



Gary Palmer
Group Manager – Policy &
Engagement
Growth & Development
Solihull Metropolitan Borough
Council

Our Ref:

PINS/Q4625/429/4

Date:

13 December 2022

Dear Mr Palmer,

Examination of the Solihull Local Plan

1. Thank you for your letter of 7 October 2022. As we set out in our letter of 5 September 2022, the redevelopment of the NEC site is in principle an appropriate and justified element of the Local Plan. However, our letter highlights a number of factors which lead us to have significant doubts over the scale, rate and timing of housing completions envisaged by the Council on the NEC site. This is in the context of the overall supply of housing land in the Borough compared with requirements, the commitment to a contribution of approximately 2,000 dwellings to unmet need in the wider HMA by 2030/31 and the key role that the NEC site is expected to play in housing supply.
2. The overall issue of the basis for and realism of delivering 2,240 dwellings at the NEC site in the plan period was raised in our Matters, Issues and Questions document of August 2021 (Matters 5 and 12). It was set out in the agendas for the hearing sessions on Matters 5 and 12 and discussed at both sessions. It formed a key element of our letter to the Council of 11 February 2022 and a significant element of the discussion at the additional hearing session held on 8 July 2022. The Council has been given ample opportunity to provide evidence and information to support its position on delivery at the NEC site and to make the case at hearing sessions. Indeed it took the opportunity to submit a number of documents in response to our letter of 11 February 2022 and prior to the additional hearing session.
3. The Viability Study Addendum (SMBC018) is one of these documents. This helpfully summarises key information on the area of the site and phases within the proposed development, the number of residential units within each phase, the mix of apartments and houses and density assumptions. The agenda for the additional hearing session, circulated in advance, included a specific item regarding density assumptions and the relationship with the split of apartments and houses. This specific issue was discussed at the additional hearing session. Our concern over the realism of densities envisaged arises from a straightforward comparison of the site area (12.92 ha for Phase 1), the number of dwellings (2,240 in Phase 1) and the split between apartments and houses (70/30). We have simply taken the information and evidence provided by and on behalf of the Council and the NEC Group. At no point in the examination has the Council or the NEC Group suggested that the above information on site area, dwelling numbers and the split of houses and apartments is

incorrect or should be amended. Our calculations of the densities required to deliver the number of houses and apartments envisaged were not disputed at the additional hearing session and we note that your letter does not raise specific concern in this respect.

4. As was discussed at the additional hearing session and set out in our letter, even if a density of 75 dwellings per hectare (dph) were assumed for houses, the apartments would need to be built at an average density of 383dph. Our letter sets out our specific concerns over the realism and practical implications of such densities and we do not repeat them here. Clearly if the density of the houses was lower, the density of the apartments would need to be even higher. It is worth emphasising that the Local Plan sets out an indicative density for houses in the UK Central Hub Area of 40dph. We do not see how main modifications or additional evidence can change the basic position on density, which is derived from the undisputed facts in terms of site area, dwelling numbers and intended mix of houses and apartments. As noted above, the Council has already had ample opportunity to provide information and evidence to support its case.
5. Notwithstanding this, our concern over the realism and practical implications of such very high densities is just one of a number of factors in our overall conclusion in relation to delivery at the NEC site. Our previous letter clearly sets these out and again we do not repeat them here.
6. Given our significant doubts over delivery at the NEC site on the scale, rate and timescale envisaged, our previous letter goes on to highlight the substantial risk of not meeting housing requirements and not making an appropriate contribution to unmet needs in the wider HMA up to 2030/31. It also clearly points out the serious implications of this for the Local Plan and for planning and co-operation in the wider HMA.
7. The way forward, as set out in our letter, is to limit this risk by reducing the reliance on completions on the NEC site. Making a contribution of approximately 2,000 dwellings to unmet need in the wider HMA by 2030/31 is one of the fundamental principles underlying the Local Plan and is a key element of co-operation between authorities. Given this, and our serious concerns over delivery at the NEC, it would be inappropriate to rely on any completions on the site up to 2030/31. The risk is too great, particularly in light of the already very marginal supply compared to the requirement for this period (11,200 including the NEC site compared with a requirement of 10,977). For the period from 2031/32 to the end of the plan period we referred to a figure "in the order of 500 dwellings". We referenced site UK1 simply as an illustration of what would seem to be a more realistic trajectory. We fully appreciate that each site is different, however the two sites are adjacent and sit within a specific part of the Borough. The proposals for both sites also share some similar characteristics in terms of the broad scale, mix of dwelling types and densities.
8. Taking all of the factors into account, we maintain our view that a realistic trajectory, which sufficiently reduced the risk to the overall supply, would include completions at the NEC site in the order of 500 dwellings from 2031/32 onwards. Given our serious concerns over delivery at the NEC site and the significant implications of under supply, we do not consider this reduction to be excessive, nor do we consider our conclusion to be extreme.
9. As we said in our letter, this would leave a shortfall in supply of approximately 1,100 dwellings up to 2030/31 and approximately 1,700 dwellings in the plan period overall. If the Local Plan were to be adopted on this basis, it would be clear from the outset that housing

requirements for the plan period would not be met by some margin and that the contribution to unmet needs in the wider HMA up to 2030/31 would be substantially below that proposed. To reiterate, this could have significant implications for agreements and co-operation with other authorities and the progress of Local Plans elsewhere within the HMA.

10. Should the Local Plan be adopted on the above basis, the Council appears to agree that the trigger for a review would relate to delivery at the NEC site. The most tangible point to trigger a review would be slippage in the first completions on site (expected in October 2027). However, even taking the start of construction as a trigger point would mean that a review of the Local Plan would not be triggered until September 2025 at the earliest. Realistically, the actual review process would not be likely to start until later in 2025 at the earliest. Such a review would need to go through all of the stages of preparation and consultation and its scope may well go beyond housing supply, it would inevitably take some considerable time. Perhaps optimistically the reviewed Local Plan could potentially be adopted by 2029/30.
11. Your letter suggests that pausing this examination to identify additional housing supply may delay adoption by approximately two years (March 2025). We consider that the delay could be potentially shorter, given that a significant number and wide range of sites have already been put to the Council during the preparation of the Local Plan and the Council has undertaken assessments of these alternatives. In many cases considerable detailed information has also been supplied by site promoters. We would also do all that we could to expedite the process. However, if adoption of this Local Plan was delayed until March 2025, this would still be well before a reviewed Local Plan could realistically be adopted. Indeed it is likely to be before such a review was even initiated.
12. We accept that a delay in adopting this Local Plan is likely to mean a corresponding delay in bringing forward completions on sites allocated in the submitted Local Plan but currently in the Green Belt. However, in many cases the trajectory would still see the sites being fully developed by 2030/31. We also acknowledge that delaying the adoption of the Local Plan would require a corresponding extension of the plan period. Clearly the contribution of additional sites to housing supply overall and specifically in the period up to 2030/31 would depend on the individual sites themselves, the overall scale of additional supply and the range of sites in terms of size, location and characteristics. We see no reason in principle why additional sites cannot be identified which collectively, along with those allocated in the submitted Local Plan, would realistically provide for an adequate supply in an extended plan period overall, the period up to 2030/31 and the five year period from adoption.
13. In the immediate period before adoption, we accept that the five year supply situation would deteriorate. However, adopting this Local Plan as it stands but with a realistic trajectory for the NEC site (in the order of 500 completions post 2030/31) would see the five year supply deteriorate in any case, without a mechanism to remedy that for several years.
14. We reiterate our point that the issue of providing an adequate housing land supply needs to be addressed in this Local Plan and the alternative of relying on a review is not an appropriate option.
15. In relation to our conclusion on the Arden Academy, one factor was that it would seem possible, in principle, to redevelop the school within its own grounds. Whilst acknowledging the Council's position on this, we have not been provided with definitive evidence to clearly

substantiate it. In any case, there are other factors which lead us to reach our conclusion. The relocation of the school to another part of the wider site has not been demonstrated to be essential. There is significant doubt over funding and there is a fundamental issue with land ownership. The proposal as it stands is not therefore deliverable.

16. We trust that this letter provides further clarity and explanation for our conclusions. We fully appreciate the implications of these conclusions and have only reached them after giving full and careful consideration to the issues and the information and evidence available. Further submissions from the Council or other interested parties are not required.
17. We would be grateful if the Council could confirm how it wishes to proceed. This letter should be added to the examination website.

Yours sincerely,

Kevin Ward and Kelly Ford

INSPECTORS