

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
REGIONAL PLANNING COMMITTEE**

Date: 7 December 2005

Subject: **Strategic Gaps in the South East Plan**

Report of: Planning Implementation Director

Recommendation:

That the Committee agree the revised wording for policy CC10 of the South East Plan regarding strategic gaps, and recommend this to the Assembly Plenary meeting on 1 March 2006 for approval.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This paper relates to Policy CC10 (Green Belts and Strategic Gaps) in the Draft South East Plan¹. This was one of a limited number of policies where the Regional Assembly agreed that further work should be undertaken, for consideration by members and possible inclusion in the final Plan submission in March 2006.
- 1.2 Members agreed wording for the part of the policy relating to Green Belts at the Plenary on 13 July 2005. However in the absence of consistent national guidance on the subject of strategic gaps, and variations in approach taken by a number of existing Structure and Local Plans, members asked that further work be undertaken to develop criteria for the identification of strategic gaps, which could be included in the South East Plan.

2. Suggested Policy Wording and Supporting Text

- 2.1 Officers at the Assembly have examined an extensive range of material², and have discussed the issue with the Cross Cutting Group and Strategy Advisory Group.

¹ This was formally Policy CC9 of the Draft for Public Consultation South East Plan, January 2005

² This has included Government policy and guidance, existing Structure Plan policies, Examination in Public (EiP) Panel Reports, representations to the draft South East Plan, sub-regional advice and independent research [most notably Elson, M (2000) Strategic gap and green wedge policies in structure plans: main report, Oxford Brookes University, http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_planning/documents/page/odpm_plan_606698-02.hcsp].

- 2.2 The primary purpose of a strategic gap is to prevent the coalescence between two substantial urban settlements. It is important that both settlements are substantial to ensure that the nature of the gap is justifiably strategic in the regional spatial context. It is acknowledged that strategic gaps have the potential to provide other environmental and health benefits; as do all areas of open countryside, Green Belt or rural fringe. However, these benefits are coincidental and whilst important, strategic gaps should not be assessed on these factors.
- 2.3 The appropriate width of a strategic gap is subjective. We consider that a gap greater than five miles between the settlements concerned is unlikely to represent a gap that is truly under threat of coalescence within the lifetime of a Local Development Document. This view was endorsed by the Strategy Advisory Group.
- 2.4 There is a presumption against development within strategic gaps. However, limited small-scale development in accordance with other policies within the South East Plan should be permitted as long as such development would not compromise the fundamental integrity and purpose of the gap.
- 2.5 We set out in Annex I proposed revised wording for Policy CCI0, and associated supporting text, for members' consideration.

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23 November 2005

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Suggested Revised Policy CC10 wording: Green Belt and Strategic Gaps

- I.22 The Government has confirmed its continuing commitment to the Green Belt as an instrument of planning policy, and consultation has confirmed very strong public support for the concept. Green Belts fulfil five main functions: to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas; to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another; to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; to preserve the special character and setting of historic towns; and to assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land. All of these functions are consistent with the Assembly's vision for the South East, and the Assembly considers that there is no case for any strategic review of Green Belt within the region.
- ~~I.23 For most of the region, Green Belt policy does not apply. In some counties, policies to identify and protect gaps between settlements have been developed, in order to maintain identity and provide some longer term spatial flexibility. Analysis has, however, shown that the definition of these gaps varies widely and there is little locational consistency. The Assembly believes in principle that a statement of consistent criteria on the identification and definition of gaps in the Plan would be appropriate and would overcome the present inconsistency. Further consideration of the option is therefore being undertaken so that a statement may be incorporated in the final Plan submission to Government.~~
- ~~I.23 For most of the South East, Green Belt policy does not apply. In some parts of the region Structure Plans and Local Plans have included policies to identify and protect gaps between settlements, to avoid coalescence of specific urban areas and maintain their identity. However there is no national guidance on the issue of strategic gaps, and definition of these gaps has varied considerably.~~
- ~~I.24 Therefore it is appropriate and necessary for the South East Plan to include a policy on this subject, identifying criteria to ensure a more consistent approach is taken by those authorities who wish to identify gaps, and to ensure those gaps are strategic, rather than what may be more correctly regarded as 'local', in function.~~
- ~~I.25 Where necessary, local authorities should identify strategic gaps in their Local Development Documents that fulfil the criteria set out in Policy CC10. The primary purpose of these gaps must be to prevent coalescence of settlements and maintain their identity. Where a gap crosses local authority boundaries, the Local Authorities should prepare a joint LDD for the gap.~~
- ~~I.26 Limited small-scale development in accordance with other policies within the South East Plan, principally Countryside and Landscape Management Policies C1–C3, should be permitted as long as such development would not compromise the fundamental integrity and purpose of the gap.~~
- ~~I.27 Strategic gaps have the potential to increase biodiversity and provide other environmental and health benefits, in the way that other areas of countryside or urban rural fringe do (see Chapter D6 policies C1 - C4, and Chapter D7 policy BE4), and full opportunity should be taken to maximise these benefits where gaps are adopted. However these benefits are coincidental to the primary purpose of strategic gaps, and decisions about whether gaps should or should not be adopted must be solely based on the criteria set out in Policy CC10.~~

- I.28 If a local authority wishes to identify a gap that does not fulfil the policy criteria, they must assess whether it is appropriate to designate it as a local gap in keeping with the guidance in Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7): Sustainable Development in Rural Areas.

POLICY CCI0: GREEN BELTS AND STRATEGIC GAPS

The existing Green Belts in the region will be retained and supported and the opportunity should be taken to improve their land-use management and access as part of initiatives to improve the urban rural fringe. If there are any cases for small-scale local review these can be pursued through the Local Development Framework process.

Elsewhere in the region, where there is a need to prevent the coalescence of settlements in order to retain their separate identity, local authorities may identify the location and boundaries of strategic gaps in a Local Development Document (or joint LDD where the gap crosses more than one local authority) if the following criteria are met:

- (a) the gap will prevent the coalescence of settlements each with a resident population greater than 10,000 persons;
- (b) the gap must be no greater in size than is necessary, and in all cases no greater than five miles at its widest point.

Development should only be permitted in a strategic gap where it would not compromise, individually or cumulatively with other existing or proposed development, the fundamental integrity and purpose of the gap.

Elsewhere in the region, strategic gaps and corridors will be protected from inappropriate development with the purpose of maintaining the character of the region by retaining the separate identity and preventing the coalescence of settlements.

If there are any cases for small-scale local review these can be pursued through the Local Development Framework process.

Local authorities should identify, in Local Development Frameworks, strategic gaps and corridors that will protect the character and pattern of development and prevent coalescence.