

**WVPS Coalescence Statement: Policy R6 – Bread and Cheese Field SLAA163**

The allocation of the Bread and Cheese Field (SLAA163) under Policy R6 would result in harmful coalescence between Westbere and Hersden and would therefore conflict with the fundamental objective of maintaining the physical and visual separation of distinct settlements. The site is not a neutral parcel of land capable of absorbing development without consequence. Rather, it performs a critical spatial role as the remaining open land between the eastern edge of Westbere and the westward expansion of Hersden, particularly in the context of the existing Hoplands development. Its loss to housing would materially reduce, and in practical terms eliminate, the gap that currently allows the two settlements to remain legible as separate places.

This is not merely a question of administrative boundaries; it is a question of settlement identity, landscape structure and sound spatial planning. Westbere derives much of its character from its detached rural form, its relationship with the surrounding countryside, and the fact that it remains perceptibly separate from neighbouring built-up areas. Hersden, by contrast, has experienced significant modern expansion. The Bread and Cheese Field lies at the point where those differing settlement forms most closely approach one another. Development of this field would therefore not represent a contained or isolated extension, but a decisive narrowing of the open land that currently prevents the settlements from merging in visual and functional terms.

The role of Hoplands is central to this assessment. That development has already extended the built influence of Hersden westwards towards Westbere. On the opposite side, the established residential frontage along Bushy Hill Rd marks the eastern edge of Westbere's settled form. Bread and Cheese Field sits between these two built elements. Once that field is developed, the remaining sense of separation would be severely compromised because the site would effectively connect the expanding urban edge of Hersden with the existing dwellings associated with Westbere. The representation is therefore correct to identify the site as the final and most important part of the open buffer between the two settlements.

The practical effect of Policy R6 would be to create a continuous or near-continuous corridor of development where there is currently a meaningful visual and spatial break. Even if some landscaping or open space were retained within the site, that would not alter the essential fact that built form would be introduced into the very land that currently performs the separation function. Coalescence does not require complete physical joining in the narrowest sense. In planning terms, it occurs where the perception of distinct settlements is materially eroded through the encroachment of development into the gap between them. That is precisely the outcome that would follow here.

The issue is compounded by the treatment of Bushy Hill Rd in the proposed settlement boundary. The representation argues that these dwellings are part of the established Westbere settlement pattern and should be recognised as such. If that is correct, then the spatial logic against allocating Bread and Cheese Field becomes even stronger, because the site would sit directly between the accepted edge of Westbere and the built expansion of Hersden at Hoplands. Conversely, excluding Bushy Hill Road from the settlement boundary does not solve the coalescence problem; it merely obscures it through an artificial boundary definition. Planning judgment should be based on the reality of how settlements are experienced on the ground, not on a boundary line drawn in a way that understates the relationship between existing development and the proposed allocation.

The proposed approach is also unsound in strategic terms because it fails to respect the importance of open land between settlements. The field should be understood not as a reserve for infill or rounding off, but as a landscape gap with a clear anti-coalescence function. The representation notes that earlier policy wording referred more clearly to the need to avoid coalescence, yet that safeguard has been weakened or removed in the submission version. That change is significant. Where a site is so evidently sensitive in terms of settlement separation, the plan should apply stronger protections, not fewer. Removing explicit anti-coalescence safeguards from the policy while allocating the key separating field for development is internally inconsistent and undermines the credibility of the spatial strategy.

The Council's reliance on a proposed Green Gap elsewhere does not remedy this defect. As the representation explains, the designation of Headleys Field as Green Gap is insufficient because that land does not sit at the point where separation between Westbere and Hersden is most under threat. It is therefore incapable of performing the same strategic function as Bread and Cheese Field. A Green Gap is only effective if it protects the land that actually prevents settlements from merging. In this case, the plan appears to protect land that is less critical while allocating the very field that provides the most important visual and spatial break. That is not a coherent or evidence-led approach to settlement separation.

There is also a broader issue of settlement identity. Westbere is valued not simply as a collection of houses but as a distinct village with its own historic form, rural setting and sense of arrival. The gap between Westbere and Hersden is part of how that identity is understood and experienced. Once built development extends across Bread and Cheese Field, the approach to Westbere from the direction of Hersden would be fundamentally changed. The transition from one settlement to the other would be blurred, and the detached rural character of Westbere would be diminished. That harm would not be temporary or easily reversible; it would be a permanent consequence of the allocation.

For these reasons, Bread and Cheese Field should not be allocated for residential development. The field should instead be recognised for the strategic function it currently performs and protected accordingly. If the plan is to be sound, it must preserve a meaningful and defensible gap between Westbere and Hersden, rather than facilitate the erosion of that gap through development. The appropriate remedy is therefore the deletion of Policy R6, the recognition of Bread and Cheese Field as land that should remain open, and the use of planning policy to secure the long-term separation of the two settlements. Without that change, the plan would permit harmful coalescence and fail to protect the distinct identity of Westbere.