

Sandwell Local Plan

Consultation Statement

October 2023

1. Overview of the Consultation Process

1.1 This Consultation Statement provides an overview of the consultation process carried out both internally and externally by Sandwell MBC during the preparation of the new Sandwell Local Plan (SLP) .

1.2 This Statement provides information on the following: -

- An overview of the Council's engagement activities, across all individuals, groups and stakeholders during the first stage (Issues and Options) of the local plan-making process, including which bodies and persons were invited to make representations
- Which engagement activities were used during the Issues and Option stage of the local plan-making process (both informal and formal).
- How individuals, groups and stakeholders were invited to make representations to inform the Local Plan process.

1.3 A separate document has been produced, ***Issues and Options Consultation: Summary of Representations and the Council's Response***, which summaries the consultation responses received at the Issues and Options stage of the local plan review process.

Background to the Consultation

1.4 The new Sandwell Local Plan will replace the current development plan documents (the Black Country Core Strategy and the Sandwell Sites Allocations and Delivery Development Plan Document). At the time of the Core Strategy adoption, there was a clear commitment to review it five years after adoption, to ensure the spatial objectives and strategy were being effectively delivered and to keep the plan up to date. Work commenced on the review in 2016 in the form of the Black Country Plan. This is in line with national planning guidance, which states that "*most Local Plans are likely to require updating in whole or in part at least every five years*". Rolling the plan forward would also enable longer term needs to be addressed. The need for a review has been given greater urgency by new challenges that have emerged since 2011.

1.5 The decision was made in late 2022 to cease work on the Black Country Plan, which meant that the Council had to commence work on a Local Plan for Sandwell.

1.6 The Sandwell Local Plan will be examined for "soundness" by an independent planning inspector, whose role is to assess whether the plan has been prepared in accordance with the Duty to Cooperate and other legal and procedural requirements. The tests of soundness include considering whether the Sandwell Local Plan is founded on a robust and credible evidence base and whether it represents the most appropriate strategy for the borough when considered against reasonable alternatives. The responses to the consultation exercises will form part of this evidence base: they will be used to help decide the matters to be considered in the documents and guide the policy choices where options exist.

1.7 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with neighbourhoods, local organisations and businesses is

essential. It also states that a wide selection of the community should be proactively engaged, so that Local Plans, as far as possible, reflect a collective vision and set of agreed priorities for the sustainable development of that area. As such, in order for the Sandwell Local Plan to be found “sound” and able to be adopted, the Council needs to be able to demonstrate that consultation has taken place throughout the process and that it has tried to engage actively with people who have a stake in the future of the area.

- 1.8 The Council has an adopted Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), which provides guidance on who will be involved in the production of planning documents and the techniques that might be used. SCIs set out the minimum levels of involvement that interested people should be entitled to expect, but Sandwell Council hopes to exceed these levels. The consultation requirements will vary depending on what document is being worked on and what stage has been reached in its production.
- 1.9 At each stage, public consultation will be carried out as the Sandwell Local Plan starts to evolve. Although there is flexibility around this is achieved at the discretion of local planning authorities, the National Planning Policy Framework and Guidance sets out the stages required:
- **Stage 1 Issues and Options** – sets out the planning and development issues that need to be addressed during the plan period and some broad options about how they might be addressed.
 - **Stage 2 Draft Plan** – following further evidence gathering and consideration of matters raised during the consultation on the Issues and Options, a more detailed document is produced, which sets out the likely emerging policies, proposals and allocations that will be considered in the final publication document.
 - **Stage 3 Publication** – the Sandwell Local Plan is finalised and approved by the Council, ready for submission to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.
 - **Stage 4 Examination in Public** – the Secretary of State appoints a Planning Inspector to hold a Public Enquiry or Hearing on published plan to enable final public scrutiny of the Sandwell Local Plan. The Inspector examines whether the plan is sound and recommends any changes which need to be made in order to ensure soundness is achieved.
 - **Stage 5 Adoption** – Once the recommendations of the Planning Inspector have been taken into account, the Sandwell Local Plan can then be adopted by the Council.
- 1.10 The **Issues and Options stage** (see Figure One) focuses on scoping the Plan review; the issues that the review will need to address; and identification of broad options.

Views were sought on:

- the period that the plan should cover;

- the evidence base to be prepared;
- cross boundary and strategic issues that will need to be addressed;
- the key challenges that the Sandwell faces over the period of the plan;
- the level of growth that should be provided for; and
- the opportunities that exist to accommodate this growth.

Figure One: Stages of Consultation



This timetable above is set out with the aim of adopting the revised Sandwell Local Plan in 2025.

2. Method of Engagement

- 2.1 At the Issues and Options stage, the Council consulted widely, utilising the Sandwell Local Plan Consultee Database as a starting point. Everyone on this database received an e-mail or postal letter with information on the consultation and how to respond. The consultee database is made up of roughly 500 consultees, including statutory (specific) organisations, general consultation bodies, and local consultation bodies, along with many individual residents.
- 2.2 The Council has sought to engage positively with a range of groups throughout the process, and not only at times of consultation. As part of the Duty to Cooperate (DtC), the Council has met on several occasions with neighbouring and closely related authorities to discuss and identify any cross-boundary issues and how to tackle them. A separate ***Sandwell Local Plan Regulation 18 Duty to Cooperate Statement³*** will be prepared, which outlines how Sandwell is managing the requirements of the Duty to Cooperate throughout production of the Sandwell Local Plan.

Stakeholder Engagement Methods

- 2.3 The Council undertook Member engagement in the run-up to the Cabinet meeting, seeking authority to undertake the Issues and Options consultation and also throughout the consultation period.
- 2.4 In recognition of the role other teams within the Council play in the production of the Plan, internal engagement was undertaken with teams and staff. This included:
 - Use of internal communication methods (weekly bulletins, internal webpages, team meetings etc.) to promote the consultation and to encourage individuals to have their say.
 - Emails sent to relevant officers and teams notifying them of the Cabinet process and the start of the consultation.
- 2.5 As each stakeholder group is different, a variety of methods and approaches were used to ensure as wide an audience as possible was reached. Below is a summary of the key groups and the ways in which they were engaged with throughout the consultation process.

a) Communities

- Notified through press release/article
- Hard copies of the documents at the Council's receptions and at Libraries.
- Notified through social media
- Council's weekly newsletter
- Support from Councillors to circulate the information and promote events
- Articles in the Sandwell Herald newspaper
- Working with Area Partnerships to promote the consultation and events through their local channels and meetings.

b) Businesses

- Notified through press release/article
- Council's business database mailshots,
- Promoted through the Sandwell Business Engagement Team, Chamber of Commerce

c) Landowners and Investors

- Many are on the consultation database so received notifications of the consultation
- Landowners were sent letters about sites already identified for allocations to establish their ongoing involvement
- Invited to submit sites through the 'Call for Sites' process.

d) Partners

- Many are on the consultation database so received notifications of the consultation

e) Other specific groups

- Statutory consultees and other prescribed bodies, such as Environment Agency and Historic England, were automatically notified when consultation took place.

f) Duty to Co-operate

- In order to try to address some of the housing shortfall, Sandwell has been continuing with the Duty to Cooperate discussions with neighbouring authorities that were started as part of the Black Country Plan.

3. Consultation Materials

- 3.1 **Press Release:** A press release was released the week before Issues and Options consultation opened on the 6th February 2023.
- 3.2 **Sandwell Local Plan website:** As part of the review a dedicated page has been set up on the Council's website.
- 3.3 **Consultation Software:** Consultation software was used to produce an interactive on-line document that is easy to use and to manage the consultation responses.
- 3.4 **Consultation Notifications:** The consultation software allows Mailshots to be sent to all those in the database with email addresses. This was used to notify all contacts of the launch of the consultation.
- 3.5 As there are also a number of contacts who do not have email addresses or who prefer to be contacted via the post the Council wrote to these contacts.
- 3.6 **The Issues and Options Document:** An Issues and Options document was produced that aimed to guide interested parties through the issues facing Sandwell and ask questions to aid the consultation. The document was set out in the following way:
- 1) Introduction – including the scope of the review and details on how people could get involved
 - 2) Sandwell Today, the Existing Strategy - summarising the current strategy and its delivery
 - 3) The Strategic Challenges and Opportunities – setting out the key issues that the review needs to address
 - 4) Reviewing the Strategy to Meet New Challenges and Opportunities – which presented the level of growth that needs to be planned for and the options to deliver these
 - 5) Delivering Growth, Infrastructure and Delivery – a review of the issues around delivering the social and physical infrastructure that would be needed to support growth
 - 6) Review of Existing Core Strategy Policies and Proposals – a summary of the current policies and the potential changes to the policies.

A total of 30 hard copies of the Issues and Options document were printed for consultation events and libraries.

- 3.7 **On-line Consultation Document:** The consultation software hosted an interactive version of the Issues and Options consultation document allowing consultees to comment on the document as they make their way through the different sections. This will also eventually allow the consultees to see what comments have been submitted by others. Individuals received automatic notifications confirming that their consultation responses have been made. Following the consultation period all consultation representations have been collated and grouped together to allow for easier reviewing by officers. Paper/email copies have also been accepted and were entered into the system by officers. A total of 564 formal responses were received to the consultation via online submissions or paper response forms.
- 3.8 **Paper Response Form:** Throughout the consultation period the online consultation portal was widely promoted, to encourage as many people as possible to use this method for

replying. A paper response form was also produced to capture the representations of those who didn't wish to or couldn't use the online method.

- 3.9 **Call for Sites Questionnaire:** To inform the Plan, a Call for Sites exercise was undertaken in parallel with the Issues and Options consultation, inviting land owners, developers and anyone who is aware of suitable sites to submit them for consideration through the planmaking process. A questionnaire was produced to facilitate the collection of information on sites and individuals were able to plot the sites themselves via the consultation portal. Paper/email responses were also accepted and entered into the system. The call for sites process ran from February 2023 to March 2023.
- 3.10 **Summary Leaflet:** A summary leaflet was produced that provided an overview of the key consultation issues and questions in order to encourage people to get involved in the consultation without requiring them to use the full Issues and Options paper. This included a freepost address and was also available online.
- 3.11 **Media Releases:** In order to break down the different elements of the Issues and Options consultation into accessible information the issues were presented as key themes that were considered to reflect some of the themes that mattered the most to communities and businesses.

Media releases were published in the following newspapers and on social media platforms

Date	Newspaper / Website	Article
Friday 3 rd February	SMBC Residents Newsletter	Consultation launch
Monday 6 th February	SMBC Website	Consultation launch
Monday 6 th February	SMBC Facebook Page – 10,482 views	Consultation launch
Monday 6 th February	Staff Newsletter	Consultation launch
Friday 10 th February	SMBC Residents Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Monday 13 th February	Staff Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Friday 17 th February	SMBC Residents Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Monday 20 th February	Staff Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Friday 24 th February	SMBC Residents Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Monday 27 th February	Staff Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Wednesday 1 st March	SMBC Facebook – 6,635 views	Consultation reminder
Wednesday 1 st March	SMBC Instagram – 1,176 views	Consultation reminder
Wednesday 1 st March	SMBC Twitter – 1,975 views	Consultation reminder
Friday 3 rd March	SMBC Residents Newsletter	Consultation reminder

Date	Newspaper / Website	Article
Monday 6 th March	Staff Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Friday 10 th March	SMBC Residents Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Monday 13 th March	Staff Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Monday 13 th March	Sandwell Herald	Consultation reminder
Thursday 16 th March	SMBC Facebook Page – 7,992 views	Consultation reminder
Thursday 16 th March	SMBC Instagram – 1,166 views	Consultation reminder
Thursday 16 th March	SMBC Twitter – 1,294 views	Consultation reminder
Friday 17 th March	SMBC Residents Newsletter	Consultation reminder
Monday 20 th March	Staff Newsletter	Consultation reminder

3.13 Frequently Asked Questions: A list of frequently asked questions were produced to support the consultation and provide further details on the process were necessary including information on why the review was taking place and the different stages of plan making. This was available on the website:

https://www.sandwell.gov.uk/info/200317/planning_policy/4990/sandwell_local_plan/2

4. Regulation 18 Draft Plan Consultation

- 4.1 The Regulation 18 Draft Plan consultation will take place from Monday 6th November to Monday 18th December. Members of the public, local authorities, businesses, developers and other stakeholders who have an interest in Sandwell will be able to have their say on the draft document, which sets out a number of emerging policies, proposals and allocations. Any comments received in response to this consultation will be considered before the final publication document is produced.

Methods of Engagement

- 4.2 The Council will utilise the Sandwell Local Plan Consultee Database as the starting point for its current engagement process. Everyone on this database will receive an e-mail or postal letter containing information on the consultation and how to respond.
- 4.3 The Council undertook Member engagement in the run-up to the Cabinet meeting, seeking authority to undertake public consultation on the Draft Local Plan. In addition, recognition of the role other teams within the Council play in the production of the plans internal engagement was undertaken with teams and staff.

Methods of Engagement

- 4.4 As each stakeholder group is different, the Council has used a variety of methods and approaches to ensure it reached as wide an audience as possible. Below is a summary of the key groups and the ways in which it plans to engage with them throughout the consultation process.

a) Communities

- Notified through press release/article
- Hard copies of the documents at the Councils' receptions and at Libraries and leisure centres.
- Notified through social media
- Council's weekly newsletter
- Support from Councillors to circulate the information and promote events -
- Articles in the Sandwell Herald newspaper
- Working with Area Partnerships to promote the consultation and events through their local channels and meetings.
- One to one meetings available by appointment

b) Businesses

- Notified through press release/article
- Councils business databases mailshots,
- Promote and engage through the Sandwell Business Engagement Team, Chamber of Commerce

c) Landowners and Investors

- Many are on the consultation database so received notifications of the consultation

- Landowners sent letters
- Invited to submit sites through the 'Call for Sites' process.

d) Partners

- Many are on the consultation database so will receive notifications of the consultation

e) Other specific groups

- Statutory consultees and other prescribed bodies, such as Environment Agency and Historic England, are automatically notified when consultation takes place.

f) Duty to Co-operate

- In order to try to address some of the housing shortfall, Sandwell has been continuing with the Duty to Cooperate discussions with neighbouring authorities that were started as part of the Black Country Plan.

5. Consultation Events

- 5.1 Since the Issues and Options consultation, Sandwell has kept stakeholders up to date with the plan preparation process. Available evidence has been published both in early 2023 and the summer of 2023. Regular e-bulletins have been issued in relation to these events.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Sandwell has been committed to involving stakeholders and the local community in the development of the draft local plan. This is clearly demonstrated by the range and breadth of consultation and involvement since work commenced on the Issues and Options in 2022.
- 6.2 The Issues and Options consultation reached a wide range of people, businesses, landowners and developers who live, work or have a vested interest in Sandwell. Methods of publicity for the consultation including events, social media and a dedicated Sandwell Sandwell Local Plan website helped to highlight the issues and the different decisions that may be required in the coming years to accommodate growth and development across the Borough up to 2041. The consultation was more far-reaching than any other planning consultation carried out within Sandwell previously and generated approximately 564 responses overall.
- 6.3 All comments made have been considered by the Council as part of the development of the next stage of the plan. In undertaking this exercise, it is recognised that there will sometimes be local opposition to proposals, and it is necessary to assess the material issues raised to the consultation rather than simply responding to the number of responses on an issue.
- 6.4 Where there have been objections to the Plan (evidenced in the detailed summary - ***Issues and Options Consultation: Summary of Representations and the Sandwell Councils' Response***) that have not led to a change to the Local Plan, this does not mean the Council has failed to consider responses. It is the role of the Local Plan to balance the material considerations raised as part of the process against a number of other issues, whether these be other consultation responses, evidence base documents, or the application of national planning policy. It is this 'planning balance' which is central to the plan-making process, with consultation responses informing the approach towards what the Council believes to be a 'sound' Plan when assessed against the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework and also to ensure it is legally compliant.