

Statement given by Andy Carter MP

Warrington Borough Council Reference 2019/34700

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The case against the proposed development at Land to the west of Junction 20 of the M6 Motorway, and Junction 9 of the M56 Motorway and to the south of Grappenhall Lane/Cliff Lane Warrington

Friday 12th May 2023 - Check Against Delivery

Introduction

Let me start by being clear that I am all for economic growth and support for job creation and investment within Warrington South. Indeed, so is the Government and one of the Prime Minister's 5 priorities to drive growth in the economy.

Which is why I've fought so hard and consistently to re-use the former coal fired power station at Fiddlers Ferry, because it's predominantly brown field and located next to a rail line which offers great potential for jobs and housing.

I want to see growth and we have a good supply of brownfield land waiting for development since the closure of that site and I am right behind anyone who wants to work with me to invest in the infrastructure in an area which needs regeneration.

Since taking my seat in Parliament I can't think of a week where a developer hasn't written to me to make the case for putting a new warehouse on a piece of green-belt land. They usually seek a meeting to give me a long list of reasons why special circumstances exist. In every case, they don't.

I've argued consistently that I want to see the Warrington Local Plan reach a conclusion. I want to see an agreed strategic vision for my constituency where the right infrastructure is in place to support the growth.

There are elements of the local plan I don't necessarily agree with, but it will be a Local Plan agreed through the correct process. The Planning system is there to ensure that the development does not just follow market requirements but is managed to meet the social, economic, and environmental objectives which are set out and agreed locally and underpinned by the NPPF

So, let's look to set out why I consider the proposal, the subject of the application before you, to be '*inappropriate development*' within the Green Belt and the other reasons why I believe it to be unacceptable.

Let me just add that this development has generated so much correspondence from constituents and raised so many concerns that I felt it necessary to raise the matter in Prime Ministers' Questions, which is a pretty high bar to stand up with 6 million people watching you and raise an issue.

Following that intervention, the Secretary of State issued a stop notice to prevent the application from proceeding and subsequently he decided to appoint you to conduct this inquiry. I'm glad you're here.

A question of Prematurity

So let me start with Prematurity. The application for this development is premature, because in a Plan-led system applications fall to be considered against national policies set out in the NPPF and policies of the adopted Local Plan.

Because the policies of the emergent Local Plan are still under consideration this proposal should not be determined in advance of the Plan's formal adoption.

This is not just an issue of timing, as it is accepted that the weight afforded to policies within an emergent plan are dependent on which stage of the process has been reached.

I understand that we are at the post-Inquiry stage, and therefore it is normal for significant weight is afforded to any applications which fall to be determined during that stage.

In this case the site is part of a wider allocation for employment uses within the emergent Local Plan. However, the Local Plan Inspectors have indicated that they consider the Local Plan to be '*unsound*' and proposed several alterations to address these areas of concern in their response to the Council.

The Inspectors do not agree with the level of employment land proposed by the Plan and consider that the overall provision should be reduced by some 148ha. In fact, they specifically identify land allocated near to the M6/M56, of which this application site forms a substantial part, should be deleted from the Plan and all the land should remain as Green Belt.

In its response to the Inspectors, the Council has published a '*Schedule of Modifications*' in which it is proposed to accept both suggestions of reducing the overall allocation of employment land and the deletion of the South East Warrington Economic Area (SEWEA) from the Plan, leaving that land wholly with the Green Belt.

The necessary consultation period has now ended, and the Inspectors' final decision letter is anticipated. However, if this application were to be allowed now, it would be at odds with the Council's current position and the opinions of the Local Plan Inspectors.

Additionally, it would be prejudicial to the objectives of policies within the Emergent Local Plan for other parts of the Borough.

Not least of which is the potential redevelopment of Fiddler's Ferry, which the Local Plan Inspectors consider will serve to meet a significant proportion of the Borough's employment land requirements for the whole Plan period. Just for clarity, Fiddlers Ferry falls within my constituency, so I'm not making a NIMBY argument.

The proposal is contrary to Government Policy for permissible Development within the Green Belt

The development of land within the Green Belt is inappropriate, except where that development would neither prejudice the principals of maintaining the open character of the Green Belt nor be contrary to the purposes of including land within it. For example, the use of land for agriculture of outdoor sport and recreation is accepted because it meets both these criteria.

The majority of new buildings on land within the Green Belt would usually fall foul of these objectives and as such would be considered to be 'inappropriate'.

However, I appreciate some 'inappropriate' development may be acceptable where the benefits proposed are shown to outweigh the harm. For instance, it could be argued that the benefits accrued from the provision of a new hospital in such a location might be sufficient reason to allow a development to proceed, which would otherwise be considered 'inappropriate'. Although I am arguing for a new Hospital for Warrington, this is not what the proposal before you is looking to secure.

I note that the applicants have tabled similar arguments, in terms of the benefits that would be accrued for economic growth, as well as the jobs which would be created by the development of this site. Arguing the presence of '*special circumstances*' which would allow their proposal to be approved.

Notwithstanding the details of such a case, I remain unconvinced that the benefits, which might be secured, are sufficient to address the harm which this proposal would present and the prejudicial impact it would have upon the protection of the wider Green Belt within South Warrington. The Inspector reached a similar conclusion when considering the 'Stobart' appeal on land nearby.

I read with interest the Local Plan Inspectors' post-hearing letter to the Council and in particular their conclusions about the SEWEA site, which stated that:

'Exceptional circumstances to alter the Green Belt in this case do not exist. In order to be justified and consistent with national policy the SEWEA and Policy MD6 should be deleted.'

Therefore, this proposal must be considered unacceptable as it represents inappropriate development in the Green Belt and should be refused as such.

What benefits are there from the perspective of Economic Growth and Job Creation

Irrespective of the Local Plan Inspectors' conclusions, I would question what the precise economic benefits of the proposed development would be for my constituents.

Firstly, there is a question mark about whether the potential jobs created would meet local employment needs?

Warrington currently enjoys low levels of unemployment, and there appears to be a skills miss-match between the

type of work being sought locally and those jobs which might be offered by the proposal. This is likely to lead to labour being brought onto the site from further afield, rather than meeting an identified local employment need.

Furthermore, I question the overall level of job-creation that might be afforded from the proposals for this site.

This is because in recent years the number of jobs created per square metre of floor space by logistics operation is far lower than that previously expected. This change is due in no small part to significant advances in automation, as I recently witnessed first-hand at the large Amazon operation in Warrington, indeed they (Amazon) highlighted the growth of robot-technologies.

The Visual Impact of the Proposal (including the setting of a recognised Historic Asset)

Even if the principal of development with the Green Belt is accepted, there is still a need to consider what the visual impact of the proposals would be, both on its specific location and the site's wider setting.

The application site is currently in open countryside, with very few buildings within its boundaries, so any significant increase in the number of buildings, however well designed, will have a detrimental impact on the site's visual appearance.

Furthermore, the site is on some of highest points within the vicinity, increasing the visibility of any buildings placed on it, from some distance away.

The total site area, coupled with the scale and massing of buildings required to serve any modern logistics operations, will necessitate the provision of very large structures which it will be difficult to screen within the landscape.

This would make it difficult, if not impossible, to mitigate against any visual harm caused by the proposed development.

It is also necessary to recognise the harm the proposal would have to the setting of the historical buildings within the vicinity of the site.

The necessary scale of the proposed buildings would swamp the listed buildings and destroy their setting which will be detrimental to their value as heritage assets.

For these reasons the proposal should be rejected.

Transport linkages (including public transport) and Traffic Issues

While the site is located close to the intersection of three motorways, which serves to enhance its value as a centre for any logistics operation, it is not sustainable in terms of its public transport links, with few and infrequent bus services passing the site.

The proximity of the site to even the nearest housing, in Lymm and Appleton, is unlikely to encourage prospective employees to walk to the site, especially given the lack of pavements and the associated danger that brings.

Also, while cycling would be feasible, the current road network and high level of HGV traffic would put off all but the most determined cyclists.

Given that the development proposes some 2400 car parking spaces, it is evident that the applicant anticipates the majority of the work force would travel to the site by private car, recognising the lack of any real alternative, which itself could be seen as an admission that the site is not sustainable.

The impact of existing commercial operations in and around south Warrington already has a significant impact upon on nearby motorway network and other distributor roads in the vicinity.

At peak times, and when there are problems on the motorways, it is not unusual for there to be queuing traffic, including significant numbers of HGVs, for some distance along the single-carriageway feeder roads which lead up to the motorway interchange at Junction 20 of the M6.

Without significant changes to the current road network in the area the proposal will only serve to exacerbate an existing problem. This proposal does not envisage such transformation and unfortunately neither does the Local Plan.

Finally, Warrington has the added issue that any vehicular traffic needs to cross the Manchester Ship canal and is reliant upon the swing bridges which afford access over it.

When these bridges are opened, to enable larger ships to journey along the canal, they all open in succession. This causes a significant build-up of traffic not only on either side of the bridges, but all across Town.

On occasions, when there is a high level of boat movement along the canal, this can cause gridlock across the Town for several hours. This in turn has a knock-on impact upon the whole of the wider road network, including in the vicinity of the application site.

The significant level of vehicular movements associated with the proposal would only serve to exacerbate an existing problem.

Sustainability of the location

In addition to the application site being poorly served by public transport and not easily accessible by foot or bicycle, with the exception of a single pub and a church there are no services close to the site.

This will have significant implications for servicing the proposed buildings and for any staff employed there.

Unless provision is made on site, staff would have to travel several miles to purchase food or other essentials.

This would not only add traffic movements from and to the site but would mean the development would be unlikely to provide the positive impact on the wider local economy, which is often associated with any new major centres of employment.

Wider Environmental Concerns (including noise and air pollution)

The application site is predominantly in agriculture and associated uses. Therefore, the proposed development would not only present a loss of openness, but would detrimentally impact the local ecosystem; causing a loss of wildlife habitats which are unlikely to be satisfactorily replicated in any mitigation scheme proposed.

Additionally, Warrington already has an issue with poor air-quality, and despite the recent closure of a coal-fired power station (Fiddlers Ferry) levels of nitrous dioxide and other noxious particulates within the air remains very high.

This is mostly attributed to the high levels of traffic generation and the harm associated with vehicle emissions.

This unacceptable situation would only be made worse if the 6/56 proposal were to be approved and the levels of vehicle movement associated with 2400 car parking spaces and all the HGV vehicles required for an expansive logistics operation, were allowed to be added into the mix.

This only serves as a further reason why this proposal is unacceptable and should be refused.

Conclusion

So let me conclude, the proposal represents inappropriate development in the Green Belt, and the benefits of the proposal are insufficient to outweigh the harm cause to the open character of the Green Belt or the purpose for

including land within it. As such the proposal is contrary to Government Policy.

The proposed development of the land at the South east Warrington Employment Area (SEWEA) is no longer supported by the emergent Local Plan, as amended in March 2023 by the Council's published *Schedule of Modifications*.

The proposal is therefore 'premature' in advance of the Inspectors' final decision letter and the Plan's formal adoption.

Approval of this application would be at odds with the Plan-led system of development management and would be prejudicial to other policies and objectives of the Emergent Local Plan.

Additionally, the proposal would cause harm to '*interests of acknowledged importance*', including the visual impact within an area of open countryside, by virtue of the proposed developments required scale and massing.

Furthermore, the traffic generated by the proposed development would exacerbate existing problems with the local transport network and the poor air quality situation.

Finally, the development will result in the loss of wildlife habitats to the detriment of the local eco-system, which mitigation cannot adequately resolve.

For all these reasons I respectfully request that you to dismiss this appeal and thereby refuse the granting of planning permission for this proposal.