

Objection to Local Plan

Eur. Ing. Professor Brian Patrick Axcell M.A., M.Sc., Ph.D., C.Eng., MEI
Borough Councillor for Appleton Ward
Parish Councillor for Cobbs and Hillcliffe on Appleton Parish Council



I do not wish to participate at the oral examination.

Overview

I hereby submit my objections to the Local Plan.

I support the objections made by Appleton Parish Council and by the South Warrington Parishes Group but I wish to stress the unsoundness of the following aspects of the Local Plan:

1. Housing numbers
2. Green Belt release
3. Highway infrastructure
4. Use of town centre sites
5. Use of the site of Fiddler's Ferry Power Station
6. Employment land

Housing numbers

The housing target "has been set to ensure that there are sufficient homes to meet the Council's economic growth aspirations" (page 33 of Local Plan). Thus, the housing number is not based on need but on the Council's desire for the town to become larger and valuable Green belt land is to be sacrificed to achieve this goal.

Just over one third of the housing proposed during the plan period is on Green Belt land (7064 dwellings out of 20790) and these homes will be built at various locations at the edge of the town. 4201 housing units will be in the "Garden Suburb" and 1631 will be in the "South West Extension". I object to the terms "Garden Suburb" and "South West Extension"; the plan should make plain that the former describes Appleton, Grappenhall and Stretton, the latter is a euphemism for Higher Walton.

The Local Plan contains an error on page 33 for the planning permissions already granted for green field sites in the so called "Garden Suburb"; the number is not 930, it is approximately 1020 (400 houses at Grappenhall Heys, 370 at Appleton Cross, 180 at the Pewterspear site in Stretton and about 70 in the centre of Appleton Thorn). When this additional housing is added to that proposed in the Green Belt, something like 40% of new homes built during the plan period will be remote from the town centre.

Further, Warrington's population in 2017 was about 210,000. A total of 20790 new homes in the plan period implies a population increase of 48648 (the 2011 census revealed an average occupancy

in Warrington of 2.34 persons per dwelling), equivalent to a population increase of 23%. Is a population increase of nearly 50,000 during the plan period based on need? I doubt it.

In considering the locations for new housing in south Warrington, it should be noted that at present there is a half-hourly bus service to Walton and an hourly bus service to Appleton Thorn (this bus service passes the boundary of the Pewterspear site). There are currently no buses to Grappenhall Heys or Appleton Cross.

Green Belt release

The proposed developments in the Green Belt would destroy Appleton, Stretton and Walton as we know them. Some of the best countryside in Warrington would be lost forever, all in the cause of the Council's growth aspirations.

If the housing numbers were based on need, not the council's desires (and those, no doubt, of property developers), and more efficient use were made of non-Green Belt sites, this loss of Green Belt would be unnecessary.

Highway infrastructure

The highway proposals in Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) to deal with the extra car traffic generated from the developments in Appleton, Grappenhall and Stretton are minimal. There is no new crossing of the Manchester Ship Canal apart from the Western Link, which will not be beneficial for traffic heading north or into the town centre. The 6,800+ new homes in south Warrington will probably result in an extra 14,000 cars on the road network. If the extra traffic from the new developments is to be accommodated, there would have to be new cross-town routes. Such routes are absent from the plan.

At present, even in the absence of initiating events on the motorways or swing bridges, Warrington experiences regular serious traffic congestion. Some of the congestion hotspots are as follows:

- (a) Stockton Heath and the approaches to the village centre on the A49 in both directions (at travel-to-work and travel-from-work peaks and at lunchtimes, but also routinely throughout the day).
- (b) The Lymm interchange on the M6/A50 and the M6/M56 junction. Vast numbers of HGVs access the road network at the M6/A50 junction and from 4 pm onwards on weekdays this junction is very heavily congested.
- (c) The Thelwall viaduct
- (d) The Cat and Lion junction at the A49/B5356 intersection in Stretton
- (e) Approaches to Bridge Foot on Chester Road, Wilderspool Causeway and Knutsford Road
- (f) Lumb Brook bridge
- (g) The A49 north of the town centre

There are no firm proposals for new roads to deal with these problems. Traffic congestion has a negative impact on the reliability of bus services, which creates a further incentive for car travel.

In LTP4 there is an aspiration for a shift from car travel to more sustainable modes. The target reduction in car journeys from 74% to 60% of the total is highly unlikely to be achieved, given that many of the housing areas are too remote from the town centre to encourage walking or cycling and bus services are infrequent and expensive. Even if all of the new housing areas had a half-hourly bus service, this would be unlikely to attract many people from their cars. For a substantial shift towards

bus travel, Transport for London bus frequencies and bus fares would be needed; these are not economically possible outside the capital.

As stated previously, Warrington's population in 2017 was about 210,000 and a total of 20790 new homes in the plan period implies a population increase of 48648 or 23%. If one assumes that the number of journeys made is proportional to the town's population, the unlikely shift in car journeys from 74% to 60% of the total, a factor of 0.81, would result in just about exactly the same number of car journeys being made at the end of the Local Plan/LTP4 period, given the 23% increase in population. An almost certain failure to achieve this sizeable modal shift would lead to yet more cars on the roads. In addition, an increase in HGV traffic will occur if employment land in the "Garden Suburb" is occupied by the haulage industry and there will be extra associated car travel (see below).

Use of town centre sites

For years there have been empty sites in the town centre, mainly designated for retail, because of increasing problems nationally in the "High Street". Empty sites should be used for housing; more people living in the town centre would revitalise it and there would be less pressure on the road network. In contrast, if traffic congestion increases because of all the out-of-town housing developments, then fewer people will visit the town centre and its decline will continue. An increased use of the town centre for housing means that less housing will be required on the Green Belt. Development should start in the Town Centre, not on the fringes of the town.

Fiddler's Ferry Power Station

During the consultation for the Preferred Development Option for the Local Plan, as a Chartered Energy Engineer I was among the residents who pointed out that the very large Fiddler's Ferry Power Station site would become available during the plan period. This observation was ignored by the Borough Council.

It has now been announced that the power station will close in March 2020. Any new power station on the site would have a far smaller footprint because there would be no requirement to store coal and deal with ash. This large brownfield site must now be considered for development in the local plan, which would take pressure off the Green Belt.

Employment land

If land in the Green Belt in the so-called "Garden Suburb" identified as employment land is, as expected, taken over by the haulage industry, HGV traffic at the M6 and M56 junctions will increase significantly. Further, because such employment is relatively low-paid, many people employed here will travel to work from outside the immediate area because housing in south Warrington would be unaffordable for them, adding yet more traffic to the road network. The outcome will be worse traffic congestion.

Conclusion

In summary, the Local Plan is unsound in many areas and it should be rejected.

B. P. Axcell
15th June 2019