

SHROPSHIRE LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION

Stage 1 Hearing Statement

Representor unique Part A Ref *	A0633
Matter	2
Relevant questions nos	5, 9, 13, 14

*Your unique reference can be found in the Schedule of Respondents (Schedule 3 of document SD014.01) at:

<https://shropshire.gov.uk/planning-policy/local-planning/local-plan-review/draft-shropshire-local-plan-2016-2038-examination/examination-library/earlier-regulation-18-plan-making-stages-of-consultation/regulation-19-pre-submission-draft-of-the-shropshire-local-plan-consultation/>

Matter 2 Hearing Statement A0633

2.1 It is not considered that the Council has proven a justified need for allocating housing and employment for meeting some of the Black Country unmet need. No evidence was submitted during the consultation stages; it is only since the consultation stage has closed that the Council has sought to provide any evidence. As this evidence was not forthcoming during the Reg 19 consultation, it appears that it has been submitted retrospectively to justify what is already proposed rather than being original evidence used to support the allocation in the first place.

2.2 There is inconsistency in the actual number of houses and employment land proposed to be allocated to meet this need. Both within a document itself and between documents, the Council state “around 1500 houses”, “up to 1500”, and “specific contribution of 1500 houses”. Similarly, there is “30ha” employment land and “up to 30ha”. “Around could mean significantly more than 1500; “up to” could mean significantly less than 1500 or 30ha. In EV041, it is stated that the Council has “accepted the principle of meeting a proportion” of the unmet need, but no evidence was given when the allocations were proposed in the public consultation stages, why they had accepted or how they came up with the proportions.

2.3 As it is clear from the various documents submitted since Reg 19 consultation that these allocations are to be met within Shifnal and Bridgnorth and will require the release of Green Belt, it is essential that there is some certainty in actual numbers to be allocated. In view of the need to provide exceptional circumstances for the release of Green Belt, the fact that the Council are inconsistent in their statements on the allocation numbers, indicates that they have failed to justify the figures proposed and hence any exceptional circumstances.

2.4 There is similar inconsistency and lack of clarity in the actual unmet need that the Council is seeking to help meet. EVO 42 refers to “indicate” an unmet need, “unlikely” to be met, it is “understood” there is an unmet need, “forecast” of need. The Black Country Authorities say they are seeking “appropriate” contributions from other authorities but give no indication what is “appropriate”. They also state (EVO41) that after their Plan consultation stages and confirmation from other authorities that there “could” continue to be a shortfall or it is “possible” that there would continue to be a shortfall. It is clear, therefore, that there is too much uncertainty about the level of unmet need for the Council to consider allocating such large amounts in their Plan.

2.5 The Council state that the Black Country authorities strongly support the Shropshire allocations, and appear to use this as part of their justification. However, this is only to be expected –it is in their interest, and they are bound to support, any other Council willing to take on some of their housing and employment responsibilities, as it will make it far easier for them to have less numbers to plan for in their own local plans . They would far rather have Shropshire have to release Green Belt in their area, than the Black Country and their adjoining authorities having to lose their Green Belt land. No weight, therefore, should be given to Black Country support in justifying the Council’s allocations.

2.6 At the time that the Council agreed to take up these allocations, there was minimal evidence of the amount of unmet need, other nearer adjoining authorities had not yet assessed their abilities to meet any need, and no testing of the need had yet been subject to public consultation. In view of the significant impact that the Council's allocation will have on Shifnal, Bridgnorth and the Green Belt, it is considered that agreeing to take some of an unmet need that has not yet been tested, agreed and without knowing how much other nearer Councils can take, is unjustified.

2.7 Since the end of the Reg 19 consultation, in documents submitted on the Council's website (EVO 42 and 41), the Black Country Authorities state that their **draft** plan would not be published until August-October 2021, that they were still to publish up-to-date shortfall figures and that they were still engaging with other Councils and some still had to test their ability to take additional allocations. They also state that evidence to support any forecast housing and employment shortfall is to subject to further consultations on the Black Country Local Plan at Reg18, 19 and Examination stages. The Housing Topic Paper confirms that the level of unmet need has not yet been tested nor alternative authorities ability to meet need through their local plans. Since the Reg19 consultation, the Government have announced increased funding in the Black Country to enable greater brownfield redevelopment, and the impact of Covid and new work from home employment patterns have occurred. The BCLP will, therefore, need to consider these new material considerations during the consultation stages of their Plan, so it is far too early to assess the likely quantity of unmet need that may now arise, or the ability of those Councils adjoining the Black Country to meet that need, especially when such allocations impact on removal of Green Belt.

2.8 National policy paragraph 61 refers to meeting any needs that "cannot" be met. As stated above, there is still much uncertainty about the level of any shortfall and the ability of adjoining authorities to meet such shortfall and none of this has yet been tested through statutory consultation stages. The allocation by the Council of such a large proportion of an as yet uncommitted figure is considered to be contrary to national planning policy guidance.

2.9 EVO41 makes it clear that the Council and the Black Country assume that the housing and employment allocations will be met in Shifnal and Bridgnorth. It is stated that it will be accommodated within already planned developments in those two towns. However, before accepting these allocations, the Council had already planned the developments for Shifnal and consequential need to release Green Belt, on the argument that the developments were required to meet Shifnal's own sustainable needs. As a significant proportion of the 1500 houses and 30ha employment land is proposed for Shifnal, how can this in- migration simply be accommodated within planned developments stated to be solely to meet Shifnal's needs. Either the Council was wrong in its Shifnal needs analysis and original allocations for the Town, greatly exceeding taking land out of the Green Belt, or the Black Country allocations can only be met by proposing additional land for development around the town, which can only be met by release of Green Belt. The arguments above relating to the considerable uncertainty about any shortfall in

unmet need are surely insufficient justification for taking such a significant amount of development from the Black Country and the requirement that Green Belt would have to be released to meet this need.

2.10 EVO41 also says that the housing and employment will “respect the character” of the area. As Shifnal is a relatively small market town and in their Plan, the Council note that this is a particular feature of the town that the local community want to retain, it is inevitable that the only way a significant proportion of the housing and employment allocations can be met is by significant expansion of the town into the surrounding countryside/Green Belt. This will in no way respect the character of the town or meet the objectives of the local community (it is noted that in its proposed Levelling Up Bill, the Government is seeking to give greater planning influence over developments in their areas to the local community – the proposed allocations are contrary to the evidence given at all consultation stages by the local community on how they want to see their town develop in the future).

2.11 In documents submitted since the Reg19 consultation ended, the Council make great play of the transport links between east Shropshire and the Black Country. However, the most sustainable links are with Telford (which is in the east of the County of Shropshire). As I pointed out in my detailed Reg19 evidence, if anywhere in the east of the County is best in sustainable development terms to meet any Black Country shortfall it is Telford. Yet that Authority has decided not to take any shortfall. This would seem to indicate that they have significant reservations over the level of unmet need and any shortfall not being fully evidenced at present. It is hard to see how Shropshire can justify allocating such large amounts of housing and employment land and almost certain release of further Green Belt in the east, when Telford which is a far more sustainable position to meet any such need is not proposing to take any additional Black Country shortfall. It is in the same strategic corridor (with better transport links) referred to by the Council, is not in the Green Belt and has a significant amount of vacant housing and employment land that does not require significant infrastructure developments and cost as would the Council’s proposed allocations.

2.12 The Council use figures stated to be for the east of the county: the county itself includes Telford but there is no indication whether these figures include Telford or not. Even if they exclude Telford, in view of the importance of that Town in the eastern Strategic corridor quoted by the Council, it is surely essential that the ability of that town to help meet the regional quoted sustainable needs for the east of the county must be considered as part of the overall planning process and not treat Shropshire in isolation when planning on a regional scale as here.

2.13 The Council state that the additional Black Country housing will be integrated into the wider housing strategy which allocated specific proportions of the total housing between Shrewsbury and principal/key centres. Yet as it is stated that this additional housing will be met in Shifnal and Bridgnorth, the proposal will change the percentage ratios for meeting the housing totals in principal and key centres, so would not comply with the housing strategy.

2.14 National planning policy paragraph 61 refers to taking any unmet need from another authority is “in addition” to local housing need”. The Council have not taken their Black Country allocations as addition but say that this is to be incorporated as part of their local housing need. This is contrary to national planning policy. The Council originally proposed housing and employment needs figures for the county area which were specifically stated to be to meet the local needs of Shropshire. However, the Council are now proposing that these figures must now include 1500 houses and 30ha of employment land, which they confirm are in-migration and not local Shropshire needs. This seems to be manipulating the system, with Shropshire keen to curry favour with Black Country authorities by agreeing to take a significant proportion of their housing and employment needs, without having to amend their total figures and the specific allocations within settlements and having to justify such amendments in their public consultation. If they consider that they do have justification for taking on this Black Country need, then they would have simply added these figures to their previously proposed totals in the Plan, and not retrospectively tried to simply feed these additional in-migration totals into an existing local need strategy.

2.15 National planning policy paragraph 27 requires Statements of Common Ground to be publicly available throughout the plan making process to provide transparency. No such Statement was submitted and made available to the public until **after** the end of the Reg19 consultation. The proposal to include such Black Country allocations was made without any supporting Statement to justify the allocations and without any supporting evidence made available to the public and upon which they could be challenged. It is noteworthy that “evidence” has only been submitted when challenged by the Inspectors questions. The Council appear to have only provided evidence to justify their allocations after they have already committed themselves not only to the “principle “ (as stated in other documents) but to specific numbers. No justification was provided to the public during the consultation stages. The Council appeared to have used the opportunity provided by the Inspectors questions to justify retrospectively what they have already decided. It is far easier to gather evidence to support what is already proposed, than have to provide such evidence before the event. Allocation should follow evidence not vice versa, which is considered to be a further cumulative factor showing that the Council had no justification in its proposed Black Country allocations.

2.16 In their evidence now submitted to seek to justify the allocations, the Council state that the quantitative evidence is for 943 houses. They then “round” this up to 1000 (no reason is given) and add a further 500 for flexibility (qualitative figures). In view of the fact that they then say that the allocations will be incorporated within the existing local housing needs figures and the significant impact these allocations will have on Shifnal and Bridgnorth and the Green Belt between these towns and the Black Country, it is considered that more detailed quantitative justification is required for the additional 557 “qualitative” housing added to the 943 quantitative put forward. Adding a further 57 simply to “round up” and then a further third for flexibility, when the total unmet need is so uncertain and untested, is not considered to be justification for overriding national policy on local housing needs and Green Belt.

2.17 The Employment topic paper states that there is estimated to be an unmet employment need of 210ha. It says that 91 ha of this is proposed for S. Staffordshire leaving 129 ha to be met by all the other authorities. Yet Shropshire is proposing to meet a quarter of that remaining need. Whilst reference is made to strategic links in the east of Shropshire to the Black Country, in sustainable terms it is still significantly further away than adjoining authorities and would have significant impacts on Green Belt. No justification has been given why Shropshire is taking such a large proportion of untested unmet need compared to other authorities in a more sustainable location to accommodate such development.

2.18 The Council support the Black Country comments that Shifnal's existing planned employment development will meet their employment needs. The Council appear to be now using this to justify their increase in Shifnal's employment land from 16ha to 41ha. However, the Council did not use this as their justification for increasing the size of the Shifnal employment allocation when originally proposed. It appears that they are now seeking to use this retrospective information to justify their original proposal which was subject to a number of detailed objections. It seems that as the Council failed to provide any rebuttal evidence to the detailed objections from the local community (supported by a considerable amount of detailed technical evidence), they have retrospectively relied on the Black Country allocations to try to support their original unsustainable Shifnal allocations.

2,19 The Council in its public consultation stages stated that the employment land allocation for Shifnal was specifically to meet sustainable development needs of the town. Yet in the documents submitted post Reg19 consultation, the Council now refer to Shifnal meeting in-migration needs from the Black Country. Either this proves that local objections to the original increase from 16ha to 41ha were correct and there was no justification for the originally proposed increase when no Black Country allocation was proposed, or else the claim that this in-migration can be accommodated within existing planned development is wrong and additional land will inevitably have to be released from the Green Belt to meet the in-migration allocation proposed for the town in addition to what the Council claim is needed solely to meet the town's own needs.