

Response and Objection to Planning Application 261059 – Land south of Langley Common Road Arborfield Green Wokingham (Barkham Square)

1 – Context

I am conscious that Barkham Square was included in the submission of the Local Plan Update (LPU) as a location for development, to meet the set housing needs of the borough, and assessed as sustainable within the context of the available alternatives. The additional affordable housing and care home facility will be valuable additions.

Whilst I accept the analysis which led to Barkham Square's inclusion in the LPU, I am objecting to this proposal on the basis of specific issues with the proposal. I also wish to emphasise the need to progress measures that will address the cumulative impact of this development and other approved, recommended and potential development in the local area.

2 – Development Specific Issues

2.1 – Local Travel

There are some travel positives in the proposal. The location will provide a safe walking and cycling route between School Road and Arborfield Green, opening this up for home to school travel for both The Coombes primary and Bohunt Secondary. The application mentions a controlled crossing on Barkham Road in this location, installation of which should be a condition of approval early in the development.

Langley Common Road is uncharacteristic in the local area as a 40mph road. A change to this has been opposed by Thames Valley Police in the absence of road calming measures. The addition of a crossing and new roundabout would be welcomed and enable the change. The proposed roundabout has wide geometry that will enable vehicles to turn in and out of the development at speed creating avoidable hazards for vulnerable road users. The roundabout geometry could be tightened whilst still allowing the required access.

A key tool to mitigate congestion in the local area is to improve public transport and walking and cycling links. The application references these but does not make significant proposals to improve them.

Walking and cycling journey times appear to have been taken from the closest edge of the development to the destination and are optimistic as a result. This should be acknowledged when considering the willingness to walk and cycle. However, the traffic-free connectivity to Arborfield Green will make this a good choice.

The Leopard 3 bus route (for which frequencies are incorrect in the application) has further potential. An accessible bus stop serving the development on the existing Barkham Street route would be very valuable, with a journey time to Wokingham of 7 minutes rather than the 23 from the stop referenced in the application. This links to the need to improve Barkham Footpath 7.

Greenways are shown in the application but not all are funded, including parts of the proposed route to Wokingham Town. Improvement of this is essential given the traffic conditions on, and inability to improve, the only alternative

along Barkham Road. The development should make a contribution towards unfunded sections of this route.

I note the proposed shared pavement and cycleway on the far side of Langley Common Road. Signage on this should direct cyclists to rejoin the carriageway at its end, not be signed as No Cycling, in accordance with LTN 1/20 guidance.

2.2 – Other Issues

Existing residents on the south of Langley Common Road will overlook the site and, via a small strip of housing, directly to the elderly care facility, one of the most imposing structures on the site. Existing residents are understandably disappointed in their loss of view, and in future reserved matters applications I would hope to see their perspective taken into account.

The siting of the allotments is poor if intended for residents of Barkham Square, and further limited by the lack of pedestrian access from Arborfield Green. It seems to anticipate access by vehicle as the primary concern. I would like to see them relocated to a site where access on foot is readily achievable, which would also help with their security, or access made available from Arborfield Green.

There seems to be a missed opportunity to access the proposed SANG directly from the proposed green corridor to the South, rather than an elongated access route.

3 – Cumulative impact

The current approved local plan and submitted local plan updates both contain very significant development West of Barkham Square, supported by some new infrastructure, but with dependence for rail travel, medical services and education to the East, in Wokingham Town. In addition to the dwelling numbers contained in these strategic plans, around 600 additional dwellings have been approved in the vicinity and an application for a further 650 houses is anticipated, all claiming sustainability on the back of the Arborfield Garrison SDL.

I accept that a development of the scale of Barkham Square is best placed alongside an existing development rather than in isolation. However, transport infrastructure, school capacity and primary medical care capacity in the area are already under stress with around 1,000 dwellings in the Arborfield Garrison SDL yet to be occupied. Existing proposals to address these issues need to be prioritised.

The community facilities in the SDL were scaled to support an additional 3,500 houses. Some, such as sport facilities, seem generous, but others are not. Proposed development in the local plan update and approved development outside of local plan will place these under pressure.

3.1 – Local Travel

The largest concern is the ability of the road infrastructure to cope with additional peak traffic. Whilst the application describes peak hour traffic forecasts mostly as acceptable, at their short-term peak queues regularly exceed these numbers. Most obviously, morning traffic queues on Langley Common Road towards Barkham Street peak at half a mile with delays of up to 10 minutes and it is only this constraint that prevents junctions further along this route from suffering the same issue.

The NPPF describes either serious or unacceptable traffic impact as material to planning. A local perspective would describe the existing congestion as severe, with around 1,000 existing approved houses still to be built along this corridor before Barkham Square is considered.

Junction mitigations along Barkham Road and at the northern end of Bearwood Road need to be progressed, for which clear proposals are required for this application to be approved.

3.2 – NHS GP Provision

The absence of NHS primary care has long been a concern in this area since the NHS declined to support the proposed surgery in the SDL. The ICB routinely opposes any development in the area on the basis of a lack of surgery capacity at the available surgeries in Wokingham Town, Swallowfield and Finchampstead, and seems to have shifted its ambition to future facilities at Loddon Garden Village, a smaller development than the Arborfield SDL on current plans. Even if capacity can be added at these locations, additional car trips are likely to be the dominant means of travel to existing locations given their distance and limitations on travelling for care by bus. Approval of significant incremental dwellings should seek a commitment from the NHS to address the lack of local services.

3.3 – School Provision

Arborfield SDL is identified in the school places strategy as having a future primary shortfall. This was anticipated with the proposed second primary in Finchwood Park. Approval of further development needs to be linked to a firm plan to provide local primary capacity. Secondary provision is likely to be dependent upon Wokingham Town schools until, and if, further provision happens in Loddon Garden Village, adding to the importance of easy bus access.

These same considerations will apply to the application for potential development at Blackcroft Farm for which the environmental scoping study proposes a further 650 houses, also claiming sustainability from proximity to the SDL.

4 – Summary

There are a number of issues with the application which I believe need to be addressed through amendments and conditions in order for this application to be approved. A recommendation for approval needs to be supported by plans for the main cumulative impacts of development to be addressed.