

Chairman David Bower welcomed a full turnout of residents and Councillors to a public meeting, hosted by the Knowle Society, held on Monday 3rd November at Arden Academy, to hear about the proposed plans which will have a material impact on the Knowle Conservation Area and the three villages of Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath. He reminded those present that it was not a hustings and asked for all to be respectful to audience and speakers. A panel of Councillors, MP and LA representatives would be happy to answer questions following the presentations.

Cllr Andy Mackiewicz, supported by Mark Andrews, Head of Planning, Design and Engagement Services, outlined the background and Cllr Dave Pinwell addressed concerns about infrastructure and lack of a Local Plan.

1. In his presentation, Cllr Mackiewicz emphasised that he had chosen Dorridge to live because of its excellent schools, the countryside, the helpful people and organisations. He explained that the Local Plan of 2020 addressed the demographic need and affordability ratio with median house prices which at the time was acceptable, but which had since met with Inspectorate disagreement over proposed increase in school provision. 2024 saw a new government, with former rejections being approved and the request to withdraw the original Local Plan. With the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), new calculations came into play, resulting in the need to find more green belt and brownfield sites. Within the next 14 years, in line with government policy, the onus is on SMBC to build another Knowle and Dorridge.
Cllr Mackiewicz was keen to emphasise that the Council was doing its best to try to shape the outcome without saying no. However, the issues of the national framework, plus reorganisation of local government, was making the situation more difficult. If SMBC is deemed too small a borough with regard to planning, the Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) would then have the final say. The goal was therefore to shape and enhance the environment, to build houses for young people in the borough – shared ownership and first homes being the priority. As a result, 300 plus calls for sites had gone out for all land around Solihull – some being premature as no infrastructure was so far in place - and the need to be mindful that those sites had to deliver particular objectives. Councillor Courts, as a former leader of the Council, has been trying to change the policy but with the Combined Authority and the new Act of Parliament, ultimately, the Mayor of the Combined Authority will decide where the houses will go. SMBC was working to retain an influence as the green belt/Meriden Gap remained very important to keep and to maintain the local villages. The terminology of “towns” was purely for practical planning purposes and would not affect the status of current “villages”. He stressed the difficult situation, with new guidance, new Acts, new framework and lack of knowledge on numbers.
2. Mark Andrews presented the technical process of planning and the changing pace of the planning system due to the significant system change nationally. The impact of the new policy framework and more detailed government guidance was being worked through, with a new infrastructure Bill in prospect which would change the national system even further. The Mayoral plan would develop management policies to steer development. The old regional planning tier was now represented in the spatial development strategy which would look across all levels and deliver a new Local Plan for the area. The first Neighbourhood Plan was Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath and that remained in place at the present time. However, the key change was the introduction of “grey belt”, with a new tier and area of consideration of how to develop the green belt. Technically grey belt was a concept of brownfield within green belt (i.e. petrol stations/garage sites etc, i.e. derelict land). Five purposes were set out within national policy, with new guidance defining those which would not relate to “villages” but “towns” for this purpose.

He emphasised that the sites would have to perform strongly against the described purposes and the importance of the assessment hierarchy – what the towns and villages would look like – not to spoil the independent village – more the context of “settlement” in terms of planning. He explained that a site may be grey belt but not automatically built on. Housing and land supply is a challenge which would add significant weight to delivering homes. He cited the Balsall Common plan which was challenged but within the flexible area for debate. It had been passed by the Inspectorate, with the view that most sites could be made sustainable. The “golden rules” were met, i.e. 50% of affordable housing, infrastructure and new green spaces, so the development was not deemed inappropriate.

In referring to the handouts, it was emphasised that the sites offered were all different and that some met the “golden rules” and some did not. The Council had a legal duty to ‘determine’ applications with regard to the adopted Local Plan but this was out of date, so determinations would need to have regard to the National Framework for sustainable development. The considerable need for housing meant that each application would be considered on its merits. If multiple applications fell within the same area, they could be considered cumulatively, to encourage working together for a co-ordinated approach. It was stressed that these were at outline stage at present, with detailed phases to come. For any application within green belt which met the triggers, the areas of consideration would be worked on i.e. highways, landscape, education etc. The risk of appeals meant that applicants could appeal to the Inspectorate, due process tested and be overturned – as with Balsall Common.

New statutory plan to be introduced, as a responsibility of the Combined Authority, with seven specific areas. Plan has stopped short of specific sites and work is in process for a new Local Plan – to align the timetable and work together. Some uncertainty remained over duties of co-operation and engagement with wider areas, which was an ongoing consideration. Consultation has launched already for the Mayoral Plan and would highlight the established guiding principles.

With regard to the Local Plan for Solihull, and the evolution of the 2020 Plan, the aim was to continue to develop this, looking to maximise brownfield sites and density where appropriate to do so, but not at the present time. If it is infrastructure led, it needs to be appropriate. The call for sites did not mean that they would all come forward necessarily.

3. Councillor Dave Pinwell introduced his Infrastructure presentation with all of his three hats, Ward Councillor, Director of Visit Knowle and Knowle Society Trustee as the three objectives align in wishing to see a balance of infrastructure in Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath in whatever developments end up being built. He touched on how infrastructure would be stretched in terms of capacity, and how it is matched to developments, and whether improvements made. Six areas of consideration: Health, Schools, Leisure, Parking, Highways and Utilities. In recent questionnaires, three particular concerns emerged: Health, Parking and Highways.
 - a. Schools: in the KN2 Arden Triangle area, there were plans for a new senior school on the current area of Arden Academy but no details of timescale or how it will be achieved. There will also be a new Primary School but the site allocated was not good, with vehicular access through the Kler construction residential site, with resulting parking chaos. Pedestrian access would be from the bridleway and footpath alongside Grove Road which will not be easy to access. Very few details available and funding not secured, as well as timescale yet to be decided. Adequate capacity in current primary schools presently.

- b. Health: the three GP surgeries were currently under strain and securing a GP appointment already challenging generally (not just locally). Under Section 106, planning applications approved within Arden Triangle: Inspired Villages and Kler Construction who had put monies up which would go to NHS for improved services, but these monies would not be there until estates were well advanced, with a level of occupation – which was some years away, with no NHS plans as yet.
- c. Leisure: covered open spaces, green spaces, sports facilities and the like. Under Section 106, Kler Construction and others will have obligations for monies but no plans as yet for use and timescale unknown. Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath are very well served with community spaces, compared with some other areas.
- d. Utilities: provision of electricity, gas and water would go from national to local distributor for any new development, with Severn Trent Water responsible for surface and soil drainage which would have to be in place before planning – the digging up of roads will therefore continue for some years.
- e. Parking: already an issue, particularly during the day in Knowle and now in Bentley Heath as well, with the success of new businesses, and even Sainsbury's car park in Dorridge had its problems. No immediate solutions but some thoughts for meeting future demand, with potential for 40 extra spaces for Knowle but viability needed to be determined first. Bentley Heath most pressing as no land available and one solution was to divert to walking, cycling and bus services. Bus services had recently increased to half-hourly from hourly service and Cllr Pinwell recommended their use. However, encouraging folk to walk and cycle is difficult.
- f. Highways: some roads and junctions are already at capacity – Section 106 has been agreed for KN2 Arden Triangle, with Warwick Road, Stripes Hill and top of Bridleway. Inspired Villages would put in bus stops at Purnells Way and monies put up by applicants for highways improvements.

Cllr Pinwell referred to the Knowle Transport Study of October 2020 – a 132 page report which he recommended. It demonstrated that in 2017, 708 vehicles went along Knowle High Street in the Warwick direction during the morning peak hour, with 520 going the other way at the same time. KN2 Arden Triangle and KN2 Knowle Football Club land were included so the new developments would generate extra traffic which would be a substantial increase on original figures – all this being modelled pre-pandemic and working from home. The additional primary school traffic was not taken account of at the time. He therefore concluded that the study needed to be updated for 2026 as it was clear that the junctions would be under even more pressure and would not cope with the projection and the High Street would be under the worst pressure by the developments in the pipeline.

He saw a need for more work to quantify the stress on the current infrastructure, so that further decisions on planning applications would have a clearer understanding of the impact of infrastructure. The study model needed to be updated with current factors. He and fellow councillors would be pressing for the strong voice of residents and commitment sought for infrastructure first, not second, as monies come through late in the day.

Questions to Panel:

Martin Leigh, Chairman Neighbourhood Watch Lady Byron Lane, felt that the figures were vastly under cooked in terms of traffic flow, citing 698 cars, with 21 speeders in 2024 and so far this year 525 cars, with 21 speeders. He felt that Browns Lane and Lady Byron Lane would be as problematical as Knowle High Street. In answer, Cllr Pinwell cited the black

strips installed in Tilehouse Green Lane and Lady Byron Lane, as the route to the motorway, which would have demonstrated more recent data.

Martin, local resident, asked what the Council was doing to maximise brownfield sites rather than green belt. Cllr Mackiewicz confirmed that they were looking to do just this, i.e. Mell Square with 1600 homes if approved. This would continue to be a priority nationally as well – brownfield first – but the potential issue is that this would only go so far. The aim was to definitely use brownfield sites. Previously monies had been used for social housing and tracts of Black Country land regenerated and cleaned up – rather than the use of green belt more locally. Realistically, Saqib Bhatti MP felt there was a limit to brownfield sites within Solihull and affordability and land value skewed the numbers.

Richard Newton, local resident, was concerned about the parking situation and high street traffic and asked about multi-storey parking and another route to move traffic away from the High Street. Cllr Pinwell said that this had been looked at, that it was seriously expensive to realise and would take a financial case to succeed. The feasibility of a relief road would be worth consideration.

Sian, local resident, was concerned that a lot of time and energy had been spent on the Neighbourhood Plan and did it carry any weight. The answer from Cllr Mackiewicz was yes, that it was adopted, always assessed, alongside the Local Plan, and updated framework and guidance. Councillors were equally mindful that the Local Plan is getting older but that it was hoped to carry forward much of its content and he was pleased to confirm that they worked closely with the Forum to share information, with much local engagement.

Paul Riley, resident, worried about the balance of power between councillors, planning, developers etc as it was clear that some of the sites were totally unsuitable and had it been challenged. He felt that under Section 106, the Health monies for instance could be used for one GP for five years and with regard to the cycle routes, no one used them – especially any Care Home residents on Stripes Hill -so who is challenging these things? Cllr Pinwell stated that these things were challenged very strongly by the Forum, with support from Councillors – but all to no avail – that the developers definitely have the balance of power. Mark Andrews stated the concern about the location of the primary school around accessibility and intake, that part of the aim was for the primary school to be accessible by walking and cycling, proportionate to the new development.

With regard to Health, monies contributed have to be spent within the local area and it was in the interests of the health authority to spend within the legally binding agreement. Cllr Pinwell clarified that Section 106 was for capital spend only by NHS to enhance existing or new services. GP payments were paid for by NHS funding – their income being related to numbers of population.

Cllr Mackiewicz also confirmed that although the Inspectorate declared there was no need to build a school, Saqib Bhatti, MP and Cllr Ian Courts got the land assigned. Saqib Bhatti said that the balance of control would always be win and lose, with the odds skewed in favour of developers because of government decisions. The reality was about challenging the huge numbers of applications and referenced the recent similar meeting held in Hockley Heath. He felt this was the start of the journey for the voice of the community. The appeals were not just about housing but about taking powers away in some cases, with very tight parameters. With secured monies for the secondary school, the housing needed to be matched, followed by the infrastructure which was the wrong way round. With the huge housing numbers, Saqib had also campaigned for an A&E for Solihull.

Councillor Courts re-affirmed that the balance of power had shifted massively to developers in the last twelve months and the next proposal would be around “watering down” the Planning Committee in order to remove it – which was something he felt we all needed to worry about.

A further question: would people commit to supporting new homes if sustainability issues are addressed? Cllr Mackiewicz felt that more people are leaving the area as they cannot afford to live here, hence the First Homes, starter homes, shared ownership etc – he hoped for balanced and appropriate growth. Saqib championed the need for housing for young families – in the right place – which would be a challenge.

Councillor Courts was anxious to focus more on homes for young people so they didn’t have to leave the area, infrastructure challenges, keeping green spaces.

Joy Montgomery wondered why, if infrastructure was so important, could developers not donate an actual surgery for instance as part of the process so that it’s in place and ready. In answer, Mark Andrews said that this sometimes happens – i.e. Inspired Villages as part of the detail could provide a health facility in theory. Other developments have included specific roads to help support traffic flow and it was not unknown for a primary school to be included – but we don’t want to build and have it sitting there empty. The doctors’ surgery in Dorridge was rebuilt as part of the Sainsbury’s application, for instance, and in Balsall Common, each developer contributed to the building of the bypass.

In closing the meeting, David Bower thanked all for their attendance and contributions to a very constructive evening.

The meeting closed at 9.05 p.m.