

Report to Warrington Borough Council

by Andrea Mageean BA (Hons) BPI PhD MRTPI and Kevin Ward BA (Hons) MRTPI

Inspectors appointed by the Secretary of State

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Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended)

Section 20

Report on the Examination of the Warrington Local Plan

The Plan was submitted for examination on 22 April 2022

The examination hearings were held between 6 September and 6 October 2022 and on 13 July 2023

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Abbreviations used in this report

AA	Appropriate Assessment
DPH	Dwellings per hectare
DtC	Duty to Co-operate
EDNA	Economic Development Needs Assessment
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority
GTAA	Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpeople Accommodation Assessment
HIA	Heritage Impact Assessment
HMA	Housing Market Area
HRA	Habitats Regulations Assessment
IDP	Infrastructure Delivery Plan
LCRCA	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LHNA	Local Housing Needs Assessment
LWS	Local Wildlife Site
MPA	Minerals Planning Authority
NE	Natural England
PPG	Planning Practice Guidance
PPTS	Planning Policy for Traveller Sites
SA	Sustainability Appraisal
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SEP	Strategic Economic Plan
SEWEA	South East Warrington Employment Area
SEWUE	South East Warrington Urban Extension
SOCG	Statement of Common Ground
SPA	Special Protection Area

Non-Technical Summary

This report concludes that the Warrington Local Plan (the Local Plan) provides an appropriate basis for the planning of the Borough, provided that a number of main modifications are made to it. Warrington Borough Council (the Council) has specifically requested that we recommend any main modifications necessary to enable the Local Plan to be adopted.

Following the hearings in September and October 2022, the Council prepared a schedule of the proposed main modifications and carried out sustainability appraisal (SA) and habitats regulations assessment (HRA) of them. The proposed main modifications were subject to public consultation over a six-week period. It became apparent however that there were issues with the notification process and so a further six week consultation was undertaken. An additional hearing session was held on 13 July 2023 to reconsider the issue of the overall employment land requirement. We have recommended the inclusion of the main modifications in the Local Plan after considering the SA and HRA, all the representations made in response to consultation on them and the further submissions and discussions at the additional hearing session.

The Main Modifications can be summarised as follows:

- Reducing the employment land requirement for the Borough from 316.26ha to 168ha so that the Local Plan is justified in this respect;
- Deleting Policy MD6 and the proposed site allocation for the South East Warrington Employment Area as they are not justified or consistent with national policy;
- Amending Policy MD1 and the housing trajectory in relation to the proposed site allocation at Warrington Waterfront to recognise the uncertainty over the delivery of the Western Link Road and the consequential effect on housing delivery and therefore to ensure that the Local Plan is effective;
- Amending Policy MD3 and the proposed site allocation at Fiddlers Ferry to reduce the amount of land to be removed from the Green Belt in order to ensure that the Local Plan is justified and consistent with national policy in this respect;
- Deleting Policy MD4 and the proposed site allocation at Peel Hall to ensure that the Local Plan is effective in recognising the site as an existing commitment with planning permission; and
- A number of other modifications to ensure that the plan is positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Introduction

1. This report contains our assessment of the Local Plan in terms of Section 20(5) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended). It considers first whether the Local Plan's preparation has complied with the duty to co-operate. It then considers whether the Local Plan is compliant with the legal requirements and whether it is sound. Paragraph 35 of the National Planning Policy Framework 2021 (NPPF) makes it clear that in order to be sound, a Local Plan should be positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy.
2. The starting point for the examination is the assumption that the Council has submitted what it considers to be a sound plan. The Local Plan, submitted in April 2022 is the basis for our examination. It is the same document as was published for consultation in October 2021 (the Updated Proposed Submission Version Local Plan – SP1).

Context of the Local Plan

3. Warrington is the most northerly of the local authorities in the Cheshire area. It sits mid-way between the conurbations of Liverpool and Manchester and shares boundaries with Halton, Cheshire West and Chester, Cheshire East and the Metropolitan Boroughs of St Helens, Wigan, Salford and Trafford.
4. The Borough comprises the main urban area of Warrington, surrounded by a rural area and a number of smaller settlements. The Green Belt surrounds the main urban area and the other settlements. The River Mersey and Manchester Ship Canal run through the heart of Warrington. The Borough is well served by transport links and in particular the M6, M56 and M62 Motorways which run through it, providing strong north-south and east-west links to the rest of the region and further afield.
5. Warrington was designated as a New Town in 1968. The population and employment base of the Borough grew and the main urban area expanded significantly. Warrington continues to perform an important role in the regional economy with significant net in commuting, particularly from Wigan and St Helens and to a lesser extent Halton and Cheshire West and Chester.
6. The Local Plan will supersede all the policies in the adopted Local Plan Core Strategy (2014). It is a comprehensive plan including strategic policies and site allocations. There is one made Neighbourhood Plan in the Borough (Appleton Parish Thorn Ward Neighbourhood Plan).

Main Modifications

7. In accordance with section 20(7C) of the 2004 Act the Council requested that we should recommend any main modifications necessary to rectify matters that make the Local Plan unsound and /or not legally compliant and thus incapable of being adopted. Our report explains why the recommended main modifications are necessary. The main modifications are referenced in bold in the report in the form **MM001**, **MM002** etc, and are set out in full in the Appendix.
8. Following the examination hearings, the Council prepared a schedule of proposed main modifications and carried out SA and HRA of them. The main modification schedule was subject to public consultation for six weeks. It became apparent however that there were issues with the notification process and so a further six week consultation was undertaken. An additional hearing session was held on 13 July 2023 to reconsider the issue of the overall employment land requirement. We have recommended the inclusion of the main modifications in the Local Plan after considering the SA and HRA, all the representations made in response to consultation on them and the further submissions and discussions at the additional hearing session.
9. In light of comments received and the additional hearing session, we have made some amendments to the detailed wording of the main modifications and added consequential modifications where these are necessary for consistency or clarity. None of the amendments significantly alters the content of the modifications as published for consultation or undermines the participatory processes and SA/HRA that has been undertaken. Where necessary we have highlighted these amendments in the report.

Policies Map

10. The Council must maintain an adopted policies map which illustrates geographically the application of the policies in the adopted development plan. When submitting a local plan for examination, the Council is required to provide a submission policies map showing the changes to the adopted policies map that would result from the proposals in the submitted local plan. In this case, the submission policies map comprises the Warrington Local Plan Policies Map (SP2).
11. The policies map is not defined in statute as a development plan document and so we do not have the power to recommend main modifications to it. However, a number of the main modifications to the Local Plan's policies require further corresponding changes to be made to the Policies Map. In addition, there are some instances where the geographic illustration of policies on the submitted Policies Map is not justified and changes are needed to ensure that the relevant policies are effective.

12. These further changes to the policies map were published for consultation alongside the main modifications (CD68).
13. When the Local Plan is adopted, in order to comply with the legislation and give effect to the Local Plan's policies, the Council will need to update the adopted policies map to include all the changes proposed in SP2 and the further changes published in CD68. It will also need to reflect the up to date information regarding the safeguarding zone for Manchester Airport.

Public Sector Equality Duty

14. We have had due regard to the aims expressed in S149(1) of the Equality Act 2010. This has included our consideration of several matters during the examination including provision for Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Showpeople and the provision of accessible housing.

Assessment of Duty to Co-operate

15. Section 20(5)(c) of the 2004 Act requires that we consider whether the Council complied with any duty imposed on it by section 33A in respect of the preparation of the Local Plan.
16. We have had regard to the Duty to Co-operate (DtC) Statement, as updated and amended (SP7), and the representations made in considering whether the DtC has been met. The Statement describes the regional working with other local planning authorities, cross-boundary co-operation on strategic priorities and the consultation that has taken place with bodies prescribed under Regulation 4 of the Regulations.
17. The Council has engaged regularly with all neighbouring councils and combined authorities in terms of housing needs and requirements (including Halton, St Helens, Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Salford, Trafford, Wigan, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA)). Analysis of the interrelationships with these neighbouring areas in terms of migration, commuting, housing markets and service provision has concluded that Warrington has the strongest relationships with St Helens and Halton. These authorities have formed a strategic housing market area (HMA) known as Mid-Mersey.
18. Following DtC discussions, each authority in the Mid-Mersey HMA has agreed to meet its own Objectively Assessed Need for housing. These authorities have confirmed in the Statement of Common Ground (SOCG) (SP10) that they will keep their housing need under review and address any issues arising in the future through the DtC process.

19. The Council, along with Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester Councils, belongs to the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). It is accepted by the constituent authorities that the LEP area does not form a single Functional Economic Market Area for the purposes of the NPPF. Nonetheless, there is evidence of collaborative working with the LEP to support the economic growth of the sub-region and in support of the delivery of the LEPs spatial strategies within Warrington.
20. The Warrington Economic Development Needs Assessment (EDNA) August 2021 (EC2) reviews cross boundary issues relating to economic growth and employment land provision. This confirms that Warrington's wider economic geography includes Halton and St Helens, parts of Greater Manchester including most of Wigan, western portions of Trafford and Salford, and the northern parts of Cheshire West and Chester and Cheshire East.
21. The Council has agreed with St Helens Council that the 31.2 ha western extension of the strategic employment site known as Omega will contribute to meeting Warrington's employment land needs. This is on the basis that, whilst this area falls within St Helens administrative boundary, it effectively extends an established employment location within Warrington and will be accessed exclusively via Warrington's highway network. The SOCG sets out that Council will continue to liaise with St Helens Council over the apportionment of the additional 44ha of employment land benefiting from the planning consent gained in November 2021. Whilst the St Helens Borough Local Plan was adopted in July 2022 and therefore the respective Local Plans are at different stages, the SOCG demonstrates the constructive working between the two authorities.
22. The potential cross-boundary implications of the proposed strategic site allocations have been considered. Transport modelling has analysed possible changes to commuting and migration flows, particularly the impact on Cheshire East. There is evidence that the concerns raised by Cheshire East Council regarding the effects of HGV traffic and the potential highway impacts on Swineyard Lane can be addressed through ongoing discussions to identify and agree the detail of mitigation measures.
23. Similarly, in relation to the cross-boundary implications of the Fiddlers Ferry allocation, there is evidence of joint working with Halton Council and agreement that this employment and housing allocation would count towards meeting Warrington's needs. The Council has agreed to ensure appropriate mitigation is provided to address any impacts on Halton's transportation and social infrastructure arising from the allocation of Fiddlers Ferry.
24. In relation to the St Helens employment site at Parkside, which abuts the shared boundary with Warrington, the Council and St Helens Council have agreed to work together in liaison with National Highways, Wigan Council and the GMCA

to consider any cross-boundary infrastructure issues. Similarly, in relation to the St Helens proposal at Bold Forest to form a garden suburb close to the shared boundary with Warrington, the Councils will work together with National Highways to address cross-boundary infrastructure matters.

25. The DtC Statement also evidences the co-operation with other prescribed bodies, including infrastructure providers and technical consultees. This has influenced the policies in the Local Plan and the preparation of key supporting documents such as the Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP) (IN1).
26. National Highways has had ongoing involvement in ensuring there is full understanding of the impact of the development proposed in the Local Plan, such that the required mitigation measures are understood, and that the IDP is kept under review in respect of schemes relating to the Strategic Road Network. A SOCG reflects this co-operation (SP11), particularly in respect of Junctions 7 and 8 on the M62.
27. Key bodies such as Natural England (NE) have had an input into the additional evidence required to support the provisions of the Local Plan. The Council and NE have worked together to resolve the in principle objections raised by NE in relation to the HRA (SP12) (with the exception of the issue relating to Holcroft Moss, as discussed below).
28. The Council has also worked with Cheshire West and Chester and Cheshire East Councils as the neighbouring Minerals Planning Authorities (MPA) to address concerns about the ability of Warrington (and its wider Local Aggregates Assessment sub-region) to meet its own 7 year aggregate sand and gravel land bank requirements. Work to ensure that the aggregate shortage will not place additional burden on the two Cheshire MPAs will continue.
29. We are satisfied that, where necessary, the Council has engaged constructively, actively and on an on-going basis in the preparation of the Local Plan and that the DtC has therefore been met.

Assessment of other aspects of legal compliance

30. The Local Plan has been prepared in accordance with the Council's Local Development Scheme although there has been some modest slippage in the timetable.
31. Consultation on the Local Plan and the main modifications was carried out in compliance with the Council's Statement of Community Involvement.

32. The Council carried out SA of the Local Plan, prepared a report of the findings of the appraisal, and published the report along with the Local Plan and other submission documents under Regulation 19. The appraisal was updated to assess the main modifications.
33. The Updated HRA August 2021 (SP12) considered whether the emerging proposals in the Local Plan would have a likely significant effect on any of the 6 European Sites with potential linkages to the Warrington Borough area. As such effects could not be excluded an Appropriate Assessment (AA) was undertaken. This considered the likely impacts of the Local Plan alone and in combination with other plans and projects. Following an AA in relation to each of the pathways identified, recommendations were made as to how the impacts could be mitigated, with policy wording revised accordingly. This included provision for project level AA, where appropriate. On this basis the HRA concluded that there would be no adverse effects on the integrity of European sites, either alone or in combination with other plans and projects.
34. An Updated HRA (CD27) was produced in December 2021 to take into account comments made by NE. Additionally, with specific reference to impacts on the Manchester Mosses Special Area of Conservation (SAC), further work was undertaken to address methodological differences between the Updated HRA (SP12) approach and that used by the GMCA to model air quality as part of the Places for Everyone Plan. This resulted in an Addendum HRA (E9) being produced in April 2022. The Addendum HRA concluded that the revised methodology did not fundamentally change the conclusions of the Updated HRA. That is that an adverse effect on the integrity of the Manchester Mosses SAC cannot be dismissed when the Local Plan is considered in combination with the traffic growth from planned development in surrounding areas. That said, the use of this methodology significantly reduced the air pollution forecast of the impacts of the Local Plan alone.
35. Following the submission of the Local Plan, NE raised concerns about the Updated HRA being incomplete with reference to their concern that the potential effects of the Local Plan on Holcroft Moss within the Manchester Mosses SAC had not been finalised. Specifically, this was regarding the modelling of the in-combination effects of the Local Plan along with the Places for Everyone Plan in relation to air quality issues associated with road traffic emissions from the M62 adjacent to this part of the SAC. Additional concerns were raised about whether the AA was made in the light of the conservation objectives for the site, and also the nature of the mitigation measures proposed.
36. The Council and NE have subsequently worked together to address these matters. Specifically, a further Updated HRA (E10) of November 2022 has been produced. This has sought to ensure that the assessment of the effects on Holcroft Moss is complete in that it includes consideration of the whole SAC, and that the assessment is undertaken with specific reference to conservation

objectives. This updated assessment concludes that the forecast traffic growth would mean that the two plans considered together would make a greater than imperceptible contribution to retarding the restore objective relating to this European site. As a result, mitigation is necessary to avoid an adverse effect.

37. Specifically, to supplement the package of 'soft' measures identified in the Local Plan, the delivery of long-term ecological resilience works involving hydrological restoration measures to benefit Holcroft Moss has been agreed as the preferred mitigation approach. This would be commensurate with the impacts on the site from forecast traffic growth. A specific SOCG (SG11) between the Council, the GMCA and NE sets out that the Council will lead on the preparation of a Habitat Mitigation Plan to be produced by December 2023. This will avoid any adverse effects on the integrity of the SAC from both the Warrington and the GMCA plans alone and in combination with other projects and plans.
38. The Development Plan, taken as a whole, includes policies to address the strategic priorities for the development and use of land in the local planning authority's area.
39. The Development Plan, taken as a whole, includes policies designed to secure that the development and use of land in the local planning authority's area contribute to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change.
40. The Local Plan complies with all other relevant legal requirements, including in the 2004 Act (as amended) and the 2012 Regulations.

Assessment of soundness

Main Issues

41. Taking account of all the representations, the written evidence and the discussions that took place at the examination hearings, we have identified 21 main issues upon which the soundness of the Local Plan depends. This report deals with these main issues. It does not respond to every point or issue raised by representors. We originally identified a single broad ranging issue relating to the Spatial Strategy (Matter 3). For the purposes of this report we have dealt with some of the specific points raised in Matter 3 under different issues. We deal with issues concerning housing need and the housing requirement and economic growth and development first, given the significance of our conclusions on these matters for the overall Spatial Strategy and proposed site allocations.

Issue 1 – Whether the Local Plan has been positively prepared and whether it is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to housing need and the housing requirement.

42. The Council has followed the standard method for assessing local housing need as set out in the NPPF and the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG). The data used was the most up to date at the time that the Regulation 19 version of the Local Plan was published for consultation in October 2021. The use of the standard method results in a minimum housing need of 816 homes per year. This equates to at least 14,688 new homes over the 18 year plan period between 2021/22 and 2038/39.
43. As set out above in respect of the DtC, there is agreement with other authorities that Warrington will meet its own housing needs in full and will not be required to contribute towards any unmet needs from other areas.
44. We deal in detail below with the issue of the overall employment land requirement. A key element in our consideration of that issue is the relationship between the employment land requirement and likely jobs growth compared with planned housing growth and resulting labour supply. As we explain, there should be a broad alignment between employment and housing growth. We conclude that the employment land requirement should be reduced to a level which would provide for additional jobs on a scale which is in reasonable balance with the labour supply that would result from planned housing growth.
45. The Local Plan sets out a housing requirement of a minimum of 14,688 new homes over the plan period (an average of 816 per year) in line with the need identified using the standard method. As we go on to discuss below, although the Council has sought to maximise the capacity of the existing urban area to deliver housing, significant alterations to the Green Belt are needed to enable enough land to be allocated to meet this requirement. A substantial increase in the housing requirement would be needed to achieve a broad alignment of labour supply with the scale of employment growth likely from the amount of employment land proposed in the submitted Local Plan. This would involve further significant alterations to the Green Belt, in addition to those already proposed.
46. An average annual housing requirement of 816 new homes per year would in itself represent a significant increase on recent trends in completions. Between 2010/11 and 2021/22, the annual average for completions was 575¹. The figure of 816 new homes per year has not been achieved since 2007/8. Increasing the

¹ Using annual figures set out in CD52

housing requirement even further would raise considerable doubts in terms of realistic delivery.

47. The Local Housing Needs Assessment Update of 2021 - H2 (the LHNA) identifies a total annual net need for 423 affordable houses. On the face of it, this would represent a significant proportion of the overall housing requirement and might suggest that it should be increased significantly to facilitate the provision of more affordable housing through the planning process. However, meeting the needs of those already living in housing would not in itself add to the overall housing need, reducing the annual figure to 109. The demographic projections used in the standard method already take account of need from newly forming households. Excluding this element would leave an annual need of only 30 affordable houses. The standard method factors in an affordability ratio, which in Warrington's case, increases the housing need from the baseline demographic figure of 715 per year to 816 per year. In addition to the affordable housing that would be delivered as part of market housing developments, there is likely to continue to be a supply from schemes by Registered Providers and the Council's Housing Company.
48. The Local Plan takes an appropriate approach to identifying housing need and setting out a housing requirement of a minimum of 816 new homes per year. There is no need to increase the amount of housing being planned for to meet needs from other areas, to facilitate economic growth, to provide for affordable housing, or for any other reason. Significantly increasing the housing requirement above this figure would involve the removal of substantial additional areas of land from the Green Belt and would require a noticeable increase in housing delivery rates compared with recent trends.
49. The Local Plan relies on a number of site allocations on land currently in the Green Belt. For the larger strategic sites, there are also significant infrastructure requirements. It will therefore take some time to bring such sites to the point where they can start to deliver houses. The Local Plan recognises this and takes a realistic approach to the likely timescale for delivery on allocated sites. In light of this, Policy DEV1 sets out a stepped housing requirement of 678 homes per year in the first five years and then 870 homes per year for the rest of the plan period. This is an effective and justified approach, given the circumstances that apply.
50. There are four designated neighbourhood areas in the Borough. A significant part of three of these falls within the boundary of the South East Warrington Urban Extension Main Development Area (Policy MD2). Distributing the total number of houses between the different neighbourhood areas prior to a comprehensive development framework for the allocation site would be premature and prejudice this process. In the case of Lymm, the Local Plan proposes specific site allocations. In light of these particular circumstances, the

Local Plan is justified in not identifying housing requirements for the designated neighbourhood areas.

Conclusion

51. The Local Plan has been positively prepared and is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to housing need and the housing requirement.

Issue 2 – Whether the Local Plan has been positively prepared and whether it is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to economic growth and development.

Background to the employment land requirement

52. The EDNA provides the basis for the employment land requirement in the Local Plan. Average total land take up for strategic and local purposes was 14.22ha per year between 1996 and 2020. The EDNA also considered employment growth forecasts from Oxford Economics and Cambridge Econometrics and calculated the likely employment land needed as a result. This analysis included looking at growth sectors only and the higher level growth scenario from the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP). However, the EDNA did not consider these labour demand assessments to be realistic given the actual past take up rate compared with that which would have been predicted through modelling.
53. The EDNA therefore recommended that the total strategic and local past annual take up rate is projected forward over the plan period. It also recommended a further three year buffer and an allowance for business displacement. Ultimately it identified a total need for 316.26ha for the plan period. The Local Plan sets this figure as the employment land requirement and seeks to make provision to deliver this.
54. The Local Plan did not attempt to establish any link between the employment land requirement and employment forecasts (labour demand) or demographically derived assessments of future labour supply. The PPG² makes it clear that a range of data should be used to forecast future needs for employment land. It includes reference to employment forecasts and assessments of current and future local labour supply, along with past take up rates, future property market requirements, consultation with relevant organisations, and assessments of business trends and changing business models. It goes on to explain that authorities should take account of longer term economic cycles and consider and plan for alternative economic scenarios.

² Reference ID: 2a-027-20190220

55. Recent years have seen some very significant events that have had, and are likely to continue to have major impacts on the economy and how it functions. Key amongst these are Brexit, the Covid Pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The significant increase in home based working and continuing shift towards online retailing are also major influences, as is the growth of the storage, distribution and logistics sector.
56. Against this background, it is very difficult to predict future needs for employment land, particularly over an 18 year plan period. Depending on the methodology used and the assumptions made, assessments of future employment land needs can vary considerably. The benefits of taking account of a range of data and assessments, as set out in the PPG are clear. The submitted Local Plan proposed significant alterations to the Green Belt to accommodate housing and employment needs. Such alterations can only be made on the basis of exceptional circumstances and where these are fully evidenced and justified.

Employment growth forecasts and labour supply

57. The employment growth forecasts from Oxford Economics and Cambridge Econometrics indicate net jobs growth for the plan period of 12,319 (Oxford) and 17,391 (Cambridge). These were the only comprehensive employment growth forecasts available to the examination. Despite some criticism of them from various parties, no comparable alternative forecasts were submitted for us to consider. The consultants advising the Council considered the Cambridge forecasts to be too optimistic, and the Oxford forecasts unduly pessimistic. They advised that a mid-point between the two forecasts is realistic. The Council confirmed that this was its position. This would see 14,855 additional jobs over the plan period.
58. The LHNA estimates that some 18,300 additional jobs could be supported by the growth in labour supply as a result of the housing requirement of 816 homes per year, assuming existing commuting patterns. If the commuting ratio was 1:1 for new jobs, this would fall to approximately 16,100 additional jobs. As set out above we consider the housing requirement of 816 homes per year to be justified.
59. The figure of 18,300 additional jobs is above even the Cambridge Econometrics forecast which is considered too optimistic and is significantly above the mid-point regarded by the Council as realistic. Therefore, assumptions made about the jobs growth that can be supported by the increased labour supply as a result of the housing requirement already build in an element of optimism and additional growth compared with forecasts.
60. In response to our request following the initial hearing sessions, the Council provided some additional information on the potential number of jobs that could

be generated from the total amount of employment land proposed in the Local Plan and other sectors (CD10 and CD10a). This indicated that 33,368 total additional jobs could be created. We also took account of data on actual land take up between 1996 and 2020 (341.29ha) and actual net jobs growth in the Borough as a whole over this period (48,350). This indicated that for each 1ha of employment land that had been taken up, there had been approximately 142 additional jobs created in the local economy overall. After discounting for business displacement, we estimated that the employment land requirement of 316.26ha in the submitted Local Plan could see in the order of 42,400 total additional jobs in the local economy as a whole.

61. On the basis of the information and analysis available to us at the time, we concluded that the likely jobs growth as a result of the amount of employment land proposed in the Local Plan would be far in excess of that which could be supported by the increased labour supply resulting from the level of housing growth planned.
62. We do not suggest that there needs to be an absolute match between employment land provision, estimated jobs growth and labour supply or that such an absolute match is even possible. However, there needs to be broad alignment, at least, in order for the local economy and housing market to function effectively and to avoid substantial increases in unsustainable commuting patterns. We concluded that there was a significant disparity between the employment land requirement in the submitted Local Plan and the level of housing proposed. This is in the context of a Local Plan which proposes alterations to the Green Belt to allocate sufficient land for employment and housing and our conclusion that the housing requirement of 816 homes per year was justified. We considered that the employment land requirement of 316.26ha was not justified therefore.

The post hearings letter and proposed main modifications

63. These points were set out in our post hearings letter of 16 December 2022 (ID06). That letter went on to use the past trend of 142 jobs in the whole economy for every 1ha of employment land taken up, along with the estimated additional 18,300 jobs that could be supported by 816 new homes per year, to arrive at a revised total employment land requirement of 168ha (after applying a 3 year buffer and allowance for displacement).
64. This reduced employment land requirement was included amongst the proposed main modifications published for consultation. Our conclusion on this issue was also a key element in the proposed main modification to delete Policy MD6 and the site allocation for the South East Warrington Employment Area (SEWEA). We deal with that specifically under Issue 9 below.

65. In light of the representations received on the proposed main modifications and the additional and more detailed information and evidence submitted, a further hearing session was arranged to re-consider the employment land requirement. We have fully taken account of all the additional information and evidence submitted prior to and following this hearing session and the discussion that took place on the day.
66. We acknowledge that the conclusion on the employment land requirement set out in our letter of 16 December 2022 was based on relatively simple analysis. This was largely as a consequence of the information and evidence available to us at the time. The information and evidence now available is more sophisticated and detailed.

Market factors and the strategic nature of logistics development

67. As noted above, the employment land requirement in the Local Plan is based on the average total annual past take up rate between 1996 and 2020, projected forward. This take up rate has been heavily influenced by development at one strategic site, Omega. Omega sits either side of the M62, to the north west of the main urban area, and adjoins the boundary with St Helens Borough. Between 1996 and 2020 some 144.5ha of land was taken up at Omega. This was almost entirely for Class B8 storage and distribution uses and approximately 110ha of this was taken up in just three individual years.
68. Evidence and discussion regarding future employment land needs was largely focussed on the logistics sector. This is understandable given past take up trends and assessments of market demands. Whilst the two proposed site allocations in the Local Plan would provide land for Class B8 and Class B2 uses, it is clear that it is anticipated that there would be a strong emphasis on Class B8 uses. This was also the case with existing sites and the Omega West site in St Helens which is allocated in the adopted St Helens Local Plan. This allocated site adjoins the Omega site in Warrington and is subject to an agreement between the two authorities that it will contribute some 31.2ha towards Warrington's needs. The Secretary of State granted planning permission for a larger site at Omega West in St Helens including an additional 44ha of land (75ha in total) in 2021. The Council's position is that this additional 44ha should logically also be included in the supply for Warrington. To date there is no agreement between the authorities on this matter however.
69. Warrington is clearly well placed in terms of the market for Class B8 storage and distribution (logistics) uses. It has seen strong demand for such development, largely due to its location and accessibility to the motorway network. Vacancy rates for industrial premises in Warrington are relatively low (4.8% in June 2023 – AM5.01). Rental levels are strong and have been on an upward trend in recent years. Those involved in the sector continue to see

Warrington as an attractive location and there is market pressure for additional land and premises to come forward.

70. However, the logistics sector largely operates on a sub-regional, regional or even national level. Whilst sites within Warrington may be particularly attractive to the market, there are a range of other locations, in other authorities, which provide opportunities to meet development needs. There are a number of sites in the sub-region/region allocated in Local Plans and/or coming forward through the planning process, which can accommodate logistics development, including on a large scale. Table 1 of AM5.01 identifies a total of approximately 1,955ha of employment land supply allocated in adopted Local Plans in the Functional Economic Market Area. It estimates that some 1,379ha remains available, although in some cases monitoring data is not up to date.
71. In the case of Omega West and Parkside, both in St Helens, these are adjacent to the boundary with Warrington Borough. It is important to note that the scale of need on a sub-regional or regional level for Class B8 uses or employment land generally has not been quantified. Nor has the specific role that Warrington should play in meeting that need.
72. Given the strategic nature of the logistics sector and the dominant effect of the Omega site on past trends, simply projecting forward past total take up rates and assuming that they need to be fully replicated by the provision of land in Warrington is not justified. The implications of such provision and the context of other sources of data and assessments need to be taken into account.

Past take up trends in more detail

73. The EDNA considers past take up rates over a 24 year period, 1996 to 2020. More recent trends over a 10 year period show a much greater take up of land for Class B8 use and a notable decline in take up for office development. However, this short term trend has been predominantly due to land take up at the Omega site. As the PPG makes clear, account should be taken of longer term economic cycles. The 24 year period used in the EDNA allows for this and takes account of the somewhat sporadic nature of take up on a year by year basis. It provides a robust basis to consider past trends in take up.
74. In terms of past trends, the EDNA identifies an average annual local take up rate of 8.2ha between 1996 and 2020. This excludes strategic take up at Omega. After applying a 3 year buffer and an allowance for displacement this would give a gross requirement of 189.84ha over the plan period.
75. Based on the past trend for combined strategic and local Class B8 take up only, the EDNA identifies a specific gross need for 179.64ha over the plan period (including 3 year buffer and an allowance for displacement). This is relevant

given the particular focus on Class B8 uses in the intended supply identified in the Local Plan.

Labour demand models and labour supply in more detail

76. Whilst the EDNA dismissed the use of labour demand models given the disparity with past take up trends, it is useful to consider them in order to provide some context and given that such assessments are referred to in the PPG. Even when including only those sectors of the economy forecast to grow, an estimated 62.24ha (Oxford) and 60.12ha (Cambridge) would be required (Table 44 of EDNA columns A+B+C). Factoring in the more optimistic employment growth from the SEP would still only result in a total requirement of 107.44ha (Oxford) and 105.07ha (Cambridge).
77. We return now to the relationship between the estimated number of jobs that could be supported by the growth in labour supply resulting from planned housing growth (18,300 jobs) and the likely total jobs growth from employment land provision and other sources. This is in the light of more detailed and sophisticated information and analysis provided following the publication of the proposed main modifications and for the additional hearing session.
78. We have considered the alternative assessments of total jobs growth arising from the Local Plan proposals and other sources that have been put forward. These rely to one extent or another on assumptions such as on job densities, the proportion of jobs in certain sectors that need to be accommodated in Class E(g), B2 or B8 space (on employment land), displacement and multiplier effects. Variations in these assumptions can have significant effects on the overall outcome of the assessment.
79. In terms of job densities, there was a broad consensus that the Employment Density Guide 2015 published by the Homes and Communities Agency (CD74) provides the most appropriate guidance. For Class B8 uses it sets out a range of densities from 1 job per 70sqm for "final mile" distribution centres, 1 per 77sqm for regional distribution centres to 1 per 95sqm for national distribution centres.
80. Based on analysis in the EDNA, the Council confirmed the position regarding the Oxford and Cambridge forecasts for additional jobs not requiring employment land and jobs in sectors generating office based jobs (AM5.01, CD75 and CD82). Taking the mid-point between the two forecasts, this indicates approximately 6,460 additional jobs not requiring employment land and some 9,397 jobs in sectors generating office based jobs.
81. Past trends between 1996 and 2021 show significant jobs growth in financial and business services and Government services. To a large extent these have traditionally been office based. There is no substantive evidence to suggest that

the predicted future growth in such sectors is not realistic. Some office based jobs may be accommodated on sites included as part of the existing supply, but as set out in the EDNA (Table 9 and para 4.10), this is not likely to be a significant amount, given that only 1.15ha is specifically identified for office development. Some ancillary office based jobs would also be likely as part of the development of Class B2 and B8 uses on the sites proposed to be allocated. However these are likely to be relatively small in number.

82. The capacity to accommodate the forecast growth in office based jobs on existing employment sites and the sites proposed in the Local Plan is therefore limited. The Council's latest assessment is that office vacancy rates as of June 2023 were 8.6% by premises and 12.6% by floorspace (Paragraph 2.29 of AM5.01). This vacant stock provides some capacity to accommodate growth in office jobs. Importantly there has been a significant shift towards home based working in recent years, particularly in sectors that were more traditionally office based. To a large degree this was accelerated by the Covid pandemic. Although it is expected that there will be a continued return to office based working, there is likely to remain a significant proportion of home based working.
83. The growth in office based jobs is therefore likely to be mainly additional to jobs estimated to be created on the land supply set out in the Local Plan. This supply is made up of existing sites, the allocated Omega West site in St Helens, and the two proposed site allocations in the Local Plan. The Council estimated that a total of 17,019 jobs would be generated from this Local Plan land supply (Table 2 AM5.01). This assumes that the proposed allocation sites would be developed exclusively for Class B8 use with a job density of 1 per 80sqm. However, the relevant policies also allow for Class B2 use (which would have significantly higher job densities) and the EDNA assumes a job density of 1 per 70sqm for Class B8 uses. Both of these factors would lead to a notable increase in the jobs estimated compared to that set out in AM5.01.
84. A more sophisticated approach to this particular question was put forward on behalf of Langtree Property Partners (culminating in OD13). This attempted to estimate the net jobs likely to be created, factoring in assumptions on full time job equivalents, displacement rates (40% and 50%) and multipliers. It also assumed that the proposed allocation sites would be developed exclusively for Class B8 use and job densities of either 1 per 80qm or 1 per 95sqm. Given that Class B2 uses could also take place and the potential range of densities for different forms of distribution uses, it may be that the assessment under estimates the jobs likely to be created. Nevertheless, taking it at face value, it indicates that between 10,184 and 13,888 net additional jobs could be created from the supply identified in the Local Plan, depending on assumptions.
85. The assessment then attempts to add estimated jobs not requiring employment land provision (10,718) and after adjustment for multiplier effects concludes that the total net job gain in the whole of the Warrington economy would be between

19,757 and 23,045, depending on assumptions. The 10,718 figure assumes that 50% of jobs growth in finance and business and ICT would be on employment land, along with 22% of jobs growth in Government and other services.

Regardless of whether this assumption is correct, the Local Plan supply would provide limited opportunity to accommodate such office based jobs, for the reasons set out above. A substantial proportion of the jobs growth in these office based sectors will be in addition to the jobs provided through the Local Plan supply. As recognised above, there is some potential for existing vacant space to be used and there is likely to be a significant amount of home based working in these sectors.

86. More realistically, a figure of up to 15,857 jobs in addition to those from the Local Plan supply should be factored in (6,460 additional jobs not requiring employment land and 9,397 jobs in sectors generating office based jobs). Adjusting for the multiplier effect (as in Table 2.8 of OD13) would give a potential range of 24,837 to 28,100 additional total jobs in the whole of the Warrington economy. Even if this were reduced modestly to take account of some limited office job provision within the Local Plan supply, the estimated number of total additional jobs in Warrington would be significantly in excess of the 18,300 that could be supported by the growth in labour supply resulting from planned housing growth. The figure would be even higher if some Class B2 uses were developed on the proposed site allocations and job densities were higher. The potential to increase labour supply by reductions in unemployment rates is relatively limited.
87. An alternative approach to the labour supply assessment was put forward on behalf of Liberty Properties Ltd (MMC 051). It takes as a starting point the 18,300 jobs that are estimated to be supported by the growth in labour supply as a result of planned housing growth over the plan period. It then apportions these based on the current sectoral split. This is inappropriate given that different sectors are likely to grow or shrink to different degrees over the plan period, as set out in the Oxford and Cambridge forecasts. It then reassigns all of the jobs in Government services and manufacturing (4,557 in total) to the distribution sector. Whilst manufacturing jobs are predicted to decline, there is no clear basis to assume that they will necessarily be replaced by additional jobs in distribution. More significantly, there is no basis to assume that 3,657 jobs in Government services would be replaced by the same number of jobs in distribution. No substantive evidence was put forward to justify this approach. These assumptions have a very significant effect on the jobs predicted to be in distribution and the consequential land requirements for that sector.

Alternative approaches

88. We have also given consideration to the alternative approach to assessing employment land requirements put forward on behalf of St Modwen Developments Ltd (set out in the Employment Needs Assessment by Savills –

AM5.08f). We appreciate that the net absorption rate (the amount of net floorspace occupied over a period of time) provides a useful indicator of demand. However, it includes relocations to and from second hand space and is therefore likely to over-estimate the demand for new build accommodation which is related to the need for additional land.

89. Attempting to quantify the scale of suppressed demand is a complex process involving a number of assumptions. For example, the relationship between rental growth and availability rates is not necessarily absolute. Factors other than the availability rate may have affected rent levels. There may also be a range of factors affecting the ability of a particular business to locate or relocate, other than the availability of premises. The approach factors in a very significant uplift for a growth in e commerce and the consequential demand for floorspace. Whilst this is based on the assumption that online sales will increase by 66% over the plan period, this seems to stem from a forecast up to 2025 only.
90. Overall, we have doubts as to the validity of the approach. Notwithstanding that, as it results in an estimated need for 494.62ha of industrial and logistics land, the jobs growth associated with this would be far in excess of that which we consider to be reasonably balanced with predicted labour supply.

Arriving at an employment land requirement figure

91. Having re-considered the issue in light of the more detailed and sophisticated evidence and information available, it remains our view that the employment land requirement of 316.26ha is not justified. It should be reduced to a level which would see a broad alignment of total jobs growth in the economy as a whole with the growth in labour supply resulting from planned housing growth. In arriving at a figure it is important to take account of the range of data available and the context provided by other assessments.
92. The above analysis would suggest that as a simple starting point sufficient employment land should be provided to deliver at least 2,443 net additional jobs (18,300 minus 15,857). Applying the assumptions used in OD13 and taking the low density/high displacement scenario, this would result in a basic minimum need for 83ha³. We acknowledge that some of the predicted growth in office jobs could be accommodated on sites in the existing supply and as part of site allocations. This would mean that employment land for more than 2,443 net additional jobs would be needed and so the minimum need for employment land would be greater than 83ha. We also recognise the need to build in some flexibility and

³ Net additional jobs 2,443 ÷ multiplier of 1.29 = 1,894 jobs.
1,894 ÷ 0.5 for displacement = 3,788 gross jobs
3,788 x 90% to give FTE of 3,409 jobs.
Assuming 1 job per 95sqm gives 3,409 x 95 = 323,855sqm
Assuming 3,900sqm per Ha gives 323,855 ÷ 3,900 = 83Ha

avoid being overly precise, given the inherent difficulties in forecasting future jobs growth and the need to rely on a number of assumptions.

93. Much has been made of recent trends in the logistics sector in Warrington. Table 1 and paragraph 3.25 of AM5.04 point to jobs growth in transportation and storage of approximately 3,600 between 2009 and 2019. Combining this with an assumed half of the jobs growth in wholesale and retail gives a total estimate of some 4,800 jobs in Class B8 uses over that 10 year period. If this recent past trend is projected forward over the 18 year plan period, it would see approximately 8,640 jobs. In line with the EDNA, it would be reasonable to assume that 48% of these jobs (4,147) would require employment land. If this is taken as a net figure and again using the methodology in OD13, a range of 99ha to 141ha of employment land would be required dependent on the assumptions regarding job density and displacement.
94. Given our post hearings letter and the published main modifications, along with the more detailed analysis that was subsequently submitted, we have pragmatically assessed the implications of the proposed Local Plan employment land supply, excluding the SEWEA. This would be approximately 171ha. Adopting the methodology in OD13 would see between 6,680 and 8,896 net additional jobs depending on assumptions on job density and displacement. Jobs growth not on employment land and in office based sectors (up to 15,857) would be additional to this, subject to a reduction in half of the multiplier figure. Potentially then, the Local Plan supply minus the SEWEA could help to deliver up to 21,786 to 23,753 jobs in the Warrington economy as a whole.
95. Given that some of the predicted growth in office jobs could be accommodated on the remaining identified employment sites, these figures may be optimistic. It may also be that growth in some sectors does not materialise to the extent forecast and we are conscious of the projected continuing decline in manufacturing jobs. However, there would still be sufficient headroom above the figure of 18,300 jobs that could be supported by the anticipated growth in labour supply to take account of these factors and provide a reasonable degree of flexibility. If some Class B2 uses were included in the remaining allocation, total job growth would be higher.
96. The amount of employment land proposed in the Local Plan, minus the SEWEA would therefore result in a broad alignment of estimated total jobs growth and labour supply.
97. As set out above, we had previously concluded that a basic requirement of approximately 129ha was justified. Adding a three year buffer and an allowance for displacement would bring this to 168ha. A three year buffer will provide sufficient flexibility and the displacement allowance of 17.64ha is justified given the approach the Council is taking to masterplanning and regeneration in the main urban area.

98. We have considered a wide range of possible employment land requirement figures. Establishing needs for employment land is far from an exact science, given the reliance on assumptions and forecasts. We have now undertaken a more sophisticated analysis, given the evidence and information put forward following our post hearings letter. We have been able to undertake a more detailed assessment of the likely total jobs growth and how this compares with forecast increases in labour supply, working on the principle that there should be a broad alignment between the two.
99. The level of provision proposed in the Local Plan, excluding the SEWEA, would achieve this and provide for a reasonable amount of flexibility. This suggests that a basic employment land requirement of approximately 129ha and a total requirement of 168ha after a buffer and displacement allowance would be appropriate. Therefore whilst our analysis has been more sophisticated and detailed, we reach the same conclusion as in our post hearings letter.

The context for a reduced employment land requirement

100. Putting this in context, this would be significantly above the highest figure arrived at through labour demand modelling (107.44ha when including growth from the SEP). It would also be above the range calculated to provide for a continuation of recent trends in job growth in Class B8 uses (99ha to 141ha). Estimated jobs growth from the Local Plan supply minus the SEWEA of up to 8,896 would be broadly comparable with a continuation of recent past trends in jobs growth from Class B8 uses (8,640 jobs).
101. We have explained our concerns over the reliance solely on past trends in take up rates. These are largely due to the strategic nature of the logistics sector and the dominant effect of the Omega site on past trends. However, it is useful to reiterate that based on the past trend for Class B8 take up only, there would be a need for 179.64ha over the plan period (including a 3 year buffer and an allowance for displacement).
102. Having taken account of a wide range of data, we therefore conclude that the employment land requirement of 316.26ha, based on a simple projection forward of total past take up rates in Warrington is not justified. There needs to be a broad alignment between employment land provision, estimated jobs growth and labour supply, in order for the local economy and housing market to function effectively and to avoid substantial increases in unsustainable commuting patterns. This is particularly important in the context of a Local Plan which proposes alterations to the Green Belt to allocate land for employment and housing.

Conclusion on the employment land requirement

103. A reduced total requirement of 168ha would achieve this broad alignment and provide a reasonable degree of flexibility. It would be significantly above requirements based on labour demand modelling, even those that take an optimistic view of jobs growth. The proposed Local Plan provision is heavily focussed on Class B8 uses. A requirement of 168ha would be above the range calculated to provide for a continuation of recent trends in jobs growth in Class B8 uses. The estimated jobs growth that would be provided for in this sector by this reduced requirement would be broadly comparable with recent past trends. The reduced requirement would also be broadly comparable to the longer term trend in Class B8 take up.
104. The employment land requirement should be reduced to 168ha. Main modification **MM005** would address this and is necessary to ensure that the Local Plan is justified. We have amended the detailed wording of the modification from the version published in respect of Paragraph 4.2.13, to reflect the more sophisticated and detailed analysis above.

Other aspects of Policy DEV4

105. Policy DEV4 is justified in identifying the Town Centre of Warrington as the main location for new office development. Although the market for new office space may be relatively limited, the Town Centre provides a number of opportunities for redevelopment and the Council and others are investing significantly. The Town Centre benefits from good public transport accessibility and as discussed above, the planned supply of employment land outside of the Town Centre will offer limited potential to accommodate office development, given the focus on Class B2 and particularly Class B8 uses.
106. The EDNA carried out a thorough review of existing employment sites and took a realistic view of their continued suitability. Based on this evidence and in light of the need to ensure an adequate supply and range of sites, Policy DEV4 provides a comprehensive, positive and justified approach to existing employment sites. Main modification **MM005** is necessary however so that part 8 of the policy is clear and therefore effective in respect of the approach to office development outside of identified locations.
107. For effectiveness, main modification **MM005** is also required to clarify the approach to colleges and higher education establishments, the approach to a review of the situation regarding employment land needs and the fact that the plan period should be expressed as 2021/22 to 2038/39 to remove any confusion. We have amended the detailed wording of the modification from the published version in respect of Paragraph 4.2.22 to remove reference to the Western Link Road.

Overall conclusion on Issue 2

108. Subject to main modification **MM005**, the Local Plan would be positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to economic growth and development.

Issue 3 – Whether the Spatial Strategy is justified, effective and consistent with national policy, including in terms of the distribution of development across the Borough, site selection, the overall approach to the Green Belt and the overall approaches to infrastructure provision and viability.

Spatial strategy for housing

109. The Local Plan seeks to focus new housing on sites within the main urban area of Warrington. This is a justified approach given that it provides the best access to services, facilities and public transport and provides opportunities for regeneration and the re-use of previously developed land. The Council has taken a comprehensive and rigorous approach to maximising the capacity of the urban area to accommodate housing development. We set out our concerns regarding the delivery of the Warrington Waterfront site (Policy MD1) below. In light of these concerns, the main urban area is now estimated to have capacity for just under 10,900 new homes. This is a realistic assessment of the potential to accommodate new housing on land currently not in the Green Belt.

110. The housing requirement of 14,688 new homes could not be delivered without alterations to the Green Belt. The Council is committed to meeting its own housing needs in full and there is no scope for other neighbouring authorities to accommodate any of Warrington's needs.

111. The Local Plan proposes to alter the Green Belt and allocate sites for housing. This would involve a single large strategic extension to the south east of the main urban area, land adjacent to the former Fiddlers Ferry Power Station which would help to facilitate the redevelopment of the power station site for employment development, a smaller urban extension at Thelwall Heys and a number of smaller site allocations in outlying settlements. We deal with these individually in more detail later in our report. However, on a strategic level, the approach to the distribution of new housing is justified. It largely focusses growth on locations with good current accessibility to services and facilities, it recognises the need and potential to facilitate the redevelopment of the large previously developed site at Fiddlers Ferry and provides for a good range and choice of sites in terms of location and characteristics.

112. The scale of planned housing growth in the outlying settlements is compatible with the level of services and facilities available and the existing scale and

character of the settlements. Taking account of the main modifications, these sites which are currently in the Green Belt would provide capacity for some 4,400 new homes.

113. The Council has considered reasonable alternatives throughout the plan preparation process and adapted its approach to take account of changing circumstances. Notable amongst these are the reduction in the planned level of housing growth from the figure of 945 homes per year in the 2019 submission version (PVL1) and the announcement of the closure and subsequent decommissioning of the Fiddlers Ferry Power Station. It has taken a comprehensive, transparent and justified approach to assessing options and the site selection process. It has considered a wide range of factors and evidence, including the potential impact on the Green Belt.
114. Given the scale of need for new housing and the lack of sufficient capacity within the urban area, there are in principle exceptional circumstances on a Borough wide level to alter the Green Belt and allocate sites for housing development.
115. We set out our conclusions on housing supply in more depth below, taking account of adjustments due to main modifications affecting particular sites. However, taken together, the housing supply from within the urban area and from proposed site allocations will be sufficient to meet the housing requirement over the plan period and provide a modest amount of flexibility. There is no need to allocate additional sites for housing.

Spatial strategy for employment land

116. The Council has considered reasonable alternatives for employment land provision throughout the plan preparation process. Again it has taken a comprehensive, transparent and justified approach to assessing options. It has considered a wide range of factors and evidence, including the potential impact on the Green Belt.
117. Having taken account of the existing supply and the contribution from the Omega West site in St Helens, the submitted Local Plan sought to meet the employment land requirement of 316.26ha by allocating two large sites. These are the Fiddlers Ferry Main Development Area (Policy MD3) and the SEWEA Main Development Area (Policy MD6).
118. We have concluded that the employment land requirement in the submitted Local Plan is not justified and should be reduced to 168ha. Although reliant on removing some land from the Green Belt for housing⁴, the Fiddlers Ferry

⁴ See our conclusion on Issue 6 which reduces the extent of land to be removed from the Green Belt for housing at Fiddlers Ferry

allocation would see the reclamation and redevelopment of a very large area of previously developed land, not in the Green Belt. It would make an important and necessary contribution to meeting housing needs. On the other hand, the SEWEA would involve the removal of a significant area of land from the Green Belt, purely for employment development.

119. The supply of employment land without the SEWEA would be sufficient to meet the requirement of 168ha. There is currently no agreement between the Council and St Helens Council as to the contribution, if any, that the additional 44ha at Omega West should make to Warrington's needs. However, given its location adjacent to the boundary and the existing Omega site in Warrington, and the strategic nature of employment land in this case, it is reasonable to take it into account, if only in terms of providing some additional flexibility to the supply in the wider area. There is no strategic need in quantitative terms to alter the Green Belt and allocate land for employment development at the SEWEA or indeed elsewhere in Warrington. Exceptional circumstances to alter the Green Belt to accommodate employment development do not exist.

Overall approach to the Green Belt

120. As set out above, whilst there are exceptional circumstances to alter the Green Belt to accommodate housing needs, the same does not apply to employment development.
121. National policy does not require Local Plans to identify safeguarded land. Paragraph 143 of the NPPF states that such land should be identified, where necessary, in order to meet longer term development needs stretching well beyond the plan period. It is not possible at this point in time to forecast what the future needs for housing and employment land may be beyond the plan period. Nor is it possible to predict what an appropriate strategy might be to accommodate them. The South East Warrington Urban Extension (SEWUE) will provide scope for housing development to continue after the plan period and there is a clear commitment to monitor and review the situation regarding development needs. There is no need for the Local Plan to identify safeguarded land.
122. Policy GB1 sets out a justified approach to development and settlements that are excluded or washed over within the Green Belt. It is consistent with national policy. In order for it to be effective however, main modification **MM007** is required to remove references to the Western Link Road, the SEWEA and exceptional circumstances relating to employment development needs.
123. Employment land needs will be reviewed before the end of the plan period and there is clearly potential for future Local Plan reviews to consider further alterations to the detailed boundaries of the Green Belt. However, this is not

inconsistent with part 1 of Policy GB1 which refers to maintaining the general extent of the Green Belt to at least 2050.

Overall approach to infrastructure and viability

124. Specific issues relating to the infrastructure needs and viability of specific site allocations are discussed under the relevant sections of the report below. We have identified a particular concern with the delivery of the Western Link Road and this has a significant effect on the proposed Main Development Area at Warrington Waterfront (Policy MD1).

125. In overall terms however, the Council has taken a realistic approach to infrastructure needs and provision. Collectively, policies throughout the Local Plan set out a comprehensive and justified approach to infrastructure. The viability of the Local Plan and the proposals within it have been realistically assessed.

Conclusion

126. Main modifications **MM001** and **MM002** would amend the Introduction to the Local Plan and the Vision and Spatial Strategy to reflect the modified approach to employment land, the Green Belt and exceptional circumstances, housing capacity and individual site allocations. They would also clarify that the plan period should be expressed as 2021/22 to 2038/39. They are necessary to ensure that the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

127. Subject to the above main modifications, the Spatial Strategy is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Issue 4 – Whether the Warrington Waterfront Main Development Area (Policy MD1) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

128. The Warrington Waterfront Main Development Area is well located in relation to the urban area and town centre. Whilst it is a green field site, the vast majority of the site is not in the Green Belt. The allocation could potentially make a significant contribution of 1,335 dwellings to housing provision, 1,070 of which could be within the plan period. This would reduce the need for Green Belt alterations elsewhere in the Borough. In principle the allocation of the site is therefore justified. However, the development of the site is wholly reliant on the proposed Warrington Western Link Road as it is not otherwise accessible.

129. The cost of the Western Link had previously been estimated at £212.7m. A conditional offer of a maximum capped £142.5m funding contribution was received

from the Department for Transport in April 2019. The Council had made a commitment to fund the remaining £70.2m in November 2017 and again in July 2019.

130. However, the context for the Western Link has changed significantly since then. The previous proposed submission version of the Local Plan (PVLP1) published in April 2019 included a substantially larger Warrington Waterfront allocation incorporating two areas of employment land. Additionally it included a south west urban extension of around 1,600 homes which would also have been reliant on the Western Link. In both cases, contributions towards the Western Link would have been required. These proposals were not carried forward to the submitted Local Plan and the scale of development proposed in this part of Warrington is now much less.
131. Crucially the estimated cost of the scheme has now increased by some £57m to approximately £269m. The previous commitments to funding are now dated and as noted above, the context for the scheme has changed significantly. We are not aware of any recent commitments to funding from either the Department for Transport or the Council in the light of the current proposals in the submitted Local Plan and the estimated increased overall cost. Even if those commitments still stand, there is a very substantial shortfall in funding of some £57m. Whilst the Council remains committed to the Western Link, at the present time there is no realistic evidence of this funding being secured, putting the delivery of the Western Link in serious doubt.
132. On this basis we consider that the Warrington Waterfront Main Development Area is not developable within the plan period. That said, the principle of the allocation is justified, and it may be that funding for the Western Link can be secured at some point, facilitating the development of the Warrington Waterfront site. In light of this we have concluded that the allocation and Policy MD1 should remain in the Local Plan. This would retain the potential for housing development to come forward and may assist in securing funding for the Western Link. However, the housing trajectory and the calculation of the supply of housing land should not factor in any completions from the site, given the degree of uncertainty that exists.
133. Main modification **MM019** is required to ensure that Policy MD1 is justified, effective and consistent with national policy. It would amend part 1 of the policy and the reasoned justification to reflect the uncertainty over delivery. It would also amend Part 4 and Part 5 of the policy to ensure that requirements relating to an agreed Development Framework for the allocation are proportionate and appropriate.
134. It is also necessary to amend Part 41 of the policy and the reasoned justification in relation to the mitigation of air quality impacts on the Manchester Mosses SAC. This addresses the conclusions of the HRA and ensures consistency with the

relevant provisions of Policy ENV8, as modified. An amendment to the wording of Part 42 is necessary to ensure consistency with policy and legislation relating to designated heritage assets. These amendments are also included in **MM019**.

Conclusion

135. Subject to the above main modification the Warrington Waterfront Main Development Area (Policy MD1) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Issue 5 – Whether the South East Warrington Urban Extension Main Development Area (Policy MD2) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

136. The South East Warrington Urban Extension (SEWUE) is a key element of the overall spatial strategy. It is envisaged that approximately 2,400 new homes will be provided up to 2038/39 and the site has potential to continue delivering housing beyond the plan period. The total capacity is estimated at some 4,200 new homes. The SEWUE will make a very substantial contribution towards meeting the housing requirement and play a significant role in the provision of affordable housing.

137. Policy MD2 requires the site to be brought forward within the context of a comprehensive development framework and for the new homes to be supported by a wide range of social, community and physical infrastructure, including local centres, schools, green space and significant improvements to the transport network.

138. The land in question is currently in the Green Belt. The parcels of land concerned were assessed as making a weak or moderate contribution to the purposes of the Green Belt. To some extent the development of the site would be reasonably well contained by the existing urban area and recent residential developments. The local road network would provide well defined boundaries and the M56 provides a very strong physical boundary to the south and there is potential to strengthen the boundaries of the Green Belt through planting. A gap between the main urban area and Appleton Thorn would remain.

139. However, given the scale and extent of the site, it would inevitably involve a significant encroachment into the countryside. Much of the land in question is currently in open, agricultural use. The development of the site would bring significant change to its character and appearance.

140. Policy MD2 sets out a comprehensive set of criteria to guide an appropriate form of development and to ensure that specific development proposals take full account of relevant constraints and opportunities.
141. Within the context of the need to provide for sufficient housing and the spatial strategy, we consider that the benefits of the allocation clearly outweigh the harm and that there are exceptional circumstances in this case to justify altering the Green Belt and allocating the site for development.
142. Much of the land is owned by Homes England. There is a clear commitment to bring the site forward for development and well developed plans to do so. Evidence demonstrates that the development will be viable and that the timescale and rate of housing delivery envisaged is realistic, taking into account the scale of the site and the potential for multiple sales outlets, whilst also recognising the need for infrastructure provision.
143. Main modification **MM020** would remove references to the SEWEA and clarify that contributions to GP facilities at Appleton Cross will be required. It would also clarify the role of the development framework, the approach to development adjacent to the boundary of the site and the approach to a review of infrastructure requirements. It would ensure consistency with Policy DEV5 in relation to the approach towards retail development.
144. In common with other allocations involving Green Belt release, **MM020** would provide greater clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements. It would also amend Part 40 and the reasoned justification relating to the mitigation of air quality impacts on the Manchester Mosses SAC. This addresses the conclusions of the HRA and ensures consistency with the relevant provisions of Policy ENV8. The main modification is therefore required to ensure that Policy MD2 is justified and effective.

Conclusion

145. Subject to main modification **MM020**, the SEWUE Main Development Area (Policy MD2) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Issue 6 – Whether the Fiddlers Ferry Main Development Area (Policy MD3) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

146. The Fiddlers Ferry Main Development Area encompasses the former power station site and adjoining land including to the south beyond the St Helens Canal and railway line. The allocation envisages two distinct phases. The first phase relates to the former power station and the opportunity this provides for new

employment uses. This phase would also involve land currently in the Green Belt to the east of the former power station for a minimum of 860 homes. The Council's viability evidence demonstrates that this phase one residential development is required to cross-subsidise the demolition and remediation costs of developing the former power station land for employment purposes.

147. Phase one would involve the removal of much of parcel WR79, from the Green Belt. This is assessed as making a strong contribution to Green Belt purposes. It is also possible that the arable fields and woodland comprising this parcel provide habitat for the Mersey Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar species. However, phase one would make an important and necessary contribution to the supply of housing and employment land in the Borough. As noted above, the release of Green Belt land for the housing element of phase one is necessary for the viability of the employment element of the allocation which would utilise previously developed land and avoid the need for Green Belt release elsewhere for employment land. Together these factors provide the exceptional circumstances necessary to justify altering the Green Belt in this case.
148. The southern part of the allocation site is intended to be developed in phase two. This area lies south of the St Helens Canal and extends down to the River Mersey, though the intertidal areas are outside the allocated area. The western portion is allocated for residential development. This area is currently used for ash processing, with commercial extraction activities ongoing. The eastern portion, which contains wet lagoons, would be retained as open space and would remain in the Green Belt. Whilst the landscape value of the western portion and its engineered landform is lower than the east, visually these largely open areas form an important part of the wider River Mersey corridor.
149. The Green Belt boundary would need to be altered to allow for housing development. The wider parcel, of which this area forms a significant part, was assessed as making a moderate contribution to Green Belt purposes. This was based in part on the Council's assessment that it makes 'no' contribution to purpose 1, to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas, given that it is not adjacent to the Warrington urban area. However, it appears that its relationship with the built-up area of Widnes was not considered. It was nonetheless recognised that the wider parcel of land makes a strong contribution to purpose 2, preventing neighbouring towns from merging into one another, as it forms part of an essential gap between Warrington, Widnes and Runcorn. The phase two development on the western portion of this area would erode this gap.
150. Turning to Green Belt purpose 3, the wider parcel was assessed as making a moderate contribution to safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. The whole area is reasonably well contained to the St Helens Canal and the embankments around the lagoons, though to the south the area opens out to the intertidal area and the River Mersey beyond. The eastern and western portions are separated by an access lane, the Vyrnwy Aqueduct underground water

pipeline and electricity pylons, all running north to south, with the eastern wet lagoons potentially providing a durable boundary. Nonetheless, this area has a high degree of openness and supports far reaching views. Therefore, notwithstanding the fact that only part of the area would be developed, this would represent an encroachment into the countryside which would have a significant effect on the openness of the Green Belt.

151. The southern part of the allocation also encompasses, and lies adjacent to, areas of particular environmental sensitivity. It incorporates part of the Upper Mersey Estuary Local Wildlife Site (LWS) and the St Helens Canal (disused) LWS. It is also adjacent to the Widnes Warth Saltmarsh LWS and the Upper Mersey Estuary Intertidal Areas and Mudflats LWS. Whilst the ecological and biodiversity value of the western portion is likely to have been impacted by ash extraction activities, it is located directly adjacent to areas of acknowledged high sensitivity. Various ecological surveys and impact assessments have been undertaken, though some of this is dated, and more recent surveys relate to the phase one area only. There are therefore likely to be significant biodiversity implications associated with the southern part of the allocation which have not been fully evaluated.
152. The LWS, and the areas of saltmarsh and mudflats near the southern boundary of the site, are around 5km from the Mersey Estuary SPA and Ramsar at the closest point. The updated HRA (SP12) notes that all qualifying species of wintering birds have been recorded in the tetrad encompassing the allocation. A Preliminary Ecological Appraisal undertaken in January 2021 also confirmed the presence of various habitats on site, including unimproved neutral grassland, swamp, standing water, saltmarsh and arable fields. It concluded that the site has potential functional linkage to the SPA and Ramsar. On this basis the updated HRA sets out that further wintering bird data is required as part of the policy requirement for the allocation.
153. Updated information provided to the examination indicates that wintering bird surveys were being undertaken during the 2022/2023 winter period and are proposed for the 2023/2024 season (as set out in CD31). There is therefore some uncertainty around the habitat implications of the allocation as a whole. It may prove necessary to plan for avoidance measures and mitigation in respect of the effects of phase one of development, including the possibility that land within the phase two allocation could be required for such purposes.
154. In contrast with phase one, the phase two housing development would not be required to cross subsidise the development of the employment land. Whilst it is only necessary to demonstrate that the phase two allocation is developable, the Council's viability evidence suggests that the delivery of phase two could be challenging, with the potential requirement for a new bridge across the railway and canal. On this basis the Viability Assessment (V2) suggests that any surplus generated from phase one could potentially be utilised as cross-subsidy to contribute towards enabling the delivery of phase two.

155. As currently envisaged, the phase one residential development for a minimum of 860 dwellings would also deliver a single form entry primary school. In this regard there would be a basic level of local service provision, along with the adjacent employment opportunities.
156. The housing proposed across the two phases would amount to a minimum of 1,760 dwellings. On this basis it is suggested that this would provide a 'critical mass' which would facilitate infrastructure delivery and the provision of supporting infrastructure to help realise the ambition of creating a sustainable new community. However, even if all 1,760 homes were constructed, it is doubtful whether this volume of housing would be sufficient to support a self contained community. Furthermore, given the close proximity of this new residential development to the urban areas of Widnes and Warrington, it is likely that its residents would draw on the wider range of facilities and services in this broad and reasonably accessible hinterland.
157. Based on our conclusions in relation to the overall supply of housing land, there would be an adequate supply even if phase two of the Fiddlers Ferry allocation were to be removed. This element is not required to cross subsidise the employment development on phase one, the development of this area would undermine the purposes of the Green Belt and there are concerns in relation to the impacts on biodiversity and habitats. As a result, we conclude that the benefits do not outweigh the harm which be likely to be caused and consequently the exceptional circumstances required to alter the Green Belt to allow for phase two of the Fiddlers Ferry development do not exist.
158. In light of the above, amendments are required to Policy MD3 to remove phase two of the allocation. Main modification **MM021** sets out the necessary amendments to the supporting text and Part 1, Part 2, Part 9, Part 26 and Figure 19, with Part 4 and Part 27 also deleted, to reflect this and the consequent reduction in the anticipated housing delivery during the plan period to a minimum of 860 homes. The land to the south of the railway line would remain in the Green Belt, with Policy provisions amended accordingly. Nonetheless, it is appropriate that this area should continue to be part of the allocation to reflect the ongoing restoration of the large lagoons as part of a comprehensive approach to the restoration and regeneration of the Power Station. This area will provide an ecological and recreational resource.
159. **MM021** sets out the amendments necessary to Part 3, Part 15 and Part 17 to reflect the reduced infrastructure requirements associated with the allocation. It is also appropriate that the reasoned justification should make reference to the fact that the IDP, as it relates to Fiddlers Ferry, be kept under review, with any subsequent updates being dealt with through future reviews of the Local Plan. Amendments are also necessary in relation to the requirements for the Development Framework to ensure that these are proportionate, appropriate and reflect a realistic assessment of the deliverability of the allocation. These are also

set out at **MM021** and relate to Part 5 and Part 6, with Part 8 also deleted and additional supporting text included.

160. In common with other allocations involving Green Belt release, **MM021** includes a modification to Part 28 required to provide greater clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements.
161. **MM021** also includes a modification to Part 37 which is necessary to clarify the requirement that development must not impact on the operations of existing infrastructure and other operations, noting particularly the proximity of the adjacent COMAH site. It is also necessary to amend Part 41 and the reasoned justification relating to the mitigation of air quality impacts on the Manchester Mosses SAC. This addresses the conclusions of the HRA and ensures consistency with the relevant provisions of Policy ENV8.
162. Overall main modification **MM021** is therefore necessary to ensure that Policy MD3 is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Conclusion

163. Subject to the above main modification, the Fiddlers Ferry Main Development Area (Policy MD3) would be justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Issue 7 – Whether the Peel Hall Main Development Area (Policy MD4) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

164. Policy MD4 relates to a site of approximately 69ha at Peel Hall. Although it is currently predominantly undeveloped and open, it is not in the Green Belt and forms part of the main urban area, with the strong boundary of the M62 to the north. It is anticipated to provide up to 1,200 new homes, supported by a range of infrastructure.
165. Outline planning permission was granted by the Secretary of State in November 2021, following an appeal. That permission is subject to a wide range of conditions and a planning obligation which deal effectively with the issues covered by Policy MD4. There is a clear intention to bring the site forward for development.

Conclusion

166. Given the significant change in circumstances since the Local Plan was prepared and published at Regulation 19 stage, it is no longer necessary to include the site as an allocation. In order for the Local Plan to be effective in

recognising the status of the site, Policy MD4 and the associated reasoned justification should be deleted, and the site should be recognised as a commitment in terms of the housing supply. Main modification **MM022** would do this.

Issue 8 – Whether the Thelwall Heys Main Development Area (Policy MD5) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

167. The site at Thelwall Heys (Policy MD5) would provide for at least 300 new homes and therefore make an important contribution to housing needs including those for affordable housing.
168. It is currently in the Green Belt and was assessed as making a weak contribution to the purposes of the Green Belt. Development of the site would represent an extension of the main urban area and an encroachment into the countryside. The character and appearance of the site would clearly change. However the site has strong physical boundaries, particularly the Bridgewater Canal to the south and south-east and Cliff Lane and the A50 to the west. There is already residential development to the south of the Canal along Weaste Lane.
169. We consider that the benefits of the allocation would clearly outweigh the likely harm and that consequently there are exceptional circumstances to justify altering the Green Belt and allocating the site for development given the need to provide for sufficient housing and the spatial strategy.
170. Policy MD5 sets out a comprehensive set of criteria to guide an appropriate form of development and to ensure that specific development proposals take full account of relevant constraints and opportunities. In particular, it recognises the importance of the canal and footpath running along the southern boundary of the site and the need to maximise and reinforce the environmental and socio-economic benefits that this provides.
171. The policy also sets out a clear framework to ensure that appropriate contributions to infrastructure are made and that suitable access arrangements are in place.
172. The site is in single ownership and has relatively few constraints. The timing and rate of development envisaged is realistic and the site is likely to be able to contribute to the housing supply early in the plan period.

173. Main modification **MM023** would remove references to the SEWEA and clarify the approach to the historic environment. It would provide greater clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements.
174. It would also amend Part 22 and the reasoned justification relating to the mitigation of air quality impacts on the Manchester Mosses SAC. This addresses the conclusions of the HRA and ensures consistency with the relevant provisions of Policy ENV8. The main modification is therefore required to ensure that Policy MD5 is justified and effective.

Conclusion

175. Subject to main modification **MM023**, the Thelwall Heys Main Development Area (Policy MD5) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Issue 9 – Whether the South East Warrington Employment Area Main Development Area (Policy MD6) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

176. The proposed SEWEA would involve the removal of some 137ha of land from the Green Belt and its allocation for employment development (Class B8 and Class B2 and related ancillary uses).
177. As paragraph 119 of the NPPF states, strategic policies should set out a clear strategy for accommodating objectively assessed needs, in a way that makes as much use as possible of previously developed land. Paragraph 140 of the NPPF is clear that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified. Paragraph 141 of the NPPF explains that all other reasonable options for meeting the identified need for development should be examined, before concluding that exceptional circumstances exist to justify changes to Green Belt boundaries.
178. A key element of the Council's justification for the allocation is that there is an employment land requirement of 316.26ha and that this cannot be met without altering the Green Belt and allocating land for development. However, we have concluded that the requirement of 316.26ha is not justified and it should be reduced to 168ha. We have also concluded that the supply of employment land provided by existing commitments and the proposed Fiddlers Ferry Main Development Area would be sufficient to meet this reduced requirement. There is also the potential for additional supply to come from the larger consented Omega West site in St Helens. There is no strategic need in quantitative terms to alter the Green Belt and allocate land for employment development at the SEWEA or in Warrington as a whole.

179. Given its location in relation to the junction of the M6 and M56 Motorways and its current greenfield and largely undeveloped nature, the site proposed for the SEWEA is clearly attractive to the development industry, particularly with respect to the logistics sector. There is strong interest in progressing proposals for the site and it would be likely to come forward for development relatively quickly. In itself the SEWEA would be likely to provide for a substantial number of jobs and have significant benefits for the economy.
180. However, as noted above there would be a sufficient supply of employment land without it. The allocation at Fiddlers Ferry and existing commitments would provide a range of sites in different locations across the Borough, including for Class B8 uses. The employment land element of the Fiddlers Ferry allocation would involve the redevelopment of the former coal fired power station and associated previously developed land.
181. Bringing forward the Fiddlers Ferry site for employment development clearly has significant challenges in relation to the demolition and clearance of existing buildings and structures, remediation works and the overall viability of the proposals. It is also not as well placed as the SEWEA in relation to the motorway network. However, the site is being actively promoted for redevelopment and some progress has been made in terms of bringing forward proposals. Evidence before the Examination indicates that the employment land element of the Fiddlers Ferry allocation is viable and deliverable (subject to cross subsidy from housing) and that it has the potential to accommodate large scale and strategic development, including for logistics. Therefore, in terms of the range and type of employment land that would be available, there is no strategic need for the SEWEA.
182. The site for the SEWEA is located immediately to the east of the Appleton Thorn Trading Estate, Barleycastle Trading Estate and Stretton Green Distribution Park which are inset within (excluded from) the Green Belt. However, it is separated from the urban area of Warrington by significant areas of open countryside which are also within the Green Belt. In terms of the purposes of the Green Belt, the primary role of the site in its current form is to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. The site is bound to the south by the M56, the east by the M6 and the north by the B5356 and so the allocation could create strong, permanent Green Belt boundaries. Nonetheless, the scale and extent of the site and the development proposed on it would involve a substantial incursion into largely undeveloped and open countryside.
183. The information within the Masterplan Development Framework is illustrative at this stage, though it sets out the broad parameters for the comprehensive development of the area for large scale distribution, logistics, industrial uses and ancillary offices. The site is largely flat with limited internal and boundary vegetation, and therefore has a high degree of openness. Such visual openness

would be lost to development on a considerable scale, accommodating very large buildings and associated vehicles. The loss of openness would be severe.

184. Considering the landscape and visual impacts of the allocation more broadly, the overriding character of this area is as part of Warrington's rural hinterland. This is somewhat undermined by the existing warehouse and industrial developments to the west, and the motorways to the south and east. However, the scale and form of the development proposed would be transformative in nature, substantially expanding the industrial character of the adjacent area. Furthermore, the site is located on part of the highest land in the Borough, which then gradually descends northwards towards a central band of low lying, reasonably level land. Whilst tree planting could assist with mitigating visual impacts, it is likely that development on the scale proposed would cause substantial visual intrusion, particularly when viewed from roads and public rights of way to the north. It would have a significant adverse effect on the character and appearance of the area.

Conclusion

185. There is no strategic need for the SEWEA allocation in terms of the need for employment land or the range and type of employment land that would be available. It would result in a significant encroachment into the countryside, undermining one of the purposes of the Green Belt and would cause severe harm to the openness of the Green Belt. It would also have a significant adverse effect on the character and appearance of the area. Whilst there would be economic benefits as a result of the allocation, these do not outweigh the above concerns. Exceptional circumstances to alter the Green Belt do not exist. The SEWEA is not justified, nor is it consistent with national policy. Main modification **MM024** would delete Policy MD6 and the associated reasoned justification and is necessary to address these concerns.

Issue 10 – Whether the site allocation at Croft (Policy OS1) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

186. The site is located to the north-east of the settlement of Croft, adjacent to the primary school and Deacon Close. Part of the site is in active equestrian use as Heathcroft Stud Farm, the rest is agricultural fields. It is allocated for a minimum of 75 dwellings.

187. The site is located within the Green Belt and has been assessed as making a 'weak' contribution to Green Belt purposes. This is the combined consideration of all 5 Green Belt purposes, including safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. Whilst the site does not have durable boundaries, existing built form on part of the site means that its contribution to openness is moderate to weak. The provisions of Policy OS1 recognise that a landscaping scheme would

be required to reinforce the northern, eastern and southern boundaries of the site.

188. In line with other allocations located adjacent to outlying settlements and requiring the release of Green Belt land, the exceptional circumstances required to justify Green Belt release relate to the wider spatial strategy. This will ensure that sufficient housing is provided to meet Warrington's needs overall, including the need for affordable housing. The site's relatively unconstrained nature means that homes will be delivered early in the plan period. Development in this location will also support the vitality and viability of local services in this area. In this case we are satisfied that the likely benefits would clearly outweigh the harm and that exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated.
189. Whilst facilities in Croft itself are limited, there is good access to a wider range of services in Culcheth, including via regular bus services. There will clearly be more traffic generated on local roads, however there is no evidence that this cannot be accommodated within acceptable parameters, nor that suitable access to the site cannot be provided, noting also that Policy OS1 requires a Transport Assessment and a package of transport improvements to be provided. Other more detailed design and layout considerations will be addressed as part of the development of specific proposals.
190. In common with other allocations involving Green Belt release, it is necessary to provide greater clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements. It is also necessary to amend Part 18 and the reasoned justification relating to the mitigation of air quality impacts on the Manchester Mosses SAC. This addresses the conclusions of the HRA and ensures consistency with the relevant provisions of Policy ENV8. Main modification **MM025** would achieve this and is necessary to ensure that the policy is effective. We have corrected a typographical error in the published version of the main modification.

Conclusion

191. The site allocation at Croft (Policy OS1) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy, subject to main modification **MM025**.

Issue 11 – Whether the site allocation at Culcheth (Policy OS2) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

192. The site comprises adjoining parcels of land in two ownerships, located to the east of the settlement of Culcheth. This area is currently in agricultural use. The largest parcel has been assessed as having capacity for 192 homes, with the smaller parcel having capacity for 11 homes. Together these parcels are allocated for a minimum of 200 dwellings. The loss of agricultural land must be balanced against the delivery of the spatial strategy overall.

193. This land is located within the Green Belt. The main parcel has been assessed as making a 'weak' contribution to Green Belt purposes, whilst the smaller parcel makes a 'moderate' contribution. These assessments are the combined consideration of all 5 Green Belt purposes, including safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. This area has durable boundaries to the north and west as it adjoins Warrington Road and Holcroft Lane, which are close to the edge of the settlement. However, the limited vegetation along boundaries to the south and east mean that the site appears well connected to the countryside beyond and also provides a strong degree of openness. The provisions of Policy OS2 recognise that a landscaping scheme would be required to reinforce these boundaries, particularly to the south-west.
194. The exceptional circumstances required to justify Green Belt release relate to the wider spatial strategy. This will ensure that sufficient housing is provided to meet Warrington's needs overall, including the need for affordable housing. The site's relatively unconstrained nature means that homes will be delivered early in the plan period. Development in this location will also support the vitality and viability of local services in this area. We conclude that the benefits of the allocation would outweigh the likely harm and are satisfied that exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated in this case.
195. Culcheth provides a range of facilities and services locally and is well served by public transport. The level of growth proposed is capable of being absorbed without significant impacts. There will clearly be more traffic generated on local roads, however there is no evidence that this cannot be accommodated within acceptable parameters, nor that safe and suitable access to the site cannot be achieved, noting also that Policy OS2 requires a Transport Assessment and package of transport improvements to be provided. The emphasis on active travel within these provisions will assist in managing air quality impacts. Policy provisions also address concerns regarding possible impacts on flood risk locally.
196. In common with other allocations involving Green Belt release, it is necessary to provide greater clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements. It is also necessary to amend Part 19 and the reasoned justification relating to the mitigation of air quality impacts on the Manchester Mosses SAC. This addresses the conclusions of the HRA and ensures consistency with the relevant provisions of Policy ENV8. Main modification **MM026** would achieve this and is necessary to ensure that the policy is effective.

Issue 12 – Whether the site allocation at Hollins Green (Policy OS3) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

197. The site at Hollins Green (Policy OS3) would provide for at least 90 new homes. This scale of development is in keeping with the size and character of the

village. It would make an important contribution to housing needs including those for affordable housing and help to provide for a good range of sites across the Borough.

198. It is currently in the Green Belt and was assessed as making a moderate contribution to the purposes of the Green Belt. Development of the site would represent an extension of the village and an encroachment into the countryside. The site is currently open, and the development proposed would clearly change its character and appearance.
199. However the housing at Marsh Brook Close to the north-west and the A57 Manchester Road to the south-east form strong boundaries and provide a sense of enclosure. The Marsh Brook and existing trees also provide clear boundaries.
200. There are exceptional circumstances to justify altering the Green Belt and allocating the site for development given the need to provide for sufficient housing and the spatial strategy.
201. Policy OS3 sets out a comprehensive set of criteria to guide an appropriate form of development and to ensure that specific development proposals take full account of relevant constraints and opportunities. It includes a requirement for a landscape scheme to reinforce the amended Green Belt boundaries. The policy also sets out a clear framework to ensure that appropriate contributions to infrastructure are made and that suitable access arrangements are in place.
202. The site is being actively promoted for development. The timing and rate of development envisaged is realistic and the site is likely to be able to contribute to the housing supply early in the plan period.
203. For effectiveness, main modification **MM027** is necessary to provide greater clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements.

Conclusion

204. Subject to main modification **MM027**, the site allocation at Hollins Green (Policy OS3) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Issue 13 – Whether the site allocations at Lymm (Policies OS4 and OS5) are justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Policy OS4 – Pool Lane/Warrington Road

205. Policy OS4 allocates land either side of Warrington Road for a minimum of 170 new homes. The site would make a significant contribution to housing needs

including those for affordable housing. It would add to the choice and range of housing sites available. Lymm is a sizeable village with a good range of services and facilities. Together with site OS5, the overall scale of development proposed is compatible with the current size and character of the village.

206. The site is currently in the Green Belt and was assessed as making a weak contribution (land north of Warrington Road) and a moderate contribution (land south of Warrington Road) to the purposes of the Green Belt. Development of the site would represent an extension of the village and an encroachment into the countryside. The site is currently open, and the development of the site would bring significant change to its character and appearance. However the part of the site to the north of Warrington Road is reasonably well contained by existing development including the hotel and there are relatively strong tree lines along the western and southern boundaries. There is potential for these boundaries to be strengthened.
207. Given the need to provide for sufficient housing and the spatial strategy we conclude that the benefits of the allocation outweigh the likely harm. There are exceptional circumstances to justify altering the Green Belt and allocating the site for development.
208. Policy OS4 provides a wide range of criteria to guide an appropriate form of development and to ensure that specific development proposals take full account of relevant constraints and opportunities. It includes a requirement for a landscape scheme to reinforce the amended Green Belt boundaries. Policy OS4 also sets out a clear framework to ensure that appropriate contributions to infrastructure are made and that suitable access arrangements are made.
209. The site is close to an elevated section of the M6 (Thelwall Viaduct). The design and layout of the new houses would need to take this into account in order to mitigate potential effects from noise and on air quality. Policy ENV8 includes clear criteria on these issues.
210. The site is being actively promoted for development. The timing and rate of development envisaged is realistic and the site is likely to be able to contribute to the housing supply early in the plan period.
211. Main modification **MM028** is necessary to ensure that the policy is effective in providing clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements and the approach to the historic environment. We have amended the detailed wording of the modification from the version published in relation to part 16 of the policy to reflect the deletion of the SEWEA.

Policy OS5 – Rushgreen Road

212. Land at Rushgreen Road is allocated for a minimum of 136 new homes and a new primary health care facility. The site would make an important contribution to housing needs including those for affordable housing. It would help to provide a range of housing sites across the Borough.
213. The site is currently in the Green Belt and was assessed as making a weak contribution to its purposes. Whilst development of the site would represent an extension of the built form of the village, it would be very well contained by existing residential areas to the west and north and the recent housing development to the east. The Bridgewater Canal forms a very strong physical and visual boundary to the south.
214. There are exceptional circumstances to justify altering the Green Belt and allocating the site for development given the need to provide for sufficient housing and the spatial strategy, which we conclude outweigh the harm likely to be caused by the allocation.
215. Policy OS5 provides a wide range of criteria to guide an appropriate form of development and to ensure that specific development proposals take full account of relevant constraints and opportunities. It also sets out a clear framework to ensure that appropriate contributions to infrastructure are made and that suitable access arrangements are made.
216. The site is being actively promoted for development. The timing and rate of development envisaged is realistic and the site is likely to be able to contribute to the housing supply early in the plan period.
217. Main modification **MM029** is necessary for effectiveness to provide greater clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements and the approach to the historic environment. To ensure the policy is effective, **MM029** is also necessary to amend Figure 27 to show a slightly altered site boundary. Again we have amended the detailed wording of the modification from the version published in relation to part 16 of the policy to reflect the deletion of the SEWEA.

Conclusion

218. Subject to main modifications **MM028** and **MM029**, the site allocations at Lymm (Policies OS4 and OS5) are justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Issue 14 – Whether the site allocation at Winwick (Policy OS6) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

219. The site is located adjacent to the northern edge of the settlement of Winwick and is currently in agricultural use. It is allocated for a minimum of 130 dwellings. The loss of agricultural land must be balanced against the delivery of the spatial strategy overall.
220. This land is located within the Green Belt and has been assessed as making a 'moderate' contribution to Green Belt purposes. This is the combined consideration of all 5 Green Belt purposes, including safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. The site is visually well connected to the surrounding countryside, though is bound by Golborne Road to the west and Waterworks Lane to the east thereby creating durable boundaries. The northern boundary of the site is not clearly defined and is therefore not durable. The provisions of Policy OS6 Part 12 set out that a landscaping scheme is required to reinforce these boundaries, although to be effective, main modification **MM030** is required to remove the reference to hedgerow along the northern boundary.
221. In line with other allocations located adjacent to outlying settlements and requiring the release of Green Belt land, the exceptional circumstances required to justify Green Belt release relate to the wider spatial strategy. This will ensure that sufficient housing is provided to meet Warrington's needs overall, including the need for affordable housing. This site's relatively unconstrained nature means that homes will be delivered early in the plan period. Development in this location will also support the vitality and viability of local services in this area. The benefits of the allocation outweigh the likely harm and exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated in this case.
222. Winwick Battlefield is located to the west of the site, separated by Golborne Road. This area is also in agricultural use. The Battlefield appears on Historic England's Register of Historic Battlefields and is recognised as having historic significance, topographical integrity and archaeological potential. It is a designated heritage asset, referred to in the NPPF as being an asset of the highest significance. Therefore great weight must be given to its conservation. The allocated site is currently part of the open rural setting of the Battlefield, assessed in the Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) (HIA7) as making a moderate contribution to the significance of this setting.
223. The development of the allocated site could erode the historic rural setting of the Battlefield. The HIA suggests that this could have a moderate impact on the significance of this setting and therefore the potential to cause less than substantial harm in this regard. However, any harm in this regard would be outweighed by the public benefits of the proposal in terms of supporting the delivery of the housing requirement for the Borough. Moreover, the impacts

could be mitigated by ensuring adequate separation distances and appropriate buffer treatment, as set out in Policy OS6 Part 23.

224. Additionally, the Battlefield is identified as possessing substantial overall archaeological potential. Given the proximity of the allocated site to the Battlefield and the likelihood of it being of archaeological interest, main modification **MM030** would amend Part 24 of Policy OS6 to include the requirement for both desk based assessment and field evaluation to explore the archaeological potential of the site. This is required to ensure that the policy is effective and consistent with national policy in this respect.
225. Winwick provides some facilities and services locally and is reasonably well served by public transport. The level of growth proposed is capable of being absorbed without significant impacts. There will clearly be more traffic generated on local roads. Noting the close proximity of Winwick to the boundary with St Helens, the cumulative effects of the allocated site have been considered alongside other planned development, including that associated with Parkside Colliery. However, there is no evidence that the allocated site cannot be accommodated within acceptable parameters, nor that safe and suitable access cannot be achieved, noting also that Policy OS6 requires a Transport Assessment and package of transport improvements to be provided. The emphasis on active travel within these provisions will assist in managing air quality impacts.
226. The size of the site along with the scale of development indicated mean that existing infrastructure can be accommodated with the necessary easements. This includes the Water Treatment Works and Service Reservoir directly to the south and the electricity pylons running across the allocated site. Policy provisions also address concerns regarding possible impacts on flood risk locally.
227. In common with other allocations involving Green Belt release, it is necessary to provide greater clarity in relation to Green Belt compensatory improvements. It is also necessary to amend Part 19 and the reasoned justification relating to the mitigation of air quality impacts on the Manchester Mosses SAC. This addresses the conclusions of the HRA and ensures consistency with the relevant provisions of Policy ENV8. Main modification **MM030** would achieve this and is necessary to ensure that the policy is effective.

Conclusion

228. The site allocation at Winwick (Policy OS6) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy, subject to main modification **MM030**.

Issue 15 – Whether the Local Plan has been positively prepared and whether it is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to the approach to housing land supply.

229. On the basis of our conclusions on the proposed site allocations and adjustments made as a result of discussions during the examination, an updated housing trajectory shows that an estimated 15,288 new homes can be delivered over the 18 year plan period 2021/22 to 2038/39. This is based on realistic and justified estimates of completions from various sources. Approximately 12% of the supply would come from sites of less than 0.25ha, which means that the requirement in paragraph 69 of the NPPF in terms of small and medium sized sites is met.
230. The estimated overall supply is above the requirement of 14,688 and provides a modest amount of flexibility. The amended trajectory does not count any completions on the Warrington Waterfront site (Policy MD1). This site could, potentially at least, come forward during the plan period and provide some additional flexibility to the supply. The SEWUE (Policy MD2) has capacity for some 1,800 additional new homes beyond the plan period. Some of these could, again potentially at least, come forward during the plan period. The Council has a clear commitment to monitoring and reviewing the situation regarding housing completions and would need to review the Local Plan well before the end of the plan period in any case.
231. Given past performance on housing delivery, the Council acknowledges that a 20% buffer should be applied when calculating a five year housing land supply. Taking 2023/24 as the start year for the calculation, the basic five year requirement would be 3,774 homes (3 x 678 and 2 x 870). The updated trajectory shows estimated completions of 1,737 in the first two years of the plan period. This represents a surplus of 381 homes compared with the requirement for these years. The reduced basic requirement is therefore 3,393 homes. Applying the 20% buffer to this gives a five year requirement of 4,072 homes.
232. The updated trajectory estimates completions of 4,882 homes in the five years between 2023/24 and 2027/28. There is likely to be at least a five year supply of housing sites at the point of adoption of the Local Plan therefore.
233. Actual completion figures for 2022/23 have recently been made available (CD086). These show net completions of 1,472 homes compared with the updated trajectory estimate of 1,053 homes. This would increase the surplus in the plan period so far and reduce the five year requirement. The supply would be even healthier if this updated figure was used.

234. Main modification **MM032** would replace the housing trajectory in Appendix 1 of the Local Plan with the updated version referred to above. It is necessary to ensure that the Local Plan is justified and effective in this respect.

Conclusion

235. Subject to main modification **MM032** the Local Plan has been positively prepared and is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to the approach to housing land supply.

Issue 16 – Whether the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to the approach to housing density, meeting housing needs and Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpeople provision.

Housing density

236. In the context of a Local Plan which relies on alterations to the Green Belt to fully meet housing requirements, Policy DEV1 rightly seeks to make efficient use of housing sites and promote minimum densities. Given the potential for regeneration within the Town Centre and evidence of recent developments, the policy justifiably seeks densities of at least 130 dwellings per hectare (dph). It is also justified in recognising the potential for densities of at least 50dph in the wider Town Centre Masterplan area, sites adjacent to District Centres or otherwise well served by public transport, and densities of at least 30dph elsewhere.

237. The policy allows for a flexible approach to take account of particular local or site specific circumstances. Main modification **MM003** would provide necessary effectiveness by introducing more clarity to parts 5c and 6 of the policy and explaining clearly in Paragraph 4.1.23 how sites that are well served by public transport will be defined.

Meeting housing needs

238. Policy DEV2 sets out a comprehensive and justified approach to affordable housing. It recognises that viability is more of an issue on redeveloped sites in Inner Warrington and seeks 20% affordable housing provision as part of market housing sites there. Elsewhere, and for greenfield sites in all cases, 30% is sought. This approach is justified by evidence on need and viability. Sufficient flexibility is built in to the policy to take account of site specific viability issues. Main modification **MM004** is necessary to ensure that the wording of part 1 of the policy is consistent with national policy in relation to defining the site size threshold that would apply.

239. The LHNA identifies a need for a mix of housing types and tenures. Policy DEV2 justifiably reflects the need for such a mix. Main modification **MM004** is required to ensure that the policy is effective in recognising that the evidence base on the specific mix needed is likely to change over time and that small sites may not feasibly be able to meet the full range of housing types needed.
240. The approach to accessible and adaptable and wheelchair user dwellings is justified by evidence on need from the LHNA and the viability assessment. Main modification **MM004** is also required to ensure that the policy is effective by introducing necessary clarity in terms of a site size threshold and a recognition that a range of evidence may justify a more flexible approach in specific cases.
241. In relation to parts 18 and 21a of Policy DEV2 it is unclear how housing for older people or a suitable mix of housing types would be defined or how these aspects of the policy would be implemented. Main modification **MM004** would delete these parts of the policy and is necessary to ensure that it is effective.
242. In other respects Policy DEV2 is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpeople provision

243. Evidence on needs is provided by the Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpeople Accommodation Assessment 2018 (the GTAA - GT1). This was produced on behalf of the Council along with Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester and Halton Councils. For Warrington it identifies a need for 15 Gypsy and Traveller pitches and 15 Travelling Showpeople plots between 2017 and 2032, along with 5-10 pitches for transit provision. It also identifies a need for 4 pitches for those who no longer met the definition of Gypsies and Travellers in Annex 1 to the Planning Policy for Traveller Sites (PPTS).
244. Taking into account sites that have received planning permission since the GTAA was published, there is sufficient provision for Gypsies and Travellers to meet needs up to 2032, including for those not meeting the definition in the PPTS. There is also sufficient provision for Travelling Showpeople to meet needs for the first 10 years of the assessment period (up to 2027).
245. The Council is committed to meeting identified needs. Policy DEV3 sets out a positive framework to do so. There is a clear commitment to update the GTAA and address needs beyond 2032 in a future review of the Local Plan. Policy DEV3 is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Conclusion

246. Subject to main modifications **MM003** and **MM004** the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to the approach to housing density, meeting housing needs and Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpeople provision.

Issue 17 – Whether the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to the approach to retail, leisure and the Town Centre.

247. Policy DEV5 sets out the retail hierarchy. Policy TC1 specifically supports the role of the Town Centre as a regional employment, leisure, cultural and transport hub. In addition to the Town Centre, the hierarchy comprises three district centres (Birchwood, Stockton Heath and Westbrook), nine neighbourhood centres and a number of local centres, with additional local centres proposed to meet the needs of Main Development Areas. These other centres perform an important role in providing a range of facilities and employment opportunities within walking and cycling distance of where people live. This hierarchy is supported by the evidence base, in particular the Retail and Leisure Study Update 2019 (RL2), which reviewed the hierarchy set out in the previous plan and recommended that it be maintained. To ensure that Policy DEV5 is readily understood and effective, main modification **MM006** would add detail into the reasoned justification to provide clarity on the roles of the different types of centres in the retail hierarchy.

248. Smaller centres continue to face competition for retail spend from larger retail operators and online shopping. Within this context Policy DEV5 seeks to direct new retail and leisure development of an appropriate scale to these defined centres, and to ensure that centres at all levels of the hierarchy are able to provide and retain a range of shops, services and facilities within a high-quality environment. This generally accords with national policy, though **MM006** would add further text to reflect the requirement of the NPPF paragraph 93 to plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaces, community facilities and other local services within local centres. This would ensure that the policy is effective and consistent with national policy in this regard.

249. Where retail or leisure uses are proposed outside a defined centre then it is appropriate to require that a sequential test be applied to demonstrate that there are no suitable sites within existing centres or edge of centre locations. This is consistent with the NPPF paragraphs 87 and 90. The threshold of 500m² has been brought forward from the previous plan and is set at proportionate level given the continuing pressure out-of-town retail provision can bring on the viability of existing centres. **MM006** would combine the relevant parts of Policy DEV5 on the approach to out of centre development in order to ensure that it is

clear and effective. This modification would also remove the reference to 'office uses' to ensure consistency with national policy.

Conclusion

250. The approach to retail, leisure and the town centre is justified, effective and consistent with national policy, subject to the main modification referred to above.

Issue 18 – Whether the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to the approach to transport and other infrastructure.

251. Policies INF1 and INF2 set out an effective and justified approach to sustainable travel and transport and the safeguarding of land for transport improvement schemes. Policy INF3 does the same in respect of utilities, telecommunications and broadband.

252. Whilst the approach to community facilities in Policy INF4 is justified, main modification **MM008** is necessary to ensure it is effective in setting out clearly that a new hospital in Warrington could be accommodated within the policy framework of this Local Plan in addition to a site allocation in a future review.

253. Part 6 of Policy INF5 is unduly onerous and insufficiently flexible in relation to taking account of the implications for viability when considering planning obligations for infrastructure. It also lacks sufficient clarity in not referring specifically to emergency services in the list of potential matters to be funded by planning obligations. Main modification **MM009** is required in order for the policy to be justified and effective in these respects.

254. Main modification **MM010** would ensure that Policy INF6 is effective by clarifying that the safeguarding zone for Manchester Airport is shown on the Policies Map.

Conclusion

255. Subject to the above main modifications, the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to the approach to transport and other infrastructure.

Issue 19 – Whether the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to the approach to the Borough's historic, cultural, built and natural assets.

Warrington's places

256. Warrington comprises a range of place types, from urban to countryside, including a complex network of distinctive environments. Policy DC1 seeks to recognise and positively reinforce the varying characteristics of different parts of the Borough. In general terms the provisions of Policy DC1 are justified and consistent with national policy. That said, main modification **MM011** would remove the reference to the protection of inset settlements and also the suggestion that outside settlements new development will be accommodated through the release of Green Belt. This is necessary to ensure that the policy is effective by introducing clarity and removing the duplication with the provisions of Policy GB1.

Historic Environment

257. NPPF paragraph 190 requires that plans should set out a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment. Policy DC2 seeks to ensure that Warrington's historic environment is protected, enhanced and proactively managed whilst supporting appropriate sustainable development. Whilst there is a general consistency with national policy, main modification **MM012** is necessary to accurately reflect the requirement to conserve and where appropriate enhance the historic environment. **MM012** would also address the need for clear drafting and to ensure consistency with national policy in relation to the tests for justifying harm to designated heritage assets. It is necessary to ensure that the policy is effective and consistent with national policy.

Green Infrastructure

258. The NPPF sets out the role of green infrastructure as a network of multi-functional green space, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, health and wellbeing benefits. Further, the PPG (Ref ID: 8-007-2190721) refers to the role of local plans in setting out the locations of existing and proposed green infrastructure networks and provisions for their protection and enhancement.

259. Policy DC3 seeks to recognise Warrington's collective network of green spaces and environmental features and their multi-functional benefits at a strategic level. It sets out an overarching framework for the care and management of these areas, seeking to enhance their functioning through identifying linkages.

260. Whilst the wording of Policy DC3 generally reflects national policy and legislation covering the protection and enhancement of the natural environment, there is a lack of precision and clarity in some criteria, with amendments required to ensure appropriate protection. Main modification **MM013** would include amendments to Part 4 which are necessary to clarify requirements in relation to securing measurable net gain in biodiversity and to also confirm the nature, purpose and requirements of restoration and enhancement measures as they relate to the full range of irreplaceable and semi-natural habitats. Similarly **MM013** would amend Part 5 to reflect the fact that green infrastructure performs different functions, with some areas being primarily set aside for ecological or environmental purposes and others contributing to quality-of-life considerations. This main modification would also amend the reasoned justification to clarify the relevant national policy requirements, including the mandatory requirement for a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. It would also amend Figure XX ensure that it correctly reflects the provisions of Policy DC3.
261. **MM013** would remove Part 6 relating to the application of the mitigation hierarchy from Policy DC3, with main modification **MM014** placing this provision within Policy DC4. Policy DC4 is the more logical home for this provision as it focuses on delivering the ecological networks.
262. **MM013** is necessary to ensure that Policy DC3 is effective and consistent with national policy.

Ecological networks

263. Whilst Policy DC4 generally reflects national policy and legislation covering the protection and enhancement of ecological networks, there is a lack of precision and clarity in some criteria required to ensure appropriate protection. Main modification **MM014** would set out amendments to Part 1, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5, Part 6, Part 7 and the reasoned justification that are necessary to reflect the requirements of national policy and legislative provisions for protected habitats. More specifically, the amendment to Part 7 is necessary to set out a more robust and standardised approach to ecological assessment. As referred to above, Part 8 has been moved from Policy DC3, with the amendments set out in **MM014** required to reflect national policy provisions in relation to the mitigation hierarchy.
264. **MM014** would also set out the changes necessary to Figure 13 to provide greater clarity in reflecting the provisions of Policy DC4. Overall **MM014** is required to ensure that Policy DC4 is effective and consistent with national policy.

Open space, sport and recreation provision

265. Policy DC5 sets out the importance of access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation as an important element of the health, well-being and cohesion of communities. These provisions are based on a reasonably up to date assessment of existing provisions and there is recognition of the importance of maintaining this evidence base as a robust basis for developer contributions and/or potential Community Infrastructure Levy investment. We are satisfied that Policy DC5 provides an effective approach to the protection and enhancement of open space, sport and recreation facilities and that it is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Quality of place

266. Policy DC6 has a range of provisions seeking to secure high quality design as a basis for attractive, sustainable, safe and accessible places. It sets out the importance of recognising and building on local distinctiveness, including through adopting masterplans and design codes for larger sites. It refers to the fact that detailed guidance for the development of town centre brownfield sites is set out in the Warrington Town Centre SPD. To ensure that it is effective, main modification **MM015** would amend Part 1, Part 3 and Part 4 to improve the drafting and therefore clarity of policy wording.

Conclusion

267. We conclude that, subject to the above main modifications the approach to the Borough's historic, cultural, built and natural assets is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Issue 20 – Whether the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to waste management, flood risk and water management, minerals, energy and environmental and amenity protection.

268. Policies ENV1 to ENV6 set out a comprehensive policy framework for waste management, flood risk and water management and minerals. The policies are justified and consistent with national policy. Main modification **MM016** is necessary to clarify in part 7 of Policy ENV5 that peat deposits will also be protected from harmful development. Subject to this modification policies ENV1 to ENV6 are also effective.

269. Policy ENV7 includes a requirement for development on the allocated sites and all other major development to reduce carbon emissions by at least 10% when measured against the Building Regulations (Part L) in place at the time planning

applications are submitted. As the PPG explains⁵ The Written Ministerial Statement on Plan Making of March 2015 sets out the Government's expectation that Local Plan policies should not be used to set conditions on planning permissions with requirements above the equivalent of Level 4 of the Code for Sustainable Homes.

270. The requirements in Part L of the Building Regulations were updated and came into force in June 2022. These now set standards above Code Level 4. Policy ENV7 is therefore not consistent with national policy in this respect. There is no specific evidence relating to Warrington to support the intended policy approach and it is not clear that the additional costs of such requirements have been specifically factored in to the viability assessment for the Local Plan. This aspect of Policy ENV7 is therefore also not justified. Main modification **MM017** would remove the requirements and ensure that the policy is justified and consistent with national policy.

271. Policy ENV8 sets out a comprehensive approach to environmental and amenity protection. As noted above, concerns were raised by NE in relation to issues of air quality and the effects on Holcroft Moss within the Manchester Mosses SAC. Further co-operation on this issue took place between the Council and NE during the examination, culminating in the updated HRA and statement of common ground. Main modification **MM018** would amend part 4 of the policy and paragraph 9.8.6 to strengthen and clarify the approach towards management and restoration of Holcroft Moss and mitigation requirements for relevant development proposals. It is necessary to ensure that the Local Plan is justified and effective.

Conclusion

272. Subject to the above main modifications the Local Plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in relation to waste management, flood risk and water management, minerals, energy and environmental and amenity protection.

Issue 21 – Whether the approach to monitoring and review is justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

273. The Council has a clear commitment to monitoring the implementation of the Local Plan and specific proposals within it. This is set out in Policy M1 and the Monitoring Framework in Appendix 2. Policy M1 also identifies specific actions to support the delivery of housing and the circumstances that would trigger a review of the Local Plan.

⁵ Reference ID: 6-012-20190315

274. Main modification **MM031** would introduce specific reference to a potential review based on the monitoring of jobs growth. This is necessary for the policy to be effective, particularly given our analysis and conclusion on the employment land requirement. This main modification is also required to ensure that the Monitoring Framework is effective in reflecting a number of other main modifications.

Conclusion

275. The approach to monitoring and review is justified, effective and consistent with national policy, subject to main modification **MM031**.

Overall conclusion and recommendation

276. The Local Plan has a number of deficiencies in respect of soundness for the reasons set out above, which mean that we recommend non-adoption of it as submitted, in accordance with Section 20(7A) of the 2004 Act. These deficiencies have been explained in the main issues set out above.

277. The Council has requested that we recommend main modifications to make the Local Plan sound and capable of adoption. We conclude that the duty to cooperate has been met and that with the recommended main modifications set out in the Appendix the Warrington Local Plan satisfies the requirements referred to in Section 20(5)(a) of the 2004 Act and is sound.

Andrea Mageean and Kevin Ward

Inspectors

This report is accompanied by an Appendix containing the Main Modifications.