

Good morning, and I am pleased to welcome you to Sandwell.

My name is Vicki Smith and I am a councillor for Cradley Hill and Old Heath Ward. I am also the Cabinet Member for Housing and am responsible for planning, including the production and delivery of the Sandwell Local Plan.

I would like to set out the issues we have faced in delivering the Sandwell Local Plan to this examination, as well as some background on Sandwell.

The biggest issue for the Sandwell Local Plan has been in trying to provide sufficient land to meet the identified need for both housing and employment growth. Despite the number of housing and employment sites that have been identified and allocated in the plan, there is a shortfall in both areas. We have a finite supply of land readily available for development, and simply put, we cannot meet all our housing or employment needs within Sandwell.

To try to meet those needs in full would result in significant and harmful levels of overdevelopment in the urban areas and the loss of open and green spaces across the district. Even then, development needs would not be fully met. This degree of town cramming would inevitably have an adverse effect on the living environment, health and wellbeing of Sandwell's residents, alongside the intensification of climate change impacts and the degradation of the natural and built environment, habitats and green and blue infrastructure.

However, we have adopted a positive approach to meeting those needs as far as we can by adopting challenging targets in the Sandwell Local Plan - to provide sites for around 10,500 new homes and protect and deliver around 1200 hectares of employment land between now and 2041, while promoting sustainability, environmental improvements and good design.

We have also worked very hard to ensure that Sandwell's residents benefit from policies designed to mitigate against climate change impacts, encourage recreation and physical wellbeing and provide the infrastructure needed to deliver growth. We are determined to utilise land efficiently, using previously developed land, vacant properties and surplus industrial / employment land, and to maximise housing densities where appropriate.

Our Council Plan 2024 – 2027 supports the delivery of a healthier, more successful future for the people of Sandwell and enhance people's life chances across the borough. It identifies several proposed outcomes that would indicate success. The Sandwell Local Plan helps to deliver the spatial aspects of the Council Plan, by shaping the pattern, type, character and location of growth in the Borough:

- **Growing up in Sandwell** – the Local Plan contains policies that will contribute to the delivery of facilities, services and opportunities for children and young people.
- **Living in Sandwell** - The Local Plan will be important to local communities, supporting town centres and associated community facilities and services. It will play an important part in delivering the spatial and land use aspects of the Council's Vision 2030, particularly as it relates to housing, employment, transport, environment and education goals.

- **Healthy in Sandwell** – Health and wellbeing is a key theme addressed throughout the Local Plan. It promotes healthy living and supports active lifestyles and healthy transport choices including walking, cycling and outdoor recreation.
- **Thriving economy in Sandwell** - The Plan will provide the regeneration framework for future investments and projects, particularly in more deprived areas.
- **One Council One Team** – delivery of the plan ambitions will require collaboration and partnership working across the organisation if we are going to achieve the level of ambition set out in the plan

We are the second-most densely populated local authority area in the West Midlands (after Birmingham) with a young and diverse population. More than 40% of our residents are under 30, compared to around 30% elsewhere in the UK. Our population is also more diverse than elsewhere, with almost 40% of residents from an ethnic minority background compared to the regional average of 18.8%. In 2019 Sandwell was ranked as the 12th most deprived of England's 317 local authority areas.

Sandwell covers an area of 86 square kilometres. Of this area, around 20 square kilometres are made up of various types of open space, including parks, community open spaces, allotments, and sports fields. Many of these sites also contain further designations, such as local nature reserves, sites of importance for both local and regional nature conservation, Green Belt, waterways and green corridors.

According to a survey carried out in 2021, Sandwell has the highest level of tree canopy cover in the Black Country at 18%, compared to 17% in Dudley, 16.6% in Wolverhampton and 10.5% in Walsall.

And for such a heavily developed and urbanised area, we also contain the regionally significant Sandwell Valley, which plays a vital role in delivering opportunities for recreation, acts as a leisure destination for many thousands of people a year and contains some of Sandwell's most important green places and areas of ecological value.

Despite the shortage of deliverable sites to meet our housing and economic growth needs, there is no justification for the redrawing of green belt boundaries within Sandwell. Green belt in Sandwell plays a crucial role in preventing the coalescence of towns and settlements within and beyond Sandwell's boundaries, and in protecting open land.

Sandwell has a long industrial history, especially in manufacturing. Until the 1980s the Black Country, together with neighbouring Birmingham, was the powerhouse of Britain's manufacturing economy. We welcome residents from Birmingham and the other Black Country boroughs who work in our many businesses and industries; our residents similarly work and travel outside the borough. We have developed close and supportive working relationships with neighbouring authorities, many of whom are also experiencing similar shortfalls in available housing and employment land.

Sandwell's history of intense industrial and mining activity means that land that may become available for development is often in need of remediation. This in turn lowers site viability, which acts as a constraint on the type and amount of development that can be delivered. This same industrial history has also left a positive legacy. The

borough's rich industrial heritage and architecture is of note; we are keen to safeguard it as a record of our history.

Given Sandwell's highly urbanised nature and its location at the heart of the main West Midlands conurbation, it was neither feasible nor realistic to identify a strategy in the SLP that required the use of large tracts of vacant open land, either brownfield sites or land that was classified as greenfield or undeveloped. Sandwell has a limited amount of the type of high-quality land needed to enable businesses to expand and grow in the borough's industrial core.

We have recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the creation of the borough of Sandwell, but our collective history goes back much further than that. Sandwell is a truly polycentric place that comprises six historic former boroughs, some of which have roots going back to the Anglo-Saxon era; places such as Oldbury and Smethwick are mentioned in the Domesday Book. These former boroughs contain numerous smaller settlements and localities, each with their own distinct and proudly held identities, populated by hardworking and friendly communities.

As we say here, Sandwell is a bostin place, full of bostin people, and Sandwell Council is committed to delivering a sound and sustainable local plan that serves our residents' needs.