

Basingstoke and Deane Local Plan 2011 to 2029

Public Examination Hearings

Issue 4: (Q7) Other Housing Matters

Policy EM1 – Landscape

Policy EM1 – Strategic Gaps

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Submission by CPRE Hampshire

1. For a borough that is largely rural in character, landscape considerations are an essential component of any local plan. However, not all the landscape is distinctive or characteristic. Much of the land is farmed, and can be regarded as ordinary and commonplace. It may nevertheless, have a sense of place, and has a friendly familiarity for its local inhabitants. It is not always helpful to see or categorise such landscape according to a hierarchy of designated and undesignated land.
2. The need for a landscape strategy and its better recognition in the local plan has long been advocated by CPRE. Landscape character assessments can be helpful in understanding the nature and sensitivity of landscape and in providing appropriate protection. Planning and land management also need to work together. This may apply especially in the special areas, the North Wessex Downs AONB being the principal area in the borough.
3. The Landscape Assessment of 2001 has helped to identify 20 key landscape types, as well as their qualities and characteristics. This and other supplementary documents, such as village design statements and the AONB management plan have helped provide a managed response to development pressures outside the urban areas. Flexibility is required in this sphere, as in many others, in relation to development proposals. Any proposal for development or use must be in scale and supportive of the local economy and to social needs. Affordable and other housing is equally important in the AONB as in non-designated rural areas.
4. Greater access to the countryside should also be encouraged, and combined with wider understanding of the workings of the land and its cultivation. Much of the land is utilised in one way or another. Some landscapes remain isolated and inaccessible but they should still be valued and recognised.

Policy response

5. CPRE supports the approach to countryside protection and enhancement, and has said so many times. However, Policy EM1 deals only with the landscape impact of new development. It tends to rely on the assessment made by the developer. The Plan should apply its own policy and approach to reflect and support the spatial objectives and overall strategy.
6. It is not sufficient to simply list a set of documents, but a more comprehensive approach is needed, to provide adequate protection and setting out to achieve the main spatial objectives. Landscaping can also be applied to new development, to ensure it fits in well with its surroundings. Landscaping should not be expected to mask or hide new development. Rather it should seek to enhance and ensure sustainability. There should be more reference to areas of high tranquillity and to historic landscapes, parks and gardens, and the role they play in ensuring an attractive and viable environment.

Policy EM1 – Strategic Gaps

7. North Hampshire has no Green Belt. Instead, previous county structure plans included a number of Strategic Gaps, in order to prevent coalescence and promote town identities. While the policy basis of strategic or local gaps has diminished, their emergence in local plans, as in Basingstoke should be welcomed.

8. Gaps are essentially an urban policy rather than a rural policy, for the protection of the countryside. Like Green Belt, they do not seek to consider landscape values; rather they are a policy instrument. Hampshire, and Sussex, and parts of Berkshire apply such gaps, and these have retained their long term role in the planning system.

9. Experience of planning appeal and development proposals over the years have shown the resilience of gaps. Their widespread recognition in the planning system should continue to be supported in the future. Avoiding coalescence is a valid and viable objective, and its incorporation in the Plan should be supported. Local Gaps have a longer term role and function, and this is widely recognised by the public.

10. Settlements can often be very different in nature, some old established, others newer and meeting different needs. Merging them together, as can easily happen is not desirable and it is not appropriate for a small rural community to be engulfed by another expanding one.

11. As for development in gaps, this should not be permitted if it reduces or diminishes the sense of physical or visual separation. Any development should be carefully planned so it does not encroach into the gap area, as defined. It should not be allowed to reduce or compromise the essential value and purpose of the gap as an instrument of policy.

12. Public recognition and support for gaps is often very high, and this is an important factor. If the neighbourhood planning approach allows for proposals that encroach on the gap, they may be acceptable. They may often be balanced by other proposals that seek to retain character and identity, and such plans will require a flexible and sensitive approach.

13. The Strategic and Local Gaps, as proposed are primarily around the urban area of Basingstoke town. These are viable, and are intended to prevent small villages being swallowed up by the town. They seek to provide an element of protection for character and identity which should be recognised and supported.

Conclusions

14. The inclusion of gaps has long been part of the planning tradition in Hampshire. Their role and effectiveness in controlling sprawl is well understood. They should be seen as an urban policy rather than as a countryside protection policy, and their role is clear. Public recognition is important in retaining them as a valuable planning tool.

15. Policy EM1 – Strategic Gaps should be accepted as an integral part of the planning regime for north Hampshire. The element of flexibility and the ability to avoid 'absolute' policies is recognised. An allowance for small scale developments, if otherwise appropriate, ensures that any rigid approaches can be avoided, with no one seeming to be prejudiced. Appropriate weight should be given to this policy.