

What is a Local Plan and why is it important?

- All Local Planning Authorities must prepare a Local Plan covering their area. The Local Plan should cover a 15 year period, setting out how much development the area should accommodate, sites to accommodate that development and supporting infrastructure. The Plan also identifies areas for protection and enhancement including the green belt and key heritage and biodiversity assets.
- If we don't have a Local Plan, we will not have a sound basis to make planning and investment decisions, losing control of where development takes place across the City. Government has powers to directly prepare a Local Plan for the City if we do not progress, and have used these powers elsewhere in England (including in South Essex and Oxfordshire).

The Wolverhampton Local Plan

- The City has an adopted Local Plan in the form of the Black Country Core Strategy (BCCS), adopted 2011, and a series of Area Action Plans (AAPs) adopted 2014-16 covering key regeneration areas. We have also supported our communities in preparing two Neighbourhood Plans (adopted 2014) which carry full legal weight.
- The current Local Plan documents are dated, and need reviewing in order to ensure that we have an up to date Plan which carries full legal weight.

The Black Country Plan

- The Black Country Plan (BCP) was the principal mechanism to update the current Local Plan, and was being produced on a joint basis with the other Black Country Councils. Between 2017-22, significant progress had been made with the BCP, including two stages of public consultation and an extensive evidence base. By Autumn 2022, the final draft Plan was being prepared for consultation.
- In September 2022, Dudley Council unilaterally withdrew from the BCP without prior warning. Given the requirement to have an up to date Local Plan in place, the Council resolved to prepare a Wolverhampton Local Plan (WLP), building on the work already undertaken for the BCP. Work on the WLP progressed from late 2022.

Wolverhampton Local Plan – the NPPF

- In December 2022, Government published proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for consultation. The Local Plan must be in compliance with the NPPF.
- The proposed changes covered a range of issues including how plans should consider sites in the green belt when identifying sites for housing development. The impact of this proposed change means that if included in the final version, then Local Plans are not required to allocate land in the green belt even if it is not possible to meet housing needs on all other sources of land including maximising capacity on brownfield sites.

The implications of the NPPF for Wolverhampton

- Wolverhampton cannot meet its housing needs in full on land within the existing urban area, so based on the current (unmodified) NPPF, we were required to consider opportunities within the green belt as set out in the BCP.
- The proposed changes to the NPPF mean that this is no longer the case, and in January 2023 the Leader announced that, subject to approvals, it would be the intention to bring forward a Wolverhampton Local Plan with no green belt sites at all allocated for development.
- This announcement also confirmed that, as a prudent and responsible Council, we need to consider the full implications of the final version of the NPPF before we progress the WLP through further stages of consultation. This is consistent with the approach of a number of other Councils, including South Staffordshire, Walsall and Bromsgrove.

Wolverhampton Local Plan – next steps

- On 8th September 2023 the Secretary of State advised that the revised NPPF will be published ‘in the Autumn’. If the NPPF is published at that time, we will be able to respond quickly, building on the work we have already prepared.
- The Plan must go through a number of statutory stages, the first of which is an Issues and Preferred Options consultation setting out the scope and proposed strategy including areas for development and protection / enhancement.
- Subject to the timing of the NPPF, this could take place in early 2024 following Cabinet approval, followed by consultation on a Draft Plan in autumn 2024.
- This will allow us to submit the Plan to Government for Examination by June 2025 – the key deadline for Plans which are being prepared under the current Local Plan system. Adoption should then take place in mid-2026.