

<b>Planning and Transportation Policy Working Group</b>	
<b>Meeting Date</b>	13 <sup>th</sup> March 2025
<b>Report Title</b>	Local Plan Review – Swale Important Countryside Gaps Review 2024
<b>EMT Lead</b>	Emma Wiggins, Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
<b>Head of Service</b>	Joanne Johnson, Head of Place
<b>Lead Officers</b>	Natalie Earl (Planning Manager (Policy)) and Stuart Watson Project Manager (Policy)
<b>Classification</b>	<b>Open</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	1. That members are asked to note the findings of the Important Countryside Gaps Review 2024 and specifically the amendment of Countryside Gap SG4: Sittingbourne and the satellite village of Bobbing.

## 1. Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 As part of considering the local policy options and continuing to ensure the evidence base is up to date, a review of the important countryside gaps (Gaps) that were identified in 2014 and agreed as part of the adopted Local Plan Bearing Fruits was commissioned in the summer of 2024. This review (Appendix II) does not reconsider the additional gaps that were identified in the 2021 Important Countryside Gaps study due to the recent nature of that work.
- 1.2 The same methodology for this review has been used as the 2021 review to ensure consistency of approach, with assessment criteria updated where appropriate. For example, changes in mapping regions for policy criteria external to adopted Local Policy, and development that has subsequently been commenced and completed since the previous studies.
- 1.3 This Important Countryside Gaps review builds on the work of previous studies for the Council and provides an update that considers changes in both national policy and recent development. In the main the study proposes recommendations to gaps boundaries that are minimal to encompass recent development that has recently occurred.

## 2. Background

### Gaps Assessment Criteria

2.1 The Council's consideration for the Gaps in planning decision making is set out within the preamble to Policy DM25 "The separation of settlements - Important Local Countryside Gaps" of Local Plan `Bearing Fruits (2017). The preamble sets out the purpose of the gaps to be:

- maintain the separate identities and character of settlements by preventing their merging;
- safeguard the open and undeveloped character of the areas;
- prevent encroachment and piecemeal erosion by built development or changes to the rural open character; and,
- influence decisions on the longer-term development of settlements through the preparation and review of Local Plans.

2.2 This review follows the same methodology developed by Land Use Consultants (LUC) in 2021 that informed new Important Local Countryside Gaps in the east of the borough. Whilst this study updates the existing Important Local Countryside Gaps in the west of the borough. This ensures all the gaps follow the same methodology and are defined using a consistent method and evidence base.

2.3 The Gaps review at paragraph 1.5 sets out the considerations for a purposeful countryside gap as:

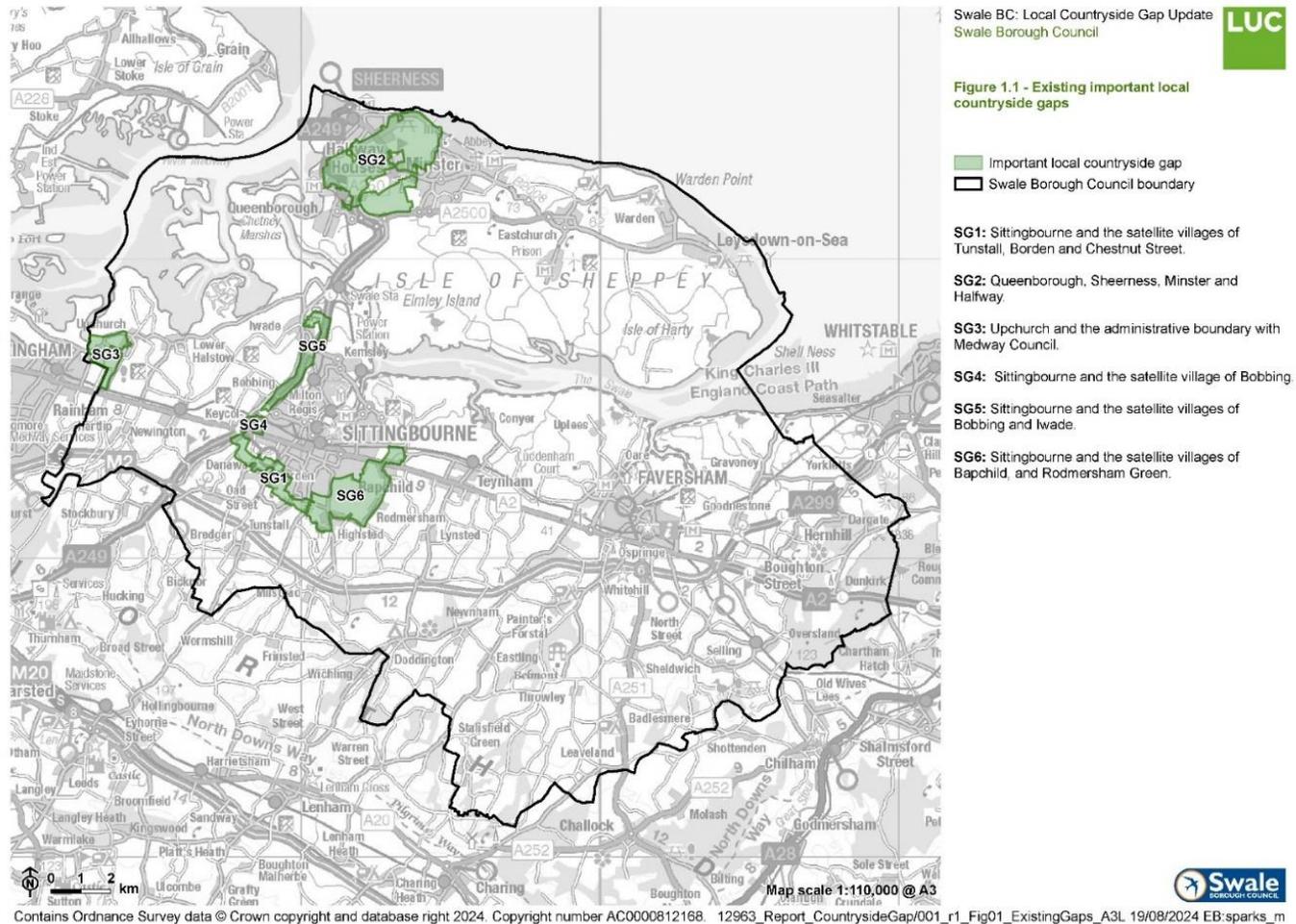
*The sense of separation provided between settlements relates to the character of the gap as well as its size. Small gaps can be effective in maintaining settlement separation if they have a rural character and provide separation, perhaps as a result of a distinct topography, presence of vegetation which limits inter-visibility between the settlements, or containing a distinct landscape feature.*

*On the other hand, large gaps may not be effective if they have a suburban character, lack vegetation or have clear inter-visibility between the settlements, and lack any other features that might provide a sense of separation such as a distinct topographical or landscape feature.*

2.4 The Gaps in this review are split into 6 groupings as follows:

- SG1: Sittingbourne and the satellite villages of Tunstall, Borden and Chestnut Street;
- SG2: Queenborough, Sheerness, Minster and Halfway;
- SG3: Upchurch and the administrative boundary with Medway Council;
- SG4: Sittingbourne and the satellite village of Bobbing;
- SG5: Sittingbourne and the satellite villages of Bobbing and Iwade; and
- SG6: Sittingbourne and the satellite villages of Bapchild, and Rodmersham Green.

The groupings are set out in the map below:



2.5 There are currently no prescribed methods within national planning policy or guidance for assessing countryside gap designations. To address this, Gaps review assessment criteria have been developed from previous Swale studies, and best practice from Local Plan examinations. The table below is taken from the review and sets out the review’s assessment criteria:

Criterion	Explanation	Indicators of a weak gap	Indicators of a strong gap
Existing settlement identity and pattern	Assess the extent to which the settlements or neighbourhoods that lie adjacent to the gap have an individual townscape character and identity that contributes to existing settlement pattern.	<p>The individual townscape character, form and pattern of the settlements or neighbourhoods that lie adjacent to the gap are not distinct.</p> <p>Loss or partial loss of the gap would not adversely affect the existing settlement pattern.</p>	<p>The individual townscape character, form and pattern of the settlement or neighbourhoods that lie adjacent to the gap are distinct.</p> <p>The presence of Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings are indicators of individual settlement character.</p> <p>The gap plays a role in settlement separation and pattern.</p>
Landscape character	Assess the landscape character of the area between the settlements or neighbourhoods and any land use and landscape features within the gap that contribute to its character as open and undeveloped land.	<p>There are significant manmade features or urban land uses that contribute to the developed character of the landscape.</p> <p>The area lacks typical elements of rural vegetation e.g. farmland, hedges, trees etc, which contribute to an undeveloped character.</p> <p>The area has a suburban character and residential areas outside defined settlement boundaries weaken the perception of the gap as 'countryside'.</p>	<p>Existing rural land uses contribute to the open and undeveloped 'countryside' character of the landscape, e.g. agriculture, horticulture, forestry.</p> <p>The landscape has significant landscape features that contribute to its undeveloped character.</p> <p>There is a low density or absence of development.</p>
Visual character	Assess the visual character of the area between settlements and any views to settlements	Views to and from the settlement do not contribute positively to	Views to and from the settlement contribute positively to the visual character of the area

Criterion	Explanation	Indicators of a weak gap	Indicators of a strong gap
	<p>or from settlements into the open countryside that contribute to that character and provide visual separation between settlements or neighbourhoods.</p>	<p>the visual character of the area.</p> <p>There is a clear inter-visibility between the settlements due to a lack of vegetation. Intervisibility alone does not indicate a weak gap and this criteria interplays with settlement identity and pattern e.g. intervisibility of contrasting settlement types may contribute to a stronger gap function.</p>	<p>(e.g. views mentioned in the Landscape Character Assessment/ Conservation Area appraisal).</p> <p>There are limited/no views between settlements. Landscape elements, such as hills, ridges, and/or tall vegetation within the gap contribute to the sense of visual separation between the settlements.</p> <p>Alternatively, where there is intervisibility or a narrow gap, the view shows clearly differing settlement character and identity e.g. between an expanding urban edge and distinct rural village.</p> <p>Open vistas and long views may also indicate a strong gap where they are an important part of the character of the landscape.</p>

Findings of the Gaps review

- 2.6 The Gaps review summaries and policy recommendations are shown below and the changes recommended are illustrated through existing and proposed maps contained within Appendix I.
- 2.7 Whilst most recommendations in the review are to retain the Gaps with minor sensical changes to their boundary to reflect recent development, the review also proposes removing SG4 due to it not being countryside in character from the impacts of the A249 along its western boundary.

**SG1: It is recommended that the gap is largely retained** at its current extent to avoid the coalescence of Sittingbourne, Chestnut Street, Borden and Tunstall.

The settlement boundary of Sittingbourne, and therefore the gap, should take into account the recent planning permission for housing development south-west of Sittingbourne. The gap should then be extended south to follow ZR147, ZR142 and ZR141 to retain a robust gap between Sittingbourne, Tunstall and Borden.

**SG2: It is recommended that the gap is retained** between Sheerness, Queenborough, and Minster to avoid the coalescence of these settlements. The main threat to coalescence is between Queenborough and Minster along the B2007 with the A249 forming the only real boundary between the two. One change to the boundary is required to exclude the Minster Park area off Ash Lane in the north-east of the gap as this is an established residential area that does not add to the rural countryside character of the gap.

**SG3: It is recommended that the Gap is retained** at its current extent to avoid coalescence of Upchurch and Rainham. A change to the boundary is required in the south-west due to a recent development on the edge of Rainham along Otterham Quay Lane.

A small amendment to the boundary should be made to allow for the permitted development on Otterham Quay Lane. The current proposal shows development restricted to the south of the site which allows the north to remain part of the gap.

**SG4: It is recommended that this Gap is removed.** Existing recreational and educational land uses to the east of the A249 and the strong boundary feature of the road itself reinforced by mature vegetation provide clear separation between the edge of Sittingbourne and Bobbing, which lies north of the railway line. The gap is dominated by the A249 which does not provide a 'countryside' character.

An Important Local Countryside Gap is not required to maintain the separate identities of the settlements, safeguard the open and undeveloped character or prevent encroachment of the rural open character.

**SG5: It is recommended that the Gap is retained** between Sittingbourne and Bobbing to avoid the coalescence of these settlements. There are rural land uses between Sheppey Way and the A249 which should be retained, although the A249 itself forms a strong physical feature to the settlement edge of Sittingbourne.

It is recommended that the gap covers land up to the new southern boundary of Iwade and that the gap is removed from the east of Iwade. New residential development east of Iwade will provide a country park between the settlement edge and the A249. The A249 is also a strong physical feature retaining separation between Iwade and the commercial edge of Sittingbourne.

**SG6: It is recommended that the gap is retained** at its current extent to avoid the coalescence of Sittingbourne and Bapchild. Although the main threat to coalescence is along the A2 corridor, the proposed gap extends north and south of the A2, to ensure that the settlements remain separate.

It is recommended that the gap is retained at its current extent to avoid the coalescence of Sittingbourne and Rodmersham Green. One small change in boundary is required to take into account the recent planning permission for housing development off Swanstree Avenue.

- 2.8 This review will go on to inform the Local Plan Review and be one of the evidence base considerations on where future development would be deemed inappropriate.

### **3. Proposals**

- 3.1 The proposal is that members are asked to note the findings of the Important Countryside Gaps Review 2024 and specifically the amendment of Countryside Gap SG4: Sittingbourne and the satellite village of Bobbing.

### **4. Alternative Options Considered and Rejected**

- 4.1 The option of not reviewing the Local Plan Review – Swale Important Countryside Gaps Review 2024 was considered and rejected. It is a requirement of national planning policy to consider the conservation and enhancement of the natural landscape when preparing a Local Plan, and the aim of the review is to provide an updated evidence base to assist in meeting this requirement.

### **5. Consultation Undertaken or Proposed**

- 5.1 This is an evidence base document and therefore not subject to consultation. Comments about the document, like with any other evidence base document, can be submitted through the consultation on the Regulation 18 Local Plan. In the next Reg 18 version of the Local Plan, the Council will be able to reflect the findings of this study and garner feedback.

## 6. Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The proposals in the report align with the following Corporate Plan action: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="540 468 1360 506">• A Local Plan with local needs and capacity at its heart.</li></ul>
Financial, Resource and Property	No implications identified at this stage as this is within the agreed Local Plan budget.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	No implications identified at this stage.
Crime and Disorder	No implications identified at this stage.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	This proposal will assist with the conservation and enhancement of the natural landscape.
Health and Wellbeing	No implications identified at this stage.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	No implications identified at this stage.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	No implications identified at this stage.
Equality and Diversity	No implications identified at this stage.
Privacy and Data Protection	No implications identified at this stage.

## 7.0 Appendices

### 7.1 Appendix I: Existing and proposed Gap changes

7.2 Appendix II: Swale Important Countryside Gaps Review

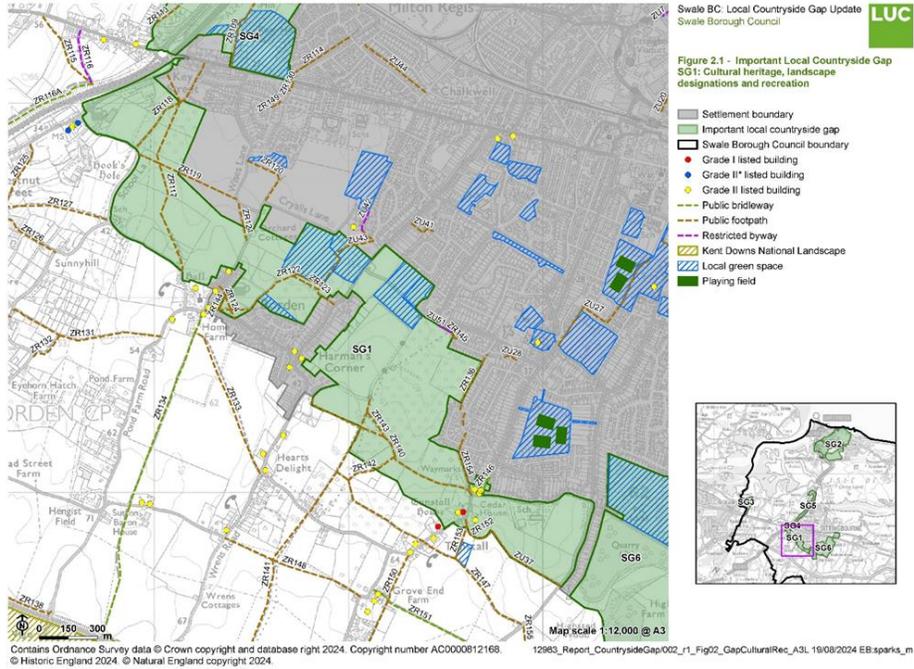
## **8.0 Background Documents**

8.1 None

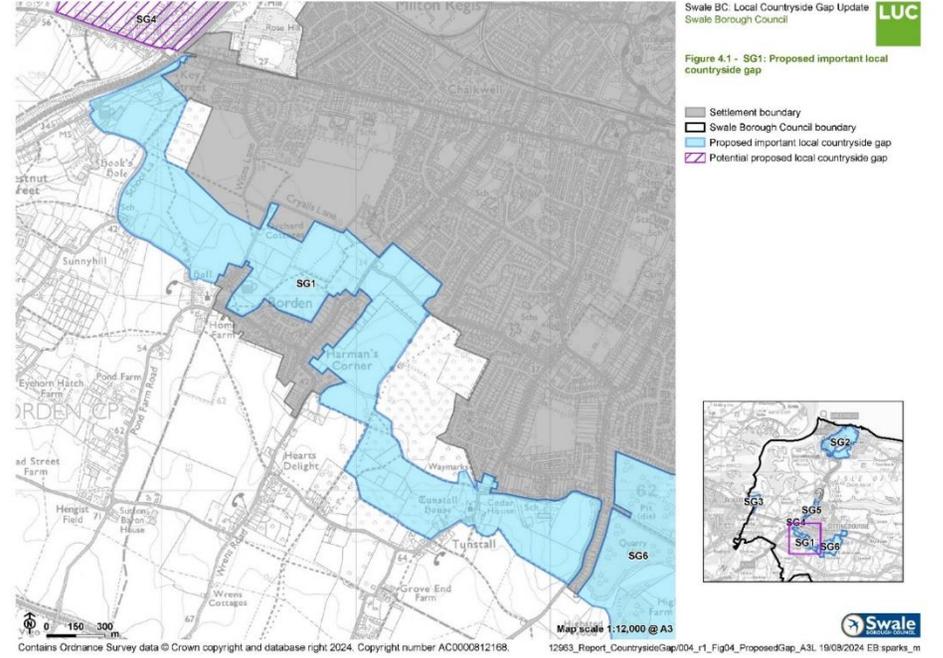
# Appendix I: Existing and proposed Gap changes

## SG1: Sittingbourne and the satellite villages of Tunstall, Borden and Chestnut Street

Existing

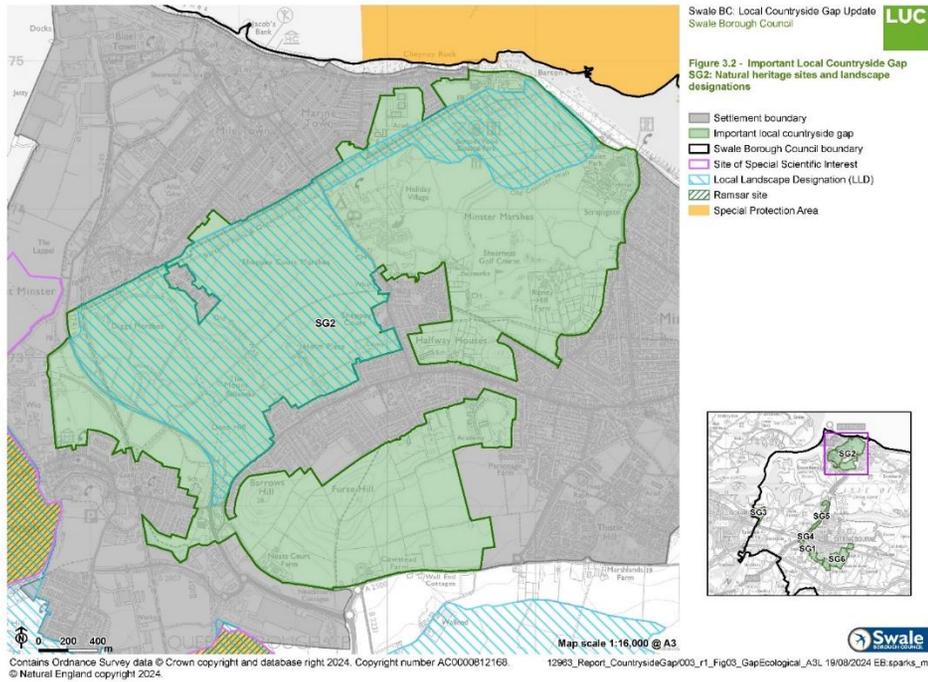


Proposed

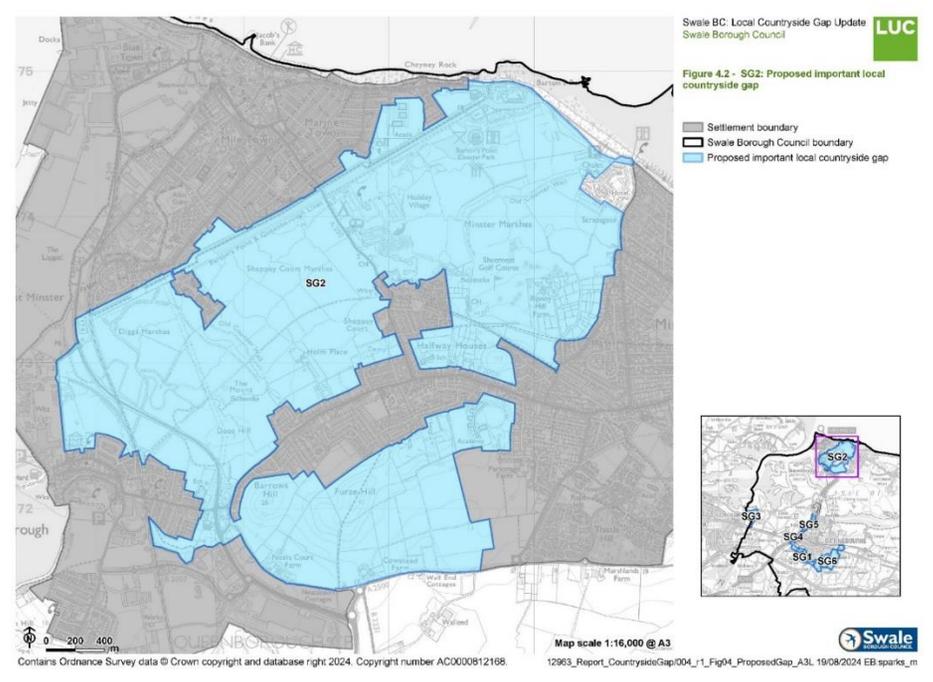


# SG2: Queenborough, Sheerness, Minster and Halfway

Existing



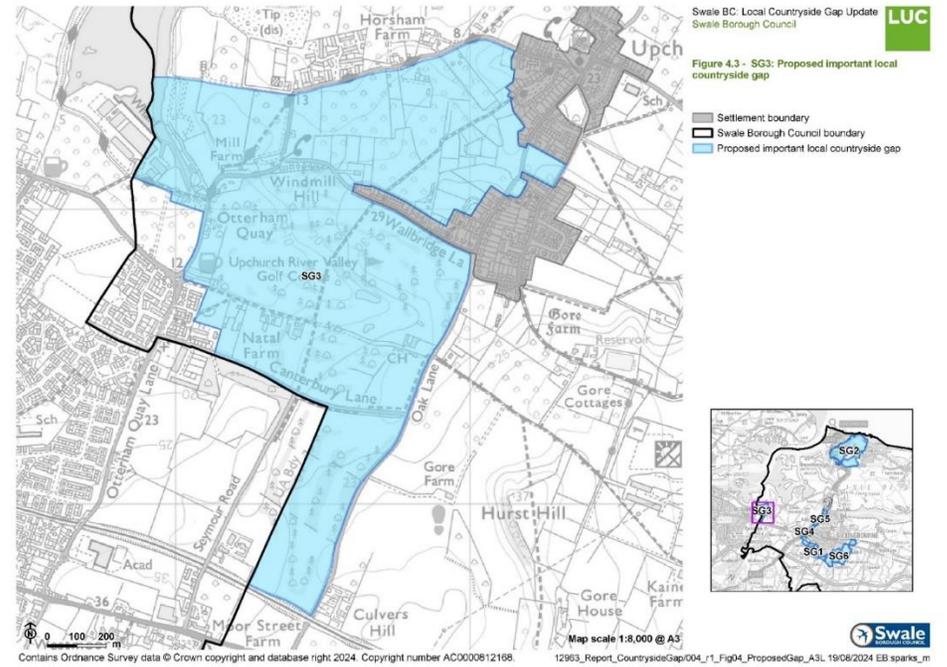
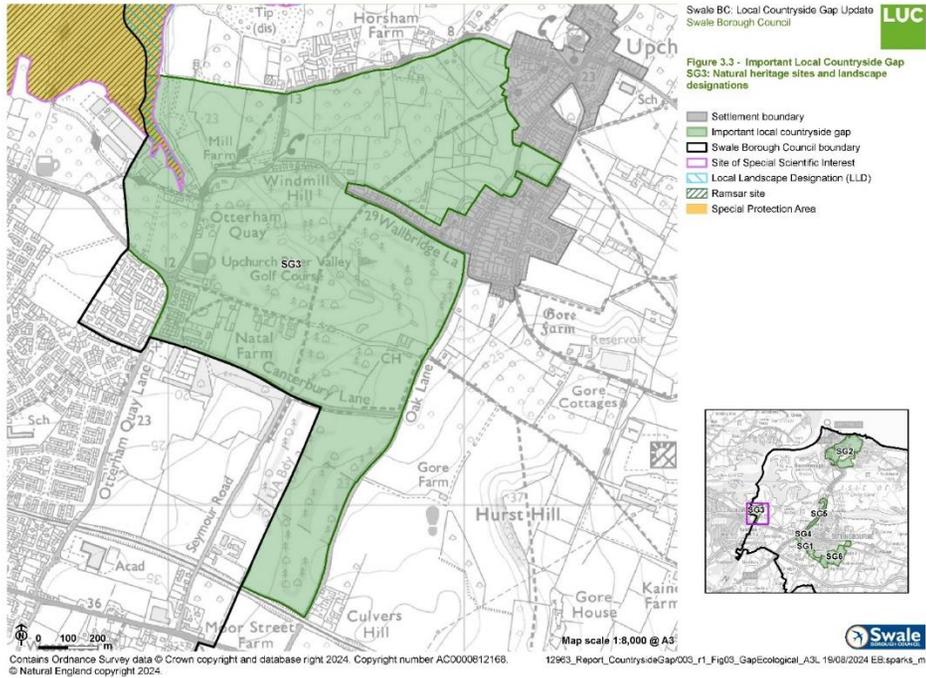
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# SG3: Upchurch and the administrative boundary with Medway Council

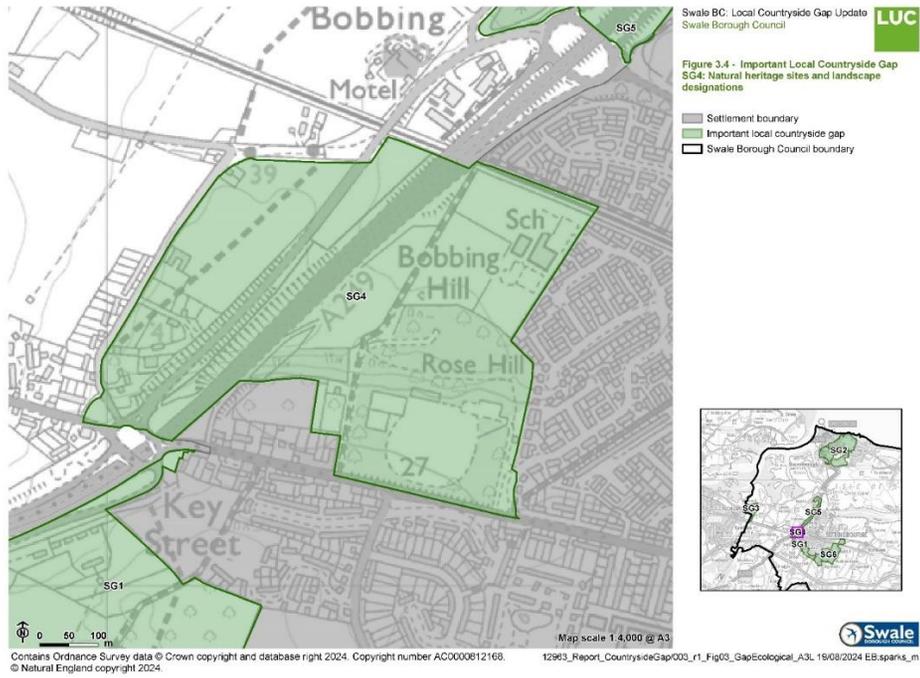
Existing

Proposed

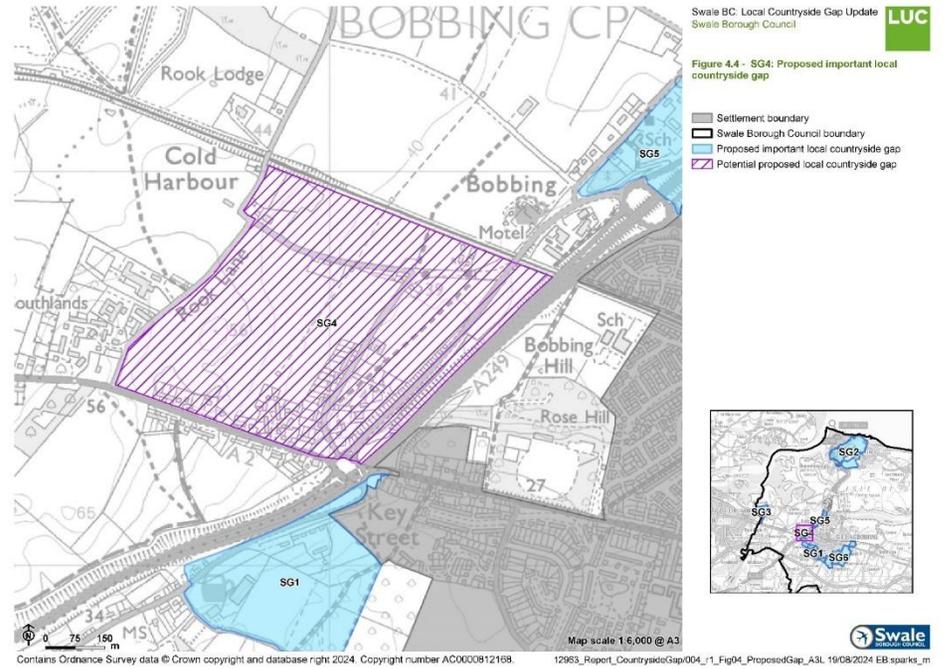


# SG4: Sittingbourne and the satellite village of Bobbing

Existing

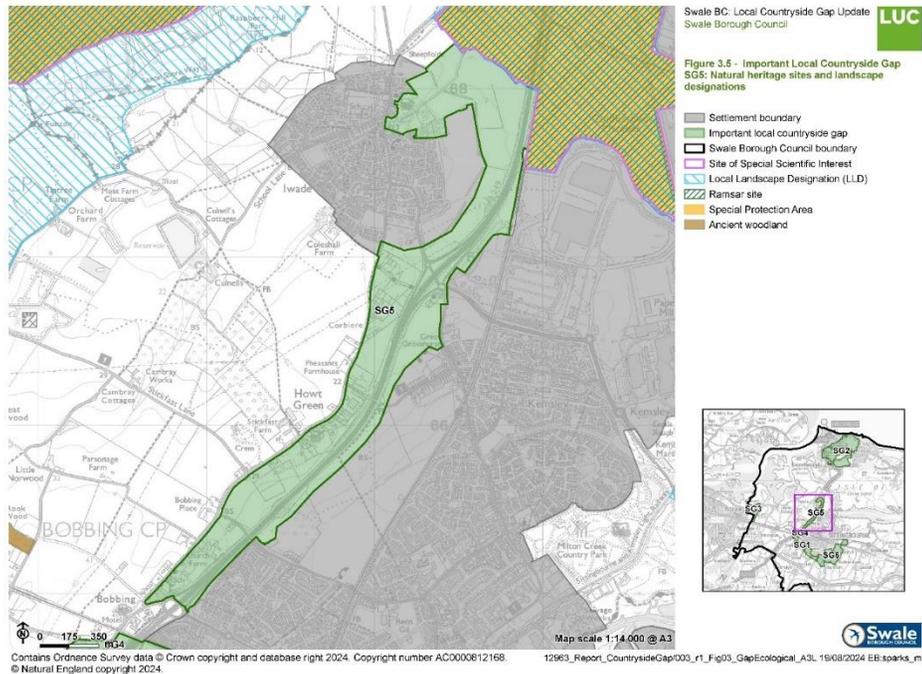


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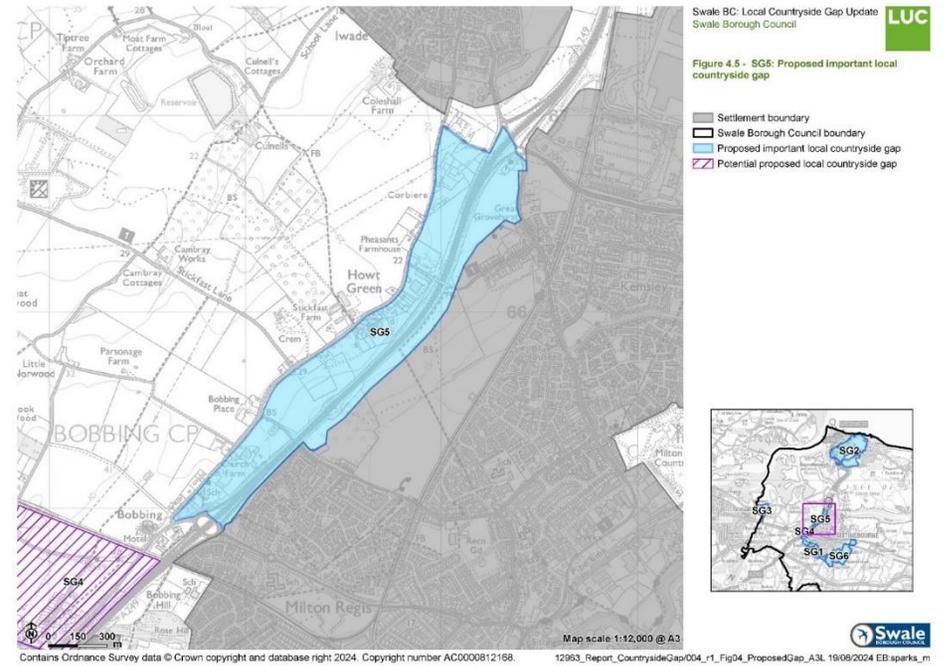


# SG5: Sittingbourne and the satellite villages of Bobbing and Iwade

Existing

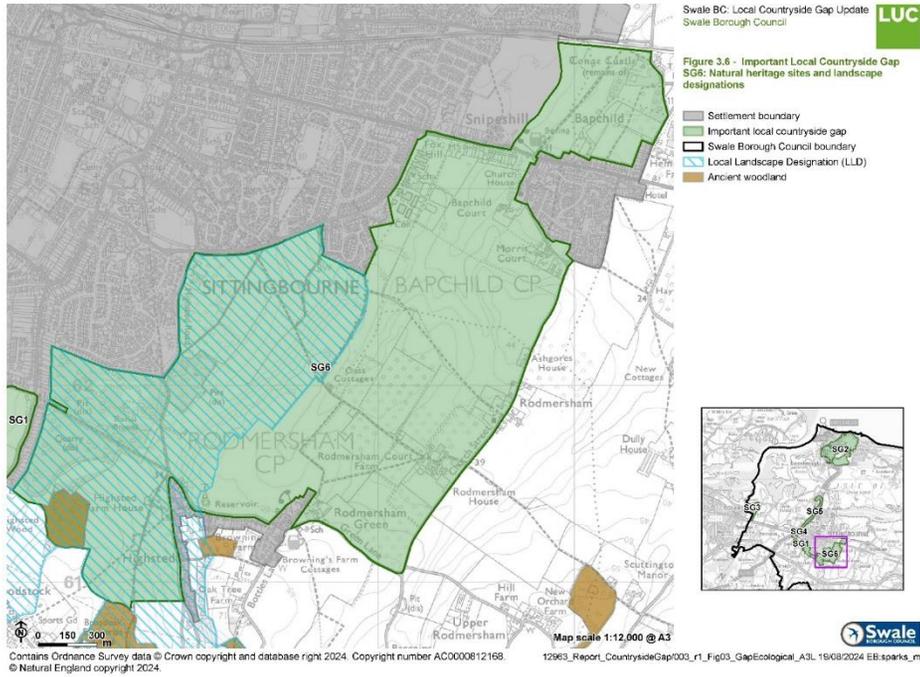


Proposed



# SG6: Sittingbourne and the satellite villages of Bapchild, and Rodmersham Green

Existing



Proposed

