

Jointly Agreed Minutes – SGBA & SCC

Sheffield Green Belt Alliance meeting with Council Leaders

Wednesday 9 September 2026 | Sheffield Town Hall

Attendees

Councillors: Cllr Fran Belbin - Leader of Sheffield City Council; Cllr Angela Argenzio - Leader of the Green Group.

Sheffield Green Belt Alliance: Gill Travis (CEG); Bec Nutton (CEG); Pete Pearson (CEG); Lynda Jackson (CEG); Derek Hastings (Lodge Moor); Jonathan Hobson (S12); Claire Pennington (S13); Steph Oliver-Beech (S13); Michael Parkin (S13).

Council officer/support: Nikki Rees.

1. Opening and purpose of the meeting

Councillor Fran Belbin welcomed Alliance members and advised that she had not yet replied to the Alliance's open letter. She explained that a further consultation was imminent and that the planning team was heavily engaged in preparing it. She said the Local Plan process was highly technical and complex and that she wanted to ensure any information provided to the Alliance was accurate.

Cllr Belbin confirmed that, following the 8 August site visits, she and Cllr Argenzio had combined their notes and grouped the issues raised into a number of common themes. Some responses had been received from planning officers, but further clarification was still required before those responses could be shared. Cllr Argenzio added that she also had further questions arising from the answers received.

An Alliance member explained that the purpose of the meeting was to follow up the 8 August visits and to consider issues affecting the Green Belt allocations as a whole rather than repeat detailed site-by-site objections. The Alliance reported that the leaders' site visit had been very positively received by communities, with approximately 60,000 views of the relevant social-media post and information also circulated to a mailing list of nearly 3,000 people. Members said residents had welcomed what they saw as a sign that their concerns were finally being heard.

The Alliance emphasised that, while it recognised the statutory role of the Planning Inspectorate and the professional role of planning officers, members also wanted to understand the views of the elected Council leaders and what action they considered appropriate in response to the concerns raised.

2. Responsibility for the Plan and planning resources

Alliance members expressed disappointment at the emphasis in Cllr Belbin's recent Sheffield Star statement on the statutory process and continued representations to the Inspectors. Members said communities had repeatedly been directed to the Inspectors over the previous 16 months and stressed their view that the Sheffield Plan remained the Council's plan, with the Inspectors examining the evidence and proposals submitted by the Council.

The Alliance then raised concerns about resources. Members referred to Cllr Belbin's description of a small planning team undertaking substantial additional Local Plan work alongside its everyday responsibilities, and contrasted this with the importance of securing an up-to-date Local Plan previously emphasised by the Council's Chief Executive. The Alliance made clear that this was not intended as criticism of individual planning officers, but as a question of organisational capacity, leadership and whether a project of this scale had been adequately resourced. The Alliance suggested that there should be a separate, dedicated team running the project, independent from the planning team.

Cllr Belbin explained that her quote in the Star was in the context that she had been asked to give a comment in direct response to the open letter from the Green Belt Alliance, the tone of which she felt was quite tough on the planners. She said that she felt defensive of the planning team, who were working extremely hard. She said the work needed to be led by officers with professional planning expertise, that there was a national shortage of planners, and that local knowledge was important. She did not consider the Local Plan to be a project that could simply be staffed through a generic project-management model. She acknowledged that capacity was a real challenge and said officers also had to undertake work required by the Inspectors while responding to campaigners and the wider public.

Alliance members maintained that the scale and strategic importance of the Plan warranted additional capacity and that resource constraints should have been identified and addressed earlier. Cllr Belbin noted that Sheffield was now in the exceptional position of moving into a fifth consultation, which had not been anticipated.

3. Learning from the Street Trees dispute and future engagement

The Alliance referred to its September 2025 meeting with Chief Executive Kate Josephs and to the Lowcock Inquiry into the Sheffield Street Trees dispute. Members said a central lesson was that years of explaining a position without meaningful listening and response had damaged trust, and that progress ultimately required genuine dialogue, mediation and partnership.

The Alliance said it did not want the Green Belt issue to follow the same path, with meetings taking place but communities feeling that engagement had no influence. Members stressed that they had repeatedly sought constructive engagement and wanted a mechanism through which their evidence and local knowledge could be properly considered.

It was agreed that the Alliance would prepare a note of the meeting, send it to the Council for checking and agreement, and then publish the agreed record so that the communities represented could see what had been discussed.

4. Questions arising from the site visits

Cllr Belbin outlined the principal themes which she and Cllr Argenzio had referred to planning officers. These included: the potential effect of site constraints on housing numbers and the housing trajectory; cumulative impacts of development in neighbouring authorities; infrastructure and access; flood risk; ecology and contamination; brownfield land and the Brownfield Register; the five-year review and windfall assumptions; and a number of site-specific matters.

Cllr Belbin confirmed that answers had not yet been received to all questions. Some responses received required further interpretation or clarification before she and Cllr Argenzio were satisfied that they understood them sufficiently to share them.

Alliance members asked to receive both the leaders' explanation of the responses and, where possible, the underlying responses from planning officers. Members explained that they had developed detailed

knowledge of the evidence base and wished to see the original technical information as well as any summary.

Cllr Belbin said she was not seeking to obscure the responses and indicated that further clarification would first be sought from officers.

5. Brownfield land

Cllr Belbin stated, from recollection, that the Brownfield Register had last been updated in 2023. An Alliance member asked that officers clarify precisely what had been updated at that point, noting that the Alliance had been unable to identify evidence of a comprehensive city-wide call for sites associated with that update. Cllr Belbin agreed to add this to the matters requiring clarification.

Alliance members also raised the Small Sites Aggregator pilot and asked what had happened to that initiative and whether it could help unlock smaller brownfield sites, like the site on Manor raised at the last East LAC meeting. Cllr Elle Dodd had explained that site had gone undeveloped for years because no developer found it viable. Cllr Belbin said her understanding was that smaller sites contributed through the windfall allowance.

The discussion considered brownfield sites that may require public intervention to become viable. Cllr Belbin referred to work involving South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority funding and other public funding to bridge viability gaps on difficult sites, including work such as the Furnace Hill and Neepsend development. Alliance members questioned how viability and the need for public funding had been reflected in the Local Plan evidence and examination; if the sites were viable then why did they need external funding, and if they were not viable, why had they been included in the plan?

6. Infrastructure, deliverability and strategic sites

Alliance members raised concern that necessary infrastructure was not sufficiently secured within individual site-allocation policies and questioned whether reliance on later planning applications provided adequate certainty. Members referred in particular to changes in wording through the Main Modifications and asked who was providing political scrutiny to ensure that policies were not weakened.

Cllr Belbin referred to the Government's Golden Rules and said her understanding was that detailed infrastructure requirements would be addressed at the master planning stage. Alliance members responded that the Golden Rules did not provide equivalent protection for employment sites and argued that questions of infrastructure, viability and deliverability needed to be resolved before land was permanently removed from the Green Belt.

The Alliance also questioned whether the Council had followed through on its own rationale for selecting larger strategic sites. Locations such as Handsworth, allocated for 1,700 homes, were chosen to enable the coordinated planning of the infrastructure needed to support sustainable development. Yet the Council had not provided a detailed infrastructure plan, and key decisions are deferred until "the planning stage". This leaves the very strategic planning used to justify these allocations yet to be resolved.

Cllr Belbin referred to the potential for larger developments to support the case for strategic transport improvements, including possible tram extensions. Alliance members distinguished between regional aspirations and committed infrastructure and stressed that development should not proceed on an assumption that such infrastructure would subsequently materialise.

Members raised examples of existing pressure on health services, roads and other facilities and argued that some physical constraints could not readily be mitigated. Cllr Belbin noted that some infrastructure

assessments, including those relating to GP surgery provision, were undertaken by other professional bodies such as the NHS and that the Council relied on that professional advice.

7. Ability to revisit the Plan, new evidence and the Role of the Inspectors

An Alliance member challenged the suggestion that the Council was unable to revisit elements of the Plan at this stage. The member said the Alliance had taken professional and planning advice indicating that the Council could approach the Inspectors to ask for a rethink.

Cllr Belbin said this was not her understanding of the process but that she would seek further advice on the point.

Cllr Belbin also said that she was carefully considering what options might be available to her in terms of next steps and whether there was a political route through the current situation.

Alliance members emphasised that they did not want the Plan to fail, but believed that identified risks should be addressed before adoption rather than deferred until planning applications. Members said that, if significant new evidence demonstrated that particular assumptions were unsound or sites were not deliverable as anticipated, the Council should be prepared to consider what could be changed.

The Alliance drew a distinction between the Council's responsibility to prepare the best plan for Sheffield and the Inspectors' role in determining whether the submitted plan met the required test of soundness. An Alliance member explained that the Inspectors were assessing whether the plan was sound, rather than identifying every possible improvement that might turn a "C" plan into an "A". Passing the examination would therefore not, in itself, demonstrate that the Council had produced the best plan for the city.

Members reiterated that the Council remained accountable to Sheffield's residents for the quality of the plan and should not use reliance on the Inspectors to deflect that responsibility.

8. Agricultural land

Alliance members raised significant concerns about agricultural land, including land predicted to be Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land, how the main modifications weakened the protection of BMV, and questioned whether the updated policy provided sufficient safeguards or assessment before allocation.

Cllr Belbin said this was also an issue she would expect the Inspectors to consider.

9. Affordable housing and housing delivery

Alliance members agreed that Sheffield needed affordable housing but questioned whether the spatial distribution proposed by the Plan aligned with identified need. Members also raised the housing trajectory and the consequences if allocated sites failed to deliver the assumed number of homes.

Members stressed that councillors voting on the Plan should understand the implications of the housing trajectory, site capacity and delivery risks before any adoption decision.

10. Political ownership and governance of the Local Plan

Alliance members raised the question of where overall ownership and governance of the Local Plan sits, particularly in relation to the Green Belt allocations. Members said this was an issue they had previously raised with the Council's Chief Executive and remained concerned that it was difficult to identify who was taking overall responsibility for the Plan and its consequences.

The Alliance highlighted what it regarded as an unusual position: significant community opposition to the Green Belt allocations; opposition from a number of councillors and political groups; opposition from two Sheffield Labour MPs; and previous public acknowledgement by the former Council Leader that the distribution of development was unfair. Members also referred to comments from council officials that, with more time, the Plan might have looked different.

Against that background, Alliance members questioned who now politically owns and supports the Green Belt element of the Plan and who is providing overall scrutiny of the decisions being taken as it progresses towards adoption.

This was linked to concerns raised earlier in the meeting about political scrutiny of changes made through the Main Modifications, including instances where Alliance members believed policy wording had been weakened. Members considered that there needed to be clear political and organisational accountability for the evidence, modifications and ultimately the Plan that would be presented to councillors for adoption.

11. Future dialogue and way forward

In summing up, the Alliance stressed that the consequences of the proposed Green Belt allocations were potentially life-changing for affected communities and that members had developed substantial site-specific knowledge and evidence. The Alliance said it wanted this knowledge to be used constructively rather than the relationship becoming increasingly adversarial.

Alliance members said the current public-question arrangements at Council did not provide a mechanism for meaningful dialogue: questions and answers were necessarily brief and scripted, with little opportunity to explore evidence, clarify an answer or work through an issue.

The Alliance therefore asked how a meaningful channel could be established between the Alliance, the political leadership and, where appropriate, senior planning officers, so that evidence could be discussed directly rather than exchanged through repeated formal questions and answers. Members suggested that some form of working group involving relevant senior planning representation could provide such a forum.

Cllr Belbin said she was conscious of the difficulty of meaningful engagement where she and Cllr Argenzio were relaying technical information from the planning team and then had to return to officers for further answers. She said she was genuinely unsure what form of further engagement would be feasible within the current statutory context, but undertook to consider the question.

The Alliance reiterated that it was not seeking special treatment or asking the Council to bypass the statutory process, but was asking for meaningful engagement alongside it.

Actions / matters to follow up

- Cllrs Belbin and Argenzio to obtain the outstanding answers and further clarification from planning officers on the issues arising from the August site visits.
- Council to consider providing the Alliance with the underlying/raw planning responses, as well as an accessible explanation, once clarification has been completed.
- Cllr Belbin to seek clarification on what was updated in the Brownfield Register in 2023 and the nature of the process used.
- Cllr Belbin to seek further advice on the circumstances in which the Council may approach the Planning Inspectors to request a rethink of the current Local Plan proposals/process
- Cllr Belbin to consider whether a more meaningful mechanism for ongoing dialogue with the Alliance, including appropriate senior planning officer involvement, is feasible.
- Council to progress arrangements for a visit to the Lodge Moor site.

- Alliance to circulate these draft minutes internally for accuracy before sending them to the Council for review and agreement.
- Cllr Belbin agreed to follow up the live issue of the destruction of priority habitat on SES29 with Cllr Norris.

Note: These minutes are intended as a concise record of the substantive discussion rather than a verbatim transcript. Minutes drafted by SGBA and wording agreed with Sheffield City Council on 17/09/26.