

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Report by the South Warrington Parishes Local Plan Working Group (SWP)

September 2020

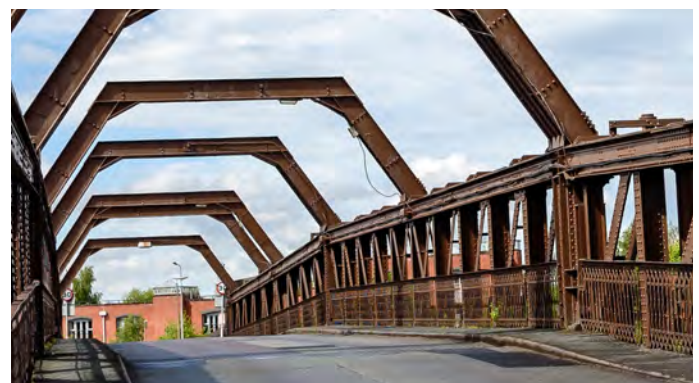
1. INTRODUCTION

Warrington Borough Council has been in the process of producing a new Local Plan for more than 5 years. At various stages in this process the Council has consulted the public, residents and business in the Borough, potential developers and landowners, and neighbouring Councils over the content of the Plan. This process has resulted in the submission of many thousands of comments from residents across the town, expressing concern over the content of the the Proposed Submission Version (PSV) of the Local Plan.

As it stands, it would seem that the Council is choosing to largely disregard those and many other similar objections from across the Borough and that the PSV, largely unaltered, will form the Local Plan Submission Document (LPSD) that will be presented to the Secretary of State, for progression to approval via Examination in Public (EIP).

The South Warrington Parishes Local Plan Working Group (SWP) is deeply concerned at the course the Council is following because it believes it is likely that the LPSD will be found unsound by the inspector at the EIP, with the result that the Local Plan will have to be changed with consequent loss of time.

This is a summary of our Report 'A New Plan for a Changing World' which sets out our reasoning for a new Local Plan which would be better for Warrington as a whole in these changing times. We believe it would be sounder and have a better chance of being accepted at the EIP.



2. THE TEST OF SOUNDNESS

In order to meet with the approval of the Secretary of State, the Plan has to be considered to be “sound.” It must be based on robust evidence. It must be viable. It must be deliverable. The SWP is concerned that the Plan will not meet this test for the following reasons.

- It is built around inflated housing numbers
- It is the result of a weak strategy which relies entirely on growth driven by logistics-based (i.e. road-based) employment at out-of-town sites, and housing development based on levels of house-building which are simply not credible when viewed in a historic context. To achieve the desired outcome, the rate of house-building would have to double compared with the average achieved in the last 10 years. The PSV does not explain how such a dramatic improvement can be achieved.
- A strategy based on road transport is undesirable for environmental and health reasons and is already outdated thinking
- Large areas of Green Belt would be lost to house-building.
- It does not explain how, even if the housing goal was achieved, Warrington as a whole would benefit. In fact, it seems likely that the rest of the town would be neglected as resources are sucked in by the new housing. It would be harder for the town to fund its targets for education and health in the area as a whole. The present inequalities in the town would be exacerbated.
- It is no doubt hoped that some of the residents of the new Garden Suburb will either work in the new logistics facilities (unlikely) or in Manchester or Liverpool (road-based again, and strategically undesirable) and spend their money in Warrington. The obstacle to this is that Warrington is an unusual town bisected by three waterways which impede the flow of road-based traffic from south to north. The hope of reviving the Town Centre in this way would need to be supported by credible infrastructure proposals for improving south-north communications within the town. There are no such proposals in the current Local Plan.

The PSV is therefore likely to be found unsound at the EIP.

3. A CHANGING WORLD

Within the last year, external circumstances have changed dramatically. Covid-19 has changed everything. It is SWP’s view that the flaws in the current plan as highlighted above, will expose the weaknesses of the PSV proposals to an even greater extent, simply because of the circumstances faced by the economy of the town, the North West and the Country. For a range of reasons, community expectations, aspirations and requirements are very different now, not only to the 2014 household projections and the 2016 evidence base used in the original version of the Local Plan, but even to the evidence used to support the 2019 PSV.

It is obvious to even the most casual observer that at the present time a number of significant factors are impacting on the way the residents of Warrington choose to live and work in comparison with circumstances which existed in 2019, let alone 2014. The most immediate of these is Covid-19. But there are others, all of which have progressed or developed since the PSV was prepared, such as; changes in the planning process, the economic recession, departure from the EU, the advent of HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail, availability of previously-developed sites in Warrington, LTP4, climate change and sustainability, the Town Centre, Port Warrington, viability and deliverability of the PSV, and inequality issues.

4. A NEW APPROACH

SWP considers there is a better strategy, a better way forward. WBC could still produce a better Local Plan, which is less likely to be found unsound, which would be of benefit to all residents of the Borough and which, critically, would ameliorate some of the inequalities which currently exist across the town.

In the light of the increased risk that the PSV will be found unsound at EIP and the significant changes, outlined above, that have occurred since the PSV was prepared and presented for consultation, the Council would be fully justified in taking a step back, to review and reflect on the consequences of change. SWP suggests that it would be possible and desirable to develop a new Local Plan in order to overcome the deficiencies set out above and thus to establish a realistic, shared and deliverable vision for Warrington.

The main elements of a New Local Plan would be -

- Reducing housing numbers to a minimum through a more thorough assessment of need and by reassessing the plan period.
- Avoiding the creation of large new suburbs dependent on travel by car, but placing new development where it can be accessed and afforded by those who need it most
- Develop the role of the town centre to reflect changes in retailing
- Make use of brown field sites such as Fiddlers Ferry, the hospital site and Bank Quay
- Develop a rail-based strategy that sees Warrington's position at the junction of both north-south and east-west rail routes as a key transport hub.

The advantages of a New Local Plan would be -

- The use of realistic housing numbers.
- Reduced building on Green Belt.
- Making best use of Warrington's rail assets and avoiding massive spending on road infrastructure to be viable.
- A greater benefit in terms of improvement in Air Quality than the current Local Plan.
- A greater focus of Council spending in the town centre, with consequent reduction of current levels of inequality in the town, and the creation of opportunities for improvement of education and healthcare.
- Reducing the chance that the Plan will be found unsound at EIP.





5. CONCLUSION

There is an opportunity to step back and reconsider. The PSV should be withdrawn in response to the increased risk of being found unsound and in response to the changes that have occurred externally. It would be possible to produce in its place a sounder new Local Plan, to the benefit of all the residents and businesses in the Borough, whilst achieving higher levels of consensus and credibility than currently exist.

