



Land East of Poplar Hill, Combs Ford, Stowmarket
Appeal ref APP/W3520/W/18/3214324
 Supporting document
Mind the gap! Maintaining the strategic gap
between Stowmarket and Combs



Figure 1 Showing how the strategic gap would be radically reduced

1. Introduction

1.1. If the proposed development on Mill Mount Field were to go ahead, the physical separation between Stowmarket and Combs, referred to here as the 'strategic gap' would be reduced from approximately half a kilometre at present to less than 150 metres.

1.2. Mill Mount Field was once part of the Civil Parish of Combs, which prior to 1934 extended down to the River Gipping. Over the years Stowmarket has advanced inexorably up Poplar Hill to the present boundary. Although Mill Mount Field now sits within the Stowmarket boundary, we believe that this is as an anomaly resulting from the redrawing of the Civil Parish Boundary between Stowmarket and Combs in 1934. Nonetheless, the redefinition of the boundary to include Mill Mount Field within Stowmarket has in no way altered the intrinsically rural nature of the site.

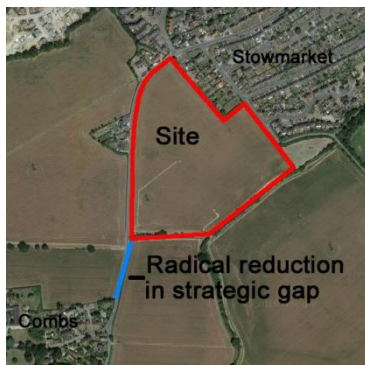


Figure 2 © Google maps

From overhead (see left) it can clearly be seen that Mill Mount Field projects into the countryside, beyond the natural rounding off of the settlement of Stowmarket. And on the ground, there can be no disputing that the natural boundary between Stowmarket and the countryside beyond is along the brow of Poplar Hill. This is reflected in the line of the settlement boundary as defined by Mid Suffolk District Council (MSDC).

To allow Stowmarket to spill down the hill towards Combs in the way proposed would effectively merge the two settlements. Gladman accept that there needs to be a physical separation between Stowmarket and Combs, and that the advance of Stowmarket towards Combs has to stop at some point. However, they suggest that a gap of less than 150 metres is adequate.

1.3. It is our contention that to maintain a meaningful strategic gap between the town and the village of Combs, the advance of Stowmarket should be brought to a halt at the top of Mill Mount Field, at the settlement boundary defined by MSDC.



Figures 3 and 4. The photographs above show the potential impact of the proposed development. Figure 3 is taken from the current settlement boundary. Mill Mount Field is in the foreground. Combs is just visible on the far horizon. Figure 4 shows the view from the southern edge of the proposed development, with Combs less than 150 metres away.

2. What do we mean by a strategic gap?

2.1. Landscapes around major settlements have a special role to play in maintaining the distinction between town and country and in providing a rural setting to the built-up area.

Strategic gaps are designed to:

- Protect the setting and separate identity of settlements by avoiding their coalescence;
- Retain the openness and character of the land between and around existing settlements; and
- Provide access and recreational benefits to urban dwellers, including the perceived as well as real benefits of having open countryside near to where people live.

A clear gap between settlements helps to maintain a sense of place for both residents of, and visitors to, the settlements on both sides of the gap.

Although the NPPF does not contain a specific reference to strategic gaps, there are a number of principles that have been widely adopted by local planning authorities. In particular, when travelling through a strategic gap there should be a clear sense of leaving the first settlement, travelling through an undeveloped area and then entering the second settlement.

2.2. Without question, that is true of the current gap dividing Stowmarket and Combs. Emerging from the urban environment of Stowmarket at the top of Poplar Hill, the traveller is presented with a wide open view of the countryside beyond. The village of Combs is just visible on the far horizon. As the road sweeps down the hill towards the Slough, there is a clear sense of leaving the town behind. The views at this point include that of St Mary's Church, set against the ancient Combs Wood, the significance of which is covered elsewhere in our submission. Approximately half a kilometre after leaving Stowmarket behind, the traveller enters the village of Combs.

2.3. Combs is a ribbon development, stretched out along two roads through the village to the south and to the south west, as well as a number of minor roads. Consequently, the main feature that strikes the visitor to Combs is its green and open setting. A sharp contrast to the urban scenery of Stowmarket.



Figure 5 Tree-lined Park Road



Figure 6 The Park seen from the roadside

3. Why is maintaining a strategic gap between Stowmarket and Combs so important?

3.1. A settlement's identity can be as much as a result of its setting, within the surrounding countryside, as with the quality of its buildings. Combs is a quiet and peaceful village. It is located on a low rise directly to the south of the market town of Stowmarket, with a valley known locally as the Slough separating it from the town.

3.2. There are a number of significant local landmarks within the village, including Model Farm, the Tannery and St Mary's Church. The Tannery is still run by Webb & Son (Combs) Ltd, which is officially recognised as the oldest family business in Suffolk, having been founded in 1711.



Figure 7 Model Farm



Figure 8 Tannery House

There are 307 dwellings in Combs, with a population of approximately 620 adults plus children. Park Road, the main thoroughfare through the village, takes its name from the parkland that lies behind it. This parkland is defined in the Stowmarket Area Action Plan (SAAP) as a 'Visually important open space'. Park Road itself is lined in places with tall mature trees (Fig. 5 above).

3.3. The main centre of population stretches from the area around Combs Tannery, past Model Farm to Fenns Farm and beyond. There is a second concentration of dwellings on the south eastern edge of the village, taking in the hamlets of Little London and Moats Tye. In years past, many of those living in Combs would have worked locally. The village is surrounded by arable farmland, and before mechanisation many of the men and women in the village were employed in farming. Some of the surrounding farms date back to the 15th century and many of the houses and cottages built to house the farming community still survive.



Figure 9 One of many thatched cottages in Combs village

There is a wealth of older properties in the village, many of them thatched. The historic nature of the parish is reflected in the 57 listed properties in Combs, including one Gospel Hall, eight barns and two sets of gates. Indeed, Gladman's Landscape and Visual Appraisal produced by FPCR states 'The majority of Listed Buildings (18 buildings) within 1km of the site are located within the village of Combs, along Park Road and Tannery Road, including Model Farm and the Tannery House within Combs Tannery Business Park.'

3.4. Stowmarket, by contrast, is the major town in Mid Suffolk. Despite its many redeeming features, it is distinctly urban in character and appearance. The SAAP (para 4.17) describes Stowmarket as lying within two river valleys and stresses the importance of protecting the skyline to ensure that the views in, out and across the town identified in the Stowmarket Environmental Assessment (2008) are not harmed. It places the onus on developers to demonstrate that the built form and massing of any development proposed 'will enhance the setting of Stowmarket and maintain the distance views across the valley to the town ridge line'.

3.5. When considering the Edgecomb Park development the SAAP (para 6.50) highlights the need to maintain the feeling of openness and long distance views from the top of Poplar Hill looking South and West. The SAAP goes on to say 'With only three designated towns in the District (Stowmarket, Needham Market and Eye), the majority of Mid Suffolk's population live in villages. These villages are an essential part of our rural way of life and their unique character and local distinctiveness needs to be maintained and protected. This is especially the case for the villages surrounding Stowmarket'. SAAP Policy 6.22 highlights the need to protect the landscape and maintain the separation between Stowmarket and Combs.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Whilst the edge of a settlement may be seen as a sustainable location for new development due to the existing infrastructure this must be weighed up against the adverse effects of urban sprawl.

4.2. Much of the expansion of Stowmarket in recent years has taken place to the north of the town close to the A14, and this trend is likely to continue. The villages to the south of the town, including Combs, have been largely unaffected by development, in part because of their poor access to the wider infrastructure, and they remain largely unspoilt.

4.3. Because of its location and rural character Combs is popular with local visitors from Stowmarket and beyond, many of whom travel on foot along its footpaths and quiet lanes. The unique charm and appeal of the village are worth preserving for the present generation of both residents and visitors, and for those generations who come after us. Maintaining a strategic gap is essential to prevent Combs from being subsumed by Stowmarket, to the detriment of the wider community.

Report prepared by Ian Clark for the Save Mill Mount Field Network

About the Save Mill Mount Field Network

We represent 1,500 local residents, from Stowmarket, Combs Ford, Battisford, Moats Tye and Little Finborough, who signed a validated petition to Mid Suffolk District Council (MSDC) objecting to planning application DC/18/02380. The proposed development site is known historically as Mill Mount Field.

Our full submission consists of the following documents:

1. A statement of case
2. Grade 1 listed St Mary's Church and its setting
3. Impact of the development on the landscape
4. Mill Mount Field – a valued landscape
5. Archaeological potential of the site
6. Mind the gap! Maintaining the strategic gap between Stowmarket and Combs
7. Traffic and road safety

Contacts for further information

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