

Local Plan review 2021, Salisbury Civic Society response

1) New settlement concept. The Society is very disappointed that the plan contains no proposal for shifting all greenfield development (assuming that it's currently not realistic to expect this to be reduced to zero) away from existing settlements, and to completely focus it on a new settlement somewhere in south Wiltshire.

The Society has long advocated this, believing that a continuing process of seeking less and less satisfactory sites on the edge of Salisbury, in particular, has nothing to be said for it, and will just increasingly detract from the city's character. A new settlement, carefully positioned, would create the chance to create a genuine new community, properly infrastructured. It would, subject to the commercial requirements of the housebuilders who would no doubt need to play a major role, offer town planners, architects and landscape architects the chance to think a settlement through from scratch, and create something which is a testament to the possibilities of contemporary design, and a great benefit to those who live there.

The Society is very disappointed that the emerging spatial strategy's assessment of three alternative development strategies, for the Salisbury Housing Market Area, ranked the new settlement concept as the worst performing of these. It would query whether the 'sustainability appraisal' which produced this result really took into account all the relevant factors. It is notable that the general assessment of the way forward for Salisbury states that there may be 'long term constraints' on continuing with the current strategy, on which the plan thinking is based. If this strategy is likely to eventually run into a dead end, now is surely the time to look for an alternative approach, and avoid some of the damage which will be done before that dead end is reached.

If the new settlement concept cannot in any case be fully evaluated, 'due to having no knowledge of a specific location', the Society believes that this plan review was absolutely the time to consider any and all possible locations, and to reach a decision on whether a new settlement is viable, and hopefully get the process of achieving one in motion. There is nothing to be gained from the continuing uncertainty regarding the new settlement concept, which others as well as the Civic Society have been advocating for south Wiltshire for many years.

2) Location of the 940 dwellings sought for Salisbury. The Society's ultimate position is that none of these should be located on greenfield sites. Current thinking, driven in particular by the climate emergency, should be pushing towards the abandonment of construction on such sites, and the seeking of higher densities within the existing city in order to meet projected needs.

However, because the Society accepts that it may be unrealistic to expect this sort of major change to happen rapidly, it will still comment on the suggestions in the plan for the achievement of these 940 dwellings. It believes that Site 6, north of the Downton road, is fundamentally unacceptable, principally because of its impact on views of the cathedral, and it does not believe the impact could be removed or mitigated to an acceptable degree through the scale or layout of any housing scheme there. It is not minded to propose any alternative location for the 220 dwellings proposed for this site, believing instead that these should be treated as additional to the 330 dwellings cited by the plan as coming from proposals in the adopted Salisbury Central Area Framework, and from the emerging Salisbury Neighbourhood Plan's call for sites. This is linked to three other aspects of the plans on which we wish to comment, as follows.

3) The Maltings/Central Car Park. The Society believes that this area is not properly considered in the plan, and that some reference needs to be made to the 200 dwellings on it which are already adopted policy, and therefore do not count towards the calculation of the 940 dwellings needed in Salisbury. Furthermore, it believes that this major brownfield site, which in the emerging retail climate seems very unlikely to be the focus of any major retail developments, should be able to accommodate significantly more than 200 dwellings, once the River Park project has prepared the way for major redevelopment schemes on the site. It should be possible to achieve quite high densities here, without needing to build particularly high and have any impact on cathedral views.

4) Churchfields. The Society is very disappointed by the 'assumption', quoted in the Alternative Development Strategy section of the plan documentation, that 'There are significant barriers to the re-development of the Churchfields site in Salisbury for housing. It is not considered capable of development in the plan period 2016- 2036.' While the adopted policy which seeks 1100 dwellings on Churchfields and the Engine Shed site may well not be achievable in any foreseeable time frame (and in the case of the latter location possibly not at all), this should not prevent a serious look at removing of some existing uses on Churchfields, not least ones operated by Wiltshire Council, and looking for a portion of housing development here. This is another major brownfield site, and abandoning any hope of building houses on it before 2036 is not the sort of approach the council should be advocating.

5) Brownfield sites generally. The importance of maximum utilisation of brownfield sites needs to be at the absolute forefront of plan thinking. In addition to the Maltings/Central Car Park and Churchfields, as already referred to, the Society would emphasise the potential for housing, along possibly with other uses, on the Brown Street and Salt Lane car parks. This has been cited since at least the Salisbury Vision of 2006, and the time has come to take it forwards in a serious way.

There are many other possible small sites where, without challenging the adopted Salisbury Skyline policy, housing development of a reasonable scale of density can be fitted in. With the right professional design input from architects, town planners, landscape architects, and urban designers, such developments could also add significantly to the built quality of the city.

6) Green and Blue Infrastructure (GBI). The Society is very concerned at the lack of consideration of Salisbury's GBI in the Local Plan review. The landscape and riparian environments, i.e. the local green and blue infrastructure, not only constitute the natural capital which the community depends on for providing resilience going forward, but support health and wellbeing with spaces for recreation, education and getting close to nature. They also provide an extremely high-quality landscape setting which supports the local economy by making Salisbury an attractive place to live, work and visit, as has been highlighted in the Central Area Framework published last year.

There are spectacular views to the cathedral and city from most of the principal routes into Salisbury along the river valleys and from the surrounding chalk downs, as well as extensive views beyond to the wider landscape. There is a wealth of important cultural features and important wildlife habitats in addition to the historic fabric. For example, as noted in the CAF, the watermeadows penetrate into the heart of the city, the important historic landmark of Old Sarum overlooks the city from the north, and there are the internationally important rare chalk stream habitats that flow through the city, and several contemporary as well as historic designed landscapes within the urban area.

Salisbury's green and blue spaces are already under pressure from large scale peripheral housing development, and there are still more planning approvals in the pipelines which will mean additional pressures – overuse, misuse, and protected sites and priority habitats becoming increasingly vulnerable to damage.

The Local Plan review low growth strategy with a focus on brownfield sites is to be welcomed, and it is important that the Salisbury Area Greenspace Partnership community generated plan, 'Working towards a GBI Strategy for the Salisbury Area', which illustrates the potential for safeguarding and enhancing local GBI, is acknowledged by Wiltshire Council policy makers and incorporated into the Local Plan Settlement Profile for Salisbury. The Civic Society strongly supports the work done by the SAGP in this respect, and asks Wiltshire Council to make the fullest possible use of it.