

Bus Action Partnership's response to the Solihull Local Plan Draft Submission Plan October 2020 regarding Knowle, Dorridge & Bentley Heath

Bus use can play a significant part in reduction of emissions as people use their cars less, if at all. Currently the Solihull aim is to encourage travel by public transport, cycling and walking in order to reduce emissions and traffic congestion and also to encourage healthier lifestyles. For public transport to help with this it needs to be readily available, otherwise people won't use it.

Our local Bus Action Partnership was formed in 2019 when representatives from Knowle Society and the Dorridge & District Residents' Association joined together to look at the local bus services. Between us we represent about 4,000 residents across Knowle, Dorridge & Bentley Heath (KDBH). We were aware that the service had been deteriorating over the previous few years and many residents were finding it hard to use the buses due to their infrequency and unreliability. This had been exacerbated by recent changes to routes and timetabling. A summary of our concerns can be found in the letter we sent to Laura Shoaf, the Managing Director of Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) in March of this year. This letter is attached to our submission.

Earlier this year, before the pandemic took hold, we also organised an online survey to get some evidence as to the satisfaction or otherwise of residents with the local bus services. The results are also attached to our submission and indicate that recently (before the pandemic, which has driven bus use down much further as people have been encouraged to use cars rather than public transport for safety reasons) many people have stopped using the services for a number of reasons: they are only hourly, which is not frequent enough to constitute a reasonable service, particularly for people travelling to and from work or school; the services in the evenings and at weekends are very limited; punctuality is poor, which makes the service unreliable and therefore much less attractive; and there are poor links with other buses and transport modes, such as trains. Sometimes there was traffic congestion, which held buses up, adversely affecting punctuality.

Paragraph 685: *"The settlement is well served by public transport with bus services running throughout the area..."*

Our area is **not** well served by public transport. There is a good train service from Dorridge station, but that is not as convenient for those living at the Knowle end of the settlement, giving rise to parking issues in Dorridge as noted. The train and bus services are not linked well so as to facilitate onward journeying, and the bus services are inadequate - infrequent throughout the day and timings are also not tailored to meet the needs of those wishing to use them to get to work or school.

KDBH already has high car ownership and with the proposed new housing developments on Hampton Road and in the Arden Triangle it is imperative that the bus service is improved to prevent significant congestion on the roads in the area. Currently there is no bus service going up Hampton Road at all, and the site of the proposed development there would mean a long walk to catch a bus, which would greatly reduce the likelihood of people living there using the buses.

Paragraph 690 again states that our area is well served by public transport - with regard to the buses, this is **not** the case (see above). The frequency is not sufficient to constitute a good reliable service; for many people the routes are inconvenient and there is a history of unpunctuality which makes people even less likely to use the buses as they feel they cannot rely on the service, even such as it is.

We refer you to the evidence base the Council has published in Solihull Connected and Objective 5 which states that a policy should be “embedded in the Local Plan and Wellbeing policies to support walking, cycling and public transport use ... recognising the specific needs of the different parts of the Borough.

We need to plan differently if we are not to experience severe congestion and adversely affect the attractiveness of the Borough in terms of growth and connectivity.”

We would therefore suggest that the wording is changed to reflect this:

“The area is not well served by the bus network and in accordance with Objective 5 of the Council’s evidence based “Solihull Connected” we will work with the local community and Council Partners to facilitate an improved and sustainable bus service.”

Paragraph 696 - Improved public transport - a higher population gives greater potential for improved public transport to be viable e.g. better frequency of bus services.

The current services are currently woefully inadequate to serve the residents of KDBH; this improvement is needed **immediately**.

(a) Public Transport

Paragraph 253 of the Plan states that

“To make provision for sustainable communities and to realise the future economic ambitions of Solihull it is critical that there is an integrated approach to transport and development across the borough. Easy access to services and facilities such as jobs, education, fresh food retailers and open space by all modes; and an efficient, safe and attractive street and highway network are crucial to supporting these ambitions.”

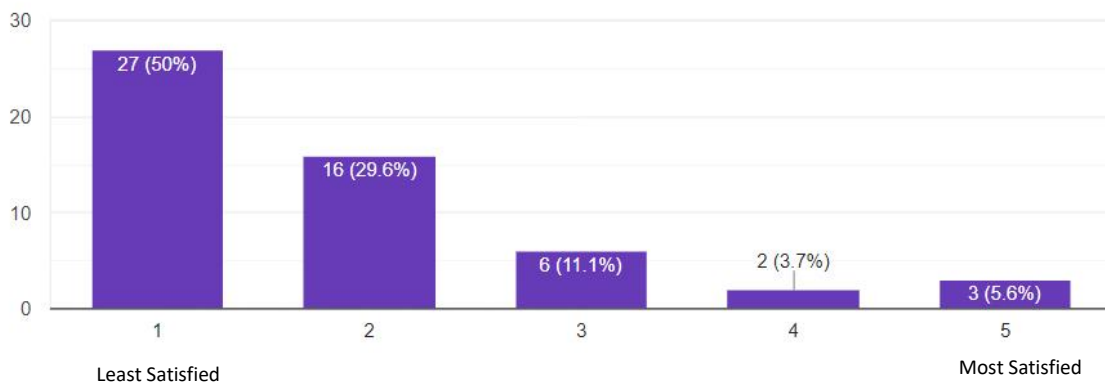
In this context, **Para 685** of the Plan states of KDBH that

“The settlement is well served by public transport with bus services running throughout the area...”

This is disputed, of 96 respondents to a transport survey in KDBH completed in February 2020, 54 declared as bus users and recorded their satisfaction with public transport was reflected as:

How satisfied are you with the frequency of the service?

54 responses

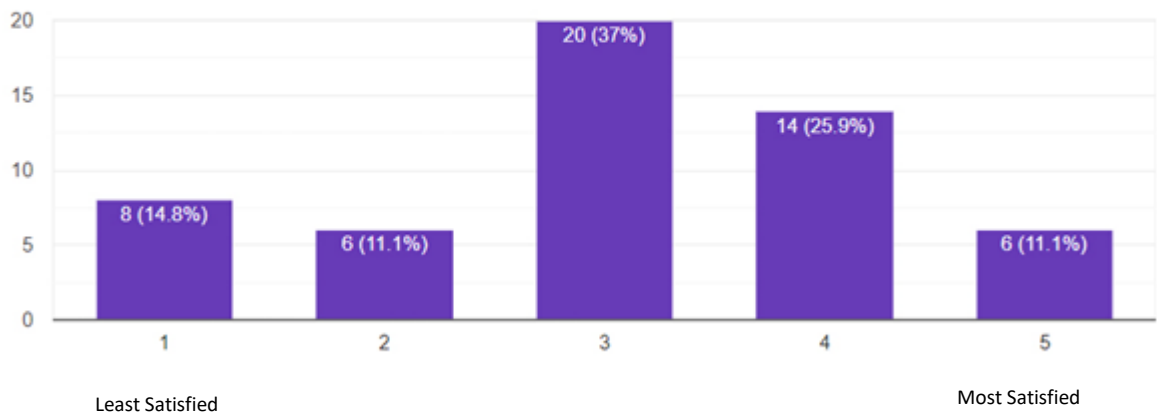


The key issues emerging were that the hourly services (and in excess of an hour between buses at peak times on the A7/8) to all parts of KDBH except the Warwick Road corridor were inadequate to serve the needs of shoppers and those travelling to work and that some of the timings did not serve school and college travellers.

The survey also reflected dissatisfaction with reliability:

How satisfied are you with the reliability of the service, ie adherence to timetable?

54 responses



Paragraph 685 also states

“Regular train services from Dorridge Station in the centre of the village provide links to Birmingham”.

However, the return service from Birmingham from its night time economy has been poor. The Pre-Covid timetable had 48 and 12 minute gaps between trains each hour from Birmingham with those trains 12 minutes apart arriving in Dorridge within a few minutes of each other. (Frequency is currently, understandably) reduced.

Solihull Connected refers to a Community Liveability Programme and “looking at new ways to promote and deliver place and transport initiatives in local neighbourhoods” and that “An important consideration was “transforming high quality public transport and cycle schemes, especially working with partners’ aspirations and programmes”.

The strategy goes on to state –

“This programme (Community Liveability) will identify and assess local transport and place needs in communities through existing and new Local Transport Plan initiatives and potentially community sponsored projects and importantly think differently to optimise council, partner and community resources (described below). This will ensure the best community outcomes in terms of quality of life, enhancing the environment, increasing travel choices and supporting economic vitality in both urban and rural settings”

Paragraph 253 of the Plan states as a local transport issue

“the difficulty in achieving sustainable modes of transport in the rural parts of the Borough, due to the number of small settlements and dispersed population”.

On the other hand, **Paragraph 676** states that

“KDBH is the Borough’s largest rural settlement with a combined population of around 19,800”.

It should be clear that the former issue should not affect KDBH, which has almost 10% of the Borough’s population, and yet transport operators persistently claim that the issue does prevail, because KDBH is ‘rural’ as a reason for low frequency services.

Furthermore, the standards set out in Policy P7 Para 2, ie *“provide access to a high frequency bus service within 400m”* does not presently apply to a significant proportion of KDBH as it stands and, also, would not apply without service change to the two proposed development sites in Knowle apart from the northern part of the Arden Triangle within 400m of the Station Road/Warwick Road junction.

Policy P72 iii also confirms on all development a provision to **“provide access to a bus service offering at least a 30 minute daytime frequency within 400 m of the site”** and

Policy P8 i directs that **“essential travel can be met by forms of sustainable transport in addition to the private car”**.

Accordingly, it is suggested that Para 685 is amended to reflect the true public transport provision in KDBH and to assert the minimum provisions for the area in accordance with Policies P7 and P8. This would accord with the “Justification” criteria set out in the Draft Submission in paragraphs 268, 271 and 276 for the avoidance of doubt and give certainty to applying the policies in respect of KDBH as referred to throughout this submission.

(b) Walking and Cycling

Paragraph 262 of the Plan states:

“The Cycling and Walking Strategy is a key step in our approach to accommodate growth in travel demand on our network while maintaining Solihull’s special character”.

This is taken to imply that, in respect of proposed developments in Knowle, an increase in walking and cycling will mitigate against the impact of population growth to sustain the character of Knowle's village centre in particular.

To sustain the economic health of the retail and business centre of Knowle and to provide ready access to central community facilities, constraining traffic congestion is essential and making the centre more readily accessible by modes of traffic other than the car is vital.

This point is acknowledged within **Paragraph 690** where it is stated:

“Opportunities for enhancing existing walking and cycling routes and creating new routes will continue to be explored, particularly where these would provide access to schools, local centres and the railway station.”

However, the opportunity has not been taken to clearly mark out these opportunities on the Concept Masterplans for the two proposed development sites, where vehicular access points, roads and existing footpaths are marked up, but not any additional walking and cycling routes.

Instead, such proposals are set out in a separate Knowle Transport Study, not apparently referenced in the draft Local Plan.

It would make the draft Local Plan more sound if (a) the Transport Study was referenced and (b) there was compatibility between the plans in the two documents.

In the case of the Arden Triangle, easy access for all parts of site to the village centre, on foot and by cycle, are essential. The Illustrative Masterplan shows low density housing adjacent to Grove Road apparently cut off from access to the rest of the development, whereas a safe cycling/walking route through the development to is likely to be preferred to an exit onto Grove Road and a journey up Stripes Hill, being both shorter and safer.

In the case of the Hampton Road sites, cycling and walking along Hampton Road to the village centre would have no obvious alternative, but cycling on this busy road presents obvious dangers.

In both cases it would helpful in the Illustrative Masterplan to provide some indications for illustrative routes/solutions to safe and convenient walking and cycling opportunities that new residents are likely to find appealing.