Our Green Warrington – Response to NTLS Warrington Local Plan

Main Modifications Consultation

26 April 2023

From: Stephanie Fallon, Ali Ellam and Peter Ellam



Further to our <u>original full response</u> to the proposed Local Plan we have considered the proposed modifications and would submit that they remain insufficient to achieve the following aims and objectives set out in the proposed Local Plan:

Restoring, protecting and enhancing Warrington's ecological networks, woodlands and wildlife sites

MM 013	DC3		
	Part 4	4.	The Council will work with partners to strengthen restore, enhance and expand the network of core ecological sites, wildlife corridors, and stepping stone habitats and restoration areas in order to:
			a. secure a measurable net gain in biodiversity in accordance with national legislation and its supporting best practice guidance; b. to expand tree cover in appropriate locations across the Borough; c. to improve landscape character, water and air quality; d. to help adapt to flood risk and mitigate the impacts of climate change; e. to contribute to the development of the Mersey Forest; f. to contribute to the delivery of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the wider regional nature recovery network; g. of wetland sites by to enhanceing the wetlands and other important irreplaceable and semi-natural habitats across Warrington; and hg. to support the retention of underused farmland for habitat creation and management.

Modification Reference Number	UPSVLP Policy or Paragraph Number	Change (deleted text in strikethrough; new text underlined and bold)
	Part 5	Development Proposals affecting Green Infrastructure 5. All development proposals should, as appropriate to their nature and scale:
		 a. protect existing green infrastructure and the functions it performs, especially where this helps to mitigate the causes of and addresses the impacts of climate change and contributes to natures recovery; b. increase the functionality of existing and planned green infrastructure especially where this helps to mitigate the causes of and addresses the impacts of climate change and contributes to natures recovery; c. improve the quality of existing green infrastructure, including local networks and corridors, specifically to increase its attractiveness as a sport, leisure and recreation opportunity and its value as a habitat for biodiversity, where these two functions do not adversely affect each other;
	Part 6	6. Where a loss of, or negative impact on green infrastructure functionality or ecological system/network is unavoidable, development proposals should demonstrate what mitigation measures are proposed and/or, replacement green infrastructure will be provided. Any replacement or mitigation measures should seek to secure a net gain in biodiversity assessed against the latest version of the DEFRA Metric and be deployed as closely as possible to the affected green infrastructure asset.
	Figure XX	Fig. XX Amend 'Key Green Infrastructure Links and Opportunities' diagram to more closely reflect the provisions of Policy DC3. The map has been amended to include all of the GI opportunities listed in Part 2 and Part 3 of Policy DC3 (See Appendix 1 for revised diagram).
	Para 8.3.14	8.3.14 The built up areas of the borough contain a variety of types of urban green spaces. In particularly the main urban area of Warrington contains a significant amount of green

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		space as a legacy of its former New Town status. A unique feature of this network is a framework of linked open spaces that form a necklace around the Town Centre and the masterplanning areas (Warrington's "Circular Parklands").
	Para 8.3.16	8.3.16 In exceptional circumstances where it is not possible to avoid some loss in the functionality of the network it is expected that replacement provision will be provided in order to satisfy national policy. Any replacement provision or mitigation compensation measures should be in close proximity to the site so as to maintain the integrity of the network.
	Para 8.3.17	8.3.17 The NPPF indicates that Local Plans should seek to secure measurable net gains in biodiversity (Paragraph 179b). This policy encourages opportunities to secure measurable net gains in biodiversity across the Plan area as a whole. The proposed updated DEFRA Biodiversity Metric is designed to provide ecologists, developers, planners and other interested parties with a means of assessing changes in biodiversity value (losses or gains) brought about by development or changes in land management. The metric is a habitat based approach to determining a proxy biodiversity value. An updated-The latest version of the DEFRA tool that was introduced in 2012 is currently out for consultation metric, together with a metric for assessing small sites, is due to be published in early-2023.
	Para 8.3.19	8.3.19The Council will continue to work with Natural England to identify a full ecological network; and with the Local Nature Partnership to produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy; and give consideration for the need for the preparation of an SPD that will map out the ecological network and set out the Council's considerations and expectations when such sites are proposed for development or impacted by proposed development nearby

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		Infrastructure in its widest sense contained in Policy DC3 and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.	
	Part 2	 <u>Designated Ssi</u>tes and areas that make up the Borough's ecological network and are recognised for their nature and geological value are shown on the Policies Map and include: 	
		a. European Sites of International Importance	
		b. Sites of Special Scientific Interest	
		c. Regionally Important Geological Sites	
		d. Local Nature Reserves	
		e. Local Wildlife Sites	
		f. Wildlife Corridors/Natur <u>e</u> a l Improvement Areas	
		Other elements that make up the Borough's ecological network and are recognised	
		for their nature and geological value include:	
		g. irreplaceable, protected and priority habitats	
		h. ecological stepping stones and restoration areas, and	
		i. other areas identified in the Borough's Local Nature Recovery Strategy	
		The specific <u>designated</u> sites covered by the above designations at the time of publication are detailed in Appendix 4.	
		Development affecting Sites of International Importance	
	Part 3	Proposals for development which may affect European Sites of International	
	THE CO.	Importance will be subject to the most rigorous examination in accordance with the	
		Habitats Directive Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as	
		amended). Development or land use change not directly connected with or necessar	

1. It is not clear how WBC will be able to ensure that a "measurable net gain in biodiversity" is achieved under the terms of the proposed Local Plan / Modifications, or that WBC will be able to successfully "work with partners" to "restore, enhance and expand the network core of ecological sites, wildlife corridors, stepping stone habitats and restoration areas", nor that they will be able to "enhance the wetlands and other important irreplaceable and semi natural habitats across Warrington", given for example, the proposals for mass development forming the South East Warrington Urban Extension, Thelwall Heys, the site at Peel Hall - and the likely identity of the "partners" who will be involved in such developments.

- 2. While organisations such as Natural England, the Cheshire Wildlife Trust and The Woodland Trust will have important contributions to make when development is considered in Warrington, ultimately WBC's policies, whether the original or modified, do not provide sufficient authority, protection or "teeth" for these organisations (and others) to influence changes or to challenge proposed developments that will adversely impact our green spaces, woodlands, waterways and wildlife. Simply put, these policies are not sufficiently robust to be able to challenge the plans and intentions of partners such as Homes England or national volume developers.
- 3. It should also be noted that strenuous objections from The Woodland Trust to development adjacent to The Dingle, Fords Rough and Parrs Wood as set out in their original response to the PSV have been completely ignored:

A letter from The Woodland Trust dated 29 September 2017 to Warrington Borough Council set out their response to the Preferred Development Option (PDO), which proposed mass development at these woodland sites at the same location as that which is proposed by the PSV 2021 SEWUE. The Trust writes,

"The proposed preferred development option would result in development sited directly adjacent to two Woodland Trust-owned sites Lumb Brook Valley and Grappenhall Heys. Due to potential adverse impacts on the aforementioned sites the Woodland Trust objects to this Preferred Development Option.

Lumb Brook Valley is designated as Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland (ASNW) on Natural England's Ancient Woodland Inventory. As such, the following Planning Policy applies: National Planning Policy Framework, Paragraph 118, states that "planning permission should be refused for development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland and the loss of aged or veteran trees found outside ancient woodland, unless the need for, and benefits of, the development in that location clearly outweigh the loss.

Natural England's standing advice for Ancient Woodland and Veteran Trees states: "Trees and woodland classed as 'ancient' or 'veteran' are irreplaceable. Ancient woodland takes hundreds of years to establish and is considered important for its wildlife, soils, recreation, cultural value, history and contribution to landscapes."

The close proximity of a large residential development to our site could have numerous adverse impacts on the health of our sites. Currently the areas in which development options are being proposed act as a protective buffer and area of undeveloped and natural habitat adjacent to both Lumb Brook Valley and Grappenhall Heys. By replacing this natural area with a residential development there will be a dramatic change in the intensity of the land use. This will expose these sites to a variety of outside influences, also known as 'edge effects', which may have impact negatively on both of these sites. The current options proposed will result in both sites being completely surrounded by housing.

We believe that the inclusion of Lumb Brook Valley as Strategic Green Space is inappropriate, and that the Council should find other alternatives to fulfil their green space obligations. Furthermore, the conversion of our site Grappenhall Woods into a country park, without consulting the Trust or receiving permission is improper, and the plans should be altered to remove our site from a plan of this nature."

Given these woodlands remain in the current plan for sites of mass development it is clear that any partners with an interest in protection of Warrington's natural environment have little influence, and so one has to ask how any proposed policies, modified or otherwise will make any difference in the protection and enhancement of our ecological networks and irreplaceable habitats.

- 4. There also remains no specific mention in any of the modified documents of The Mersey Valley Timberland Trail.
- 5. By way of further example, whatever development frameworks or policies that have been or are currently in place to ostensibly "protect and enhance" green infrastructure and sites of biodiversity, including Warrington's woodlands, were either insufficient, or simply ignored when mass volume development was approved, for example, at what has been named "Orchard Meadows", a Barratt / David Wilson Homes housing estate in South Warrington directly adjacent to Dipping Brook woodland, or the Rowland Homes recent housing estate at Grappenhall Heys, directly adjacent to Parrs Wood, a Woodland Trust wood:

This is the development at "Orchard Meadows" permitted under current polices and frameworks and the NPPF that are supposed to "enhance and protect" our ecological networks and local wildlife sites / sites of biodiversity / woodlands:





- 7. Above is a photograph of development by Rowland Homes at Grappenhall Heys, again, directly adjacent to woodland at Beech Wood / Parrs Wood.
- 8. As can be seen from the photographs above, mass development, in spite of alleged existing development frameworks and polices to protect our natural environment in according with past and current guidelines in the NPPF, which would have been in force at the time these developments were approved, has been permitted directly adjacent and encroaching upon the woodlands with the housing built literally a few feet from the edge of the woodlands. The adverse impact on this natural habitat is exacerbated by the fact that there is already volume development on the other open side of the woodlands at Dipping Brook.
- 9. We do not accept that under current plans, provisions, policies and proposed development frameworks, modified or otherwise, that it will be possible for WBC to "improve landscape character, water and air quality", nor will be possible to "enhance the wetlands and other important irreplaceable and semi-natural habitats across Warrington" by virtue of the fact that;
 - a) The sites selected for mass development in South East Warrington are some of the most attractive and characterful landscapes in Warrington. Warrington unfortunately has relatively little to recommend it as a destination currently and remains somewhat in decline, but the landscape in South East Warrington, including its irreplaceable ancient woodlands at The Dingle and Fords Rough, the landscape from Parrs Wood to the Bridgewater Canal at Stockton Lane and the landscape from the summit of Lumb Brook Road towards the town centre and beyond are exceptional landscapes with long vistas and are an asset to the town and which attract visitors from all over Warrington. This is a natural amenity for the benefit of all residents and visitors that is set to be degraded with

mass, soulless development. There is no policy that could possibly achieve the stated aim to "improve landscape character", or "enhance...important irreplaceable and semi natural habitats" while the above mentioned sites are going to be subject to mass development, particular of the nature we are likely to see created by WBC's "partners", Homes England and the various national and regional volume developers that have been permitted to develop in Warrington thus far.

- b) WBC appear to have prioritised preserving an artificial "green ring" around Warrington over preserving the most attractive and accessible open countryside and natural landscape for enjoyment by the public. There will now be urban sprawl with generic volume developer housing and / or shed type distribution warehouses at the West, South and East of Warrington. The plan eliminates any distinctiveness brought about by singularly attractive countryside and landscape in a historic setting in South East Warrington and instead will be another step towards Warrington becoming even more of a bland, generic "any town" than it already is. This is not aspirational planning, nor is it sustainable.
- c) The decision to create mass development at one of Warrington's most attractive landscape locations will terminally degrade one of the town's few assets
- 10. We would propose that the parcels of land directly adjacent be removed from the Local Plan for the SEWUE to ensure that the above named sites are protected as it is clear, from past examples of development adjacent to important woodland that there will be insufficient measures put in place to ensure that these habitats are protected.

Proposed removal of sites from the Local Plan to genuinely protect and enhance Warrington's ecological networks including Local Wildlife Sites and irreplaceable ancient woodlands (outlined in red). Proposed modified site for development – if ultimately considered absolutely necessary (outlined in green)



Sustainability Appraisal on Modifications

11. We would also submit that the modifications to the policies contained in the Local Plan will not be sufficient to meet the objectives contained in the original and supplementary Sustainability Appraisal:

Will new housing have good access to open space, sport and 8. Enable groups to recreational facilities on foot and by public transport? contribute to decision Will there be opportunities for local communities to be involved in the making and encourage planning and design of developments? a sense of community How will the levels and distribution of housing and employment affect identity and welfare. community cohesion? Health and Will the development encourage mixed use of buildings and space in Provide, protect or Wellbeing order to stimulate the creation of social networks and interaction enhance leisure between different social groups? opportunities, How will development help to protect and enhance a network of multirecreation facilities, functional green infrastructure that encourages active travel and green infrastructure recreation? and access to the Will the development include provision for adequate usable open countryside space including areas for equipped play.

- 12. There is no evidence that local communities will be afforded and empowered to have any meaningful involvement in the planning and design of developments. While lip service may be paid to such provision the reality is that both WBC and the local community have very little power to challenge plans by developers, whether in the design of the homes proposed or the surrounding landscape and infrastructure.
- 13. An example of this would include the proposals for extraordinarily out of keeping residential development by Urban Splash at Grappenhall Heys, where despite significant objection from the local community to such housing design, and despite alternative housing designs and styles more in keeping with the area being put forward (including by us), the mechanisms in place were such that once the development had received planning approval, and was supported by a so called "Design Panel" (most of whose members had no knowledge of the area) then the local community's input was basically superficial, a box ticking exercise and which had no real power to force changes to the design.
- 14. A further example of this is the failure to have any or any adequate regard to neighbourhood plans and design statements in South East Warrington when it comes to permitted volume residential development in the area, despite such documents having been adopted by WBC.
- 15. There is nothing within the proposed modifications that would give us cause to believe that matters will be any different on future developments.

Accessibility	9. Protect and enhance accessibility for all the essential services and facilities.	Will new housing development be within walking distance of essential services such as schools and health facilities? Do these essential services have capacity? Are buildings fit for purpose and able to accommodate increased population? Will the new development support or facilitate the integration of a range of services in a single location (neighbourhood hub) to increase accessibility and reduce the need to travel? Will new housing and employment be in areas that are likely to encourage car usage? Will new development increase congestion on key routes?
		Will new development increase congestion on key routes? Is the infrastructure in place/planned to minimise impact of increased population on traffic issues? Will the future use of footpaths and cycleways be maximised by ensuring connectivity and useability?

16. Given the objections from Homes England in their response to the Proposed Local Plan SEWUE, despite their having been involved in drafting and developing the proposals for the SEWUE itself, we are not persuaded that WBC's plans for the SEWUE as set out in their Proposed Local Plan and in the Modifications document will be achievable:

MM 020	MD2	
	Part 1	1. Land to the south east of Warrington, extending from Grappenhall Heys in the north, to
		the M56 in the south, as defined on the Proposals <u>Policies</u> Map, will be removed from
		the Green Belt and allocated as the South East Warrington Urban Extension.
	Part 3	3. The Urban Extension will be supported by a wide range of infrastructure as follows:
		a. A range of housing tenures, types and sizes, including affordable homes, custom and
		self-build plots and supported and extra care housing.
		b. Two 2 form entry primary schools, capable of expansion to 3 forms of entry
		c. A new secondary school to provide a minimum of 4 forms of entry.
		d. A new leisure facility incorporating health provision.
		 e. Contribution to expansion of proposed Appleton Cross GP facility.
		ef. Local shops and other community facilities of an appropriate scale.
		£g. An extensive green infrastructure network.
		gh. Playing pitches.

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		 ♣ i. A range of smaller areas of open space within the residential development to serve the new community. ‡ i. A Community Recycling Centre. ‡ k. A comprehensive package of transport improvements, for both on-site and off-site works. ‡ i. Compensatory green belt improvements and ecological mitigation and enhancement. ‡ m. Flood mitigation and drainage including exemplary sustainable drainage systems (SuDS).
	Part 5	 The Development Framework will be agreed with the Council in advance of planning applications being submitted. The Development Framework will be a material consideration in the determination of planning applications across the Urban Extension; planning permissions will only be granted where they are consistent with the Development Framework.
	Part 8	8. Any development adjacent to the allocation boundary must not undermine the integrity of the delivery of the South East Warrington Urban Extension.
	Part 16	16. The Urban Extension should also include local shops, a supermarket, and other appropriate local services and community facilities in accordance with Policy DEV5. Any proposal for retail development above 2,500 sq.m. will require a retail needs assessment and be subject to the sequential assessment set out in Policy DEV5.

- 17. While we note that WBC state that their proposals for the SEWUE will be delivered and they remain within the Modifications set out above, their partners in this are Homes England and Miller Homes, who have objected to the above proposals from WBC as follows:
 - a) Whilst it is fully accepted that the development of the SEWUE will need to provide a range of housing tenures, types and sizes including affordable homes, there is no current evidence to suggest that typologies such as custom and self build plots or supported extra care housing are required on this specific site or in the locality.
 - b) There is a lack of any upto date evidence to justify this very specific requirement relating to primary schools. Whilst the principal landowners do not dispute that a development of the planned scale is likely to require new school facilities the precise number of primary schools at any given size is inextricably linked to the timing and location of development within the allocated area and the extent to which there is any available capacity in nearby schools at that point in time. To this end, the policy should not specify the number of primary schools or their intake. Rather, it need only refer to the need for the SEWUE to accommodate on site primary school provision commensurate with the impact of the new development based on up to date evidence of need and demand.
 - c) As with primary school requirement, the secondary school requirement is too specific and should instead refer to the need for the SEWUE to provide secondary school provision, either on or off site, commensurate with the impact of development based on up to date evidence of need and demand.
 - d) With regards to the second sentence (dealing with the location of new primary schools), while the principle of the approach is agreed, this is a matter that will ultimately be determined as part of the Development Framework for the site. As such, if it is considered by WBC that it is right that the policy includes a reference to the siting of new schools (the view of the landowners is that this is unnecessary), the principal landowners propose that the wording of the policy is revised to identify that such matters will be considered and agreed during the preparation of the Development Framework.
 - e) Subject to the precise requirements for the new leisure facility being identified and its provision suitably evidenced and justified...principal landowners welcome WBC's support for this being co-located with any planned secondary school facility (also to be justified).
 - f) There is no up to date evidence to justify a requirement for a community recycling centre being met on land within the SEWUE, Reference to its need should be deleted if no evidence for requirement.
- 18. It is difficult to see therefore that on the basis of the current and modified policies, even with a specific development framework, that there is any mechanism in place to ensure that these additional facilities, the infrastructure proposed and also the opportunities for builders other than national volume developers will definitely proceed and so there remains issues with the viability and delivery anticipated within the SEWUE plan. WBC is asked to provide confirmation as to how it can be guaranteed that WBC's proposals as set out above will be delivered, given their co-authors of the SEWUE development proposals in their "SEWUE: A deliverable Proposition" document, Homes England and Miller Homes now seek to object to their own drafted proposals.

Is new housing likely to be affordable given the viability of available land?

Will there be enough homes of the right size, type and tenure to meet identified needs of all social groups?

Does the new housing meet likely future needs in terms of occupants, given the ageing population?

Will homes be accessible and easily adaptable in order to enable current and future occupants to remain in their homes as their needs change?

Is housing likely to be of a high quality design?

Will housing be designed in a way to help reduce noise pollution, energy waste, fuel poverty and flood damage risk?

Will construction allow passive cooling and adequate air exchange to reduce overheating risk and promote good indoor air quality?

6. Ensure access to good quality, sustainable, affordable housing

Housing

- 19. We are concerned that given Homes England's objections to the original Proposed Local Plan that there will remain a lack of affordable housing in South East Warrington. We are also concerned that there are insufficient policies in place, even with the Modifications, to ensure that adequate provision is made for the older population, who may wish to downsize and free up properties for young families.
- 20. With regards to the design of housing, given the track record of development stewarded by Homes England (and their previous iterations) and volume developer partners, it remains highly unlikely that the housing in Warrington will be of a "high quality design". Despite their being a Supplementary Planning Document setting out Design Codes for Warrington Town Centre (which we support) there is nothing in the current Modifications that would ensure that Design Codes are rolled out for all development in Warrington. These are examples of the housing that been developed under Homes England's stewardship recently. It should be noted that these areas are semi rural with historic nearby villages.

Below are examples of the sorts of housing design quality in semi-rural and historic South East Warrington under Homes England:



21. We would ask that WBC ensure that there are specific Design Codes put in place, with proper input from the local community for all proposed large developments in the Warrington area.

Modification / Removal of South East Warrington Employment Area plan

- 22. We support the decision of the Inspector to remove the proposed South East Warrington Employment area from the proposed Local Plan. This is not only because of the severely detrimental effect such development would have on the surrounding landscape and open green space / open countryside and its nearby Local Wildlife Sites, but because we feel plans for significant warehousing and distribution sites as a mechanism for future employment growth in the Warrington area is low aspirational and does nothing to drive the "levelling up" much needed in the Warrington area. While it is reasonable to allocate some land to distribution warehouses, given the nature of online retail, it speaks to the lack of vision for the town that the only substantive employment proposals over the Plan period relate to this type of business.
- 23. The proposal to simply replicate what has been done in West Warrington at Omega, with mass distribution sites and volume developer generic housing estates is going to render Warrington a soulless, bland part of Cheshire with nothing distinctive to attract external investment.
- 24. There are already significant distribution sites across the perimeter of Warrington. It is not clear why WBC (regardless of the arguments made by Langtree and Partners) would feel that the town would benefit from even more of them. It is also not clear that the apparent "success" of these mass distribution sites will continue in the future in any event, and there is a risk that reliance on this type of "monoemployment" model for job creation in Warrington will be severely detrimental to the town in the near future. One only has to read the recent news that Ocado is closing one of their warehouse distribution sites, putting around 2,300 jobs at risk because of the move towards more efficient, automated services to know that the future of distribution is likely to change significantly. Langtree and partners had proposed that the South East Warrington Employment area could generate in the region of 4000 jobs how realistic is this in light of the incredible development we are currently seeing in AI and automation?
- 25. An exemplar of the attitude of those with interests in mass generic development in the town was heard at the Local Plan Examination in Public in September 2022. It was reported that one of the proposed developers at the EIP made the following arguments:

The NPPF gives guidance that town Plans should focus on their proven strengths when identifying economic growth and land utilisation... Warrington had little strength in science park or green energy type of employment and rather had over recent years proven that its primary strength lay in logistics (i.e. warehousing and distribution). Bluntly, the way forward for Warrington was more storage and logistics and that this clearly needed to be close to motorway network so Fiddlers Ferry was less attractive to developers than Six/56 location.

An utterly depressing and low aspirational attitude.

26. One of the main problems Warrington has is the lack of pedestrian footfall in the town centre. While plans to introduce significant residential development in the town centre are very much

welcomed, if there are no jobs other than in the retail or hospitality sector in the town centre, then most will have to find work outside the town centre, including those in the new town centre residential developments. This means that during the daytime the town remains essentially empty. If one was to compare Warrington town centre after 5pm with Liverpool or Manchester, it would be clear that the difference is that there are an incredible number of businesses operating from these cities, which means that post 5pm employees of these businesses then participate in the city centre, creating wealth and cultural prosperity for the city. This is what WBC should be focusing on, not simply going for quick, easy (but short term) "wins" by covering the borough with mass distribution sites.

- 27. The narrow vision and scope of plans to simply surround Warrington with distribution sites and not focus on bringing real business investment and employment in a variety of professions to the town centre mean it is unlikely that there will be fundamental changes to the quality of life of its residents and the financial and cultural prosperity of the Borough.
- 28. We are also of the view that more should be done to develop and encourage investment in the town centre and where out of town sites are to be developed for employment, then the focus should be on science, research and development and green energy and would like to see more structured economic policies that reflect this.

Our Green Warrington Stephanie Fallon, Ali Ellam and Peter Ellam