

Dear Sirs,


Warrington Preferred Development Option Consultation

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my comments on the Preferred Development Options that Warrington Borough Council have put forward as the first stage of preparing a new Local Plan. 

be over the unnecessary release of Green Belt land to support a massive expansion of the town – and its transformation into a city – but I have read the documents that you posted on the website, and attended two of the consultation events. These have informed my views, and I hope my response recognises some positive parts to your plans as well offering constructive criticism.

Context and uncertainty

The proposals have been developed at a time of great uncertainty, both nationally and locally. Nationally, the 2016 referendum on leaving the EU has introduced significant uncertainty on the prospects for the economy over the next years or decades. How should this feed into a local plan – should expansion be scaled back – should our main focus be on consolidating the town rather than overstretching? This does not seem to be discussed.

Additionally the current government has introduced a bizarre middle tier of Government in the form of directly elected mayors with enhanced powers for the major city regions. Warrington is in the unusual position (I believe unique position, but I have not checked this) of being sandwiched between two new city regions.  lived in Warrington, we have had some advantages to our location with good motorway links and a mainline train service, but we may suffer in the next period of time from being outside the sphere of influence of the two city regions. Ideally we would have a regional vision in which our plans could sit, but this is not the current model.

The major focus – revitalising the town centre

Getting the town centre working properly must be a major priority in the next local plan. I welcome much of what is in the proposed plan in these areas. This includes completion of the Time Square developments, revitalising Bridge Street, the new Riverside Housing

developments, and looking to provide a mixture of housing and employment options in the town centre.

There was a really interesting article in the Guardian last week on the problems facing Bolton as it lost shops to the major draws of the City of Manchester and the Trafford Centre; and how its town centre, which I remember as thriving 30 years ago, is now pretty run down. The unfortunate fact is that this article could have been written equally about Warrington. With the loss of BHS, M&S and even Debenhams under threat, Warrington is looking decidedly shabby. I think some of this is of our own making. We have allowed developers to move shopping to out of town centres – and this is still going on with the expansion to Alban Retail Park. It makes it all more convenient to those of us with cars, but the effect on the town is evident.

Central to the prospect of revitalising town/city centres is increasing the number of people living close to the town centre who will use the shops, restaurants and cinemas. You can see this from thriving cities on your foreign holidays, but also close at home with the examples of Manchester and Liverpool. Even 20 years ago Liverpool was a totally different place; people had moved away from the city centre and there was a seedy, even dangerous, feel as you walked around at night. The warehouse conversions to flats in the old docks, and now extending to the North, and “executive” flats springing up nearer the City has meant there is a new customer base for the city businesses. As a result, Liverpool seems to have weathered the economic slump of the last ten years better than most cities in Britain. The message for us in Warrington is clear – our focus on housing should be high quality flats close to the town centre, not a major “garden city suburb” disconnected from the town.

So why the garden city suburb?

I had chats with several of your staff at the consultation events. This brought out something I had missed previously. The major reason for the new houses is because developers will object to the Local Plan if there aren't sufficient opportunities for them in the next 20 years. I know that there is a prejudice in favour of the developer, but this is ridiculous. We should be allowed to develop a plan which suits Warrington's needs and treat additional development proposals on their own merits.

Connectivity with the town and the “new” bridge

[REDACTED] I know that connectivity with the town is not as good as we would like. Warrington to the South of Ship Canal is linked to the rest of the town by the three swing bridges and the Cantilever Bridge. I know that the Western Link Road is proposed in the next few years, but this will only have a marginal effect on traffic as far away as Grappenhall.

It does not take much to cause “melt down” of the local traffic system. In recent months we have had issues caused by the closure of the Cantilever Bridge for resurfacing, by problems on the M6, even just by people diverting off the motorway when there is high wind or rain. Many of us think that Warrington will suffer from the decision to charge tolls on the Runcorn-Widnes bridges, even the one that has been free for 50 years. One

thing for certain is that the roads connecting us with the town centre will become busier if the new garden city suburb is built.

The solution in the proposed plan is the proposed bridge following the line of the old Warrington to Stockport railway line (the Pennine Trail and Latchford railway bridge) is – quite frankly – bonkers! Traffic will be higher than the houses in Bradshaw Road, Ollerton Close and Poynton Close, which is hardly desirable. When it gets to the north side in Latchford the sketch gets deliberately vague. This is because there is no easy way to link it in with the existing road network. I can see three ways, but none of them work; a complex turning ramp to bring traffic onto Thelwall Road, a more gradual ramp alongside the canal to join by the Swing Bridge, or keep the road high over the A50 and somehow engineer a termination by the flats by the Cantilever bridge. All of them put traffic in places where they would add to problems.

It is reported that there is a major caveat to the current plans – the council recognises the need for traffic modelling. Anyone who knows the area could save a lot of money going to consultants – the current planned road cannot help! I also think that the costs will escalate – even planning to retain the existing piers and throwing a new road deck over it will end up costing a significant amount. I know that the intention is to levy the developers with money for infrastructure, but I doubt that current estimates get anyway near the true infrastructure costs.

I understand the difficulty that the planners had with the proposed road – there is no easy way of addressing the issues of the canal and river. When we moved South, I had a meeting at the Town Planning Office, and was talked through the then extant plan – this was to be a grandiose flyover near the Cantilever Bridge which I think would have gone through the area where the flats have been built and skirted the playing fields of Sir Thomas Boteler school to join up with the A50. With development since, I think the only real practicable plan would be to engineer a crossing underneath the Thelwall viaduct – maybe sharing the piers - but this is much further out.

Where will the garden city suburb residents work/shop?

The reality of building houses with good connections to the motorway but poor ones to the nearest town would be that it is more likely that the garden city suburb becomes the garden city dormitory suburb. I think it will attract people who work in Manchester or Chester who want a better house than one they can afford nearer to work. As a result this doesn't actually relate to Warrington – in fact this suburb could be landed anywhere near any motorway junction and still deliver what the developers want. This relates back to my earlier point about the lack of a regional policy or vision.

Loss of the Green Belt

For some years, we were assured that the overall approach to development between Lymm and Stockton Heath was to regard the Bridgewater Canal as the defendable boundary of the Green Belt. The current proposal blows that entirely out of the water and concedes all the way to the M56 motorway. This is entirely disproportionate and is unnecessary pandering to the wishes of developers.

There have always been some soft edges to the policy. In this respect Grappenhall Heys has played the role of a “stalking horse”. The presence of this development has allowed the plan to propose linking it to existing settlements on all sides. Existing villages will lose their identity - all swept up in the mash of the Garden City Suburb. A more gradual approach would allow some additional development – maybe to link up Grappenhall Heys with Broad Lane and improve its connectivity, but still maintaining distance from the Bridgewater Canal and the farmland to its North, South and West. Other less dramatic developments could be allowed inside the existing Green Belt, for example in the Thelwall Heys and Camsley Grange areas. This would allow a more sustainable and gradual development pattern. Grappenhall and Thelwall would benefit from some additional development and refreshment of housing stock, especially if it included a variety of differing house types and sizes.

“If you build it they will come”

If the proposals become embedded in the local plan, the intention will be to levy developers and start to build infrastructure. Unfortunately this does not mean that the developers will actually build the houses. Developers all around Britain sit on land banks which they could build on, but don't. They build when there is an adequate return on their investment, and when this represents the best use of their resources.

I think there is a naive assumption that a Garden City Suburb will follow the same ordered development that we had during the Warrington New Town era. Instead, I believe there is a significant risk that development takes place much slower than planned. As a result we will have “roads to nowhere” and empty fields with access roads but no houses – potentially for decades. I don't think this dystopic vision is worth the immediate blight to the existing Green Belt to enable this patchwork development.

Conclusion

Although I welcome the intention to improve the town centre as a place to live and work and welcome these aspects of the proposal, I believe that the proposed loss of the Green Belt land in South Warrington is an unnecessary development driven, not by need, but by the wish to avoid challenge by external parties. I also have doubts whether the developers will develop at the rate assumed, and strongly suspect that the plan is deliverable.

I hope you find my contribution to the debate helpful.

Yours sincerely,

