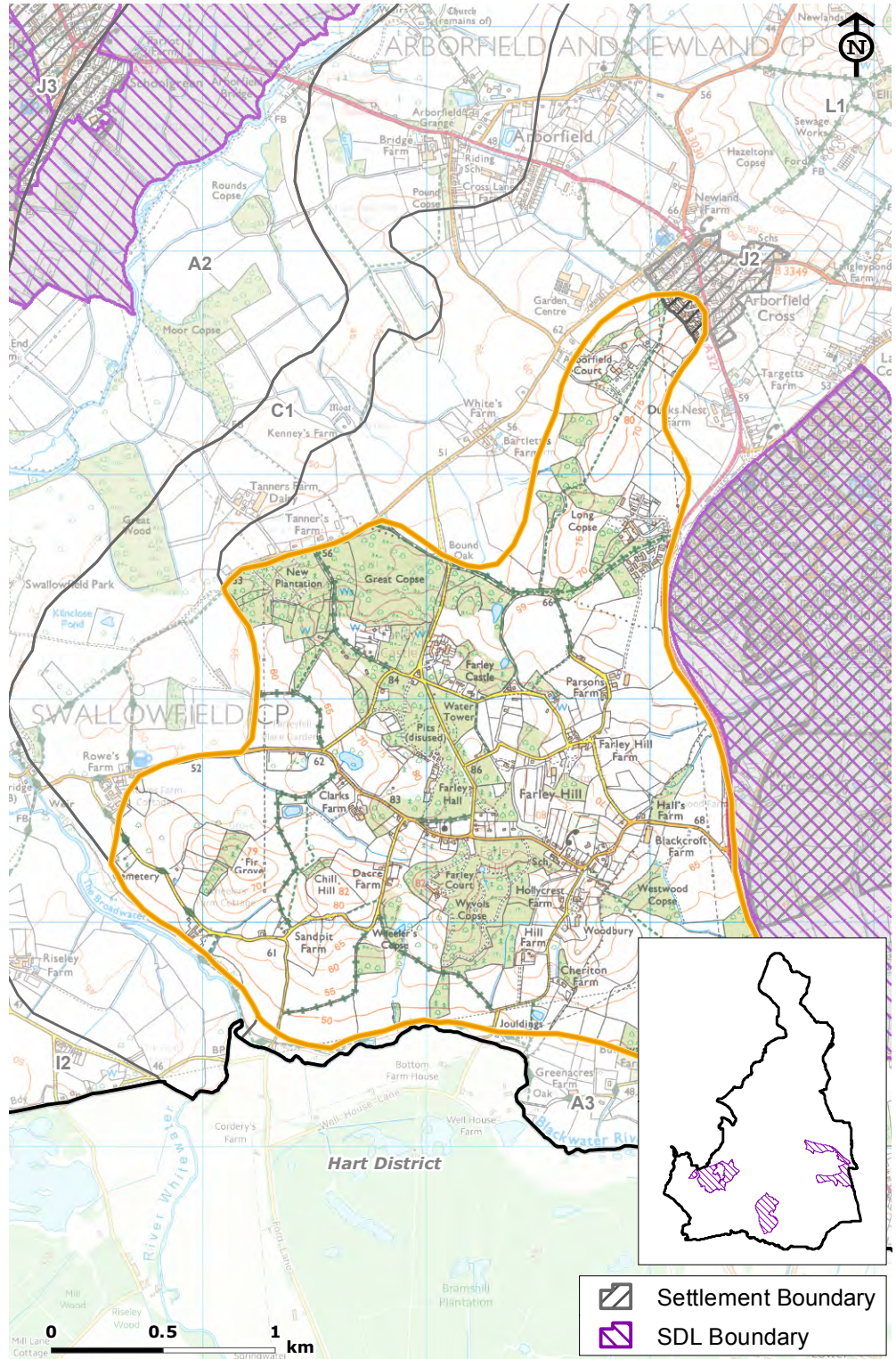
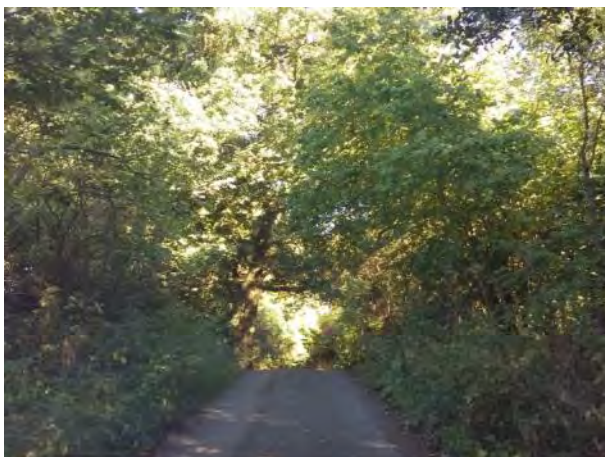




SUMMARY

A discrete elevated landscape of small hills and knolls. The higher areas are wooded, with a distinctive coniferous element interspersed with pastures with arable farming on the lower slopes. Timber framed farmhouses and brick built cottages are linked with a network of winding rural roads and lanes.

The Farley Hill Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills character area is located in the south of the borough and rises from the surrounding lower land of A2: Loddon River Valley and A3: Blackwater River Valley in the west and south and from J2: Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay and N2: Finchampstead Pastoral Sandy Lowland to the north and east. The boundaries of the area largely follow the base of the slopes along the 50m contour line. To the east and west of the area where the slopes are not so distinctly defined the boundaries follow a series of minor roads and the A32.



Key Characteristics

- **Small undulating hills** rising to 80m AOD at Farley Hill. The islands of higher land express the underlying geology, of London Clay overlain by Bagshot Formation sands and Sixth River Terrace deposits, which produce poorer soils making it unsuitable for agriculture. The lower clay slopes support mixed agriculture.
- **Small ponds and open water bodies**, possibly from former gravel or clay pits are scattered throughout the area, including Farley Hill West pond, a proposed LWS.
- **Extensive woodland network** of mixed, coniferous and deciduous woodland and copses, including areas of BAP priority habitat and ancient woodland, many of which are designated as LWS. Farley Hill Woods also contains small areas of remnant heathland habitat.
- **Intricate small scale landscape** with small sinuous pastures enclosed by the woodland, and arable fields on lower slopes bounded by thick overgrown hedgerows with hedgerow trees. Early enclosure field systems cover an extensive area.
- **Marginal land uses** including pony paddocks with associated stables bound by post and rail fencing and semi-industrial uses of farmland which influence the rural character.
- **Some large agricultural buildings** which are highly visible within the small scale landscape.
- **Historic parkland associated with Farley Hall** (Grade I listed). The parkland was laid out in early-mid 18th century, with possible contribution from Charles Bridgeman, and is a Grade II Registered Park and Garden.
- **Rural settlement pattern** of closely spaced farmsteads, the hamlet at Farley Hill and 18th and 19th century country houses with a strong vernacular of brick, timber-framing, thatch and clay tile. A new estate development on the former Poperinghe Barracks disturbs this pattern.
- **Network of footpaths and bridleways and quiet rural lanes and tracks, some sunken**, which wind through the woodlands, bordered by bulky hedgerows and often without kerbs or intrusive signage.
- **Views to the river valleys of the Blackwater, Broadwater and Loddon**, with this area forming a **wooded backdrop** to views from the surrounding landscape.
- **Secluded, remote character** of the landscape enclosed within woodland, with an experience of dark skies.

Natural Landscape

- L2.1 The area comprises a convoluted series of small knolls or hills rising to 80m AOD centred on Farley Hill, expressing the geology of London Clay overlain by sands and gravels of the Bagshot Formation, Sixth River Terrace Gravels and Head Gravels. Water shed from the higher land has eroded valleys down the sides of the hills forming a complex and small scale landscape. Streams still flow down these valleys and there are drainage ditches in others. There are disused gravel pits on Farley Hill, and a number of small open water bodies may have been gravel or clay pits. The Farley Hill West Pond is a proposed Local Wildlife Site (LWS) for its very high toad population.
- L2.2 On the central area of Farley Hill the poor fertility of the soil makes it unsuitable for agriculture and here the land use is largely woodland, which ranges across the area both on the hill tops and the sides of the slopes. The woodland is mixed deciduous with conifers, and Scots pine is

particularly noticeable in the Farley Hill area, along with beech, birch, holly, yew and rhododendron. The woods are irregular in outline and vary in size including small blocks loosely connected to the larger areas. These woodlands often have heathy elements as they developed on slightly sandy soils, for example the small remnant area of heath at the Farley Hill Woods complex. Seven of the woodlands are designated as LWS, for the BAP priority habitat lowland mixed deciduous woodland.

- L2.3 On the more fertile soil over the London Clay, the lower slopes of the hills support arable farming mixed with pasture. Areas of rough grazing and paddocks are also evident. Fields are small and sinuous in outline following the varied topography of the hill slopes and often enclosed or partially enclosed by woodland. The hedgerows and hedgerow trees add to the rural, wooded character of the area with their overgrown appearance. The paddocks detract from the unity of the landscape as they are geometric in outline with post and rail fences rather than hedges, although they are small scale. There are large agricultural buildings, and farms with semi-industrial use, including an anaerobic digester plant at Hill Farm and substation and breakers yard south of Ducks Nest Farm, which also disrupt the small-scale field pattern.
- L2.4 The historic parkland of Farley Hall occupies a central block of Farley Hill, bounded by public lanes, with gardens and an early to mid-18th century landscape park possibly designed (at least in part) by Charles Bridgeman, and designated as Grade II Registered Park and Garden. The Hall stands at the edge of the woodland with views across to Swallowfield Park and the Loddon valley. The woodland to the east of the hall may have been part of the pleasure gardens, and the more open terraced lawns to the west give way to parkland running down to the lake. The park extends its influence on the landscape through the lodges, two of which survive, and the holly, yew and laurel hedge along Bunglers Hill. There is BAP priority habitat lowland wood pasture and parkland recorded.

Cultural Landscape

- L2.5 The Roman road between London and Calleva (Silchester), known locally as the Devil's Highway, enters the area at Lea Copse where it can be traced for a short length. There is however, little evidence of either prehistoric or Romano-British settlement. Place names such as Farley and Langley containing "-leah" (a woodland clearing) indicates settlement in the forest landscape which later formed part of the Royal Forest of Windsor. The area is characterised by a low level of settlement of closely spaced farmsteads linked by a network of lanes, including the former Wokingham Lane which runs west from Langley Common.
- L2.6 The piecemeal clearance of woodland to form cultivatable land by assarting, and later by agreement, can be seen in the pattern of small irregular fields intermixed with woodland around Farley Hill. This early enclosure landscape covers an extensive area, once contiguous with adjacent lands around the Loddon (A2 and C1) and Spencers Wood (J3). A considerable amount of this early field system remains well-preserved.
- L2.7 Later development has also influenced landscape character. The elevated ground at Farley Hill became the site of the 18th and early 19th century country houses and landscaped parks at Farley Hall, Farley Hill Court and Farley Castle (formerly Wragg Castle). The possible 'motte' at Farley Hill Place may be a landscaping feature. Some of the woodland represents 19th century plantation – such as New Plantation at Farley Castle, while the small Farley Hill Common was not enclosed for farmland until 1865.
- L2.8 Settlement in this area is in a regular pattern of farms dispersed on the hill slopes, with the scattered hamlet of Farley Hill crowning the central higher area. Grander historic houses are on the high ground around the village (Farley Hall, Farley Castle, Farley Hill Court and Arborfield Court) backed by the woods, with views out over the hillsides.
- L2.9 There is a rich variety of vernacular materials and architectural styles with timber framed farmhouses and cottages, some infilled with red brick and with thatch or clay tiled roofs. There are also Victorian polychromatic Reading brick houses with clay tiles or slate roofs and decorative barge boards in the hamlet of Farley Wood. Farley Hall is an early 18th century red brick Queen Anne style house, listed at Grade I. The historic parkland around the Hall includes small brick

lodges and the former kitchen garden with a brick gardener's cottage set into the north wall (listed Grade II).

- L2.10 More recent development includes the estate development on the site of the former Poperinghe Barracks off the A327 Eversely Road (formerly part of the Arborfield Garrison) and the conversion of the early 19th century gothic style brick built Farley Castle to apartments.
- L2.11 An intricate network of winding rural roads and lanes, bridleways and footpaths links the farms and hamlets, and are used for recreation. The lanes are highly rural in character, a small proportion are sunken, bordered by bulky hedgerows and by woodland. They are without kerbs, sometimes with rough grassed triangular islands at junctions and with little intrusive signage. The roads are becoming busier, and traffic is now an issue. Informal passing places have also been created.

Perceptual Landscape

- L2.12 The woods form a wooded horizon, framing views across the Loddon, Broadwater and Blackwater river valleys and strengthening the wooded character of the borough. The enclosure given by the woods on the hills themselves adds drama to the open views out across the valleys.
- L2.13 There is a quiet and rural ambiance, and although the landscape is accessible, it still feels secluded and tranquil, with dark skies.

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- **Distinctive hilly landform and wooded skyline** visible and forming a backdrop in the wider landscape.
- **Variety and complexity of mixed broadleaved woodland**, some of which is ancient in origin, with high biodiversity value reflected in BAP priority habitats and LWS designations.
- **Intimate pattern of pastures, woodland and arable farmland** provides scenic quality and visual diversity.
- **Recreational value** of the network of the tree-lined and enclosed byways and footpaths allowing access and enjoyment of the countryside in close proximity to urban areas.
- **Rural pattern of farms and hamlets**, which are well integrated into the wooded landscape and display a **strong vernacular** of timber-framed farmhouses and cottages, with polychromatic Reading brick, clay-tiled or thatched roofs.
- **Sunken winding rural lanes and tracks with mature hedgerows** are visually appealing and add rural character to the landscape.
- **Historic parkland landscape** associated with the Farley Hill estate, designated as a Registered Park and Garden, provides a cultural record of the past and layers of history within the landscape.
- **Contrast between the enclosure created by the woods and framed views** across the Loddon, Broadwater and Blackwater river valleys.
- **Areas with a strong sense of seclusion and rural tranquility**, with naturalistic perceptual qualities and experience of dark skies due to the lack of settlement.

Landscape Condition

This is a distinctive hilly landscape with an intact pattern of pastures, woodland and arable farming interspersed with vernacular settlements. These provide a strong sense of place and strong perceptual

qualities of seclusion and remoteness resulting in a **good condition**. However increasing traffic levels are affecting the tranquillity of the area. The presence of large agricultural buildings and semi-industrial uses for farms is incongruous, as is the replacement of hedgerows with fencing.

Key Issues

- Loss of structure and species diversity in deciduous woodland has occurred in the past through cessation of coppice management. However, there are positive signs that woodlands are being brought back into management.
- Effects on tree health or species composition of woodland as a consequence of pathogens and climate change.
- Spread of sycamore, rhododendron and other invasive/exotic species into native deciduous woodland is threatening the locally distinctive species composition of these woodlands.
- Influence of woodland management on wider landscape character, in particular affecting wooded ridgelines.
- Hedgerow loss associated with the expansion of fields and intensification of agriculture.
- Loss of remnant of heath habitats as a result of scrub encroachment.
- Changes in agricultural practice, including conversion of livestock grazing to horse paddocks, are leading to a decline in traditional management regimes and loss of traditional features such as hedgerows and hedgerow trees. Temporary fencing and structures resulting in a decline in rural intactness.
- Lack of recruitment of young trees (through natural regeneration or planting) required to rebalance the age structure of parkland and hedgerow trees is an on-going threat to the character of the landscape.
- Potential pressure for more paddocks, particularly at settlement edges leading to a fragmentation of the rural landscape.
- Recreational pressure leading to erosion of special ecological features and other landscape features.
- Demand for new residential development and supporting infrastructure outside the area impacting on landscape character. The proximity of development in relation to the Arborfield Garrison SDL development (in adjoining LCA M1) may affect the tranquillity and character of the area.
- Infrastructure associated with new development outside and inside the area, particularly the Arborfield Cross Relief Road which crosses the north of the area, and increased traffic on the Eversley Road.
- Increase in traffic on small lanes leading to a loss of tranquillity and resulting in unofficial passing places and erosion of verges. This may lead to demands for upgrading the network of rural lanes with new signage, line painting and widening which threatens their intimate rural character.
- Demand for densification and infill within existing settlements leading to loss of features such as trees, woodland and historic features, such as the small estate on the former Poperinghe Barracks.
- A modern trend towards close-boarded fencing of garden boundaries leading to the loss of green infrastructure and biodiversity at the local level.

- Pressure for further semi-industrial uses of farmland e.g. anaerobic digestion plant at Hill Farm, which can cause loss of landscape features, and increase traffic to and from the site.
- Potential pressure for built development on the skyline leading to loss of wooded ridges which are characteristic of the local landscape.
- This character area contains a reservoir of 'dark skies', particularly to the south of the area. Light pollution is a key issue affecting the night landscape.
- Increasing demand for communication masts, pylons and poles leading to visual intrusion of these elements in the elevated landscape.

Landscape Strategy

To maintain the landscape character of the *Farley Hill Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills* the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance the existing wooded and secluded character.

The key aspects to be conserved are the views, intimate pattern of pastures, tranquillity and dark skies, woodland and arable farmland and rural settlement pattern linked by narrow lanes. There are opportunities to restore and actively manage the historic parkland, ancient woodland coppice and the connecting hedgerows. Marginal farmland and paddocks should also be enhanced.

In terms of development, the aim is to conserve the sparse settlement pattern, and maintain the low density of development avoiding encroachment from the new development at Arborfield.

Landscape Guidelines

- **Conserve and enhance the wooded character of the landscape**, including BAP priority habitats and ancient woodlands, designated as LWS. Continue to promote appropriate management through natural regeneration, control of non-native species and coppicing as a management tool for neglected woodland.
- **Increase the extent of native deciduous woodland**, using locally occurring native species in order to provide screening of roads and development. Plan for the next generation of hedgerow trees with a programme of tree planting. Seek to avoid introduction of coniferous boundaries and shelterbelts.
- **Conserve the rural qualities of the farmed landscape**. Manage and enhance the wildlife interest of agricultural fields by encouraging the creation of uncultivated field margins and other wildlife-friendly farming methods around intensively farmed fields.
- **Conserve and manage hedgerows** as important wildlife habitats and landscape features, as well as the links they provide across the landscape and between areas of woodland. Reinststate or repair hedgerows with native species where there are opportunities to do so.
- **Manage the integration of equine related activities into the landscape** through the maintenance of existing boundaries or restoration of hedgerows and control of associated built development.
- **Conserve and protect the intricate landscape pattern of woodland and mixed pasture and arable fields**, and encourage appropriate management of grassland by grazing.
- **Conserve and protect the parkland landscapes**, and plan for the next generation of parkland trees, including BAP priority habitat lowland wood pasture and parkland.
- **Conserve, enhance and manage heathland habitats**, particularly from changes in land use and encroachment by secondary woodland and scrub. An appropriate heathland management

regime is critical.

- **Conserve the individual identity of the hamlets, farmsteads and manors through control of new development.** In particular avoid the spread of development from Arborfield into the area.
- **Enhance informal recreational enjoyment of the landscape** but balance this with continued conservation of valuable semi-natural habitats. Consider zoning of activities to ensure ecologically valuable or more sensitive elevated landscapes are protected from damaging activities and ensure appropriate management of informal recreation, particularly in relation to the Rights of Way network and connections to new residential areas.
- **Maintain and enhance the character of the rural winding lanes with their unimproved road side verges.** Resist unsympathetic highway improvements or widening that would threaten their rural character, particularly in the most rural areas.
- **Integrate the new urban edge of the development at Arborfield** through planting of woodland and large-species trees to provide visual screening and a positive interface between the built up and rural areas.
- **Use appropriate tree planting to help integrate new roads, particularly in relation to the Arborfield Cross Relief Road** and its connection via Eversley Road.
- **Enhance sense of place through careful design** (including siting, massing, scale, materials and landscape – and sensitive lighting to retain dark skies at night) to minimise the impacts of any potential new development on valuable attributes. Take particular care to minimise the visual impact of commercial farm enterprises. Restrict unsympathetic boundary changes around existing properties.
- **Conserve distinctive wooded character of undeveloped skylines.** Consider the impact of any development on skylines, particularly vertical elements which would have the potential to be highly visible from adjacent character areas, and the Loddon and Blackwater valleys. Develop sympathetic fell cycles to maintain positive character, particularly phased cycles along sensitive skylines to ensure that the wooded backdrop is maintained. Particular care should be taken in the siting of communication masts or other vertical elements, which have the potential to be highly visible in this elevated landscape.
- **Protect the framed views** across the river valleys
- **Protect the strong perceptions of tranquillity** and intimate character of the landscape, including the experience of dark skies through the control of development.



L2: Farley Hill Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills

