

Statement of Common Ground
between Walsall Metropolitan
Borough Council and South
Staffordshire District Council
South Staffordshire Local Plan
2023-2041
Position at September 2024

1. Statement of Common Ground (SoCG) between South Staffordshire District Council (SSDC) & Walsall Council

Introduction

2. This Statement of Common Ground (SoCG) has been prepared by South Staffordshire District Council (SSDC) and Walsall Council, hereafter referred to as “the parties” to inform the submission of the South Staffordshire Local Plan 2023-2041.
3. 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 (Special Areas of Conservation).

Geography covered by Statement of Common Ground

4. This SoCG covers the Local Planning Authority areas of South Staffordshire District and Walsall Council. Both authorities are also within the Greater Birmingham & Black Country Housing Market Area (GBBCHMA)¹ and are either within, or are closely functionally related to, the South Staffordshire FEMA² and Black Country FEMA³. 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 parties 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

² South Staffordshire EDNA 2020-2040 defines the South Staffordshire FEMA as Wolverhampton City Council, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, Cannock Chase District Council, Stafford Borough Council

³ Black Country EDNA 2017 and 2021 update

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 WMBC 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 have participated in the GBBCHMA Strategic Growth Study (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 Black Country authorities⁴ similarly 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 Plan consultation in 2021 that this shortfall stood at around 28,000 dwellings, despite Green Belt release being explored. Whilst SSDC has raised points through the Draft Black Country Plan consultation which it considers may reduce this shortfall, it is common ground that there is likely to be a very significant shortfalls arising from the Black Country and that this requires discussion under the Duty to Cooperate. Since that time the Black Country authorities have announced that they are no longer progressing with a joint Black Country Plan and are now preparing individual local plans covering each authority respectively. In November 2022, Walsall Council resolved to produce its own [independent] local plan: the Walsall Borough Local Plan (WBLP). As those plans are being progressed, there is an acknowledged that the evidence supporting the Black Country Plan identified a significant unmet need which will need to be further evidenced and quantified.
8. Walsall Council and SSDC have constructively engaged on an ongoing basis to address the housing shortfalls of the HMA, including the shortfalls of the Black Country authorities⁵. This led to SSDC proposing a 4,000 dwelling contribution to the unmet needs of the HMA, using the scale of locations set out in the GBBCHMA Strategic Growth Study. This was reflected in SSDC's November 2022 (Regulation 19) Publication Plan which proposed housing growth that included 4000 homes contribution towards the GBBCHMA shortfall but required significant Green Belt release in order to do so.
9. However, following a consultation on proposed changes to the NPPF published in December 2022, progress on the previous iteration of the SSDC 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

⁴ City of Wolverhampton Council, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

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.

10. 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. SSDC consider that 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.
11. To date, there is no agreed approach between SSDC, Black Country authorities and Birmingham as to how South Staffordshire's housing needs contribution should be attributed between these authorities generating housing shortfalls. SSDC considers that agreement from other local authorities generating shortfalls would be particularly important to ensure a co-ordinated approach to this issue.
12. WMBC and SSDC both recognise the importance of developing a 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. SSDC is 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. Given the scale and complexity of the housing shortfalls arising in the HMA, a West Midlands Development Needs Group Statement of Common Ground and future strategic planning mechanisms are considered by SSDC to be the appropriate vehicle by which to consider the issue holistically.

Employment

13. SSDC and Walsall Council both sit within the South Staffordshire Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA). Walsall Council is also within the Black Country FEMA and SSDC is identified as being outside of the Black Country FEMA but still having strong economic links to it despite this. There is therefore clearly a strong functional link between Walsall Council and SSDC on employment matters.
14. The South Staffordshire Local Plan 2023-2041 proposes to deliver sufficient employment land on local and strategic employment sites to both meet its own needs and provide a surplus that could contribute towards cross-boundary shortfalls.
15. South Staffordshire's 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.

16. The EDNA update (2024) suggests that strategic sites (excluding the West Midlands Interchange - 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.
17. 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 WMI⁶ suggests it can provide additional surplus B8 use class 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.
18. Walsall Council with the other Black Country authorities prepared an Economic Development Needs Assessment (EDNA) (latest version dated 2023), examining employment land requirements across the Black Country FEMA for the period 2020-2039. This identified a shortfall of between 212 and 232ha of employment land across the Black Country FEMA. The Black Country EDNA recommends that in meeting this shortfall the Black Country authorities should engage with neighbouring authorities with a strong or moderate economic relationship to the Black Country FEMA through the duty to cooperate. Walsall Council (and the three other Black Country authorities) have therefore been in duty to cooperate discussions with SSDC and other local authorities to identify whether SSDC could contribute towards its employment land shortfall.
19. The minimum proportion of employment land oversupply that can be attributed towards the Black Country and the role of other authorities within the South Staffordshire FEMA in contributing to unmet needs is being addressed through a separately drafted statement of common ground covering the entire South Staffordshire FEMA geography. SSDC and Walsall Council consider that this FEMA-wide statement of common ground is the appropriate

⁶ West Midlands Strategic Rail Freight Interchange: Employment Issues Response Paper – Whose need will the SRFI serve? (Stantec, Feb 2021)

mechanism by which to address these strategic employment needs, whilst acknowledging that the Black Country FEMA authorities (including Walsall) will also need to hold duty to cooperate discussions with other local authorities holding strong or moderate functional economic relationships with that area in addressing employment shortfalls. This separate statement of common ground is also considered a more appropriate mechanism by which to address SSDC's and Walsall Council's positions on the West Midlands Strategic Employment Sites study.

Cross boundary transport impacts

20. SSDC and Walsall Council 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 Walsall administrative area. No other cross-boundary transport issues have been identified.

Infrastructure

21. SSDC and Walsall Council 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 and primary care provision) to serve the needs of residents of SSDC will be delivered within South Staffordshire. No other 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 period⁷. SSDC considers that the latest evidence from the 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

⁷ South Staffordshire Council Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment - Final Report 2024

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 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. A March 2022 response from the Black Country local authorities indicated that no additional sites had been put forward to meet local need for new pitches through the draft Black Country Plan consultation, previous call for sites or site identification work. Therefore, the Black Country authorities considered it unlikely that they would be able to meet pitch needs arising in neighbouring authorities, including South Staffordshire, through the Black Country Plan review. However, no details were given about efforts made to examine the potential for expanded or new public site provision, nor was a follow-up response received to SSDC's subsequent August 2022 letter.
26. Subsequently, correspondence has confirmed that Walsall Council's permanent traveller site is full and that there is a temporary transit site but that only has a 3 year permission. While the Walsall Site Allocation Document (SAD) (2019) allocates a new permanent (non-Green Belt) site, no funding has been identified to enable its delivery and no options have been considered for publicly run sites in the Green Belt. The only Green Belt sites proposed in the Black Country Plan within Walsall comprised the retention of two existing single family pitches. Finally, Walsall has very little publicly owned land that remains available for development either as a traveller site or for general housing.
27. Given this background, SSDC is of the view that it will need to continue to work with Walsall Council to establish whether there is scope for new publicly run Green Belt sites (including as part of a wider housing allocation) which could address SSDC pitch needs as the WBLP progresses.

Natural Environment

28. SSDC and Walsall Council are committed to continue working together as part of the Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Partnership with the aim of ensuring that the integrity of the Cannock Chase SAC is protected and that appropriate mitigation measures are secured in order to ensure development does not have adverse effects on the integrity of the SAC.
29. Both Walsall Council and SSDC acknowledge the need for both authorities to continue working collaboratively with Natural England in relation to visitor impacts from the residents of new development within 15 km of Cannock Chase SAC; and in relation to air quality impacts from new development and associated commuting on Cannock Chase SAC and the other protected sites relevant to the Cannock Chase SAC Partnership authorities. This includes consideration of cumulative and in-combination effects. Where practicable, SSDC and WMBC will work with other authorities in the Cannock Chase SAC Partnership authorities to address wider impacts of development proposals on all SACs. This includes joint working on a sub-regional (Staffordshire and the Black Country) air quality study that will assess air quality impacts on protected sites as

a result of estimated growth. The findings of this study will feed into individual authorities Habitat Regulations Assessment process.

30. SSDC and Walsall Council are committed to continue working together in respect of matters relating to the natural environment where these are applicable to the authorities, including the potential for cross-boundary local nature recovery networks and strategic wildlife corridors.

Matters of Disagreement

31. Walsall Council consider that SSDC's position regarding meeting the housing needs of neighbouring authorities and the release of green belt land, is now in question because of the new government's proposed changes to national planning policy and legislation. It is Walsall Council's position that the potential changes to the NPPF may affect local plans which are currently in preparation, such as the South Staffordshire Local Plan. Depending on the outcome of these proposed planning reforms, it is Walsall Council's position that SSDC may need to revise its local plan and SoCGs.
32. SSDC does not consider that the proposals in the consultation version of the draft NPPF (July 2024) materially impacts its ability to progress its April 2024 Regulation 19 Publication Plan. This is because the Local Plan would be examined under the December 2023 NPPF under the proposed transitional arrangements set out in the draft NPPF (July 2024), so long as that the Local Plan is submitted within 1 month of the revised NPPF being published. It is not expected that we will have a new NPPF until the end of 2024, and it is SSDC's intention to submit in December 2024.
33. SSDC consider that the appropriate way forward is to proceed to get its emerging Local Plan adopted in order to deliver development in the short to medium term with a firm commitment to an immediate review of the plan (as required under the transitional arrangements) where potentially higher Local Housing Needs and cross boundary issues can be revisited, supported by updated evidence including an updated strategic growth study, and through future strategic planning arrangements.

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 Walsall 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: 6 November 2024

Walsall Council

Name: Dave Brown

Position: Executive Director – Economy, Environment & Communities

Signature: 

Date: 6 November 2024