduce the risk of flooding
 - Ensure the sustainable and prudent use and management of natural resources including the promotion of natural resources including the promotion of sustainable drainage and water conservation
- Built and natural heritage
 - Protect and where possible enhance the significance of historic assets and their setting

- Protect and improve the quality and character of places, landscapes, townscapes and wider countryside whilst maintaining and strengthening local distinctiveness and sense of place
- Ensure high quality and sustainable design for buildings, spaces and the public realm that is appropriate to the locality
- Biodiversity and geodiversity
 - Protect, maintain and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity
- Climatic change and resource use
 - Limit, mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change
 - Increase energy efficiency and production of renewable energy
 - Minimise waste and maximise reuse, recovery and recycling

3.2 Environmental considerations account for five of the eight themes (natural resources, built and natural heritage, biodiversity and geodiversity, climatic change and resource use) and eleven of the eighteen objectives. Social and economic considerations account for three of the eight themes (economy and employment, health and wellbeing and housing) and just seven of the eighteen objectives.

Point 1 – The failure of the sustainability appraisal process to provide adequate weighting across the three strands of sustainable development

Section 19 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires a local planning authority to carry out a sustainability appraisal of each of the proposals in a plan during its preparation. More generally, section 39 of the Act requires that the authority preparing a plan must do so “with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development”.

No one arm of sustainable development is afforded more weight than the other in national planning policy and a planning balance must be struck. However, the emphasis on items assessed in the sustainability appraisal is clearly skewed towards environmental rather than social or economic considerations.

The weighting of the environmental considerations has not been adjusted in the sustainability appraisal so the three strands of sustainable development including the environmental, economic and social considerations have not been given equal weighting.

This point needs addressing in the context of the Borough being constrained by Green Belt and housing delivery not having kept pace with its housing requirement since the removal of the housing target from the Local Plan Core Strategy as recognised in the Warrington Housing Delivery Test Action Plan (January 2020). This will have undoubtedly had a negative impact on the delivery of sustainable development, which has the prospect of continuing if the Local Plan is not fully compliant with the National Planning Policy Framework (“NPPF”), which provides a clear emphasis on providing a significant boost to delivering new homes at paragraph 60 and economic growth and productivity at paragraph 81.

High Level Growth Options

3.4 Having considered the sustainability appraisal, in relation to the high level growth options, it is noted that:

- The Council previously opted for a high level growth option that aligned the housing requirement with the economic aspirations to support higher jobs growth in line with the Cheshire and Warrington devolution bid (1,113 homes per annum) – at that time the Government had not introduced the standard method for calculating local housing need;
- The Council then opted for a high level growth option that aligned the housing requirement with the economic growth scenario (945 homes per annum) – the minimum local housing need was 909 homes per annum at that time which was 4% below the housing requirement;
- The Council have now opted for a housing requirement that aligns with the minimum local housing need of 816 homes per annum; and,
- The Council’s rationale for the selection of the preferred growth strategy is set out in the Development Options and Site Assessment Technical Report (September 2021).

Point 2 – The failure to consider 1,113 homes per annum as a reasonable alternative in the 2021 SA Report, when this was previously preferred

The Council’s preferred high level growth option for housing is for 816 homes per annum based on the Standard Methodology rebased to 2021.

The Standard Methodology should inform the minimum number of homes required in an area as confirmed by paragraph 61 of the NPPF and the National Planning Practice Guidance (“NPPG”), but strategic policies must still be based on an objective assessment of housing requirements, and strategic policies must ensure they meet the minimum objectively assessed needs in order to meet the presumption in favour of

sustainable development test at paragraph 11 and the 'positively prepared' test at paragraph 35 of the NPPF.

Each of the objective assessments and the sustainability appraisal undertaken by the Council point to a housing requirement above the Standard Methodology. Indeed, there are compelling reasons to go beyond this figure to ensure the planned economic ambitions of the Council are aligned with required housing delivery. To not do so would lead to unsustainable travel and migration patterns and potentially higher levels of unaffordability if economic growth continued to outstrip housing requirements for an enlarged workforce.

The Council's preferred high level growth option at the time of the 2017 Interim SA Report was for 1,113 homes per annum to reflect economic aspirations to support higher jobs growth in line with the Cheshire and Warrington devolution bid. This option was previously preferred by the Council. As such, it is unreasonable to not consider this level of housing growth again as a reasonable alternative and re-test this through the sustainability appraisal process for the Submission Plan.

Point 3 – The failure to provide adequate reasons to discount 945 homes per annum in the 2021 SA Report, when this was previously preferred

The Council's preferred high level growth option at the time of the 2019 SA Report was for 945 homes per annum based on the economic growth scenario. Whilst this has been tested in the latest iteration of the sustainability appraisal, it is now rejected by the Council with very limited justification in the 2021 SA Report itself.

The Development Options and Site Assessment Technical Report (September 2021) provides the Council's rationale for the preferred high level growth strategy, which seeks to align housing growth with the minimum local housing needs however this does not refer to the outcomes of the 2021 SA Report.

The 2021 SA Report says that the positive socio-economic effects recorded for the options under Scenario G (816 homes per annum) are slightly lower when compared to Scenarios E (909 homes per annum) and Scenario F (945 homes per annum) but that the effects are still significant (Appendix C, page 299). However, the socio-economic impacts of Scenario G (816 homes per annum) have not been thoroughly considered or explored within the 2021 SA Report.

The 2021 SA Report goes on to says that the negative effects of Scenario G (816 homes per annum) in terms of several sustainability factors would be reduced (Appendix C, page 299). However, it must be acknowledged that the previous iteration of the sustainability appraisal concluded that this level of growth could occur without undue harm to the environment. It must also be acknowledged that the sustainability appraisal process is skewed towards environmental considerations (as set out above).

Pegasus Group have provided a note on economic growth and housing need (Appendix 6), which finds that as a minimum the previously preferred option of 945 homes per annum should be the housing requirement if the Local Plan is to meet the positively prepared test. The Council's previous evidence base reports and the 2019 SA Report demonstrate that this target can be met without undue environmental or social harm.

High Level Distributions Options

3.15 Having considered the sustainability appraisal, in relation to the high level distribution options, it is noted that:

- The Council previously opted for Green Belt release to provide 8,791 homes and 247ha of employment land;
- The Council then opted for Green Belt release to provide 7,064 homes and 246ha of employment land; and,
- The Council have now opted for Green Belt release to provide 4,372 homes and 245ha of employment land.

Point 5 – It was previously found that Green Belt release for 8,791 homes and 7,064 homes could be achieved without unduly adverse social or environmental impact

Point 6 – It was previously found that Green Belt release for 7,064 homes could be achieved without unduly adverse social or environmental impacts

Point 7 – The Council’s preferred option for Green Belt release to provide 4,372 homes performs less well in terms of socio-economic objectives when compared to the previously preferred high level distribution options.

The preferred high level distribution options have remained constant throughout the Local Plan Review which seeks to release Green Belt adjacent to the main urban area of Warrington, with incremental growth at the outlying settlements.

The Council’s preferred high level distribution option at the time of the 2017 Interim SA Report was for Green Belt release for 8,791 homes, which indicates that Green Belt

release at this scale could be achieved without unduly adverse social or environmental impacts. Furthermore, the Council’s preferred high level distribution option at the time of the 2019 SA Report was for Green Belt release for 7,064 homes, which again indicates that Green Belt release at this scale could be achieved without unduly adverse social or environmental impacts. Indeed, the majority of this additional growth can be accommodated within a 'Weak' performing strategic Green Belt parcel (General Area 10), which is not fettered by any significant environmental constraints.

Now the Council’s preferred option is for Green Belt release to provide 4,372 homes and 245ha of employment land. It should be noted that the preferred high level distribution option in the 2021 SA Report performs less well in terms of socio-economic objectives when compared to the previously preferred high level distribution options. This is a particular important point to make in the context of a Borough which is woefully underperforming in terms of meeting its housing needs.

Locations of Development

3.17 Having considered the sustainability appraisal, in relation to the locations of development, it is noted that:

- The Council previously opted for a less dispersed approach adjacent to the main urban area of Warrington including a Garden Suburb of 6,000 homes and south west extension of 2,000 homes – this performed best in the sustainability appraisal;
- The Council then opted for a less dispersed approach adjacent to the main urban area of Warrington including a Garden Suburb of 4,200 homes and south west extension of 1,600 – this option was preferred in the sustainability appraisal because:
 - It was capable of meeting development needs and deliver infrastructure needed to support the development itself and contribute to the wider sustainable development of Warrington as a whole;
 - Revised Green Belt boundaries were likely to be robust and durable beyond the Plan period;
 - Whilst housing delivery from these sites is unlikely within the early years of the Plan period, incremental growth in the outlying settlements, and continued development within the urban area itself will help to ensure that housing supply is maintained in the short term; and,
 - The positive effects of a smaller Garden Suburb would be less pronounced with regards to health and wellbeing and green infrastructure enhancements; and,

- The Council have now opted for a more dispersed approach adjacent to the main urban area of Warrington including a smaller Garden Suburb of 2,400 homes, referred to as the South East Warrington Urban Extension, Fiddlers Ferry and Thelwall Heys; and,
- The Council's rationale for the selection of the main urban area development locations is set out in the Development Options and Site Assessment Technical Report (September 2021).

Point 8 – The failure to test a less dispersed pattern of development (a larger Garden Suburb and South West Urban Extension) as a reasonable alternative to a more dispersed pattern of development (South East Warrington Urban Extension, Fiddlers Ferry and Thelwall Heys).

Options for the Garden Suburb

- 3.18 This section of 2021 SA Report says that the Council still consider the Garden Suburb to be a reasonable option for meeting residual housing need, but that the scale of growth considered reasonable (at this stage) is approximately 2,400 dwellings in the plan period. As such, the Garden Suburb is subsequently referred to as the South East Warrington Urban Extension. The main reason for this reduction in the overall scale of growth is given as the challenges relating to the timely delivery of infrastructure and rates of housing delivery.
- 3.19 Four options are considered for the South East Warrington Urban Extension which are shown on a series of figures, including:
- Figure 8.1: SEWUE Option 1 – Land extending from Grappenhall Heys in the north to the south as far as Stretton Lane.
 - Figure 8.2: SEWUE Option 2 – Similar to Option 1 but extending further south to the M56.
 - Figure 8.3: SEWUE Option 3 – This option includes the Homes England land around Grappenhall Heys but extends to the south east to include land being promoted by private developers, up to the boundary of Broad Lane in the east. Some of the Consortia land is included in this option.
 - Figure 8.4: SEWUE Option 3 – This option includes the eastern element of the original allocation, extending southwards parallel to the A50 to the potential proposed employment location and westwards to include the land where there neighbourhood centre was envisaged to be located. Most of the Consortia land is included in this option.
- 3.20 Each option performs relatively similar, which is to be expected given that they are all in the same broad location and involve the same parcels of land to an extent. Option 2 is identified as the preferred option as it would make the strongest contribution to ensuring the permanence of the

revised Green Belt boundaries in the long term, without the loss of any strongly performing Green Belt parcels.

Point 9 – The failure to test a larger Garden Suburb as a reasonable alternative to the South East Warrington Urban Extension

The Council’s preferred locations of development includes a smaller Garden Suburb, referred to as the South East Warrington Urban Extension.

However, the Council’s preferred locations of development at the time of the 2017 Interim SA Report was for a Garden City Suburb of approximately 6,000 homes and an urban extension to the south west of Warrington of up to 2,000 homes. At that time, it was concluded that this scale of development could take place without undue environmental or social impacts.

Furthermore, the Council’s preferred locations of development at the time of the 2019 SA Report was for a Garden Suburb to the south east of the Warrington of around 4,200 homes (within the Plan period) and an urban extension to the south west of around 1,600 homes. Again, this highlights that the originally envisaged Garden Suburb proposal can be achieved without resulting in undue environmental harm. As such, development in the region of this scale of growth within south east Warrington must be tested as a reasonable alternative within the sustainability appraisal.

Moreover, other smaller options for the Garden Suburb were dismissed on the basis that they would not deliver sufficient social and physical infrastructure required in this part of Warrington.

No reconsideration has been given to a larger Garden Suburb within the 2021 SA Report despite this being the preferred option earlier in the Local Plan Review. As such, the Council's latest decisions have not been founded on a sufficiently robust testing of all reasonable options. As such, a larger Garden Suburb option within south east Warrington must be tested as a reasonable alternative within the sustainability appraisal.

The NPPF says at paragraph 19 that local plans and spatial development strategies should be informed throughout their preparation by a sustainability appraisal that meets the relevant legal requirements. The reference to relevant legal requirements refers to the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004, commonly referred to as the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations (SEA Regulations).

Section 12 of the SEA Regulations says where an environmental assessment is required, the responsible authority shall prepare, or secure the preparation of, an environmental report. The report shall identify, describe and evaluate the likely significant effects on the environment of implementing the plan or programme and reasonable alternatives taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of the plan or programme.

NPPG confirms the following:

"A sustainability appraisal is a systematic process that must be carried out during the preparation of a Local Plan. Its role is to promote sustainable development by assessing the extent to which the emerging plan, when judged against reasonable alternatives, will help to achieve relevant environmental, economic and social objectives."

3.29 In terms of the options for the Garden Suburb it is noted that earlier in the sustainability appraisal process it was identified that a smaller Garden Suburb of 2,400 homes would:

- Not bring with it the same potential to achieve strategic infrastructure improvements compared to a larger Garden Suburb option;
- Have lower positive effects as the strategic green space secured would be lower, as well as new social infrastructure compared to a larger Garden Suburb option; and,
- Not be as effective at establishing comprehensive transport infrastructure when compared to the larger Garden Suburb options.

3.30 In the latest sustainability appraisal a larger Garden Suburb of 4,200 homes was not considered as a reasonable alternative despite this being identified earlier in the sustainability appraisal as:

- Being more likely to achieve significant positive effects upon socio-economic factors;
- Being able to deliver substantial improvements to infrastructure as well as supporting growth to the south west of the urban area, which ought to support regeneration within inner Warrington;
- Being able to provide new and existing communities to have good access to health care, recreational facilities, open space and walking and cycling links to promote active travel; and,
- Having the potential to deliver major improvements to transport networks and create communities with good access to a range of services.

Point 10 - The failure to provide sufficient justification for a smaller Garden Suburb

The 2021 SA Report only considers Garden Suburb options of approximately 2,400 dwellings in the Plan period and refers to it as the South East Warrington Urban Extension. The main reason for this reduction in the overall scale of growth is given as the challenges relating to the timely delivery of infrastructure and rates of housing delivery.

However, this is insufficient justification for the South East Warrington Urban Extension instead of the previously preferred larger Garden Suburb, because:

- **The delivery of infrastructure and rates of housing delivery were acknowledged when the larger Garden Suburb was identified as the preferred option, but this did not prevent its allocation in the first draft regulation 19 WLP (March 2019);**
- **The Garden Suburb was made up of three distinct villages and a neighbourhood centre, which led to the assumption in the Warrington Garden Suburb Development Framework (Aecom, March 2019) that development could commence on multiple fronts, which consequently impacted on the overall trajectory figures and resulted in the anticipated delivery as set out in the housing trajectory in the first draft regulation 19 WLP (March 2019);**
- **There is no evidence to suggest that the Garden Suburb could not be delivered and phased in accordance with the requirement now set out in 'Policy MD2 – South East Warrington Urban Extension'; and,**
- **The phasing requirements of the South East Warrington Urban Extension could delay housing delivery given that it is incumbent on Homes England delivering a significant portion of the site and whose delivery rates in this area are demonstrably slow, and is reliant on substantial improvements to infrastructure.**

No reconsideration has been given to a larger Garden Suburb within the 2021 SA Report despite this being the preferred option in the 2019 SA Report at the time of the first draft Regulation 19 WLP (March 2019). As such, the Council's latest decisions have not been founded on a sufficiently robust testing of all reasonable alternatives.

Appraisal Findings: Site Options

- 3.31 This section says that detailed proformas for each site option, including a map of the site location and boundaries are contained within separate reports (# 6.1.7). However, there is no link to these separate reports, and it is unclear whether they are missing but are intended to form part of the SA Report or the evidence base of the second draft Regulation 19 WLP (September 2021).

Point 11 – Separate reports that are referred to in the 2021 SA Report, including proforma, are missing and need to be provided with the submission documents so that can be considered by all interested parties and the Local Plan Inspector.

The separate reports which have informed the sustainability appraisal in the 2021 SA Report need to be provided to us and clearly cross referenced so that they can be considered as part of the Regulation 19 consultation.

3.32 'Table 6.2: Housing site options (Main urban area of Warrington)' lists all sites which were considered in the sustainability appraisal. It is also suggested that these sites are shown on 'Figure 6.1: Warrington Local Plan: Site Options and Allocations (Housing)'. However, not all sites considered in 'Table 6.2: Housing site options (Main urban area of Warrington)' are shown on 'Figure 6.1: Warrington Local Plan: Site Options and Allocations (Housing)' – including R18/P2/125A and R18/P2/125B (Taylor Wimpey), R18/P2/113 (Mulbury Homes (Grappenhall) Limited), and R18/P2/116 (Lone Star Limited).

Point 12 – Sites are omitted from Figure 6.1 of 2021 SA Report including the Consortium Land and this should be rectified since it would provide a clear indication of land in Warrington Garden Suburb

Omitted sites should be added to Figure 6.1 particularly those which would provide a visual depiction of land within the larger Garden Suburb which was the preferred option earlier in the Local Plan Review and, as set out above, should have been considered as a reasonable alternative in the 2021 SA Report.