

Statement of Common Ground
between Solihull Metropolitan
Borough Council and South
Staffordshire District Council
South Staffordshire Local Plan 2023-
2041
July 2024

Statement of Common Ground (SoCG) between South Staffordshire District Council (SSDC) & Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC)

Introduction

1. This Statement of Common Ground (SoCG) has been prepared by South Staffordshire District Council (SSDC) and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC), hereafter referred to as “the parties” to inform the submission of the South Staffordshire Local Plan 2023-2041.
2. This SoCG has been prepared in accordance with national guidance and is intended to cover matters of strategic importance relevant to the parties. It documents those matters agreed by the parties regarding the South Staffordshire Local Plan 2023-2041 and any areas which remain subject to further discussion and therefore will be updated accordingly. This Statement of Common Ground covers the following matters:
 - Housing (including housing needs across the GBBCHMA);
 - Employment land;
 - Transport and infrastructure matters;
 - Gypsy and traveller accommodation; and
 - Natural environment

Geography covered by Statement of Common Ground

3. This SoCG covers the Local Planning Authority areas of South Staffordshire District and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council.
4. Both authorities are also within the Greater Birmingham & Black Country Housing Market Area (GBBCHMA)¹. There are wider strategic housing and employment shortfalls arising over these geographies that are subject to separate statements of common ground over these wider geographical areas dealing with these issues.

Key Strategic Matters

5. The local authorities have had on-going dialogue on cross-boundary planning issues over the course of many years, discussing a broad range of planning issues including strategic matters. The key strategic matters included within this Statement of Common Ground are; housing provision; employment land; transport and wider infrastructure matters; gypsy and traveller accommodation; and matters relating to the natural and historic environment including designated sites. These discussions have informed the development of adopted plans and other related documents.

¹ The GBBCHMA is made up of 14 authorities including Birmingham City Council, Bromsgrove District Council, Cannock Chase District Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, Lichfield District Council, North Warwickshire Borough Council, Redditch Borough Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, South Staffordshire District Council, Stratford upon Avon District Council, Tamworth Borough Council, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council and Wolverhampton City Council

6. The following issues are considered to be the key strategic matters with regards to on-going plan making, although there are other issues which may have cross boundary impacts. Both authorities are committed to further dialogue moving forward, not just limited to the periods of plan preparation.

Housing

7. SSDC and SMBC have been active members of the GBBCHMA Technical Officers Group since it was established in 2017 and both authorities have contributed to discussions relating to the delivery of unmet housing need within in the HMA. Both authorities also previously participated in the GBBCHMA Strategic Growth Study (SGS) (2018), which examined need and supply across the entire HMA up to 2031 and 2036, before proposing potential growth options for authorities to consider through their own plan-making process in order to seek to address any resulting unmet needs. The parties acknowledge that the SGS forms part of the evidence base (not policy) for relevant plans and that through more detailed work of their own plans the proposed locations for strategic growth in the SGS may not be suitable, achievable or deliverable and/or other strategic options may be available.
8. The Black Country authorities² declared an unmet need from their urban area as early as their Issues and Options consultation in 2017, later indicating through the Draft Black Country Plan³ consultation in 2021 that this shortfall stood at around 28,000 dwellings (up to 2036), despite Green Belt release being explored. Since that time the Black Country authorities have announced that they are no longer progressing with a joint Black Country Plan and are now to prepare individual local plans covering each authority respectively. Whilst those plans are now at an early stage it is acknowledged that the evidence supporting the Black Country Plan identified a significant unmet need which will need to be further evidenced and quantified. It is further noted that three of the Black Country authorities that have published R18 plans (Dudley MBC, Wolverhampton CC and Sandwell MBC) have done so on the basis that (a) they are not able to accommodate their own needs and (b) they are not proposing the release of any sites from the Green Belt.
9. The parties recognise that Birmingham City Council have published an Issues and Options consultation in October 2022 which indicates a shortfall of over 78,000 (to 2042) dwellings based on existing known supply. This is the first BCC publication setting out the nature of unmet need beyond 2031.
10. SSDCs previous November 2022 (Regulation 19) Publication Plan proposed housing growth that included 4000 homes contribution towards the GBBCHMA shortfall but required significant Green Belt release in order to do so.

² City of Wolverhampton Council, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

³ The parties recognise that in October 2022 the 4 Black Country authorities announced that work on a joint plan covering the 4 authorities would no longer be pursued, and instead each authority would pursue its own individual plan. At the time of writing the implications of this change in circumstances have not yet been fully considered.

11. However, following a consultation on proposed changes to the NPPF published in December 2022, progress on the previous iteration of the plan was paused. This reflected amendment to national Green Belt policy which subsequently came into force through the December 2023 NPPF. This confirmed that “Once established, there is no requirement for Green Belt boundaries to be reviewed or changed when plans are being prepared or updated”, and that “Authorities may choose to review and alter Green Belt boundaries where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified, in which case proposals for changes should be made only through the plan-making process”. SSDC is also aware that the delay caused by the pause to the South Staffordshire Local Plan means that the Strategic Growth Study (2018) is no longer considered up to date in planning terms and therefore a sound evidential basis for the previously proposed 4000 home contribution. SSDC no longer considers that all of the previous proposed Green Belt sites are justified by exceptional circumstances and given this and SSDCs previous proposed plan period (to 2039) being inconsistent with national policy, SSDC no longer consider the 2022 (Regulation 19) version of the plan to be sound and suitable to progress to submission.

12. Given this change of circumstances, SSDC has revisited its strategic approach and tested further spatial strategy options considering the ways in which housing growth could be distributed across the district. SSDC is now proposing an alternative strategy that brings forward suitable safeguarded land and open countryside sites but limits Green Belt release to its Tier 1 settlements. These are the most sustainable settlements in the District with access to rail links, and limited Green Belt release at these settlements aligns with NPPF para 146(b) to give first consideration to land which is previously developed and/or is well served by public transport. Under SSDCs revised capacity led strategy based on the most suitable and sustainable sites, SSDC will allocate sufficient sites to meet its own needs, plus a small surplus (currently 640 dwellings when accounting for our own housing needs based upon the 2023 Standard Method calculation) that could be attributed to unmet needs of the GBBCHMA.

13. SMBC and SSDC both recognise the importance of developing an appropriate common evidence base across the HMA as far as is feasible and practical in order to ensure that contributions to unmet needs are properly evidenced. As such, both authorities are party to the 2022 GBBCHMA Development Needs Group Statement of Common Ground, which seeks to provide a programme of work and governance structure to address the housing shortfalls arising from the HMA as a whole. However, the parties acknowledge that subsequent changes to national policy that gives local authorities greater control over when to release Green Belt will likely impact the scope of further HMA-wide evidence to consider housing shortfalls and its potential solutions. Given the scale and complexity of the housing shortfalls arising in the HMA, the further iterations of the Development Needs Group Statement of Common Ground is considered to be an appropriate vehicle by which to consider the issue holistically. In SMBC’s view, changes to national planning policy may also have an impact on the continuing examination of SMBC’s plan and the greater flexibilities provided by the new NPPF may allow SMBC to revise its contribution to the HMA shortfall as SSDC has done.

Employment

14. SSDC and SMBC are within separate functional economic market areas but continue to work together collaboratively as part of GBBCHMA Technical Officers Group to progress the necessary follow on work identified as necessary in the West Midlands Strategic Employment Sites Study 2021. No further cross-boundary issues have been identified.
15. The South Staffordshire Local Plan 2023-2041 proposes to deliver sufficient employment land on local and strategic employment sites to both meet its own local needs and provide a surplus that could contribute towards cross-boundary shortfalls.
16. South Staffordshire's EDNA Economic Development Needs Assessment (EDNA) was prepared in 2022 and then updated in 2024. The update comprised details of the pipeline of employment land at 1 April 2023 and rolled forward evidence of labour demand covering the period 2023-2041. As part of its updated evidence base SSDC has identified gross residual needs of 62.4ha for the period 2023-2041 which includes an increased margin for churn and frictional vacancy that reflects the requirement to make sufficient provision for its own needs upon a combination of strategic and non-strategic sources of supply commitments and allocations. The resulting contribution towards unmet need is an output of these updates to the evidence base.
17. The EDNA update 2024 suggests that strategic sites (excluding WMI) within SSDC's area can contribute a surplus of 27.6ha to the unmet needs of other local authorities. In addition to sites in the current pipeline, SSDC is proposing to allocate an additional strategic site at M6 Junction 13 that will add an additional 17.6ha to the pipeline of sites. This recognises that allocating additional land will increase the pipeline of sites to more closely reflect recent take up (which has had a sub-regional component 'built in' due to recent large-scale completions, predominantly at i54). It also recognises that the site provides the only significant opportunity to deliver a non-Green Belt site in the district, at a location identified as a potential broad location for strategic employment land in the West Midlands Strategic Employment Sites (2021). The result of this addition to the pipeline is that the surplus of employment land that is available to unmet needs of other authorities increases to 45.2ha.
18. Additionally, the SSDC Local Plan will allocate the consented large-scale strategic rail freight interchange called West Midlands Interchange (WMI) within SSDC's area. The South Staffordshire EDNA (2022) indicates that only 18.8ha of WMI is attributable to South Staffordshire's needs, indicating that the rest may be able to contribute to unmet needs in the wider WMI travel to work area. Supporting work commissioned to examine the apportionment of WMI suggests it can provide additional surplus B8 employment land to a wider travel to work area including the Black Country authorities, equating to 67ha of B8 land to the four Black Country authorities making up the Black Country FEMA. The remaining land supply from WMI aside from the South Staffordshire, Black Country and Cannock apportionment has not to date been formally stated as necessary to meet needs by other local authorities in the WMI travel to work area. This may increase the apportionment of land from WMI which could potentially be apportioned towards the unmet needs of the Black Country FEMA, dependent on the stance of other authorities related to the site.
19. In the context of the potential apportionment of employment land at the WMI, the parties recognise that proposals for UK Central included in SMBC's emerging plan also include strategic employment land being provided beyond the local needs of the host authority.

More clarity on how this could be accounted/attributed for is expected to be included in the Inspectors' report which will be received in due course.

Cross boundary transport impacts

20. SSDC and SMBC are committed to continue working together in partnership, alongside their respective highways authorities, with the aim of ensuring the necessary transport and highways improvements are implemented to support sustainable growth across both authorities. SSDC's are proposing two strategic housing site allocations, however none are within close proximity to the Solihull administrative area. No other cross-boundary transport issues have been identified.

Infrastructure

21. SSDC and SMBC will work together where required, with the aim of ensuring the necessary infrastructure improvements are delivered to support sustainable growth across both administrative areas.
22. Necessary infrastructure (including school places) will be delivered within South Staffordshire. Therefore, no cross-boundary infrastructure issues have been identified.

Gypsy & Traveller Provision

23. SSDC has identified a 162 pitch need for Gypsy and Traveller households in South Staffordshire over the local plan period, including 92 pitches within the first 5 year period⁴. SSDC considers that latest evidence from Council's Gypsy and Traveller evidence base indicates that all suitable sites (including Green Belt options) which have capacity to reduce this shortfall have been maximised. It also indicates that all public land options in the District (including Green Belt options) have been explored for their potential to provide **new** public site options which could address specific families' needs and thereby reduce the shortfall. Despite these efforts, SSDC can only deliver 37 pitches within the plan period on sites which would address its unmet pitch needs. This leaves a very significant shortfall, even against the District's 5 year pitch need, which is a strategic cross-boundary issue to be discussed with adjacent authorities and other authorities within the same housing market area.
24. SSDC has written to all adjacent and housing market area authorities on multiple occasions during the plan preparation regarding the potential shortfall in Gypsy and Traveller pitch needs within the District. Following on from the publication of SSDC's Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA) in late 2021, SSDC wrote to all HMA and neighbouring authorities in January 2022 setting out the extent of the pitch shortfall, despite the Council's efforts to maximise all suitable and deliverable sites (including within the Green Belt) which would address the unmet need. This letter then requested authorities examine their ability to contribute to its unmet pitch needs, specifically in the form of extra supply on publicly run sites where pitches could be ensured for the families in need within SSDC. It then wrote

⁴ South Staffordshire Council Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment - Final Report 2024

again to these same authorities in August 2022, providing an update on extra efforts that SSDC had made to identify new public sites within the District upon Staffordshire County Council land. Despite these efforts, the letter communicated that a significant shortfall still remained and that SSDC required assistance in addressing its unmet pitch needs through new or expanded publicly run sites. In August 2023 work began on an update to SSDCs GTAA to assess need over the updated plan period to 2041, and neighbouring authorities were advised of this in a further letter in October 2023.

25. SSDC wrote to SMBC in January 2022 and then in August 2022 asking for assistance in meeting the unmet need for pitches within South Staffordshire. In SSDC's view it is currently unclear as to what extent SMBC may or may not be able to assist in meeting unmet pitch need arising from SSDC as there is no confirmation as to what options to explore additional public pitches have/have not been considered by SMBC. SMBC assert that there is no current surplus of pitches in Solihull and that experience from adopting SMBC's existing Gypsy & Traveller DPD that any future additional pitches needed to accommodate SMBC's own needs would need to be provided in the Green Belt and as such Solihull is in no sequentially preferable position to accommodate any of SSDC's needs.

Natural Environment

26. SSDC and SMBC are committed to continue working together in respect of matters relating to the natural environment where these are applicable to the authorities.
27. No specific issues have been identified.

Signatures

We confirm that the information in this Statement of Common Ground reflects the joint working to address identified strategic matters that has been undertaken between South Staffordshire District Council and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. The authorities will continue to work together to address cross-boundary issues on an ongoing basis.

South Staffordshire District Council

Name: Kelly Harris

Position: Lead Planning Manager

Signature:



Date: 17th July 2024

Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

Name: Gary Palmer

Position: Group Manager (Policy & Engagement)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Palmer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "G".

Signature:

Date: 29th October 2024