

APPENDIX E Part 4

Distinctiveness of Settlements

The separate identities and very different characters of Benson and Preston Crowmarsh as distinct settlements in a rural setting, have been noted above in the settlement character assessments. The high value placed on the sense of identity was formative to the original Neighbourhood Plan in 2017 and led to Policy NP27, which required that development should retain rural landscape space between these and other neighbouring settlements adequate to maintain their distinction and rural character. The Revised Plan looks to strengthen this policy. This section looks at the role of the gaps between the settlements, and their importance to this priority.

The gap between Benson and Rokemarsh:

The delivery of allocated housing on sites BEN3 and BEN4 will inevitably reduce the gap between these two settlements, but the impact has been mitigated by the layout now approved and shown on the Concept Plan. This layout, shown on the aerial view below, delivers the required amount of housing whilst providing for green space and buffers towards Rokemarsh and the countryside, and without need to build on the land east of the roundabout or the paddocks adjacent to the north of that land.



The green open spaces, fields and paddocks between Benson and Rokemarsh (map base courtesy of Thomas Homes and David Wilson Homes)

Notwithstanding the above the remaining open spaces between the development (i.e. future Benson) and Rokemarsh will be small, and will be precious in preserving both the physical and visual

separation between the two settlements, and their distinctiveness of character. The green, open character of those spaces will be important to their rural setting. The spaces fall into three categories:

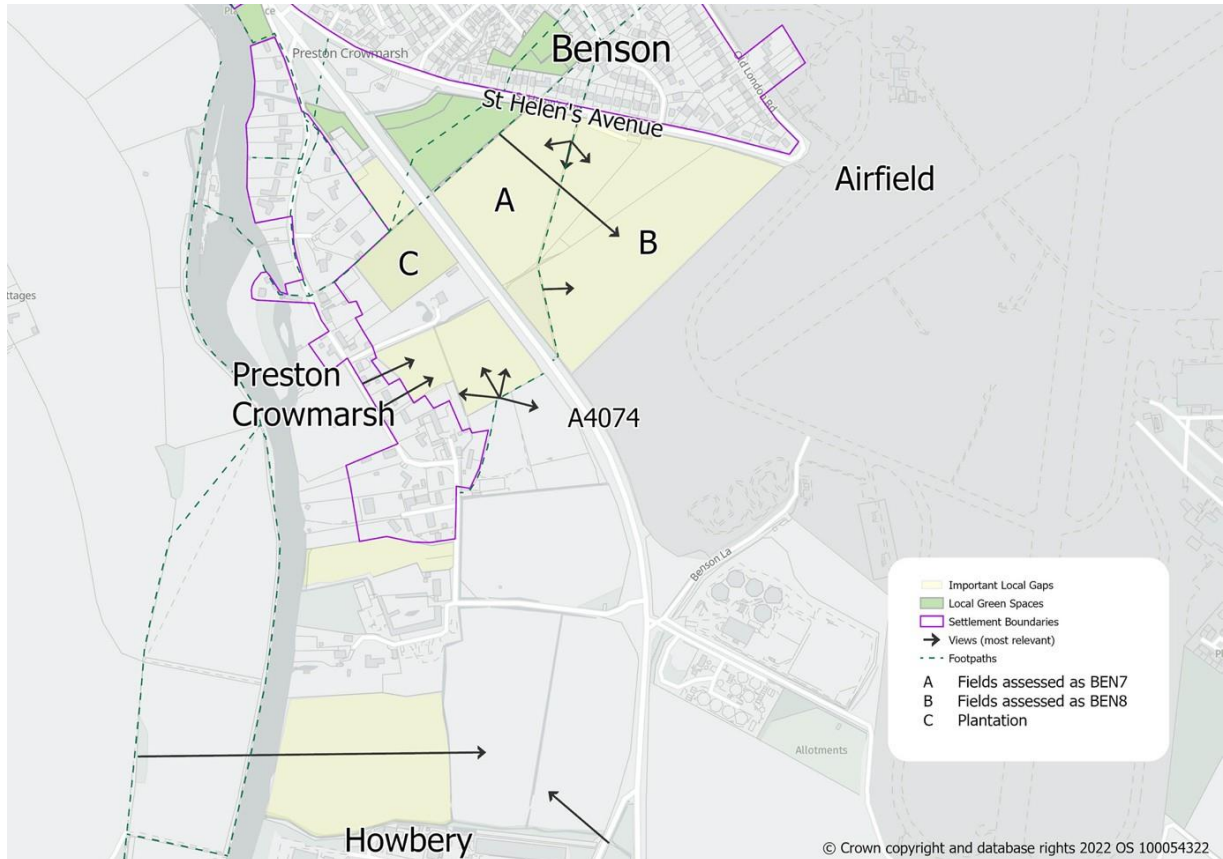
- i. The fields to the north of the BEN 3/4 site: these have not been put forward for development. While they have not been formally assessed, it is evident that they are not necessary to meet the current housing need, and that allocation would not be justified by any essential contribution to the land-take and financing of the relief road, as was essential to the allocation of the site currently under development. Furthermore, they are more distant from Benson village centre, with poor connectivity to facilities and services. It is anticipated that these fields will remain part of the countryside.
- ii. The paddocks between the site and the two houses at The Orchard and Port Hill House were included in the BEN4 allocation site at the time of the original plan because the site boundary had been based on SODC's 'Call for Sites' map of February 2015. The separate circumstances and ownership of the paddocks only became clear in May 2017, by which time our Neighbourhood Plan had already passed through its Pre-Submission Consultation and was about to be passed to SDC for its "Submission Consultation" stage. This revised Plan removes the paddocks from the BEN4 allocation, as it is now clear that the approved current development of the much larger part of the allocation will be more than adequate to provide the amount of housing and the Relief Road required by Policy NP2, and that further housing is not required. This revised Plan excludes the paddocks from the Benson Settlement Boundary because they are currently part of the countryside setting of the village - and notes that significant housing development here would extend Benson to Braze Lane, linking the BEN4 houses directly with The Orchard and Port Hill House, in a way that the current development avoids. This would severely prejudice the separate identities and distinctiveness of the settlements of Benson and Rokemarsh. To date, one application for further housing on the paddocks has been dismissed at appeal (P18/S0181/O), on grounds of the poor connectivity between the site and the village, and a renewed application, P21/S0882/O, has been refused but is subject to appeal in October 2022.
- iii. Other spaces are outside the Plan Area in the parish of Berrick Salome, and come within the remit of the Berrick Salome Neighbourhood Plan. This Plan also expresses concern that the settlements should remain separate and distinct. Policy BER1 of the Berrick Salome Neighbourhood Plan requires that: "Development proposals between Rokemarsh and Benson should conserve the open and tranquil character of the intervening landscape and its views. Proposals which would either individually or cumulatively, unacceptably detract from the separation between Rokemarsh and Benson will not be supported."

The need to consider the effect of cumulative development is relevant across all three of the above spaces as they work together to provide the desired degree of separation.

The gap between Benson and Preston Crowmarsh

Benson and Preston Crowmarsh have always been associated but separate settlements. Benson had access to the Thames, with wharves at what is now the Waterfront, but grew to the north and east along the brook, while Preston Crowmarsh focussed on the mill, the weir and ferry crossings, and on the originally dispersed farms at Crowmarsh Battle and Lower Farm. As noted in the settlement

assessments, Preston Crowmarsh remains a small-scale hamlet, quiet and very rural in character, and is ranked as an “other” village, while Benson has become a busy, growing “larger” village. There is much coming and going between the two, but residents see themselves as belonging to one or the other.



Gaps, views and routes relevant to the distinctiveness of the settlements

Preston Crowmarsh grew to the north in the later 20th century such that houses are only separated from the Waterfront by the amenity green space at Rivermead. At the very north end it is the A4074 that cuts the extended hamlet from the main part of Benson village. The degree of separation grows rapidly, however, to the south, with a wedge of open space surviving between the hamlet, St Helen’s Avenue and the airfield. At the tip of the wedge, allotments and paddocks owned by the Parish Council, together with the nature reserve at Millbrook Mead, form a narrow band of green space that marks the separation. The rest of the wedge comprises fields, criss-crossed by footpaths that link Benson and Crowmarsh, but cut through by the A4074.

The fields on both sides of the A4074 are valued for the separation that they provide, but are also important to the countryside setting of both Benson and Preston Crowmarsh, and to their identity as rural settlements. For Benson they provide countryside and breathing space almost on the doorstep, with the opportunity to walk across open fields and paddocks and enjoy long views south across the airfield grassland to the Chilterns beyond (View 5). Willows along the drainage ditch, and a patch of natural scrubland add to the enjoyment of the outer path. For Preston Crowmarsh the plantation to the rear of The Old Mill House provides a buffer from the road, and the small fields of pasture associate closely with the single line of houses that characterises the settlement. They provide a natural green background in views between the houses as seen from the lane, and make a major contribution to the attractive appearance of the conservation area.

While the A4074 forms a ready barrier between the two settlements, it also provides a line that could be perceived as a future limit of development by landholders on both sides. Large-scale and/or cumulative development here could clearly prejudice the sense of separation and distinction, and erode the rural setting.

Large-scale development on the Benson side has been attempted. Fields A and B were put forward in response to a call for sites and are shown on Figure 3 of the Plan as BEN7 and BEN8. As explained in the Site Assessment in Appendix A, they were not allocated for housing because of the loss of “green separation” and the risk of settlement coalescence, the environmental health issues arising from the proximity to the airfield, and lack of relevance to the strategic plan for Benson.

Applications for development of BEN7 (P16/S1301/O and P16/S4223/O) had already been dismissed at appeal, primarily because of the environmental health issues. No applications have been made for BEN8, which is even closer to the airfield, and it is likely that similar issues will hinder large-scale development opportunities as long as the airfield remains in use. BEN8 has accordingly been returned to cultivation, bar the scrubland, and part of BEN7 is in use as horse paddocks. The greater part of BEN7, however, is left unkempt as if there is still hope of development opportunities at some time in the future.

The settlement boundaries introduced in the Revised Plan clarify that all the fields concerned are not part of the settlements but part of the countryside. The Plan also directs that any development should have regard for the importance of preserving open rural space between the settlements and identifies them as an important local gap (Figure 20). Development associated with their agricultural or grazing use could be appropriate, but other forms of development permitted in the countryside will need to be located, scaled and designed to preserve the quality of that gap.

The gap between Preston Crowmarsh and Howbery Business Park

The existing gap between Preston Crowmarsh Farm and Howbery Park is highly important to the distinctiveness of Preston Crowmarsh as a small rural settlement, with Crowmarsh Battle Farm slightly separate at the southern end. It separates these buildings from the large offices and the more distant built-up area of Crowmarsh Gifford. The gap is apparent from Benson Lane and the A4074, but more particularly from the lane through Preston Crowmarsh, the footpath currently permitted across the fields, and the Thames Path National Trail across the river.

The gap comprises a large 3-part field that is described in the South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment as flat floodplain pasture. It is further assessed in Landscape Character Area 1 in this appendix and shown in Views 9 and 16. This field is highly distinctive because of its flat, low-lying character, with hedge boundaries and long lines of willows along the drainage ditches. The westernmost section of the field is almost completely within Flood Zones 2 and 3, as it is affected by surface water and water from around Marsh Wood, as well as flooding from the River Thames. This part of the field is purely pastoral. Where the ground drops to the River Thames it is again lined with willows.

All sections of the field contribute to the gap, and care will be needed with any development proposals in accordance with Policy NP 27. The section by the river, however, is of particular importance as it lies directly between the Crowmarsh buildings and Howbery Park. While this section is partially screened by the willows from river views or views from the Thames Path, it provides space that is clearly free from development, and that allows views between the settlements, through to the rising slopes of the Chilterns. These views are particularly evident from

the footpath that diverges from the Thames Path to run towards Wallingford at slightly higher level. The views link the two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This section of the field is therefore marked on Figure 20 of the Plan as an important local gap.

Gaps between settlements and farmsteads

The historic economy of the Plan Area was based on agriculture, and the survival of farmsteads is important to its rural character. The protection afforded to the historic farmstead buildings by listing, and by including buildings in the Schedule of Buildings of Local Heritage Note is set out in Appendix C and Policy NP6 of the Plan. Their setting depends on survival of their agricultural surroundings.

A number of the farmsteads were located in Benson village, which historically comprised a more loosely spaced series of farms and dwellings than now apparent, but a number were, and are, separate:

Fifield was a separate manorial holding with a farmstead well away from the village. It remains isolated, well beyond the end of Brook Street, with fields to the north and the grassy expanse of the airfield to the south. This setting ensures that the huge barns still stand out in the landscape as they have done for over 200 years, and that the farmstead still expresses its distinct agricultural function, even though the barns have been converted to residential use.

Hale Farm was an enclosure farmstead, built in the 1850s out in the fields, long before Sunnyside or the houses at Port Hill were dreamt of, let alone the developments at BEN1 and BEN2. It now marks the transition from settlement to countryside. The small-scale fields and semi-parkland around it are described in Landscape Character Area 4 of this Appendix and are important to that transition, and to the historic interest of the farmhouse and farm buildings.

Crowmarsh Battle Farm has much greater antiquity, and is known to have been a grange for Battle Abbey. Its existence helped to shape the development of Preston Crowmarsh, to which it undoubtedly belongs in terms of community, but the farmstead has always been a little distant from the concentration of houses, surrounded by its fields. The gap between the continuous run of houses and the farm is now small but significant to the setting of the farm, and the single narrow field that survives is noted as an important local gap on Figure 20.

Lower Farm at Preston Crowmarsh was also once more separate from the historic settlement than now. It has been subsumed into the built-up area along the east side of the lane as defined by the settlement boundary, but the surviving field to the west of the lane, and the fields to the east of the former farm buildings are important to its setting.