

Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment

September 2024

Land North of School Road,
Arborfield Cross,
Wokingham

Prepared by
CSA Environmental

On behalf of:
Croudace Homes

Report No: CSA/6541/01

Report Reference	Revision	Date	Prepared by	Approved by	Comments
CSA/6541/01	-	25/07/24	JP	CA	First issue
	A	31/07/24	JP	BS	Amended footpath layout
	B	08/08/24	JP	BS	Updated to client comments
	C	14/08/24	JP	CA	Amended basin layout
	D	14/08/24	JP	CA	Revised access and boundary
	E	28/08/24	JP	CA	Minor edits to text
	F	12/09/24	JP	BS	Further edits to text
	G	16/09/24	JP	CA	Further edits to text



CONTENTS	Page
1.0 Introduction	2
2.0 Landscape Policy Context	2
3.0 Site Context	9
4.0 Site Description and Visibility	13
5.0 Suitability of the Site to Accommodate Development	19
6.0 Conclusion	27

Appendices

Appendix A: Aerial Photograph

Appendix B: Site Location Plan

Appendix C: Photosheets

Appendix D: Designations and Local Policy Plan

Appendix E: National Landscape Policy Context

Appendix F: Landscape Strategy Plan

Appendix G: Methodology and Summary Landscape and Visual Effects

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 CSA Environmental has been appointed by Croudace Homes, Vortal Homes Limited and Falcon Developments (SE) Limited to undertake a landscape and visual impact assessment of Land North of School Road, Arborfield Cross, Wokingham (the 'Site'). This is in regard to an outline planning application for a proposed residential development of up to 95 dwellings together with open space and associated works. Means of access to be considered (with Appearance, Landscaping, Layout and Scale to be reserved).
- 1.2 The Site lies within the administrative area of Wokingham Borough Council. The location and extent of the Site is shown on the Site Location Plan at **Appendix B** and on the Aerial Photograph at **Appendix A** and a selection of photographs from within the Site and from public vantage points in the surrounding area are provided in **Appendix C**.
- 1.3 This assessment describes the existing landscape character and quality of the Site and the surrounding area. The report then goes on to discuss the suitability of the Site to accommodate the development proposals, and the potential landscape and visual effects on the wider area.

Methodology

- 1.4 This assessment is based on a site visit undertaken by a suitably qualified and experienced Landscape Architect in May 2024. The weather conditions at the time were sunny with light cloud. Visibility was very good.
- 1.5 In landscape and visual impact assessments, a distinction is drawn between landscape effects (i.e. effects on the character or quality of the landscape irrespective of whether there are any views of the landscape, or viewers to see them) and visual effects (i.e. effects on people's views of the landscape from public vantage points, including public rights of way and other areas with general public access, as well as effects from residential properties). This report therefore considers the potential impact of the development on both landscape character and visibility. The methodology utilised in this report is contained in **Appendix G**.
- 1.6 Photographs contained within this document (**Appendix C**) were taken using a digital camera with a lens focal length approximating to 50mm, to give a similar depth of vision to the human eye. In some instances, images have been combined to create a panorama. The photographs and visualisations within this report have been prepared in general conformance with the Landscape Institute's Technical Guidance Note 06/19, as set out in the Methodology in **Appendix G**.

2.0 LANDSCAPE POLICY CONTEXT

National Planning Context

- 2.1 National planning policy is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework ('NPPF'). Section 15 of the NPPF deals with conserving and enhancing the natural environment. Paragraph 180 of the document states that the planning system should contribute to the protection and enhancement of the natural and local environment through, among other things, protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, '*... (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan)*'. The paragraph also outlines that the planning system should recognise 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, and of trees and woodland.*'
- 2.2 The Planning Practice Guidance ('PPG') adds further context to the policies contained in the NPPF. The guidance as relevant to this assessment covers landscape and the natural environment and the design of new developments.
- 2.1 The National Design Guide (2019) has been produced as part of the PPG. It provides guidance to *illustrate '... how well-designed places that are beautiful, enduring and successful can be achieved in practice.'* The National Model Design Code (July, 2021) expands upon the ten characteristics of good design providing an overarching framework for design.
- 2.2 Those sections of the NPPF and PPG relevant to this assessment are summarised in **Appendix E**.

Local Policy Context

- 2.3 The development plan relevant to the Site is the Core Strategy, adopted by Wokingham Borough Council in 2010. It sets out the planning objectives for the Borough for the period 2010 - 2026. Policies relating to the Site and the landscape as relevant to this assessment are summarised below.
- 2.4 **Policy CP1 Sustainable development** notes that planning permission will be granted for development proposals that prioritize sustainable development by maintaining or enhancing the quality of the environment and preserving water quality.
- 2.5 **Policy CP3 General Principles for development** outlines that planning permission will be granted for development proposals that adhere to

several key principles: appropriate scale, high-quality design, functionality, and safety without compromising neighbouring amenities or ecological features. These proposals should enhance the site's ability to support biodiversity, integrate with surroundings, and contribute to community infrastructure and facilities.

- 2.6 **Policy CP7 Biodiversity** requires that sites designated as internationally or nationally important for nature conservation will be conserved and protected from inappropriate development. Development that may harm designated sites, habitats, species of principal importance, or compromise biodiversity action plans will only be permitted if it's demonstrated that the need for the proposal outweighs the need to safeguard nature conservation. Mitigation measures or appropriate compensation must be provided to offset any potential harm.
- 2.7 **Policy CP11 Proposals Outside Development Limits (including countryside)** indicates that proposals outside development limits may be permitted if they contribute to sustainable rural enterprises, promote recreation in the countryside or bring about environmental improvements.
- 2.8 **Policy CP18 Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location** sets out the phased delivery of 3500 dwellings at Arborfield Garrison including affordable homes and also employment, retail facilities, two new primary schools and a new secondary school.

Adopted Managing Development Delivery Local Plan

- 2.9 Adopted in 2014, the Managing Development Delivery Local Plan builds on the strategy set out in the Core Strategy. Again, the document sets out the planning objectives for the Borough for the period 2010 – 2026. Policies relating to the Site and the landscape as relevant to this assessment are summarised below.
- 2.10 **Policy CC01 Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development** establishes a presumption in favour of sustainable development as per the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 2.11 **Policy CC02 Development Limits** delineates development limits for each settlement. Planning permission at settlement edges requires demonstration that the proposed development is within these limits and respects the transition between built-up areas and open countryside, considering the character of adjacent landscapes.
- 2.12 **Policy CC03 Green Infrastructure, Trees and Landscaping** sets out that development proposals are expected to enhance the Borough's Green Infrastructure networks. This includes provisions for new green spaces, the

protection and enhancement of existing ones, and the incorporation of high-quality landscaping. Additionally, proposals must ensure the protection and retention of existing trees, hedges, and other landscape features, with an emphasis on native planting.

- 2.13 **Policy CC09 Development and Flood Risk** requires thorough consideration of all flood risks.
- 2.14 **Policy CC10 Sustainable Drainage** mandates that all development proposals must manage surface water sustainably, considering climate change impacts.
- 2.15 **Policy TB05 Housing Mix** states that proposals for residential development must include a housing mix that aligns with the area's character and meets current and projected household needs, including affordable housing.
- 2.16 **Policy TB08 Open Space, sport and recreational facilities standards for residential development** stipulates that development proposals with the potential to reduce open space or recreational facilities must align with paragraph 74 of the National Planning Policy Framework. Furthermore, the policy requires that open space, indoor or outdoor play areas, as well as sports and recreational facilities, should be provided on-site as part of residential development proposals.
- 2.17 **Policy TB21 Landscape Character** states that proposals must address the Council's Landscape Character Assessment, considering landscape quality, strategy, sensitivity, and key issues.
- 2.18 **Policy TB24 Designated Heritage Assets (Listed Buildings, Historic Parks and Gardens, Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Conservation Areas)** outlines the Borough Council's commitment to conserving and enhancing designated heritage assets, including Historic Parks and Gardens, Scheduled Monuments, and Conservation Areas. Development proposals must demonstrate that they will conserve and, where feasible, enhance the important character and special interest of these assets and their settings.

Supplementary Planning Guidance

- 2.19 The following supplementary planning documents provide information relevant to the Site. This information is summarised below.

Arborfield and Newland Village Design Statement

- 2.20 Adopted in 2015, the Arborfield and Newland Village Design Statement sets out how the local community wishes the characteristics of the area

to be preserved and enhanced. Policies relating to the Site and the landscape as relevant to this assessment are summarised below.

- 2.21 **Policy 1 Impact on Surroundings** notes that development should have regard to the surrounding landscape and neighbouring development, particularly where this is of unique local character.
- 2.22 **Policy 2 Variety of Housing Styles** comments that the parish enjoys diverse housing styles, spanning from historic estates to terraces, enriching its architectural landscape. Encouragement is given for diversity to enhance street character, with building designs sensitively aligned to neighbouring housing features.
- 2.23 **Policy 3 Position of Buildings** notes that building lines should remain set back from the road to preserve the area's character, contributing significantly to its rural ambiance.
- 2.24 **Policy 4 Farmland, trees and boundaries** states that the parish features extensive farmland, characterized by large fields bordered by hedgerows, predominantly arable and sheep pasture, with smaller fenced paddocks near settlements. Hedgerow trees, small woodlands, and shelterbelts enhance scenic views and provide recreational spaces. Preservation of high-quality trees, particularly native broadleaf species, is prioritized. Additionally, boundaries should blend with existing features, favouring natural frontages like low hedges while ensuring compatibility with the area's character.

Neighbourhood Plan

Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan

- 2.25 The Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan, produced by Arborfield and Newland Parish Council, was made in April 2020. Policies relating to the Site and the landscape as relevant to this assessment are summarised below.
- 2.26 **Policy IRS1 Preservation of separation of settlements** notes that in order to safeguard the division between settlements, development proposals beyond designated development limits must adhere to Policy CP11 of the Core Strategy. This entails preserving the rural landscape's character and appearance while ensuring that new developments do not contribute to the merging of existing settlements, whether physically, visually, or in perception.
- 2.27 **Policy IRS2 Recognise, respect and preserve identity and rural setting of settlements** underscores the importance of recognising, respecting, and preserving the identity and rural setting of settlements in development

proposals. This entails considering the scale, form, and density of development, as well as using materials that reflect the local character. Applications are expected to align with guidance outlined in the Village Design Statements for Arborfield and Barkham.

- 2.28 **Policy IRS3 Protection and enhancement of the natural environment and green spaces** emphasizes the importance of preserving and enriching the natural environment and green spaces within the area. Development proposals must prioritize conservation efforts, aiming to prevent biodiversity loss and ideally achieve a net gain. Additionally, the policy guides development on designated Public Open Spaces, advocating for their enhanced use or adherence to national planning policies if space loss is proposed. Locally valued natural assets, like The Coombes woodland, are mentioned for conservation and enhancement.
- 2.29 **Policy IRS4 Protection and enhancement of the historic character of the area** prioritises preserving and enhancing the historic character of the area in development proposals. It requires projects to protect or enhance specific areas like Arborfield Cross Conservation Area and Chamberlain's Farm Area of Special Character, as well as the local historic environment, including Listed buildings and Scheduled Monuments.
- 2.30 **Policy TC1 Retention of existing valued community facilities** prioritises retaining valued community facilities in new development proposals.
- 2.31 **Policy AD1 New development within development limits** states that the neighbourhood supports new housing within existing Development Limits, including Arborfield Garrison, provided it meets plan requirements, with preference for brownfield sites.
- 2.32 **Policy AD3 High quality development with generous open space, properly landscaped** states that all new developments must maintain the rural and historical character of the area while delivering high-quality design. This includes recognising and contributing sensitively to local character, considering density in harmony with the surroundings to promote spaciousness and variety.
- 2.33 **Policy AD4 Address local flood risk management** requires planning applications for development to address local flood risk management comprehensively. This includes incorporating Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) principles. Additionally, measures such as swales, ponds, and tree planting should be implemented to slow water runoff rates, with consideration given to known local flooding problems.

- 2.34 **Policy GA2 Implement local network of green routes for non-motorised users** requires development proposals to facilitate the establishment of a comprehensive network of Greenways and other Public Rights of Way (PROWs). This includes supporting the creation of all-weather routes, safe crossings at intersections with primary routes, and improved connectivity across the Plan Area. Additionally, proposals should encourage sustainable transport options, like safe routes to schools, and enhance access to the countryside and nearby destinations for recreational use.

Emerging Policy

Local Plan Update

- 2.35 At the time of writing, Wokingham Borough Council has noted that work is underway on a new Local Plan, a 'Local Plan Update', which will supersede the existing Core Strategy Plan, and put in place a new planning strategy for the period to 2040. At the Full Council meeting held on the 25th July 2024 the Council communicated that it was the intention to present the final publication version of the Local Plan Update at the meeting, however, this was delayed due to outstanding final inputs from consultees and assurances from external legal advisors on soundness. Accordingly, the status and future adoption date of the Local Plan Update is currently uncertain.

3.0 SITE CONTEXT

Site Context

- 3.1 The Site comprises two parcels of land on the north eastern edge of Arborfield Cross. The western parcel is located immediately to the north of The Coombes Primary School and the eastern parcel located immediately north of School Road. The settlement of Arborfield Cross is a nucleated village, situated approximately 8km south east of the centre of Reading.
- 3.2 School Road, to the south of the Site, extends from the roundabout junction within the north of Arborfield Cross, to Langley Common Road in the east. The main built up area of Arborfield Cross extends south and westward. To the east of the Site is Wood Lane (Byway ARBO10) which extends northwards to a sewage works. Beyond Wood Lane to the east is a large, detached property and associated grounds, a horse paddock and residential built form along the northern edge of School Road (extending up to Langley Common Road). To the immediate west of the Site is Cole Lane (Byway ARB09) which continues north eastwards and is lined with substantial hedgerows on both sides. To the north of the Site are agricultural fields with the aforementioned sewage works located approximately 250m north of the Site.
- 3.3 Fields in the surrounding area typically have strongly defined boundaries comprising hedgerows and mature trees. Ancient Woodland called 'The Coombes' lies about 750m north east of the Site, with the Bearwood Lakes golf course located immediately beyond that.

National Landscape Character

- 3.4 Natural England has produced profiles for England's National Character Areas ('NCA'), which divides England into 159 distinct natural areas, defined by a unique combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity, cultural and economic activity. The Site is located within NCA 129 Thames Basin Heaths with NCA 115 Thames Valley just to the north of the Site.
- 3.5 The Thames Valley character area is a wedge-shaped area spreading out from Reading to include Slough, Windsor and the south-west fringes of London. The Thames Basin Heaths character area stretch westwards from Weybridge in Surrey to the countryside around Newbury in Berkshire.
- 3.6 NCA 129 Thames Basin Heaths includes parts of the Metropolitan Green Belt around Chobham and the rivers Wey and Mole. West of this are

large conurbations and a major road network incorporating the M25 and M3 motorways. Key characteristics of the area relevant to the Site include:

- *Plateaux of Tertiary sands and gravels in the London Basin, with intervening river valleys floored by London Clay.*
- *High woodland cover, offering an array of colour in the autumn. Conifers and large plantations on former heathland are dominant features in the east, while the west is scattered with small, semi-natural woodlands on ancient sites.*
- *Acid, leached soils mean that farming on the plateaux is limited to rough pasture, and that alternative land uses (such as forestry, golf courses and horse paddocks) have emerged. Heather, gorse, oak and birch all thrive here. Arable land and improved pasture are found in the valleys, on alluvium.*
- *Beyond the large areas of heathland and woodland, there is a patchwork of small to medium-sized fields with woods. The legacy of historic hunting forests includes veteran trees, ancient woods, ancient hedgerows and parklands. Historic meadows remain as fragments along watercourses.*
- *Historic commons offer tranquillity and unenclosed views, while other rights of access are enjoyed across farmland, canals and downland.*
- *Valley floors are wet with ditches, numerous watercourses, ponds, waterfilled gravel pits, reedbeds and carr. Historic features include mills, relict water meadows, and canals such as the River Wey Navigations.*

3.7 NCA 115 is mainly low-lying with the River Thames providing a unifying feature through a very diverse landscape of urban and suburban settlement, infrastructure networks, commons, woodland, reservoirs and mineral workings. Key characteristics relevant to the Site include:

- *Flat and low-lying land, rising to low, river-terraced hills.*
- *The underlying geology is dominated by the London Clay which, over much of the area, is overlain by river-lain sands and gravels.*
- *The numerous hydrological features provide unity to an area which otherwise lacks homogeneity.*
- *Farming is limited. Where it survives, grazed pasture is the major land use within a generally open, flat and featureless landscape.*

The field pattern is medium-scale and irregular, with smaller fields to the west.

- *Although densely populated and developed, pockets of woodland, open grassland, parkland, wetlands and intimate meadows provide escape and tranquillity.*
- *To the south, the open Thames flood plain dominates, with its associated flat grazing land, becoming characterised by a number of formal historic landscapes on higher ground.*

Regional Landscape Character

- 3.8 The Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment (2019) considers the character of the landscape at a district level.
- 3.9 The Site falls within Landscape Character Area ('LCA') J2 Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay, which lies within the Landscape Character Type ('LCT') J Settled and Farmed Clay. LCA L1 Bearwood Wooded Sands and Gravel Hills lies just to the north of the Site.
- 3.10 The stated key characteristics of this LCA relevant to the Site include:
- **'A gently undulating landscape** between 50m and 65m AOD, underlain by London Clay with localised areas of River Terrace Gravels. Shallow wooded valleys follow the course of the Barkham Brook, which is geologically marked by areas of alluvium.
 - **Consistent pattern of water bodies** including streams, drainage channels, ditches and open water bodies of various sizes resulting from the clayey and loamy soils which impede drainage.
 - **Wooded context** provided by characteristic mature hedgerow and in-field trees, combined with woodland belts, with BAP priority habitats and ancient woodland, and the wooded horizons of the surrounding hills. This creates a loose sense of enclosure.
 - **Arable farming dominates, with pasture on higher ground** and horse paddocks near settlement. Fields are large and geometric, bound by fragmented hedgerows supported by post and wire.
 - **A dense settled character influenced by modern development** including the new garden village on the site of Arborfield Garrison and the southern edge of Wokingham which incorporates an industrial estate. There is little consistent style or form.

- **Older scattered settlement of farms, hamlets and small nucleated villages** at Barkham and Arborfield Cross. The buildings have traditional vernacular of timber framing and clay tiles, exemplified by the Conservation Area at Arborfield Cross. A number of farmhouses are listed.
- **A network of busy local roads cross the area.** They tend to be rural in character, with ditches, hedges and hedgerow trees, sometimes opening directly onto the arable fields. The A327 adds noise and movement to the area.
- **Public rights of way** run between the settlements, and provide access for recreational use.
- **A rural character away from development and roads**, with views across to adjacent character areas including across the Loddon Valley.
- **A historic road, now represented by footpaths, lanes and Victorian carriageways**, that appears on Norden's map of 1607, connecting Swallowfield Park via Arborfield Cross and the Coombes (in LCA L1), with Wokingham.'

3.11 Overall, the assessment states that the condition of the landscape is moderate, due to the pattern of arable and pastoral fields, and remnant wetland associated with Barkham Brook. The assessment notes that the hedgerow network is fragmented and further development at the Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location will further fragment the rural settlement pattern.

3.12 The assessment outlines landscape guidelines for the LCA. Overall, the strategy is to conserve and enhance the remaining rural character. The specific guidelines for the area, relevant to the Site, include:

- **'Conserve woodlands, including ancient woodland**, BAP priority habitats and remnant standard trees. 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 and linking woodland habitats. Seek to avoid introduction of coniferous boundaries and shelterbelts.
- **Conserve the open and rural qualities of the farmed landscape** which provides a physical and visual separation or gap between

settlements. Protect the individual identity of towns and villages, and retain their sense of physical and visual separation. In particular protect the sensitive areas of open land between Arborfield Garrison and Barkham, and Barkham and Wokingham town, and Arborfield Garrison and Arborfield Cross.

- **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 with standard trees** 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. Plan for the next generation of hedgerow trees with a programme of tree planting.
- **Conserve and protect the landscape pattern of mixed pasture and arable fields** and encourage appropriate management of grassland by grazing.
- **Conserve, enhance and manage wetland and woodland habitats** including within LWS. Protect the habitats from development, changes in land use and encroachment by secondary woodland and scrub.
- Conserve the value of Arborfield Cross Conservation Area and the listed and historic buildings, including farmhouses, and non-designed heritage assets such as Second World War defences.
- **Conserve and enhance the integration of urban edges** through wooded boundaries and large-species trees to provide visual screening and create a positive interface between the built up and rural areas particularly around Wokingham town, Arborfield Garrison, and Finchampstead.
- **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 potential impacts of any new development on valuable attributes.
- **Maintain and enhance the character of rural lanes** resisting unsympathetic highways improvements, infrastructure and signage particularly in the most rural areas.
- **Conserve views to distinctive wooded horizons.** 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.'

- 3.13 LCA L1 Bearwood Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills is described as a self-contained area of higher ground which formed part of the historic Bearwood estate. The area is said to contain undulating hills characterised by dense woodland.
- 3.14 The Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape is described in Wokingham Borough Council's Valued Landscapes Topic Paper (2020). It centres around the Registered Park and Garden of Bearwood and with the village of Barkham to its extreme south. The Topic Paper reiterates the landscape characteristics articulated in The Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment. The concept of valued landscape is an emerging policy in the Local Plan Update for the period to 2040.
- 3.15 From our own assessment of the Site and surroundings, we would note that in terms of the wider landscape character of the area, the Site is broadly representative of the District LCA description of LCA J2 Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay. It consists of arable farmland of fairly geometric fields divided by hedgerows.

Statutory and Non-Statutory Designations

- 3.16 The Multi Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside Map ('MAGIC') and the policies maps contained within the Wokingham Borough Council Local Plan indicate that the Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character or quality (Designations and Local Policy Plan in **Appendix D**).
- 3.17 There are two trees on the boundary of the Site covered by Tree Protection Orders ('TPOs'). An area of commercial premises is indented into the southern corner of the Site. Along the boundary of this indent a Sycamore tree is covered by TPO-1926-2023-T6 and an Ash tree by TPO-1926-2023-T5. This was confirmed by consulting the online mapping provided by Wokingham Borough Council on 16th May 2024.

Conservation Area and Listed Buildings

- 3.18 The Arborfield Cross Conservation Area is located approximately 200m west of the Site. There are a number of Grade II Listed Buildings within the Conservation Area. The Site is not visible from within the Conservation Area, including the area around the Grade II listed Arborfield Cross War Memorial. The Grade II Listed Building Langleypond Farmhouse lies immediately east of the Site.

Public Rights of Way

- 3.19 Cole Lane Byway ARBO9 runs from the roundabout where School Road meets Eversley Road immediately north of the north-western boundary of the Site and continues through open fields to The Coombes woodland about 1km away. Cole Lane is proposed by Wokingham Borough Council's Greenways Project to become part of Greenway Route K which would run from Arborfield along Greensward Lane, Swallowfield Road and Cole Lane to The Coombes. An historic road *'that appears on Norden's map of 1607, connecting Swallowfield Park via Arborfield Cross and the Coombes with Wokingham'* is mentioned in the Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment (2019) as characteristics of LCA J2 Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay. Cole Lane is part of this historic road.
- 3.20 Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 runs from the southern corner of the Site immediately south of the south-eastern boundary of the Site before turning north west to meet Cole Lane Byway ARBO9 about 500m north of the Site. Just north of this point Ellis's Hill Byway ARBO8 runs west to meet Mole Road B3030. For details refer to the OS Mapping on the Site Location Plan in **Appendix B**.

4.0 SITE DESCRIPTION AND VISIBILITY

Site Description

- 4.1 The Site consists of two roughly rectangular arable fields between The Coombes Primary School and commercial premises on Wood Lane, with a combined area of 8.25ha. The western field is referred to below as Parcel A and the eastern field as Parcel B as shown on the Aerial Photograph in **Appendix A**. A derelict agricultural vehicle was present near the western corner of Parcel A at the time of the site visit.
- 4.2 Both parcels are bounded on all four sides by out-grown hedges with many mature trees which provide a strong sense of enclosure to the Site. The two parcels are also separated from each other by an out-grown hedge with mature English Oak trees. There is a rectangular indent into Parcel B to its southern corner adjacent to the junction of School Road and Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 where there are commercial premises. The hedge here is much lower, though there are a few trees, so there is intervisibility with the Site. Towards the southern corner of Parcel A there is a lower portion of the hedge where there is some intervisibility with The Coombes Primary School.
- 4.3 An agricultural access track runs from Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 along the outside edge of the north-eastern boundary of the Site giving access to Parcel B via a gap in the hedge in its eastern corner adjacent to Wood Lane Byway ARBO10. Access to Parcel A is from the track through a gap in the hedge in the northern corner. This is adjacent to Cole Lane Byway ARBO9 but there is no access to the byway through the dense hedge along Cole Lane. There is also no direct access between the parcels through the dense hedge separating the two parcels.

Topography

- 4.4 The Site is located on a gently north-east facing slope which falls from approximately 60m Above Ordnance Datum ('AOD') on the south-western edge to slightly below 50m AOD in the north-eastern corner. Parcel A slopes diagonally down to the north from high ground around The Coombes Primary School. Parcel B slopes diagonally down to the east from the high ground around the school.
- 4.5 To the north east the land levels off either side of Barkham Brook that runs north to flow into the River Loddon about 2.5km away. The other side of the brook the land rises again to The Coombes woodland. Just south west of the Site the landform flattens off at around 65m AOD around the centre of Arborfield Cross. Beyond this the land falls again to the north west and west to the River Loddon.

- 4.6 Immediately south of the Site across School Road is an area of pastoral land which slopes down in a V-shape either side of a small brook from a high point around 60m AOD adjoining rear gardens of dwellings on Link Way to 50m AOD to the east of the area. To the south west the ground gently rises further with local high points around Arborfield Court and Long Copse just above 75m AOD.

Visibility

- 4.7 An assessment of the visibility of the Site was undertaken and a series of photographs taken from public vantage points, rights of way and public highways. The photo locations are illustrated on the Location Plan and Aerial Photograph contained in **Appendices A** and **B** and on the photographs in **Appendix C**.
- 4.8 From our assessment, the Site is well contained against the existing built edge of Arborfield Cross, with only glimpses of the Site available from the majority of public vantage points. This is mainly due to the dense out-grown hedges with mature trees surrounding almost the whole Site. Although there are a number of public rights of way across the higher ground around Ellis's Hill Farm to the north, they run between hedges with dense hedgerow trees and have several additional layers of hedgerows between them and the Site. Overall, views are largely confined to glimpses from the stretch of School Road to the south west of Parcel B and partial visibility from the stretch of Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 to the south east. The key views of the Site are described in the tables contained in **Appendix G** and are summarised below.

Near and Middle Distance Views

South

- 4.9 There is a gap in the out-grown hedge near the southern corner of Parcel A adjoining The Coombes Primary School and to the west of this there are some thinner sections of the hedgerow. From parts of the school there are views of Parcel A from the upper storeys (Reciprocal view in **Photograph 1**) and there are some other of glimpses of Parcel A from the upper floors of the school and from parts of the edge of the grounds (Reciprocal view in **Photographs 4 and 5**).
- 4.10 The commercial premises indented into the southern corner of Parcel B have relatively low hedges with only a few trees. The premises are predominantly single-storied but there is some visibility from them (Reciprocal views in **Photographs 6 and 7**). There is some visibility of trees standing on the Site from the stretch of School Road to the south beyond these premises (**Photograph 18**). There is no visibility of the Site from

Langleypond Farmhouse to the south west due to the mature coniferous trees in its grounds. Neither is there visibility from the stretch of School Road to the south west beyond Langleypond Farmhouse (**Photograph 17**).

- 4.11 From the stretch of School Road between Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 and The Coombes Primary School there are glimpsed filtered views of Parcel B between vegetation (**Photographs 10 and 19**). From the stretch south of the school itself views are entirely obscured by trees and the two-storey buildings which are especially tall in the style of Victorian school buildings (**Photograph 11**).

West

- 4.12 There is no visibility of the Site from dwellings in the village to the south west of School Road. There is no visibility from the Conservation Area including from the Arborfield Cross War Memorial. The Site is obscured from the area around the war memorial by dense tall trees along Cole Lane Byway ARBO9 (**Photograph 12**). The vegetation along Cole Lane is sufficiently dense to eliminate virtually all visibility of the Site though there would likely be some filtered glimpsed views in winter.

North

- 4.13 There is no visibility of the Site from the public rights of way in proximity to the Site to the north due to dense trees running along them (**Photographs 13 and 14**). There are views of the Site from Arborfield Sewage Treatment Works (Reciprocal views in **Photographs 2 and 3**). However, there is no public access to these facilities.

East

- 4.14 Along most of Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 the vegetation is dense and there is no visibility of the Site. There are a few places immediately to the east of the Site where gaps allow some visibility (**Photographs 15 and 16**) but there is not a continuous experience of the Site from the byway. There are heavily filtered views from the upper storeys of some of the dwellings off Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 near the north-eastern corner of Parcel B (Reciprocal view in **Photograph 9**).

Longer Distance Views

North East

- 4.15 Although there is higher ground around Ellis's Hill Farm views of the Site from public rights of way running across this high ground are obstructed

by trees alongside the route and other intervening belts of vegetation (**Photographs 20, 21 and 22**).

North West

- 4.16 As the B3030 approaches Arborfield Cross from the north, first as Mole Road then Sindlesham Road, there are views across the fields between Newland Farm and Hazeltons Copse. The views are most open on the stretch around the junction with Church Lane. However, views of the Site beyond are obscured by intervening landform and vegetation, especially the vegetation along Cole Lane Byway ARBO9 (**Photographs 23 and 24**).

Landscape Quality, Value and Sensitivity

- 4.17 The Site does not carry any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character or quality. It consists of two arable fields north of School Road to the east of Arborfield Cross. The fields are utilised for relatively intensive arable cultivation. The fields are surrounded by and separated from each other by an intact structure of thick outgrown hedges in good condition. The Site is adjacent to built form of the village but not overly conspicuous as it is separated from it by substantial hedges. The Site has a generally rural and enclosed character due to the wooded character of the land facing it to the north. Overall, the Site is assessed as being of medium landscape quality.
- 4.18 The Site consists of two arable fields adjoining a primary school on the northern edge of Arborfield Cross. It contains no particular features within it which could be described as rare. There are two trees subject to Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) on the boundary of the Site but no Ancient Woodland within the Site or on its boundary. None of the trees on Site were assessed as being Category A in the survey conducted by SJA Trees in May 2024. However, the central tree belt is an intact mature landscape feature. There are no heritage designations on the Site and no designations for nature conservation interest. There is no public access onto or across the Site. There are limited views of the Site from the wider landscape, with the majority of views from nearby public vantage points being partial, owing to the hedgerows on the Site boundaries. Overall, the Site is assessed as being of medium landscape value.
- 4.19 Although the landscape associated with Bearwood estate to the north is identified in Wokingham Borough Council's Valued Landscapes Topic Paper (2020) that landscape is described in the Landscape Character Assessment as a self-contained area of higher ground characterised by dense woodland. The Site is part of a distinct landscape on lower ground

and characterised by mixed farmland. As such, it is not considered to form part of a valued landscape in respect of paragraph 180(a) of the NPPF.

- 4.20 Landscape sensitivity is judged according to the type of development proposed, in this case residential development. The Site's permanent vegetation is confined to the field boundaries including the field boundary running through the middle of the Site. The vast majority of this vegetation is capable of being retained within a sensitively designed housing layout and is not considered to be a substantial constraint to development. The Site's character is influenced by its proximity to The Coombes Primary School on the built edge of Arborfield Cross, albeit separated by a dense out-grown hedge. Accordingly, the Site is assessed as having medium sensitivity to residential development.
- 4.21 To the west of the Site lies the townscape of Arborfield Cross. There is housing from a breadth of time periods represented including Arborfield Cross Conservation Area but also some twentieth century development which does not specifically exhibit characteristics of the area. The settlement retains a strongly nucleated layout with its eponymous junction still serving as a local transport node. The Conservation Area is assessed as being of high quality and value with high sensitivity to residential development whereas the remainder of the townscape is assessed as being of medium quality and value but medium sensitivity to residential development.
- 4.22 To the south and east of the Site there is a mixed area of pastoral fields, low density linear residential development and commercial / light-industrial development lying between Arborfield Cross and Arborfield Garrison. Out-grown hedges are retained throughout. The pastoral fields show signs of sporadic sub-division for horse pasture. This landscape is assessed as being of medium-low quality and medium-low value. Sensitivity to residential development is assessed as being medium-low.
- 4.23 To the north of the Site lies another area of mixed farmland that is essentially rural in character. This area consists of pastoral fields, arable fields, small blocks of woodland and a sewage treatment works. The sewage works are low-lying and visually contained. This landscape is assessed as being medium quality and medium value. Sensitivity to residential development is assessed as being medium-high.
- 4.24 Beyond this further north is an area associated with Bearwood estate. This is identified in Wokingham Borough Council's Valued Landscapes Topic Paper (2020) and is described in the Landscape Character Assessment as a self-contained area of higher ground characterised by dense woodland. This landscape is assessed as being high quality and

high value. Sensitivity to residential development at the Site is assessed as being medium-high.

5.0 SUITABILITY OF THE SITE TO ACCOMMODATE DEVELOPMENT

5.1 The proposals relate to an outline planning application for a proposed residential development of up to 95 dwellings together with open space and associated works. A Landscape Strategy Plan (**Appendix F**) has been developed. Key features of the plan include:

- Access off School Road has been configured around an existing thinner point of the treed boundary to minimise the number and quality of trees to be removed. Any removal will be mitigated by planting of new species in keeping with the character of the road.
- New play provision including a Local Equipped Area of Play ('LEAP') and 2 further Local Areas of Play ('LAPs'). There will also be trim trails alongside recreational routes through the proposal, providing exercise opportunities for adults and teens.
- Sustainable Drainage Systems ('SuDS') for the lower ground to the north east and north west of the Site to be seeded with wildflower mix. These will contribute to Biodiversity Net Gain and form part of a robust boundary with the countryside to the north.
- Mature trees and hedgerows on the Site to be retained. Hedgerow to the east to be enhanced to protect the rural setting of the Listed Building across Wood Lane from the Site. Planting will be of native species and include a high proportion of English Oak in keeping with the existing species mix on Site. Ornamental avenue trees to define the main routes through the proposals.
- Community Orchard towards the south-east corner of the Site. A path will run past the orchard and the orchard will be adjacent to an area of naturalistic play to encourage community use of the orchard. The orchard will also contribute to Biodiversity Net Gain and help protect the rural setting of the Listed Building across Wood Lane from the Site.
- Recreational routes around and within the Site. These will offer a range of routes around the existing mature English Oak trees, through the Community Orchard and past wildflower.

5.2 The key landscape and visual effects are summarised in the tables in **Appendix G** and described in the relevant section below.

Impact on Landscape Features

- 5.3 The landscape features contained within the Site are confined to the field boundaries. There are out-grown hedges with numerous mature trees along the great majority of all four of the Site boundaries. There is also an out-grown hedge with mature English Oak trees separating Parcel A from Parcel B.
- 5.4 The Landscape Strategy Plan (**Appendix F**) shows how the Site can be developed while retaining the vast majority of the trees and hedgerows. Vehicular access from School Road would result in the loss of a group of trees along the southwestern boundary of Parcel B. There would also be some trees lost for vehicle access from the hedge dividing Parcel A from Parcel B. However, in the arboricultural report by SJA Trees all these trees were categorised as Category C and assessed as being lower quality than other surrounding trees or as not contributing significantly to the local landscape. Any tree removal required to accommodate the new access off School Road and the access road between Parcel A and Parcel B, would be offset with new trees to be replanted behind the visibility splays of the access and elsewhere throughout the Site.
- 5.5 Further compensation for losses would be provided by the proposed tree, thicket and hedgerow planting on the Site boundaries, within the development and within the new public open spaces. Overall, the development would contribute to a net increase in tree cover. The new SuDS features would also be planted with wildflower meadow grass and areas of long grass which would provide opportunities to enhance the Site's biodiversity.

Relationship to Settlement

- 5.6 Parcel A is adjacent to the buildings and grounds of The Coombes Primary School which form the north-eastern edge of Arborfield Cross. Parcel B is adjacent to Parcel A to its west. However, the Site is separated from the school grounds by a hedgerow of mature trees.
- 5.7 The existing dense tree and hedgerow vegetation to the north east and alongside Wood Lane Byway ARB010 to the east and Cole Lane Byway ARB09 to the west, combined with proposed thicket and tree planting along the eastern and western boundaries, would provide a strong edge to the proposed development and strengthen the containment from the surrounding countryside.
- 5.8 Open countryside would remain to the south of the proposals physically separating them from Arborfield Garrison and the new residential developments under construction and proposed there. The proposal would retain most of the green rural character of School Road east of

the school which gives a sense of departure from or arrival to Arborfield Cross for pedestrians and cyclists. Consequently, and in accordance with 'Policy IRS1 Preservation of Separation of Settlements', the proposed development would not contribute to the merging of settlements and there would be no perceptual reduction in the separation between Arborfield Cross and Arborfield Garrison.

Impact on Public Rights of Way

- 5.9 There are no existing public rights of way which are directly affected by the proposals.

Visual Effects

- 5.10 As discussed in Section 4, the Site is well contained within the wider landscape, with few long-distance views available due to the undulating landform north west of Arborfield Cross, combined with the dense treed field boundaries all around the Site boundaries and around the public rights of way to the north west and north east. The key visual effects of the development are summarised in the tables in **Appendix G** and briefly discussed below.

Near and Middle Distance Views

South

- 5.11 From The Coombes Primary School there would be some views of proposed dwellings in Parcel A beyond the proposed playing fields and open space. These views would be heavily filtered by existing and proposed vegetation. As the dwellings would be on lower ground views from upper-storey windows would be retained over the dwellings to the wooded higher ground around Ellis's Hill Farm to the north.
- 5.12 From the commercial premises indented into southern corner of Parcel B there would be views over the relatively low hedges of the proposed dwellings. In places these would be slightly filtered by the few trees standing on the boundary. From the stretch of School Road to the south of the commercial premises there would also be views of the dwellings though filtered by trees, landscaping in the green open spaces of the proposals and the commercial premises themselves.
- 5.13 There would be a change to the character of the stretch of School Road from the commercial premises to the school. However, the proposed access road would be located close to the boundary of the school ground and the current edge of the settlement minimising impacts on the remainder of School Road and retaining most of the wooded character of the route in and out of the village. The proposed built form

itself would be set back within the Site with new thicket and tree planting further reducing its visibility from School Road.

West

- 5.14 There would be no visibility of the proposal from the rest of the village to the south west of School Road. There would be no visibility from the Conservation Area including from the Arborfield Cross War Memorial. The proposed dwellings would be almost entirely obscured by multiple layers of vegetation along Cole Lane Byway ARBO9, although there would be heavily filtered glimpsed views of the dwellings in winter.

North

- 5.15 There would be virtually no views of the proposed development from public rights of way in proximity to the Site to the north due to the dense trees running along them. Any visibility would be limited to a small number of glimpses of roof tops through dense vegetation. The changes to the view would be minor and there would be little alteration to the character of the view.
- 5.16 There would be views of the proposed dwellings from Arborfield Sewage Treatment Works. However, there is no public access to these facilities.

East

- 5.17 Along most of Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 the vegetation is dense and there would be no visibility of the proposed development. In places where there are gaps in the vegetation currently, proposed planting of trees and thicket would close off visibility towards the proposals as it grew. Initially there would be some filtered views of the proposed dwellings from the stretch of Wood Lane immediately east of the Site, but over time these would diminish to occasional glimpses of rooftops.
- 5.18 There would be no visibility of the proposals from the Grade II Listed Building Langleypound Farmhouse due to the mature coniferous trees in its grounds.

Longer Distance Views

- 5.19 Although there is higher ground around Ellis's Hill Farm to the north east, views of the proposals from public rights of way running across the higher ground would be obscured by trees running alongside them and other intervening belts of vegetation.
- 5.20 Views of the proposals from the B3030 to the north west of the Site would also be obscured by intervening landform and vegetation, especially along Cole Lane Byway ARBO9.

Landscape Effects

- 5.21 As set out in Section 4, the Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character, quality or value. The Site's main landscape features occur along the field boundaries (including the field boundary between Parcels A and B) and consist of out-grown hedgerows with numerous mature trees. All trees at the Site are confined to the field boundaries. The trees are generally of moderate or low arboricultural value but are mature landscape features contributing to the treed character of the settlement edge.
- 5.22 The majority of vegetation would be retained as part of the proposed development, however a group of trees alongside School Road would need to be removed. This would be to facilitate construction of Site access. A short section of vegetation would also need to be removed from the hedge between Parcels A and B. However, in the arboricultural report by SJA Trees all these trees were categorised as Category C and assessed as being lower quality than other surrounding trees or as not contributing significantly to the local landscape.
- 5.23 Development of the Site would inevitably change its character from that of arable fields to a residential development with associated open space and SuDS features. The proposed development would adjoin the existing built form on School Road and around Link Way. It would be well contained by the existing planting around the boundaries and proposed enhanced planting especially to the eastern and northern boundaries. The proposals follow the landscape guidelines for LCA J2: Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay by conserving and managing hedgerows with standard trees, conserving the integration of urban edges, and using appropriate tree planting to help integrate new roads.
- 5.24 With regards to the effect on the character of the immediately surrounding area, the proposed development on the Site would somewhat extend the built edge of Arborfield Cross to the east but the perceptual effect of this would be almost entirely contained to the stretch of School Road from The Coombes Primary School to Wood Lane Byway ARBO10, and even there would be limited. Proposed planting around the access to the proposal from School Road will help to retain the treed character of School Road.
- 5.25 The development would have a limited impact on the wider landscape, as the new homes would be well related to the existing settlement, and the development would benefit from firm, clear boundaries to the wider countryside. The new dwellings would be set within the retained landscape framework strengthened by additional tree planting to enhance the treed character of the edge of the village. The proposals

would be extremely well-contained in views from public locations. Consequently, landscape effects on the wider countryside would be limited. There would be no intervisibility with the potential valued landscape associated with the Bearwood estate.

- 5.26 Based on the principles of the development set out at the beginning of this section, we consider that the Site can be developed while retaining the majority of the Site's established landscape framework, and without resulting in significant adverse harm to the landscape and visual character of the surrounding countryside. A summary table detailing the anticipated Landscape Effects can be found in **Appendix G**.

6.0 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The Site consists of two roughly rectangular arable fields on the north eastern edge of Arborfield Cross, between The Coombes Primary School and commercial premises on Wood Lane.
- 6.2 The Site does not carry any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character or quality. The fields are utilised for relatively intensive arable cultivation, and are surrounded by and separated from each other by an intact structure of thick outgrown hedges in good condition. The Site is adjacent to built form of the village but not overly conspicuous as it is separated from it by substantial hedges. The Site has a generally rural and enclosed character due to the wooded character of the land facing it to the north. Overall, the Site is assessed as being of medium landscape quality.
- 6.3 The Site is well contained against the existing built edge of Arborfield Cross, with only glimpsed views of the Site available from the majority of public vantage points. This is mainly due to the dense out-grown hedges with mature trees surrounding almost the whole Site. Although there are a number of public rights of way across the higher ground around Ellis's Hill Farm to the north, they run between hedges with dense hedgerow trees and have several additional layers of hedgerows between them and the Site. Overall, views are largely confined to glimpses from the stretch of School Road to the south west of Parcel B and partial visibility from the stretch of Wood Lane Byway ARBO10 to the south east.
- 6.4 The proposals comprise an outline planning application for a proposed residential development of up to 95 dwellings together with open space and associated works. Proposed access is to be taken of School Road to the south.
- 6.5 A Landscape Strategy Plan has been developed for the Site (**Appendix F**) which shows how the Site can be developed while retaining the vast majority of the trees and hedgerows. Vehicular access from School Road would result in the loss of a group of trees along the southwestern boundary of Parcel B. There would also be some trees lost for vehicle access from the hedge dividing Parcel A from Parcel B. However, all of these trees were categorised as Category C and assessed as being lower quality than other surrounding trees and do not contribute significantly to the local landscape. These losses would be offset with new trees to be replanted behind the visibility splays of the access and elsewhere throughout the Site. There would be a localised effect on the character of the Site and its immediate surroundings, although the well contained nature of the Site would minimise the effect on the character of the wider landscape.

- 6.6 The new houses would be well contained by retained vegetation to the boundaries and that within the wider surrounding landscape, limiting the extent of visual effects to users of School Road, Wood Lane and the adjacent Coombes Primary School. New structural thicket and trees planting is proposed to strengthen the existing Site boundaries which, together with new tree planting through the development, will reduce the level of visual effects as it matures.
- 6.7 As set out in this assessment, the proposed development at the Site would be closely associated with the existing edge of Arborfield Cross and very well contained in views from the wider area. Landscape effects on the character of the countryside beyond the Site would be limited.