

SOLIHULL LOCAL PLAN REVIEW - ISSUES AND OPTIONS CONSULTATION

CALL FOR SITES

The Arden Triangle – A Strategic Opportunity for Major Community Benefit and Growth

Response on behalf of Arden Academy, Station Road, Knowle

January 2016

1.0 The Arden Triangle Concept

- 1.1 Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council has put out a 'Call for Sites' as part of the Local Plan Review Initial Consultation process. This Statement has been prepared, on behalf of Arden Academy to provide an explanatory overview in support of a number of sites to the east of Knowle that, in combination, present a strategic development opportunity to secure major community benefits and housing growth. The area concerned has been termed 'The Arden Triangle'.
- 1.2 The sites in question are shown on the accompanying Indicative Development Potential Plan (Ref: UV/006959-L-001). Individual Call for Sites Proposal forms have been completed for the following combination of sites:
1. Sites D, E and F: Land largely occupied by the existing Arden Academy and associated playing fields and sports facilities, with potential for housing development;
 2. Sites C, G1 and G2 (green areas): Possible site for a new Arden Centre for Community Learning with potential to incorporate a primary school as part of an all through provision;
 3. Site J: Potential site for a new 2-form entry Catholic Primary School linked to the Arden Triangle initiative; please refer also to Plan Ref: UV/007057-01 that accompanies a separate Call for Sites pro forma for the existing St George and St Teresa Catholic Primary School site, Mill Lane, Bentley Heath;
 4. Sites G1 and G2 (white areas), G2/H, H (white and green area) and I: land in multiple ownership that presents opportunities for future housing development and associated open space and/or playing fields and associated external environment features including access to schools.
- 1.3 All the sites in question are currently located within the existing adopted Green Belt.

Arden Academy – Existing Site

- 1.4 The catalyst underlying the 'Arden Triangle' initiative is the desire of Arden Academy governors to vacate the existing school site and to relocate to another site that allows the creation of a new school, appropriate for a contemporary 21st century teaching environment that also provides a major resource for community activity and interaction.
- 1.5 Arden Academy is currently located on the east of Station Road, Knowle. It is a highly successful and thriving school community which is heavily over-subscribed and attracts admission requests from well outside its natural catchment. A planned increase to a 10-form entry in 2016, means that the school role will be approaching 2000 in five years time. However, the existing site is tightly constrained and offers minimal scope for further expansion and growth.
- 1.6 Many of the existing buildings date back to the opening of the school in 1957. The existing campus has resulted from a series of additions over the years leading to a patchwork of development without a clear hierarchy of spaces. The majority of spare space outside of

the playing fields has been built on over time to satisfy the growing needs of the school. The appearance and condition of much of the building fabric and layout reflects the age of the school and is no longer fit for purpose. The most recent development comprises a modular construction teaching block that opened in September 2015 to provide much needed additional classrooms.

Arden Centre for Community Learning

- 1.7 The aspiration is to develop a state of the art 'Arden Centre for Community Learning' on land that the school partially owns to the south and east of the existing school playing fields. The north -west part of the site is currently in use as a reflection garden linked to the Medical Centre/NHS complex (Site B). The main part of the site incorporates land owned by Arden Academy and used occasionally for rugby pitches. Additional adjoining land in private ownership will be required for school playing fields and other elements of the external environment of the school, including access into the site. The potential to provide a new facility of this type will be dependent in part upon the ability to realise the residential development potential of the existing Arden site as capital receipts from the sale of the land would form a major component of the funding needed to deliver the new Arden Centre for Community Learning. Both the existing Academy site and the potential location of a new site are in the Green Belt.
- 1.8 The proposed new site is capable of accommodating a 3 –storey school of sufficient size to accommodate anticipated growth to a capacity of approximately 2000 secondary school pupils, up to and including sixth form students. It is anticipated that the new facility would incorporate a 600 seat performing arts venue, reflecting the important role that drama and music activities fulfil in the life of the school and the scope to create a shared facility that could also be used by the local community. In addition, there would be a much needed 4G sports pitch, swimming pool and regional Gymnastics Centre, as well as two all-weather pitches, MUGA, Youth Centre and car parking. With the anticipated growth of Primary school numbers in the community it is also possible to create a new all through school which will meet future demand. The entire ethos underpinning the aspiration to create a new Arden Centre for Community Learning lies in its name. It would fulfil a crucial role as a hub for educational and community use and would be purpose built to optimise that role. The layout of the buildings is too constrained to enable this to be achieved at the existing Arden campus site.

Potential for new 2FE Catholic Primary School

- 1.9 It is envisaged that the proposed creation of a new Arden Centre for Community Learning within the Arden Triangle could also incorporate a site for a new 2 –form Catholic primary School. An indicative location is shown on the Area Plan as Site J. Subject to the approval of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham Trustees, the school governors of the 1 FE entry St George and St Teresa Catholic Primary School, off Mill Lane, Bentley Heath consider that there are opportunities, linked to the new Arden Triangle initiative, to identify and plan for a site to accommodate a new 2FE Catholic Primary School only 1km distant from the existing school. There would of course be benefits in shared use of facilities between the adjacent sites.

- 1.10 The existing St George and St Teresa Catholic Primary School premises and site are no longer suitable for a 1 FE entry school and create operational challenges to the efficient running of the school. The school occupies a restricted site that it has outgrown and the accommodation is cramped and unsuited to modern educational needs. Previous Local Authority reports/inspections have highlighted the fact that the school is half the size of any other one-form entry school. Despite this, the school is tremendously popular and successful and teaching standards have been highly praised. There is a history of over-subscription.
- 1.11 The provision of a new 2 FE Catholic Primary School on an alternative site would confer benefits for pupils, parents, local residents and staff alike and offers the potential for use as a community asset outside school hours. The provision of a building with modern and appropriate facilities to replace the existing inadequate premises would enable this excellent thriving school to further develop and enable an increased number of children to access the high quality of education it provides
- 1.12 Further details are provided in the separate Call for Sites pro forma that has been submitted for the existing Catholic Primary School site.

Scope for Delivery

- 1.13 The ability to succeed in bringing these aspirations to fruition is critically dependent upon:
- Gaining the support of parents, local residents and representative organisations, local businesses, land owners and local politicians ;
 - Influencing the direction of planning policy,
- 1.14 High level discussions have been underway for some time, and will continue, with officers and key members of Solihull MBC, and with members of the Knowle Society and the recently formed Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath Neighbourhood Forum. The reaction thus far has been encouraging. The Head of Arden has also instigated discussion with private landowners of key sites within the area bounded by Warwick Road to the east and Grove Road to the south, whose support will be paramount in achieving the assembly of a site of sufficient size to accommodate the new Arden Centre and the associated playing fields and external environment features that would be required. The potential site is currently landlocked and potential access options will also be a matter for negotiation with landowners. Again, the initial outcome of discussions has been positive.
- 1.15 A primary focus of the current Local Plan Review is to address the implications for Solihull of the major shortfall in housing provision across the housing market area of the GBSLEP and to ensure that sufficient land, in terms of amount and distribution, is found to meet revised requirements. Significantly, the aspirations to secure a new Arden Centre offer the potential to unlock a major opportunity for housing growth as the existing Arden Academy site is ideally located for this purpose, close to the centre of Knowle, with excellent access to local services and facilities and to nearby local bus routes. The plan would also see a significant reduction in traffic on Station Road linked to the Academy. The routes to the new Arden Academy would also provide much safer routes to school for children. The concerns linked to parking close to the existing Academy site would also be resolved.

- 1.16 However, the broader extent of open/agricultural land land contained by Warwick Road and Grove Road presents significant additional opportunities for residential development to the east of Knowle, over the period of the plan to 2033 and potentially beyond. This potential resource could make a major contribution towards meeting overall housing requirements identified by the Local Plan Review, a prospect largely supported by the landowners. The entire area presents a strategic development opportunity to secure major community benefits and housing growth. Known as the Arden Triangle, it combines the aspirations for a new Arden Centre for Community Learning with the scope for new housing growth, whilst taking advantage of opportunities to retain the openness of the landscape as much as possible through careful siting of playing fields, open areas and other 'green' external environmental features.
- 1.17 Please note that apart from the existing Arden Academy site, the location, size and definition of the potential development sites, playing fields and open spaces are notional only at this stage, pending detailed feasibility studies that will need to look closely at space requirements and access possibilities within the context of the Local Plan Review process and its outcome.

Green Belt Considerations

- 1.18 At present, all the sites that lie within the 'Arden Triangle' are in the Green Belt. NPPF is clear that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open but recognises that in exceptional circumstances the boundaries of the Green Belt can be altered through the preparation or review of the Local Plan.
- 1.19 The Strategic Housing Study, undertaken last year to inform the Spatial Plan for Growth being prepared for the GBSLEP area, revealed a shortfall of some 37,500 dwellings across the wider market area up to 2031. The Study provides the basis for identifying an objectively assessed housing need figure for Solihull which will be developed through a Strategic Housing Market Assessment for the Borough (SHMA) and will form part of the required evidence base for the Local Plan Review.
- 1.20 The Issues and Options Consultation Document suggests that, on the basis of current data, sites to accommodate an additional 4,000 dwellings will need to be identified, as a minimum, in order to achieve a housing requirement of around 13,500 dwellings over the plan period. This figure will increase if either the objectively assessed needs for the Borough is higher than currently projected or if any of the housing shortfall occurring in the wider HMA is accommodated in the Borough. The Issues and Options document poses a number of scenarios as to how this level of growth could be distributed and acknowledges that some housing development will need to take place on land currently designated as Green Belt.
- 1.21 We consider that the opportunities presented by the Arden Triangle for major community benefits and housing growth have great merit and provide a strong basis to support and justify Growth Options F -Limited Expansion of Rural Villages/Settlements) and G, which includes Significant Expansion of Rural Villages/Settlements. Both options refer to Knowle/Dorridge. Accordingly, we would ask that the sites identified on the accompanying Indicative Development Potential Plan (Ref: UV/006959-L-001) should form a part of the

Green Belt Assessment that the Council acknowledges is required as a first stage of a Green Belt review.

1.22 It is appreciated that the Green Belt Assessment will be undertaken in accordance with defined criteria. However, we wish to draw attention, in advance, to some of the merits that the Arden Triangle sites present:

- The existing Arden school was originally built in 1957. It therefore preceded the designation of the site as green belt and has always been a developed site within it. The site is well contained and forms an integral part of the settlement form of Knowle; its release from the green belt would not intrude upon open countryside.
- The potential indicative sites for the Arden Centre for Community Learning and a new 2FE Catholic Primary School and existing land beyond would have limited visibility from properties along Station Road by virtue of mature boundary trees and vegetation along their rear boundaries;
- The entire Arden Triangle area is almost entirely obscured from view from Warwick Road to the east, due to boundary vegetation and/or development along the entire route. In consequence, there is no visual perception of openness or awareness of countryside from this direction, that would be compromised adversely by the release of land from the Green Belt;
- There is significant scope to ensure that any development release from the green belt is interspersed by retained open land/school playing fields and open space linked to housing development to maintain a rural aspect and sense of openness;
- Warwick Road and Grove Road would form highly defensible boundaries should land be released from the Green Belt
 - (i) to meet housing requirements during the plan period and/or
 - (ii) to create safeguarded land to meet longer term requirements to ensure that the Green Belt boundary will not need to be altered again at the end of the plan period.
- Whilst located within the Meridian Gap, the release of land would not result in the coalescence of Knowle/ Dorridge with any neighbouring settlement.

1.23 It is acknowledged that the development aspirations for the Arden Triangle and the constituent land parcels within it are at an early stage at present. However, this initial consultation exercise, as part of the Local Plan Review, presents a crucial opportunity to alert the Council formally to the potential strategic opportunities that the area could offer. The Head of Arden would welcome continued dialogue with Council officers and members as the Local Plan Review process moves forward and places high priority upon continuing efforts to gain the support of local people, landowners and key business contacts for these proposals.