

General comments

As usual this is a very full document. However it fails to meet the strategic imperative of primary school numbers in Balsall Common. The current primary school is over-crowded and causes traffic congestion problems, locally as well as on the B4101. This road has had major increases in traffic over the past thirty years providing a link from the west of Solihull – Knowle, Dorridge and Shirley to business parks in Coventry. There is no mention in the Draft Plan of traffic numbers being measured.

In addition, the projected numbers of dwellings suggests that there would be pressure on two primary schools. A review of the impact of circa 1750 dwellings would suggest, by using the usual calculation (1000 dwellings = 800 pupils of school age.) This calculates to be 1400 pupils. If this number is stretched over 12 year groups it amounts to close on 120 per year group. [Source - SMBC Education Department for Balsall Common Village Plan 2009].

One option would be to seek to extend the two suggested schools to three form entry. This may prove to be a problem in recruitment as well as logistics. However if the current Balsall Primary school were to be relocated as part of the development of Grange Farm, much of the problem could be solved.

Green Belt boundaries – are they defensible or not?

In the very comprehensive review of sites, the defensibility of GB boundaries seems to be a critical issue. At the same time some sites are promoted when land adjacent **could** be developed in future. In other situations there are sites, which if united, could provide comprehensive development in this plan. Example site 142 Grange Farm (1161 dwellings) is immediately adjacent to site 82 – 47 units. Both sites rejected partly on the basis of Green Belt boundary being not defensible. One site starts on Kenilworth Road A452; the other reaches Balsall Street B4101.

Other sites have been allocated in the name of “residential” which would or could be better used for commercial or job-creation/ tourism purposes.

Specific comments – Balsall Common

The B4101 – Balsall Street is a clear and defensible boundary to the west of Balsall Common. It's only breach currently has been to facilitate a Listed Building – Fernhill Court. The acceptance of Frog Lane as an allocated site is dangerous in that it establishes a precedent for development west along the B4101. In addition at some future stage the widening of Frog Lane which is one of the few “country lanes” in Balsall Common will be necessary. Development here would require traffic in Frog Lane which would destroy the current “country lane” nature. In addition, it would create an opportunity to facilitate the future development of Oakes Farm, land rear of Fernhill Court and ultimately fill in the gap from Oakes Farm to Saracen Drive, either now or in the future. The allocation of Frog Lane makes little contribution to the housing needs, especially if the current primary school were to be relocated to Grange Farm. The remainder of the site is in Green Belt. Allowing development is inconsistent with the requirement for defensible boundaries. The current concept could lead for the remainder to be developed in future. This land (rear of/along Frog Lane) could make a contribution to sports facilities, especially the need for an all-weather surface. If such a surface could be obtained

from CIL funds, so much the better. An alternative could be as part of a s106 agreement in respect of the commercial developments in the north – hotel / offices.

The provision of space for the potential of a two / three form entry primary school away from B4101 traffic has been ignored. This particular site (Grange Farm) could enable comprehensive development of a part of Balsall Common not affected in any way by HS2. [It is recognised that HS2 will have a major impact on the eastern side of the settlement.] The allocation of this site would facilitate the relocation of the existing primary school whose site could be either redeveloped or absorbed into Heart of England School including the adjacent playing fields. HoE school will also need to absorb the additional pupils from the new housing. Development here could also be started as soon as the Plan is approved. There would be no interference from HS2.

Land just north of Wootton Green Lane is suitable for modest residential development, but it is difficult to see the logic of involving large swathes of land north-west of A452 – Kenilworth Road in the northern part. Sites such as Travallion Stud are distant from the current centre. Rumours have persisted that a “new centre” for Balsall Common could be developed in this area. A food store operator is the source of the rumour following “confidential” discussions with officers. Such a commercial use would be better allocated for a hotel or even offices. The number of units suggested here would be replaced significantly by the allocation of Grange Farm. The location of Balsall Common 7 miles from NEC, Airport and UK Central makes Balsall Common an attractive location for a number of developments. The site could provide local jobs; this in turn could reduce the need for local people to travel out of Balsall Common to work. Whatever is ultimately decided, the traffic geometry will also take a sizeable amount of land at the north end of the settlement. The display in the draft plan does not address the traffic issues in respect of access to A452. There is also room for a hotel adjacent to Old Lodge Farm, part of which is in Council ownership. This plus commercial development in this area would contribute to local jobs and support local traders.

Windmill Lane

The development here in the past was a poor strategic decision, it being so far from the centre. If it is intended to progress matters further here, a suitable parking area should be provided for the Listed Building – the Windmill, a tourist attraction. In addition care should be taken not to extend the three-story type development in such narrow roads.

By-pass

It is not clear yet, what line the projected by-pass will take. Mention has been made of Catchem’s Corner as the point to cross Kelsey Lane. There would be a better line at the apex of Old Waste Lane, taking the widest possible “sweep” ultimately linking at a point adjacent to Eveson’s Fuels. There is a regular view in town planning that roads (and rivers/railways/hills etc.) provide tangible development barriers. Whatever the line of the bypass, the opportunity should be taken to ensure that there would be no room for development beyond it to the east in the direction of Coventry. This component of the by-pass will be of importance as the site of Jaguar at Meer End develops. There is only one north/south road from UK Central. The “ripple” effect of such traffic would impact on A452; the new by-pass (named A452?) would alleviate that issue.

HS2 issues.

Clearly the major impact is on the east side of the settlement. There seems to be a consideration that Balsall Common should not be hit with a “double whammy”, namely this draft plan and HS2. Apart from the extreme north end of the settlement, HS2 has no impact on the remainder of Balsall Common, west of A452. In which case, development west of the A452 should progress without too much difficulty, especially if the relocation of Balsall primary school is carried out at an early stage. This is another justification to bring Grange Farm into urgent consideration.

Education numbers

This issue is raised at the start of this paper. It is the most strategic imperative to tackle the already crowded use of the existing Balsall Primary School.

Some years ago I was advised by SMBC that 1000 dwellings equates to 800 pupils of school age. The current estimate of 1765 dwellings at this draft stage of the plan, would suggest a figure in excess of 1400. This figure spread over 12 years amounts to circa 120 pupils per year group. These numbers should justify the strategic decision to have at least two primary schools, one east and one west of the A452. In view of the accommodation and traffic issues caused by the current Primary school, its relocation as part of this process is essential. Serious consideration should be given to the impact of pupil numbers as a result of any developments planned for Balsall Common.

Sports

Whilst there are a number of sports played in Balsall Common, some players still have to travel outside Balsall Common for suitable venues- e.g. hockey. There is a dearth of facilities for indoor sports. There is also a desire for an all-weather surface. This could meet the need for hockey, 5-a-side football, walking football (a pensioner’s activity), netball etc.

Settlement or small town?

It was clear from the Hearn Report that the expansion of Balsall Common into a small town was inevitable. It is no longer a village; hence it is termed a “settlement”. This is a pejorative term for a collection of dwellings with some shopping facilities. There is a case for an Inset Study, outside the process of this Draft Plan. This has been sought in times past; the most recent was in 1989! The key question for Solihull MBC is what does it require from Balsall Common to satisfy its process? A long term plan is essential. What is of critical importance is to ensure that the infrastructure required is given top priority.

Centre

This is described in the SMBC documents as “thriving”. This is not so – see para 84 chapter 5 – Balsall Common. Within the past few years all three banks have closed, although a service of sorts is provided by the post office, but the personal “account” touch is missing. There are still two shop premises vacant, with another closing down. Whilst one ex-bank premise has been turned into a professional property development practice; not the sort of building a shopper enters every day. Parking is a key issue. An obvious solution could be for Solihull to acquire the former Partco building, demolish it and have a two storey car park erected. The upper floor should be restricted to people

who come to the centre for work. Variants of this suggestion have been made to Solihull Council over the past twenty years. The Balsall Common Village Plan which I led and reported in 2009 had a very clear message: - that over 80% of shoppers did their weekly shop away from the centre of Balsall Common. It is recognised that retail trade is not the same as it was years ago. As an experienced town centre “regenerator” it is clear to me that if shoppers cannot park cars at a reasonable price they will go elsewhere. The irony is that such parking as there is in Balsall Common is free; there is just not enough of it. Hence the suggestion above that the building be acquired.

North area development

In essence, the development of sites at the northern end should not be for residential, but for commercial / job creation uses. The proximity of Balsall Common to the Airport, NEC & UK Central for these functions would assist the tourism offer of the borough. Development here for one or two hotels could also provide some sporting facilities, either indoor or outdoor. The projected layout of the area of the Stud, suggests that officers have been in detailed negotiation with developers. (The same thing applies in respect of Frog Lane). Whilst this might provide officers with some guidance of developer preferences, it does not necessarily provide answers to the needs of the community it seeks to serve. This leads to a sense of cynicism amongst residents who conclude that there is little point in such a consultation, if matters are already decided between officers and developers. Development for a hotel would need a small “footprint”, thus enabling many large trees to be saved.

A change of designation of the Stud area would lead to the “loss” of such land for residential. This could be overcome by replacing it by facilitating the development of Grange Farm. This could be achieved urgently in order to facilitate the relocation of the existing Primary school.

“If not here – where should development be?”

This is a common question in these situations. This submission recognises that Balsall Common will need to lose some Green Belt to accommodate the Solihull Council response to the Birmingham Housing Management Area. This proposal suggests removing Frog Lane and the Trevallion Stud from residential development, whilst taking advantage of Grange Farm and adjacent land. Thus replacing that which would be lost, whilst at the same time creating space for job creation developments – hotel or other commercial developments for the benefit of Balsall Common...

David Deanshaw

Past Chairman of the Balsall Common Village Plan 2004/2009

Professional Regeneration Consultant West Midlands

Former Chairman of Strategic Planning London Borough of Harrow 1980s

Past member of the South-east Regional Planning Forum (SERPLAN).

March 2019