

Local Plan, Policy Planning & Programmes
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15 June 2019

COMMENTS ON WARRINGTON DRAFT LOCAL PLAN

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] We have only just briefly viewed the Zoning Map and documentation and make the following hurried comments to meet the 17 June consultation deadline.

Our comments relate to the proposed rezoning of land for housing and employment in the 'Garden Suburb' (South Warrington) area.

We are opposed to the vast scale and extent of this rezoning (from its existing Green Belt designation) on grounds (1) and (2) below.

1. Harmful impact on countryside character and loss of agricultural land.

This area of rolling Cheshire countryside is unquestionably of exceptional high landscape value. Its open character and topography make it an area of 'true' Green Belt. The area is also of high amenity value to the general public – to be appreciated and enjoyed not only by local residents but all Warrington residents and visitors to the town. It is one of Warrington's real assets. The land is also of good agricultural value; I know this first hand from my past dealings in the late 70's/early 80's with two landowners/farmers of a large part of the eastern area [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Having not fully read the Local Plan, we are not clear on the justification for the specified housing need/numbers for the town. However, even accepting these numbers, we consider that the importance of the continued protection of this most valuable area of countryside far outweighs the housing and economic need arguments – and this certainly in respect of the scale and extent of the rezoning now proposed, extending east right across to the A50 and south to the M56.

There obviously has to be a reasonable 'balance' and acceptance of a certain degree of development to help meet housing needs (this subject also to the infrastructure constraints – see (2) below). Such development should in our opinion be extremely more limited and provided within those parts of the area within the original defined New Town boundary; this could then surely go hand in hand with the specified housing and employment needs being met on brownfield sites and areas of lesser landscape value in other parts of the Borough and/or, viewed on a sub-regional level, in neighbouring districts.

We make these comments not as 'nimbies' but as Warrington residents, thinking of the long term future of the town and the importance of safeguarding areas of special open countryside for the enjoyment of this and future generations.

Supplementary comment on Employment land allocation

We are astonished that, on the most elevated part of this open countryside area – which must be one of the highest points in Warrington – the Council propose to rezone such a large area (approx. 286 acres) for employment development, to include warehousing/logistics use with inevitable humungous sized sheds as evidenced by the recent Stobart and Langtree applications – and this within a so-called ‘Garden Suburb.’ Such development would have an enormous adverse impact on the countryside character of the area, not only in terms of the buildings themselves but the associated traffic generation in the area. For this reason we consider that the weight to be given to the landscape impact and environmental considerations far outweighs the economic/employment arguments in the particular site circumstances.

The development also cannot reasonably be justified on the basis of it being a so-called ‘extension’ of the Barleycastle Lane warehousing complex. The Barleycastle Lane complex was permitted for warehousing on the basis of it being a brownfield site – namely the site of the disused former Stretton Airfield. The proposed new employment site, apart from it being more than twice the size of the Barleycastle Lane complex, is a greenfield site.

2. Traffic implications/highways infrastructure

Before our recent return to Warrington, we were repeatedly informed about the severe traffic congestion in the town and the peak hour ‘gridlock’ problem, particularly with regard to the north-south/south-north traffic movements, which everybody opined resulted from increased development being permitted without adequate infrastructure. Traffic congestion is of course a problem throughout Britain and is part of modern life but, in considering the planning and infrastructure issue in the case of South Warrington, it is useful to view the current Draft Local Plan in its recent historical context.

New Town Designation/Outline Plan/development threshold

Following Warrington’s designation as a New Town in 1968, large areas of land in South Warrington were zoned for housing under the Development Corporation’s New Town Outline Plan (approved in 1973 following an Inquiry in 1972).

Most importantly, the proposed zoning of these areas went hand in hand with the provision of a proposed ‘North-South Expressway’ involving a new high level bridge (HLB) across the Ship Canal alongside the Cantilever Bridge – the expressway running south to the M56 and north to connect with two east-west expressways across the town.

The purpose of the N-S expressway was to serve the new proposed development and avoid and relieve traffic congestion on the A49 (through Stockton Heath), and the A50 (through Grappenhall and Latchford). Also to help relieve Bridge Foot. The expressway/HLB was itself controversial because of its potential environmental impact and impact on residents around the HLB section. It was nonetheless integral to the opening up of the South Warrington ‘Bridgewater’ area for development.

My recollections are:-

- (i) That at the Inquiry into the Outline Plan (1972) it was agreed that no more than 1,000 houses would be permitted south of the Canal in the absence of the related HLB/N-S expressway.
- (ii) That as far back as 1980, following approval of the Development Corporation's detailed submissions for their first phases of development in the Dudlow's Green Area, the 1,000 houses threshold had already been exceeded.

NOTE: The Development Corporation's detailed planning submissions for each phase of development did not go through the normal planning permission process but were approved by the (then) Department of Environment under the (then) 1965 New Towns Act.

At this time (circa 1980) my recollection is that, although the Borough Council and former Cheshire County Council Highways had raised strong objections to further major development in South Warrington in advance of the HLB/expressway, these objections were overridden by arguments about the strategic importance of housing land in Bridgewater (for 'executive' housing) both for Warrington and surrounding districts of the County.

This was nearly 40 years ago. Since that time (i.e. since the threshold was exceeded), hundreds of houses - likely over 1,000? - have been built in the 'Bridgewater Area' without the HLB/expressway. No doubt the line taken has been that traffic congestion, as stated before, is part of modern life and has to be balanced against the provision of much needed housing. This is understandable but only to a degree. If for example the continued approval of developments without requisite infrastructure improvements resulted in congestion becoming so severe as to unreasonably obstruct emergency service vehicles (fire and ambulance) it then becomes a threat to public safety and life and becomes unreasonable.

Current Draft Local Plan – numbers and infrastructure

It is appropriate to view the current Plan's proposed housing numbers, with associated highway improvement proposals, in the context of the preceding planning history. These are as follows:-

Housing numbers

- The Plan states that there are already outstanding planning permissions for a further 930 houses to be built in the Garden Suburb area.
- Also that an additional 5,100 houses would be built in this area during the Plan period, with potential for 2,300 more homes beyond that period.
- That a further 1,600 houses would be built in the Walton area.
- Also, the 116 hectares (286 acres) zoned for Employment would be for a stated 'major' new employment area.

Proposed highways improvements.

These involve:

- Major improvements to the junctions of the M56 and M6 early in the Plan period.
- A new strategic link road to provide additional connections from the Garden Suburb to the A49 and A50.

- The Submission map also indicates a ‘Safeguarded Infrastructure’ line alongside the Cantilever Bridge – this so that any future development in that area does not prejudice a future new Ship Canal crossing. Significantly the Report states that:

*‘Further transport infrastructure will be required to support **later** phases of development **towards the end of the Plan period and beyond**. It is anticipated that this will include significant public transport improvements and **potentially** a further crossing of the Manchester Ship Canal.’ (emphasis added)*

Comments and views on traffic/highways issue

- The original HLB/expressway proposal, which was integral to the original (‘73) rezoning of land for development in the Appleton/Grappenhall area, is again put on the back burner under the current Plan, with seemingly thousands more houses to be allowed in advance. Hence being at odds with the original land use/transportation strategy for the planned expansion of this part of South Warrington. Moreover, whilst the HLB/expressway was considered essential to serve the large planned development within the boundary of the New Town Designated Area, the current Local Plan proposes major development both within and way beyond the NTDA boundary (i.e. considerably larger scale of development), with a further crossing of the Ship Canal only ‘potentially’ to be included ‘towards the end of the Plan period and beyond’.
- The combination of the large numbers of dwellings already committed by existing consents, together with the numbers associated with the rezoning, plus the rezoning for a major new employment area, will obviously involve a massive increase in traffic throughout the South Warrington area, in particular the Stockton Heath, Appleton and Grappenhall areas. This will inevitably involve increased traffic congestion in these areas and have an adverse impact on the whole character and amenity of the district.
- The proposed Bridge Foot improvement will no doubt improve north-south traffic through the town generally, but will unlikely affect the massive increase in traffic (as a result of the rezoning) within and through Stockton Heath, Grappenhall/Latchford and the Lumb Brook Road/Cantilever Bridge route into town, with associated congestion.

NOTE: As an example peak hour traffic on the Lumb Brook Road route presently backs up from the Grappenhall Road junction at times nearly as far as Witherwin Avenue. Our neighbours advise that, at peak hours it generally takes 20 minutes in the junction queue just to reach Grappenhall Road. This situation will likely considerably worsen with ‘just’ the 930 houses already committed under existing permissions.

- In the absence of the proposed HLB/expressway, which itself would have a huge impact on residents and the environment, and taking into account the scale of development already built and committed by existing permissions, orderly planning surely dictates that only a much more limited scale and extent of development be permitted in this area, with the existing Green Belt designation largely retained to ensure the continued protection of this special countryside area, for the reasons outlined under point 1.

We reiterate that, due to our circumstances and time constraints with the 17 June deadline, we have not yet been able to properly read the documents and supporting traffic assessments, justification, etc. and hence our comments on the traffic issue are qualified. Our views are based simply on us viewing the Proposals Map and part of the Garden Suburb section.

Conclusion

For the above reasons we strongly object to the vast scale and extent of the Draft Local Plan's proposed rezoning of land – from Green Belt to housing and employment – in the Plan's so-called 'Garden Suburb' area of South Warrington.

Roy & Liz Webster

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