

SOLIHULL LOCAL PLAN REVIEW

DICKENS HEATH PARISH COUNCIL's RESPONSE January 2016

Scale of development

The parishes of Cheswick Green, Dickens Heath and Tidbury Green, the “Blythe Villages,” have taken substantial development under past Plans, notably the Dickens Heath new village, constructed in the last 15 years. Tidbury Green Parish faces 190 more houses on greenfield land at Tidbury Green Farm and is threatened with a further 250 or so houses on Lowbrook Farm.

This area is part of the West Midlands Green Belt which washes over existing older residential development, but out of which land has been taken for new development. The Green Belt should not be reduced further.

There is no case for any ‘Sustainable Urban Extension’ in the Dickens Heath Parish. Dickens Heath has reached the limits of expansion; any further growth would reduce gaps between the new village and other settlements and create urban sprawl, the prevention of which is one of the purposes of the Green Belt as stated in the NPPF.

The Strategic Housing Needs Study for the Housing Market Area (SHNS, August 2015) is clear that SUEs should be resisted in this type of area:

“For the planning authorities in the HMA (Housing Market Area), a key policy choice will remain the future role of the Green Belt, and particularly its role in checking the growth of the conurbation, as opposed to towns and villages in the wider Green Belt. Almost any SUE (Sustainable Urban Extension) option will result in the loss of Green Belt land. Therefore, if the primary function and purpose of the Green Belt is to check the growth of the conurbation, SUE proposals on the edges of the City and Black Country, including Solihull, should continue to be resisted. On this basis, SUE growth should be directed further afield, to the main settlements in the shire counties”. (para 10.26)

Impact of existing development

Dickens Heath now has some 1800 dwellings (and increasing) but the original design was for only 700 dwellings. The impact of this level of population on the local road system, which has had no road improvements to compensate for this additional growth, is significant. Outside the village built-up boundary, the roads are primarily narrow country lanes. Heavy traffic and increased local traffic have already churned up and ruined verges on [Rumbush Lane, Cleobury Lane, Braggs Farm Lane and Wood Lane]. There are junctions with low visibility which were not a problem before the recent housing growth, but are now potentially dangerous. The level of traffic creates noise, and deters walking and cycling on what were once quiet lanes.

The main public transport facility in the Dickens Heath and Tidbury Green areas is the frequent train service between Whitlocks End and Central Birmingham via Shirley. This has been provided since 2010 and has changed travel patterns; previously the hourly service did not attract heavy use. With the low frequency (hourly) and lack of car parking at Wythall, Whitlocks End is heavily used and its car park is overloaded now. The service and car parking at Whitlocks End

was expanded primarily to serve Dickens Heath (1 km to the east) was developed but it is now also being used substantially by commuters who do not live in the immediate vicinity and who travel from further afield. In its own way, it has become a “Park and Ride” destination.

The car park is now operating at full capacity and with no alternative parking is effectively locking out the local users it was originally intended to service. It is programmed for expansion by Centro to meet additional demand from both existing and new residential developments in Dickens Heath and the Blythe Villages area. However it is located some distance from any motorway links and further out of area use should be discouraged while supporting local growth by improved provision of sustainable forms of transport links with facilities for cycling, walking and improved direct bus services. This would allow local residents to benefit from shorter more practical home to destination journey times that utilises the surplus rail capacity.

Options for growth (Section 6 of Local Plan Review consultation)

Dickens Heath Parish Council strongly opposes ‘Option 1’ (pages 33-34). This Option proposes development adjacent to railway stations at Whitlocks End and Wythall, against the County Boundary. (It does not show what the effect of this Option might be in Bromsgrove District.) There may be a case for locating development close to railway stations on other lines but not on the North Warwickshire Line.

Any housing located between Dickens Heath and Whitlocks End would amount to urban sprawl on a large area of Green Belt. The contained village of Dickens Heath would be expanded away from the services at its centre. Ancient Woodland and valuable playing fields for local clubs would be under threat. The original decision to approve Dickens Heath, by the adoption of the first UDP in 1997, was made in the context of Green Belt status being confirmed at the same time on all the open land around the settlement. The Green Belt until 1997 was only ‘Proposed’ or ‘Interim’ Green Belt. This confirmed status, which dates from 1997, should not be altered. Exceptional circumstances need to be demonstrated to alter Green Belt boundaries in a Local Plan Review. There are no exceptional circumstances for changing the boundary to allow 500-700 new houses on the land between Dickens Heath and Fulford Hall Lane.

Infrastructure needs (‘Solihull Connected’, Page 50 of Local Plan Review consultation)

There is a need for local infrastructure in the Dickens Heath Parish.

Para 182 states:

“The Council is also developing a local transport strategy and investment programme, ‘Solihull Connected’. This will set out a vision for transport in Solihull for the next 20 years along with a short, medium and long term investment plan. The ambition set out in the Green Paper is to create a balanced transport investment programme that recognises the need to cater for cars, but places an increasing emphasis on walking, cycling and public transport. This approach aims to accommodate the increasing demand for travel as a result of growth, whilst ensuring the quality of Solihull is protected and that transport effectively supports the delivery of wider agendas such as those around climate change and health.”

No public transport improvements are proposed in the list at para 183 that would serve Dickens Heath, and no investments in walking and cycling schemes are listed at all.

The Parish Council would wish to see included in ‘Solihull Connected’ improvements for public transport and walking and cycling.

In particular ways to access the rail services at Whitlocks End (Dickens Heath’s station) from the village are deficient. Most users drive despite the relatively short distance (1-1.5 km) because walking and cycling are less than easy. The traffic calming on Tithe Barn Lane slows cars but does not provide good facilities for walking or cycling. The facilities at Whitlocks End are poor – no station building or kiosk despite heavy commuting use.

The Parish Council proposes that a separate cycleway alongside Tithe Barn Lane from Dickens Heath to Whitlocks End station be included in Solihull Connected. This would have the effect of transferring many trips from car to cycle or foot, and reduce pressure on Whitlocks End station car park. The proposal needs to be listed in the Plan and shown on the Proposals Map before it can be promoted by Solihull MBC as highway authority and funds used to acquire land and carry out the works.

The Parish Council suggests that co-ordination with Worcestershire County Council take place with a view to continuing the cycleway by a bridge over the railway and a new cycle track alongside Truemans Heath Lane to Truemans Heath. A complete route would maximise of cycling and walking to access the rail service. The need to take more land in the Green Belt to add still more station car parking would be substantially reduced. Better facilities for users of the station could also be provided; it currently has little shelter and no sales kiosk to serve users.

Dickens Heath Parish Council fully understands the need for more housing land in the Plan period and therefore agree to “**Options B, C, D & E.**” To cater for the level of growth proposed, and to minimise the impact on the Green Belt, the Council will need to incorporate all these “Options” in the Plan.

As for “**Option F**” (Page42), while we recognise that the Blythe Valley Park site is capable of additional housing, the rest of the “Blythe Villages” of Cheswick Green, Tidbury Green and Dickens Heath have had enough recent development and cannot take any more development. It is for the individual remaining rural villages to decide if they can cope with additional development or not. The Green Belt surrounding these “Blythe Villages” should not be altered.

Growth “**Option G**”(Page 44) would have a significant adverse effect on the Green Belt and as such, the Dickens Heath Parish Council strongly object to this proposal. However, if the “Blythe Villages” are to be protected from any more future development, we understand that some development will need to be built in the Green Belt as there is so little brownfield land available for development. We therefore propose that the area of Light Hall Farm, South of Shirley and North-East of Dickens Heath could be taken out of the Green Belt for development at a later phasing stage of the Local Plan.

We trust that our views will be duly considered by your Council and would welcome the opportunity to discuss our views further with your officers if required. We wish to congratulate the Council on the preparation of this document which is comprehensive but user friendly.