

Q&A

NEXUS 10 QUESTIONS WITH...

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HOUSING

one

Nexus: Birmingham has faced a significant housing shortfall. Has viability affected high-density schemes?

Sarah: Tall buildings remain in the city core, but focus has shifted from for-sale flats to build-to-rent, and now largely student accommodation. Student schemes or schemes with a student element seem most viable right now, while we're still resisting co-living. We're consenting growth, but delivery hasn't followed. That gap between consents and build-out highlights the challenge: funding hasn't kept pace with approvals.

two

Nexus: How will Birmingham meet housing needs?

Sarah: Housing delivery remains steady (over 28,000 identified sites will be supplied in the next five years), but with the system in flux, the key question is whether rates will hold over the next two to three years. As we prepare for our Local Plan examination, we're reviewing potential red flags and consulting on areas including a Green Belt Review. With overall housing need reduced and the previous 35% uplift removed, Birmingham may soon meet demand within its boundaries—shifting the conversation from asking others to take our shortfall to demonstrating we've explored all options to meet our own needs and ease pressure on the wider Housing Market Area.

three

Nexus: How is the region responding to political change?

Sarah: It's uncertain. Elections and structural shifts in Shire Counties could disrupt Local Plans. In the Shires, investment decisions are tough. Without clarity on leadership or structure, it seems riskier and we're seeing that in the increase of Applications going to Appeal. Birmingham remains consistent and relatively pro-development, as seen in the 6% YoY increase in the number of applications for planning permissions, which is a strength.

In Q1 2025, applications across the West Midlands rose 8%—mainly speculative Green Belt proposals in the Shires—diverting resources from strategic planning. Authorities are bogged down fighting grey belt battles instead of planning more strategically for meeting housing needs. The system is too slow and we need reform, fast; Green Belt issues should be resolved in 18 months, not five years.



EMPLOYMENT

four

Nexus: The West Midlands Growth Plan seeks to create 100,000 good jobs in fast growing industries over the next 10-years. Which sectors in the West Midlands Growth Plan will see the most growth?

Sarah: Clean tech and energy are major job creators, with science, health, and medical tech also key - think Bruntwood, expanding knowledge quarters. Growth here means new university facilities, residential schemes, and Grade A offices.

five

Nexus: Is connecting with hubs outside the Growth Plan area a priority?

Sarah: Absolutely. Birmingham and Solihull already collaborate (e.g. the Growth Corridor and Levelling Up Zone), and HS2 is enabling links like Aston University's partnership with West London Universities, demonstrating that physical infrastructure is driving new relationships. From a Local Plan perspective, Birmingham will meet employment land requirements, but we're now asking: what kind of jobs are we enabling, and where? It's not just ticking boxes, it's about strategic alignment. The new duty to cooperate between the Combined Authority and neighbouring authorities is crucial.

six

Nexus: Should the duty to cooperate include employment?

Sarah: Yes, employment needs are just as vital as housing. When unmet, it shows up in generational worklessness or graduates unable to find meaningful work. Our approach is becoming more localised and interventionist, with a focus on housing, culture, skills, and transport. Take Digbeth and the creative sector. It's more than the BBC, it's Digbeth Loc Studios, and Steven Knight. We're just beginning to tap into that cultural capital.

seven

Nexus: Is the creative sector driving wider investment?

Sarah: Definitely, but there is a gap in the service layer—such as hotels and transport—which affects viability. As we learn more about what creative industries need, it's clear that traditional land use designations are limiting. It's not just B8 or Grade A offices anymore. We need to adapt to new industries. We're on the edge of something major, but planning tools are outdated. WMCA and the Council are ready to support growth, but we need flexibility. National infrastructure and policy must support these sectors. HS2 showed how infrastructure leads the way, and now we must define what Birmingham becomes next. Its uniqueness is our opportunity.



RESOURCING

eight

Nexus: With concerns around timelines and reform, how are you finding resourcing?

Sarah: Birmingham has a nearly full team, but the real pressure isn't planners, it's everything around them: ecology, legal, transport. Planning can't move if the infrastructure that supports it isn't resourced. We lack standardisation, with different authorities constantly reinventing the wheel for basic things like validation checklists and S106 agreements every time.

nine

Nexus: Are national reforms improving efficiency? And will consultee comments be published online?

Sarah: Some ideas like allowing councils to set fees could help, but implementation is slow. Validation remains inefficient. We were sitting on 900 applications in January—now cleared—but that backlog came from asking for unnecessary things. Manual uploads in an AI world are archaic. On tech and transparency, the back-office system is being upgraded so statutory consultee comments should be visible soon. We're cautious about tech; some solutions over-promise and under-deliver.

ten

Nexus: What about attracting and retaining planning talent?

Sarah: That is critical. Apprenticeships we worked hard to develop have been lost, yet new government-funded graduate posts are transformational. Universities want real case studies, and we're finally showcasing the value of planning careers. We need to show planning is about place-making, not just regulation. Planning influences prosperity, and we need that recognised nationally, not as "just a hurdle".

Nexus 10 Questions With... is a series of interviews with key figures in the development sector, exploring in detail their thoughts on the opportunities for delivering growth on their patch, the challenges they are facing and what the industry can do to help overcome those.

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