

Local Plan – Matter 10
Retail, Leisure and the Town Centre

The Town Centre at present (2022)

Warrington's town centre has gone through a long period of decline until recent years and the Master Plan, underpinned by the proposed Local Plan, has made some attempt to redress this. However, the town centre is suffering from the legacy of the old New Town planning policies. We contend that the scope and aspirations for Warrington in the proposed Local Plan are limited and based on outmoded urban planning design principles. They lack vision for the future and take no account of changing life styles and climate change (see points 4 and 5 below).

We do not believe that the Local Plan is justified as it does not achieve the goals of the NPPF in providing 'sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work...' (NPPF, Section 12, para 126, page 38).

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) also states that 'Design policies should be developed ... so they reflect the local aspirations and are grounded in an understanding and evaluation of each area's defining characteristics.' Previously, the town centre was a proud, industrial town and full of independent, family run, local shops. In order to ensure that this vibrancy and community feel returns to the town centre, the vision must be to re-purpose the town centre using all available brown-field sites, acquiring under-used and largely redundant retail parks to use for housing and thereby reducing car-dependency, inherent air pollution problems and bringing huge economic as well as social benefits to Warrington.

We make the following points to support this view:

1. Local Plan and LTP4 continue to ensure that Warrington will remain a car-centric town. This lack of vision will limit economic development.
2. The model of building satellite housing estates on the outskirts of the town is an out-dated planning model, perpetuating the old New Town strategy.
3. The poor transport infrastructure for these satellite housing estates ensures that every house needs a minimum of 2 cars and quite often 3 or 4 as families grow.
4. Client Earth and Air Quality News (Feb 2022) have taken the UK government to court and their advisors say that EU/UK governments/local authorities and polluters which are liable may well be asked for compensation by individuals where harm has been caused due to air pollution.
5. Warrington's air quality has consistently been highlighted as being high in terms of WHO limits. These limits have recently been reduced.

Borough Council's Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) was signed off in 2018 and does reflect new scientific advances which now directly link auto-immune disease, heart failure, dementia, autism as well as asthma and lung disease to poor air quality.

The AQAP is based on out-of-date sources and does not reflect any urgency in tackling Warrington's poor air quality. Warrington's AQAP focuses on NO₂ emissions and there is only one monitor in Warrington (funded by Stockton Heath Parish Council) which measures particulate matter PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀. These are known to be the most dangerous to people's health.

Encouraging a car dependent town directly increases PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ and directly impacts on the health and wellbeing of the population.

6. The house build numbers in the Local Plan are completely unrealistic. Even though there has been a reduction in the target from 945 houses per annum. The government's target of 816 per year over a twenty-year period is, based on Warrington's previous track record, unachievable as the average build rate over the past 10 years has been 567. Setting unachievable targets means that the Local Plan cannot possibly be sustainable or sound.
7. Current infrastructure (health facilities, leisure and public transport) is poor and does not serve the needs of the current community. Leisure and public transport facilities in South Warrington is poor. A further influx of more housing will further downgrade what facilities there are to the point where they will be no longer sustainable.
8. 'We must do better at joining up our transport, decarbonisation and planning goals in both urban and rural areas. Too many developments... are difficult to reach without a car.' (Decarbonising Transport – A Better, Cleaner Britain)
9. These satellite housing estates are largely unaffordable for Warrington residents, even when taking into account the affordable housing levy. When these houses are marketed in the £500,000 region, young families will still find them unaffordable.
10. Local retail and community centres that are planned for these satellite housing estates often do not materialise for many years thereby increasing car dependency within the town.
11. These satellite housing estates lack diversity in the type of build and are generally not building in future sustainability in terms of eco-friendly heating systems /heat source pumps, electric vehicle charging points etc..

12. A recent development in Warrington is the availability of Fiddlers Ferry which makes land available for housing and economic development. The added advantage that Fiddlers Ferry has is that there are already rail lines which offer up the opportunity of rail connectivity to Warrington and further afield. This connectivity makes it a viable and sustainable site.
13. Warrington town centre has some excellent leisure facilities – the Museum, the Parr Hall and Pyramid, a cinema, the historic Palmyra Square as well Victoria Park. A town centre with a bigger and multi-generational population would help to stimulate the cultural scene in Warrington and would attract visitors from outside the town.
14. There is little justification for using Green Belt land to prop up an unsustainable, poorly designed, outdated model of urban growth.

THE FUTURE POTENTIAL FOR THE TOWN CENTRE

1. The real future for the Warrington is in redefining the town centre.
2. There is too little emphasis on Town Centre regeneration and maximising the use of brownfield sites, including the repurposing of other land uses in the Town Centre which could be better utilised as housing. Re-purposing and creating diverse, multi-generational, student and family housing (including social housing) will invigorate and bring 'life' to the town centre.
3. Town Centre Master Plan – first and last mile. £99m Town Centre plan aims to provide 900 apartments within the town centre. This is a narrow provision of housing. It does not provide for more mixed housing for families and older people. The focus is on young people and ignores the fact that a healthy community needs to be multi-generational.
4. There are a number of failing retail parks in the town centre such as the Riverside Retail Park which bring nothing to the character or vibrancy of the town centre. They would be ideal brownfield sites for housing.
5. MPPF 2021 Strategic Policies gives weight to the notion of concentrating housing in the centre of Warrington instead of developing out-of-town, poorly serviced housing estates that lack all types of infrastructure:
 - '20. Strategic policies should set out an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and design quality of places, and make sufficient provision¹³ for:
 1. a) housing (including affordable housing), employment, retail, leisure and other commercial development;
 2. b) infrastructure for transport, telecommunications, security, waste management, water supply, wastewater, flood risk and coastal change

- management, and the provision of minerals and energy (including heat);
3. c) community facilities (such as health, educational and cultural infrastructure)
 4. d) conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment including landscapes and green infrastructure, and planning measures to address climate change mitigation and adaptation.'

The University campus has moved to the town centre and students are generally more dependent on public transport as they tend not to have cars. Public transport with reliable and regular bus and tram links (proposed Tram Link line 1 from the north of Warrington) would provide this. However, there has been a singular lack of interest from Members of Warrington Borough Council and Officers to engage with Trams for Warrington.

6. The Town Centre Master Plan focuses on young professional needs and aspirations and makes no mention a more mixed society incorporating social housing. The development of brownfield sites in the town centre is essential but plans must also reflect the needs and the character of local people.

7. Ensuring the vitality of town centres (NPPF Chapter 7)

This NPPF requirement has been partially incorporated into the local plan. However, Warrington urban area has many vacant or disused properties which are suitable for acquisition for affordable residential development, many being in or around the town centre area.

This spatial concept should be employed which will bring significant social vitality and viability to the requirement for a more progressive town centre environment and community. It will enable a more balanced residential housing uptake and reduce or negate the release of green belt. There is little evidence within the plan whereby this NPPF requirement has been considered.

8. Town Centre Master Plan – first and last mile. £99m

The Town Centre plan aims to provide 900 apartments within the town centre. This is a narrow provision of housing. It does not provide for more mixed housing for families and older people. Chester University Campus has moved into the town centre and this is a positive.

However, the focus in the Town Centre Master Plan is on young people and ignores it completely the fact that a healthy community needs to be multi-generational. The Town Centre Master Plan focuses on young professional needs and aspirations and makes no mention of a more mixed society incorporating social housing. The development of brownfield sites in the town

centre is essential but plans must also reflect the needs and the character of local people.

9. The densification of mixed housing in the town centre would enable more imaginative modes of travel within the town and would make other modes of travel such as trams/light rail a clean, almost carbon-free mode of travel. A multi-modal bus/tram/rail transport model would greatly reduce Warrington's high dependency on the car and would go a long way to reducing/eliminating the poor air quality in Warrington.
10. The estimated housing density generally throughout south Warrington is circa 15 – 20 density per hectare (dph) and is as low as 11dph in some higher priced areas. This is not socially inclusive and creates a social divide.
11. The introduction of a Park and Ride at Winwick would enable line 1 (Winwick to the town centre A49) proposed by Trampower. This would increase the footfall to the town centre for the whole community, especially young people such as students at the Warrington Campus (Chester University) and the Youth Zone.
12. The NPPF (para 105, page 30) states that 'Significant development should be focused on locations which are or can be made sustainable, through limiting the need to travel and offering a genuine choice of transport modes. This can help to reduce congestion and emissions, improve air quality and public health.'
13. Trams have been proven to increase the footfall of town centres. A multi-modal, accessible transport system would include hydrogen powered minibuses aligned with tram routes. This would enable Warrington to claim 'city status' and would allow greater connectivity to Manchester, Liverpool and beyond.
14. There are a number of retail parks in the town centre. These provide low quality retail outlets and there are many unoccupied units. They detract from the retail potential in the town and would provide ideal brownfield sites for housing or green parks/leisure.
15. Mixed housing and trams would encourage a vibrant and diverse retail offer. It would encourage smaller, artisan shops that would improve, not detract from the character of the town centre. This would help Warrington to build on its historic, industrial identity.
16. The retail and leisure study 2019 was based on a 2014 NEMS survey of 1,000 households. How can this study still be relevant eight years later and when the retail market has changed dramatically since covid? Shopping patterns and expectations have changed dramatically since 2014. The policy is predicated on a scenario that no longer exists. Therefore, this aspect of the Local Plan is neither sustainable or sound.

It is no longer relevant.

17. The effects of Brexit are still affecting our economy and we are now in the midst of a chronic cost of living crisis which is expected to last for a considerable number of years. This will undoubtedly mean that the predictions for retail that have been put forward are no longer relevant and applicable to Warrington in 2022 and to Warrington in the future.
18. The Local Plan attempts to justify the release of the Green Belt (i.e the South East Urban Extension) by the provision of retail facilities and a local centre to facilitate new satellite housing developments. However, recent past history in Warrington shows that these facilities are not forthcoming from developers at the beginning of the build. This practice does not help local residents who will always need to use the car to access shopping facilities, doctors and leisure facilities. As a consequence, the development of retail in the town centre, supported by accessible, cheap, reliable and integrated, public transport systems (buses/trams) in the town centre, is absolutely essential to the economic growth of Warrington.

In conclusion, the Local Plan is neither sound nor sustainable. Reference 'Promoting healthy and safe communities (NPPF Chapter 8)

'1. The USVPLP fails to consider this NPPF requirement in its approach to community and Social Wellbeing as defined in the plan policies: W1 - Retail and Leisure needs, W4 – Warrington's community Facilities and W5 – Open Space, Outdoor Sports and Recreational Provision. It excludes any reference for the provision for **indoor** social, cultural and recreational facilities for the variety of indoor activities required within a balanced society.'

Trams for Warrington contends that Warrington's Local Plan does not improve the quality of life or the health and well-being of Warrington residents. It misses opportunities to radically move from being a car-dependent town to one that is modern, vital, building on its current economic success. As it stands, based on the points above, we do not believe it to be sound, sustainable or justified. We do not believe that it has been positively prepared.