Virginia Water Neighbourhood Plan

LOCAL GAP STUDY

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Authored by: Stephen Wadsworth CMLI

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1. Introduction

Background

1.1 The Virginia Water Neighbourhood Plan Forum is preparing the Virginia Water Neighbourhood Plan (VWNP) for its area, with the aim of consulting on a draft document in autumn 2023.

Emerging Neighbourhood Plan

1.2 The emerging VWNP has identified an area that it considers to be a potential Local Gap (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Plan showing the current proposed Local Gap/Study Area

1.3 The purpose of any Local Gap policy within the emerging VWNP would be to:

"…identify local gaps between the settlements of Virginia Water and Englefield Green and Egham to prevent new development from making them merge into each other."

1.4 The potential Local Gap occupies an area between the main settlement of Virginia Water and Englefield Green (located in the adjoining neighbourhood plan area) to the north and between the Stroude Valley and the settlement of Egham (also outside the VWNP area).

1.5 It is recognised that the identification of Local Gaps is a widely used, conventional planning policy designation. Such a designation has the potential to assist with the prevention of physical and visual coalescence of settlements and to help maintain the identity and character of individual settlements.

Purpose of the Study

1.6 Briarwood Landscape Architecture has been commissioned to undertake a review and appraisal, in respect of landscape and visual matters, of the potential Local Gap so far identified by the VWNP Forum. The study is intended to examine whether the potential Local Gap is appropriate in its

suggested scale and extent in fulfilling its intended role of strengthening the protection of the physically and visual separate and distinct character and identity of the settlement of Virginia Water.

1.7 The intention of this study is to provide a robust evidence base for scrutiny during the consultation period of the draft VWNP and at the neighbourhood plan's examination stage.

1.8 For the purposes of this Local Gap Study, the potential Local Gap currently identified by the VWNP Forum is regarded as 'the study area'.

Structure of Report

1.9 The following study report is divided into the following sections.

1.10 Section 2 outlines the National and local planning policy context that is supportive of the principle of establishing Local Gap designations.

1.11 Section 3 explains the methodology used for undertaking the appraisal process of the study area.

1.12 Section 4 outlines the landscape and visual appraisal and its findings.

1.13 Section 5 provides for conclusions and recommendations.

2. Planning Policy Context

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

2.1 The NPPF states in paragraph 7 that:

"The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development."

2.2 To achieve such sustainable development the NPPF outlines three overarching objectives in paragraph 8. One of which is environmental and states:

"– to protect and enhance our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, improving biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy."

2.3 Paragraph 20 of the NPPF says that strategic polices of the local planning authority should make sufficient provision for the:

"…conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure, and planning measures to address climate change mitigation and adaptation."

2.4 Paragraph 174 of the NPPF explains that planning policies should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment. In section (b) of paragraph 174 this enhancement of the natural and local environment should be achieved by:

"…recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland…

NB Underlining is author's emphasis.

2.5 The National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) states under the title Landscape that:

The National Planning Policy Framework is clear that plans should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and that strategic policies should provide for the conservation and enhancement of landscapes. This can include nationally and locally-designated landscapes but also the wider countryside.

Runnymede Local Plan 2030

2.6 There are no policies within the current Runnymede Local Plan 2030 that specifically relate to the establishment or maintenance of Local Gaps within the borough. Much of the borough is within the Metropolitan Green Belt. The Local Plan contains various policies relating to the Green Belt. These policies are designed to primarily to

"prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open."

2.7 Several policies are, however, relevant to the aim of protecting the landscape and natural environment of the borough.

2.8 Policy EE11: Green Infrastructure states:

The Council will seek to avoid further habitat fragmentation of Green Infrastructure by encouraging development proposals which restore, maintain and enhance habitat connectivity, in particular in Biodiversity Opportunity Areas as shown on the policies map.

The Council will seek development to contribute towards the delivery of a high quality multi-functional Green Infrastructure network by requiring proposals to provide and make enhancements to onsite Green Infrastructure assets. In exceptional circumstances, if it is not possible to provide on-site Green Infrastructure as it is neither feasible nor viable, a financial contribution towards provision and enhancement of Green Infrastructure and services may be sought.

The Council will ensure the effective use of Tree Preservation Orders to protect significant trees and will encourage the proper care and maintenance of trees by requiring owners to submit applications to work on protected trees and ensure that protected trees are replaced if they have to be felled.

2.9 Policy EE9: Biodiversity, Geodiversity and Nature Conservation

Development on or adjacent to the following hierarchy of important sites In the Borough will need to pay particular attention to the requirements of this policy.

1)Ramsar sites (international).

2)Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation (European).

3)Sites of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserves (National).

4)Ancient Woodland, ancient or veteran trees; and/or trees and hedgerows protected by a Tree Preservation Order.

5)Sites of Nature Conservation Importance, Local Nature Reserves.

6)Other priority habitats and priority species not identified in 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5above (Local); designated Local Green Space where richness of wildlife has been identified as a contributing factor in its designation; and any area in Runnymede that may be in future identified as a Nature Improvement Area; trees considered to make a significant contribution to their surroundings, individually or as a group.

The Council will seek net gains in biodiversity, through creation/expansion, restoration, enhancement and management of habitats and features to improve the status of priority habitats and species. Development proposals should demonstrate how this will be achieved and should be in accordance with any Supplementary Planning Document the Council prepares.

Development proposals not directly related to the management of Ramsar, SPA,SAC as well as SSSI units forming part of these designations will not be permitted unless it can be demonstrated that the impact of proposals, either alone or in combination, will not result in likely significant adverse effects. If significant adverse effects remain even with the implementation of suitable avoidance and/or mitigation, development proposals will need to demonstrate that alternatives to the proposal have been fully explored and that Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest(IROPI) exist. In these exceptional circumstances the Council will only permit development where suitable compensatory measures can be implemented.

For development proposals that affect national, regional or locally protected sites not forming part of a Ramsar, SPA or SAC, permission will only be granted where it can be demonstrated that the benefits of the development proposal clearly outweigh the harm to the site and has followed the hierarchy of mitigation so that biodiversity y/geodiversity damage from development should first be avoided, then mitigated on-site and finally, as a last resort and where acceptable, offset.

3. Methodology

3.1 There is presently no prescribed method for assessing Local Gaps. Local Gap policies have generally been found sound at the examination stage of the particular neighbourhood plan when supported by up to date evident to validate the extent and purpose of the proposed Local Gap.

3.2 In reviewing the potential VWNP Local Gap, reference has been made to the methodologies used in other similar studies. These include the Chichester District Council Landscape Gap Assessment – 2019, and The Ivers Neighbourhood Plan: Referendum Plan October 2022 amongst others.

3.3 In reviewing the proposed Local Gap within the evolving VWNP a desk top study has been undertaken. This has included a review of relevant published documents in the evidence base for the adopted Local Plan for Runnymede Borough Council together with appropriate Supplementary Planning Documents and published landscape character assessments.

3.4 Use has also been made of the Defra run MAGIC website https://magic.defra.gov.uk/About_MAGIC.htm

This website provides geographic information about the natural environment from across government.

3.5 The area of the proposed Local Gap has also been visited. Observations made on the site visit have been noted and photographs taken .

Assessment Criteria

3.6 When assessing the suitability of the proposed Local Gap and its component areas, consideration has been given to the following criteria:

- The perception of openness and enclosure of the landscape and the implication for the prospective size of the Local Gap;
- Whether the area is predominantly undeveloped;
- The presence or otherwise of a comprehensible pattern of land management and uses;
- The presence or absence of physical landscape features such as highways, watercourses, hedgerows, woodlands etc, that may be

considered to be permanent within the landscape and which would help determine the boundary of any gap;

- The perception of visual separation both within and outside the potential Local Gap;
- The character of the individual settlement and the form of the edge of settlement closest to the proposed gap;
- The presence of any other landscape designation or heritage designation (such as conservation areas, listed buildings etc, where the landscape setting may be important) within or close to the potential Local Gap;
- The presence of an environmental or heritage designations likely to form an absolute constraint to future development such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Registered Parks and Gardens, Scheduled Ancient Monuments etc.;
- The presence of public rights of way that enable an appreciation of the potential Local Gap and which form a transitional connection between an individual settlement, the Local Gap and the wider landscape (including the possible area of future development).

Other Considerations

3.7 Other factors that that need to be considered include the following.

3.8 Consideration 1. Does any land in the proposed Local Gap already have planning permission, or has it been allocated for development that might conflict with such a designation?

- Review the planning history for the area to ensure that it is not subject to an extant planning permission, and that it has not been allocated for development under the local plan.
- The Local Gaps designation will rarely be appropriate where land already has planning permission for a large scale development, or where it has been allocated for development under the local plan.
- An exception to this may be where it can be demonstrated that the Local Gap designation would be compatible with the planning permission / local plan allocation, or where the planning permission / local plan allocation is no longer capable of being implemented.

3.9 Consideration 2. Does the area play an important role as a buffer preventing coalescence between settlements, and if so, could this role be significantly harmed by development?

- An area could qualify for designation as a Local Gap if it plays an important role as a buffer preventing coalescence of and between settlements, and if this role could be significantly harmed by development.
- In evaluating the importance of an area's role as a buffer, consideration should be given as to how much open space currently exists between settlements. Where little open space remains between settlements, its designation should be prioritised.
- Thought should also be given to the quality of the remaining open space. A significant stretch of undeveloped land will often be more effective at preventing coalescence than land punctuated by built forms.
- In determining if development would significantly harm an area's ability to act as a buffer, account should be taken of how even low levels of development can bring about changes in the way an area is experienced. For example, a few dwellings, modern farm buildings, static or holiday caravans or equine structures etc. can in some situations fragment the perception of an undeveloped landscape, and reduce the sense of separation between settlements .
- Account should also be taken of the fact that larger settlements tend to exert greater effects on their hinterlands than small ones. The impacts of noise, litter, light pollution, traffic and incidental development tend to extend further from larger settlements than from small ones. Larger settlements may therefore require larger buffers than smaller ones in order to prevent a sense of coalescence.

3.10 Consideration 3. Does the area make an important contribution to the character or landscape of a settlement, and if so, could this be significantly harmed by development?

- An area could qualify for designation if it made an important contribution to the character or landscape setting of a settlement, and if that contribution could be significantly harmed by development.
- Contributions to character or landscape setting might include helping to create an attractive backdrop for a key approach to the settlement, or providing important views into or out of the settlement or its environs.

- New development might give rise to harm such as the interruption of views, or a reduction in the sense of visual isolation etc.
- In determining harms to the character or landscape setting of a settlement, account should be taken of how even low levels of development can bring about changes in the way an area is experienced in certain contexts. For example, a single dwelling, modern farm building or equine complex etc. on open land can fragment a sense of visual isolation deriving from undeveloped landscape.

4. Landscape and Visual Appraisal

Overview of the Local Gap Study Area

4.1 The Local Gap study area consists of most of the northern part of the VWNP area (see Figure1). On a north-south axis, the study area's narrowest point is approximately 750 metres between Callow Hill in the north and Hollow Lane in the south. At its widest point the study area is approximately 1.6km, between Prune Hill in the north and the rear of properties in Piper' End in the south.

4.2 The study area's northern boundary follows that of the VWNP's northern boundary and runs along New Wickham Lane, Stroude Road, Whitehall Lane, Prune Hill, Blakeham Lane in the eastern section before moving westward to cross the A30 and pass south of Egham Wick Plantation and onto the Guards Polo Club.

4.3 The eastern boundary of the study area is contained by the M25 motorway.

4.4 The study area's southern runs to the south of the historic Great Fosters, now a hotel complex, and southwards along Stroude Road before passing over the Virginia Water to London railway and around the norther edge of Virginia Water to Callow Hill. The southern boundary then passes along Christchurch Road before running southwards along the A30 London Road.

4.5 The western study area boundary passes through Windsor Great Park along the boundary between the boroughs of Runnymeade and Windsor and Maidenhead.

4.6 Topographically, the study area undulates between a low point of approximately 15 metres Above Ordnance Datum (AOD) in the east close to the M25 and a high point of approximately 64 m AOD in the west close to the Guards Polo Club. Callow Hill in the centre of the study are reaches a high point of approximately 70 metres AOD.

Designations

4.7 With reference to the online MAGIC resource https://magic.defra.gov.uk/

4.8 The entire study area is covered by the Metropolitan Green Belt. The Green Belt is a planning rather than landscape protection designation. There is no

requirement for landscape within the Green Belt to be of a certain character, use, condition or level of quality.

4.9 The study area to the west of the A30 London Road is part of Windsor Great Park (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Plan showing Landscape, Heritage and Environmental designations

4.10 The park is a grade I registered park and garden. The south-eastern part of the study area within the Windsor Great Park is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

4.11 Great Fosters in the east of the study area is a grade II* registered park and garden. Great Fosters also contains several listed buildings. There are several other listed buildings within the study area boundary, mostly in the southern portion.

Published Landscape Character Assessment

4.12 Within the published Surrey Landscape Character Assessment[1] the study area is covered by two landscape character areas. The area broadly to the west of the Virginia Water to London railway is within the SW1- Virginia Water Sandy Woodland landscape character area (LCA) (see Appendix 1).

Appendix 1 - SW1- Virginia Water Sandy Woodland LCA

4.13 The area to the east of the railway line is within the RV2 – Thames River Valley Floor LCA (see Appendix 2).

Appendix 2 - Thames River Valley Floor LCA

4.14 The key characteristics of the Virginia Water Sandy Woodland LCA are given as:

- *Underlain by Bagshot Formation Sand solid geology, and a small area of Windlesham Formation Sand, Silt and Clay.*
- *An undulating landscape, with western and central areas draining into the lake of Virginia Water, whilst the eastern areas slope down to the Thames floodplain.*

[1] Surrey Landscape Character Assessment – Runnymede Borough – Hankinson Duckett Associates – April 2015

- *The character area consists of extensive areas of deciduous and coniferous woodland and plantation, including areas of ancient woodland, surrounding large lakes, including Virginia Water and the Obelisk Pond within The Savill Garden. The majority of the area is owned and managed by The Crown Estate as part of the Windsor Great Park to the north-west. Views are obscured by woodland generally, but there are often long vistas along routes cleared through woodland, and across Virginia Water and Obelisk Pond.*

- *The A30 and A329 roads cross the character area, but elsewhere there are few roads. The Waterloo to Reading railway line skirts the south-eastern edge of the character area.*

- *Although there are limited formal public rights of way, there are numerous tracks and paths across The Crown Estate, allowing access through the woodland and to Virginia Water lake.*

- *The Savill Garden, Valley Garden and other landscape associated with Virginia Water are significant visitor attractions.*

- *There are occasional scattered large houses, small groups of low density dwellings along roads, and complexes of buildings, including the American International School. Buildings are contained within surrounding woodland and are not overly intrusive.*

- *The Savill Garden, Valley Garden and other landscape associated with Virginia Water are grade I registered parks and gardens, and areas are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and/or Sites of Nature Conservation Importance. Virginia Water lake itself was constructed in 1750, and when extended in 1780, was the largest artificial lake in Britain.*

- *This is a generally enclosed, intimate landscape, with remote peaceful areas of woodland, however, heavy recreational use does reduce the sense of tranquillity in many areas. Human influence including roads and filtered views of settlement limits remoteness in places, more noticeably to the east. However, the eastern part of the character area separates Egham from the settlement of Virginia Water, and*

provides a wooded setting to the Thames Valley floor adjacent to the east."

NB underlining is author's emphasis

4.15 Under 'Landscape Management' guidelines 'Built Environment' the following is noted:

"Conserve the sense of seclusion with sparse settlement enclosed by woodland.

Maintain the wooded and undeveloped skyline…"

4.16 The key characteristics of the RV2 – Thames River Valley Floor LCA are given as:

- *"A level, low lying area, underlain by Thames Group Clay, Silt, Sand and Gravel solid geology.*
- *A mainly pastoral, grassland landscape, but with a significant amount of low density dwellings and other larger buildings such as research facilities, nursery glasshouses, businesses and a hotel complex.*
- *The character area becomes more rural and unsettled to the west, with farmland adjoining woodland located to the west of the character area.*
- *There are some significant belts of woodland running through the character area, including riparian vegetation along watercourses. Field boundaries to the west are lined with hedges and trees. Domestic boundaries within areas of low density dwellings, are also well vegetated.*
- *There are a number of large lakes resulting from gravel extraction, restored to leisure uses.*
- *There is a network of public rights of way, providing access to most parts of the character area.*

- *The M25 motorway passes north-south through the character area, and joins the M3 at Junction 12 of the M25, immediately to the south of the character area. The Waterloo to Reading railway line passes through the western part of the character area.*

- *Tree cover and boundary vegetation restricts views and helps obscure built form, roads and the M25 motorway.*

- *Thorpe Green at the southern end of the character area is registered Common Land.*

- *Human influences including settlement, surrounding Built Up Areas, roads and the M25 motorway, prevent a sense of remoteness, although tree cover helps create areas with a degree of tranquillity, particularly along footpaths within the western pastoral part of the character area."*

NB underlining is author's emphasis

4.17 The Landscape Strategy for the RV2 – Thames River Valley Floor LCA is to

"…conserve the commons, open areas and pastoral farmland, the historic village centres and a positive relationship between buildings and settlements edging the rural landscape."

4.18 Within the 'Land Management' guidelines, the following is noted:

"…Conserve remaining intact areas of agricultural or open land surrounding settlement…

…Conserve, enhance and restore riparian woodland, and blocks and bands of woodland at the edge of the area that screen development…"

4.19 Within the 'Built Development' guidelines, the following is noted:

"…Retain the distinct character of settlements and avoid merging these through linear development along roads, and by retaining the rural gaps between them…

…Ensure that any new large scale development does not impact adversely on rural views. Maintain relationship and quality of views to adjoining river floodplains and valleys, commons or to wider surrounding areas…"

NB underlining is author's emphasis

Visual Context

4.20 The extent and scale of the study area is not readily perceived from its edges. From most points along the study area boundary, views into and across the study area are restricted by the presence, and the layering effect, of vegetation. Where views do occur, they emphasise rather than diminish the perception of separation between settlements (see Appendix 3 – Context Views).

Appendix 3 – Context Views

4.21 The main source of public views into the gap are from the public rights of way. The various public rights of afford internal views but few are expansive ones and there is comparatively intervisibility with the area outside the study area.

Appraisal Summary

Assessment Criteria	Yes	In part	No	Commentary
Is the land predominantly open?				The sense of openness and enclosure within the study area varies. Within the various woodland blocks including Windsor Great Park there is a very strong sense of enclosure, with visibility greatly restricted by the presence of trees and in certain parts by undergrowth too. Within the less wooded and more agricultural eastern part of the study area there is a

Assessment Criteria	Yes	In part	No	Commentary
				greater sense of openness. Nevertheless a sense of enclosure still remains, as most fields and open spaces have large and dense hedgerow boundaries that, together with the lower lying topography, act to restrict intervisibility between parcels of land and the adjoining urban areas to both the north and south; especially in summer with a full leaf canopy present on the deciduous vegetation.
Is the area predominantly undeveloped?				The study area is predominantly undeveloped and comprises extensive areas of woodland together with areas of agriculture. The study area as a whole does contain some built form infrastructure. Such development is mainly focused in the central part of the study area to the west of Callow Hill, along the southern boundary to the north of Christ Church Road, and in the east to the north of Stroude Road. Development along Callow Hill comprises primarily residential properties of differing scale and ages including short terraces, single storey bungalows and more substantial dwellings. The various dwellings are largely set back from the highway so that there is still a perception of separation of settlement when travelling both northwards and southwards along Callow Hill. At the northern end of Callow Hill, is the Royal Holloway University of London Huntersdale building set in wooded grounds. The ACS International School Egham is located between Callow Hill and the A30 and has a campus style layout that includes formal landscape grounds and sports pitches. The development in this area creates a suburban landscape. Development to the north of Christ church Road is residential in nature with medium to large scale detached properties.

Assessment Criteria	Yes	In part	No	Commentary
		■		The area to the north of Stroude Road includes the residential street of Luddington Avenue. The properties fronting onto the street are a mix of single and 2 storey detached buildings. The street is suburban in nature. To the east of Stroude Road, development principally consists of the listed Great Fosters grade 1 building and its associated grade II* registered park and garden. Great Fosters now functions as a hotel. Elsewhere, the area is substantially wooded to the west of the Virginia Water-London railway with little development within the woodland blocks. To the east of the railway line, the area comprises mostly of a series of undeveloped agricultural fields.
Is there the presence or otherwise of a comprehensible pattern of land management and uses?	■			The study area has a generally simple and legible pattern of land management and land uses. Much of the area comprises managed woodland. Agricultural uses in the eastern part of the area less distinct but grazing, primarily for horses, is evident.
Is there the presence of physical landscape features such as highways, watercourses, hedgerows, woodlands etc, that may be considered to be permanent within the landscape and which would help		■		The western study area boundary follows the county administrative boundary between Surrey (Runnymede) and Berkshire (Windsor and Maidenhead). Though permanent but this line is not defined by physical features on the ground. Similarly, the western section of the study area's northern boundary, between the Guards Polo Ground and the A30 is largely undefined by any physical features on the ground. Elsewhere, the study area has a generally strong defensible boundary. The boundary primarily follows highways, including the M25. Other physical features defining the study area

Assessment Criteria	Yes	In part	No	Commentary
determine the boundary of any gap?				boundary include rear garden boundary treatments/fenceline, and public rights of way. The boundary of the study area as a whole excludes current housing allocation sites within the adopted Runnymede Local Plan.
Is there a strong perception of visual separation both within and outside the potential Local Gap?				Visibility into and out of the study area is typically restricted. Blocks of woodland and well vegetated field and property boundaries restrict many potential views into and out of the study area from both the north and from the south. Roadside vegetation and acoustic fencing restrict views into the area from the M25 and further east. Belvedere Wood and the vegetation of The Valley Gardens restrict views into the study area from the west. Where higher ground occurs, potentially more distant views across the study area, are typically greatly restricted by the presence of dense woodland and/or tree belts. Views across the study area are generally limited to the A30 London Road between The Wheatsheaf pub in the south and the ACS School Egham in the north and along the Virginia Water to London railway. Internally within the study area, views are generally very close distance ones i.e. less than 500 metres. Views are typically constrained by the presence of existing vegetation including field boundary hedgerows/tree belts and areas of woodland and scrub.
Is there a distinct character of the individual settlement and the form of the edge of settlement				The urban area of Virginia Water, to the south of the study area, has a generally well defined and distinct edge. The settlement of Stroude extends north-eastward from Virginia Water and is linear, ribbon development. The study area boundary excludes most of the settlement but

Assessment Criteria	Yes	In part	No	Commentary
closest to the proposed gap?				Luddington Avenue extends north into the area. Residential properties fronting on to Luddington Avenue have well defined rear gardens. The urban edge of Englefield Green and Egham to the north of the study area have less defined and distinct settlement edges. However, the boundary between the study area and Egham is well defined by physical features – principally roads. The boundary between Englefield Green and the study area is less well defined by physical features.
Is there the presence of any other landscape designation or heritage designation (such as conservation areas, listed buildings etc, where the landscape setting may be important) within or close to the potential Local Gap?				There are no conservations within or adjoining the study area. There are a small number of listed buildings in the study area. The presence of Local gap would potentially help conserve the landscape and/or heritage setting of the particular listed building.
Is there the presence of an environmental or heritage designations likely to form an absolute constraint to future				Paragraph 200 of the NPPF states: *"Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification. Substantial harm to or loss of:*

Assessment Criteria	Yes	In part	No	Commentary
development such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Registered Parks and Gardens, Scheduled Ancient Monuments etc.?				*a) grade II listed buildings, or grade II registered parks or gardens, should be exceptional;* *b) assets of the highest significance, notably scheduled monuments, protected wreck sites, registered battlefields, grade I and II* listed buildings, grade I and II* registered parks and gardens, and World Heritage Sites, should be wholly exceptional…"* This paragraph accords a high level of protection to those parts of the study area within the Windsor Great Park registered park and garden and the Great Foster registered park and garden. Paragraph 180 b states: *"…development on land within or outside a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and which is likely to have an adverse effect on it (either individually or in combination with other developments), should not normally be permitted. The only exception is where the benefits of the development in the location proposed clearly outweigh both its likely impact on the features of the site that make it of special scientific interest, and any broader impacts on the national network of Sites of Special Scientific Interest…"* This paragraph accords a high level of protection to those parts of the study area within the Windsor Forest and Park designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.
Is there the presence of public rights of way that enable an appreciation of the potential Local Gap and which form a				Most of the study area is private and without direct public access. The study area within the Windsor Great Park including the Virginia Water lake and the Valley Gardens although part of the Crown Estate is open to the public between 7am and 9.30pm. There are numerous walking routes through

Assessment Criteria	Yes	In part	No	Commentary
transitional connection between an individual settlement, the Local Gap and the wider landscape?				the woodlands and a promoted walking route around Virginia Water lake. There are several public rights of way passing through the study area to the east of Callow Hill. These routes afford an appreciation of the study area and do provide a connection between the Stroude part of the VWNP area and Egham to the north. When using the public right of ways within the study area the various routes do provide a sense of leaving and arrival between settlements.

Other factors

Does any land in the proposed Local Gap already have planning permission, or has it been allocated for development that might conflict with such a designation?

4.22 There are no allocations for development in the study area as part of the current adopted Runnymede Local Plan that might conflict with a prospective Local Gap designation.

4.23 Similarly, there are no allocations for minerals or waste developments in the study area as part of the adopted Surrey Minerals Plan 2011 or the Surrey Waste Local Plan 2019.

4.24 Two applications for large scale mineral extraction within the study area (see Figure 3) have been submitted.

Figure 3 - Plan showing mineral extraction planning application locations

4.25 The respective applications Milton Park Farm RU09/0015 (ref: 2009/0015) and Whitehall Farm RU21/0587 (ref: 2021/0023) have both yet to be determined (as of the time of writing) have yet to be determined. Additional information has been requested by Surrey County Council and further consultation would be required.

4.26 It is not certain that the current applications for gravel and sand extraction would gain planning consent. At present there is no immediate conflict with a prospective Local Gap designation.

Does the area play an important role as a buffer preventing coalescence between settlements, and if so, could this role be significantly harmed by development?

4.27 The study area does play an important role in acting as a buffer between the main built up area of Virginia Water to the south and the settlements of Englefield Green and Egham to the north. Much of the study area is essential in preventing the visual coalescence between Virginia Water and Englefield Green and between Virginia Water and Egham.

4.28 Any development within the study area that resulted in the loss of woodland or existing vegetation such as field boundary hedgerows and tree belts, would have the potential to bring about visual coalescence between settlements. Removal of such features would compromise the ability to determine by visual means only where one settlement ends and another begins.

4.29 It is considered that were even scattered relatively small scale development with component elements above tree height ,such as communication masts, pylons etc., or built form on higher ground, be permitted within the study area then this would compromise the area's landscape ability to prevent coalescence of settlements.

4.30 At present the width of the landscape gap study area prevents clear intervisibility between the settlements to the north and Virginia Water to the south. A reduction in the width of the gap, provided by the study area, through development would again compromise the ability of the landscape in the study area to prevent visual coalescence.

Does the area make an important contribution to the character or landscape of a settlement, and if so, could this be significantly harmed by development?

4.31 The landscape within the study makes an important contribution to the character and setting of Virginia Water (and also to the character and setting of both Englefield Green and Egham). The study area provides a largely undeveloped area of landscape that the published landscape character assessment for Runnymede identifies as 'rural' and 'pastoral' that allows for recreation, has a verdant and pastoral nature, and which expressly states provides a separation between Virginia Water and Egham

4.32 It is considered that in landscape and visual terms, the designation of the study area within the emerging VWNP would be entirely consistent with the

aspirations of the published character assessment in retaining the physical and, in particular, the visual separation of Virginia Water from the settlements to the north of the VWNP area.

4.33 Development, of any significant scale and height, would compromise and potentially severely harm the more rural and pastoral nature of the landscape within the eastern part of the study area and considerably reduce the perceived sense of openness. In the western part of the study area, any development that would lead to any reduction of the wooded nature of the landscape or rise above the existing tree line would cause harm to the character of the area and the green edge to Virginia Water. Such imaginable development would potentially lead to increased intervisibility between settlements and greater visual coalescence.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 The study area that presently constitutes the proposed Local Gap is demonstrably valuable, locally, in landscape terms as an area of multi-functional green infrastructure; acting to provide recreational opportunities, conserving heritage assets and promoting and conserving wildlife and natural habitat.

5.2 The study area is completely covered by the Metropolitan Green Belt. Such a designation affords a degree of protection to the integrity of the settlement boundary of Virginia Water, and to Englefield Green an Egham outside the VWNP boundary. Nevertheless, the proposed Local Gap designation would strengthen the protection of the physically and visual separate and distinct character and identity of the settlement of Virginia Water.

5.3 Having undertaken a landscape and visual appraisal of the study area, it is apparent that not all the landscape is appropriate for inclusion in the boundary for a promoted Local Gap as part of the emerging neighbourhood plan. Some modification of the proposed Local Gap boundary is recommended to help ensure that any intended designated is robust and transparently defensible in its extent and scale.

5.4 The following adjustments to the boundary of the proposed Local Plan are recommended:

- The study area to the west of the A30 London Road is removed from the proposed Local Gap. It is considered that this area of the Windsor Great Park is sufficiently protected by its designation as a listed registered park and garden and also, in part, as a Site of Special Scientific Interest for there to be an adequate restraint to potential future planned or unplanned development of any scale or magnitude that might compromise the separation and distinctive character of Virginia Water. In addition, although considered permanent by virtue of forming the county and district boundary, the northern and western boundaries of the study area within the Great Park are poorly defined on the ground. The area is managed so as to conserve and maintain its wooded appearance. Such a woodland asset prevents the visual coalescence of Englefield Green and Virginia Water.

- The properties and development to the north of Christchurch Road are excluded from the proposed designation. The properties and development detract from, rather than enhance the landscape and visual appearance of the current suggested Local Gap, and do not assist in the proposed function of any Local Gap in preventing physical or visual settlement coalescence. The rear garden boundaries to the various properties would form a defined and defensible boundary to any future designation.
- The properties within Luddington Close together with those to the north of Stroude Road are removed from the proposed Local Gap designation. The streets are suburban in character and act as an anomaly in the context of the more undeveloped landscape surrounding them to the north, east and west. The rear garden boundaries of the various properties would form a defined and defensible boundary to any future designation.

5.5 A revised recommended Local Gap boundary is given at Appendix 4.

Appendix 4 - Recommended Local Gap boundary

5.6 On the basis that the proposed amendments are made, the above appraisal indicates that there is justification in landscape and visual terms for the promotion of a Local Gap policy as part of the emerging VWNP so as to maintain the existing pattern of settlement through the avoidance of physical and visual coalescence between Virginia Water and the settlements of Englefield Green and Egham to the north.

5.7 Adoption of a Local Gap policy would effectively supplement and reinforce the existing Green Belt policy covering the study area. In so doing, the proposed Local Gap would create an additional layer of protection to the safeguarding of the existing settlement of Virginia Water against the possible erosion of the settlements landscape setting through the expansion of the adjacent urban edges of Englefield Green and Egham.

6. Figures

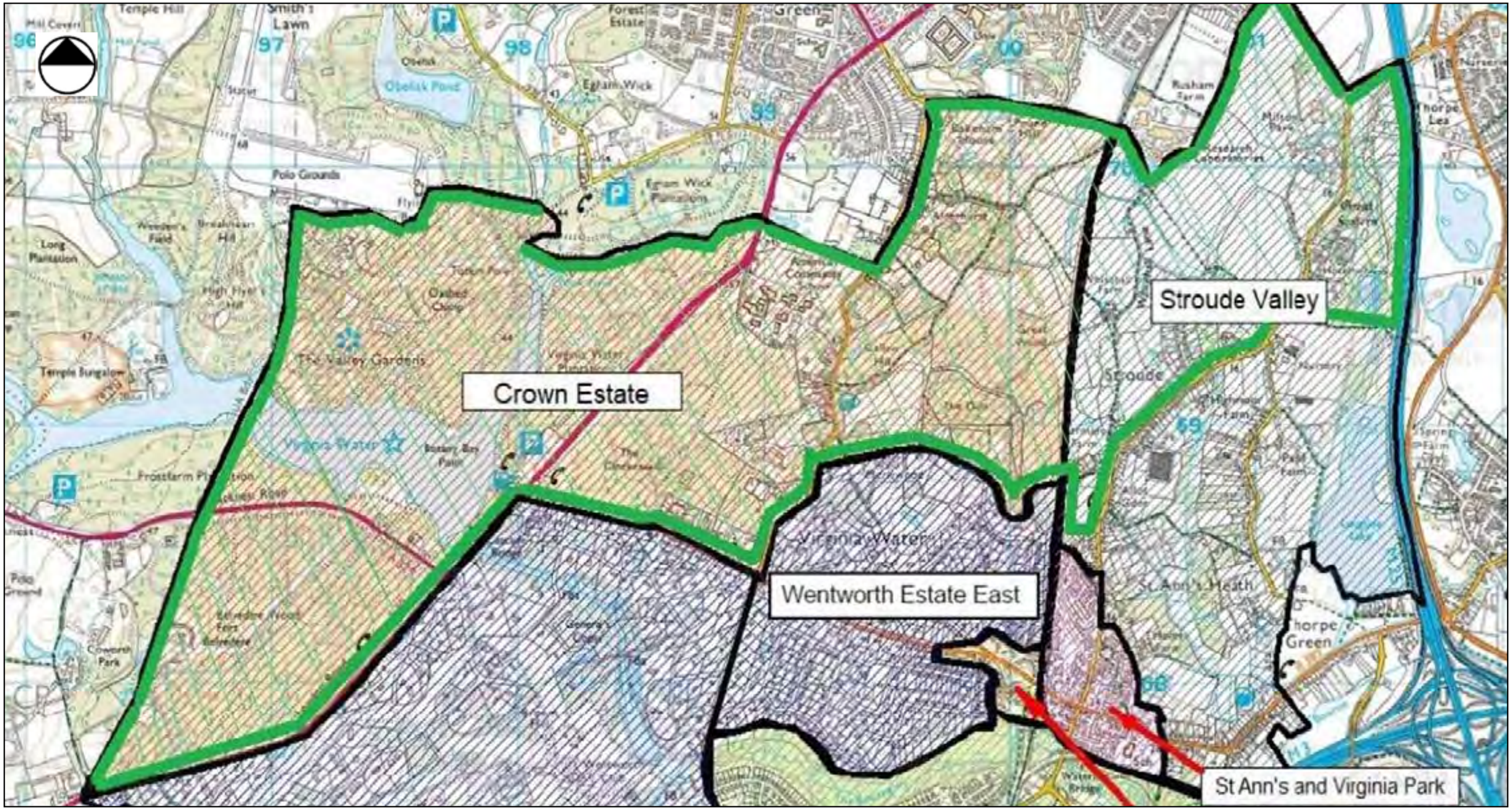

Figure 1 - Potential Local Gap - Study Area

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MAGiC

VWNP - Designations

Figure 2

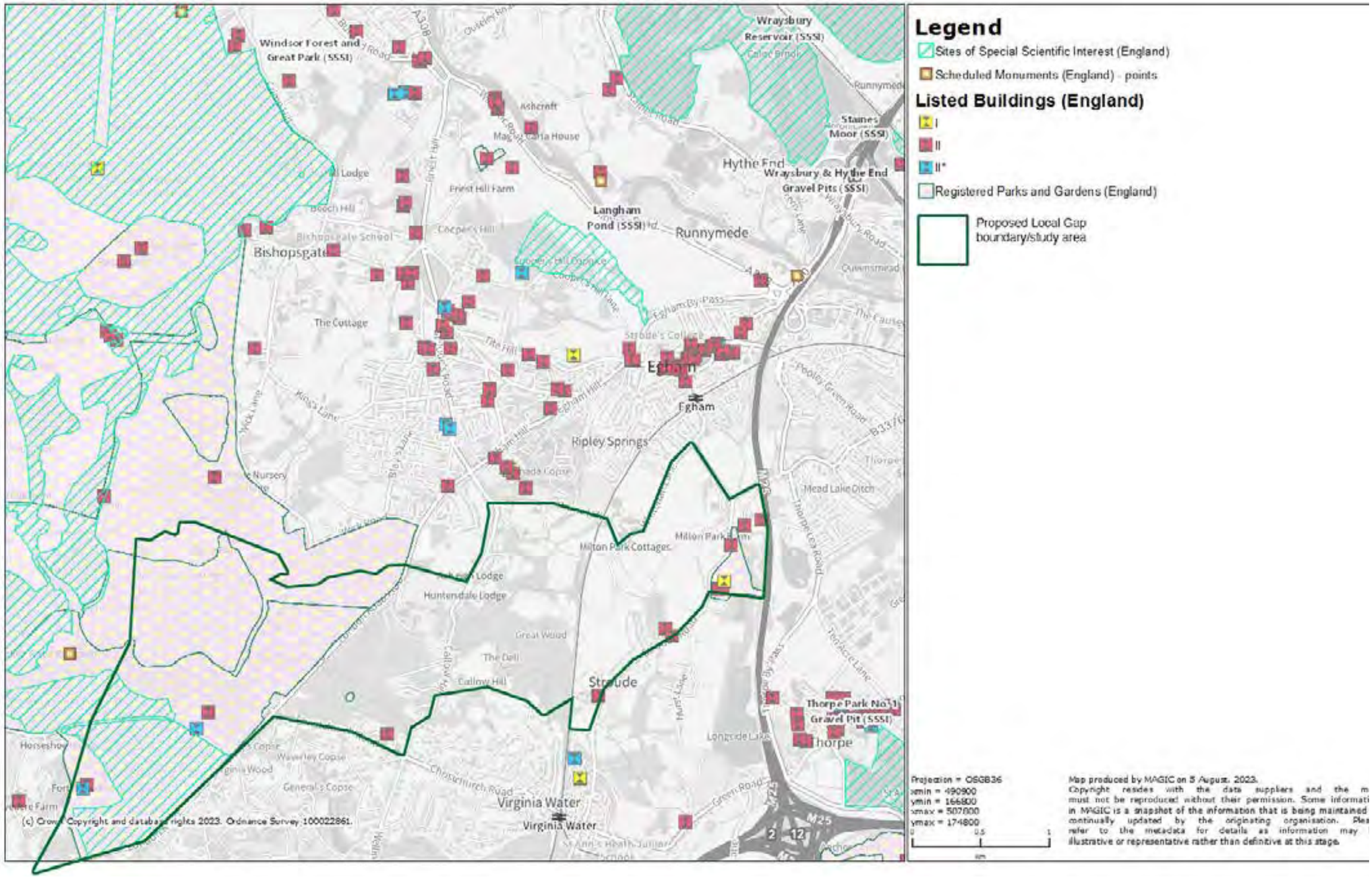
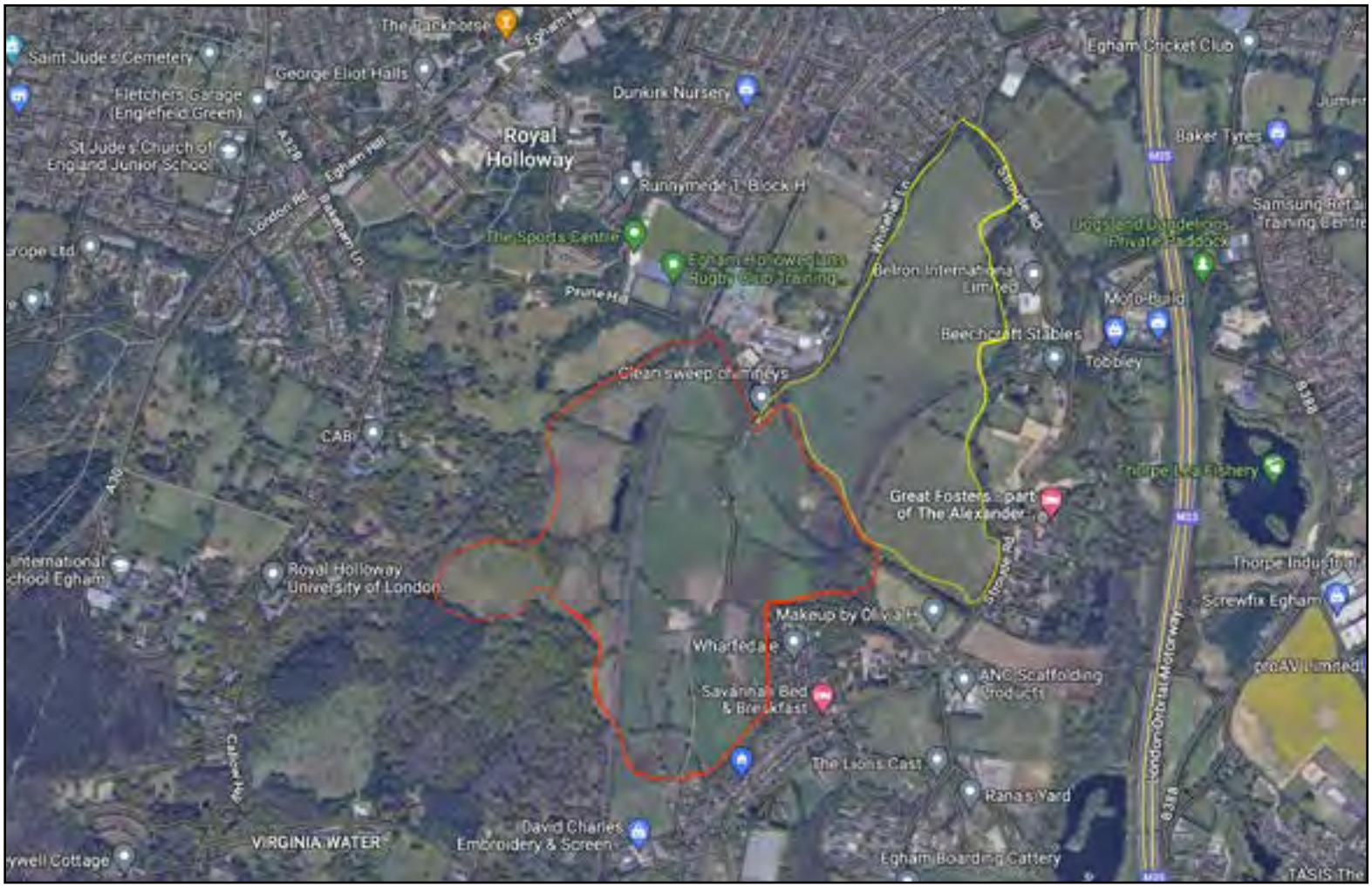


Figure 3 - GoogleMap extract with mineral extraction planning application boundaries indicated

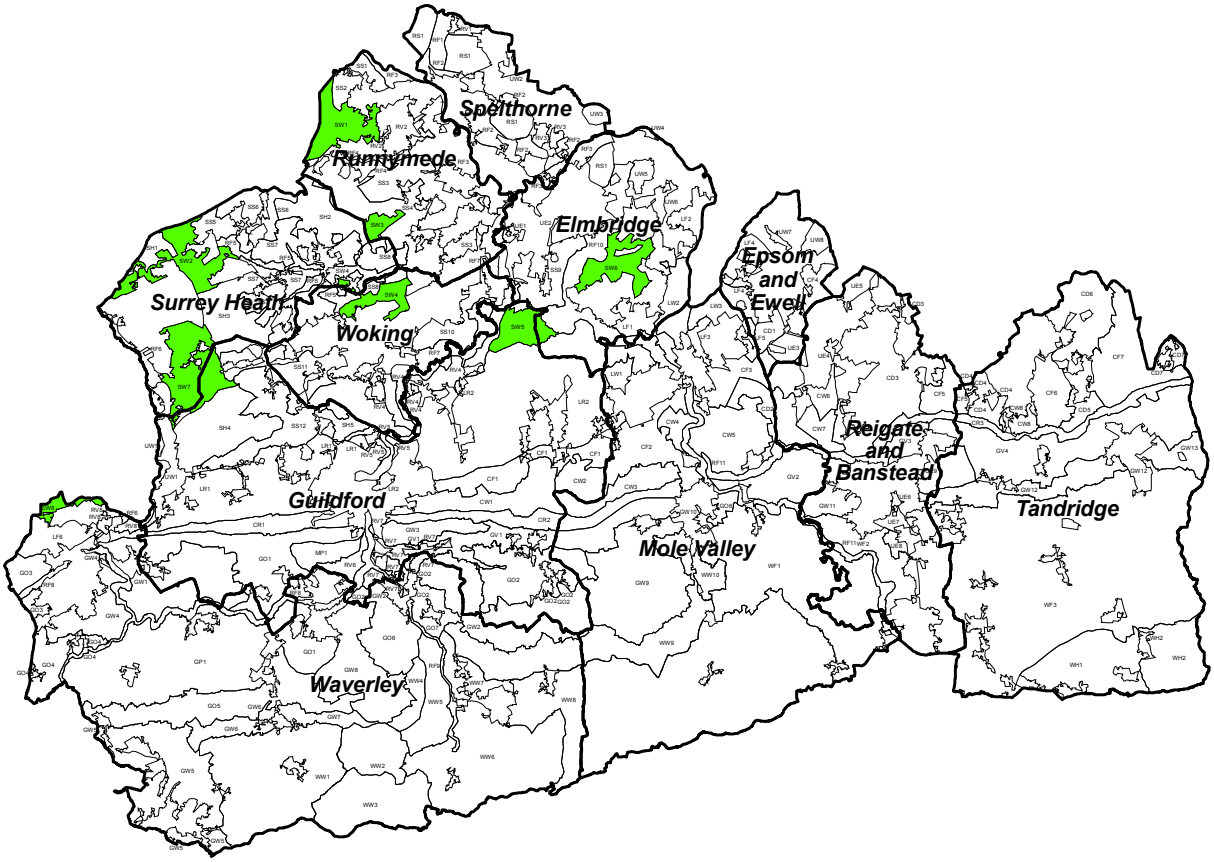


Red boundary - Land at Whitehall Farm, Stroude Road - Surrey County Council application ref: RU21/0597

Yellow boundary - Land at Milton Park Farm - Surrey County Council application ref: RU09/0299

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 – SW1 Virginia Water Sandy Woodland LCA



LANDSCAPE TYPE SW: SANDY WOODLAND

Landscape Character Areas

SW1	Virginia Water Sandy Woodland
SW2	Bagshot and Lightwater West Sandy Woodland*
SW3	Foxhill Sandy Woodland
SW4	Horsell Sandy Woodland*
SW5	Wisley Sandy Woodland*
SW6	Fairmile to Esher Sandy Woodland*
SW7	Deepcut Sandy Woodland*
SW8	Bricksbury Hill to Rowhill Copse Sandy Woodland*

* These Character Areas are outside Runnymede Borough and therefore are not described in this document. See the Surrey Countywide document for these areas.

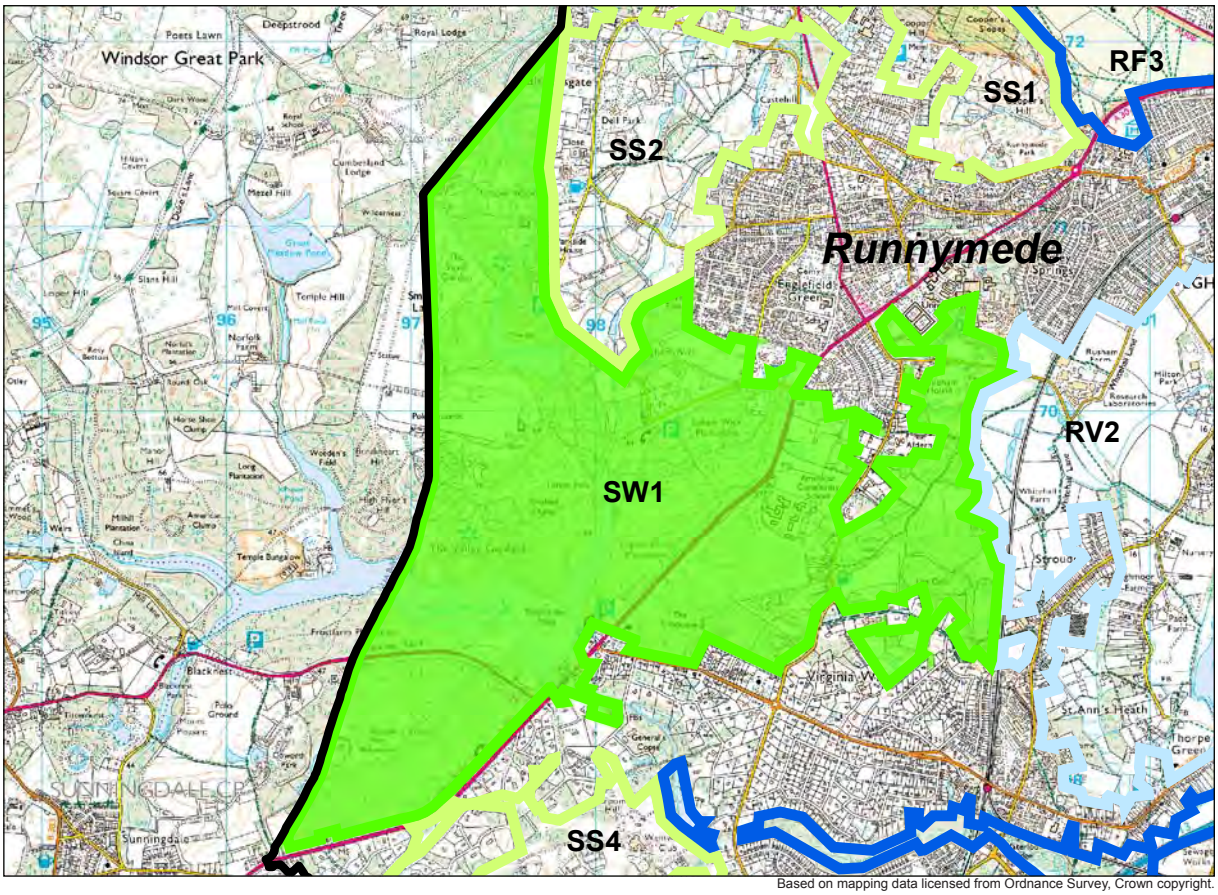
LANDSCAPE TYPE SW: SANDY WOODLAND

Location and Boundaries

The Sandy Woodland Type comprises a number of dispersed character areas within the northern and western parts of the County, identified as relatively continuous tracts of woodland, with few interventions. The boundaries of the Type are based on land cover and the underlying geology.

Key Characteristics

- An undulating landscape underlain by a solid sandy geology, and acid sandy loam soils.
- Predominately wooded with large mixed woodland blocks and plantations.
- Overall, a relatively limited amount of the woodland is recorded as ancient woodland.
- Large lakes often secluded and within woodland.
- Settlement is limited.
- In places, woodland is dissected by transport corridors, including motorways and major 'A' roads.
- An intimate, enclosed landscape, occasionally dark and oppressive within dense forest plantations.
- Designed landscapes, buildings and structures with important local historic, architectural or cultural associations.



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SW1: VIRGINIA WATER SANDY WOODLAND

Location and Boundaries

The Virginia Water Sandy Woodland Character Area lies to the south-west of Staines-upon-Thames and Egham, at the north-western edge of the county. The character area is defined by edge of the Thames River Valley Floor to the east and by the county boundary to the west. The surrounding character areas are settled with housing or farmland and have much less continuous woodland. Boundaries largely follow the county boundary, the A30, and edge of settlement. In places, the boundary is taken to the nearest build up area edges, and the edge of the adjacent valley floor, resulting in a few open areas being incorporated into the character area.

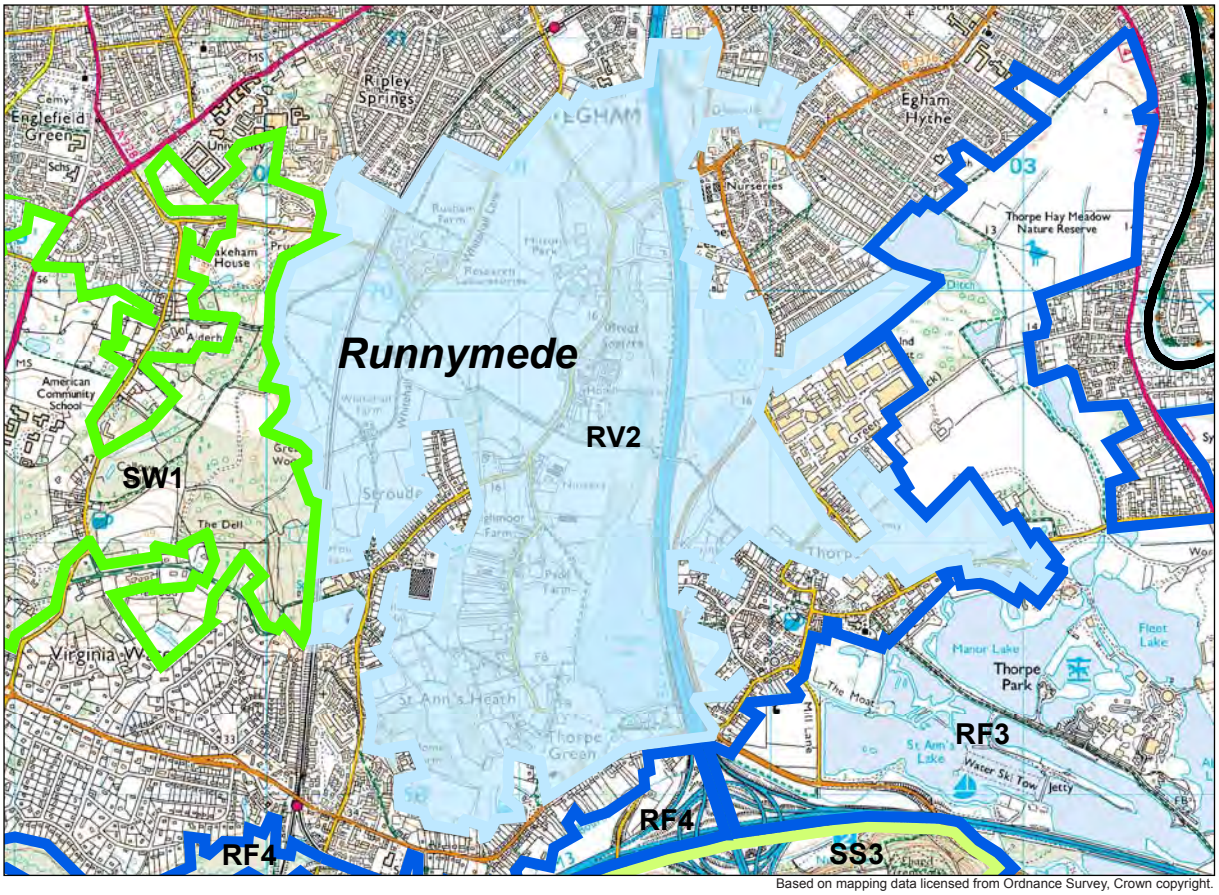
Key Characteristics

- Underlain by Bagshot Formation Sand solid geology, and a small area of Windlesham Formation Sand, Silt and Clay.
- An undulating landscape, with western and central areas draining into the lake of Virginia Water, whilst the eastern areas slope down to the Thames floodplain.
- The character area consists of extensive areas of deciduous and coniferous woodland and plantation, including areas of ancient woodland, surrounding large lakes, including Virginia Water and the Obelisk Pond within The Savill Garden. The majority of the area is owned and managed by The Crown Estate as part of the Windsor Great Park to the north-west. Views are obscured by woodland generally, but there are often long vistas along routes cleared through woodland, and across Virginia Water and Obelisk Pond.
- The A30 and A329 roads cross the character area, but elsewhere there are few roads. The Waterloo to Reading railway line skirts the south-eastern edge of the character area.

- Although there are limited formal public rights of way, there are numerous tracks and paths across The Crown Estate, allowing access through the woodland and to Virginia Water lake.
- The Savill Garden, Valley Garden and other landscape associated with Virginia Water are significant visitor attractions.
- There are occasional scattered large houses, small groups of low density dwellings along roads, and complexes of buildings, including the American International School. Buildings are contained within surrounding woodland and are not overly intrusive.
- The Savill Garden, Valley Garden and other landscape associated with Virginia Water are grade I registered parks and gardens, and areas are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and/or Sites of Nature Conservation Importance. Virginia Water lake itself was constructed in 1750, and when extended in 1780, was the largest artificial lake in Britain.
- This is a generally enclosed, intimate landscape, with remote peaceful areas of woodland, however, heavy recreational use does reduce the sense of tranquillity in many areas. .Human influence including roads and filtered views of settlement limits remoteness in places, more noticeably to the east. However, the eastern part of the character area separates Egham from the settlement of Virginia Water, and provides a wooded setting to the Thames Valley floor adjacent to the east.

Briarwood
Landscape Architecture

Appendix 2 – Thames River Valley Floor LCA



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RV2: THAMES RIVER VALLEY FLOOR

Location and Boundaries

The Thames River Valley Floor character area is a relatively small part of the wider Thames Valley which is not covered by Built Up Areas. It is located between Egham to the north and Virginia Water to the south. The majority of the character area boundary is defined by the edge of surrounding Built Up Areas.

Key Characteristics

- A level, low lying area, underlain by Thames Group Clay, Silt, Sand and Gravel solid geology.
- A mainly pastoral, grassland landscape, but with a significant amount of low density dwellings and other larger buildings such as research facilities, nursery glasshouses, businesses and a hotel complex.
- The character area becomes more rural and unsettled to the west, with farmland adjoining woodland located to the west of the character area.
- There are some significant belts of woodland running through the character area, including riparian vegetation along watercourses. Field boundaries to the west are lined with hedges and trees. Domestic boundaries within areas of low density dwellings, are also well vegetated.
- There are a number of large lakes resulting from gravel extraction, restored to leisure uses.
- There is a network of public rights of way, providing access to most parts of the character area.
- The M25 motorway passes north-south through the character area, and joins the M3 at Junction 12 of the M25, immediately to the south of the character area. The Waterloo to Reading railway line passes through the western part of the character area.

- Tree cover and boundary vegetation restricts views and helps obscure built form, roads and the M25 motorway.
- Thorpe Green at the southern end of the character area is registered Common Land.
- Human influences including settlement, surrounding Built Up Areas, roads and the M25 motorway, prevent a sense of remoteness, although tree cover helps create areas with a degree of tranquillity, particularly along footpaths within the western pastoral part of the character area.

LANDSCAPE TYPE RV: RIVER VALLEY FLOOR EVALUATION AND GUIDANCE

EVALUATION

Key positive landscape attributes

The key positive features that contribute to the character of the area and that should be conserved and enhanced are:

- Commons and other open areas which provide a rural setting for settlements and a recreational resource as areas of Open Access Land, amenity land or via public rights of way.
- Mixed blocks of open areas, or areas with a rural character providing attractive visual break to large Built Up areas in the north of the county.
- Characteristic pattern of settlement of houses facing onto commons or open areas, in the south of the County.
- Natural open areas along the rivers Blackwater and Wey, which provide attractive edge to Built Up areas.
- River Ash corridor.
- Blocks of mature trees, hedgerows and hedgerow trees creating intimate areas of landscape
- Tree lined roads and boundaries, and small blocks of woodland or mature trees.
- Role as rural setting for the adjacent flood plains.
- Public rights of ways links to the adjacent wider river corridors.
- Views to wider unsettled or rural areas.

Forces for change/sensitivities/pressures

Past Change

- Loss of hedgerows and hedgerow trees.
- Regeneration of woodland and loss of mature trees on commons.
- Intensification of edge of settlement.
- Road and rail corridors.
- Encroachment of car parking by residents, workers and commuters onto the common land.
- Spread of settlement out from villages, including along rural roads, resulting in loss of agricultural land.
- Standardisation of main roads.
- Mineral extraction and restoration.
- Urbanisation of areas to the north of the County.
- Proximity of Heathrow to the north of the County.
- Development of adjacent reservoir infrastructure in the north of the county.

Future potential forces for change

- Further requirements for mineral extraction and activities around restoration.
- Encroachment on valley floor from settlement edges and transport infrastructure.
- Further loss of hedgerows and hedgerow trees.
- Further encroachment of car parking on common land and land restored for access.
- Pressures which will lead to urbanisation of commons and open areas such as for placing facilities like recycling centres or car parking.
- Pressures for further residential and industrial development.
- Sub-division of agricultural plots and piecemeal settlement extension impacting on the historic form of settlement and further fragmentation of open areas.

Landscape Strategy

The landscape strategy for the River Valley Floor is to conserve the commons, open areas and pastoral farmland, the historic village centres and a positive relationship between buildings and settlements edging the rural landscape.

Landscape Guidelines

Land Management

- Encourage landowners to maintain an appropriate management regime using traditional farming techniques where these will conserve and enhance key landscape features such as the pasture fields, hedgerows, hedgerow trees and woodlands and maintain rural character.
- Encourage understanding of historic dimension of the landscape including underlying archaeology. Conserve historic elements of the landscape.
- Conserve and manage areas of common land.
- Conserve remaining intact areas of agricultural or open land surrounding settlement.
- Encourage restocking and consistent management of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and tree lined roads and boundaries.
- Encourage sensitively placed tree planting to maintain stock of trees on open areas and common land.
- Conserve, enhance and restore riparian woodland, and blocks and bands of woodland at the edge of the area that screen development.
- Promote traditional woodland management techniques with local landowners and the farming community.
- Encourage sustainable and multi-purpose woodlands.
- Consider opportunities for new tree and woodland planting to enhance the setting of settlements and for screening large scale development.
- Promote the use of locally appropriate species such as oaks and, close to the floodplain, willows poplar and alder.
- Conserve and enhance the rural setting of the River Wey, River Blackwater, and River Ash, particularly where they extend through urban areas.
- Ensure physical and biodiversity connections between river valley floor (Type RV) and river floodplain (Type RF) character areas are maintained and enhanced. These areas coincide with Surrey's Rivers and Thames Valley biodiversity opportunity areas.
- Conserve and enhance connectivity of key landscape attributes, paying particular attention to their positive contribution to the character of adjoining character areas (Types RF and RS).

Built Development

- Retain the distinct character of settlements and avoid merging these through linear development along roads, and by retaining the rural gaps between them.
- Maintain and enhance vegetated boundaries to transport corridors and adjacent infrastructure.
- Retain open space along the A331 corridor between Aldershot and Ash.
- Conserve the distinctive pattern of houses facing onto commons and open areas.
- Ensure that any new large scale development does not impact adversely on rural views. Maintain relationship and quality of views to adjoining river floodplains and valleys, commons or to wider surrounding areas.
- Improve understanding of the general pattern of settlements and their relationship to the landscape and to ensure that new development is sympathetic to the wider pattern of settlement.
- Resist urbanisation of the open areas and common land through the addition of inappropriate facilities such as car parking. Consider screening and enhancement of existing facilities to strengthen rural character.

- Protect landscape character and quality from negative impact of transport networks including the introduction of signs, gantries and lighting columns that impact on local distinctiveness.
- Work to foster local distinctiveness around settlements, where standard design criteria creates a lack of variation and 'urbanisation' of rural roads. Seek opportunities to 'downgrade' main roads through settlements, enhancing the immediate landscape setting and ensuring minimum clutter through encouraging appropriate surfacing of existing pavements, quality signage and reduced speed limits where possible.
- Ensure that road lighting schemes are assessed for visual impact, and impacts on biodiversity particularly where these may affect open areas, commons or the adjacent river floodplains.
- Promote the use of traditional materials and signage features with particular regard to local style and materials. Refer to Surrey design guidance; Surrey Design (Surrey Local Government Association).
- Consider function of the area as a setting to the river corridors of the Wey, Blackwater and Ash and ensure that development does not impinge on setting of the river valleys.

Appendix 3 – Context Views

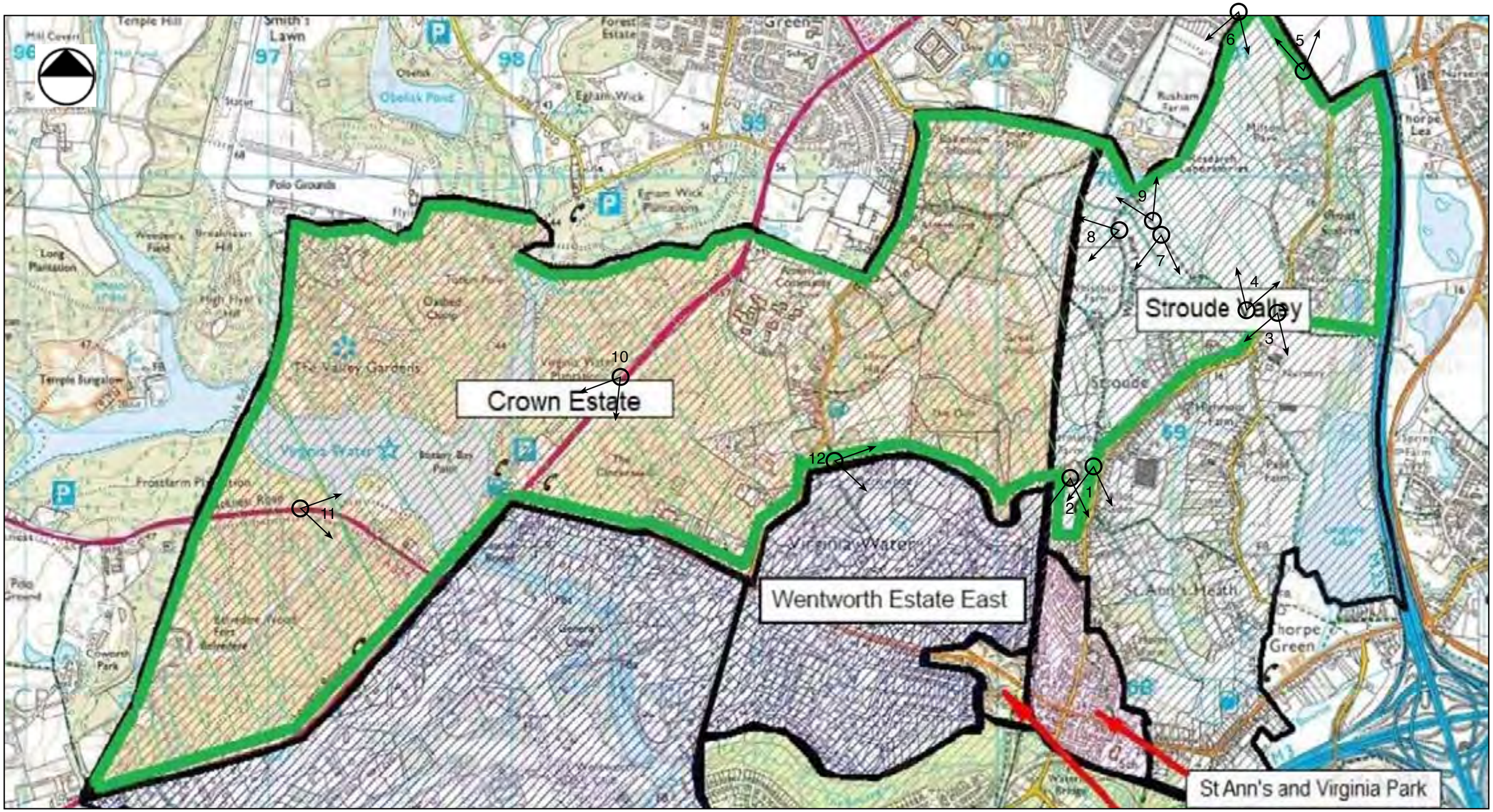

Figure 4 - Potential Local Gap - Study Area with Context View Locations

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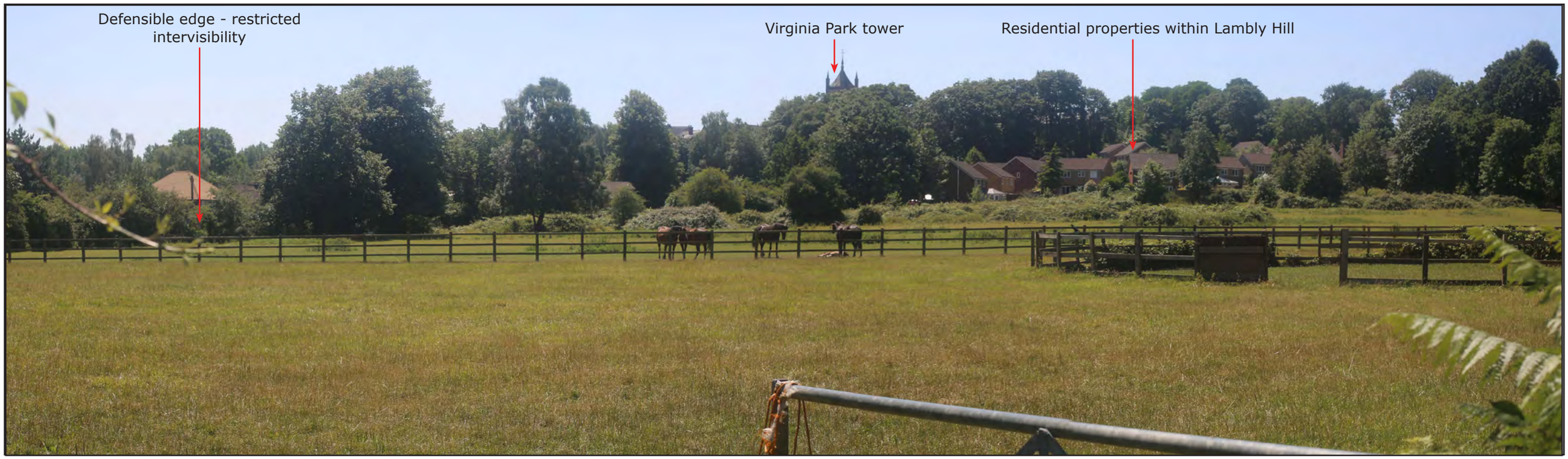
KEY TO PLAN:

- Context View Location
- VWNP character area boundary
- Potential Local Gap/ study area boundary
- VWNP character area name

For Context Only

Viewpoint 1 - View looking south along Stroude Road



Viewpoint 2 - View looking south from public right of way (BW44) close to Stroude Farm

For Context Only

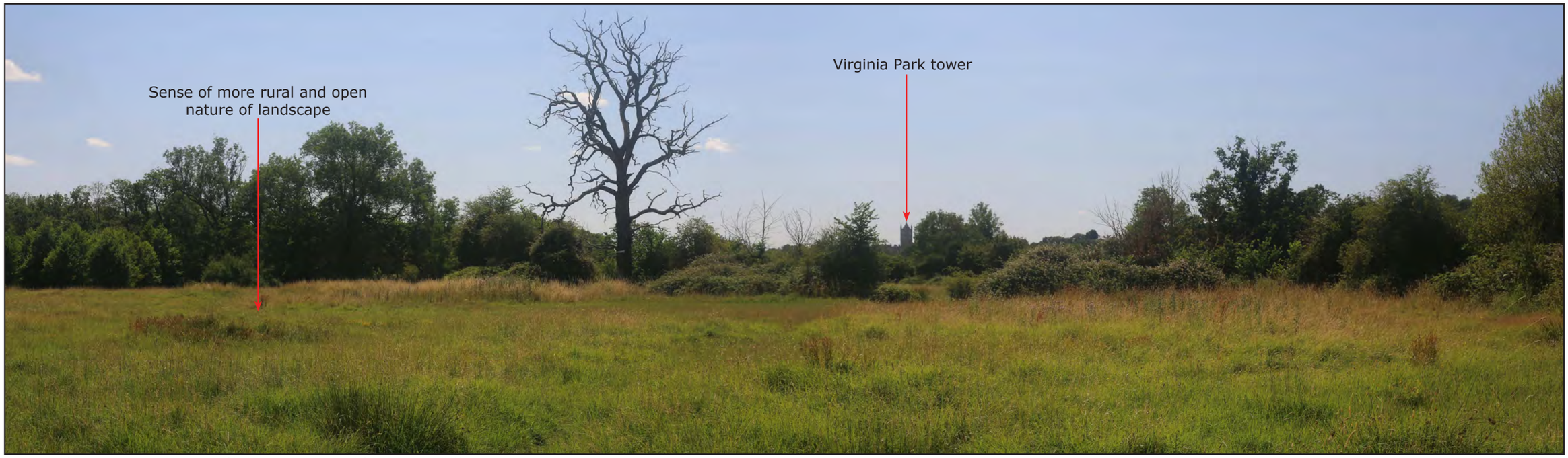
Viewpoint 3 - View looking south-east along Stroude Road close to number 215 Stroude Road

Viewpoint 4 - View looking north from public right of way (FP39)

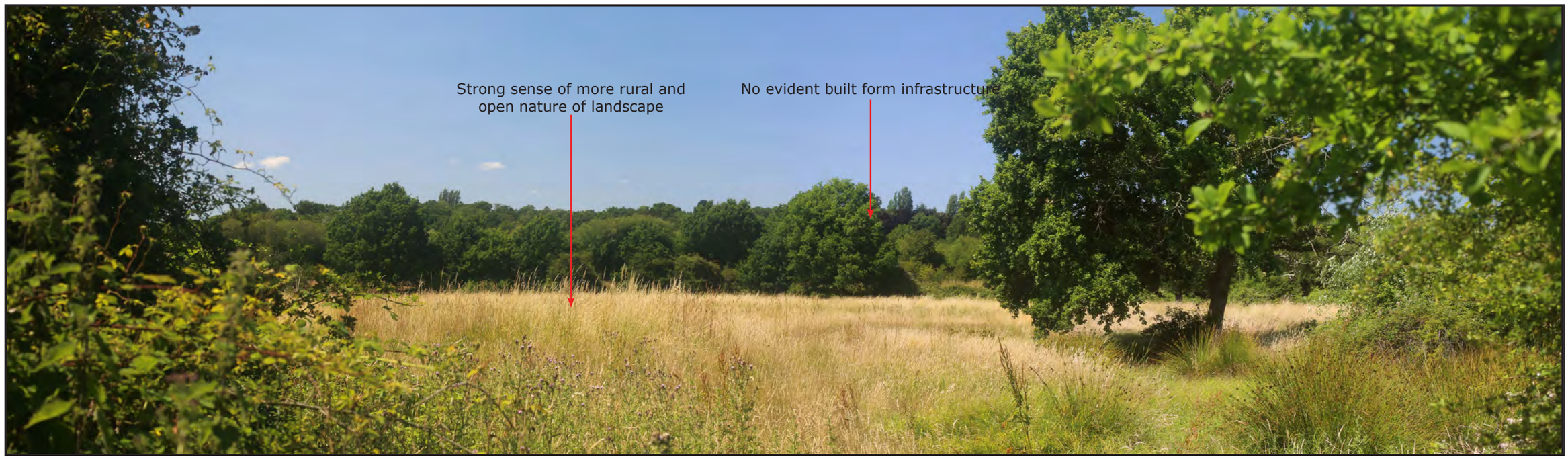
For Context Only

Viewpoint 5 - View looking north along Stroude Road

Viewpoint 6 - View looking south-west along Whitehall Lane



Viewpoint 7 - View looking south from public right of way FP39



Viewpoint 8 - View looking west from Whitehall Lane public right of way FP45

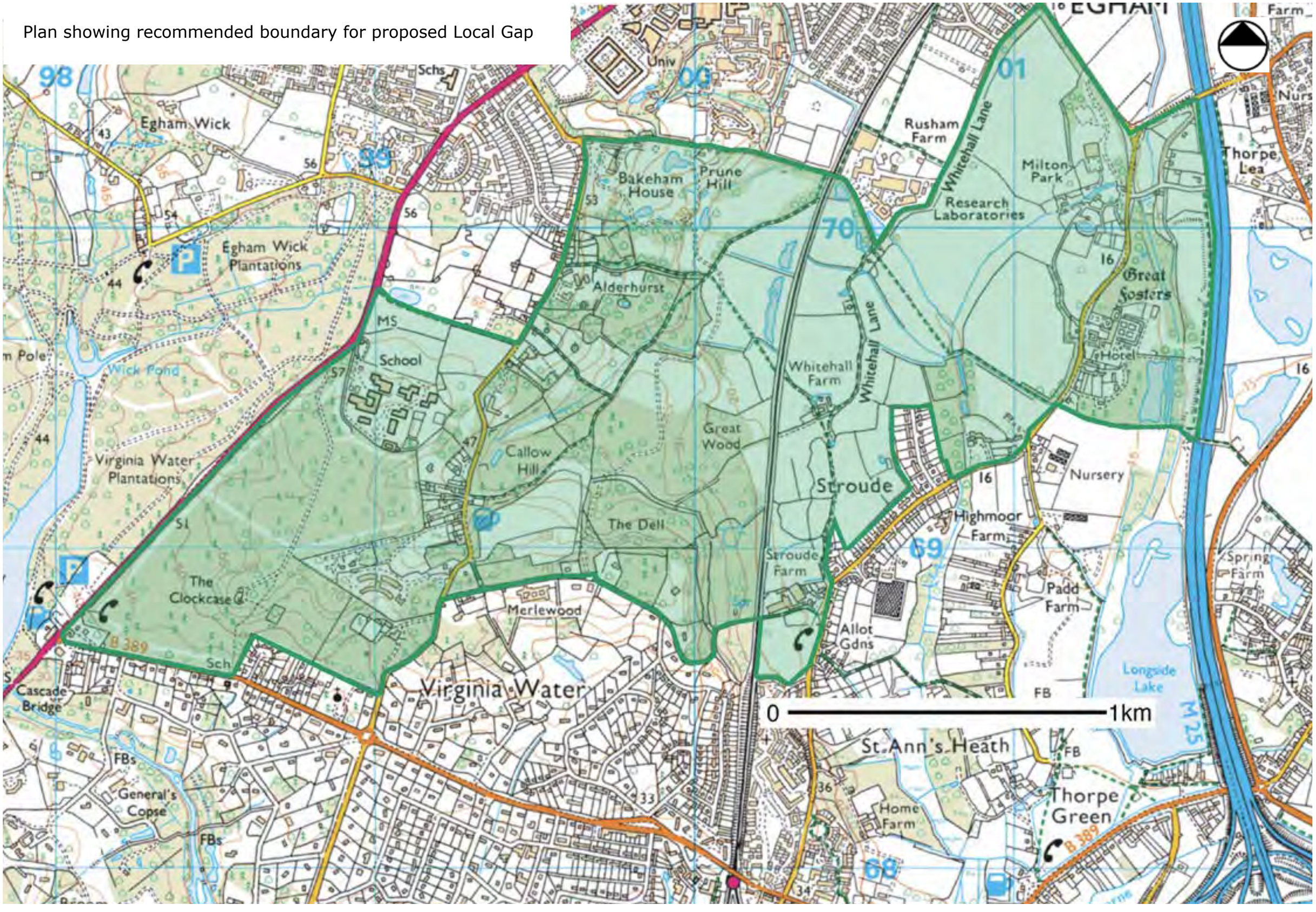
For Context Only

Viewpoint 9 - View looking north-west from public right of way FP39

Viewpoint 10 - View looking south-west along A30 London Road

Viewpoint 11 - View looking east along Blacknest Road

Viewpoint 12 - View looking east along Hollow Lane public right of way BW44

Appendix 4 – Recommended Local Gap Boundary

Plan showing recommended boundary for proposed Local Gap