

Settlements and Settlement Boundaries Topic Paper

Swindon Borough Council

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Introduction

1. This topic paper provides the background and proposed approach that will enable Swindon Borough Council as Local Planning Authority to conduct a full review of settlement boundaries. It outlines the methodology that the Council proposes to consider in reaching its conclusions and the criteria to be used when determining if the existing settlement boundary should be changed or a new one created.
2. This topic paper is one of several papers supporting the Regulation 18 consultation on the New Local Plan 2043.

Purpose and role of settlement boundaries

3. Settlement boundaries are an important planning policy tool and are defined as part of the plan-making process. They identify and define the main built-up area of a settlement and typically link to a Local Plan's spatial strategy which sets out where growth is expected and encouraged.
4. A clearly drawn boundary line is used to define the extent of a settlement. Land outside of a defined settlement boundary is termed 'open countryside', where development opportunities are more restricted.
5. It must be noted that a settlement boundary is a planning designation only and has no other administrative relevance. Settlement boundaries do not necessarily reflect land ownership boundaries, administrative/parish boundaries or the exact curtilage of dwellings.
6. Whilst the principle of development, particularly residential development, is usually acceptable within the settlement boundary, this does not automatically grant planning permission to such a proposal or mean the Local Planning Authority will grant planning permission. All proposals, whether within, adjacent or outside of the settlement boundary will be determined in accordance with the relevant provisions of local and neighbourhood plans and the National Planning Policy Framework unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Defining settlements and reviewing boundaries

7. For Swindon Borough, settlement boundaries were last fully reviewed and adopted with the Swindon Local Plan 2011; these boundaries were rolled forward without amendments for the Local Plan 2026. A partial review was carried out in 2019 (to

inform the then Local Plan Review 2036), though this work did not progress to adoption.

8. The Swindon Local Plan 2026 defines the following settlements and hierarchy as follows:

Table 1: Local Plan 2026 settlement hierarchy

Type	Settlement name
Urban Area	Swindon Urban Area
Strategic Site Allocations	Tadpole Garden Village, Kingsdown, New Eastern Villages, Commonhead (Badbury Park), Wichelstowe
Primary Rural Settlements	Highworth and Wroughton
Other villages	Badbury Bishopstone Broad Blunsdon Castle Eaton Chiseldon Hannington Hinton Parva Liddington Lower Blunsdon South Marston Stanton Fitzwarren Wanborough

9. Since the last comprehensive review in 2011, new development has evidently taken place around settlements. The Council has now also embarked on a New Local Plan to 2043 (the subject of the Regulation 18 consultation running Sep/Oct 2025) which is based on up-to-date evidence and presents a revised set of spatial planning principles that underpin the Council's approach to ensuring deliverable sustainable development.
10. The Regulation 18 consultation for the New Local Plan 2043 therefore provides an opportunity to propose a refreshed settlement hierarchy that supports the emerging spatial strategy and consult on a set of principles for undertaking a more detailed review of each settlement boundary.

An updated settlement hierarchy for the Local Plan 2043

11. The Regulation 18 New Local Plan 2043 proposes a new spatial strategy for growth in draft policy SS1 'Swindon's Spatial Approach to Growth' and a refreshed settlement hierarchy in draft policy SS2 'The Settlement Hierarchy'.
12. An integral element of the New Local Plan is a preferred approach that seeks to:
 - optimise the use of brownfield land
 - direct development towards locations with existing services and facilities so that these can be supported and used more efficiently
 - direct development to areas in need of regeneration and renewal, and,
 - where greenfield development is required, direct necessary development to areas of lower agricultural, environmental and landscape value.
13. The proposed Spatial Strategy also identifies and emphasises the role of strategic transport corridors for supporting active and public transport connections and improvements to provide a strong network linking strategic growth locations together via a broad range of facilities and services.
14. Whilst rural settlements may not be key growth locations, it is still important that they are included within a settlement hierarchy so that a stance on growth can be explicitly set out for them, providing clarity of expectations.
15. The below table provides a summary of the settlement types proposed within the Regulation 18 New Local Plan 2043:

Proposed settlement types	Description
Urban Area	This is Swindon - the principal settlement within the Borough. It comprises a series of distinct residential neighbourhoods and a large network of town, district and local centres. There is a wide range of services and facilities within the Urban Area including regionally important hubs and destinations such as the Great Western Hospital; museums, theatres and performance venues; shopping outlets

	and employment; and Swindon Railway Station.
Rural Service Centres	Medium sized settlements that remain separate from Swindon's Urban Area and sit within a more rural setting. These settlements have a more limited but important range of services and facilities that include health and leisure and often serve a wider rural catchment. Depending on their location, they will have reasonable accessibility and regular public transport connections into the Urban Area.
Larger Villages	These are modestly sized settlements that typically have a limited range of services, facilities and employment opportunities. They often serve a local catchment area and have lower levels of accessibility.
Small Villages and Hamlets	These are the smallest settlements in the Borough that have very limited or no services, facilities and public transport options.

16. The below table sets out the proposed settlement hierarchy and what designation the settlement currently has through the Local Plan 2026:

Table 2: Proposed settlement hierarchy

Settlement name	LP 2043 proposed designation	LP 2026 designation
Swindon Urban Area	Urban Area	Urban Area
Highworth	Rural Service Centre	Primary Rural Settlement
Wroughton	Rural Service Centre	Primary Rural Settlement
South Marston ¹	Rural Service Centre (emerging)	Other villages
Great Stall East and Lotmead	Rural Service Centre (emerging)	Within strategic site allocation
Broad Blunsdon	Larger Village	Other villages
Chiseldon	Larger Village	Other villages
Foxbridge	Larger Village (emerging)	Within strategic site allocations

¹ This is the expanded village of South Marston.

Redlands	Larger Village (emerging)	Within strategic site allocations
Wanborough	Larger Village	Other villages
Badbury	Small Village and Hamlet	Other villages
Bishopstone	Small Village and Hamlet	Other villages
Castle Eaton	Small Village and Hamlet	Other villages
Hannington	Small Village and Hamlet	Other villages
Hinton Parva	Small Village and Hamlet	Other villages
Liddington	Small Village and Hamlet	Other Villages
Lower Blunsdon	Small Village and Hamlet	Other Village
Stanton Fitzwarren	Small Village and Hamlet	Other Villages
Alexandra Park	Small Village and Hamlet	Not defined in LP 2026
Beranburh Field	Small Village and Hamlet	Not defined in LP 2026
Burderop	Small Village and Hamlet	Not defined in LP 2026
Hampton	Small Village and Hamlet	Not defined in LP 2026
Hodson	Small Village and Hamlet	Not defined in LP 2026
Inglesham	Small Village and Hamlet	Not defined in LP 2026
Sevenhampton	Small Village and Hamlet	Not defined in LP 2026
Thorney Park and Langton Park	Small Village and Hamlet	Not defined in LP 2026

17. The Council would welcome feedback on this proposed hierarchy and the additional areas proposed for formal designation as part of the Regulation 18 consultation.

Principles to guide a review of settlement boundary extents

18. The Council has not undertaken a comprehensive review of settlement boundaries at this stage as it wishes to collect feedback on the proposed hierarchy and the set of principles proposed to guide a comprehensive review.
19. The principles are well understood and applied ubiquitously to inform other authorities' methodologies as well as the partial review undertaken in 2019.

Table 3: Proposed principles to guide settlement boundary review

<p>Principle 1</p> <p>Settlement boundaries should be drawn tightly around built form, where practicable following defined physical features, such as walls, fences, roads and watercourses. A line should be drawn on the inside edge of the boundary where possible.</p>
<p>Principle 2</p>

Settlement boundaries need not be continuous and can potentially form two or more separate elements. In most cases it is likely that they will be continuous.

Principle 3

Settlement boundaries should **include**:

- Buildings on the edge of settlements which are physically, functionally and visually related to the existing urban area
- Curtilages that are contained within or visually form part of the settlement area, or make a contribution to the street scene
- Built/ commenced allocations and planning permissions physically related to the urban area
- Existing community facilities (i.e. schools) connected to the settlement
- designated open space or areas in leisure and recreation uses where it is predominantly surrounded by buildings that form the settlement (for example, on 3 or more sides)

Principle 4

Settlement boundaries should **exclude**:

- Designated open space or areas in leisure and recreation uses at the edge of settlements where they are not surrounded by buildings that form the settlement
- Unimplemented planning permission
- Local Plan allocations not yet commenced
- The extended curtilage of a property that relates more closely to open countryside through function or character (e.g. large garden, field, paddock).
- Uses not commonly found within the settlement boundary, such as agriculture, forestry, equestrian use, landfill, and renewable energy installations, working farms and agricultural barns
- Employment sites on the periphery of a settlement which are significant in size in comparison with the settlement or are seen as physically separate.
- Allotments, orchards etc that visually relate to the open countryside rather than the settlement

- Tree belts, woodland areas
- Isolated development, outlying development or clusters of buildings physically or visually detached from the built-up area

20. The Council would welcome feedback on these proposed principles to guide a comprehensive review of settlement boundaries as part of the Regulation 18 consultation.

Informative

21. It is inevitable that when applying the principles outlined above that there may be an element of subjectivity. Notwithstanding, the following are considered important references to guide any review:
- Adopted settlement boundaries in the Local Plan 2026
 - Reg 19 Local Plan Review 2036, proposed settlement boundaries as consulted upon
 - Adopted neighbourhood plan settlement boundaries
 - Most up to date OS base map
 - Most up to date Arial maps
 - Conservation Area appraisals and management plans for areas which lie within or close to existing or potential settlement boundaries were also consulted for any recommendations they could provide for these areas.
 - The Landscape Character Assessment 2025 has been produced in draft for consultation. Which includes updated character areas where significant changes on the ground have altered the developed/non developed extend of the LCA. Cross referencing to align documents will be required, however the LCA is a document of strategic level landscape descriptors and would not take precedence over any adopted settlement boundary.
 - Site visits may be taken and collaboration with parish councils on proposed boundaries to determine the extent of the settlement is drawn.

Conclusion

22. The Regulation 18 consultation on the New Local Plan 2043 provides an opportunity for stakeholders to comment on the proposed settlement hierarchy as well as the proposed principles for undertaking a comprehensive review of settlement boundaries. Feedback at the Regulation 18 stage will be considered and feed into future work and the production of the Regulation 19 stage Proposed Submission New Local Plan 2043.