

## **Appendix E**

### **Green Gap Assessment – Summary**

#### **Introduction**

In March 2019 LUC was commissioned by Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council to undertake a review of land between settlements and identify which land, if any, should be subject to a green wedge policy approach.

The outputs of this assessment provide evidence to support the development of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan. The Settlement Gap Assessment was undertaken alongside, but discrete from, the LUC Green Belt, Green Corridor and Landscape Sensitivity Assessment studies.

#### **Purpose**

The aim of the green gap study is to review land between settlements and provide an evidence base on the role gaps play by providing a sense of separation in maintaining settlement pattern and character, and the impact development might have on that role. The report is intended to inform decision making in relation to site selection as part of the Local Plan review process and to provide guidance to minimise the impact of future development on gaps between settlements.

#### **Methodology**

The Assessment has considered the following gaps:

- Between the 'specified settlements' identified in the District Plan (Welwyn Garden City, Hatfield, Woolmer Green, Oaklands, Welwyn, Digswell, Welham Green, Brookmans Park and Little Heath). Specified settlements are ones which are excluded from the Green Belt;
- Between the specified settlements and settlements outside the borough boundary (Knebworth, Codicote, Tewin, Burnham Green, Wheathampstead, Hertford, St Albans, Goffs Oak, Crews Hill and Datchworth);
- Between the specified settlements and villages currently 'washed over' by the Green Belt but with the potential to be removed from the Green Belt as part of the Local Plan process (Lemsford, Stanborough, Bell Bar, Swanley Bar, Newgate Street and Northaw). Essendon was not included as it was considered too remote from other settlements for any gap to need assessing; and
- Between the new settlement of Symondshyde and Wheathampstead and Hatfield, as it would create gaps with those settlements if it goes ahead.

Each of the gaps were considered against the following factors:

- Gap size – whether the current physical separation is sufficient to prevent coalescence;
- Character of the gap – whether the two settlements retain separate identities. It should be noted that even small gaps can be effective in maintaining settlement separation if they have a rural character and provide a sense of separation as a result of topography, limited inter-visibility between settlements or contain a distinct landscape feature;
- Visual separation – does the gap maintain the perception of leaving one settlement and travelling to another;
- Landscape sensitivity – the key sensitivities associated with the gap area and whether this reinforces the case for keeping land open;
- Environmental value of the gap – in terms of ecological and cultural designations and what opportunities there may be for enhancements within the gap through positive management;
- Recreational value of the gap – in terms of the recreational features present within the gap area and the potential for improved recreational use and accessibility to the countryside;
- Pressures on the gap – what the implication for the integrity and strength of the gap, or separation of the two settlements, would be if the draft allocations or sites promoted through the Council's 2019 Call for Sites exercise were to be released for development.

For each gap, the Assessment makes a recommendation as to whether there is a case for policy measures to protect or enhance the value of the gap. This would be achieved by identifying 'gap policy area' to ensure that future development protects settlement pattern and maintains a sense of separation between settlements.

Where a 'gap policy area' is considered to be warranted, the Assessment provides suggestions on the areas of land that may be included in the gap area and guidance to be followed when considering development proposals within that specific gap to ensure the separation of the settlements is maintained. It should be noted that this does not mean that development should not come forward in these areas, simply that any development will need to mitigate its impact.

## **Conclusions**

The Assessment has found that there are several areas that would benefit from a 'gap policy area' (these gaps are listed in paragraph 4.6 of the Green Gap Assessment).

The Assessment also found that although some of the Submitted Local Plan allocations would erode some of the gaps, the draft allocations could be accommodated without physical coalescence of settlements. However, it is recommended that the guidance for development within the gap areas be followed and implemented for any development of these areas.

In respect of the sites promoted through the 2019 Call for Sites exercise, the Assessment found that many of these sites intrude into existing gaps, although the development of some sites would have more impact than others, either because of the nature or characteristics of the existing gap or because of the cumulative impact of all the sites within the gap were to be released.

It should be noted at this stage the Assessment recommendations in respect of the identification of 'gap policy areas' and the extent of those gap areas are interim and would be finalised once consultation has been completed and decisions have been made on sites. Although the study has focused on land in the borough it does refer to gaps which extend into adjoining authorities and therefore raises 'duty to cooperate' considerations.