

## **Walsall Site Allocation Document**

### **Opening Statement on Behalf of Walsall Council**

#### **Cordial Thanks**

Good morning and welcome to Walsall “*where the Black Country turns green*”. And welcome to the examination of Walsall’s Site Allocation Document (SAD). Not that this should be a ‘SAD’ occasion.

I would like to thank you in opening (not to say anticipation), sir, for examining this plan – and shortly the Walsall Town Centre Area Action Plan.

I would also like to thank our Programme Officer, Ian Kemp, for his helpful and capable administration - so far. Plus, I should thank all of those attending the Examination now or in coming days, plus all of those who have responded to our consultations and who have helped our plan-making and evidence-gathering.

I should introduce myself. I am Mike Smith, the Council’s Planning Policy Manager. I am joined this morning by my colleague, Charis Blythe, who can take much of the credit for our organisation. Other members of the team are sat behind us and we will introduce you to them and to other colleagues, partners and advisors as we go through the Examination.

#### **Confidence**

We are confident that this examination should find Walsall’s SAD to be sound, certainly with the Pre-Submission Modifications and Further Modifications we are presenting - and possibly with some others. The Plan has been developed within the framework of the Black Country Core Strategy and is based on substantial evidence as we hope to show.

#### **Consultation**

Work on Walsall’s SAD started after the adoption of the Black Country Core Strategy and has taken some time, involving several rounds of consultation.

1. 2011 and 2012 - ‘Calls for Sites’, seeking to ensure we would have the best possible information on site availability and market interest.
2. 2013 - consultation on ‘Issues and Options’
3. 2015 – consultation on a ‘Draft Plan’, with the explanation as to how we derived our ‘Preferred Options’
4. 2016 (March – May) – consultation on ‘Publication Plan’
5. 2016 (November-December) – consultation on ‘Pre-Submission Modifications’. This was necessitated by issues relating to the Habitats Regulations requiring some reworking of and consultation upon our Sustainability Appraisal. However, it did provide the opportunity to make several parts of the plan ‘even more’ sound (or consistently expressed and freer of typographical slips).

#### **Cooperation**

Throughout the preparation period and not just as part of the consultations, the Council has cooperated with a wide range of parties.

As part of the Black Country and the metropolitan area the Council is well-used to working with neighbours and we have frequent cross-boundary ‘relations’ with nearby shire districts. In addition, the range of environmental, technical and other challenges affecting the borough mean that we often want and need to work with internal and external partners. We have also to take a positive a

proactive approach with landowners, developers and funders. We hope our evidence – and the representations we have received – help(s) to demonstrate this.

### **Complexity**

The time taken to prepare the SAD, the number of interests and matters involved and the consultations and evidence reflect the range and complexity of the issues in and affecting Walsall borough.

These can be seen from the SAD Document and, even more clearly, from the Policies Map (CD SM2). The pattern of land uses is complicated with different land uses and scales and characters of developments and issues intermixed. The wide range of assets and constraints we have sought to take into account is partially (but usefully) illustrated in the Technical Appendices to the SAD (CD SM5-8). In addition, we have sought to take account of local differences in social conditions, as illustrated by the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015 (CD SA1 page138). All of these issues apply together in different combinations around the borough and in a context where the industrial and mining legacy of the area add to challenges of development viability, as explored through a major Deliverability and Viability Study by DTZ now Cushman and Wakefield (CD SED1). Happily, the importance of facing such challenges appears to be increasingly recognised, at least at the level of the West Midlands Combined Authority (see for example the report of the West Midlands Land Commission: SED4).

### **A 'Camel'**

Dealing with such a complex range of issues means that we have had to make choices about what to include in the SAD. In particular, it is focussed upon the allocation of sites for development and the designation of other sites and areas for protection.

However, taking a literal view of the Local Planning Regulations (especially section 9) we have mapped the policies in the document and taken the approach that if we can map something on the Policies Map then we probably ought to have a policy about it, if that policy can usefully add to existing policy in other documents. Thus, we have some policies, such as relating to flood risk, that do not apply simply to 'allocated sites'. On the other hand, we do not have general development management policies on matters such as hot food takeaways or telecommunications, nor policies that could add little in practice to existing provisions on matters such as ground conditions.

In our view, this approach concentrates on the Council's main priorities, but it also reflects the resources available to the Council.

### **Cuts**

In this era of continuing austerity the Council is facing continuing pressure for cuts in spending. Earlier in 2017 the Council had to set a budget aiming to save £86 million by 2020. Many of its partners are facing cuts too. This means that the delivery of development will need increasingly to depend on private sector investment and a case will continue to have to be made for the targeting of scarce public sector resources, such as those emerging from the Combined Authority.

At the same time, there are likely to be fewer council and public sector facilities such as libraries and fewer staff to implement them. The Planning Policy Team is smaller than it was and this makes us more prone to the 'natural shocks that flesh is heir to'. We cannot say how many 'planners' there might be in future years. In my view and the views of my colleagues this makes it all the more important to have a sound plan in place to be able to best accommodate and prioritise investment to meet the borough's needs.

In deciding to prepare the SAD the Council is seeking to prioritise the allocation of sites for housing and for industry, whilst protecting the environment. In also preparing the Area Action Plan for Walsall Town Centre the Council is seeking to prioritise the location for the greatest change and most commercial investment in the borough. The Council was also preparing for the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), but the pressures on Council resources coincided with the Government's announcement in the Housing White Paper that CIL is to be reviewed, so the Council's Cabinet in March 2017 resolved to suspend work on CIL pending the results of the review.

### **Controversies**

Walsall has a long history of public involvement in planning issues, but the borough does not have any neighbourhood plans. On the other hand, the Council has encouraged public involvement in the SAD. Sometimes this might perhaps have been unwitting as each stage of the plan-making process has had its controversies.

1. In the early stages, the Call for Sites exercises produced landowners and developers' proposals for developments in the Green Belt, despite the fact the Black Country Core Strategy did not envisage a review of the Green Belt.
2. At the Preferred Options / Draft plan stage, questions about possible sites for gypsies and travellers produced strong reactions from local communities.
3. At the Publication stage, the loudest representations were generated by the policy (EN7) for Great Barr Hall and Estate.
4. The most forcefully expressed representations on the Pre-Submission Modifications were in respect of how the Habitats Regulations might apply to the proposed restoration of the Hatherton Canal.

All of these issues are to be considered through the Examination. However, it is notable that none of them relate fundamentally to the role of the SAD in delivering the needs for development in the context of the Core Strategy.

### **Currency and Continuity**

A similar observation might be ventured in respect of representations from commercial interests. Whilst it is perhaps inevitable that some interests will seek opportunities to maximise land and development values, it is notable that the representations in the latter stages of plan-making and especially those that have been pursued to the Examination are concerned with current schemes and with short-term aims.

This might be expected in an area such as Walsall which some might consider a little unglamorous and perhaps marginal. However, as a large a complex are in its own right and one that is part of the larger Black Country and metropolitan areas, it is important see plans for Walsall as part of a wider and longer term strategy.

In this case, the key role of Walsall's SAD is to deliver the urban regeneration strategy of the Black Country Core Strategy by maximising the potential of Walsall's brownfield sites.

For this to be achieved it is vital that the plan is put in place before the Black Country has to get too deeply into the review of the Black Country Core Strategy. That has already started with the Issues and Options consultation concluding on the 8<sup>th</sup> September. The work for the Review indicates that extending the plan period for the Core Strategy from 2026 to 2036 will give rise to projections of need that will be difficult to accommodate in our existing urban areas. The Review is therefore likely to be controversial, to give rise to some wide-ranging questions and be likely to take some time. In this context Walsall's SAD should be able to provide some certainty as to the capacity and potential

of Walsall's urban areas, as well as identifying the environmental assets and constraints that need to be respected. The SAD should therefore be seen as providing a firm basis for the future as well as helping to deliver the strategy that we already have.

### **Commendation**

Following my references to the processes and the complexities, it remains for me to clarify the description of the version of the SAD that we are asking to be examined. This is:

- the 'Submission Version' of the Document that includes the Pre-Submission and Further Proposed Modifications (including FPM35 to FPM38 set out in CD SM4b); plus
- the proposed modification set out in the Housing Topic Paper (CD EXAM1) in respect of Policy HC4.

In addition, following correspondence from the site owner in respect of a current planning application discussions are underway in respect of a possible modification to omit site HO157a (Walsall Road, Walsall Wood) from Policy HC4.

I can also advise that officers are still seeking agreement in respect of some issues, notably Policy EN4 on canals and Policy EN7 Great Barr Hall and Estate. Such discussions might or might not entail proposals for modifications.

As the Council has accepted or promoted modifications I understand that there will be a need to formally request modifications to be recommended. The Council will, of course, welcome modifications that should improve the plan.

Subject to such modifications I commend the SAD to you.