

**NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION
RESPONSE TO INSPECTOR'S QUESTIONS FOLLOWING ADDITIONAL HEARING
DAYS.**

POLICY EN5 – AREA OF SEPARATION

1 Inspector's question

- 1.2 More detailed evidence to justify the boundaries of the Area of Separation designated by Policy En5.

2 Evidence for proposed boundaries

- 2.1 The Council has previously submitted a Background Paper in respect of the Proposed Area of Separation (BP/12). Further information regarding the background to this matter can also be found in two other Background papers which were prepared in connection with the then Core Strategy and which are referred to in BP/12. For completeness these Background Papers have been added to the Examination library as EX/ 99 and EX/ 100 respectively.
- 2.2 Also of relevance are the findings from the Settlement Fringe Assessment undertaken in 2010 (SFA/01, SFA/04 and SFA/10).
- 2.3 The Area of Separation policy is a key element of the Local Plan as highlighted in the Council's opening submission to the examination. It reflects the overwhelming views of the local community who want to ensure that Coalville and Whitwick did not coalesce. Furthermore, given that the South East Coalville urban extension benefits from planning permission, and will deliver considerable strategic highways infrastructure in particular to improve the operation of the whole A511 corridor, it is preferable to retain the Area of Separation undeveloped during the life of this local plan.
- 2.4 The Council's Local Plan Advisory Committee (LPAC) of 4 March 2015 (LPAC/08) considered a report on likely designations to be included in the Local Plan including the Area of Separation. This was noted by the LPAC. The LPAC of 29 July 2015 (LPAC/06) considered a report in respect of the draft Local Plan which included a plan detailing the proposed boundary of the Area of Separation. Members supported both the principle of an Area of Separation and its proposed boundaries.
- 2.5 In terms of the development of the Area of Separation policy, the starting point was a review of the Green Wedge undertaken in 2007/2008 as part of work on the then Core Strategy (EX/99). This review had been undertaken to take account of the report of the Panel to the then emerging Regional Spatial Strategy (2007) which specifically stated that '*Green Wedges do not have the national policy status of Green Belt and...they should not be regarded as unduly restrictive and must be subject to review in order to accommodate new development*'. Furthermore, the Secretary of State made an additional change (2008) which stated that '*A review of existing Green Wedges or the creation of new ones in association with development will be carried out through the local development framework process*'.
- 2.6 There was, therefore, a clear expectation that Green Wedges and the need for them would be reviewed. This was done through a detailed Background Paper (November 2008). The key points to note are that:
- As set out in the 1996 Structure Plan Green Wedges served four purposes, including "*Preventing the coalescence and maintaining the physical identity of settlements adjoining the main urban areas*";
 - Of the four purposes only the separation issue was clearly met by the existing Green Wedge, one other was partially met (*Protecting structurally important areas of open land which influence the form and*

direction of urban development) whilst the other two purposes¹ were not satisfied;

- It was concluded that the Green Wedge designation could not be justified but that *“Whilst the Green Wedge cannot be justified having regard to the Strategy Policy 5 [of the Structure Plan] it does satisfy some aspects, in particular in respect of preventing the complete coalescence of Coalville to the south of the A511 with Whitwick and Swannington to the north”*.

2.7 The Background Paper put forward 7 options for the future of the area covered by the Green Wedge ranging from identifying all of the area covered by the Green Wedge policy as an Area of Separation (or Strategic Gap) to identifying all areas as being suitable for development.

2.8 The response to the consultation undertaken in respect of the Core Strategy in 2008/09 showed overwhelming support from the local community (particularly Whitwick) to maintain the undeveloped area between Coalville and Whitwick.

2.9 The 2012 Background Paper (EX/100) provided an update to the 2008 Background Paper, including a potted history as it related to the Core Strategy, links to various Cabinet Reports and an outline of a jointly agreed methodology for reviewing Green Wedges across Leicester and Leicestershire. The 2012 Background Paper supported the conclusions of the 2008 Background Paper that a Green Wedge designation could no longer be justified having regard to the provisions of the Structure Plan which provided the basis for Green Wedge policy .

2.10 The 2012 Background Paper went on to consider the appropriateness or otherwise of re-designating the Green Wedge as an Area of Separation. Of the three areas² which the Green Wedge could be split in to (western, central and eastern) it was concluded (again reinforcing the findings of the 2008 work) that the western area did not perform a separation function and so should be re-designated as countryside but that the eastern and central area did perform a separation function.

2.11 In respect of the central area it was concluded that:

“This area has both recreation use and value. Although the area is not necessarily apparent from roads and gateways it serves to maintain separation between the settlements of Coalville, Thornborough, New Swannington and Whitwick. Therefore, it is recommended that the area be re-designated as an Area of Separation”.

2.12 In terms of the eastern area it was concluded that:

“In terms of the Area of Separation Policy the Eastern Green Wedge is predominantly open land between the defined development boundaries of neighbouring settlements. It does perform an essential function in keeping the built-up areas of those settlements separate.

¹ “Ensures that open land extends outwards between the existing and planned development limits of an urban area” and “Preserving strategic landscape and wildlife links between the countryside and urban open spaces”

² The eastern area comprises of land between Broom Leys Road/Hall Lane/Hermitage Road/Stephenson Way whilst the central are comprises of land between Thornborough Road/Hermitage Leisure Centre/Hermitage Road/Stephenson Way. The western area comprised land west of Thornbrough Road up to Swannington and alongside the western side of Thringstone up to Peggs Green.

This area is located within the urban framework and serves to maintain separation between Coalville and Whitwick. There is strong public support for its continued protection, identified through the County Council's Green Spaces work and the various consultations undertaken as part of the development of the Core Strategy. Therefore, it is considered that this area would be justified as an Area of Separation and recommends its re-designation as such".

- 2.13 These conclusions are supported by the Settlement Fringe Assessment as outlined below.

Settlement Fringe Assessment

- 2.14 The Urban Fringe has been rigorously assessed, and the documentation is included within the evidence base of the submitted plan (SFA/01, SFA/04 and SFA/10).
- 2.15 The North West Leicestershire Settlement Fringe Assessment (SFA/01) (March 2010) set out the purpose and methodology of the assessment, and went on to assess a number of parcels of land across the district against the criteria. Broadly speaking, the assessment considered the landscape value (landscape character; representativeness and consistency with wider framework; remoteness and tranquillity) and visual quality (visual prominence; nature of the urban edge; distinctive views and setting of the settlement; public accessibility). It then made a series of recommendations if the parcel were to be developed, and assessed the potential to achieve mitigation in keeping with the landscape character in the event that the parcel were to be developed. The description of the methodology was clear that judgement was applied where appropriate.
- 2.16 There has been very little change in the landscape in and around the Area of Separation as defined by the submitted plan, since the assessment was undertaken in 2010.
- 2.17 SFA/10 sets out the results of the assessment as they relate to that land within the proposed Area of Separation, and the relevant parcels are discussed below:

0: Fringe between New Swannington and Whitwick (Hermitage Road)

- 2.18 This is the land to the east of Thornborough Road, and comprises a mix of uses. It is dominated by the Council's leisure facilities, including a golf course, built leisure centre, and a large lake. In the northern part of the parcel the character is different, being irregular field patterns. The assessment concluded that, should the land come forward for development, it would be important to "*retain a sense of separation between New Swannington and Hermitage Road*", and set out a number of detailed recommendations concerning planting, important views, and screening.
- 2.19 The assessment concluded that there was moderate/high potential to achieve mitigation, because the land is enclosed by built development which reduces (but does not eliminate) the sense of separation between settlements. SFA/04 (Urban Fringe 2: Fringe between New Swannington and Whitwick (Hermitage Road)) went into greater detail and recognises the separation role that the area performs and stated that "*The character of the land is common to that of many urban fringes; however it provides some separation between settlements. This separation is however reduced by linear development along the roads which effectively ... isolates this land from the wider countryside*".

2.20 This evidence points away from a binary choice of to develop or not to develop, instead it strongly suggests that the opportunities to develop within this land parcel, when constraints and recommended mitigations are accounted for, are extremely limited. It is the Council's opinion, therefore, that this land is an important green lung, it separates the built up areas of Whitwick and Coalville, and the emphasis the analysis placed on screening and planting, as well as sensitive views, all militate against its development. It would be difficult to develop at the edges of the parcel, not least because of the identified sensitivity and the recommendations that more planting should be considered.

1: Fringe between Hermitage Road, Broom Leys Road and Whitwick (Hall Lane)

- 2.21 This is the parcel of land that is subject to objections from Jelson, Persimmon, and William Davis, each of which own or controls land within it and between them they own or control the vast majority of the land within the parcel.
- 2.22 The study's recommendations (SFA/10) included that, should this parcel of land be developed, woodlands should be retained and enhanced, the gateways between Whitwick and Coalville should be enhanced to reinforce character and separation between settlements, ensure countryside views, and ensure a buffer of tree planting around the existing properties within the site to soften and screen views.
- 2.23 The assessment of the potential to achieve mitigation in keeping with landscape character included statements that a sense of separation could be created through incorporation of open space and woodland to the north and south of the site. This strongly suggests that selective release of land along the northern and southern edges would not be appropriate. The assessment did conclude that development on land to the south of the railway line (woodland along which it had recommended be retained) would be relatively easy to integrate, however the Council is of the opinion that the benefit of development of the area would be outweighed by the damage that would result to the landscape, and which the recommendation to retain "*existing woodland the dismantled railway*" indicates to be a genuine issue. Also as previously noted given that the South East Coalville urban extension benefits from planning permission it is preferable to retain the Area of Separation, including the land to the south of the railway line, undeveloped during the life of this local plan.
- 2.24 The assessment concluded that the character of Green Lane, which runs through the middle of the site from north to south, would be altered through development becoming more enclosed and urban, and stated that "*this could not be fully mitigated*".
- 2.25 The map that informed this section helpfully set out that the edge of the site with the A511 is a sensitive landscape which required landscape enhancement, as did the edge of the site towards Hall Lane and rear boundaries of existing homes along Hall Lane. Each of these areas were also identified as sensitive landscapes, as were Green Lane and the majority of the northern end of the parcel.
- 2.26 The more detailed description and assessment of the land parcel (SFA/04) was clear that the land forms an area of separation between Coalville and Whitwick, while accepting that perceptions within existing linear developments along the roads themselves was more limited. It did not say that perception of separation was absent.
- 2.27 Overall, the character is consistent with what could be expected of an undeveloped area of land, located between two settlements and with some ribbon developments

along roads that connect the two settlements. It is identified as performing an important function of maintaining that separation, and to a significant extent the edges of the land parcel are identified as sensitive landscapes which require enhancement and not development. Important landscape features to be retained cross the majority of the width and length of the land parcel, further suggesting that development within it would not be optimal.

- 2.28 As with parcel 0, all of this leads us to conclude that the boundary of the Area of Separation is correctly drawn.