



WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL

TOWN & COUNTRY PLANNING ACT 1990

TOWN & COUNTRY PLANNING
(INQUIRIES PROCEDURE) (ENGLAND) RULES 2000 (As Amended)

Proof of Evidence

Joanna Carter LLB(Hons) LLM MA MRTPI

Principal Planning Officer at Wokingham Borough Council

APPELLANT: Dandara Southern Ltd & Elstree Land Ltd

APPEAL SITE: Land north of Reading Road, Arborfield

PROPOSAL: Outline application for the proposed erection of up to 111 no. dwellings with associated works, parking, landscaping, publicly accessible open space and access from reading road. (all matters reserved except for means of access).

LPA REFERENCE: 243099

PINS REFERENCE: APP/X0360/W/25/3371069

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	QUALIFICATIONS, EXPERIENCE AND SCOPE OF EVIDENCE	3
2.	INTRODUCTION	4
	Introduction.....	4
	Additional Issues	8
3.	SUMMARY	10
4.	PROCEDURAL ISSUES	14
	Updated Reports and Information.....	14
	Sequential Test.....	14
	NPPF Consultation	18
5.	PLANNING HISTORY	18
6.	PLANNING POLICY	18
	The Development Plan	18
	Relevant Planning Policy	19
7.	MAIN ISSUES	20
	Main Issue 1: Whether the proposed development is in a suitable location having regard to local and national policies in relation to the location of housing.....	20
	Main Issue 2: The effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the surrounding area.....	26
	Main Issue 3: Whether the quantum and scale of development is acceptable	36
	Main Issue 4: Whether the proposal would be sustainable development, having regard to its location and opportunities for sustainable travel.....	42
	Main Issue 5: The effect of the proposed development on the nearby watercourse with particular regard to flooding and water quality	53
	Main Issue 6: Whether any potential adverse effects on the integrity of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA (“SPA”) would be adequately mitigated.....	59
	Main Issue 7: Whether the proposal would prejudice delivery of the Loddon Valley Garden Village	63
	Main Issue 8: The effect of the proposal on irreplaceable habitats, in particular the adequacy of buffer zones around veteran trees	68
	Main Issue 9: The effect of the proposal on protected species.....	74
	Main Issue 10: BNG Assessment.....	77
8.	PLANNING BALANCE	78

Housing Land Supply	78
Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land.....	82
Public Open Space.....	83
Overall Planning Balance	84

1. QUALIFICATIONS, EXPERIENCE AND SCOPE OF EVIDENCE

- 1.1 My name is Joanna Carter and I am Principal Planning Officer in Development Management Team at Wokingham Borough Council. I have 12 years of experience working in Local Government of which 7 years working for the Local Planning Authority. I hold Bachelor of Laws (Honours) degree, Master of Laws degree in Professional Legal Practice and Master degree in Town Planning. I am also a Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute.
- 1.2 I have worked for Wokingham Borough Council's Local Planning Authority since July 2018, initially within the Strategic Development Locations team. In August 2024, I took on the role of a Principal Planning Officer within Development Management. I have been involved in a number of appeals, including public inquiries and hearings.
- 1.3 My evidence is provided in my capacity as a professional planning witness. My evidence supports the Council's reasons for refusal and represents my true and professional opinion. Although I was not the case officer for the original planning application, I am familiar generally with the local area and have undertaken a site visit on 11th December 2025.
- 1.4 The content of this PoE is true to the best of my knowledge. In submitting this Proof, I confirm that I have complied with my professional requirements as set out in the Royal Town Planning Institute Code of Professional Conduct, and I confirm the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.

2. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

- 2.1 This PoE sets out my planning evidence on behalf of Wokingham Borough Council (“WBC”). It addresses the planning matters within my professional expertise, including:
- (i) the principle of development in the context of the adopted and emerging spatial strategy,
 - (ii) the loss of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land,
 - (iii) Sequential Test matters arising from updated Environment Agency flood mapping,
 - (iv) the need for access details, modelling and design certainty at the outline stage,
 - (v) the Thames Basin Heaths SPA/SANG issue, and
 - (vi) the overall planning balance.
- 2.2 This PoE does not duplicate the Council’s Statement of Case (“SoC”) or the detailed evidence submitted by the Council’s highways (including Loddon Valley Garden Village matters), landscape, arboriculture, flood risk/drainage/water quality, ecology (including Biodiversity Net Gain) and housing land supply/affordable housing need witnesses. It should be read alongside the signed Overarching Statement of Common Ground (“SoCG”), topic specific SoCGs where relevant, and the evidence from

the Council's other professional witnesses. I rely on evidence from the following witnesses on the following matters:

- Mr Chris Hannington in relation to arboriculture and landscape matters
- Mr Alan Lewis in relation to transport matters
- Mr Duncan Fisher in relation to ecology matters
- Mr Ian Church in relation to affordable and housing land supply matters

2.3 A copy of the Officer Report is included at **CD03.02**. A copy of the Decision Notice is included at **CD03.01**. The reasons for refusal ("RfR") are set out below:

(1) Principle of development

The location of this unplanned development on a greenfield site in the countryside is unacceptable in principle due to the countryside location outside of settlement boundaries; its appreciable detachment from any recognised settlement limits and the resulting quantum of development that would be substantially out of scale with the immediate locality.

The development conflicts with the spatial objectives of the development plan and policies CP1, CP2, CP3, CP6, CP9 and CP11 of the Core Strategy, CC01, CC02 and TB21 of the MDD Local Plan, Policies IR1, IR2 and AD1 of the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan, the Borough Design Guide SPD and sections 2, 4, 8, 9, 12 and 15 of the NPPF.

(2) Quantum and scale of development

The proposed location and quantum of development would result in a development with a scale, character and density that is out of keeping with character and appearance of the area and countryside, resulting in a harmful detrimental impact on the locality, contrary to policies CP1, CP3, CP9

and CP11 of the Core Strategy, CC02, CC03 and TB21 of the MDD Local Plan, IR2, AD1 and AD3 of the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan, the Borough Design Guide SPD and sections 2, 4, 8, 9, 12 and 15 of the NPPF.

(3) Impact on the landscape and countryside

The proposed development will have a detrimental impact on the landscape and character & appearance of the area by reason of the loss of fields, paddocks and green infrastructure in the countryside and the erection of a large housing development that is out of keeping with the locality, contrary to policies CP1, CP3, CP9 and CP11 of the Core Strategy CC02, CC03 and TB21 of the MDD Local Plan, IR2, AD1 and AD3 of the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan, the Borough Design Guide SPD, the Wokingham District Landscape Character Assessment and sections 12 and 15 of the NPPF.

(4) Unsustainable location

The application site is within an unsustainable location that would not encourage a modal shift towards sustainable modes of transport, by reason of the countryside location outside of settlement limits, distances to facilities and services and poor quality of the local walking environment, contrary to policies CP1, CP2, CP3, CP6 and CP11 of the Core Strategy, Policies CC01 and CC02 of the MDD Local Plan, the Borough Design Guide SPD and section 8 & 9 of the NPPF.

(5) Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

Part of the site is grade 3a Agricultural Land and therefore the development results in the loss of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land, contrary to Core Strategy policy CP1 and section 15 of the NPPF.

(6) Impact on Main River Watercourse

Part of a main river runs along the southern boundary and insufficient information has been submitted to demonstrate that the proposed development will not adversely impact on flood risk or the watercourse, contrary to policy CC10 of the MDD Local Plan, CP1 and CP3 of the Core Strategy, AD4 of the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan and section 14 of the NPPF.

(7) Thames Basin Heath SPA

In the absence of a planning obligation to secure suitable avoidance and mitigation measures and access management monitoring arrangements, in terms that are satisfactory to the Local Planning Authority (LPA), the LPA is unable to satisfy itself that the proposals include adequate mitigation measures to prevent the proposed development from having an adverse effect on the integrity of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA, in line with the requirements of Regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 as amended and Article 6(3) of Directive 92/43/EEC. The proposal would be contrary to Policy NRM6 of the South East Plan, Policies CP8 and CP4 of the Core Strategy.

(8) Planning Obligations - Employment and Skills

In the absence of a completed legal agreement, the proposal fails to secure opportunities for training, apprenticeships and other vocational initiatives to develop local employability skills contrary to MDD Policy TB12.

(9) Planning Obligations - Affordable Housing

In the absence of a completed Legal Agreement, the scheme fails to make adequate provision for affordable housing, contrary to policy CP5 of the Core Strategy and Section 5 of the NPPF.

(10) Planning Obligations - Recreational Facilities

In the absence of a completed Legal Agreement, the proposed development fails to make adequate contributions to sport and recreational facilities, contrary to MDD Local Plan policy TB08, Core Strategy policy CP4 and sections 4 and 8 of the NPPF.

- 2.4 It is anticipated that RfR 8 to 10 could be resolved through the Appellant entering into a planning obligation, which is currently subject to negotiations between the parties.
- 2.5 RfR 7 remains unresolved. There is insufficient capacity within the Council-owned Rooks Nest Wood SANG to accommodate this scheme. No alternative solution has been put forward by the Appellant. Therefore, the Appellant has failed to demonstrate that the appeal scheme would not have adverse impacts on Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area.

Additional Issues

- 2.6 In addition to the formal Reasons for Refusal, the Council's SoC also identified four additional issues:
- (i) Prejudice to the delivery of Loddon Valley Garden Village ("LVGV");
 - (ii) Access geometry and visibility splays;
 - (iii) Impacts on irreplaceable habitat (veteran/ancient trees);
 - (iv) Protected species and BNG baseline issues.

- 2.7 The access geometry/visibility matter has now been resolved, subject to agreeing the Statement of Common Ground on transport matters, but the remaining additional issues are main issues for the purposes of the Inquiry.
- 2.8 This evidence addresses these additional issues insofar as they have planning implications. The underlying technical matters are addressed by the relevant subject-matter witnesses.

3. SUMMARY

- 3.1 The appeal proposal represents an inappropriate and unsustainable form of development that fundamentally conflicts with the adopted and emerging spatial strategy for Wokingham Borough. The site lies entirely outside any defined settlement boundary and in open countryside, and its appreciable separation from Arborfield Cross means it does not function as an edge-of-settlement location. Development of this scale and format in such a location is at odds with Core Strategy policies CP1, CP3, CP6, CP9 and CP11, with MDD Local Plan policies CC01, CC02, CC03 and TB21, and with the spatial direction of the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan. These policies collectively seek to direct growth to accessible and sustainable locations, safeguard the distinct identity of settlements and maintain the quality of the Borough's environment. None of those objectives are met by the appeal scheme.
- 3.2 The proposed quantum of up to 111 dwellings would introduce an estate of suburban character and density into an area that presently reads as part of the rural setting of Arborfield Cross and the transitional countryside between Church Lane, Reading Road and the emerging LVGV. The site's existing landscape qualities – its openness, field structure, mature hedgerows, watercourse corridor and relative tranquillity – are essential components of the local character recognised within the Landscape Character Assessment and the Green Route designation along Reading Road. The development would replace this rural landscape with a visually intrusive and urbanising form of

development, further amplified by engineered road interventions, lighting and the substantial reworking of the site's natural features. These changes would erode the area's rural identity and the sensitive countryside setting, resulting in significant harm to character and appearance.

3.3 In environmental terms, the proposal gives rise to risks that have not been acceptably resolved. Updated Environment Agency flood mapping confirms that parts of the site fall within Flood Zones 2 and 3 and the scheme does not provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the proposed access arrangements (reliant on a new culvert across the Main River) would not increase flood risk elsewhere. The constraints presented by high water table, the Main River corridor and the presence of ancient and veteran trees limit the developable area to such an extent that accommodating the proposed quantum would require design compromises that are incompatible with good place-making, NPPF and adopted design guidance. As a result, neither the Sequential Test nor the requirements of CS Policy CP1, CP3 and MDD Policy CC09 have been satisfied.

3.4 The site's location also fails to support sustainable movement. Although a bus service runs along Reading Road, the walking environment is poor, with unattractive and vehicle-dominated footways that are unsuitable for many everyday journeys. Key facilities lie well beyond distances that most residents would walk in practice. The consequences are that a development of this scale would be heavily car-dependent,

contrary to provisions of CS Policies CP1, CP2 and CP6, and the NPPF's overarching objective of steering growth to sustainable locations.

3.5 The loss of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land adds further weight against the proposal. Much of the site comprises Grade 3a land, and its permanent loss for residential development conflicts with Core Strategy Policy CP1 and national policy, which recognises the economic and environmental value of such land. The proposal also fails to demonstrate that adverse effects on the Thames Basin Heaths SPA can be avoided or mitigated. In the absence of a secured and acceptable SANG solution, the development is contrary to Policy NRM6 and the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations, and this alone provides a strong reason for refusal, disengaging the tilted balance under paragraph 11(d)(i) of the NPPF.

3.6 While the provision of market and affordable housing carries weight, it does not outweigh the breadth and significance of harm. The Council's strong historic delivery record, the progress of the emerging Local Plan Update and the substantial infrastructure-led growth planned at LVGV all demonstrate that housing needs can and will be met through a coordinated, plan-led approach rather than speculative encroachment into the countryside. Even if the tilted balance were engaged, the adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits.

3.7 For these reasons, the proposal is in clear conflict with the adopted development plan, contrary to emerging spatial strategy, inconsistent

with national planning policy and incapable of being made acceptable through conditions. It is therefore my professional view that the appeal should be dismissed.

4. PROCEDURAL ISSUES

Updated Reports and Information

- 4.1 Since the application was determined, the Appellant has submitted several updated and new documents, including the Updated Flood Risk Assessment and SUDS Statement (IEP, Rev 1, January 2026, **CD17.06**) (“2026 FRA”).
- 4.2 Other documents submitted by the Appellant include an updated Illustrative Masterplan 052403-DAN-MP04 Rev – (**CD18.11**) and Indicative Land Use Plan 052403-DAN-MP04-ILUP Rev – (**CD18.09**) and overlaid Tree Removal Plan 052403-DAN-MP04-TRP Rev – (**CD18.10**). Winter Groundwater Level Monitoring Results were all submitted (**CD17.08**). These were all submitted on 4th February 2026.
- 4.3 Since the Council’s Statement of Case and the Overarching Statement of Common Ground have been produced, the examining Inspectors of the emerging LPU have issued a Stage 2 Hearings Programme (**CD07.50**) and MIQs (**CD07.51**). The Stage 2 Hearing Sessions are scheduled to start on 17th March 2026.

Sequential Test

- 4.4 This section considers whether the Sequential Test is required in connection with the appeal scheme, in light of the updated flood risk information following the Environment Agency’s revision to the Flood Map for Planning on 25th March 2025.

- 4.5 The application was originally submitted on the basis that the site lay wholly within Flood Zone 1, but the updated mapping now shows parts of the site within Flood Zones 2 and 3. This change of factual context is confirmed in the Flood Risk & Drainage SoCG (“FSoCG”) (**CD05.07**).
- 4.6 The Appellant has undertaken monitoring of groundwater and produced its results on 4th February 2026; these show groundwater levels as high as 0.01m (1 cm) below the surface.
- 4.7 The appeal is in outline, with no fixed layout and no fixed development parameters, except for the access. The Illustrative Masterplan and Indicative Land Use Parameter Plan are, therefore, non-determinative. In this context, the NPPF requires decision-makers to assess flood risk and for the Sequential Test to be applied to individual applications where development is proposed in an area at risk of flooding.
- 4.8 Paragraph 170 of the NPPF provides the overarching principle:
- “Inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas at highest risk (whether existing or future).”*
- 4.9 Paragraph 173 of the NPPF requires decision-makers to take a sequential, risk-based approach to individual applications in any area known to be at risk now or in the future from any form of flooding.
- 4.10 Paragraph 174 sets out the aim of the Sequential Test is:
- “to steer new development to areas with the lowest risk of flooding from any source. Development should not be allocated or permitted if there are reasonably available sites appropriate for the proposed development in areas with a lower risk of flooding.”*

- 4.11 Paragraph 175 advises that the Sequential Test needs not be used where the site-specific flood risk assessment demonstrates that no built development within the site boundary would be located on an area at risk of flooding. "Built development" is defined broadly and includes for example access routes and land raising (**CD11.12**).
- 4.12 Given that the application does not fix the developable area, the decision-maker must assess the reasonable worst-case flood-risk scenario. In this case, that is that the access routes would be located within Flood Zone 2 and 3 and that the attenuation basin, which may require land raising, would be located within an area of confirmed high risk of flooding from groundwater. It is important to note that the Appellant relies on the crossing of the Main River to incorporate "*the surfaced, all-weather connections from the Appeal site to (...) Church Lane*", as set out by Mr Stevens in his evidence (**CD13.04.01**).
- 4.13 Given the sloping terrain of the site, which is drained by Main River, revisions to remove the ponds from the area at risk of flooding from groundwater would require substantial changes to the indicative layout and drainage strategy. It is not clear from the evidence that such revisions would be practical or even possible.
- 4.14 Therefore, the site-specific FRA does not demonstrate that "no built development" would be located in Flood Zones 2-3 or in areas of groundwater flood risk. The implications of this under paragraph 175 of the NPPF are that the Sequential Test must be undertaken and it was not.

- 4.15 CS Policy CP1 requires that development avoids increasing risks of or from all forms of flooding. CS Policy CP3 requires that development provides functional and safe schemes. MDD LP Policy CC09 requires that proposals must be guided to areas of lowest flood risk by applying the sequential approach taking into account flooding from all sources.
- 4.16 Based on the available evidence, the proposal does not demonstrate that there would be no built development within areas at risk of flooding. As such, a Sequential Test is required and has not been undertaken. No evidence has been submitted to demonstrate that there are no reasonably available sites appropriate for the proposed development in areas with a lower risk of flooding. The proposal therefore would be at an unacceptable risk of flooding, which conflicts with CS Policies CP1 and CP3, MDD LP Policy CC09 and Section 14 of the NPPF.
- 4.17 Whilst the submitted masterplan and land use plan are indicative only, the quantum of the proposed development is not. Moreover, the appeal site is subject to several constraints, such as Flood Zone 2 and 3, Main River, veteran and ancient trees. The proposed vehicular and emergency access points would also be fixed. It is, therefore, not clear whether the detailed drainage strategy could be secured by condition, given the constraints of the site and those elements that are fixed. Therefore, I afford this harm a very substantial weight. This is further discussed in the Planning Balance section in the context of footnote 7.

NPPF Consultation

- 4.18 This evidence is prepared on the basis of the extant NPPF (December 2024).

5. PLANNING HISTORY

- 5.1 Relevant Planning History is set out in the Overarching Statement of Common Ground (**CD05.02**).

6. PLANNING POLICY

The Development Plan

- 1.1 Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 sets out a requirement that planning applications must be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 1.2 The relevant parts of the adopted Development Plan comprise the following:
- Retained Policy NRM6 of the South East Plan,
 - Core Strategy (adopted January 2010),
 - Managing Development Delivery DPD (adopted February 2014); and
 - Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan (made April 2020) (“ABNP”).

Relevant Planning Policy

- 6.1 The relevant policies are agreed and listed in the Overarching Statement of Common Ground (**CD05.02**).

7. MAIN ISSUES

- 7.1 The following main issues have been identified in the Inspector's Post-CMC Note dated 19th January 2026.

Main Issue 1: Whether the proposed development is in a suitable location having regard to local and national policies in relation to the location of housing

- 1.3 Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 sets out a requirement that planning applications must be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 1.4 The relevant parts of the adopted Development Plan comprise the following:
- Retained Policy NRM6 of the South East Plan,
 - Core Strategy (adopted January 2010),
 - Managing Development Delivery DPD (adopted February 2014); and
 - Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan (made April 2020) ("ABNP").
- 7.2 The statutory starting point for determination is the development plan. The site is outside of settlement limits, within the countryside. The scheme is contrary to the current development plans, a matter which the Appellant acknowledges (**CD04.02** and **CD13.01**).
- 7.3 The spatial objective of the development plan is to steer new development to the most sustainable locations within the defined settlement limits, minimise impact on the environment and protect the

separate identity of settlements, as specified in the explanatory text to policy CP1 and within Policy CP11.

- 7.4 The development plan establishes a clear spatial hierarchy, directing growth to defined settlements and Strategic Development Locations. CS Policy CP9 and MDD LP Policy CC02 require development to be located within settlement limits unless specific exceptions apply (and none apply in this case). ABNP Policy AD1 reinforces this position.
- 7.5 It is an established principle¹ that there is an inherent negative corollary in permissively worded policies that set out where development should be located. Where the proposal is in a location which does not accord with types of locations specified within policies, the proposal is inconsistent with these policies and in conflict with them. The proposal, therefore, conflicts with CS Policy CP9 and ABNP Policy AD1, which is accepted by the Appellant.
- 7.6 MDD LP Policy CC02 states that proposals at the edge of settlements will only be granted where they are *within* development limits. As set out in Mr Lewis' (**CD14.05.01**) and Mr Hannington's evidence (**CD14.04**), the appeal site has no functional or visual relationship that would justify its treatment as an edge-of-settlement location.
- 7.7 The appeal site is not an edge-of-settlement location: it is located outside any defined settlement limits and physically and functionally detached

¹ Canterbury City Council v Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government [2018] EWHC 1611 (Admin)

from the nearest defined settlement of Arborfield Cross. Therefore, the appeal scheme conflicts with this policy.

- 7.8 The appeal site is not allocated in the LPU and remains in the countryside. As set out in the Council's SoC, the appeal site has been assessed as part of the preparation of the LPU - it was included in the last published Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment 2024 ("the HELAA") (**CD07.19** and **CD07.20**), which concluded that the site was detached from the settlement and did not meet the exception criteria.
- 7.9 CS Policy CP11 restricts development in the countryside other than in specified exceptions. It is a common ground between parties that none of these exceptions apply to the appeal proposal and that a conflict with CS Policy CP11 is established. The purposes of CS Policy CP11 are 1) to protect the separate identity of settlements, 2) to maintain the quality of environment and 3) to help ensure development is well located for facilities and services. The proposal conflicts with all three purposes.
- 7.10 ABNP Policy IRS1 requires that proposals outside of development limits comply with CS Policy CP11 and (a) preserve the character and appearance of the countryside and (b) do not lead to physical, visual or perceived coalescence of existing settlements. ABNP Policy IRS2 requires that proposals recognise, respect and preserve the identity and rural setting of settlements with regard to, for example, scale, form and density of development.

- 7.11 The appeal site is located to the east of rural Church Lane, which is characterised generally by linear development of large detached dwellings set within generous, deep plots. The resultant spatial arrangement is spacious and verdant, also due to presence of mature vegetation along Church Lane. Its location in the context of the LVGV is such that it provides a transition between the future new settlement, the rural (future) settlement edge and countryside beyond. It forms part of the rural setting of Arborfield Cross.
- 7.12 It is agreed by both parties that CS Policy CP11 is not complied with. Therefore, ABNP Policy IRS1, also, cannot be complied with. Moreover, the appeal scheme would fail to preserve the character and appearance of the countryside by way of introducing residential development of an estate format into a countryside, which would be further compounded by the effects of off-site highway works, as set out in the Mr Hannington's PoE. Therefore, the proposal would also conflict with limb (a) of ABNP Policy IRS1.
- 7.13 Importantly, the Appellant acknowledges in their first Planning PoE (**CD13.01** para 5.21) that the LVGV would constitute a new settlement and that the appeal scheme "*proposes that identified house meets [sic] could be addressed on the other side of that same settlement*". The Appellant goes on to state that there would be no erosion of the "physical, visual or perceptual gap between the settlements" (ibid para 5.39) because the gap towards Arborfield Cross (measuring approximately 500m between the eastern boundary of the site and the

edge of Arborfield Cross defined settlement) would remain as farmland with farm buildings.

- 7.14 As part of the appeal, however, the scheme has evolved and now includes new street lighting columns and urban engineered interventions along Reading Road. Mr Hannington explains in his PoE how lighting fundamentally alters the rural qualities of this corridor and contributes to a perception of settlement extension. Given that the proposal is outside development limits, would fail to preserve separate identity of settlements and its rural setting, the appeal scheme would conflict with ABNP Policies IRS1, IRS2 and AD1.
- 7.15 Two planning applications, forming part of LVGV allocation in the LPU, have been submitted. These now outline the intended built envelope of the new LVGV and reinforce the importance of maintaining a rural transition between Church Lane (large detached dwellings in large, deep plots) and the open countryside. Whilst the plans supporting both applications are not yet approved, they recognise the rural and agricultural character of the area to the east of Church Lane. This is an essential component of settlement identity.
- 7.16 Accordingly, the proposal would erode the distinct rural separation between Arborfield Cross and the countryside, introducing lighting, engineered works and suburban activity into an area whose existing function, as set out in Mr Hannington's evidence (**CD14.04**) – is to maintain landscape separation.

- 7.17 The proposal would introduce a suburban estate, engineering interventions, lighting and a significant change to the character of the Green Route. Mr Hannington concludes that the scheme represents “a pattern of deterioration, fragmentation, and urbanising influence”. These consequences of the proposal, together with impacts set out elsewhere in this PoE, mean that the scheme would fail to maintain the quality of the environment, conflicting with purpose 2 of CS Policy CP11.
- 7.18 Mr Lewis’ evidence (CD14.05.01) demonstrates that the appeal site would result in development whose residents would be overly reliant on car journeys, due to poor location for services and facilities and unattractive walking and cycling routes. As such, the proposal would not meet the third purpose of CS Policy CP11.
- 7.19 The Appellant advances an argument that the settlement boundaries in CS Policies CP9 and CP11 are out of date because they were aligned with the level of housing delivery, expressed in CS Policy CP17, based on South-East Plan targets and a backlog existing at that point.
- 7.20 The Inspector in Blagrove Lane appeal (**CD10.05.01**) confirmed that the overprovision of homes in comparison to the requirements set out in CS Policy CP17 would not be a reason why a conflict with CP17 arises; instead the conflict arises by virtue of the “conflict with other spatial strategy policies which give spatial application to the CP17 housing requirement”. The Inspector recognised that as the housing requirement has now increased considerably from that set out in CS Policy CP17, the spatial strategy set out in CS Policies CP9 and CP11 and MDD LP Policy

CC02 is inconsistent with the NPPF. However, the Inspector also recognised that the three purposes listed above are consistent with the aims of the Framework, notwithstanding that they frustrate the delivery of housing at the necessary level.

- 7.21 However, as set out in Mr Church's evidence, Inspectors have recognised the Council's land supply within the context of significant additional housing delivery over the plan period. The spatial strategy functioned well to deliver this over-supply of homes, therefore boosting the supply of homes, although I recognise the Council cannot currently demonstrate the necessary housing land supply. I also recognise that the LPU is at an advanced stage (**CD11.13**) as it has now been submitted and Stage 1 Hearings have now been completed and that two applications forming part of the LVGV have now been submitted. Once the LPU is adopted, the Council's housing trajectory (**CD07.33**) confirms that it will have a five-year supply of housing land against the development plan's housing requirement. As such, I afford the conflict with spatial strategy substantial weight.

Main Issue 2: The effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the surrounding area

- 7.22 This issue arises from RfR3, which identified policies concerned with protecting landscape character, preserving high-quality environments, safeguarding the integrity of rural areas at settlement edges and ensuring proposed development integrates appropriately into its setting. This issue goes to the heart of why the appeal site is not an appropriate

location for a large housing development. It concerns not only the physical change from open fields to suburban estate, but also the more subtle and enduring ways in which that change would alter Arborfield Cross' rural setting, the character of the Reading Road Green Route and the countryside transition along Church Lane.

- 7.23 The character and appearance of this area is strongly influenced by its distinctly rural qualities, the continuity of its historic field structure and the sensitive way in which the built form transitions into open countryside. The appeal site plays a defining role in this transition. It is a visually permeable, undeveloped part of countryside framed by mature hedgerows, watercourses and remnant field boundaries that collectively signal, both visually and experientially, the point at which the settlement of Arborfield Cross gives way to the wider rural landscape.
- 7.24 The appeal site comprises a series of open fields and paddocks gently rising from Reading Road/Church Lane towards open farmland to the north and east. The landform, historic field boundaries, hedgerows, drainage ditches and areas of wet grassland together create a legible rural landscape structure that is characteristic of the C1 Arborfield River Terrace and J2 Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay Landscape Character Areas ("LCAs") identified in the Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment ("WBLCA").
- 7.25 Mr Hannington explains that, while elements of the wider LCAs have experienced change and some degradation, the appeal site itself still exhibits the qualities the WBLCA seeks explicitly to conserve: it is open,

rural, and forms part of a band of countryside that maintains separation between the historic core of Arborfield, Arborfield Cross and the more extensive development to the south at Arborfield Garrison. The site is framed by mature hedgerow trees, particularly along the northern edge, Church Lane and Reading Road, and its low-lying central area contains wetland features and a main river corridor.

7.26 Reading Road, designated as a Green Route in MDD LP Policy CC03, currently provides a rural approach to Arborfield Cross, with views into the site revealing rough pasture, regenerating scrub and a layered background of hedgerow trees. The Green Route's character arises from the combination of this open rural frontage, the absence of urban highway interventions and the relative low level of lighting and signage. Mr Hannington's evidence demonstrates that, notwithstanding the presence of Walden Avenue and Greensward Lane on the opposite side of the road, the overall impression is still one of leaving Arborfield Cross and passing along the edge of open countryside with scattered enclaves of dwellings before one reaches Shinfield. As set out in Mr Hannington's PoE, the baseline against which change must be assessed is one of rural character.

7.27 To the north, Church Lane reads as a rural lane with large detached dwellings set within deeply vegetated plots. The long rear gardens of those dwellings back onto the appeal site. Although some houses have been enlarged and modernised, the main character of Church Lane as a

leafy, transitional edge between settlement and countryside has been preserved.

- 7.28 The site's visual openness, ecological richness and perceptual tranquillity are experienced from both Reading Road – designated as a Green Route – and Church Lane, where large, landscaped residential plots reflect a gentle and deliberate transition from the settlement into rural landscape, including in the LPU.
- 7.29 The Landscape SoCG ("LSoCG") confirms that Reading Road is indeed a designated Green Route and that this designation is a relevant policy context for understanding the site's sensitivity and role in local character. It also confirms that the site contains ancient and veteran trees which attract specific national policy protection. These points reinforce the importance of understanding the site not merely as open land, but as a component of a rural corridor.
- 7.30 It is within this context that the proposed development must be understood. The introduction of a residential estate of 111 dwellings, along with the associated engineered access works and lighting, would fundamentally alter the landscape's established character. The Appellant's LVIA/LVA seeks to portray the site as partly enclosed and of only local landscape value, however, the SoCG records clear disagreement as to whether the Appellant's LVA has appropriately followed GLVIA3 and whether its approach to value and sensitivity is justified. Mr Hannington's analysis challenges these points, setting out

that the site's perceptual and functional role in the rural landscape is stronger than suggested in the Appellant's baseline.

7.31 The LSoCG further notes that the Appellant has not provided an assessment of the landscape and visual effects of the access works and off-site highway interventions, including lighting columns, tree removal and pedestrian improvements. This absence is not immaterial. These interventions are an integral part of the scheme and would materially contribute to its urbanising effect – particularly along the Green Route – yet their effects are left largely unexamined in the Appellant's assessment.

7.32 I accept, as does Mr Hannington, that the site is not within a designated "Valued Landscape" in NPPF terms, and that the condition of parts of the wider LCAs is recorded as moderate rather than high. However, that is not determinative. The WBLCA still identifies a clear strategy "*to conserve and enhance the remaining rural character of the landscape*" and "*retain the open and rural character of the landscape between settlements*". The appeal site contributes to those objectives – it is not redundant. Its openness, hydrology, hedgerows and framing trees provide a coherent rural setting to Arborfield Cross and the fact that parts of it are grazed by horses does not undermine this function.

7.33 The Appellant argues that the site forms part of a "widely settled" context with rural character being of local value only and that the landscape is in moderate to poor condition. Mrs Brockhurst seeks to demonstrate in her evidence (**CD13.03.01** and **CD13.02.02**) that the effects will be very

much localised, with the change on Reading Road largely confined to access points, consistent with existing glimpses of housing north of the road. In Mrs Brockhurst's view, the green infrastructure proposed as part of the scheme would "enhance" landscape character by introducing SuDS features, open space and tree planting.

7.34 Mr Hannington's evidence reaches a different conclusion. Whilst he accepts that the WBLCA records pressures and degradation in parts of the LCAs, he emphasises that local value still matters where a landscape performs important spatial and perceptual functions. This is the case here, where the landscape maintains the countryside setting of Arborfield Cross and forms part of the open land between the LVGV allocation and existing defined settlements.

7.35 In my view, the Appellant's attempt to characterise the site as ordinary, degraded countryside underplays those functions. The fact that some hedgerows are gappy, that there are low-voltage wires or that the site is used for grazing, does not mean the landscape has ceased to be rural or has become appropriate for large-scale estate development. The WBLCA is very clear that, even in LCAs where condition is "moderate", the strategy is to conserve and enhance openness, hedgerows, wetland, rural lanes and separation between settlements – not to incrementally erode them.

7.36 The Appellant expresses criticism of the WBLCA by indicating it is insufficiently focussed to provide an assessment of the appeal site. It is important to highlight that the purpose of the WBLCA is to provide a

framework to guide planning and other decisions. Mr Hannington has carefully identified those aspects of the LCA directly relevant to the site and explains how the proposal conflicts with these.

7.37 Turning to the Appellant's view that the J2 LCA has a settled character, Mr Hannington does not dispute that there is development present within the wider area. But the presence of development, including residential dwellings, does not mean that every field within that area can be developed for housing. The important question to answer is how this field reads in relation to its immediate context. Mr Hannington's evidence shows that when one travels along Reading Road or Church Lane, the impression is still of a rural area, not of a continuous built-up corridor. The fields north of Reading Road are especially important in this regard. They represent a large portion of the piece of countryside between Arborfield Cross and the LVGV allocation and provide a visual and perceptual pause between built areas.

7.38 The Appellant places significant reliance on the Zone of Theoretical Visibility ("ZTV") and Accurate Visual Representations ("AVRs") to show that visual change is confined and acceptable. Those images are undoubtedly technically competent; however, as recognised by Mr Hannington, they fail to capture some of the elements of the scheme, for example the main access arrangement or the additional tree removal now proposed along Reading Road.

7.39 The ZTV confirms, as one would expect in this topography, that the main visual influence is experienced from the surrounding roads and

properties within several hundred metres. This more enclosed ZTF does not make the effects inconsequential. It identifies where these effects would be most strongly felt: along Reading Road (which is the Green Route) and from users approaching or exiting Arborfield Cross, from Church Lane and the rear of properties whose gardens back onto the site, and from the existing footway/PRoW network. These are the receptors whose experience of the landscape is most directly affected.

7.40 The AVRs from Reading Road show clearly that the development would introduce visible built form set behind retained trees (where these are in fact retained) and new planting, but also that the composition of views would change from glimpses of open rural landscape to glimpses of a formalised residential estate and this change in character would remain evident. The Green Route would no longer read as passing alongside open countryside punctuated by farmsteads; it would read as passing between two built-up areas. That is a significant adverse change, even if some of it is partially screened by planting.

7.41 The AVRs also do not capture the full extent of change at night. As Mr Hannington indicates, the introduction of street lighting, lit windows, and increased vehicular activity would transform the currently dark, comparatively tranquil nature of this stretch of Reading Road. It is precisely this kind of urbanising effect that Policy CC03 and the WBLCA seek to avoid.

7.42 MDD LP Policy CC03 does not require simply that a development proposes to plant trees and dig SuDS ponds. It requires that

development should protect and enhance existing green infrastructure networks and, crucially, must not result in the loss, fragmentation or isolation of that network. The appeal scheme would do exactly that by removing a large area of open countryside that currently functions as part of the Borough's landscape pattern. The Appellant places considerable emphasis on the green infrastructure package and claims that the proposals "enhance" the landscape, citing additional tree planting, SuDS features, play space and multi-functional open space. As explained by Mr Hannington, mitigation cannot replicate the essential quality being lost: an open rural fieldscape forming a countryside character. SuDS ponds, new paths and amenity planting are characteristic of suburban development and would not restore the area's pre-existing countryside character.

7.43 The character and appearance harm I have described translates directly into policy conflict. Core Strategy Policy CP1 requires that development maintain or enhance the high quality of the environment. The effect here is the opposite: there is a clear downgrading of environmental quality through the loss of open fields, urbanisation of the Green Route and disruption of the settlement-countryside relationship.

7.44 CS Policy CP3 requires that development be of an appropriate scale, mass, layout and character to the area and have no detrimental impact upon important landscape features. The appeal proposal fails on both counts. The quantum of 111 dwellings on this tightly constrained, rural site forces an intensity of form and activity that is inherently at odds with

the local context, and the resulting massing and layout cannot be said to preserve the existing landscape structure identified by Mr Hannington.

7.45 CS Policy CP11 protects the separate identity of settlements and the quality of the countryside. While physical coalescence is a separate issue, the introduction of a suburban estate into this field would erode the rural character that currently distinguishes Arborfield Cross from LVGV and the wider area.

7.46 MDD Policies CC02 and TB21 reinforce these principles by restricting development outside limits and demanding that proposals respect and enhance the landscape character as set out in the WBLCA. MDD LP Policy CC03 specifically requires protection of Green Routes and green infrastructure networks. For the reasons above, the proposal fails each of these tests.

7.47 The Arborfield & Barkham Neighbourhood Plan is also relevant. Policies IRS1 and IRS2 require preservation of settlement separation and careful respect for the rural setting of settlements. Policy AD1 directs new development to within designated limits. The appeal scheme is directly contrary to these policies because it introduces a large urban form into a countryside location, thereby undermining the very rural setting that the ABNP was designed to protect.

7.48 I remain firmly of the view that the proposal would cause substantial harm to the character and appearance of the area. It would urbanise the Reading Road Green Route, compromise the rural character of the area and conflict with the landscape objectives in the WBLCA. The Appellant's

misplaced suggestions that the landscape is of low, local value and that GI measures amount to “enhancement” do not alter the fact that this is the wrong place for an urbanising development of this nature.

- 7.49 The development is therefore in clear conflict with CS Policies CP1, CP3, CP11 and CP9, MDD Policies CC02, CC03 and TB21, and ABNP Policies IRS1, IRS2 and AD1, as well as Sections 12 and 15 of the NPPF. This conflict should, in my professional opinion, attract substantial weight in the overall planning balance.

Main Issue 3: Whether the quantum and scale of development is acceptable

- 7.50 The question of whether the site can appropriately accommodate the quantum and scale of the development proposed is fundamental to the determination of this appeal. Although the application is in outline form, with matters of layout, scale and appearance reserved, the Appellant seeks approval for a fixed quantum of 111 dwellings (up to), and the Council must therefore assess whether that amount of development can be acceptably integrated within the site given its defining physical, environmental and spatial characteristics.

- 7.51 Paragraph 11 of the PPG (Design: Process and Tools) recognises:

Applications for outline planning permission seek to establish whether the scale and nature of a proposed development would be acceptable before fully detailed proposals are put forward. However, design is often considered at this stage in order to assist community engagement, inform an environmental impact assessment or design and access statement (where required) and provide a framework for the preparation and submission of reserved matters proposals.

(...)

Design quality cannot be achieved through an outline planning application alone. Outline planning applications allow fewer details about the proposal to be submitted than a full planning application, but can include design principles where these are fundamental to decision making

- 7.52 It is, therefore, clear that outline applications must nevertheless demonstrate that the amount and nature of development proposed can be satisfactorily accommodated within the site's constraints; outline applications must provide a robust foundation for later reserved matters proposals.
- 7.53 In my view, and drawing from Mr Hannington's evidence, the site is not capable of accommodating 111 dwellings without generating clear and significant planning harm. The proposal's quantum and resulting development footprint would conflict with the established rural character, the pattern and density of surrounding development and the essential functioning of this land as part of the countryside.
- 7.54 As set out elsewhere within this proof, the site is subject to several environmental constraints, including Flood Zones 2 and 3, high risk of flooding from surface water (which the Appellant proposes to mitigate by delivering a detention basin on-site, in addition to an attenuation basin required to attenuate surface water run-off) and from groundwater, the Main River corridor, veteran and ancient trees. Taken together, these constraints considerably reduce the land that can reasonably be developed, notwithstanding the indicative nature of the Land Use Parameter Plan. Taken together, these factors mean that the site cannot

absorb the proposed quantum in a manner that would result in a well-designed, contextually appropriate form of development.

7.55 Mr Hannington explains in his PoE that the proposed quantum and scale would result in a development of a suburban form and density that is out of keeping with the low-density rural pattern of development in this area and would fundamentally affect the hamlet's setting and morphology.

7.56 I acknowledge that the Indicative Land Use Parameter Plan has been updated (**CD18.09**) to address some of the concerns raised by Mr Hannington. Whilst it did not do so successfully, it shows that the developable area has shrunk in places and not expanded elsewhere. This demonstrates that the developable area of the site is not capable of being enlarged without causing further impacts not assessed as part of this process.

7.57 Mr Hannington's evidence indicates that the landscape capacity of the site is low. Mr Hannington explains that the site forms part of an established rural area containing a complex of field boundaries, wetland features, hedgerow trees and a watercourse that contribute meaningfully to local character and the wider green infrastructure network. In his view, the introduction of dense suburban housing of the scale proposed would cause a major adverse effect on the rural landscape character, with significant encroachment into the countryside and urbanisation of the Reading Road Green Route. This is not an area in which landscape can absorb new built form, including quantum proposed, without materially altering its character.

- 7.58 In terms of physical constraints, the presence of the Main River running north-south through the western portion of the site, and the updated flood mapping published by the Environment Agency in 2025, are of particular importance. These updates show that parts of the land now fall within Flood Zones 2 and 3, contrary to the situation when the application was submitted. Mrs Taylor confirms in her evidence that this triangular area to the west of the Main River would be utilised for green infrastructure, while Mr Stevens confirms this area is to perform one more additional function the Appellant relies on: it is to incorporate “the surfaced, all-weather connections from the Appeal site to (...) Church Lane” **(CD13.04.01)**. I note means of access are before the Inspector for approval. It is clear that due to the constraints present (and these too include veteran trees), there is limited scope to deliver attenuation or detention basins within the triangular part of the site.
- 7.59 In addition to the watercourse and flood zones, the presence of several ancient and veteran trees, including those located towards the eastern and northern parts of the site, significantly limits the areas available for development without resulting in deterioration of irreplaceable habitat. Buffer zones around these features, along with root protection areas, create further constraints, and, as set out in Mr Hannington’s evidence are not areas where intensification of use should take place.
- 7.60 The illustrative plans do not currently demonstrate that the necessary on-site provision of POS could be achieved without it encroaching into the buffer zones of veteran tree(s).

- 7.61 Taken together, when the area of flood risk and strategy to mitigate existing flood risk, the Main River corridor, the wide riparian buffer, the areas constrained by ancient and veteran trees, and the policy requirements in relation to open space, are properly incorporated into the layout, the realistic developable envelope would be materially insufficient to accommodate 111 dwellings in a form that would maintain the prevailing character of the area, respect landscape sensitivities or provide adequate space for well-designed public realm, drainage and flood risk mitigation measures and open space.
- 7.62 By contrast, Mrs Taylor's evidence seeks to argue that the quantum of development is achievable, relying heavily on the illustrative masterplan. However, these illustrative plans do not reflect the significant environmental and spatial constraints identified in the technical evidence. Indeed, the Appellant's Landscape PoE seeks to minimise the importance of these site constraints. In my view, the Appellant's position gives insufficient weight to the site's role in maintaining local landscape character and setting and overstates the landscape capacity of the site and the ability of green infrastructure, SuDS and planting to overcome the site's limitations.
- 7.63 In terms of planning policy, CS Policies CP1, CP3, CP9 and CP11, and ABNP Policies IRS1 and AD1 set clear expectations regarding the scale, form and location of development. Policy CP3 requires development to maintain or enhance the quality of the environment, and to be of a scale, design and character in keeping with the area. The quantum proposed

significantly exceeds what could reasonably be accommodated within a rural settlement pattern characterised by low-density dwellings and expansive landscaped plots. Similarly, MDD LP Policy CC02 requires development at settlement edges to respect transitions between built-up areas and open countryside, which is also echoed in ABNP Policy IRS2.

7.64 The appeal proposal does not achieve this, as outlined in Mr Hannington's PoE: the scale of the proposal is disproportionate and its density is fundamentally at odds with the prevailing morphology of nearby clusters of built form (i.e. the historic village of Arborfield), resulting in an incongruous and harmful intervention. The indicative layout already relies on maisonettes and detached dwellings arranged in tight spatial relationships to achieve the proposed quantum. I note that the layout is constrained by the proposed quantum, fixed access and the inherent site constraints. This means the negative aspects of the scheme cannot be resolved at a later stage.

7.65 While Mrs Taylor acknowledges that a relatively high density can be acceptable where it contributes to the efficient use of land, paragraph 129 of the NPPF makes it clear that density cannot be considered in isolation. The NPPF requires decision-makers to take account of the capacity of local infrastructure and services, the scope for further improvement, and the prevailing character and setting of the area. A development that fails to respect the character of the area, including spacing and pattern of development, does not become acceptable simply because it represents efficient land use. In this case, the proposal would

represent a dense, inward-looking enclave unrelated to the looser, rural character of its surroundings; it would appear imposed rather than integrated. For these reasons, the mere assertion that land should be used efficiently does not overcome the evident harm arising from inserting a dense form of development into an area landscape capacity cannot accommodate.

- 7.66 I, therefore, conclude the proposed quantum and scale cannot be delivered without resulting in harm to the character and appearance of the area, would conflict with the policies set out above and Sections 11 and 15 of the NPPF. This harm attracts significant weight.

Main Issue 4: Whether the proposal would be sustainable development, having regard to its location and opportunities for sustainable travel

- 7.67 The Development Plan establishes a deliberate spatial strategy which directs growth to locations that are, or can be, made sustainable. CS Policy CP1 requires that proposals demonstrate how they support opportunities for reducing the need to travel, particularly by private car. CS Policy CP2 requires that proposals contribute to the provision of sustainable and inclusive communities by meeting e.g. the requirements of ageing population, children and people with special needs. CS Policy CP3 sets out the general principles for development, which include provision of accessible and safe schemes. CS Policy CP6 requires development to provide for sustainable forms of transport to allow choice, be located where there are or will be at the time of development

choices in the mode of transport available and which minimise the distance people need to travel, improve the existing transport infrastructure, provide appropriate parking, mitigate any adverse effects upon transport network, enhance road safety and do not cause highway problems or lead to traffic-related environmental problems. CS Policy CP11 restrict development in the countryside to prevent proliferation of development in areas not well located for services and facilities.

7.68 The overarching framework for sustainable development in the Borough, set out in CS Policy CP1, requires that proposals support opportunities for reducing the need to travel, particularly by private car. This goes beyond demonstrating that some non-car modes of travel exists - instead, proposals must positively support opportunities to both reduce the need to travel *and* reliance on private car journeys.

7.69 The Appellant contends that this requirement is satisfied because a range of facilities are said to be within acceptable walking or cycling distances (**CD01.10**), the site is in close proximity to bus stops served by Leopard 3 service and the proposed off-site works (widened footways, new crossings, bus stop upgrades, additional street lighting) and Travel Plan would improve conditions and encourage modal shift (**CD13.04.01**). It is the Appellant's view that the appeal scheme would meet requirements of CS Policy CP1.

7.70 The appeal site is outside development limits, in the countryside, and appreciably detached from the nearest defined settlement of Arborfield Cross. Arborfield village is not a cohesive settlement itself - instead,

there are scattered groups of linear development without the range of day-to-day services that would support sustainable patterns of travel. Therefore, the pattern of development is not such as to reduce the need to travel by car in practice.

7.71 I recognise that several facilities would be within 1km-1.4km distance from the site. However, as set out in Mr Lewis' PoE, it is important to consider actual walking behaviour. While typical "walkable" thresholds in Manual for Streets, National Design Guide and CIHT guidance refer to up to 800m as a reasonable 10 minute walk for most people, Mr Lewis' evidence shows that, using NTS data, the majority of people only walk around 350-400 m for everyday journeys; 1.0-1.4 km is the upper limit for walk by children to or from school, and it is in excess of what most residents will realistically walk when dropping off/picking up from school or when undertaking return journey to/from a shop.

7.72 Against this behavioural background, it is of note that only a small number of facilities listed by the Appellant falls within the 800m distance from the site. Key everyday destinations, such as primary school, convenience shops, doctors' surgery and employment areas, are typically located between 1-3km from the site. The transport evidence therefore indicates that, despite the theoretical walk times, a large proportion of trips will in practice be made by car, not on foot. That is the opposite of "reducing the need to travel, particularly by car" as envisaged by CS Policy CP1.

- 7.73 CS Policy CP1 does not just look at distance - it requires schemes to be attractive, functional, accessible and safe. As outlined in Mr Lewis' evidence, the only continuous footway to (limited) facilities within Arborfield Cross is a (circa 1.5 m) path on the southern side of Reading Road, directly adjacent to a carriageway where measured 85th percentile speeds are around 40 mph, despite the existing 30 mph limit. This route is largely unlit, lacks safe crossing points, surveillance and has sections narrowed further by overgrown vegetation.
- 7.74 Although the Appellant now offers some improvements (widened footway, additional lighting, uncontrolled crossings), those works will still leave pedestrians walking immediately adjacent to a busy bus route in a rural setting. As set out in Mr Lewis' evidence, these proposals would fail to help to connect the appeal site to a broader, coherent, continuous active travel network serving a full range of destinations; they would not deliver a reduction in the need to travel by car.
- 7.75 As Mr Lewis concludes, even with improvements, the environment is not sufficiently safe, attractive or convenient to deliver more than marginal changes in behaviour.
- 7.76 Turning to accessibility of services and facilities by public transport, the Appellant places heavy reliance on the Leopard 3 bus service, which, I acknowledge, meets the definition of "good service" within the meaning of CS Policy CP6.
- 7.77 Mr Lewis' PoE acknowledges this and goes on to explain that while the Leopard 3 offers reasonable regional connectivity, it primarily serves

longer distance or higher order trips (Reading, Wokingham, rail hubs). For many local convenience, school, health and leisure trips, residents are very likely to continue using the private car because the bus journey time is disproportionate relative to the short trip distance. In other words, the bus service does not materially reduce the need to travel by car for the day-to-day trips that generate most traffic.

7.78 Overall, the appeal site's location and detachment from a full range of everyday services means that future residents will need to make frequent journeys for basic needs. Moreover, the quality and length of walking and cycling routes, and the evidence on typical walking behaviour, indicate that most such trips will be made by car, despite the presence of a bus service. I acknowledge that the Appellant's mitigation package may marginally improve conditions, but it does not change the fundamental concern that this is a car dependent, rural location.

7.79 The development therefore does not "demonstrate how [it] support[s] opportunities for reducing the need to travel, particularly by private car", as required by CS Policy CP1(11), nor does it sit comfortably with CP1's wider expectations on attractive, accessible and safe environments.

7.80 I acknowledge that whilst the Appellant's Highways PoE does not seek to rely on the infrastructure yet to be secured through LVGV proposals, Ms Taylor's PoE seeks to argue (**CD13.01** para 1.28, 5.20) that the wider area will, in time, become more accessible. However, none of this infrastructure exists today, nor is any part of LVGV committed, occupied or in a position to alter existing travel patterns.

- 7.81 As set out in Mr Hannington’s evidence, the emerging LPU evidence base demonstrates that LVGV requires delivery of large-scale transport (including significant A327 corridor) interventions. The Appellant’s SoC itself highlights the cost of this infrastructure (**CD04.02** para 4.17). Indeed, the issue of the risks speculative development in close proximity to the LVGV poses to the LPU is explored elsewhere in this evidence and in Mr Lewis’ PoE.
- 7.82 The Appellant clearly relies on the detailed infrastructure provision of LVGV (**CD13.01**). In doing so, it is clear the Appellant relies on the masterplan submitted with the application 252498, which is currently under consideration and yet to be approved. They are relying on specific infrastructure which is yet to be secured through planning permission. Most importantly, Ms Taylor concludes these elements of infrastructure (new district centre, schools) would be “*within close walking distance of the site*”. At present, there is no evidence that the services and facilities the Appellant relies on would be within acceptable walking distance as set out in Mr Lewis’ PoE. Therefore, the Appellant’s reliance on the future LVGV to improve the locational sustainability of the appeal site is misplaced. The LVGV infrastructure is neither committed nor built, and subject to phasing.
- 7.83 Turning to CS Policy CP2, it seeks to support inclusive communities. CS Policy CP3 is a broad policy that sets out principles for development and requires that the proposals deliver functional, safe and accessible schemes. As already set out above, the walking environment to the

nearest primary school is along Reading Road with measured speeds of approximately 40 mph. Due to the narrow footways, lack of surveillance or lighting, this provides for an unattractive environment for primary-school age children. Similarly, elderly residents or those with reduced mobility would not walk the distance of in excess of 1km for everyday needs. As it stands, Mr Lewis' evidence demonstrates that the footway environment attractive.

- 7.84 I acknowledge the Appellant proposes a package of works to the two bus stops on Reading Road (adjacent to Walden Avenue), including raised accessible kerbs ("bus boarders") and I recognise the proposals would undoubtedly improve the quality of travel to bus stop and the boarding buses for mobility impaired passengers or those travelling with a pushchair. This is subject to those works being appropriately secured.
- 7.85 The proposed scale of development, up to 111 units, would introduce a large, car-dependent development within countryside. As already set out above, whilst some of the interventions proposed by the Appellant are positive, they do not remedy the fundamental concerns that the proposal would result in an unsafe, unattractive and vehicle-dominated walking environment.
- 7.86 Turning to CS Policy CP6, I acknowledge, as set out earlier, that the bus stops are located directly adjacent to the appeal site and that the Appellant's proposed upgrades would improve boarding conditions and enhance the accessibility of the bus stops.

- 7.87 However, CP6 requires more than the presence of a bus service or accessible boarding facilities. It requires that development provides for sustainable transport to allow realistic modal choice for everyday trips.
- 7.88 As already set out above, the quality, safety and attractiveness of the walking environment along Reading Road is a constraint on walking and cycling for most residents. Walking distances to most everyday services fall beyond typical behaviour thresholds identified in Mr Lewis' PoE.
- 7.89 While the bus stops themselves are easy to reach from the site, this does not make the location genuinely sustainable for everyday needs. Most short, local trips (such as the school run, shopping, nursery or accessing community facilities) are not made by bus in practice. These journeys begin and end within the immediate local area, but the walking environment is so poor and distances sufficiently long that residents will overwhelmingly make these trips by car rather than on foot or by cycle. The bus therefore does not materially reduce car use for the types of journeys that generate the majority of daily traffic. Accordingly, the appeal site does not provide genuine modal choice for everyday journeys, contrary to limb (a) of CS Policy CP6.
- 7.90 As already established, the appeal site is outside development limits, detached from a full range of everyday services and served by walking and cycling environment that is unsafe and unattractive. This means that sustainable travel choices are not and will not realistically be available at the time the development would be occupied. Mr Lewis' evidence highlights that most of day-to-day journeys will be undertaken by car -

the pattern of travel will not, therefore, be minimised. Even with the proposed improvements and contributions, the environment is not sufficiently safe or convenient to deliver more than marginal behavioural change. The site therefore fails both limbs of CP6(b).

7.91 I recognise that the Appellant proposes a series of off-site works along Reading Road, including localised footway widening, vegetation clearance, additional street lighting, and the introduction of two uncontrolled crossing points. The scheme also includes enhancements to both bus stops adjacent to Walden Avenue, comprising raised accessible kerbs, improved shelters, tactile paving and enlarged waiting areas. A financial contribution towards the ongoing viability of the Leopard 3 bus service would also be secured. These measures represent improvements and I acknowledge that they would make the bus stops themselves more accessible for people with mobility impairments or those travelling with pushchairs.

7.92 However, CS Policy CP6(c) requires development to enhance facilities for pedestrians and cyclists in a manner that materially improves sustainable travel opportunities. As set out in Mr Lewis' PoE, the Appellant's measures are incremental and do not overcome the fundamental constraint: that the only continuous pedestrian route between the site and Arborfield Cross remains a narrow, vehicle-dominated footway directly adjacent to a corridor with recorded 85th percentile speeds of around 40 mph. The route lacks passive surveillance and provides no protected cycle infrastructure. These

conditions, even if improved through the provision of street lighting and footway widening, significantly limit the attractiveness and practicality of walking or cycling for the majority of everyday trips.

- 7.93 Accordingly, while the Appellant's measures provide some localised benefits and are acknowledged as such, they do not deliver the level of pedestrian and cycle infrastructure enhancement envisaged by limb (c) CS Policy CP6.
- 7.94 As shown in Mr Lewis' PoE, the majority of trips would be undertaken by car, therefore, the appeal scheme would generate many short-distance car trips, which would add pressure to the local network by virtue of the site's unsustainable location. The sensitivity of the A327 corridor, which accommodates both strategic and local movements, is evidenced in Mr Lewis' PoE. Whilst Mr Lewis identifies a range of opportunities to address this impact, these have not been pursued to date by the Appellant. The proposed improvements (Reading Road footway, uncontrolled crossings, introduction of lighting columns along Reading Road and bus service improvements) would not mitigate the transport impacts arising from the car-dependence.
- 7.95 Mr Lewis' PoE makes clear that the proposal fails limb (e) of CS Policy CP6 because the Appellant has assessed the scheme against paragraph 116 of the NPPF "severe impact" test rather than the correct local plan requirement. CP6(e) requires that any adverse effects on the local or strategic network must be mitigated. Mr Lewis explains that the proposal would generate frequent car-borne trips owing to its unsustainable

location, thereby adding unmitigated pressure to the sensitive A327/Reading Road corridor and adversely affecting active travel and community severance in Shinfield. The Appellant's limited off-site works do not address these impacts. As the harm arises from car-dependency and cannot be mitigated through minor infrastructure works, the development conflicts with limb (e) of CS Policy CP6.

- 7.96 In summary, the appeal scheme does not represent sustainable development in locational or transport terms. The site is located outside development limits, within the countryside, and is appreciably detached from a cohesive settlement or a full range of everyday facilities. As set out in Mr Lewis' PoE, most key destinations lie well beyond typical walking behaviour thresholds and, even with the Appellant's proposed works walking and cycling would remain unattractive and unsuitable for many users, resulting in most everyday trips being made by car. The proposal therefore fails to support opportunities to reduce the need to travel by private car, fails to provide inclusive and safe access to facilities for children, older people and those with reduced mobility, and fails to deliver a functional or accessible movement environment. The appeal scheme does not provide realistic modal choice for everyday trips nor is it located where sustainable travel choices will reasonably be available at the time of development. The proposal does not materially enhance pedestrian or cycle infrastructure and does not mitigate the adverse transport effects arising from its inherently car-dependent location.

7.97 CS Policy CP11 provides important additional context: its supporting text explains that preventing the proliferation of development outside settlement limits is necessary because such areas are “not generally well located for facilities and services”. The Appellant relies on the future LVGV infrastructure, but this is a misconceived approach as none of that infrastructure is currently committed, and, therefore, capable of altering current travel patterns. I recognise the site would be located in close proximity to the future LVGV allocation boundary, however, the location of services and facilities in terms of walking distances to/from site is not certain at this stage. Taken together, the evidence shows that the proposal would introduce a substantial, car-dependent development into the countryside, which is identified as unsuitable for sustainable access to facilities. It would be contrary to policies set out above and Sections 8 and 9 of the NPPF. I conclude that the negative impacts are significant and give them moderate weight in the planning balance.

Main Issue 5: The effect of the proposed development on the nearby watercourse with particular regard to flooding and water quality

7.98 Reason for Refusal 6 states that the proposal would be contrary to MDD LP Policy CC10. However, having reviewed the MDD LP, I consider that the correct policy is CC09 rather than CC10. The reason for this is that CC09 is the policy that deals with the location of development in relation to flood risk, the quality of Flood Risk Assessments (“FRA”) and which imposes the requirement not to increase flood risk elsewhere (which is

the substance of RfR6). Whereas CC10 focuses primarily on how the surface water should be managed. It is therefore my view that the reference to CC10 in Reason for Refusal 6 is a drafting error and should properly have referred to CC09.

7.99 This correction does not prejudice the Appellant's case as the flood risk and the impact of the development on the Main River have always been identified as a main issue by both parties. Accordingly, both the substance of the Council's concerns and the Appellant's evidence have consistently addressed the correct flood-risk issues. Substituting CC09 for CC10 in RfR 6 merely aligns the reason with the correct Local Plan policy basis; it does not alter the factual or technical case either party is advancing.

7.100 A Main River traverses the western part of the appeal site and then runs along its southern boundary, parallel to Reading Road.

7.101 The original FRA (2024 FRA) (**CD01.11**) was prepared at a time when the Environment Agency's Flood Map for Planning showed the site as lying wholly in Flood Zone 1; it therefore treated fluvial flood risk as "low". The 2024 FRA identified that the proposed access would require culverting of the main river.

7.102 In March 2025, the EA updated the Flood Map for Planning; the site is now shown as lying partly within Flood Zones 2 and 3. The Council determined the application on the basis of the site lying wholly within Flood Zone 1.

- 7.103 The EA's December 2025 letter to the Council (**CD17.07.04**) submitted following the submission of the appeal, explains that the 2024 FRA does not comply with the PPG (**CD17.10**) requirements because it did not use the most up to date data to assess flood risk on site, did not adequately assess the effect of a range of flooding events (including extreme events) and did not demonstrate that flood risk would not be increased elsewhere.
- 7.104 On that basis, the EA concluded that the 2024 FRA did not comply with the PPG requirements for site specific FRAs and objected accordingly.
- 7.105 In response, the Appellant produced an updated FRA ("2026 FRA"), which accepts that parts of the site are now in Flood Zones 2 and 3. It argues that all built development, access roads and land raising can be located within Flood Zone 1 and only a potential pedestrian footbridge to western green space would be within Flood Zones 2/3. Consequently, the Appellant argues that Sequential Test and Exception Test are not required.
- 7.106 CS Policy CP1 requires, amongst other things, that development avoids increasing risks of or from all forms of flooding and, where possible reduce such risks. CS Policy CP3 requires that development has no detrimental impact on watercourses. MDD LP Policy CC09 requires that proposals do not increase flood risk on site or elsewhere. ABNP Policy AD4 requires new development to take full account of local flood risk, demonstrate that local drainage and watercourses will not be adversely

affected and incorporate measures that appropriately address site-specific flood and drainage issues, including main rivers.

7.107 The 2026 FRA acknowledges that the existing access currently crosses the main river via culverts and that the proposed access will cross the main river at a new location. It also confirms that detailed hydraulic modelling will be required to support a Flood Permit Application.

7.108 However, the 2026 FRA does not include any detailed culvert design or any hydraulic modelling outputs. The EA has confirmed that without this information it cannot be certain that flood risk will not be increased elsewhere. Moreover, the EA stated (**CD17.07.04**) they oppose new culverts; where one is proposed, the Appellant should demonstrate that the culverting is both necessary and the only reasonable and practicable alternative and the culvert should be restricted to the minimum necessary to meet the Appellant's objective. The EA also confirmed that it would be unlikely to grant a Flood Risk Activity Permit ("FRAP") for the proposal as it currently stands. Paragraph 54 of the PPG (**CD17.10**) advises that FRAP may be required *in addition to planning permission* where development involves activity within 8m of a riverbank of a non-tidal main river.

7.109 In their email to the EA (**CD17.07.05**), the Appellant confirmed that a clear span bridge was now being proposed and requested the EA's fluvial model for the watercourse to understand the flood level and the soffit height of the bridge it necessitates, among other things.

- 7.110 The EA confirmed in their response (**CD17.07.02**) that they did not hold detailed modelling for this location and that the Appellant would need to undertake their own modelling to determine the soffit levels. Whilst the EA welcomed the proposal to deliver access via a clear span bridge rather than culvert, it confirmed that that their concern remained because there was insufficient information submitted to determine the flood risk, nature conservation and ecology implications of the proposed access arrangement. The EA advised that it would require detailed flood modelling to be submitted alongside plans for the design of the bridge (to be informed by flood modelling).
- 7.111 Subsequently, the Appellant confirmed (**CD17.09**) to the Council and the Inspector that they are not proposing a clear span bridge (as set out above); instead, the proposed access would be delivered via a culvert. At the time of writing of this PoE, no further details of the proposed culvert have been submitted.
- 7.112 Paragraph 067 of the PPG states *“Proposals to introduce new culverting or to build on top of existing culverting are likely to have adverse impacts on flood risk, ecology, human health and safety and amenity whilst increasing maintenance costs and hindering future options to restore the watercourse. Such proposals are likely to run contrary to natural flood management objectives and the objectives of River Basin Management Plans.”*
- 7.113 The Appellant maintains that culvert details and hydraulic modelling would be provided to the EA as part a Flood Permit Application. As such,

where PPG clearly states that culvers are likely to have adverse impacts on flood risk among other things, there is no information submitted by the Appellant to demonstrate the proposal would not results in such adverse impacts.

7.114 However, the proposed main access is not reserved - it is a fixed component that the Appellant seeks approval for. Whether or not detailed planning permission can be granted for access depends on the level of information provided. In this case, it has not been demonstrated whether or not the proposed access would increase flood risk; the details of the required width and design of the culvert have not been provided; flood modelling to demonstrate the proposed access arrangement would not increase flood risk elsewhere has also not been provided. Therefore, the Inspector cannot be satisfied that sufficient information is before her to determine whether the proposal would or would not increase flood risk elsewhere.

7.115 Even if the Inspector was minded to allow the appeal, it is not clear whether the proposed access (including its width) would be implementable in line with the detailed access drawing the Appellant is seeking to be approved. This matter cannot be left to condition where detailed permission is sought for access as the access is a fixed component of the appeal scheme.

7.116 I conclude that in absence of further information demonstrating that the proposal would not increase flood risk, the appeal scheme fails to comply with CS Policy CP1, MDD LP Policy CC09 and ABNP Policy AD4 and

would be contrary to Section 14 of the NPPF. This conflict attracts substantial negative weight and is further considered in planning balance. The proposal to culvert the main river would have a detrimental impact upon a watercourse, which conflicts with CS Policy CP3 and PPG.

- 7.117 I acknowledge the main river does not contain flowing water. Notwithstanding, the PPG clearly advises against culverting of watercourses. Without any further details as to the impact on the watercourse the culverting would have (including, as the EA has advised, the minimum culvert length required to deliver the proposed main access, which is not shown on the access drawing plans) the harm arising from the proposed culverting of the Main River attracts moderate weight.

Main Issue 6: Whether any potential adverse effects on the integrity of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA (“SPA”) would be adequately mitigated

- 7.118 The Overarching SoCG (“OSoCG”) sets out the agreed position between the parties in relation to SPA. The appeal site lies within the 400m-5km Zone of Influence for the SPA and, therefore, any net increase in residential dwellings gives rise to a likely significant effect due to recreational disturbance (**CD16.01**). The project is screened in for Appropriate Assessment under Regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended). Permission may

only be granted if the competent authority is certain, at the decision stage, that adverse effects on the integrity of the SPA will not occur.

- 7.119 The Joint Strategic Partnership Delivery Framework (**CD16.01**) provides the appropriate methodology for mitigation. Natural England advises that proposals in accordance with that framework can be assumed to avoid adverse effects.
- 7.120 The Delivery Framework requires SANG and SAMM mitigation with SANG standard being 8 ha per 1,000 population, with an occupancy rate of 2.4 persons/dwelling (**CD16.01**).
- 7.121 As no on-site SANG is proposed, any mitigation must, therefore be delivered through an alternative SANG with a catchment covering the appeal site.
- 7.122 There remain two unresolved matters between the parties: whether Rooks Nest Wood SANG ("RNW SANG") is available to mitigate the scheme and whether the proposal would avoid adverse effects on the integrity of the SPA. My evidence below addresses these two unresolved issues.
- 7.123 During the application stage, Natural England ("NE") provided a consultation response dated 13th December 2024 (**CD02.05**), in which it confirmed that the development lies within the Zone of Influence for recreational pressure impacts to a habitat site and that, due to a net increase in residential units, the proposal would have a likely significant effect on the SPA.

- 7.124 NE recognised that Wokingham had measures in place to manage these potential impacts through a strategic solution and advised that these measures should be formally checked and confirmed by the authority.
- 7.125 The OSoCG confirms the appeal scheme requires 2.13 ha of SANG to comply with the Delivery Framework and that that no on-site SANG is proposed (**CD05.08**).
- 7.126 I note there is no third party SANG solution proposed to date. The outstanding dispute is whether the strategic RNW SANG is available.
- 7.127 The Council has confirmed (**CD16.09**) that the residual available capacity within its Strategic SANG at Rooks Nest Wood is 1.1312 ha and that capacity at RNW SANG is presently sufficient for only around 58 dwellings, rather than 111.
- 7.128 RNW SANG was scaled to serve plan-led development that accords with the adopted spatial strategy, not speculative out-of-settlement proposals. Allocating the remaining 1.1312 ha to this appeal would directly prejudice delivery of planned development that accords with the development plan as it would extinguish the Council's ability to provide capacity within its strategic SANG in respect of schemes that comply with the Council's spatial strategy.
- 7.129 The Council's position is not novel. For example, proposals at Land to the North of School Road (**CD10.01.01**) secured capacity from a third party (within a suite of SANGs owned by University of Reading).

- 7.130 The Council advised the Appellant on three separate occasions (**CD16.02.01**, **CD16.02.02** and **CD16.02.03**) that it would not be willing to allocate SANG capacity for the appeal scheme, as this would prejudice the delivery of planned development which accords with the development plan.
- 7.131 The advice from NE was provided before the Council formally advised that that insufficient capacity existed to allocate capacity for 111 units. Therefore, given that no measures have been secured to avoid the likely significant impacts on the SPA, it can be inferred that NE would object to the appeal scheme.
- 7.132 I acknowledge that the Council intends to expand Rooks Nest Wood SANG by 33 hectares (**CD07.35**). However, no planning application has been submitted for this proposal and as such, the precise timescales for its delivery are not known.
- 7.133 The Appellant proposed to secure capacity through either S106 agreement or imposition of a Grampian-style condition (**CD04.02** paragraph 5.54). As I already set out above, the Council is not willing or able to allocate capacity within RNW SANG. Therefore, in the absence of an alternative solution, capacity in an unspecified SANG cannot be secured in a S106 agreement.
- 7.134 The Appellant indicated that capacity could be secured by an imposition of a Grampian-style condition. However, without any details of the proposed solution being identified to enable the appropriate assessment to be undertaken by the Inspector, there is no evidence to demonstrate

that there is some prospect of the condition being discharged (**CD10.15**).

Therefore, I do not consider that a proposal to secure unspecified measures via Grampian-style condition would allow the appropriate assessment to be passed at the stage when it needs to be passed. As there is no prospect that appropriate avoidance measures could be secured, any such condition would fail the reasonableness test.

- 7.135 Therefore, the proposal conflicts with the retained Policy NRM6 of the South East Plan, CS Policies CP4 and CP8 and Section 15 of the NPPF. This conflict is afforded very substantial weight. This issue is further discussed in the Planning Balance section of this proof.

Main Issue 7: Whether the proposal would prejudice delivery of the Loddon Valley Garden Village

- 7.136 The LVGV is central to the emerging LPU and represents the largest and most strategically consequential allocation in the LPU. Its purpose is not simply to accommodate housing need – it is designed as a comprehensive, infrastructure-led new community whose viability and success depend on a carefully managed sequence of development, transport improvements and the delivery of services, facilities and sustainable travel solutions. The question here is whether the appeal proposal would interfere with that planned delivery. It is then necessary to consider both the current status of the LPU examination and the degree of progress toward LVGV delivery.

- 7.137 But first it is necessary to recognise how the planning context has evolved since the application was determined. The LPU was submitted

to the Secretary of State in February 2025. Part 1 Hearings have been undertaken, which considered the following matters: (1) Legal Compliance and Duty to Co-operate, (2) Strategic Transport, (3) Proposed Strategic Development Locations (“SDLs”) and (4) Housing Requirement and Supply.

- 7.138 The Inspectors’ Part 1 Post Hearing Letter was published on 18th December 2025 (**CD07.36**) and confirmed that the examination of the LPU should proceed to Part 2 Hearings.
- 7.139 Since the Council produced its Statement of Case, the LPU progressed further. The Inspectors’ Stage 2 MIQs (**CD07.51**) have been published on 2nd February 2026 and Stage 2 Hearing Sessions have been set to commence on 17th March 2026 (**CD07.50**).
- 7.140 The MIQs letter emphasises that Part 1 hearings “*covered matters relating to legal compliance and the Duty to Co-operate, strategic transport, the proposed Strategic Development Locations (“SDLs”), and the housing requirement and supply. It is not our intention to revisit these matters*”.
- 7.141 Stage 2 Hearings will focus on the examination of LPU policies (**CD07.01**) and their supporting text rather than on strategic matters, such as the strategy to allocate LVGV as the new SDL. The above statement indicates that the LPU Inspectors have no concerns that would call into question the principle or deliverability of LVGV. The LVGV is allocated for development under LPU Policy SS13. The emerging spatial strategy is set out in LPU SS1, SS2, SS3 and SS5. LPU Policy SS2 sets

out that the distribution of growth will include the delivery of a new sustainable garden village known as LVGV.

7.142 Paragraph 49 of the NPPF states that weight may be given to “*relevant policies in emerging plans according to:*

(a) the stage of preparation of the emerging plan (the more advanced its preparation, the greater the weight that may be given);

(b) the extent to which there are unresolved objections to relevant policies (the less significant the unresolved objections, the greater the weight that may be given);

and

(c) the degree of consistency of the relevant policies in the emerging plan to this Framework (the closer the policies in the emerging plan to the policies in the Framework, the greater the weight that may be given)”

7.143 Limb (c) above is a matter for the examination by the LPU Inspectors. In relation to limb (a), the emerging LPU is at advanced stage given its progress. In relation to limb (b), whilst the precise wording of LPU policies is yet to be examined, there are no unresolved objections to the LPU strategy to allocate LVGV as an SDL. Moreover, two of the three LVGV applications have now been submitted and validated (with application 252769 validated the day before the Appellant submitted their proofs). I therefore, afford moderate weight to LPU Policy SS13 insofar as it proposes an allocation of LVGV to meet housing needs identified in LPU Policy SS10.

7.144 Given the strategic importance of the successful delivery of the LVGV, it is important to recognise how the appeal scheme interacts with it.

7.145 As set out in Mr Lewis' evidence, LVGV is an infrastructure-led strategic allocation whose early phases depend on the timely delivery of a carefully costed and phased package of interim transport improvements. That package was tested through the LPU's strategic modelling and scrutinised in the Part 1 hearing sessions. It is closely linked to the housing trajectory for LVGV. The Council's evidence, accepted for the purposes of the continued examination of the Plan, demonstrates that the viability and deliverability of the LVGV rely on the careful management of three elements:

- The scale and timing of early housing completions,
- The interim transport interventions required before the strategic bridges are delivered, and
- The financial contributions and developer funded works arising from those early completions.

7.146 The LVGV delivery relies on maintaining the specific transport conditions, which have already been tested through the LPU's strategic modelling, particularly the 2032 interim scenario (**CD07.40**). That modelling identifies that up to 800 dwellings (and other uses) at LVGV can be accommodated ahead of the strategic River Loddon crossing and M4 bridge, provided that certain highway network mitigation measures are delivered.

7.147 Mr Lewis outlines that those improvements include works to the A327 corridor and key junctions, enhanced public transport and the creation of active travel connections to induce behavioural change in transport patterns. The cost, timing and delivery of these works were examined at

Part 1 Hearings, and these are directly to the housing trajectory for the LVGV.

7.148 The appeal scheme represents unplanned and uncosted development in the context of the LVGV phasing. Despite Mr Lewis' proactive approach, the Appellant refused to pursue potential solutions to the interim transport infrastructure, despite the appeal site directly contributing to the A327 corridor by virtue of the site taking access of Reading Road (which forms part of A327 corridor).

7.149 As outlined by Mr Lewis, this is where the LPU transport modelling identifies the most constrained conditions. By consuming part of the limited interim highway network capacity, the appeal would risk bringing forward the need for interim mitigation earlier than modelled and affect both funding and delivery of LVGV housing and, in turn, affect the LVGV viability.

7.150 In other words, LVGV is deliverable because its transport infrastructure is deliverable, and that infrastructure is deliverable because it is phased to the housing trajectory. An unplanned scheme in the same transport corridor, therefore, has the potential to disrupt the carefully managed sequencing established in the evidence base examined during Part 1 Hearing sessions.

7.151 Drawing all of this together, I conclude that the appeal proposal would prejudice the planned delivery of the LVGV. It would do so by consuming capacity relied upon to support early LVGV phases, thereby weakening the transport conditions necessary for LVGV's sustainable travel strategy

and by increasing the likelihood that additional (or earlier) mitigation would be necessary. These elements would introduce risk to the phasing, viability and plan-making process that underpins the LPU. In my judgment, these effects weigh heavily against the proposal and carry very substantial weight.

Main Issue 8: The effect of the proposal on irreplaceable habitats, in particular the adequacy of buffer zones around veteran trees

- 7.152 This issue concerns whether the appeal scheme would give rise to deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, specifically ancient and veteran trees. The NPPF affords irreplaceable habitats the highest level of protection under policy: paragraph 193(c) requires that decision-makers refuse development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats unless wholly exceptional reasons and a suitable compensation strategy exist.
- 7.153 The Arboriculture SoCG (“ASoCG”) (**CD05.06**) confirms that T4, T39, T50, T56 and T72 are at least veteran trees, and the ancient status of T72 is not in dispute. T3, immediately outside the red line, is also a veteran tree. These trees therefore constitute irreplaceable habitat for the purposes of paragraph 193(c) of the NPPF.
- 7.154 The Council’s SoC (**CD04.03**) was prepared on the basis of the Illustrative Masterplan (**CD01.06**) as submitted with the original application. The Illustrative Masterplan showed public open space and a footpath within the RPA/buffer zone of T39, footpaths, seating and publicly accessible open space within RPA/buffer zone of T72,

residential garden and buildings within the RPA/buffer zone of T87. The Drainage Strategy showed cut-off swale within the RPA/buffer zone of T50.

- 7.155 These matters are not disputed and are recorded as such in the ASoCG (**CD05.06**). The Appellant has indicated, through discussions referenced in the SoCG, that further plans may be submitted to address these concerns.
- 7.156 Following the ASoCG, an updated Illustrative Masterplan (“2026 Masterplan”) was produced by the Appellant on 4th February 2026 (**CD18.11**), together with an updated Indicative Land Use Plan (**CD18.09**) and Tree Removal Plan (**CD18.10**). These seek to respond to issues identified by the Council.
- 7.157 Mr Hannington recognises in his PoE while the updated proposals take some steps toward reducing earlier conflict, a number of matters remain unresolved.
- 7.158 Crucially, there is no fixed parameter plan that would demonstrate the proposed quantum of development could be accommodated without incursion into RPA/buffer zones of veteran and ancient trees.
- 7.159 Similarly, there is also no tree protection plan submitted that would identify the necessary buffer zones (and RPAs) of veteran trees, including instances where adjusted buffer zones may be required (for example where rooting environment may be constrained). The ASoCG

explicitly recognises that compensatory offsetting may be required
(**CD05.06**).

- 7.160 Buffer zones of T39, T4, T50 and T72 are all shown within an area identified on the Indicative Land Use Plan as proposed for open space provision (“landscape amenity green space”). The buffer zone of T39 has not been shown to take account of the extent of this tree’s shooting branches that extend beyond the trunk of the “main” tree.
- 7.161 The 2026 Masterplan places the buffer zone of T39 entirely within land identified as “landscape amenity green space”. However, as Mr Hannington notes in his PoE, the buffer does not appear to reflect the full extent of this tree’s “walking” morphology, including the layered and regenerating stems that extend beyond the primary trunk. While the footpath previously proposed in the north-west corner has been removed, the scheme continues to rely on a pedestrian connection to Church Lane. As this access forms part of the Appellant’s strategy for reducing car travel (**CD13.04.01**) and is therefore before the Inspector for determination, it has not yet been demonstrated that this access can be delivered without incursion into the adjusted buffer zone of T39.
- 7.162 Mr Hannington also highlighted that the Appellant is relying on the area within the private garden of a dwelling to the north to provide buffer zone for T56. He acknowledges that the 2026 Masterplan no longer shows residential garden and buildings within the buffer zone of this tree, however, the 2026 Masterplan shows residential garden in a very close proximity to the veteran tree T56. Mr Hannington raises a concern that

such close proximity, although outside the drawn buffer zone, may still give rise to pressures adversely affecting the veteran tree and wider ecological networks to which the buffer zone contributes to.

7.163 For T50, Mr Hannington identifies that both drainage strategies still refer to drainage features being shown within the RPA of this tree. For T72, which ancient status is not disputed by the Appellant, Mr Hannington's evidence raises an issue that the entirety of the buffer zone/RPA is shown to be part of the recreational space. Indeed, the illustrative land use plan and landscape masterplan identify this area as amenity green space. This would lead to significant intensification of the buffer zone of this tree, potentially even greater than intensification of the use within the buffer zone of T39.

7.164 Moreover, Mr Hannington highlights in his evidence that the proposal would result in the removal of likely descendants of the ancient tree. Overall, the proposal, in Mr Hannington's view, would damage the ecological networks and green infrastructure by virtue of removing young trees of the species of veteran and ancient trees within and adjacent to the appeal site. Mr Hannington's evidence indicates that the appeal scheme would break up any existing ecological linkages between ancient and/or veteran trees within and adjacent to the site that exist and have been developed across many centuries. The result of this would be harm to the irreplaceable habitat they provide and are part of.

7.165 The fragmentation of the existing ecological network is an important consideration given the proximity of the appeal site (which as established

contains irreplaceable habitat) to other veteran trees and ancient woodland to the south-west, north-west and north-east of the site.

- 7.166 Mr Hannington's evidence sets out how the appeal scheme would result in deterioration to irreplaceable habitat. Whilst parties disagree on the status of some trees, e.g. T87, it is not disputed by the Appellant that irreplaceable habitat exists within the site. However, the submitted information, including the 2026 Masterplan, fail to demonstrate how ecological networks would be maintained. There is no fixed parameter plan that would secure such networks and/or mitigation.
- 7.167 Drawing from Mr Hannington's evidence, the scheme before the Inspector is one that does not demonstrate that deterioration of irreplaceable habitat - either within the site or in the wider network - can be voided. The policy and guidance are very clear on implications of schemes that result in such deterioration, affording such harm great weight so as to disengage planning balance, unless *exceptional circumstances* have been demonstrated. This is explored further below.
- 7.168 As set out by Mr Hannington, creation e.g. of buffer zones is a measure of *mitigating* impacts on veteran trees rather than an avoidance measure, as explicitly recognised in the Natural England's Standing Advice (**CD18.06**).
- 7.169 The Standing Advice explicitly states that that larger buffer zones may be required and, where possible, should contribute to wider ecological networks and be part of the green infrastructure of the area. As established in Mr Hannington's PoE, the appeal scheme would encroach

onto the buffer zones (which have not been adequately shown in the first place, having regard to the Standing Advice). As such, the proposal fails to deliver appropriate mitigation measures.

- 7.170 Nonetheless, these are “just” mitigation measures; these do not satisfy the requirements of paragraph 193(c) of the NPPF, which explicitly requires that loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats must be avoided by refusing proposals that result in such loss or deterioration.
- 7.171 On the evidence before the Inquiry, the scheme would result in at least deterioration of irreplaceable habitats. Paragraph 193(c) is very clear: development should be refused, unless wholly exceptional reasons exist. At the time of writing, it is not the Appellant’s position that the appeal scheme falls within the range of exceptional circumstances referred to in footnote 70. Therefore, the exceptional circumstances have not been established. For completeness, the Appellant does not put forward any compensation strategy either.
- 7.172 In addition, CS Policy CP1 and CP3 require that the high quality of environment is maintained or enhanced and that proposals do not have detrimental impact upon important ecological features. CS Policy CP7 states that development which may harm veteran trees or habitats, whether directly or indirectly, would only be permitted where such impacts are unavoidable. ABNP Policy IRS3 requires development to protect ancient trees and their wildlife corridors.
- 7.173 On the basis of the evidence before the Inquiry, I consider that it has not been demonstrated that the appeal proposal would avoid deterioration to

ancient and veteran trees or maintain the ecological networks to which they contribute. As such, the appeal scheme fails to comply with the development plan and does not meet the high bar of the NPPF for irreplaceable habitats. The proposal would be contrary to Section 15 of the NPPF. This attracts very substantial weight in planning balance and is further considered in the context of operation of footnote 7 in the Planning Balance section.

Main Issue 9: The effect of the proposal on protected species

- 7.174 This issue has been identified at the Case Management Conference as a main issue. As set out in the Council's SoC, the appeal submission introduced new streetlighting along Reading Road as part of off-site active travel improvements.
- 7.175 These off-site works were not part of the original planning application and were not assessed in the submitted Ecological Impact Assessment (**CD01.13**). Therefore, these proposals raise new ecological considerations for this appeal. This position is recorded in the Ecology SoCG (**CD05.08**), which confirms the presence of light-sensitive bat species and the proposal to introduce 22 new lighting columns along Reading Road, which had not been previously assessed.
- 7.176 The Appellant has submitted a brief Ecology Statement in its Planning PoE (**CD13.01**). However, as set out in Mr Fisher's PoE, this lacks detail on survey methodology, evidence base and does not demonstrate whether mitigation hierarchy has been complied with. Mr Fisher's PoE,

and the Ecology SoCG, recognise that information available indicates that light-sensitive bat species are present locally.

- 7.177 CS Policy CP7 states that development which may harm species of principal importance for nature conservation, whether directly or indirectly, will only be permitted where the impacts are unavoidable, provided that mitigation measures can be put in place to prevent damaging impacts or appropriate compensation provided.
- 7.178 The Appellant's original EclA did not assess impacts from off-site lighting on protected species and the Appellant's Ecology Statement (**CD13.01**) does not identify whether any bat flight corridors exists; it also does not describe survey methodology and clearly treats lighting as merely hypothetical, despite lighting columns being fixed on the engineering drawings shown in the Appellants Highways PoE (**CD13.04.01**).
- 7.179 As such, the ecological effects of the proposed off-site lighting have not been adequately assessed, contrary to CS Policy CP7.
- 7.180 MDD LP Policy TB23 requires that proposals comply with CS Policy CP7 and demonstrate how they enhance existing biodiversity features, provide appropriate buffer zones between development proposals and habitats and species of principal importance for nature conservation.
- 7.181 Based on the evidence currently available, the LPA cannot be satisfied that the proposal complies with TB23 because the ecological information relating to protected species and off-site lighting impacts remains incomplete. The proposal, therefore, conflicts with MDD LP Policy TB23.

- 7.182 ABNP Policy IRS3 requires development to conserve the environment for nocturnal species through avoidance of lighting and mitigation of the impact of external lighting likely to increase nighttime human presence.
- 7.183 The appeal scheme does not currently consider the impacts of the off-site lighting proposals on bats and fails to demonstrate that it would avoid adverse effects on nocturnal species. Therefore, the proposals conflict with ABNP Policy IRS3.
- 7.184 Whilst the Council acknowledges, as set out in the Ecology SoCG and Mr Fisher's PoE, that further information may yet be submitted to address the above concerns, it is not available at the time of writing this PoE. As such, the decision-maker cannot be reasonably satisfied that there would not be unacceptable risk of significant harm to bats, which are protected species. This attracts very substantial weight in planning balance. I reserve the right to review my assessment in the event that further information is forthcoming.
- 7.185 The detailed ecology evidence is provided by the Council's ecology witness. My planning judgement is limited to the consequences of any identified impacts.
- 7.186 Uncertainty in baseline surveys, loss of supporting habitat, and lack of secure ecological mitigation all contribute to conflict with CP7, TB23, IRS3, NE1-NE5, and NPPF Section 15.

Main Issue 10: BNG Assessment

- 7.187 During the course of the appeal, the Appellant submitted an updated BNG Metric on 26th January 2026 (**CD16.03.02**), which, as agreed between the parties, accurately reflects the baseline habitats for BNG purposes.
- 7.188 The appeal scheme would deliver 10% of BNG, although to meet this threshold, the scheme must rely on both on- and off-site measures to achieve the minimum statutory target of 10% of BNG. Moreover, as set out in Mr. Hannington's evidence, the proposal would also result in fragmentation of the existing wider ecological networks, thereby diminishing the value of the appeal scheme's on-site biodiversity gain.
- 7.189 Notwithstanding the reliance on off-site measures, the appeal scheme would deliver gains in terms of biodiversity, which represents a positive outcome. Whilst the scheme would achieve what is required by legislation, the weight applied to this benefit is necessarily tempered. Therefore, very limited weight is afforded to this benefit.

8. PLANNING BALANCE

- 8.1 The OSoCG sets out the agreed weight scales.

Housing Land Supply

- 8.2 The appeal scheme would deliver up to 111 dwellings. The Housing Land Supply SoCG (**CD05.03**) confirms that parties recognise there is a shortfall in the housing land supply, with the difference between parties being 0.2 years.
- 8.3 As set out in Mr Church's PoE (**CD14.02.01**), The change in the Council's housing land supply position is directly attributable to the December 2024 update to the standard method for calculating Local Housing Need ("LHN"), which increased Wokingham's requirement from 748 dwellings per annum (dpa) to 1,316 dpa overnight. This recalculation was entirely outside the Council's control and is the principal reason for the reduction in the five-year supply.
- 8.4 While the housing land supply assessment is necessarily a forward-looking exercise, it is important contextual evidence that the Council has historically delivered housing at levels significantly above all relevant requirements. As set out in Mr Church's Proof of Evidence, the Borough has consistently achieved very strong housing delivery, reflected in high Housing Delivery Test ("HDT") scores, with performance exceeding the requirement by at least 57% in all years prior to the December 2024 changes.

- 8.5 This strong performance is further demonstrated through completions against the adopted housing requirement in Core Strategy Policy CP17. Mr Church's evidence confirms that delivery over the plan period has exceeded the Core Strategy requirement by 2,350 dwellings, representing a 17.8% uplift over the plan-led target.
- 8.6 Similarly, when compared against the standard method for calculating LHN, completions between 2018/19 and 2024/25 total 7,871 dwellings, against a cumulative requirement of 6,137. This is an over-delivery of 1,734 dwellings, equating to a 28% boost in supply during this period.
- 8.7 Reflecting this high rate of delivery, the Borough recorded the third-highest population growth of any South East authority outside London between the 2011 and 2021 Census points, with a population increase of 15%, as set out in Mr Church's evidence. This trend is supported by ONS dwelling stock data, which shows that housing stock in Wokingham Borough increased by 14.5% between 2011 and 2021.
- 8.8 Taken together, Mr Church's evidence demonstrates that housing delivery in Wokingham has consistently exceeded both adopted requirements and every assessment of need. This level of past delivery has naturally reduced the bank of extant permissions and, therefore, the number of sites capable of contributing to the forward-looking five-year supply. Far from restricting growth, the spatial strategy in the development plan has enabled and facilitated a substantial increase in housing supply.

- 8.9 The aims of the spatial strategy include locating development in the most sustainable locations, protecting the countryside and environment, and maintaining the separate identity of settlements - all of which remain consistent objectives with the NPPF.
- 8.10 Inspectors have repeatedly recognised this consistency and effectiveness in numerous appeal decisions, including the most recent decision at Lodge Road (**CD10.06**). These decisions acknowledge that the spatial strategy has functioned effectively to deliver significant oversupply during the current plan period. However, I recognise that the present shortfall in the five-year supply affects the weight to be given to conflict with the spatial strategy in this appeal.
- 8.11 The forward look of the current housing land supply position must also be considered in the context of the progress of the Local Plan Update.
- 8.12 As set out in the Council's Statement of Case (**CD04.03** paras 5.9.2-5.9.3), Part 1 Hearings have now been undertaken and the Inspectors' Part 1 Post Hearing Letter (**CD07.36**) was published on 18th December 2025.
- 8.13 On 3rd February 2026 Part 2 Hearings Programme was published, which confirms that these hearing sessions will commence on 17th March 2026, as anticipated in the Statement of Case (**CD04.03** para 5.9.3). It is, therefore reasonable to assume, as Mr Church does (**CD14.02.01**) , that the Local Plan will be adopted in 2026.

- 8.14 Mr Church's analysis of lead-in times for outline schemes of similar scale indicates an average of 49 months to first completion, with typical annual delivery rates of 47.2 dwellings. On this basis, the appeal scheme would not deliver completions until several years after LPU adoption, and certainly not within a timeframe that influences the short-term supply position.
- 8.15 The NPPF Glossary sets out that sites which have outline planning permission for development can only fall within the definition of "deliverable" where *"there is clear evidence that housing completions will begin onsite within five years"*.
- 8.16 Turning briefly to affordability, as set out in Mr Church's PoE (**CD14.02.01**), the 2023 LHNA is the most robust and up-to-date assessment. While the gross affordable housing need is identified as 352 dwellings per annum, the number of households experiencing the greatest housing need is substantially lower at 81 per annum.
- 8.17 Although the Council cannot fully control the delivery of affordable housing, national policy does not require local authorities to meet affordable housing need in full. The Council has performed strongly relative to other Berkshire authorities and benefits from a healthy pipeline of future affordable homes, including over 760 units expected between 2025 and 2030.
- 8.18 As emphasised by Mr Church, high levels of overall housing delivery have not been shown to improve affordability ratios in Wokingham.

Trends in affordability correlate primarily with earnings growth, not with housing output. Increasing the supply of market housing alone cannot, therefore, be assumed to materially improve affordability in the Borough.

- 8.19 Nevertheless, the on-site delivery of both market housing and 40% affordable housing remains a benefit of the proposal (subject to securing policy-compliant affordable housing delivery in a S106 agreement), and each attracts substantial weight in the planning balance.

Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

- 8.20 It is common ground that the appeal scheme would result in a loss of 0.7 Grade 3a Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land ("BMVAL").

- 8.21 Paragraph 187(b) of the NPPF requires decisions to contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by recognising:

"the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services, including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land."

- 8.22 The permanent loss of 0.7 hectares of Grade 3a BMVAL does not contribute to - or enhance - the natural or local environment. Rather, it represents a direct adverse effect on a recognised natural resource. The proposal, therefore, conflicts with paragraph 187(b) of the NPPF and CS Policy CP1 (which seeks to protect the Borough's environmental assets, including agricultural land of the highest quality).

- 8.23 I acknowledge that this area of BMVAL is not currently in active agricultural use and has not been so for some time. It is also affected by

other constraints, including the Main River to the east and the presence of veteran trees, which may limit viable agricultural potential. Given these circumstances, together with the relatively small quantum of BMVAL affected, the resultant harm is appropriately characterised as minor, attracting very limited weight in the overall planning balance.

Public Open Space

- 8.24 The appeal scheme would secure on-site delivery of the following open space typologies: amenity greenspace, provision for children and young people and natural/semi-natural greenspace.
- 8.25 The surrounding area is already well served by an extensive network of Public Rights of Way, offering residents access to the countryside and opportunities for outdoor recreation. However, there are presently no play facilities within the village of Arborfield, with the nearest provision located at Arborfield Cross. While it is acknowledged that the LVGV is expected to include new play facilities (as indicated in the Play Strategy, **CD12.11**), that application remains undetermined, and the final form and location of play spaces may change.
- 8.26 Although the draft legal obligation for the appeal scheme would secure a 0.6 hectare of LEAP, this represents a minimum size play provision for a LEAP. I recognise there are currently no existing play facilities within walking distance for current residents of Arborfield village, however, the pattern of development in the surrounding area is not very well connected. Moreover, there is no strategic aim to provide such facilities

in areas which are not socially cohesive. I therefore attribute to this benefit limited weight. The proposal would deliver other elements of open space, such as parks and gardens and sports facilities via off-site contributions towards local parks and borough-wide sports facilities at Grays Farm, which would ensure the scheme is not deficient in policy terms.

Overall Planning Balance

- 8.27 Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 sets out a requirement that planning applications must be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 8.28 Paragraph 2 of the NPPF confirms that the NPPF is a material planning consideration in planning decisions.
- 8.29 The Council acknowledges that it cannot currently demonstrate a five-year supply of deliverable housing sites. Therefore, in accordance with paragraph 11(d) of the NPPF, the “tilted balance” is engaged: where there are no relevant development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out of date, planning permission should be granted unless:

(i) the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for refusing the development proposed; or

(ii) any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole, having particular regard to key policies for directing development to sustainable

locations, making effective use of land, securing well-designed places and providing affordable homes, individually or in combination.

- 8.30 Footnote 7 explains that the policies that protect areas or assets of particular importance include habitat sites, irreplaceable habitats and areas at risk of flooding.

Flood Risk

- 8.31 The updated EA Flood Maps for Planning shows parts of the site within Flood Zones 2 and 3. The Appellant's 2026 FRA shows a proposed access route to provide pedestrian access on Church Lane. Whilst indicative only, the Appellant's case relies on this connection point to deliver sustainable travel measures.
- 8.32 Moreover, the winter groundwater monitoring results indicate a high risk of flooding from groundwater. The indicative plans and 2026 FRA propose attenuation basins (which is built development, **CD11.12**) within the area of high risk of flooding. The NPPF and PPG are clear that in such circumstances, the Sequential Test should be undertaken, which is not the case. Moreover, no details, including flood modelling, of the proposed culvert to deliver main access have been submitted despite the EA's request. The EA is concerned that it has not been demonstrated that the proposed access would not increase flood risk.
- 8.33 The failure to undertake Sequential Test means it is not possible to determine whether there are any sequentially preferable sites that could be developed so as to avoid development within an area at risk of flooding. Coupled with the failure to demonstrate the proposed access

would not increase flood risk, these provides a strong reason for refusing the application, disengaging the tilted balance.

Thames Basin Heaths SPA

- 8.34 At the date of writing, no avoidance or mitigation measures are secured in respect of TBH SPA. The Council has clearly set out why capacity at Rooks Nest Wood SANG cannot be allocated to speculative development. Moreover, there is no sufficient capacity within the strategic SANG to allocate against the proposed quantum. Without SANG mitigation, the competent authority cannot be satisfied that the project will not have an adverse effect on the integrity of the SPA. Paragraph 195 of the NPPF removes the presumption in favour of sustainable development where significant effects cannot be ruled out. This disengages tilted balance.

Irreplaceable Habitats

- 8.35 The site contains several veteran (including ancient) trees. The Council's arboricultural evidence demonstrates that the Appellant has failed to provide appropriate buffer zones; the indicative layout also fails to demonstrate the proposal would not result in deterioration of irreplaceable habitats. This is contrary to paragraph 193 of the NPPF which requires that, in absence of wholly exceptional reasons and suitable compensation strategy, the permission should be refused. As the appeal scheme does not demonstrate it would not lead to deterioration of irreplaceable habitat (and no wholly exceptional circumstances exist), this disengages tilted balance.

Tilted Balance

- 8.36 Even if the Inspector were to conclude that the application of the Framework's footnote 7 policies does not provide a strong reason for dismissing the appeal, it remains necessary to consider the tilted balance position under paragraph 11(d)(ii). In doing so, I assess whether the adverse impacts of the proposal would significantly and demonstrably outweigh its benefits.
- 8.37 The Appellant accepts that the proposal would conflict with the spatial strategy. The conflict with the adopted spatial strategy is not a narrow technical breach: it arises because the site lies appreciably outside any recognised defined settlement limits and would introduce a substantial new housing estate into the open countryside, in a location whose very function is to maintain rural character and separation. Mr Hannington's evidence shows that the proposal would fundamentally alter the rural character of this area, replacing the existing mosaic of paddocks, trees and open fields with a suburban estate pattern that cannot be reconciled with its context. These structural changes would permanently erode both the physical character and the perceptual qualities of the surrounding countryside, and would erode the identity of settlements. I, therefore, afford the conflict with spatial strategy substantial weight.
- 8.38 As set out above, the impact on the character of the area by virtue of the loss of open paddocks would have a significant impact on the character of the area. This impact would only be compounded by virtue of the LVGV allocation. I, therefore, afford this harm substantial weight.

- 8.39 Whilst the loss of paddocks/open countryside elements constitutes a harm on its own, the proposed quantum of development would result in an incongruous imposition of suburban estate. This harm attracts substantial weight in my view.
- 8.40 The locational sustainability harms compound this harm. As Mr Lewis explains, notwithstanding the presence of bus stops on Reading Road, the distances to key day-to-day facilities, the absence of a safe, attractive walking environment and the heavy reliance on private vehicles mean that future occupiers would not experience a real sustainable transport choice that national policy seeks to promote. The Appellant's reliance on the future accessibility of the LVGV highlights the disconnection between the appeal site and the services on which they rely: the modes, routes or facilities that support that future accessibility are not yet secured or funded. Moreover, the scheme would in fact erode the interim highway capacity headroom required for LVGV's early phases. I consider this harm should be given moderate weight in planning balance, in particular given the explicit reference in paragraph 11(d)(ii) to directing development to sustainable locations.
- 8.41 As set out earlier in my evidence, there is a real risk that the proposal would prejudice the delivery of LVGV by consuming a substantial proportion of the limited interim network capacity modelled for the A327 corridor. That risk, despite the pro-active approach by the Highways Authority, it has not been addressed. The LVGV (and the LPU) evidence base is predicated on a careful management of phasing, viability and

transport capacity – which are matters that have been scrutinised at the LPU Part 1 hearings. Additional unplanned traffic affecting this corridor could alter both the phasing and viability of LVGV (a major strategic allocation) which the examining Inspectors have accepted should progress to Stage 2 examination. This harm is significant not just in transport impact terms, but for the delivery of the LPU strategy as a whole. I, therefore, afford this harm very substantial weight.

- 8.42 The Appellant has failed to demonstrate that a safe access solution could be delivered without increasing flood risk elsewhere. This is a serious harm in relation to flood risk and impacts on the Main River. This is notwithstanding that the application, which seeks detailed consent on access, failed to submit details of the access to demonstrate it is deliverable. The appeal scheme failed to demonstrate the proposed access, which is not a reserved matter, would not increase flood risk elsewhere. Moreover, the proposal failed to undertake the Sequential Test where one is needed, thereby failing to demonstrate that there are no sequentially preferable sites to the appeal site. In my view, these harms attract substantial and very substantial weight respectively. Additionally, as advised by the EA, there would be harm resulting from culverting of a (yet unspecified length) of Main River, which is clearly dissuaded in the PPG. This harm attracts, in my view, moderate weight.

- 8.43 The Council's evidence clearly demonstrate that the proposal would result in deterioration of irreplaceable habitat present within and around the site. Paragraph 193(c) of the NPPF is very clear on the implications

of such impacts – planning permission should be refused unless, in first instance, exceptional circumstances exist. The delivery of housing at the time when the Council cannot demonstrate the necessary housing land supply is not a circumstance that could reasonably be considered equivalent to those set out in footnote 70. This harm attracts, in my view, very substantial weight.

8.44 The proposal currently fails to demonstrate how it would not result in unacceptable impact on a habitat site. Paragraph 195 of the NPPF is very clear on the implications of a scheme that cannot rule out significant impacts on a habitat site – it explicitly disengages tilted balance. I afford this failure a very substantial weight.

8.45 The proposal would result in other harms, including the loss of BMVAL. Given the location and quantum of the BMVAL, I consider this harm to attract very limited weight.

8.46 At the time of writing of this proof, the Appellant failed to submit additional information to substantiate their assertion that the proposed off-site works would not have unacceptable impacts on protected species. In absence of such information, the decision-maker cannot be reasonably satisfied that there would not be unacceptable risk of significant harm to protected species. Paragraph 193(a) is very clear that if significant harm to biodiversity cannot be avoided, mitigated or compensated for, planning permission should be refused. In absence of further information, this harm attracts very substantial weight in planning balance.

- 8.47 Whilst the harms are extensive and significant, I recognise the proposal would deliver some benefits.
- 8.48 Much of the economic case advanced by the Appellant reflects the generic economic multipliers associated with any residential scheme of this scale. Therefore, the weight that I can reasonably attach to them is limited.
- 8.49 I acknowledge that, as set out in Mr Lewis' PoE, the Appellant sought to exploit opportunities to make the site more sustainable. Assuming these are secured via conditions/planning obligations, I afford these improvements moderate weight overall.
- 8.50 The provision of open space and BNG is either legislation- or policy-led, therefore, subject to securing the provision through conditions/planning obligations, I recognise there would be limited benefit arising from the scheme in relation to the provision of open space and very limited benefit to the provision of BNG.
- 8.51 Given the current housing land supply position and the progress of the LPU, as well as the timescales for the delivery of the appeal scheme, I afford the benefits of the delivery of market and affordable housing substantial weights respectively.

Planning Balance Summary

- 8.52 The statutory starting point is the development plan. The appeal proposal conflicts with several of its core spatial, environmental and design policies. While the Council cannot presently demonstrate a five-year

supply of deliverable housing sites (which engages paragraph 11(d) of the NPPF), the NPPF requires that before the tilted balance can be applied, it must first be established whether any footnote 7 policies provide a strong reason for refusal. In this case, three such protections are engaged.

- 8.53 The updated evidence on flood risk confirms parts of the site fall within Flood Zones 2 and 3. Moreover, the Appellant's own data confirms the site is at high risk of flooding from groundwater. The Appellant has not undertaken a Sequential Test, nor provided the flood modelling necessary to demonstrate that the proposed access and culverting works would not increase flood risk. The Environment Agency remains unable to verify that the scheme is safe or that it would not worsen conditions elsewhere. This clearly provides a strong reason for refusing the application alone.
- 8.54 The proposal also fails to secure mitigation required to avoid adverse effects on the TBH SPA. There is no available capacity at Rooks Nest Wood SANG, no alternative SANG identified in light of Council's refusal to allocate capacity within its own strategic SANG for a scheme that is not policy compliant; there is also no mechanism presently in place to secure such mitigation. As paragraph 195 of the NPPF makes clear, the presumption in favour of sustainable development does not apply where significant effects on a habitat site cannot be ruled out.
- 8.55 A further constraint arises from the presence of irreplaceable habitat, including ancient and veteran trees. The Appellant has not demonstrated

that the scheme would avoid deterioration of these features, nor has it suggested any wholly exceptional circumstances that might justify such harm. Paragraph 193 of the NPPF therefore provides another strong reason for refusal.

8.56 Given the existence of all three footnote 7 matters, the tilted balance is disengaged. However, even if it were to be applied, the outcome would be no different. The proposal would introduce a substantial, suburban housing estate into open countryside, fundamentally eroding the rural character, pattern of development and distinct settlement identity of this part of Arborfield. It occupies a location that is reliant on private car travel and the Appellant's reliance on future LVGV infrastructure only highlights the current inaccessibility of the site. The proposal would also prejudice the early delivery, phasing and viability of the LVGV (which is an allocation now at an advanced stage of examination) by consuming a disproportionate share of the limited interim transport capacity available in the A327 corridor. The proposal failed to demonstrate it would not have unacceptable impacts on protected species.

8.57 Set against these harms are the benefits of housing delivery, including affordable homes, and modest economic and environmental gains. These are recognised and carry weight, but they are not exceptional. Much of the economic case is generic, much of the environmental case is policy-led rather than additional, and the locational shortcomings limit the practical value of the connectivity improvements proposed.

8.58 Stepping back, the cumulative harms greatly outweigh the benefits. Even if assessed under the tilted balance, the conclusion clearly is, in my view, that the adverse impacts of granting permission would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits. The appeal scheme does not represent sustainable development and planning permission should therefore be refused and appeal dismissed.