

DELEGATED OFFICER REPORT



WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Application Number:	242129
Site Address:	Warren Crest Farm, Wick Hill Lane, Finchampstead, Wokingham, RG40 3PY
Expiry Date:	29 August 2025
Site Visit Date:	4 October 2024
Proposal: Full application for a proposed access, including formation of new trackway, improvement of existing track, and installation of new gates.	

PLANNING POLICY	
National Policy	National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG)
Core Strategy (CS)	CP1 – Sustainable Development CP3 – General Principles for Development CP6 – Managing Travel Demand CP7 – Biodiversity CP8 – Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area CP9 – Scale and Location of Development Proposals CP11 – Proposals Outside Development Limits
MDD Local Plan (MDD)	CC01 – Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development CC02 – Development Limits CC03 – Green Infrastructure, Trees and Landscaping CC09 – Development and Flood Risk CC10 – Sustainable Drainage TB21 – Landscape Character TB23 – Biodiversity and Development
Joint Minerals and Waste Plan (JMWP)	The JMWP does not apply to the scale of development proposed within the site's location.
Wokingham Borough Local Plan Update (LPU)	SS1 – Sustainable development principles SS2 – Spatial strategy and settlement hierarchy SS5 – Development in the countryside SS17 – Transport improvements CE1 – Design principles for efficient buildings CE2 – Environmental standards for non-residential development C1 – Active and sustainable transport and accessibility C2 – Mitigation of transport impacts and highway safety and design C4 – Green and blue infrastructure and public rights of way ER3 Supporting the rural economy NE1 – Biodiversity and geodiversity

	NE2 – Biodiversity net gain NE3 – Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area NE4 – Trees, woodland, hedges and hedgerows NE5 – Landscape and design
Other	Borough Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document CIL Guidance + 123 List Finchampstead Neighbourhood Plan

PLANNING HISTORY

No planning history relating to the application site.

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Internal

WBC Highways: No objection subject to conditions
WBC Landscape and Trees: No objection subject to condition
WBC Ecology: No objection subject to conditions

External

Berkshire Archaeology: No objection subject to condition

REPRESENTATIONS

Parish/Town Council	Finchampstead Parish Council raised no objections, but have some concerns with potential sightline issues for vehicles existing the access onto a dangerous bend. <i>Officer's Comment: This is discussed in the 'Highways Access and Safety Matters' section of the report.</i>
Ward Member(s)	No comments received
Neighbours	1 comment received in support of the application.

APPRAISAL

Site Description:

The site comprises part of a large agricultural holding located to the south of Wick Hill Lane, Finchampstead. The site falls outside of settlement limits within open countryside with agricultural fields to the south/south-east, woodland to the east and the settlement of Finchampstead North to the north/west.

The site benefits from an existing formalised access point off Wick Hill Lane adjacent to its northern boundary, as well as a less formal access point off the junction of Wick Hill Lane and Jubilee Road. An access route, which is largely unsurfaced although part of the northern section (adjacent to the existing agricultural buildings) is surfaced. It is understood that farm traffic predominantly utilise the site's northern access.

Proposal:

This application proposes improvements to the site's southern access including the realignment of the existing field gate and the part realignment and resurfacing of the

existing access route to create an access track. The track, apart from a slight realignment of its central section, would follow the existing unsurfaced route and gateways meaning that there are no proposed gates within the site. The track is to be surfaced in compacted stone.

Principle of Development:

The National Planning Policy Framework has an underlying presumption in favour of sustainable development which is carried through to the local Development Plan. The Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policy CC01 states that planning applications that accord with the policies in the Development Plan for Wokingham Borough will be approved without delay, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

As the site is located outside of settlement limits within designated countryside, Policy CP11 'Proposals outside Development Limits (including countryside)' is applicable in this instance. Policy CP11 refers to protecting the separate identity of settlements and maintain the quality of the environment and does not ordinarily permit development outside of settlement limits except where certain criteria are met. The relevant exceptions which should be considered in this case are:

- 1) It contributes to diverse and sustainable rural enterprises within the borough, or in the case of other countryside-based enterprises and activities, it contributes and/or promotes recreation in, and enjoyment of, the countryside; and
- 2) It does not lead to excessive encroachment or expansion of development away from the original buildings; and
- 3) It is contained within suitably located buildings which are appropriate for conversion, or in the case of replacement buildings would bring about environmental improvement;

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that the proposal would support a sustainable rural enterprise through supporting a working farm. The applicant has submitted a case outlining the Agricultural Need for the proposal within the submitted Planning Statement. This includes the need for a safe and reliable access to allow efficient operation of a working farm, ease access for large farm machinery and HGVs upon which the farm is reliant. It is argued that the proposal would remove the shortcomings of the existing access arrangement which are a significant constraint on the farm business.

When reviewing the site's planning history there is no evidence to suggest that the agricultural use of the site has ceased. The use of the site as an operational farm was considered and accepted as part of the recent Prior Approval application (ref 233112). Circumstances have not changed on site following the Council's previous assessment which would indicate that the agricultural use of the wider site has permanently ceased. The agricultural need for the proposed development can therefore be accepted.

The physical alterations associated with this proposal are fairly limited to the resurfacing and slight realignment of the existing access route to create a formalised access track, plus the realignment of the site's existing southern access. As such, the proposal complies with policy CP11 and is acceptable in principle subject to an

assessment of the impact on the character of the area, highway safety and all relevant material considerations.

Character of the Area:

Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy states that development must be appropriate in terms of its scale, mass, layout, built form, height and character of the area and must be of high quality design. R1 of the Borough Design Guide SPD requires that development contribute positively towards and be compatible with the historic or underlying character and quality of the local area. R12 of the Borough Design Guide SPD states that boundary treatments should be designed to contribute positively to the character of the area and to the quality of the public realm.

The proposed timber double cross gate serving the realigned southern access point would retain the permeability of the existing boundary treatment and is characteristic of field access gates within the site's rural setting. Moreover, the gate would be set further back from the highway than the existing metal gate to be removed (by circa. 23m), further mitigating the visual impact of the amendments to the site's southern access point.

The proposed access track mostly follows the route of the existing unsurfaced route, with the exception of a minor realignment of the central section. As such, the proposal would not create any new gaps in the hedgerows which mark the boundaries of the fields within the site, or further dissect the agricultural fields the track would service.

In terms of its appearance, while the track would formalise the existing access route and be more visually prominent, it would be surfaced with crushed stone which would be softer in appearance than more heavy duty alternatives such as tarmac or scalping. Moreover, public views of the development would be very limited to vantage points from the site's northern and southern access points where it would be viewed in the context of the adjoining vehicular highways.

Overall, the proposal would have a fairly limited impact on the rural character of the area and an acceptable visual impact in accordance with Core Strategy policy CP3.

Neighbouring Amenity:

Due to the scale and nature of the proposed development, and the site being located a considerable distance away from any neighbouring properties, there are no concerns relating to potential impact on neighbouring amenity in terms of loss of light, overbearing or overlooking.

Highway Access and Safety Matters:

Paragraph 116 of the NPPF states that development should only be prevented or refused on highways grounds if there would be an unacceptable impact on highway safety, or the residual cumulative impacts on the road network, following mitigation, would be severe, taking into account all reasonable future scenarios.

Core Strategy policy CP6 concerns issues relating to highway safety and access, stating that planning permission will be granted for schemes that, amongst other requirements, provide appropriate vehicular parking, enhance road safety and do not cause highway problems. Policy C2 of the emerging Local Plan Update, which is deemed to hold limited weight at this stage, states that with regards to highway safety and design, all development proposals must ensure safe and suitable access to the site for all users.

The proposed alterations to the site's southern access point comprise its slight repositioning to the east of the existing vehicular access and the formation of the access track joining with Wick Hill Lane. The access point would be located in close proximity to junction of Jubilee Road (a classified 'B' road) and Wick Hill Lane (a single track private road). Jubilee Road meets Wick Hill Lane on a sharp bend.

Following significant discussions between the applicant and the Council's Highways Officer's, revised plans have been submitted which have relocated the new access point further away from the junction, pushed the access gate further back from the highway and proposes the erection of two 'reduce speed now' traffic warning signs when approaching the bend from either direction. Further information to demonstrate the suitability of the proposed access for larger vehicles, including swept path analysis and visibility splays, has also been submitted.

The swept path analysis demonstrates that for a 19m long Tractor and Hay Wagon there would be a significant swing out onto the oncoming lane when taking a left turn exit. While this could pose a highway safety issues, the Highways Officers has advised that this would not be an adverse risk in this instance given that there would remain a low level of large vehicular traffic following the development.

The amended scheme has sufficiently addressed all initial highway safety concerns raised and as such the Highways Officers have raised no objection, subject to all works including the off-site traffic signs being implemented prior to the use of the access track.

Landscape and Trees:

MDD Local Plan Policy TB21 requires consideration of the Council's Landscape Character Assessment. Proposals must retain or enhance the condition, character and features that contribute to the landscape. The site is located within Area N2 'Finchampstead Pastoral Sandy Lowland' of the Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment (WBCLA) (2019) which is a high quality landscape within high sensitivity and a low capacity for change. The landscape strategy includes to conserve and enhance the quiet rural character and dark skies, and the aim of development is to conserve the coherent pattern of settlement and avoid the spread of urban built form including roads into the area.

Policy CC03 of the MDD Local Plan aims to protect green infrastructure networks, promote linkages between public open space and the countryside, retain existing trees and establish appropriate landscaping. There are no protected trees within the site, however trees and vegetation on and adjacent to the site's boundaries are important to the verdant setting and should be retained and protected in accordance with policy CC03.

Mature trees and vegetation define the site's southern boundary adjoining the highway, with the existing access point located within a small clearing between the adjacent woodland to the west and a line of mature trees on and adjacent to the boundary to the east. It appears that there has been some clearance of vegetation in recent years, with the submitted Ecological Impact Assessment confirming that dead trees were removed prior to the submission of the application.

Following discussions with the Council's Landscape Architect, additional information has been submitted which demonstrates that the relocated access would not result in the loss of any additional trees which is welcomed. However, to accommodate the proposed gate and the required visibility splays the retained vegetation will need to be managed and it is not clear whether trees will need to be cut back. The woodland landscape character has also been affected by the previous clearance within the site.

To reinstate the landscape character along the boundary a condition requiring the submission of, and agreement to, a landscaping scheme prior to commencement of the development has been agreed by the applicant. This scheme, which will be assessed alongside the Biodiversity Net Gain requirements, will ensure that any further loss of landscaping features to facilitate the proposal will be adequately compensated for in accordance with policies CC03 and TB21.

Ecology:

Paragraph 187 of the NPPF is clear that new development should contribute to and enhance the natural environment by minimising impact on and providing net gains for biodiversity. Policy TB23 of the MDD Local Plan requires the incorporation of new biodiversity features, buffers between habitats and species of importance and integration with the wider green infrastructure network.

Following initial discussions with the Council's Ecology Officer, an Ecological Impact Assessment (Ecology by Design, June 2025) has been submitted in support of the application. The assessment concludes that without mitigation the proposal is likely to result in net loss of biodiversity within the site and impact on protected and priority species which are present or potentially present. Of particular note are opportunities for nesting birds within trees and opportunities for wild mammals to make use of the site.

While the Ecology Officer has raised some concern with the detail provided in the assessment, they agree overall that there would be no impact on protected or priority species during and following the development if the recommended Precautionary Working Methods Statement as well as a Arboricultural Method Statement (to be agreed via condition) are strictly followed during the construction phase. Habitats for protected and priority species would also be enhanced through the Biodiversity Net Gain measures.

Overall, subject to conditions there would be no direct or indirect harm to protected species and habitats as a result of the development and the proposal accords with the NPPF and MDD Local Plan policy TB23 in this respect.

Biodiversity Net Gain

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is now mandatory for major and minor planning applications unless the proposed development meets the exception criteria set out in paragraph 17 of Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended), the Biodiversity Gain Requirements (Exemptions) Regulations 2024 and The Environment Act 2021 (Commencement No. 8 and Transitional Provisions) Regulations 2024.

The proposal does not meet the exception criteria and is subsequently required to demonstrate that there would a Biodiversity Net Gain of 10% or more following the development. The statutory framework for BNG involves the discharge of the statutory biodiversity gain condition following the grant of planning permission and prior to commencement of the development. The relevant Planning Practice Guidance states that prior to the determination of an application the LPA must be confident that the statutory condition is capable of being discharged, however full detail does not need to be submitted to the LPA prior to determination.

Following discussions with the Ecology Officer, a revised BNG metric has been submitted which shows that the development would result in a 69.31% habitat unit loss and 23.42 watercourse habitat loss without proper mitigation/compensation. The habitat baseline has been agreed by the Ecology Officer. The submitted Ecological Impact Assessment outlines proposals for the creation of new habitats which will be proposed in full within the biodiversity gain plan, including the planting of trees within the wider site and a new hedgerow adjacent to the southern boundary.

The applicant has indicated that most of the new habitats will be created outside of the application site's boundaries but within the wider site within their ownership (as indicated by the blue line on the submitted Location Plan). Taking into consideration the information submitted in support of this application, including the indicative proposals, the Ecology Officer has advised they are confident that the statutory condition is capable of being discharged and no further information is required prior to the determination of the application.

Subject to the submission of, and agreement to, a Habitat Management and Monitoring Plan (HMMP), a landscape scheme and a separate enhancements strategy via condition to support the requirements of the statutory biodiversity gain plan, the LPA can be satisfied that the proposal would comply with the mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain requirement.

Archaeology:

Policy TB25 of the MDD Local Plan states that where development is likely to affect an area of high archaeological potential or an area which is likely to contain archaeological remains, the presumption is that appropriate measures shall be taken to protect remains by preservation in situ.

The application site does not fall within an identified area of high archaeological potential. However, its southern boundary is in close proximity to The Devils Highway Roman Road. Berkshire Archaeology has reviewed the proposal and advised that there

are potential archaeological implications given the site is within an area where there is considerable archaeological evidence for past human activity, whilst the surrounding fields retain elements of Medieval landscape.

As there is a potential for archaeological remains to be damaged by ground disturbance, a condition is recommended which requires the submission of, and approval of, a Written Scheme of Investigation prior to the commencement of the development, with results submitted to Berkshire Archaeology.

Conclusion:

Overall, the proposal would support the agricultural use of the land with no adverse impact on the countryside or character of the area identified. Subject to compliance with the recommended conditions, there would be no adverse harm in respect of highway safety concerns, landscape or ecology with the proposal demonstrating that a 10% Biodiversity Net Gain can be achieved following the development.

The application is therefore acceptable and is recommended for **approval** subject to conditions.

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL): When planning permission is granted for a development that is CIL liable, the Council will issue a liability notice as soon as practicable after the day on which the planning permission first permits development. Completing the assumption of liability notice is a statutory requirement to be completed for all CIL liable applications.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010): In determining this application the Council is required to have due regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief. There is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that persons with protected characteristics as identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application and there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.

RECOMMENDATION

Conditions agreed:	Yes
Recommendation:	Approve
Date:	28 August 2025
Earliest date for decision:	3 October 2024

Recommendation agreed by: (Authorised Officer)	
Date:	29/08/25

PLANNING CONSTRAINTS/STATUS

- **Countryside**
- **Landscape Character Assessment Area – Finchampstead Pastoral Sandy Lowland**
- **Thames Basin Heaths SPA Mitigation Zones – 5km Zone**
- **Badger Setts Consultation Zone**
- **SSSI Impact Risk Zone**