

Arborfield & Barkham Neighbourhood Plan 2019-2036



Annex VI Natural Environment May 2019

A plan for the community by the community

Arborfield & Barkham Neighbourhood Plan

1. Introduction

This review is being prepared on the basis of feedback from a number of sources. It follows an approach suggested by Duncan Fisher, WBC Ecology Officer. Key input was provided by The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC). The opinions of residents have been sought via a Neighbourhood Plan Survey sent to all households. Follow-up was facilitated by a number of public events.

The following approach is being used to develop this review.

- a) The key features of the landscape have been described
- b) The biodiversity of the two Parishes has been defined
- c) The impact of recent development on the landscape has been assessed
- d) Important views will be identified
- e) Locally valued natural assets
- f) The impact of proposed development on the landscape will be assessed
- g) Aspirations for the Natural Environment of Arborfield and Barkham

2. Sources

Sources Include

- a) Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)
- b) 2004 WBC Landscape Assessment
- c) Neighbourhood Plan Survey
- d) Individual Inputs

2.1 Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)

A biodiversity report was developed by TVERC on behalf of Arborfield and Barkham Parishes which included information regarding:

- a) Protected and notable species
- b) Designated Wildlife Sites
- c) Habitats

2.2 Neighbourhood Plan Survey

The responses to the Neighbourhood Plan Survey highlight the importance of the Natural Environment.

Arborfield and Barkham have a semi-rural environment which is much valued by its residents. It is characterised by diverse landscapes and habitats surrounding distinctive residential areas of varying age, style and size. The recent joint Arborfield and Barkham Neighbour Plan survey recorded that 98% of some 520 respondents strongly supported the proposition that the rural setting makes Arborfield and Barkham a good place to live. The unique identity of the area is best preserved by retaining open spaces around the villages was strongly agreed by 91% and another 8% agreed – about as near unanimity as can be achieved.

Although transport will be dealt with elsewhere in detail, it has a significant impact on the rural environment of the area and a brief comment should be included here.

The roads throughout Arborfield and Barkham reflect the semi-rural nature of the parish – they are narrow and were established in bygone times. All the main arterial roads carry increasing levels of traffic and that is before the full brunt of the Garrison SDL is felt. The recent joint Arborfield and Barkham Neighbour Plan survey asked where and how people travelled to work. Of the some 330 respondents of working age, 86% travelled in all directions to 11 named locations with no more than 12% travelling to a single destination. The survey also asked how people travelled to work and education – 88% of the 450 respondents travel by car. When asked how many used the bus most days – i.e. daily commuters – only 3% of the 520 of respondents indicated that they did.

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The message is clear. Arborfield and Barkham residents now commute to a wide ranges of locations in neighbouring counties. To reduce significantly the dependence on cars in favour of public transport would probably not be practical in view of the diversity of travel identified. Housing gives rise to jobs and jobs require housing – it is a vicious circle which will continue to threaten the natural environment.

3. Overview

The natural environment, historical heritage and geography/geology of Arborfield and Barkham Landscape all contribute to a varied rural landscape that is much valued by the local residents. Much of this country area comprises wooded areas and historic farmlands which provide a broad range of habitats and a rich biodiversity. Any development will impact these features and projects must be selected and designed to mitigate any adverse impact on the countryside.

3.1. Landscape Features

Arborfield and Barkham are semi-rural Parishes. In the recent survey, some 98% of respondents agreed that the countryside setting was an important contribution to making the parishes a great place to live. Some 99% also strongly agreed or agreed that the unique identity of the area would be best preserved by retaining open spaces around the centres of population - as close to unanimity as possible!

The parishes cover a wide range of landscapes and habitats over flat and undulating ground. The northwest boundary of Arborfield is formed by the River Loddon, providing a rich diversity of features including marshland and rivulets. To the north, the Bearwood Estate is a listed garden area comprising lakes and broadleaf, conifer and mixed woodlands. The Coombes is a superb wooded area with a wide range of trees and other species. The western part of the area comprises open historic farmlands where deer graze and kites soar. To the south there are two important features which influence the area – Longmoor Bog which is on the boundary of Barkham and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Thames Basin Heaths lie to the south, outside of the parishes but much of Arborfield and Barkham fall within the 5km and 7km protection zones.

Within these boundaries there are several wildlife sites, copses, ancient woodlands and a bluebell wood. Specifically The Coombes is also designated as a Local Wild Life Site. There are some 400 recorded locations of protected and notable species identified by TVERC.

There are two areas of geological note –

- a. The Coombes with unique stratigraphy of London Clay, Bagshot Sands and overlying river terrace gravels. It is designated as a Local Geological site.
- b. Barkham Iron Rich Streams, in the southern part of Barkham, towards Rooks Nest Wood.

The above features provide diverse, interesting and varied opportunities for walkers, nature lovers, horse-riders and photographers but not just for local residents. They also provide potential relief, a haven for residents from the two parishes and from around the Borough, where development has already encroached on much of the countryside environment.

3.2. Biodiversity

Within the Plan Area there are several wildlife sites, copses, ancient woodlands and a bluebell wood. Specifically, The Coombes, The Holt and various smaller pockets are designated as a Local Wildlife Site. There are some 400 locations where protected species have been recorded by TVCER. These include:

- a) Amphibians: 5 species including Palmate Newt, Smooth Newt, Great Crested Newt, Common Toad, Common Frog
- b) Birds: 23 species including Gadwall, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Osprey, Kestrel, Hobby, Lapwing, Woodcock, Common Sandpiper, Stock Dove, Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Swift, Green Woodpecker, Willow Warbler, Skylark, Dunnock, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Whitethroat, Common Crossbill, Common Crossbill, Bullfinch

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- c) Higher Plants: Juniper and 8 species of Flowering Plants including Loddon Pondweed, Good-King-Henry, Sharp Rush, Coralroot, Ghost Orchid, Bluebell, Butcher's-broom, Fringed Water-lily,
- d) Invertebrates – Stag Beetle and three species of butterflies
- e) Mammals - Terrestrial (bats): 9 species and series
- f) Mammals - Terrestrial (excl. bats): Eurasian Badger, West European Hedgehog, European Water Vole
- g) Reptiles: Grass Snake

Other (mainly non-protected) wildlife commonly encountered in the last year include, Badger, Brown Rat, Common Frog, Common Shrew, Common Toad, Field Mouse, Fox, Grey Squirrel, Mole, Muntjac Deer, Newts, Pipistrelle Bat, Rabbit, Roe Deer, Lizard, Grass Snake, Blackbird, Blue tit, Buzzard, Canada Geese, Chaffinch, Collared Dove, Crow, Jay, Robin, Sparrow, Magpie, Mistle Thrush, Green Woodpecker and Spotted Woodpecker.

Barkham Parish has by far the highest density of Veteran Oak Trees in the whole of Wokingham Borough.

3.3 Geological Sites

There are two areas of geological note which are designated as Local Geological Sites:

- a) The Coombes stratigraphy of London Clay, Bagshot Sands and overlying river terrace gravels.
- b) Iron Rich Streams, in the southern part of Barkham, towards Rooks Nest Wood.

4. Development to Date

Both parishes were small rural communities until comparatively recently. In 1931 the population of the combined parishes of Arborfield and Newland was 947 while Barkham contained only 211 people. As transport links improved and as commuting to larger settlements such as Wokingham, Reading and London became easier, so the parishes absorbed an increasing dormitory population. Meanwhile Arborfield Garrison became the main base for the REME, including a training college. By 2011 the populations of Arborfield had expanded to 2,860 and Barkham to 3,603. Map B Where People Live shows the main population areas.

Barkham began to expand in the 1920s, mainly as ribbon development, particularly along Barkham Road, Bearwood Road, Langley Common Road and School Road. This process continued, usually as individual houses and bungalows. This accounts for the wide variety of housing styles. Elizabeth Park, in the northeast of the parish, is a major housing development built in 1984-1989 so as to meet the Wokingham District housing target. The population of Barkham, consequently, has grown rapidly during the 20th century. The fifty years from 1921 saw population increase from 211 to 1,858 by the 1971 census. By the time of the 2011 census, the population had more than doubled to 3,603.

Arborfield housing began to increase after World War II. Anderson and Emblen Crescents were the first developments in the early fifties, followed by Link Way. Chamberlain and Melrose Gardens were added in the 1960s, and Harts Close in the early 1970s. The building of the Arborfield Garrison by-pass in 1968 caused a change in road layout and names, affecting the old main road through the garrison area. In the mid-1990s Whitehall Brick and Tile works closed, a business that was established in 1933. The land became available for development and Badgers Mount and Gerring Road were built. With the merger of Arborfield and Newland parishes in 1948, plus the growth in housing during the second half of the twentieth century, the population numbers had increased by 2001 to 2228. The early 21st century saw further expansion with the development of Penrose Park and Poppyfields in the first decade. By the time of the 2011 census, the population had more increased to 2,860.

WBC's Core Strategy adopted in 2010 proposed the development of the Arborfield SDL on the site of the REME barracks which was imminently to close. The SDL is now under construction with completion initially planned for 2026. It is on a completely different scale from previous development in the parishes: the total

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development is planned for 3,500 dwellings of which some 1,800 will be within Barkham. Most of the balance will be in neighbouring Finchampstead.

This SDL, now known as Arborfield Green, is a brownfield site though roughly a half of the land available will not be built upon but used for SANGs and sports fields and amenity areas. This provides clearly defined open spaces within the SDL itself. Plans included a secondary school which opened in 2016. Two primary schools and a district centre are proposed and the area will be served by two new roads: the Arborfield Cross Relief Road (ACRR) and the Nine Ride Extension (NMRE). Other than the secondary school and a short section of the NMRE, the remaining infrastructure is still in the planning stage, although enabling works for the ACRR have commenced.

In addition to these open areas within the SDL, there is provision within Core Strategy Policy CP18(5) that the impact of the SDL itself on the local environment must be mitigated by ensuring open areas around the SDL are retained. During the review of the MDD (adopted in 2014), it was recognised that settlement separation areas should be preserved around the SDL, although the Inspector considered that the principle was adequately protected by settlement boundaries through Core Strategy Policy CP11.

5. Views

Views reflect the geography/geology, natural environment and man-made features of the landscape and development should blend in, not impose on them. There are many important and much loved views around the two parishes, for example:

- a) View from Arborfield Cross looking towards The Coombes
- b) View from Barkham Road, approaching the bridge, looking across Field Farm
- c) The rhododendron avenue along Bearwood Road
- d) Views from Sindlesham Road and Mole Road towards The Coombes and Carters Hill
- e) Open fields in South Barkham looking to/from Barkham Square
- f) The view from Coppid Hill looking south across open fields
- g) The chestnut avenue between Church Lane, Arborfield and the old churchyard
- h) Views from footpath AN17 adjacent to Arborfield Court
- i) Views of Carter's Hill House and its setting

In consultation with local residents a definitive list of views has been prepared. This is shown separately in Annex V.

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6. Locally Valued Natural Assets

The following locations have been identified as Locally Valued Natural Assets, as mentioned in Policy IRS3. These locations require special recognition. In the longer term should it is an aspiration for these to receive formal protection within Wokingham's Local Plan.

6.1 The Coombes woodland



The Coombes seen from the south



Coombes Lane

The Coombes is a large area of deciduous woodland in what was once part of the Bearwood Estate. It is now in private ownership.

- a) The site is used as an amenity area especially as the network of PROWs make it very accessible.
- b) Noted by the TVERC report is the wide variety of species of trees, some typical of Ancient Woodland. Furthermore, there are varieties of lower growing vegetation providing habitats for a number of Amber List birds, and the Bullfinch, which is on the Red List of endangered species.
- c) The TVERC report also notes that the site has educational and scientific interest, being 'One of the few good examples of the younger Palaeogene beds in Berkshire'.
- d) There are also a number of Veteran Trees recorded in the area worthy of preservation while WBC has extended TPOs over all of The Coombes woodland and along adjacent PROWs.
- e) It is an important feature of the local landscape and views of The Coombes woodland are possible from many miles distant. From the highest points there are vistas of surrounding settlements in all directions, yet in spite of the elevated woodland setting it has an intimate, secluded feel. Towards the south there is a classic pastoral view above Barkham Manor, while to the north there are parkland views of the old Bearwood Estate and other vantage points of adjacent agricultural land.
- f) The Barkham Village Design Statement supports the protection of more than just the wooded area of the Coombes, with its wish to 'conserve and protect the pasture in The Coombes' (page 7). The Neighbourhood Plan extends this ambition by defining the area to be protected more widely than simply the area of woodland in order that the views, environment and landscape character can be suitably preserved in the face of pressures on increased development.

It is considered important to protect The Coombes for all the above reasons to ensure the retention of the area's amenity value, biodiversity and its influence on the character of the area.

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6.2 The Holt woodland



View of The Holt with bluebells

The Holt woodland is an area of woodland in the north of the Plan Area containing Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland. It is significant in a number of ways:

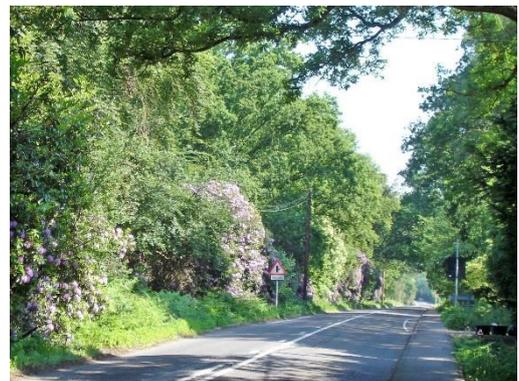
- It serves as a scenic buffer between the M4 motorway and the nearby settlement of Carters Hill.
- The Holt has been known to flood on a regular basis. This reduces the rate of run-off in the immediate area which is important in protecting the local settlement of Carter's Hill and the lowland dairy farm adjacent to the site.
- The area of the Holt site that does not stand within the floodplain contains six veteran trees; five Oaks and one Field Maple, which are worthy of extra recognition through the Neighbourhood Plan.

It is considered important to protect the Holt in view of its influence on the landscape and character of the area, its role in local flood protection and its biodiversity.

6.3 Rhododendron avenue along Bearwood Road



Bearwood Road looking south



Bearwood Road looking north

The rhododendron avenue was originally an avenue through the Bearwood estate, it offers a spectacular display of rhododendrons in May each year thus providing an iconic rural drive. In recent years it has suffered from fires and overzealous pruning. The avenue is important for two reasons:

- a) It is noted as a special landscape feature. With the largest volume of traffic passing along Bearwood road, it is appreciated not just by residents of the local parishes, but by people across the borough and further afield.
- b) The rhododendrons also have an important landscape importance as they screens the road from a scrap yard, a caravan site, a golf course and several residential properties,

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It is considered vital to protect the rhododendron avenue for both the above reasons to ensure the retention of the character of the area. If the avenue is allowed to deteriorate, it would be a great loss to the character of the wider area.

7 Future Development

Individual settlement areas must remain separated from each other when considering any further development within the parishes of Arborfield and Barkham. Ideally strong boundaries must be created by providing amenity areas which should take the form of linear parks, and also facilitate extending the greenways to create an integrated network for non-motorised transport.

An important feature of any rural environment is the lanes around these centres of population. Sindlesham and Mole Roads in Arborfield and School Lane, Barkham Road, Barkham Street, Barkham Ride and Langley Common Road began life as country roads. They have already become major commuting routes and increasingly congested even before experiencing the full brunt of the SDL development. The remaining quieter roads such as Edney's Hill (Barkham) and Church Lane (Arborfield) need to be protected with a mixture of sensible speed limits and calming devices including 'Pegasus' crossings where roads intersect lanes used by equestrians.

Elsewhere, infrastructure projects such as the Arborfield relief road, widening of Barkham Bridge and the Nine Mile Ride extension are all designed to ease the flow of additional traffic in and out of the area. However, this will not prevent 'rat running' through the smaller roads and the increasing negative impact on the countryside must be avoided wherever possible.

8 Aspirations for the Natural Environment of Arborfield and Barkham

Arborfield and Barkham Parishes wish to protect the diverse and much valued countryside when any future developments are considered outside current development limits by applying the following aspirations in accordance with NPPF paras 109 to 125 and Local Policies CP7, CP8, CP11 and CP18.

- a) Development that will harm or impact important biodiversity sites including statutory designated sites, ancient woodlands and hedgerows, veteran trees, woodlands and the flora and fauna contained therein will be resisted unless appropriate mitigation can be offered and there are adequate buffer zones.
- b) Priority should be given to developing brownfield sites where such development will enhance the location. Any development should not lead to excessive encroachment into the surrounding countryside or expansion of the development away from existing buildings.
- c) Measures introduced to maintain separation of the Arborfield Green SDL from Arborfield Cross, Barkham Hill and Finchampstead North should be retained and applied to any additional major developments.
- d) 50% of sites that encroach on the countryside should be kept as open space – either as SANGs or natural countryside.
- e) Development should only be considered if the additional traffic can be channelled into the road system being developed to support the SDL and directed away from unsuitable/country/residential roads.