

# Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath Neighbourhood Forum

## Working with Solihull Council

### INTRODUCTION

*Local Councils are required to support any community wishing to set up a Neighbourhood Forum (NF) to create a Neighbourhood Plan (NP). In our case, Solihull Council's Policy and Spatial Planning Team can provide us with guidance, support and advice in a number of ways, eg by:*

- *sharing evidence and information on planning issues;*
- *helping with public consultation events;*
- *providing advice on national and local planning policies that the Plan needs to align to;*
- *providing advice on which organisations to consult;*
- *organising the independent examination and final community referendum on the Plan.*

*We are very pleased to have Emma Tinsley-Evans as our nominated first point of contact for liaison with Solihull Council. As well as bringing her own planning skills and experience, Emma can identify the right experts on specialist subjects within the wider Council team, as appropriate. Emma has already been actively involved in helping us to set up the Forum. The notes below summarise our discussions when she attended one of our start-up Forum meetings on 14 May 2015.*

### Preparing a Neighbourhood Plan

#### General Context:

Emma identified some typical key themes for Neighbourhood Plans (NP) as being to, eg. protect a strong village centre and local character. While a NP cannot reduce development already planned, it can look at how best to identify and manage any proposed increases.

There will be an ever-increasing need for more housing. Work is currently being undertaken by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to assess and quantify the number of new homes required across the LEP Area (including Greater Birmingham and Solihull). Birmingham believes that it cannot meet all its own needs, with few brown field sites remaining.

With a shortfall of housing already across the Borough, things are likely to become even more challenging given the number of new developments in the wider Region. UK Central (UKC) developments (formally known as M42 economic gateway) anticipate creation of 100,000 jobs in the Region - contributing £5.4 billion to the regional GDP. (More details on UK central website at <http://www.uk-c.com>). UKC proposals include new housing on a significant scale, much of which could be on green belt – including to the North of the County.

For its part, Solihull Council are required to identify a rolling five year supply of land for developers. The Council are just about managing to achieve this for now, but this could change by the end of the year. If the Council fails to deliver a five year supply, then developers (many of which already hold options on sites across the area) could potentially seek to develop on green belt sites. Solihull Council therefore expects that it will need to review the green belt before too long.

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## Working with Solihull Council

Specific points of discussion in terms of our NP were:

1. **Affordable Housing:** One of the top issues for our NF, given, for example, resident feedback on how difficult it is for young people and family members to find homes they can afford in the villages. Emma explained the potential remit of the NF in relation to housing, and affordable housing in particular, as below:
  - the NF could have a good say in the type and mix of housing development sites in our area - as long as this is based on evidence;
  - in terms of affordable housing for local people: Policy P4 (b) of the Solihull Local Plan makes provision for affordable housing development on green belt to meet the needs of households in that neighbourhood - where this is supported by a Neighbourhood Plan. The Neighbourhood Plan could, therefore, identify green belt land as a 'Rural Exceptions' site to build affordable housing for local people;
  - housing policy dictates that 40% of new housing development is to be 'affordable housing' - as set out in policy P4 of the Solihull Local Plan + the Council's adopted 'Meeting Housing Needs' Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) – see <http://www.solihull.gov.uk/Resident/Planning/appealsenforcement/planmaking/ldf/meetin ghousingneeds>.  
More recently, however, these policies have been amended following changes to national guidance regarding the threshold at which affordable housing contributions will be sought. Originally, developers of allocated and unidentified sites were required to make a contribution to affordable housing for any residential site of more than three (net) dwellings, or over 0.2ha. The amended policy increases this threshold to 11 units or more, or with a maximum combined gross floor space of over 1000sqm.  
The new requirement also stipulates that, of the 40% set aside for affordable housing, 65% will be rented from a housing association at social rents; the remaining 35% will be shared ownership. Successful applicants can purchase shares starting at 25% (using savings/mortgage), and pay rent on the remaining share.
2. **Green Belt:** designated areas can only be changed via a Local Planning Review. In our case, a particular challenge for further clarification applies to any proposal to eg. relocate Arden School (already on designated Green Belt) to another area of green belt.
3. **Parking:** is dealt with by Solihull Council Transport and Highways. Issues relevant to the NF must relate to land use, or to car parking development. For example, the NF can identify land to put a car park on.
4. **Community Facilities:** This can include, for example, stipulating where developer contributions are sought - such as listing car parking as a priority consideration. Emma was uncertain about the role of a NF in addressing any need/desire for new roads, but will follow up with her colleagues to clarify.

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### Working with Solihull Council

Emma advised caution with regard to including aspirational goals, such as Community Actions, in the NP.

5. **NF Boundary:** Emma advised that we can identify a NP area as large or small as we wish - her steer was to aim to use Ward boundaries (although this is not a requirement) and significant geographic divisions, such as railway lines and roads, that are easily recognisable. Neighbourhood Areas cannot overlap, and the boundary cannot go over existing Parish boundaries – although can, if desired, go over Solihull Council boundaries. What's most important is to be able to clearly articulate a good rationale for choosing the boundary, which could relate to communities, common interests, geographic features etc.

Members discussed what is seen to be the one potential outstanding question relating to our proposed boundary – ie. determining the Northern perimeter at the top of Knowle Ward, and determining whether this should extend beyond the motorway to include Ravenshead.

6. **Referendum / Voting:** Responding to a query arising from Solihull Council's 'Neighbourhood Planning FAQ's' (Does everyone in the Neighbourhood Area have to agree to the Plan?), Emma confirmed that:
- the 50% majority needed to adopt a draft NP relates to 50% of those voting (ie. NOT 50% of all Residents in the NF Area);
  - the 'Examiner' decides who can vote in the NF Referendum. This can sometimes include people outside the Neighbourhood Plan area, in which case the Examiner must advise what the extended area should be and why;
  - within the Neighbourhood Area (or extended area, if appropriate), everyone entitled to vote in a regular election is entitled to cast a vote for the NP.
7. **Planning Documentation:** Emma provided copies of various useful planning documents relevant to our proposed NP area:
- a copy of: the 'Strategic Housing Market Assessment' and also relevant sections (chapter 8, 'Providing Homes for All) of the 'Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment' (SHLAA) documents. These form part of Solihull Council's own evidence base for planning purposes. The SHLAA identifies sites that landowners (developers or private individuals) have submitted for potential building purposes. To create the SHLAA, the Council calls for sites (most being in 3<sup>rd</sup> party ownership), details of which are then included in a database of potential development land. This does not necessarily mean that all these sites form part of current Plans; all will, however, need to be considered as part of future policy discussions. Note that, for our Area, all sites other than the three under development, have to date been told 'no' to development.
  - a map of green belt for our area. Ideally, an older map with larger scale format will be sought.

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## Working with Solihull Council

### Neighbourhood Forum Application Process

Forum Members had a number of questions relating to the process for applying to become a Neighbourhood Forum:

- What are the Council's requirements, and what assistance is available, to prepare and submit our application for formal recognition as a NF?
- How do we go about confirming, and gaining official recognition of, our proposed Plan boundary?

Emma explained more about the process, as below:

**Council Support:** The Council can provide non-financial support, guidance and assistance to complete the application - which is not overly complex.

**The Formal Application:** to establish a Forum requires a minimum of 21 members who live, work or have businesses in the area, comprising a mix of people of different ages, gender and ethnicity. While it may not always be possible to achieve this, we must be able to evidence how we have actively sought to engage a representative cross-section of residents and businesses. It is also important to ensure that Ward Councillors, as elected representatives, are briefed and on board.

**Overall Timeframes:** A Local Authority has a total of 13 weeks from the date of submission to determine the application. This includes a statutory six weeks consultation period before the area boundaries can be agreed / confirmed.

**The NP Area Map/Boundary:** Forms a crucial part of the NF application (see 5. above).

**A Forum Constitution:** Needs to be part of our application, clearly setting out how the Forum will operate. The Constitution needs to include:

- Forum Name
- Purpose
- Working Arrangements
- Nominated Signatories to Bank Account etc
- Meetings and AGM

The name of at least one person from the Forum needs to be publically available.

**Application Approval:** Ultimately, a Cabinet Member will make the final decision on our application – in our case, this will most likely be Ian Courts.

**Funding:** A grant of £8K is available, with a potential further £6K if we meet specific criteria (which we think we do). The grant would only be released where supported by a clear case explaining what the money will be spent on. The funding can then be drawn down in up to 4 chunks, with timing of expenditure having due regard to the financial year- end. This will ensure we are compliant for audit purposes. A small amount of funding may also have been set aside as part of the local Ward action plan / Council Neighbourhoods team. However, this would most likely need to be used to fund a specific cost or activity (such as community engagement), rather than as general expenditure.