

3.3 DISCUSSION AND ADVICE ON STRATEGIC GAP DESIGNATION

DISCUSSION OF STRATEGIC GAP DESIGNATION

The PUSH Framework for Gaps and Local Plan Policy CS22 make clear that the **primary purpose** of Strategic Gap designation is to maintain the ‘separate identity of settlements’ within the Borough, thereby aiming to prevent their individual character and sense of place from being lost beneath continuous and anonymous urban sprawl. There is no such clear definition, however, of what exactly determines ‘separate identity’, although a variety of terms and phrases are used in planning documents in relation to the concept, such as physical and visual separation/ coalescence, a sense of separation, defining settlement character, shaping and maintaining settlement pattern etc.

It is helpful to consider the range of factors that contribute to ‘separate identity’ as a starting point for considering the effectiveness of the landscape in different parts of the Gap in achieving this primary purpose. The discussion below examines the main ways in which landscape can influence the separate identity of settlements.

Separation of settlements

This is essentially about keeping settlements apart so that it is obvious where one settlement ends and another one starts and they do not merge into one another without any clear distinction. However, this is not just about preventing physical coalescence, i.e. development within one settlement running continuously into the next with no physical space or barrier to separate them. It is also not just about maintaining a visual gap and preventing visual coalescence between settlements - while this can often be a key factor in achieving separation, it is perfectly possible for two settlements to be in sight of one another (e.g. on either side of a valley) and still maintain their separate identities because of the nature of what lies between them. For a gap to be effective, it is the perceived ‘sense of separation’ that is critical, the ability for anyone to ‘feel’ and to understand where one place ends and another different place begins, and to experience a clear sense of moving out of one and into the other.

There can be no hard and fast rules about how big a gap needs to be to achieve that perception of separation. This will be dependent entirely on the particular character of the settlements and the land that lies between them. What is critical, however, is that there is a clear and distinctive experience of leaving one settlement behind, passing through another quite different area (the ‘gap’) before entering another separate settlement. This experience of travelling from out of one place into another can be both physical and visual. Importantly, the ‘bit in between’ needs to have integrity and distinct character as an entity or place in its own right, rather than simply be a physical space or feature, such as a field or a block of woodland etc., in order for the two settlements to feel distinct and separated.

On this basis, the effectiveness and integrity of the gap in providing a sense of separation will be maintained where:

- There is no actual physical coalescence between the two settlements;
- There is no perceived visual coalescence (this does not necessarily mean that there needs to be a visual barrier between them but that the appearance of one settlement coalescing with another is avoided);
- Measures designed to block views between built areas do not in themselves undermine the sense of visual separation that is reinforced by long-distance views between settlements;
- There is a strong and well-defined boundary between the settlement and the gap, so that it is clear where the edge of the settlement lies and the gap begins;
- There is a clear and distinct experience of leaving one settlement behind, passing through another quite different and distinct area (the 'gap') before entering another separate settlement;
- The gap has sufficient scale and coherence of character to be experienced as a place, or entity in its own right (e.g. an intact area of open farmed countryside) rather than simply a transitional space between urban areas.

Shaping settlement patterns

This concerns how the structure and nature of the underlying landscape has helped to shape the patterns of settlement within the Borough over time. Physical factors such as soils, drainage, natural vegetation, landform and the coast have all played a part in determining the historic and present day patterns of land use and settlement across the Borough and, in many cases, defining their 'natural' limits to growth (e.g. by providing a strong physical boundary, such as the coast, a ridge of land, a river valley etc.). This response to landscape is part of the individual identity of settlements, often the reason why they exist where they are and have developed a particular form (e.g. linear, nucleated, dispersed or densely settled). The uncontrolled spread of development could potentially breach natural boundaries and mask the characteristic pattern and individual distinct identity of settlements within the Borough.

Influencing the character of settlements and their settings

As described in 2.3 above, a settlement's identity can be as much as a result of its setting within the surrounding landscape, as with the character of its buildings and spaces. For example, the character of the landscape that adjoins or surrounds an individual settlement can influence whether it feels essentially rural or urban, enclosed or exposed etc. The landscape can form an important part of the visual setting of the urban area (i.e. there is a strong visual inter-relationship between the urban area and the landscape surrounding it) which influences perceptions of its identity and character by providing the backdrop or foreground to views towards the settlement, and views outwards from within the built area. The landscape immediately around settlements also has an important role to play in providing strongly defined settlement boundaries and softening the impact of built form within the urban area on the wider landscape, thus reinforcing the distinction in character and identity between town and country.

In addition to the primary purpose of designation, Strategic Gaps have a '**secondary purpose**' - by keeping land open and undeveloped it opens up opportunities for positive uses of the land within the gap to meet wider planning objectives, notably the provision of green infrastructure. All areas of open countryside form part of the Borough's network of Green Infrastructure but some areas make a greater contribution in terms of opportunities for access and recreation, or in terms of the diversity of landscape features (e.g. woodlands, hedgerows, wetlands, grasslands etc.) that provide habitats and corridors for wildlife. The contribution made by different areas is set out within the Sensitivity Assessment. The Strategic Gap policy can help to protect and enhance existing GI assets, particularly opportunities to access the countryside from the more urbanised parts of the Borough, and promote investment in GI in those areas where improvements and additional opportunities would be desirable.