

WARRINGTON LOCAL PLAN REVIEW

Comment on Preferred Development Option

I refer to the above mentioned document, subsequently abbreviated to the 'Review'. All references in brackets relate to this publication.

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Green Belt

In any assessment of 'Exceptional Circumstances' that might be paraded as an excuse to overturn Green Belt policy, it is relevant to consider the original impetus behind the policy. The August 1955 Ministry of Housing and Local Government Circular 42/55 emphasised the need to 1) check the growth of large built up areas, 2) prevent neighbouring towns from merging, 3) to preserve the special character of towns. Such distinctions were the very essence of good Town and Country Planning. The obverse would have been a free-for-all and an act of irrevocable folly. In order to conserve the integrity of urban areas and protect 'countryside', there it a sacrosanct need to uphold thresholds of where 'hard' areas end and 'soft' areas commence.

There will always be those who, for a multitude of vested interests, will attempt to undermine such a distinction. An inventory of reasons to overturn such policy will be form the basis of a constant battle; excuses will include the run-down character of the area/space/gap BUT such areas are a finite and irreplaceable asset that need to be protected. They have the potential to become a significant resource, whether ecologically, for social cohesion or as a psychological or visual separation.

The current imperative for sustainable development (however that might be argued) is in danger of eroding land close to the Warrington conurbation. I implore the decision makers to reject the easy option to ignore GB policy, one of the most important planning tenets ever conceived.

Warrington's Green Belt

Assessing the extent of required housing numbers is but one facet of a complex equation. Locating them in the 'right place' is a totally different consideration. It is imperative **NOT** to squander the land resource on which to locate these houses, thereby changing irrevocably the character of the area. Apart from considerations such as infrastructure (capacity of roads/schools/sewage et al) it is critical to identify the 'right' land on which to build. The inherent value of land is varied; some of greater 'worth' than others. The Council will be acutely aware that considerations of landscape 'value', visual worth, nature conservation et al are fundamental components. However, how much store has actually been placed on these values by Warrington BC and their consultants?

The Green Belt is tightly drawn around the urban area of Warrington, in particular restricting development to the south of the Manchester Ship Canal and to the north of the M6. Both of these geographical features form **strong defensible boundaries** to the town.

Historically, the Ship Canal has formed a defining edge to the (formerly) industrial town of Warrington, separating the urban area of Warrington from the rural and village character of the Cheshire countryside to the south. The landscape of this area has a distinctive character, becoming generally more rolling, wooded and rural, within which the villages of Stockton Heath, Grappenhall, Lymm, Daresbury and Moore each have their own identities. This contrasts with the flatter and overall, poorer landscape quality to the north, north-west and east of the town.

It is noticeable and perhaps not surprising that the 'Call for Sites' identifies the majority of sites within the more desirable and better quality landscape of north Cheshire and in particular, around the popular 'Des Res' villages of Stockton Heath and Lymm.

We are informed that "Only a small number within the urban area have been put forward for residential development that are not identified on the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA)" (para 3.5). This requires further scrutiny to establish whether this is an accurate assessment of the opportunities.

Although the Review does not provide a comprehensive comment, it dismisses the failure to identify areas to the north of Warrington for major development, with the statement that such sites were "not considered reasonable". Emphatically this is NO explanation and requires elaboration.

As a result, the options promoted by Warrington BC, in its stated ambition to become a 'New City', focus on the areas south of the Ship Canal, hitherto geographically remote from the urban sprawl of Warrington.

Options promoted by Warrington

Notwithstanding the deplorable lack of consideration of extensions to the north of Warrington, well served by the M6 in terms of transport links, I comment on the options for development growth to the south of Warrington, identified in Section 4 of the Review.

Option 1 would appear to be one of the preferred options by Warrington. This, allegedly, will create a large "Garden City Suburb" south of the Ship Canal. Despite claims that this will serve to protect Green Belt in the future, having breached the strong boundary between Warrington conurbation and the outlying Cheshire villages, the pressure to continue future growth out into the Cheshire countryside is inevitable.

Options 2, 3 and 4 in some respect spread the load but in doing so create further pressure on the surrounding countryside and require additional infrastructure on the form the 'Western Link'. This in itself will serve to urbanise the area south of the Ship Canal and will create further 'raison d'être' for future development out into the adjoining villages and the peripheral countryside.

Option 5 opens the door for a more considered and less intense, less developer led, concentration of development but with the disadvantages to the creation of infrastructure et al. However, it does not dismiss the possibility of one or more larger extensions AND importantly, it does "provide the opportunity to maintain the permanence of the Green Belt at a strategic and local level through managed Green Belt release and provides the opportunity to minimise the impact on character and environmental assets, depending on the specific locations of development" (Para 4.64 Table 8: My underlining). COMMENT: Much depends on the details of "specific locations".

South West Extension:

As a former resident of Moore and Warrington, I make the following observations on the proposal to extend the urban fabric of Warrington into the Green Belt area of countryside which separates the rural, canal-side village of Moore from the Warrington conurbation.

Options that impact on the village of Moore fail totally to conserve the gap between both Warrington and Moore and Warrington and Runcorn. Moore is a small rural village based around two farmsteads and a village pub. It has a village community and a strong identity as a small nuclear settlement adjacent to the Bridgewater canal.

The new town of Runcorn has spread its tentacles to within a 'stone's throw' of the western edge of Moore Village (however that is defined) with literally one small field providing a derisory separation between the two settlements. The proposed South West Extension would fill the entire gap between Lower Walton/Walton and the eastern confines of the village. The rural approach to the village would be overwhelmed by residential areas and the village totally subsumed by the urban extension.

The proposed extension, which is reliant on the Western Link if it is to avoid total disruption to traffic accessing Warrington from the west, would fly in the face of the Review 'Strategic Objective W5':

"To secure high quality design which reinforces the character and local distinctiveness of Warrington urban area, its countryside, its unique pattern of green spaces and its constituent settlements whilst protecting, enhancing and embracing the borough's built and natural environment" (my underlining).

Whilst so called 'high quality design' is laudable, in my considerable experience, it is not enforceable to the extent that might be promoted or aspired. In the case of Moore and similar situations, the best design should recognise and conserve the existing inherent setting of these villages and hamlets.

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