

Draft Solihull Rural Settlement Hierarchy Assessment

July 2025

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Solihull is preparing a new Local Plan to guide development in the Borough up to 2043¹. The Plan will need to reflect the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework 2024 (NPPF), which introduced the concept of grey belt and set the clear expectation that local authorities should review Green Belt boundaries where the identified need for homes, commercial or other development cannot be met through other means. It also established a new national method for calculating local housing needs which has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of houses that will be required for Solihull, such that a review of Green Belt boundaries will be needed in the Borough.
- 1.2 Where it is necessary to release Green Belt land for development, the NPPF states that plans should give priority to previously developed land, then consider grey belt, which is not previously developed, and then other Green Belt locations.
- 1.3 The definition of grey belt is outlined in the glossary of the NPPF as follows:
- “For the purposes of plan-making and decision-making, ‘grey belt’ is defined as land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and / or any other land that, in either case, does not strongly contribute to any of purposes (a), (b) or (d) in paragraph 143. ‘Grey belt’ excludes land where the application of the policies relating to the areas in footnote 7 (other than Green Belt) would provide a strong reason for refusing or restricting development.”***
- 1.4 The ‘purposes’ (a), (b) and (d), as outlined to in the above paragraph, refer to the following purposes that Green Belt serves:
- Purpose (a) is to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas.
 - Purpose (b) is to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another.
 - Purpose (d) is to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns.
- 1.5 When considering how land performs specifically against purposes (a), (b) and (d), the [National Planning Practice Guidance](#) (NPPG) now makes it explicit (for the first time) that villages should **not** be considered large built-up areas in relation to purpose (a). Similarly, it is specifically stated that that purpose (b) relates to the merging of towns, not villages; and that purpose (d) relates to historic towns, not villages.
- 1.6 In the context of the amended NPPF and NPPG it is now clear that there are specific consequences to whether a settlement is considered a village or a town. It will influence the interpretation of Green Belt / grey belt policy and have implications for the location of new development.
- 1.7 This is particularly relevant in Solihull where the gaps between settlements in the Green Belt are considered important, including the vital strategic gap between Birmingham/Solihull and Coventry, known as the Meriden Gap. Indeed, one of the key challenges in the current Local Plan and the recently withdrawn Local Plan is to maintain the gap between key settlements to ensure the integrity of the Green Belt in Solihull and to ensure it contributes to the purposes of Green Belt.

¹ Plan period dates still to be confirmed.

2. Purpose of the Study

- 2.1 The term 'village' has often been used to describe the more rural settlements in Solihull, largely due to their location outside the main urban area, rather than as a result of a proper assessment of their characteristics. Whilst this has previously been inconsequential, it is now clear that the Council must give more consideration to what this means in practice.
- 2.2 It is also acknowledged that many local planning documents, including the Development Plan and relevant neighbourhood plans use the terms 'villages' or 'rural settlements' interchangeably. However, it is important to recognise that these documents were prepared within in a policy context that did not include the explicit differentiation between towns and villages that is now provided in the NPPG.
- 2.3 Whether a settlement is considered a village or a town now has direct consequences for the implementation of Green Belt / grey belt policy; it will influence the Green Belt boundary review process and have implications for the location of new development.
- 2.4 The Council is therefore preparing a settlement hierarchy to consider the settlements in the rural part of the Borough to see whether any should be redefined as towns. For the purposes of this exercise, if a settlement is located in the main urban area of Solihull, it is not considered to be a village.

3. Methodology

- 3.1 There is no specific national policy guidance on what might constitute a ‘town’ or a ‘village’. However, it is recognised that towns generally have a larger population and a more developed, wider range of infrastructure than villages. They usually have a mix of residential, commercial and retail areas and a wider range of services and facilities, for example.

Population

- 3.2 Notwithstanding the absence of explicit definitions, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) has published data and analysis on towns in England and Wales. Whilst recognising the considerable diversity of places, it helpfully categorises towns into three size bands as follows:

Table 1: ONS Settlement Categories

	Size (population Census 2011)	Counts	% of all towns
Small	5,000 – 20,000	748	63
Medium	20,000 – 75,000	347	29
Large	75,000 – 225,000	91	8

Urban settlements used in the towns analysis, England and Wales (Source: Census 2011)

- 3.3 In addition, in June 2018 The House of Commons Library (HoCL) published a briefing paper on [City and Town Classification of Constituencies and Local Authorities](#). In this publication, the following classifications are used:

Table 2: HoCL Settlement Categories

	Population
Large towns	60,000 – 174,999
Medium towns	25,000 – 59,999
Small towns	7,500 – 24,999
Villages and small communities	Less than 7,500

- 3.4 Whilst it is recognised that the classification is not intended to resolve issues around which settlements deserve to be called ‘towns’ or ‘villages’, it nonetheless provides a further reference against which to consider where Solihull’s settlements could fall, based on population.
- 3.5 In the absence of any other specific guidance or classification, in the first instance it is proposed to see whether any of Solihull’s settlements fall within the above population categories.
- 3.6 It is then proposed to look at the population of other ‘towns’ in neighbouring local authorities to see how they compare to the settlements in Solihull.

Services and facilities

- 3.7 Notwithstanding this, whether a place is defined as a town or a village can be more nuanced than just population. Therefore, the study will look at the type of services and facilities present in an area, based on what would typically be expected in the broad categories of settlement types.

- 3.8 Generally, settlements are grouped into categories like cities, towns, villages, and hamlets, with cities being the largest and hamlets being the smallest. Within these broad categories, further distinctions can be made, but the purpose of this exercise is to consider where Solihull's rural settlements would sit in a broad settlement hierarchy.
- 3.9 Based on the broad settlement types, the table below lists the key services and facilities that would likely be expected:

Table 3: Key services and facilities based on settlement types

Facility	Settlement type			
	City	Town	Village	Hamlet
Large supermarket	✓	✓		
Small supermarket / convenience store	✓	✓	✓	
Post office	✓	✓	✓	
Church	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community hall	✓	✓	✓	
Library	✓	✓	✓	
Comparison shopping opportunities	✓	✓		
Bank	✓	✓		
Leisure centre	✓	✓		
Restaurant	✓	✓	✓	
Cafe	✓	✓	✓	
Primary school	✓	✓	✓	
Secondary school	✓	✓		
Higher education / sixth form	✓	✓		
Cinema	✓	✓		
Theatre	✓	✓		
Pub	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotel	✓	✓		
Hospital	✓	✓		
GP surgery	✓	✓	✓	
Dentist	✓	✓		
Pharmacy	✓	✓		

- 3.10 The study will therefore consider which of the above services and facilities are present in the settlements in the rural part of the Borough. All of these settlements are currently referred to as villages. The presence, or not of these facilities, coupled with population will be helpful in determining whether and at what threshold a settlement could be redefined from village to town.
- 3.11 The principal purpose of this study is to provide criteria for distinguishing between towns and villages. Although the terms small, medium and large towns are used, this study is not intended to ascribe these labels, nor is it seeking to establish criteria for distinguishing between villages and hamlets.

4. The settlements in Solihull

4.1 The settlement assessment will focus on the main rural settlements in the Borough. They are located outside the main urban area of Solihull and are freestanding rural settlements, largely (or partly) inset in the Green Belt. They include:

- Balsall Common
- Blythe Valley Park
- Catherine-de-Barnes
- Cheswick Green
- Dickens Heath
- Hampton-in-Arden
- Hockley Heath
- Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath (KDBH)
- Meriden
- Tidbury Green

4.2 It will be noted that there are additional settlements in the Borough that are not listed above. These include the smaller rural settlements, which are washed over by the Green Belt and already known as having a small population², very limited local service provision and facilities, and lack accessibility other than by private car. These areas include:

- Barston
- Bickenhill
- Eastcote
- Millisons Wood
- Berkswell
- Chadwick End
- Illshaw Heath
- Temple Balsall

4.3 In terms of establishing whether these settlements should be defined as towns, it is clear that their small population and limited facilities, would not make them suitable candidates.

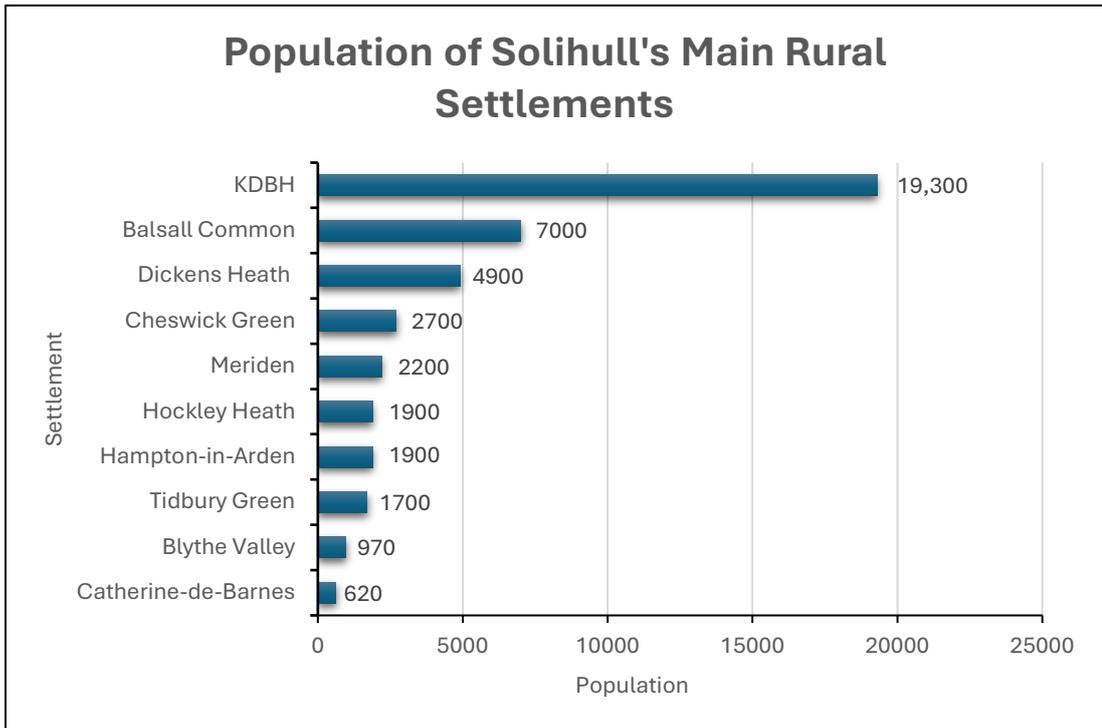
Population and Households

4.4 Using ONS built-up area maps³ of the main rural settlements listed in above, the population in each area (as of 2022) is as follows and is shown graphically below:

Settlement	Population	No. of Households
Catherine-de-Barnes	620	270
Blythe Valley Park area	970	260
Hampton-in-Arden	1,900	800
Hockley Heath	1,900	770
Meriden	2,200	990
Cheswick Green	2,700	1,100
Dickens Heath	4,900	2,100
Balsall Common	7,000	2,900
KDBH	19,300	7,900

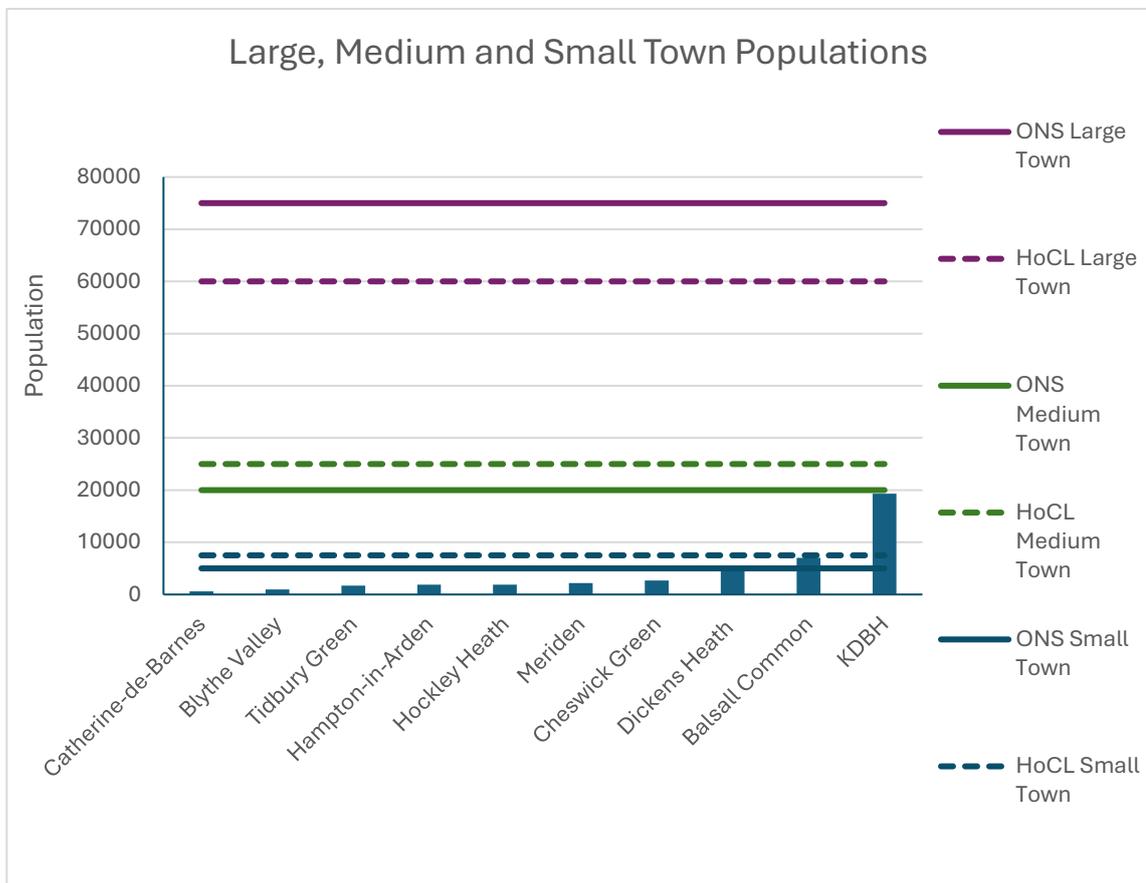
² Population specific to the settlement could not be obtained from ONS as area too small.

³ Geographies based on the physical built environment, used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to define areas of urban settlement in the UK.



Source: ONS Built Up Areas 2022

- 4.5 **Appendix 1** provides an ONS summary profile of each settlement.
- 4.6 On population alone, based on ONS settlement category sizes in Table 1 above and the HoCL Town Classifications publication at Table 2 above, there are 2 settlements in Solihull that could be identified as a (small) town. These are Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath and Balsall Common.



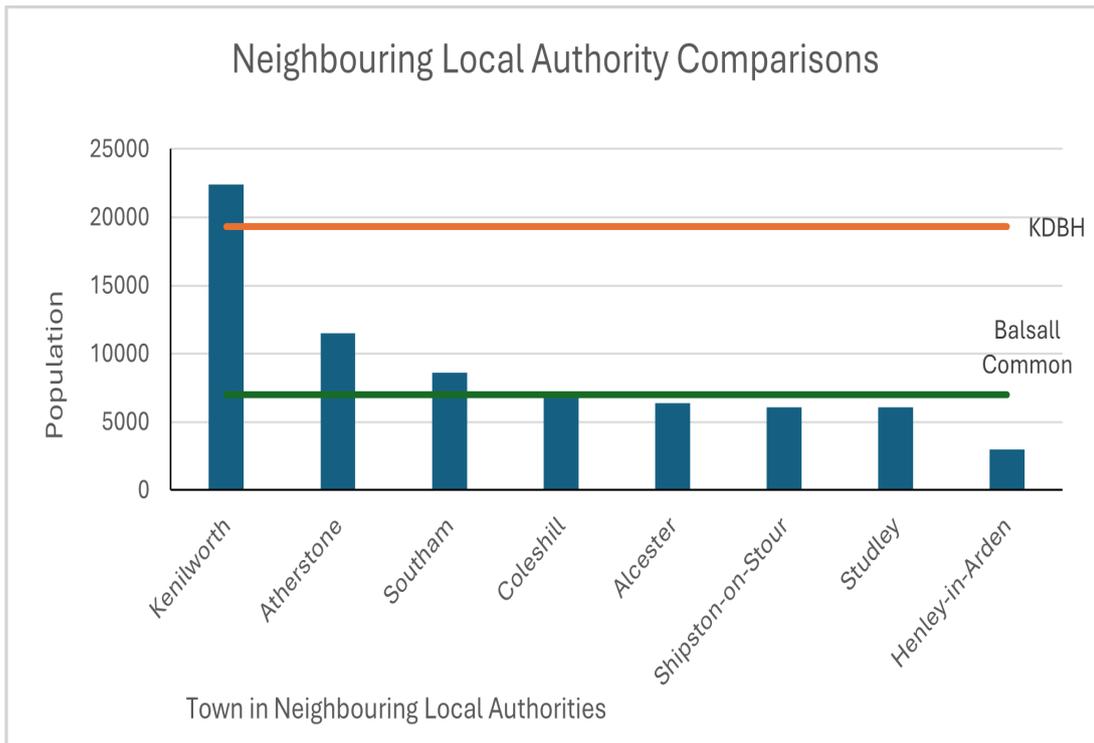
- 4.7 It can be seen that Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath, with a population of almost 20,000 is much bigger than the minimum population of a small town when considered in the context of the ONS data and HoCL Town Classifications publication. Similarly, the population of Balsall Common is also above the minimum threshold of what might be considered a small town by the ONS. Whilst Balsall Common falls just short of a small town using the HoCL publication minimum thresholds, it is recognised that the future development likely to occur in the settlement as a result current planning applications coming forward from previous draft Local Plan site allocations, will take the population of the settlement to over 7500 in the near future. However, based on a rounded view of the criteria it is considered as of now it meets the criteria to be considered a town (see later sections).
- 4.8 Dickens Heath also comes close to the threshold of a small town when considered against the ONS classification. However, it falls short of the HoCL threshold of what would be considered a small town based on population. All other settlements are also below what could be considered a small town based on population.

Local Comparisons

- 4.9 Having considered the population of settlements in Solihull, it is helpful to then look at the population of ‘towns’ in neighbouring authorities to see if any comparisons can be made. A selection of settlements from the neighbouring authorities of Stratford, Warwick, North Warwickshire have been chosen, as they are identified as ‘towns’ in their respective districts.
- 4.10 Using the data from the Built Up Area (BUA) maps of the ONS, the population of the selected towns in neighbouring local authorities are set out below:

Settlement	Population based on latest BUA from ONS 2022
Kenilworth	22,400
Atherstone	11,500
Southam	8,600
Coleshill	7,000
Alcester	6,400
Shipston-on-Stour	6,100
Studley	6,100
Henley-in-Arden	3,000

- 4.11 When comparing settlements in Solihull to those in neighbouring authorities, it is clear from the graph below that Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath is much bigger than many ‘towns’ in these areas. In population terms, KDBH is closest in size to Kenilworth. Similarly, Balsall Common is also bigger than many neighbouring towns, being comparable with Coleshill.



Services and Facilities

- 4.12 The type of services and facilities found in Solihull’s rural settlements are set out in Table 4 below.
- 4.13 The table seeks to show the services and facilities that are present in the rural settlements of the Borough. It identifies which settlements have facilities that are more typically associated with a village and whether any settlement may have facilities that are also more typically located within a town.
- 4.14 It can be seen that KDBH and Balsall Common have the most facilities that would likely be found in a town. Whilst there is no hospital, leisure centre, theatre, or cinema, not all these facilities are present in every town, in any event. Similarly, the shift to mobile banking has seen a reduction in the number of banks present in many town centres across the country.
- 4.15 The difficulties in trying to identify a threshold at which a village may transition to a town based only on services and facilities are fully recognised. However, it is clear that in Solihull’s rural settlements, the presence of a large supermarket, a secondary school and higher education opportunities, along with a full range of other facilities, could be seen as the tipping point at which a settlement morphs from village to town.

Table 4: Services and facilities available in Solihull's rural settlements

	Facility	Settlement									
		KDBH	Balsall Common	Dickens Heath	Cheswick Green	Meriden	Hockley Heath	Hampton – in - Arden	Tidbury Green	Blythe Valley Park	Catherine-de-Barnes
Town	Hospital	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Bank	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Leisure centre	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Cinema	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Theatre	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Large supermarket	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Secondary school	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Higher education / sixth form	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Comparison shopping opportunities	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x
	Dentist	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x
Village	Hotel	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x
	Pharmacy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	x	x
	Post office	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓ (limited opening)	✓	x	x	x
	Library	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	x	x
	Church	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x
	GP surgery	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	x	x
	Primary school	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x
	Café	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
	Restaurant	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
	Pub	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
Small supermarket / convenience store	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	
Community hall	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	

5. Large Built-up Areas

- 5.1 Paragraph 143 of the NPPF sets out that purpose (a) of the Green Belt is to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas. However, neither it (nor the NPPG) defines what a large built-up area is. The NPPG does state that villages should not be considered large built-up areas.
- 5.2 As part of this consultation, the Council is keen to hear views on which parts of the Borough could be considered as large built-up areas in the context of the NPPF.
- 5.3 Within Solihull this could include the following:
- The urban area which includes Solihull, Shirley, UK Central Hub area and North Solihull.
 - The urban edge of the western side of Coventry is located either on the boundary with Solihull, or very close to it. This means that the Green Belt in Solihull plays a part in checking unrestricted sprawl from Coventry and therefore the city could be considered as a large built-up area.
 - Any of the rural settlements which may be considered as towns through this settlement hierarchy assessment.

6. Summary and Conclusions

- 6.1 The primary aim of this study is to consider whether any of Solihull’s rural settlements could be defined as a town.
- 6.2 There is no specific definition of what might constitute a ‘town’ or a ‘village’. However, population and the range and type of services and facilities present in a settlement can be a helpful indicator.
- 6.3 Guidance published by the ONS and the HoCL briefing paper on City and Town Classifications suggest population thresholds for small, medium and large towns as follows:

	Population	
	ONS	HoCL
Small town	5000 – 20,000	7,500 – 24,999
Medium town	20,000 – 75,000	25,000 – 59,999
Large town	75,000 – 225,000	60,000 – 174,999

- 6.4 In population terms, KDBH is the largest rural settlement in the Borough with a population of 19,300. In accordance with the above population thresholds, this would categorise it well above the minimum threshold of a small town. Similarly, Balsall Common, with a current population of 7,000 and which is likely to increase over the next few years, would also fall within the small town category.
- 6.5 In terms of the services and facilities that are available, both settlements have the full range of services that would be expected within a village as well as many services that are also typically located in a town. Unlike any other rural settlement in the Borough, they have (or have planning permission for) a large supermarket, a secondary school and higher education opportunities.
- 6.6 These facilities, coupled with their larger populations set them apart from any other rural settlements in the Borough. KDBH and Balsall Common are also comparable (and in some cases, larger) than what are considered ‘towns’ in neighbouring authorities. These towns also have a large supermarket, a secondary school and higher education opportunities.
- 6.7 Consequently, it is considered that KDBH and Balsall Common should be redefined as towns.
- 6.8 As noted above, the population of Dickens Heath is close to the threshold used by the ONS, but in relation to services it does lack a large supermarket, secondary school and higher education/sixth form facilities. In this respect it is clearly different from KDBH and Balsall Common but could be considered by some to constitute a town, or at least be on the cusp of being so. The public consultation on the settlement hierarchy will draw attention to this and seek views on whether Dickens Heath should be considered a town or not.
- 6.9 Whilst there may be other settlements in Solihull that have some other facilities that are typically found within a town, they are often lacking some other basic services and facilities. This, coupled with their much smaller populations, lead to the conclusion that all other settlements in the rural area of Solihull should remain as villages.

Conclusion

Towns:

- Balsall Common
- Knowle, Dorridge & Bentley Heath

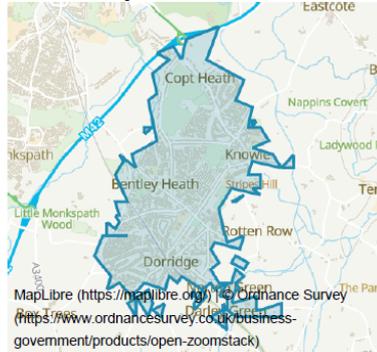
Villages:

- Blythe Valley Park
- Catherine-de-Barnes
- Cheswick Gren
- Dickens Heath
- Hampton in Arden
- Hockley Heath
- Meriden
- Tidbury Green

Appendix 1 – Summary Profile of the Main Rural Settlements in Solihull

Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath

Area map



Population

2022

19,300

people

57,112,500 people in England

Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year Population Estimates

Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

7,900

households

23,436,100 households in England

Rounded to the nearest 100 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

Small area: Output area

Balsall Common

Area map



Population

2022

7,000

people

57,112,500 people in England

Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year Population Estimates

Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

2,900

households

23,436,100 households in England

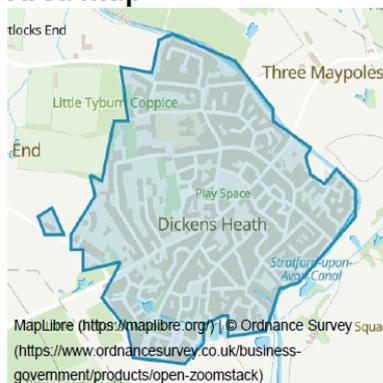
Rounded to the nearest 100 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

Small area: Output area

Dickens Heath

Area map



Population

2022

4,900

people

57,112,500 people in England

Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year Population Estimates

Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

2,100

households

23,436,100 households in England

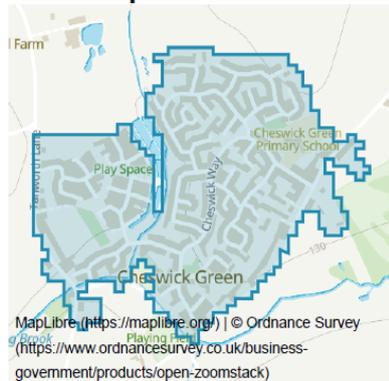
Rounded to the nearest 100 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

Small area: Output area

Cheswick Green

Area map



Population

2022

2,700
people

57,112,500 people in England
Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year
Population Estimates
Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

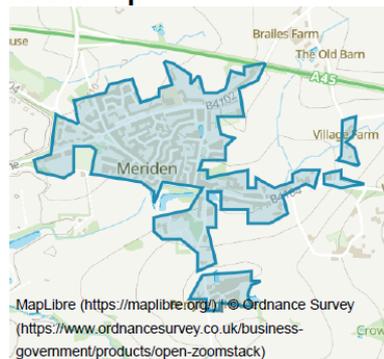
1,100
households

23,436,100 households in England
Rounded to the nearest 100 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census
2021
Small area: Output area

Meriden

Area map



Population

2022

2,200
people

57,112,500 people in England
Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year
Population Estimates
Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

990
households

23,436,100 households in England
Rounded to the nearest 10 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census
2021
Small area: Output area

Hockley Heath

Area map



Population

2022

1,900
people

57,112,500 people in England
Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year
Population Estimates
Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

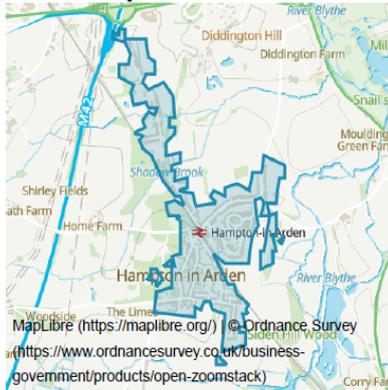
770
households

23,436,100 households in England
Rounded to the nearest 10 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census
2021
Small area: Output area

Hampton in Arden

Area map



Population

2022

1,900

people

57,112,500 people in England

Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year Population Estimates

Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

800

households

23,436,100 households in England

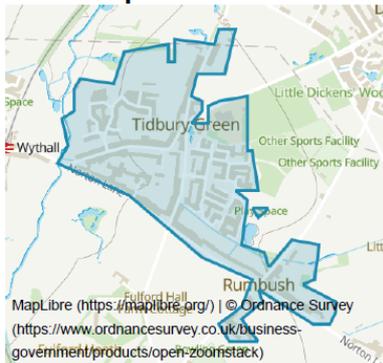
Rounded to the nearest 10 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

Small area: Output area

Tidbury Green

Area map



Population

2022

1,700

people

57,112,500 people in England

Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year Population Estimates

Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

580

households

23,436,100 households in England

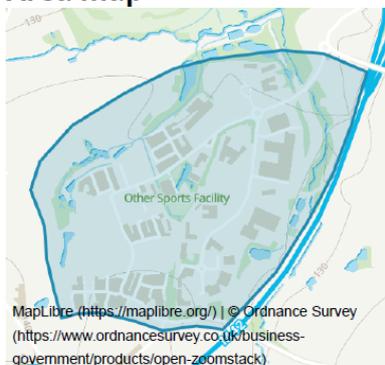
Rounded to the nearest 10 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

Small area: Output area

Blythe Valley Park

Area map



Population

2022

970

people

57,112,500 people in England

Rounded to the nearest 10 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year Population Estimates

Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

260

households

23,436,100 households in England

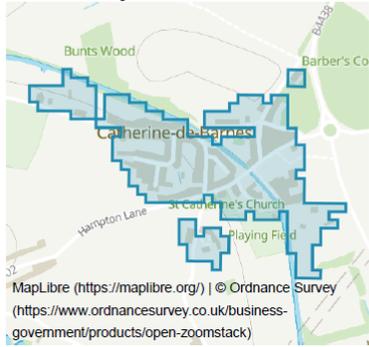
Rounded to the nearest 10 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

Small area: Output area

Catherine-de-Barnes

Area map



Population

2022

620

people

57,112,500 people in England

Rounded to the nearest 10 people

Source: Office for National Statistics – Mid Year Population Estimates

Small area: Output area

Number of households

2021

270

households

23,436,100 households in England

Rounded to the nearest 10 households

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

Small area: Output area