

Warrington Updated Proposed Submission (PSV) Local Plan Examination Hearing

Statement from David Thrower In Relation to Matter 11 (Transport and Other Infrastructure)

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1. My statement relates purely to transport issues. I suggest that transport is one of the key flaws, arguably the key flaw, of the Plan.
2. As previously stated, the Plan does not meet the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) criteria of being positively prepared, because it fails very significantly to realistically-address the highly-likely adverse transport effects that will flow from the Plan. If the Plan as presented is implemented, it will create many transport problems that will be very difficult and costly to alleviate other than marginally.
3. Secondly, the Plan is not justified in NPPF terms because it has taken the passive approach of relying largely upon use of mostly-inherited ex-New Town Development Corporation and Homes England land, rather than recognising that the policy agenda of the Government and wider community (even including the international community in relation to global warming) has moved on. It is fully accepted that development land is needed for essential additional employment activity and economic growth, and that significant new housing is required for future generations to live in Warrington and to reduce inward commuting from less-expensive-housing areas. However, locating both on Green Belt land is not justified, and represents a serious policy failure by the Council.
4. Thirdly, the Plan is not effective in NPPF terms, on transport, because despite containing references to “sustainability” and claiming to create (quote) “transformational change” in the transport network, it has little hope of delivering these in practice. The term “sustainability” cannot be arbitrarily placed alongside a totally HGV-served logistics terminal complex at the junctions of the M6 and M56. There is nothing “sustainable” in its implications for either freight transport or employee access.
5. The hope that significant sections of the community will opt for travel to work, schools, shops, stations and hospitals by walking, cycling or bus is just that,

“hope”. There is no means of actually ensuring delivery of such a strategy, much of which would depend on either behavioural change or heavy funding, or both. There is a high risk (“red”) that the only elements of the Plan that will be delivered will be the logistics complex and the new housing, with a shrivelled and incomplete transport investment package receding into the distance due to likely future shortage of public finance.

6. Fourthly, the Plan in terms of NPPF criteria is emphatically not consistent with national policy on transport issues. For the 6-56 logistics complex, I would refer the Hearing to my statement in relation to Matter 6f, the South East Warrington Employment Area.

7. To repeat just two recent policy statements by Government from that statement: (1) “The Government’s vision for transport is for a low carbon sustainable transport system that is an engine for economic growth.....the transfer of freight from road to rail has an important part to play in a low carbon economy and in helping to address climate change.” (quote from Government policies for addressing need for Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges), and (2) “We (the Government) will support and encourage modal shift of freight from road to more sustainable alternatives such as rail.....and inland waterways.....The modal shift of freight from road to rail would not only lead to a reduction in GHG levels but also reduce congestion and noise pollution.” (quote from Decarbonising Transport - A Better, Greener Britain, 2021).

8. In complete contradiction of such Government policy, the Council’s Plan’s proposal for a 4,000-employee logistics mega-terminal at 6-56 is working in exactly the opposite direction, actually-promoting HGV movements and establishing a complex that is unservable by either rail or inland waterway. It is supremely ironic that Warrington (1) is located on the West Coast Main Line, Britain’s prime railfreight artery, and (2) is on the Manchester Ship Canal, the UK’s only inland waterway for ocean-going shipping.

9. The current complete lack of any active rail freight terminal in Warrington (apart from Royal Mail Dallam) is extraordinary; even aluminium slab traffic from Latchford to North Germany has to be initially road-hauled to Widnes. The Plan appears quite content for this situation to remain unchanged, and meanwhile is proposing to actively-promote HGV traffic. In terms of progress towards Net Zero, HGV traffic is already a key Government policy concern.

10. The 6-56 logistics complex also has implications in terms of employee commuter-traffic generation. At four miles from the town centre, it is very remote from the bulk of Warrington's population. It is also very remote from rail access, and from the Bus Interchange, the hub of the town's good-quality bus network. It is also beyond convenient cycling distance from most of Warrington, and far beyond walking distance from virtually all of it. It is in a location where there are currently no bus services whatever, and it is hard to see how serving 6-56 could be shared as a bus-traffic destination with any other location. It would require a bespoke bus service that would have to be frequent at employee-starting and finishing times, yet would have little or no revenue potential at other times, and would thus almost certainly be uneconomic to resource.

11. The overall consequence of these factors is that probably 90% of employee trips would be by private car, many on local roads but some generating undesirable new longer-distance motorway commuting. Of the 4,000 jobs claimed for the development, it is probable that at least half would involve residents from other local authorities using the motorway network.

12. In relation to the South East Warrington Urban Extension proposed by the Plan, the prospect is equally bleak, and like the transport implications of the 6-56 scheme, runs completely counter to the more enlightened policies of Central Government. The latter policies are likely to be progressively-modified even further towards use of sustainable modes as the timespan towards Net Zero by 2050 rapidly reduces.

13. The Plan's proposal for no less than 2,400 homes with a further 1,800 (total 4,200) in South East Warrington, in an area that (1) is currently agricultural land and (2) is separated by three west-east waterways from the town centre, the hospital, the Winwick Road and Gemini retail parks, the town's two main line rail stations and bus interchange, and the key employment trip-attractors of the town centre, Omega/Lingley Green and Birchwood Science Park, can only be seen as an example of "continuing digging when already in the congestion hole".

14. There is already significant peak-period congestion at two locations that are crucially-relevant to the proposal to locate up to 4,200 new homes in South East Warrington. These are (1) Stockton Heath high street, and its associated features of the traffic-signalled A49/A56 junction at its southern end and the swing bridge at its northern end, and (2) Latchford gyratory, with its three signalled junctions, multiple pedestrian crossing-points and its A50/A5061 swing bridge at the southern end. In terms of traffic engineering, both of these

locations are in my view unimprovable. Capacity cannot be increased. The implications of adding large numbers of houses south of these locations is therefore obvious.

15. The three west-east waterways that dissect South Warrington is an issue of pivotal importance. The River Mersey is less problematical than the Manchester Ship Canal, as it has unrestricted weight limits on the A5060/Slutchers Lane, A5061 Bridgefoot and A50 Kingsway bridges, although of course these crossings have limited traffic-volume capacity that can be problematical on occasion. However, as has been repeatedly highlighted, the Ship Canal is only crossed by the A5060 Chester Road, A49 Stockton Heath and A50/A5061 Knutsford Road swing bridges, all of which are subject to interruption by maritime requirements, and by the Cantliever bridge with its frequently-abused 3-tonne weight limit (I have on several occasions witnessed 44-tonne vehicles using the bridge).

16. The only potential alleviation being offered by the Council in its Plan for additional crossings of the MSC are the proposed £200m (?) Western Link and a non-weight-limited replacement for the Cantilever bridge. Both are likely to be very low priority for scarce Government funding; future governments are unlikely to favour schemes to primarily-assist peak car commuting.

17. In the context of the Plan and the 4,200 additional homes for South East Warrington, the situation regarding south-north crossings of the west-east Bridgewater Canal is equally concerning. There are non-weight-limited bridges over the Bridgewater Canal on the A50 (Grappenhall), A49 (London Bridge, Stockton Heath) and A56 (Walton) approaches, but all other bridges are either narrow (single file) and weight-restricted (such as Church Lane Grappenhall) or bi-directional single-file as at Lumb Brook Road. There are already stacking/congestion problems, such as at Church Lane Grappenhall for traffic leaving the A56 eastbound, where there is no turning lane nor any prospect of creating one without significant destruction of gardens.

18. The plausibility of the traffic modelling undertaken by consultants AECOM for Warrington Borough Council is open to challenge. The report, Warrington Transport Model - Model Validation Report 2017 notes that the traffic modelling has taken June as a "typical" month. I wish to challenge this. June is a month when the weather is usually kind, the daylight is at its longest, cycling and walking are at their most attractive, and many people are either elsewhere in the UK at tourist destinations or out of the UK altogether (these are not

counterbalanced by incoming tourists in the case of Warrington as the town is not a tourist destination). It is also understood from questioning that the modelling did not allow for swing bridge openings or any roadworks.

19. It has also been recently observed that traffic data is being updated through vehicle-activated cordon counts during June-July 2022, thus repeating the bias. A much more typical month to undertake such counts is October. Other detailed criticisms are set out in Appendix 1 to my November 2021 submission.

20. The Plan rightly aspires to significantly-increasing bus use. Warrington is very fortunate to have a high-quality local operator, Warrington's Own Buses, that provides for the majority of local bus trips. However, there is no assured means of delivering significantly-increased bus use, and indeed bus use fell dramatically in the decade prior to the pandemic.

21. The principal problem that affects bus reliability is traffic congestion. For the Plan's 4,200-homes proposal for South East Warrington, the prospect is that buses will continue to be delayed by general traffic congestion. If car ownership amongst these 4,200 new homes averages (say) 1.5 cars per household, the eventual presence of 6,300 additional private cars on the highway network of South East Warrington poses a further threat to bus reliability. Reliability can be affected both by increased numbers of parked cars and by queuing vehicles.

22. The relatively low density of housing proposed for the South East Warrington Urban Extension will be extremely difficult to serve by bus economically. There is a limited prospect of a modest-frequency daytime "shoppers' service" being viable, but no realistic prospect of evening or Sunday services being viable. As an indication, it is instructive that there are currently no evening services through Grappenhall and Thelwall to Lymm, despite the large number of households thus left unserved, and that all Warrington Sunday services already end at teatime. Any developer subsidy through S106 would only be short term.

23. A discussion group (of which I am a member) has been working for some time to devise an outline design for a possible future tram system, probably based upon a "star" route network to the west, north, east and south but initially focussing on a route to the north (A49 corridor). Warrington did once possess a tram system, but the routes were short and never extended and it closed in 1935. Towns the size of Warrington in France and other mainland-European countries have modern tram systems, but to date the only UK towns (as opposed to cities) to re-introduce trams or modernise an existing system are

Blackpool and Croydon. Public finance for such a scheme will be very difficult to obtain under present centralised-government control but this may change in the face of the growing climate emergency.

24. The Plan has made vague reference to a “mass transit system”, by which the Council appears to mean guided buses or unguided buses running on reserved lanes. This cheaper option is likely to have appeal for some, but certainly not all, car users. Its active pursuit appears worthwhile, but again will largely depend on a degree of public funding from central government. Once again, there may prove to be a major difference between the Plan’s aspirations and actual delivery on the ground.

25. A key aspect of the South Warrington highway network, apart from the congestion hotspots already identified, is that it is likely to be very difficult to improve what is entirely a single-carriageway system. No additional lanes could be created on the A49 south of Stockton Heath, from the junctions of Delphfields Road/Broomfields Road to London Bridge (Stockton Heath centre’s southern edge) without a dramatically-adverse impact upon the landscape, loss of trees and gardens, etc, and there would be little purpose anyway as from London Bridge to the north side of the Ship Canal there is only a single lane in each direction.

26. Similarly, the A50 through Grappenhall is effectively unimproveable, as although the corridor between buildings is wide it is lined with parked vehicles, trees and grass verges. Again, widening would be destructive and deeply unpopular. And again, it would be pointless, given the swing bridge constraint.

27. Between these two areas, there is a difficult signalled double-junction at the intersection of Ackers Road, A56 Chester Road, A56 Grappenhall Road and Lumb Brook Road, the latter involving a signalled bi-directional single lane beneath the listed Bridgewater Canal underbridge (highlighted earlier). Vehicle stacking space between the two parts of the junction is already overloaded, and the location is unimproveable, yet a major housing estate is planned on land immediately west of Lumb Brook Road very close to this junction, with yet more major housing estates a little further south. The location is set to be likely to become continually congested, and delaying buses, with no prospect whatever of amelioration.

28. Finally, a comment on cycling and walking. For cycling to be a viable option for the South East Warrington Urban Extension does not simply require the

provision of cycle tracks through the proposed new housing estates. Many cyclists could be expected to wish to reach the town centre and/or rail stations, and this would require the transition of the extremely cyclist-unfriendly Bridgefoot gyratory. Reaching (say) the Birchwood Science Park would equally require routeing via the A50 and A57 main roads. And returning to the new housing areas (say, from Stockton Heath shopping centre) by cycling would be deterred by the fact that almost all the proposed new housing is up a hill.

29. For walking, the Plan's commitment to improve conditions for pedestrians (throughout the Borough, not just in areas of development) is very welcome. However, experience suggests that implementation of this policy to date has been weak. An important consideration is pedestrian/vehicular conflict, and the future significant growth in car and LGV/HGV traffic levels that would follow in South East Warrington from the implementation of the Plan's proposals as they stand, and the effects these would have on pedestrians attempting to cross roads - particularly the young, older people and people with disabilities - seems to have been completely overlooked by the Plan.

30. To conclude, the Plan in terms of transport issues appears to have "put the cart before the horse". The Plan should have started with the transport network, recognised the potential of upgrading (where possible) the A57 and A562 to the west of the town, the A49 to the north of the town and the A57 to the east of the town, exploiting land bandwidths on each of those corridors, and also exploited the major inherited asset of the west-east rail line with its existing stations at Warrington West/Sankey, Warrington Central, Padgate, Birchwood and Glazebrook and a possible new station halfway between Warrington West and Widnes at Barrow's Green. The clusters of new housing could have then been located on these upgraded corridors, plus marginally-more in outlying centres, and (importantly) much more heavily in the town centre. A much more modest amount of new housing could then have been accommodated in South East Warrington and at Lymm, albeit with some congestion resulting.

31. Instead, the Plan has decided, rather passively, to concentrate new housing in South East Warrington, to be served by transport corridors that not only are already congested but which crucially are incapable of substantive improvement, with local rail playing no role at all. If this strategy is pursued, it will bequeath future generations with transport problems that will be partly hugely-expensive and damaging to deal with, but mainly completely insoluble.

