

**Berkswell Parish Council**

**Clerk to Berkswell Parish Council – Mr Richard Wilson  
PO Box 6379, Coventry CV6 9LP**

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Policy and Spatial Planning,  
Solihull MBC  
Council House  
Manor Square  
Solihull  
B91 3QB

22 January 2016

Dear Sirs

**Solihull Local Plan Review**

Please find attached my Council's response to the Solihull Local Plan Consultation Document.

Regards



**Mr Richard Wilson  
Clerk to Berkswell Parish Council**

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## **Berkswell Parish response to the Solihull Plan Review consultation**

### **1. Summary Position**

- 1.1. Berkswell Council recognises that SMBC has a major task in finding locations for the predicted demand for housing within the Borough area.
- 1.2. The Council recognises that all areas must contribute to the housing numbers if they are to be achieved. The Council is willing to help SMBC with this challenge and wishes to have detailed discussions to assist SMBC on site selection using its local knowledge before draft proposals are published to
- 1.3. In general terms the Council considers that the solution to the challenge facing the housing review is to be found by combining most options and not focusing on a single or just a few options. In this way we believe that the housing targets can be met to the benefit of existing and new residents.
- 1.4. The Council considers that the judgement should be based upon
  - 1.4.1. Minimising the impact on the greenbelt
  - 1.4.2. Maximising the use of previously developed land and being imaginative about linking such sites to current settlements
  - 1.4.3. Minimising dependency on car usage because of road congestion. This implies developing new homes in areas where job growth will be the highest and where high frequency transport is best or is planned to be developed
  - 1.4.4. Everyone should take some housing development

### **2. Comments on the 7 options proposed within the Consultation document**

#### **2.1. Option A - High frequency Public Transport Corridors and hubs**

- 2.1.1. The principle behind this concept is sound overall. Within the context of Balsall Common we are not at all certain that Balsall Common meets the high frequency criteria
- 2.1.2. There is no high frequency bus service in our Parish or Balsall Common and none planned within the Solihull Connected Green paper
- 2.1.3. There are only two trains per hour with an asymmetrical frequency with a gaps between trains of 20 and 40 minutes rather than one service every 1/2 hour. The capacity of this line is full at peak times.
- 2.1.4. There is insufficient car parking at Berkswell Station. Large numbers of cars are parked every day on Hallmeadow Road
- 2.1.5. According to SMBC statistics 70% of residents in our area travel to work and their daily business by car
- 2.1.6. Recent development in Balsall Common has not been close to the station creating short car journeys even for those using the train.

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## **2.2. Option B - Solihull Town centre**

2.2.1. On the face of it this looks like an attractive option. SMBC figures indicate that there are few current residents, 15% of Borough jobs with projected job growth of 8%. It is also an attractive option for those wishing to travel to Birmingham to work.

## **2.3. Options C North Solihull and E - UK Central**

2.3.1. We are responding to these two options together because they are geographically taken as being in the same transport area by the Solihull Connected Green paper.

2.3.2. These options appear to be highly appropriate. The major Borough jobs growth will be in these areas with 18,000 new jobs projected in the Plan period amounting to approximately a 55% increase. The UK Central proposal to build 2000 homes close to the new HS2 rail station will put the new homes in close proximity to the new jobs thereby minimising commute time and cost for residents and minimising travel by car.

2.3.3. However, we consider that two factors should govern housing expansion in UK Central

2.3.3.1. the layout and design of the homes must be such to minimise noise inside homes from the airport, the main roads and HS2. This can be done but must be planned

2.3.3.2. Homes must be of a size and type as to meet local needs and not be attractive to commuters seeking to live there and commute to London on the new HS2 line.

## **2.4. Option D Shirley Town Centre and the A34 corridor and Option G significant extension of the urban core of the Borough**

2.4.1. All of the statistics indicate that these options should be the prime options.

2.4.2. The urban core has 50% of the people, 45% of the jobs and 18% projected job growth. 40% of urban residents already commute to Birmingham and much of the pressure for housing in the Borough will be to meet the unfulfilled requirements of Birmingham.

2.4.3. The urban core is well provided with high frequency buses and trains

2.4.4. Extending the urban core will maximise existing large scale community infrastructure within Solihull such as proximity of hospitals, shops, leisure centres, entertainment, access to further education and quite possibly a range of schools. The urban core is also convenient for travel to the growing jobs in Birmingham.

2.4.5. There is significant undeveloped land on the urban fringe that can be developed within the M42 and alongside the A34.

2.4.6. However, it might damage the character of surrounding Parishes. Please see below in missing options.

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## **2.5. Option E - Limited expansion of rural villages/settlements**

- 2.5.1. The Council considers that this option could form part of an overall solution in conjunction with options C & D and an expansion of the urban core. Careful site selection could minimise the impact on the greenbelt and minimise additional commuting by car.
- 2.5.2. This option need not be limited to the major settlements shown in the options booklet and some limited expansion of smaller villages and hamlet should be considered because collectively such small expansions will add worthwhile housing numbers.
- 2.5.3. It is our view that limited expansion of Balsall Common would not require additional schools to be built in the Balsall Common area. The schools have significant numbers of pupils from outside of Balsall and Berkswell Parishes. A reduction of such non local pupils will improve local road congestion particularly around the schools.
- 2.5.4. Careful site selection around Balsall Common could generate a worthwhile contribution to housing numbers whilst not damaging the greenbelt. However, such sites would benefit from improved footpath networks and traffic junction pedestrian crossings to assist journeys to school by foot. The Parish Council stands ready to advise on both suitable locations for housing a facilitating pavement/cycle networks.
- 2.5.5. However, it must be recognised that there is limited local employment in the rural east and high car usage due to very limited public transport. Therefore, every additional home will create more road traffic and congestion.

## **2.6. Option G - Significant Expansion of rural settlements**

- 2.6.1. This option will adversely impact the nature and character of the current settlements damaging the social infrastructure by too rapid change.
- 2.6.2. It will also require significant investment in
  - 2.6.2.1. schools in Balsall Common,
  - 2.6.2.2. car parking at Berkswell Station and in the village centre
  - 2.6.2.3. an improved road network.
- 2.6.3. It will create significant road transport given the much higher than Borough average dependence upon cars in the rural east and significantly longer journey distances to work as is shown in the Solihull Connected Green paper. The Green paper already shown Balsall Common having two congestion hot spots
- 2.6.4. Overall this is the worst available option for preserving the rural space for the people of the Borough.

## **2.7. Option G - New settlements**

- 2.7.1. We consider that this option can have very significant merit. It will of course damage the greenbelt but no more than by expanding the existing settlements. Careful site choice could also put such homes closer to the jobs than some of the existing settlements and thereby cause less impact on the road network.

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- 2.7.2. Establishing a new community has been successful in Dickens Heath. It keeps the size of communities at a level where social cohesion produces a true community. Significantly, expanding an existing settlement such as Balsall Common destroys the strength of a village without producing the "population mass" for the facilities of a town.
- 2.7.3. Within an overall solution and to keep Balsall Common at a manageable size for village cohesion, our suggestion would be the consideration of a new settlement in the Parish of Berkswell situated on the reclaimed quarry land off Cornets End Lane. Some land has been reclaimed for about 7 years. This is a radical step but such a new village could be centred around a green with a village hall, small local shop and primary school. Access to the growing employment area around North Solihull/NEC by car would principally be by dual carriageway and not put any pressure on an existing rural settlement.
- 2.7.4. Such a new settlement could have a policy encouraging 3 storey homes designed in a sympathetic manner to both reduce the footprint of houses and provide limited flats.

### 3. Missing options

The consultation option calls for any new options

- 3.1. It would appear that the best route forward would be a mix of options. However, currently missing from the option is a limited expansion of the urban core. This would minimise the impact on the overall openness of the greenbelt but still benefit from leveraging the urban core's resources be they transport or infrastructure.
- 3.2. The Options and issues document does not appear to consider options for building on the mass transit routes published in the Solihull Connected Green paper in particular on the Sprint route westward from the NEC. This could be an area for a new settlement.
- 3.3. As mentioned before limited expansion of the smaller rural settlements could add worthwhile numbers. Significant care would be needed but the Spitfire Homes development outside Knowle shows what attractive design can achieve for the landscape. Our vision is for more modest family homes but built to fully integrate with their surroundings. There are many such places across the borough including Berkswell village which has a school. Another potential local location for a settlement is in the Temple Balsall areal which already has a school.
- 3.4. We would also recommend a review of the Borough policy for the conversion of redundant buildings. It is our understanding that Stratford District Council has a more liberal approach. Conversion or demolition with a high quality replacement could enhance the beauty of the greenbelt by removing ugly redundant buildings. Constraining such change to conversion rather than knock down and rebuild restricts the creation of buildings truly sympathetic to their location even if they might be considered "pastiche". Some of our cities' great buildings are pastiche of Greco-Roman style. The very successful Spitfire development at Knowle is pastiche but adds to the landscape.
- 3.5. We would suggest the compulsory purchase of the Part Co building within Balsall Common. This has stood empty for many years. Planning permission has been

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granted but no action taken by the owner. If SMBC were to purchase the site they could work with the Co-op to reconfigure the site to achieve vehicle deliveries from the Kenilworth Road into the Co-op rather than from the congested Station Road and through the Part Co site. A rationalised site could then have a higher number of affordable homes over 3 or 4 stories. The finance for this could come from the early release and sale of the Council owned land at Riddings Hill with outline planning permission and the profits temporarily invested in buying the Part Co site. (The Riddings Hill site is in Berkswell Parish)

- 3.6. SMBC should consider that a more robust planning policy to provide more 2/3 bedroom homes & single storey small homes for retired people to release family homes for families to make the best use of greenbelt land in achieving housing numbers.
- 3.7. Consideration should be given to the use of land used by HS2 Ltd to build the railway and then released after construction.

## **4. Concerns about facilities/infrastructure in Berkswell Parish & Balsall Common**

- 4.1. At the public meeting on 11 January 2016, the SMBC Planning Policy and Transport Manager asked for specific concerns about infrastructure and facilities in should new homes be built in our area.
- 4.2. It is our view that, with careful planning, some additional homes can be built within Berkswell village and Balsall Common without significant changes in facilities.
- 4.3. With respect to schools we note that there are 4 schools in our area. Berkswell, Balsall Common and Temple Balsall Primary Schools and the Heart of England Academy secondary school. All four schools are fully subscribed. However, many students at the schools come from either Berkswell or Balsall Parishes. They are driven to school causing significant road congestion and certainly in the case of Berkswell School fears for road safety in Berkswell village. It would appear inappropriate to build additional schools in the Berkswell/Balsall Common area only to have more students driven to school from outside the area in an non sustainable manner. Schools should be local to children at per planning policy.
- 4.4. The provision of a footpath from Balsall Common to Berkswell would assist in children from the Riddings Hill area walking to school. Careful siting of new development and a foot/cycle path on Lavender Hall Lane could also maximise local use of Berkswell School minimising unsustainable car transport. It would also facilitate walking/cycling to school from Berkswell village to the Heart of England Academy.
- 4.5. We are concerned about the potential for increased flooding by building more hard areas on Barratt's Farm area on Station Road. Part of this land is categorised at a grade 3 flood zone by the Environment Agency. (See appendix). It regularly floods see photos in appendix. We are concerned that the building of HS2 will increase the flooding of this area despite the balance ponds being provided. The water from the balance ponds will flow into the Baylis brook which already struggles to drain this land. When the local ground capacity is overloaded the underpass on Station Road floods making is impassable and disrupting this important commuter route to Coventry. See photo in appendix. A combination of HS2 and poorly planned housing could significantly worsen this problem requiring major investment to resolve it.

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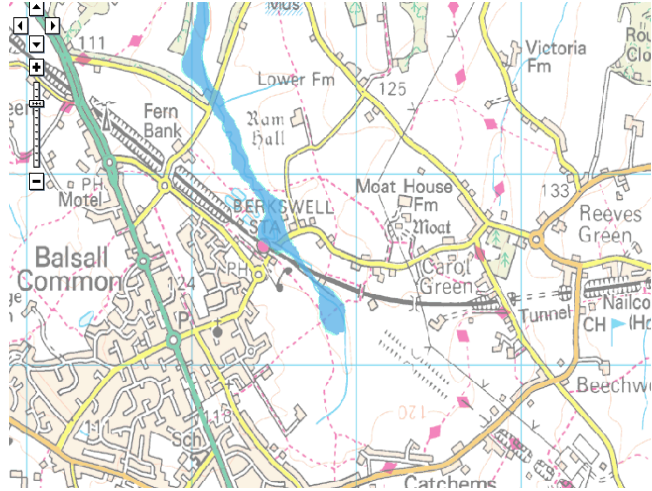
- 4.6. The Council is concerned about HGV road congestion during the time of construction of HS2 which will generate very large volumes of traffic through Balsall Common and some rural parts of Berkswell. Each home built will require additional HGV trips and infrastructure work such as services connections in roads. Consequently, careful planning of housing development during the construction of HS2 will be necessary to avoid yet more congestion. Selecting sites away from the likely congested spots, managing the size of developments and careful phasing will help with this respect.

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## Appendix

**Flood zone from Environment Agency Web site**



**More flooding at Barratt's Farm**



**Flooding at Barratt's Farm**



**Flooded underpass as Berkswell Station closing the road**





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