



torus

Locality Plan – Warrington

Strategy Team

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Version 1

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Torus' current position and future ambition for Warrington

Date 13/07/20

Executive Summary

To be completed once we've had feedback from tenants

Introduction

The Torus heartland plans will highlight how the organisation will help shape our heartlands of Liverpool, St Helens and Warrington. Torus are committed to having a significant social impact in the areas that we have a presence, and these plans will ensure that our community work is aligned to local needs. Our entire business model is centred around *Growing Stronger Communities* through an inclusive growth model. The plan will enable Torus to tailor its response to the regeneration work that needs doing and will ensure our impact is as far-reaching as it can be.

Torus' current standing in St Helens

Great Homes

High quality, well-maintained homes and landlord services will always be at the heart of what we do. We go beyond simply letting properties. We deliver a 'landlord plus' scheme that includes a round-the-clock repairs and maintenance service, financial advice, employment and training support, as well as specialist support for older people and for those with complex needs.

Working closely with local partners, we are broadening the mix of home types and tenures we offer. The intention is for this document to ensure that that broadening reflects local need and that it supports and strengthens economic and social sustainability.

Our current housing stock in the Warrington region is 8,863, this figure includes 1,578 dwellings for older people. Thousands of people in Warrington have relied on Torus' extra care provisions. In 2019/20, 243 customers in sheltered housing schemes were regularly engaging in positive wellbeing activities. There were 1083 attendees in total.

Ambitious Developments

Torus recognise the significant impact we can have on shaping our heartlands. The importance of identifying local need and ensuring that our developments meet changing local demand is pivotal for our long-term ambitions.

Prior to the pandemic, Torus had a commitment to create at least 5,300 new homes by 2024. The long-term effects of the crisis and the economic contraction are yet to truly pan out, however, Torus remain committed to pursuing an ambitious development programme.

Torus currently have 1844 units on site across 33 different development sites, spanning 10 local authorities. Torus Developments has not let the current economic downfall affect its ambitions; Torus still has an extensive pipeline and there are no intentions to scale back. The Group has 1568 units in our approved pipeline and a further 2000+ in our strategic long-term pipeline.

297 of those 1844 units which are on site are in Warrington. This represents 16.1% and is a good reflection of how, despite our exploration into other North West areas, Warrington will remain a strategic priority for our developments programme. Almost all of those units in St Helens will be made available for Affordable Rent and a small proportion for Shared Ownership.

Strong Communities

Torus' overarching ambition that defines all of our service delivery is to *Build Stronger Communities*. The community support that we offer has an incredibly significant social impact in the areas that we operate in. By supporting the vulnerable, through vital interventions and through providing opportunities, we help empower the communities that have historically been marginalised.

However, that community ambition is not solely down to social impact, our economic contribution is just as important. Torus has a pre-crisis turnover of £190mil and employs 1500 members of staff, that's not to mention the considerable supply chain. Our contribution to the local economy through our policy of inclusive growth has enabled us to strengthen those communities even further. Our continuous presence as an anchor institution at the heart of our communities has ensured we are one of the biggest and most trusted employers in the region.

Torus' charitable arm, Torus Foundation, was created to ensure commercial profits made by the Group are used to make a positive difference for tenants and the wider community. Torus Foundation has had a wide-reaching impact throughout the region.

Examples of the work the Foundation does in St Helens:

- New Leaf - the scheme aims to provide investment in local projects that increase economic development by investing in projects which will support skills development, employment and job creation, social inclusion and local community regeneration. 584 people moved into work and 370 people were helped into training and education in 2019/20.
- Warrington Time to Change - Torus Foundation work in partnership with Warrington Borough Council and Warrington Speak Up on a flagship programme, Time to Change. The continuation of the project requires additional funding contributions from Torus Foundation.
- It also works with Warrington Borough Council Neighbourhood Team to lay on school holiday sessions, coffee mornings and fitness sessions.

Commercial Contracting

A big part of the landlord plus package, that our tenants have become accustomed to, is delivered by our in-house commercial contractor, HMS. HMS delivers all repairs and maintenance services for our 40,000 tenants across the North West.

The ever-expanding capacity of HMS has enabled Torus to pursue ambitious development targets. The combined efforts of Torus Developments and HMS ensured the Group delivered 649 homes in

2019/20, including 306 for affordable rent, 189 for Shared Ownership and (20) Rent to Buy, and 134 specialist homes for people with additional care needs. 21 of those units were in Warrington.

Warrington as a locality

Growth Planning

Warrington already has one of the strongest economies in the North West with current employment in the town standing at 77%, which is higher than the national average. The Warrington workforce is, however, ageing and a younger population will be required to replace older people exiting the workforce. Replacement demand from an ageing population is the highest driver of future labour demands in Cheshire and Warrington (230,000 jobs by 2025).

The Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) recognises Warrington Town Centre as one of the key opportunities, in its area, for the growth in urban living that is attractive to younger people. Warrington has been identified by the LEP as one of its priorities for growth in its Strategic Economic Plan (SEP).

While growth is forecast, there is insufficient existing employment land supply to meet Warrington's long-term needs. Warrington Council were in the process of creating a new Local Plan prior to the crisis, the current crisis appears to have pushed back the publication of the plan. This Plan stipulated that over the 20-year plan period, from 2017 to 2037, provision will be made for a minimum of 362 hectares of employment land

The main employment sites have been allocated at:

- Port Warrington
- Waterfront Business Hub
- Garden Suburb Employment Area
- Omega Westward Extension (St Helens)

Warrington Borough Council have stressed the importance of transport investment to the economic development of the area. While around 70% of residents live and work in Cheshire and Warrington, Warrington is a magnet for workers from other areas with significant net commuting into the sub-region from neighbouring authorities. This is particularly the case for younger workers and, consequently, travel congestion has become a major concern across the Borough.

The Local Transport Plan set out a number of new infrastructure and services aimed to reduce the reliance on the private car by promoting walking and cycling. Some of the measures outlined by the Plan include:

- Major infrastructure improvements including new high-level bridge across the Manchester Ship Canal and link road
- Major highway and public transport infrastructure to support development in South Warrington.
- An enhanced rail and bus travel offer introducing new schemes such as a car club and bike sharing to enable car free and car-lite living.

The need for revised figures, and revised priorities, that take into consideration the expected imminent economic contraction, is, of course, now pivotal. It is yet to be seen by how much these ambitions will be affected by Covid-19, however, the appetite to grow and diversify the region, both economically and socially, will remain even if the figures aren't as ambitious. Torus envisage being a big part of the town's recovery and are already contributing significantly to the Council's, recovery plans. We do not anticipate our economic contribution decreasing, any drop in turnover will be very short-term, with the long-term ambition being to increase capacity and build even stronger communities.

Torus have historically been very much at the heart of the region's target setting, whether that be actively having an input on plans or by providing services that help them reach the targets that have been set. Being a strategic partner to the local authority has ensured Torus has helped shape the economic direction of the region.

Demographic

The population in Warrington has more than doubled since it became a new town in 1968 to 209,547. Over the next 25 years the population is expected to increase by 9%, which equates to nearly 19,000 more people.

Warrington's population structure has a much lower proportion of 20-29 year old's, and a higher proportion of 40-59 year old's, compared to England and Wales. The over 65 population is around 18.2%, compared to 18% in the UK general population. The age profile of Torus tenants mostly reflects the age profile of the general population.

As indicated earlier, employment is relatively stable in Warrington. However, it should be noted that prior to the crisis unemployment figures were already beginning to rise. Even though the increase was only slight, it is worrying that a trend was beginning to form just before a recession is likely to hit.

Warrington has a relatively skilled workforce, compared to other North West areas. 40.5% of the population in Warrington has an NVQ level 4 qualification or above, compared with 35.5% in the rest of the North West. Figures actually indicate that Warrington compares favourably at all skill levels. The largest areas of employment in Warrington are professional, scientific and technical services and Wholesale and Retail Trade, Repair of Motor Vehicles services.

Demand

Warrington Council had announced prior to the crisis that their proposed new Local Plan will aim to deliver 18,900 new homes (or 945 a year, up to 2037). Those projected housing figures aim to match Warrington's expected growth and ensure enough homes are provided to support the number of jobs that will be created from Warrington's future economic growth.

Warrington has a geographical mix of both urban and rural areas, with approximately 63.7% of the council's area is classified as Greenbelt. The housing demand, up to 2037, far exceeds the amount of urban land available to the council. Therefore, meeting those targets may well be dependent on other land being made available, including the Greenbelt areas surrounding the town centre. The Council have however stressed the importance of preserving almost 90% of Warrington's Greenbelt.

The Council has set out three main house building priorities:

- Build enough affordable properties for young buyers.
- Build enough accessible homes for people with disabilities.
- Build enough homes for elderly people as the ageing population continues to grow.

These are of course very high-level ambitions. The Council are likely going to assess the current situation and put forward attainable targets. All three of these priorities are however likely to last the duration of the crisis, if anything they will be exacerbated by the current environment. Affordability was an issue prior to the crisis, with the Council worried that young families were being excluded from the housing market.

Taking into account the minimum provision of low-cost home ownership in accordance with the NPPF, in Inner Warrington the Council had previously sought a 50/50 split between rented and low cost home ownership, with a 66/34 split in all other areas.

Priorities may however change with the current economic contraction as less people will be in a position to get on the property ladder. The demand for Affordable Rent and Social Rent is likely to increase. During the last recession house prices fell leading to an increase in demand but a collapse in mortgage advances meant that house builders reduced the number of new house builds. This, coupled with the economic uncertainty over jobs, meant that during 2009 and 2010 waiting lists for local authority housing were at their highest.

The most recent Local Housing Needs Assessment (LHNA) suggested that Warrington needed approximately 377 additional new affordable homes each year over the plan period between 2017 and 2037. The major reason affordable need is high in Warrington has been attributed to the average house price being over 6 times average household incomes, combined with a falling supply of the Borough's social housing stock as a result of 'Right to Buy'.

The Council indicated in the provisional Local Plan that their ambition is for housing delivery to support the Council's aim of promoting social inclusion, this would ensure people have genuine choice over the location in which they live and enable households to remain within their local communities over time. This is very much aligned with Torus' place making and inclusive growth approach. Torus have a longstanding history of supporting the council reach its strategic ambitions, and we envisage continuing to do so.

The Council have also clearly identified the need for specialist/extra care accommodation as well as dwellings for the elderly. Their policy, prior to the crisis, was that 20% of the properties in any residential development of 10 dwellings or more should be made 'Accessible and Adaptable dwellings' and where there is an identified need, the Council will also seek a proportion of wheelchair user dwellings. Residential developments, of 10 dwellings or more, also has to include a 20% provision to accommodate the needs of older people. The Council also indicated that they will support applications for Supported and Extra Care housing in accessible locations.

In terms of location, the provisional Plan indicates that the priority will be in Warrington's urban central area. However, the Council's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), has only identified deliverable capacity for a minimum of 13,726 new homes in this area. The substantial urban capacity will rely upon regeneration plans for the Town Centre, major developments at Warrington Waterfront and also at the wider Inner Warrington area.

The following sites have therefore been earmarked to be removed from the Greenbelt as sustainable urban extensions to the main urban area of Warrington:

- Garden Suburb – minimum capacity of 6,490 homes of which a minimum of 4,201 homes will be delivered in the Plan Period.
- South West Extension – minimum capacity of 1,631 homes to be delivered in full in the Plan Period.
- A minimum of 1,085 homes to be delivered on allocated sites in Burtonwood, Croft, Culcheth, Hollins Green, Lymm, Winwick

The Council has indicated in the proposed plan that, prior to the crisis, planning permissions were prioritised in the Town Centre for higher density development and to optimise the use of previously developed land. This is very much aligned with the Government's priorities and is therefore likely to remain a focus for the Town's recovery plans.

Partnerships

Torus is well connected in the region and is very much regarded as a strategic partner to the Warrington Borough Council. This relationship with the local authority, as well as Torus Leadership being present on various boards, such as the Cheshire and Warrington LEP, Warrington Chamber for Commerce and the Warrington Town Deal Board has ensured we have helped determine the economic direction of the town and the surrounding areas.

Our position locally as an anchor institution has ensured that we are a key contributor to the local economy and one of the region's leading employers. This status as a consistent beacon within our communities has allowed us to adopt a policy of inclusive growth where there is an interdependency between us, our tenants and the wider communities.

Torus leaders are also part of forums and groups based in the town with a specific issue that they focus on. These groups are committed to tackling issues such as, unemployment, poverty, welfare disparity, and the lack of key skills. Torus' affiliation with these groups, the emergency services and other local care providers has ensured our social impact has been substantial and far-reaching.

Equally important are the aspirations of national partners, most notably the Government and its housing accelerator, Homes England. The Prime Minister has stressed the importance of brownfield development and for transport and infrastructure improvements to make otherwise suitable areas available for development.

The Prime Minister also expressed his desire for more efficient and sustainable homes to be built. He is preparing a complete overhaul of the planning system which will allow developers to build better, build greener and also to build faster. Something of course Torus would welcome. Torus continuously monitor Government priorities and shape our business priorities accordingly.

Homes England's ambition to challenge traditional norms to improve neighbourhoods and grow communities by building a better standard of homes at a faster rate is certainly something Torus can, and has been, contributing to. Being the region's only Homes England strategic partner, Torus are best positioned to ensure their ambitions are reflected in the city.

Future ambitions in St Helens

Housing

Torus Developments have already indicated to Homes England that they do not intend to let the crisis slow down progress made in our heartlands and emerging heartlands. Homes England are aware that Torus are in a position to increase capacity and deliver on our ambitious development targets.

As alluded to earlier, Torus still has an extensive development programme in place that it remains committed to delivering. Torus has long been a key contributor to housing delivery in Warrington, and we envisage continuing to work with the Council to address those issues with land to reach the extensive targets set out in the provisional Local Plan. This, coupled with Torus' economic contribution significantly helping the local economy, means we will be an important part of the town's growth plans. It is yet to be seen how the current crisis will affect the figures set out in the Plan, however, given the fact Torus are actively involved in developing the region's recovery plans, we can expect a big role to play in service delivery in the years to come.

Our land-led approach and our focus on placemaking and regenerating existing communities, as well as creating new homes and places for people to live in and thrive, is very much aligned with the ambitions of Homes England. Torus' development and wider business strategy therefore strikes a chord both locally and nationally.

Torus' current focus on developing houses for Affordable Rent is aligned with local demand. Future long-term development plans in the area will also reflect this local demand. There is clearly already a significant need for Affordable Housing and any recession is only going to exacerbate that need. Affordable housing providers, like Torus therefore have an incredibly important role to play.

Torus should also look into ensuring a vast proportion of our new build properties in Warrington are both wheelchair and elderly friendly. Torus aim to embrace the innovation sphere in the post-Covid-19 environment, adapting our properties to a 'Homes for Life' standard would be a good way of doing that and would satisfy local need for elderly provision. The emphasis on providing housing for the older generation should not be understated. The aging population in Warrington will require appropriate housing and Torus should make that a strategic priority.

Torus will be looking to build in the urban part of the region around the Town Centre. We will also be monitoring whether the Council's post-crisis economic priorities remain to be around Port Warrington and the Waterfront Business Hub, and whether the large-scale infrastructure investment commitments outlined prior to the crisis remain intact. The Government have said that housing developments should be intricately linked to transport / infrastructure investment and this guidance will help influence our development strategy.

These areas will be more densely populated and will consist of smaller developments. Our development strategy will however also include larger scale developments to help ensure the Council reaches its house building obligations by 2037. The Council has already indicated that the post-crisis target of building 18,900 houses by 2037 will be dependent on Greenbelt land being made available and have already indicated that a large proportion of the Greenbelt development will be done at the Garden Suburb. This is something again Torus will need to monitor and consider.

Warrington is strategically well placed between Manchester and Liverpool and sits alongside a number of key motorways. The Council will be looking to capitalise on that and as land is made available for economic development, Torus will be monitoring to see where housing development could follow.

It should be noted that a recession could force the council to reassess priorities from delivering higher end developments in areas of high employment or connectivity, in favour of shielding the vulnerable neighbourhoods that will be hardest hit. The reader should be assured that, whilst we remain committed to delivering high quality housing for a vast variety of individual need, our place making commitments to the region's most vulnerable and deprived areas will not be overlooked.

Torus will adapt, as ever, to the changing demand as it becomes clearer. Historically, the Council's areas of focus areas have been areas where we have a big presence. The Council recognise the contribution Torus' presence at the heart of communities can have on the targets that they set. This interdependency between Torus and the local authority will be highlighted even further in the post-Covid environment.

Torus will also actively look for conversion opportunities. The Government have stressed the importance of brownfield development and have made converting non-residential buildings into residential building much easier. There also appears to be an appetite, both nationally and locally, for utilising derelict and vacant land. Torus have a longstanding history of doing just that and envisage a continuation of that policy. The conversion of the Blackburn Arms pub in Orford Green is a good example of how Torus is regenerating otherwise vacant land.

One of the Council's major concerns, prior to the crisis, was the aging workforce in Warrington and extensive efforts have been made to try and attract younger professionals to the town. These people will likely need family houses in and around the Town Centre, something that is in relatively short supply. The Torus Developments Programme will therefore bear this factor in mind.

This housing commitment should also focus on 'green' technologies and methods. Local politicians and national politicians alike have stressed the importance of the 'Green Revolution' and Torus should not be left behind. Concentrated efforts on lowering emissions and reducing our carbon footprint should therefore be of paramount concern in our development efforts.

Other services

A vast proportion of Torus housing stock is situated in the city's most deprived areas. The Group therefore remain committed to ensuring tenants in these areas will continue to get the support they need, particularly in what are incredibly difficult times. This will include financial support and health and well-being provisions – particularly to Torus' older tenant population.

Warrington Borough Council have, during and since the crisis, highlighted mental health as a key focus for them. Torus Foundation will continue to work with the Council to address the social and economic issues facing the area, and as the Council have earmarked mental health provision as a priority for them, this is something Torus will support them with.

Although employment levels in Warrington were relatively stable prior to the crisis, the likelihood is that an economic contraction of the magnitude that is going to occur will lead to high levels of unemployment across the entire country. The employment support in our communities will be essential as the country and certain sectors look to recover.

The results of the Torus led New Leaf programme in Warrington has been incredibly positive. The programme helped 584 people move back into work in 2019/20, and it also helped 370 people into training and education. This provision will be even more important with companies across the

country already announcing large-scale redundancies. The Government's economic recovery plan has moved to protect the younger generation from potential job losses and incentivise apprentice schemes. The New Leaf programme will look to capitalise on this messaging and support young people into meaningful employment.

Warrington Council have long been concerned about aging workforce and ensuring there are skilled employees ready to make the transition. One of Torus' priorities is to up-skill our tenant population and the wider communities. This will be even more important post-crisis as the economic priorities of the entire country will be up for review, with certain sectors looking to expand whilst others will be looking make efficiencies.

There will be a real appetite across the entire country, not just in Warrington, to rebuild broken communities. The most vulnerable societies are the ones most likely to be affected by economic contraction. Torus intend to be at the forefront of these efforts to rebuild communities and to shield the most vulnerable in the region.

Throughout the district there are pockets of severe deprivation. Areas such as Poplars and Orford, where deprivation is rife, will need the support of Torus Foundation more than ever. Torus has a strong presence in these communities with a high proportion of our housing stock being situated in these areas. Despite being relatively close to the Town Centre, employment levels are very low and areas like this will need increased shielding.

Torus will utilise the close ties it has with local partners. Strategies to tackle deprivation, such as, social inclusion and community wealth building will need a harmonious approach with all community partners to ensure long-term solutions that will provide sustainable growth and improvement.

The current crisis, coupled with the impending withdrawal of EU funding, has presented a number of funding difficulties for Torus Foundation. However, the Foundation remains committed to providing the services that so many people across the region rely upon and a fundraising strategy has been developed.

The Foundation's new fundraising strategy will enable initiatives such as New Leaf, Warrington Time to Change and the Neighbourhood Team activities to continue. A lobbying strategy has been created to ensure the entire Group has the resources to maintain and increase our service capacity.

Having our own in-house commercial contractor of course brings with it a number of benefits, notably the ability to provide a reliable, readily available and cost-effective repairs and maintenance service to our tenant population. Torus remain committed to providing all aspects of our landlord plus package, and the sustainability of HMS is pivotal to that. HMS has secured business loans to ensure its financial stability and envisage being running back at full capacity in the near future.

Torus has big plans to actively address the skills shortage. The shortage in skills in construction is well-documented and both HMS and the Foundation can offer employment support and can encourage new skills, either for staff or community residents, to build and maintain the homes of the future. This will be extremely beneficial for a region that is actively trying to build a more sustainable economy.

Potential challenges

The underlying challenge present throughout this document, that the entire world is looking to overcome, not just Torus or the social housing sector, is of course Covid-19 and the effects the disease will have on our service delivery.

From a development's perspective, the crisis has already led to significant reductions in starts on site, handovers, sales, gross expenditure, grant income, sales income and net expenditure. This reforecast position will clearly have a significant impact on the Coronavirus Pandemic on the Development Programme and overall Development Budget. Torus Developments have already indicated that due to the crisis, schemes currently on site will be delayed by three months, whereas schemes not yet on site will be delayed by six months.

The majority of Torus' social impact in the region is coordinated by the Torus Foundation. The current crisis has, however, presented a number of funding difficulties for the Foundation. The amount Gift Aided to the charity from Torus Group's commercial activities has reduced significantly due to reduced workloads at Torus Developments and HMS.

This, coupled with the end of EU funding at the end of the year, will present a number of challenges for the Foundation. The European Structural and Investment Fund will be replaced by the United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund, however the full details of this funding stream are yet to be revealed so it is hard to gauge just how much the Foundation would be entitled to. Charities across the country are however anticipating access to funding to some extent, there just appears to be a certain level of apprehension at the levels of funding that will be made available.