

MEMORANDUM

From:	Catherine Brimble Senior Landscape Officer		
Service	WBC Landscape and Trees	App No:	250735
Address:	Land to the north of School Road, Arborfield Cross.		
Proposal:	Outline application for the proposed residential development of up to 70 dwellings together with associated access, landscaping, open space and associated works. (All matters reserved except for means of access.)		
Type of Development:	Major Dwellings (10+)		
Site Visit Made:	Yes – 23 rd October 2024		

Summary Of Recommendations

- ☐ No comment
- ☐ No objection
- ☐ No objection subject to conditions (and reasons) **stated below**
- ☐ Request further information before determination as **stated below**
- ☒ Objection due to the reason(s) **stated below**

Comments On Proposal

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The site is located in the countryside outside the settlement limits. School Road is designated as a Green Route in accordance with Local Plan policy CC03.
- 1.2. This application is for 70 dwelling is submitted following refusal of an earlier application of 95 dwellings (242421) which previously extended across two fields. This current application is now restricted to one field to the north of The Coombes Primary School with a new access off School Road to the east of the school in the south-western corner of the second field.
- 1.3. Although this is an outline application where all matters are reserved apart from access, an Illustrative Masterplan is provided indicating a possible layout for the 70 dwellings. To address issues raised in relation to the previous application, the following changes have been incorporated into the current layout for this application and as indicated on the Illustrative Masterplan:
- A central green space with play area.
 - Sustainable drainage scheme to include overland conveyance features.

- Housing orientated to back onto the southern boundary of the site with the school.
- Space provided within verges and street scene for larger species trees.
- Pedestrian and cycle access onto Coles Lane relocated closer to the centre of the village.

2 LANDSCAPE INFORMATION AND ASSESSMENT

2.1 Local Planning Context

2.1.1 Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment (WBLCA), dated November 2019, identifies a number of different landscape character areas (LCA's) across the Borough and provides key information regarding each of the LCA's. The site falls within Landscape Character Area: J2 – Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay.

2.1.2 A Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) by CSA Environmental dated March 2025 is provided to accompany the application and provides the details of the Key Characteristics, Condition, Valued Landscape Attributes and Guidelines for LCA J2. The WBLCA considers the overall landscape condition for J2 to be moderate due to the pattern of arable and pastoral fields, and remnant wetland influences associated with Barkham Brook.

2.1.3 Just to the north of the site the landscape gradually changes and is identified within the WDLCA as being in Landscape Character Area (LCA) L1 – Bearwood Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills. This landscape is heavily wooded around the Bearwood Estate but to the south the area is more intricate, with coombe woodland valleys and contrasting grazed pasture. It has a strong character which is in good condition because of the absence of roads and settlement in combination with having a distinctive mix of interconnected woodland and pastoral and arable fields bounded by hedgerows. One of the key characteristics associated with LCA L1 and where there is an interrelationship with LCA J2, is the '*Smaller scale rural patchwork of deciduous woodland and sheep pasture associated with the hills and incised coombe valleys in the south.*' LCA L1 is sparsely populated creating an intimate and secret landscape and a strong sense of place.

2.2 Landscape character of site and immediate surroundings

2.2.1 The village of Arborfield Cross is a clear example of a nucleated rural settlement that is separated by farmland from Langley Common, Barkham, and Arborfield Garrison. The village characteristics are identified within the valuable landscape attributes of LCA J2 – Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay as contributing to the rural settlement pattern and link to the past.

2.2.2 Arborfield Cross sits on a high point in this undulating landscape with the roads (and Byway) leading into the village rising to a high point of 66m AOD at the roundabout in the centre of the Arborfield Cross Conservation Area.

The majority of routes into Arborfield Cross provide a wooded context to the village characterised by mature hedgerows, hedgerow trees and small blocks of woodland.

2.2.3 The landscape around this area supports a comprehensive network of footpaths and byways many of which are historic routes and provide links to the wooded landscape of The Coombes to the north. Cole Lane running along the north-western boundary of the site is a Byway open to all traffic (BOAT) (ARBO09). Wood Lane further to the south-east of the site is also a BOAT (ARBO10).

2.2.4 The proposed development site consists of an agricultural field currently in arable production and is bordered by outgrown hedgerows with substantial hedgerow trees, and woodland belts. The site forms part of the undulating valley side of Barkham Brook, rising up to the settlement edge of Arborfield Cross which is defined by a reasonably strong tree belt separating the south-western boundary of the site with The Coombes CE Primary School and associated playing field. The school playing field is outside the settlement boundary with only seven dwellings and the school buildings located within the Arborfield Cross settlement north of School Road.

2.2.5 The fields to the east of the village provide the important visual and physical separation of Arborfield Cross village with the linear residential dwellings further to the east at Langley Common. When travelling along School Road (designated as a Green Route) there are glimpsed views through the vegetation of the open countryside on either side of the road, leading up to the village edge. There is a definite sense of arriving in Arborfield Cross only when passing beyond the width restriction into the village, as before this point none of the settlement is visible.

2.2.6 The verdant and quiet character of School Road is important to the setting of this part of Arborfield Cross. Now that the road is a no through road, the only traffic passing the site are those cars parking in the new laybys created for school parking. The trees and overgrown hedgerows on either side of the site encloses the road and forms a green tunnel effect. The vegetation on both sides of this part of School Road create a unique and special character to the south-eastern entrance to Arborfield Cross highlighting the rural characteristics of the setting of this village.

2.2.7 Although the wider landscape character of J2 is assessed as being of moderate condition, the landscape between Arborfield Cross and the adjacent landscape character area L1 – Bearwood Sands and Gravel Hills, is greatly influenced by the high-quality landscape of this landscape character area to the north, and the site clearly forms part of the shallow valley sides of Barkham Brook which make up this landscape.

2.3 Valued Landscape Assessment

2.3.1 In January 2020 Wokingham Borough published a Topic Paper on Valued Landscapes to respond to paragraph 187 (a) of the current NPPF (December 2024) and prepared as part of the evidence base for the Emerging Local Plan

Update and associated Policy NE6. This initially identified a series of valued landscapes, however since then further work has been undertaken to make refinements to the boundaries of the valued landscape areas and to update the assessment. The revised document, *Valued Landscapes Assessment (September 2024)* has now been published as part of the evidence studies produced for the current consultation related to the Local Plan Update: Proposed Submission Plan (Regulation 19).

2.3.2 The updated Valued Landscapes Assessment indicates the application site is located within the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape. The document gives clear guidance as to the various changes and boundary reviews that were made to a number of the Valued Landscape areas, and these are listed in section 6.68 Table 2.

2.3.3 With reference to the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape and changes to the south-western area it states:

The area around the Barkham Brook includes: a number of Public Rights of Way; the Barkham Road Green Route; part of a Medieval common (Langley Common); a Second World War pill box; and features shown on the Norden 1607 Map of the Forest of Windsor (including Hazelton's Copse). Barkham Brook, its associated wetland and other habitats provide important ecological habitats and ecosystem services.

And

Annex V of the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan (2020) identifies important views and vistas which present an exceptional panorama of the landscape. Notable features include views from Arborfield Cross towards The Coombes and views from Barkham Road and Barkham Street.

2.3.4 Paragraph 6.65 of the assessment provides further guidance on the wider assessment:

It should be noted that landscape is a continuum, and boundaries will often represent zones of transition, but to make the valued landscape designation clearer and to simplify its use, the boundaries have been refined so that, wherever possible, they follow identifiable features on the ground such as field boundaries or roads. A consequence of this is that the valued landscapes may, therefore, include some areas that may not 'exhibit any of the demonstrable physical features' but nonetheless form an integral part of the wider valued landscape. This is, of course, consistent with the Aylesbury Road, Wendover decision. (Paragraph 65).

It is therefore essential that in assessing the site as part of this application I have considered it as part of the wider landscape in which it is located, rather than in isolation.

2.3.5 I have undertaken a site visit and assessment of the landscape around the site and consider the following landscape attributes to relate to the site and

the surrounding landscape and that contribute to the inclusion of this parcel of land in the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape:

- The medieval trackway from Swallowfield to Wokingham shown on the Norden map of Windsor Forest (1607).
- The current BOAT, and other PROWs.
- The valley of the Barkham Brook creating an undulating topography / rolling topography and fieldscape.
- Wholly rural site – no sense of any urban area nearby / absence of built development.
- Strong scenic value to the landscape.
- Sense of relative tranquillity with very limited traffic noise especially as School Road is now a no-through road.
- Peaceful walking along the BOATs.
- Perception of the land as quintessential English Countryside.
- Significant views into and across the surrounding countryside and of the wooded hills at Bearwood and the Coombes from PROW and BOATs.
- Significant areas of ancient woodland (including Hazeltons Copse close to site - mapped since at least Norden 1607 (Map of the Forest of Windsor).
- Number of veteran trees on BOAT's adjacent to the site or close to site.
- Significant areas of lowland mixed deciduous woodland (a habitat of principal importance), tree and hedgerow cover.
- Grade II Listed Langleypound Farmhouse (part of which is late 16th Century, so Elizabeth I).

2.3.6 These aspects are reflected in the valuable landscape attributes identified in the WBLCA for LCA J2 – Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay as listed below:

- ***Barkham Brook and associated wetland*** which provide important ecological habitats including wet meadow and BAP priority habitat wet woodland.
- ***Pattern of arable and pastoral fields***, which provides a rural character away from settlement, and creates an important separation between settlements.
- ***Mature hedgerow trees and in-field trees*** which provide a wooded character and visual interest within the landscape.
- ***Rural settlement pattern*** of farms, hamlets and small nucleated villages outside the urban area which provides a rural character and a link to the past.
- ***Recreational value*** of the network of rights of way between settlements.
- ***Views across the landscape*** to surrounding character areas, particularly across the river valleys to the west and to the wooded hills to the north and south provides a loose sense of enclosure.

2.3.7 Also due to the close relationship this landscape has with Landscape Character Area (LCA) L1 – Bearwood Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills the following valuable landscape attributes for LCA L1 also relate to the site.

- **Elevated wooded hills** forming a backdrop to the wider landscape and western settlement edge of Wokingham. The wooded hills provide physical and visual separation between settlements, including Wokingham and Reading, and the future development at Arborfield Garrison (Arborfield SDL) to the south of the area.
- **Varied topography which forms an intricate range of landscape spaces and backdrops** emphasised by the largely enclosed and wooded nature of the core of the area, with views out over farmland to the wider countryside.
- **Large expanses of mature mixed woodland** which are designated as BAP priority habitats and LWS and provide important ecological habitats and a sense of place. Stands of Scots pine and beech woodlands on the hilltops provide characteristic landmark features.
- **The distinctive mosaic of interconnecting mixed woodland interspersed with small scale pastoral fields** in the south of the area which provide scenic qualities and visual diversity.
- **Medieval landscape features** which survive on the boundary of later historic estates, such as wide tracts of former common land which provide a cultural record of the past and strong time depth.
- **Recreational value** particularly in The Coombes through the presence of byways, footpaths and bridleways which allow enjoyment of the landscape. A golf course and cricket club offer formal recreational opportunities.
- **Peaceful secluded character** with naturalistic qualities and experience of dark skies, largely unsettled and with limited access, which provides a rural retreat in close proximity to urban areas.
- **Contrast of enclosed views within woodland and long views** across the Loddon Valley towards Reading, and south towards Barkham and beyond.

2.3.8 To conclude, I consider the site does significantly contribute to and is an integral part of the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape as demonstrated by the valuable landscape attributes I have identified in my assessment.

2.4 Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment

2.4.1 As previously identified a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) by CSA Environmental dated March 2025 is provided to accompany this application and this section refers to aspects of this document.

➤ **Site Description and Visibility**

2.4.2 In Chapter 4 of the LVIA, landscape quality, value and sensitivity are discussed in paragraphs 4.17 – 4.26. Paragraph 4.19 highlights that the Valued Landscape policy NE6 as found within the Emerging Local Plan has not been tested at public examination. However the NPPF indicates that

planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes. It is therefore not unreasonable that WBC should undertake an assessment in line with best practice and to provide an up-to-date evidence base to identify those valued landscapes within the Borough and which should then be further considered through the emerging Local Plan.

2.4.3 Paragraphs 4.19 and 4.20 of the LVIA mentions the '*Bearwood Estate*' several times and how much of this area lies within the Bearwood Registered Park and Garden although it is not entirely clear to what the extent of the '*Bearwood Estate*' refers. Landscape Character Area (LCA) L1 – Bearwood Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills extends well beyond the Registered Park and Garden both to the east and the south into the adjacent wooded landscapes and therefore LCA L1 is not solely represented by the '*Bearwood Estate*'. The Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape generally includes the majority of the LCA L1 in addition to part of LCA J2 to the north of Arborfield Cross around Barkham and Barkham Brook. As discussed in the Valued Landscape Section above I have identified those valued landscape attributes within and around the site that I consider strongly relate to the characteristics found within the Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape. Therefore I do not agree with the conclusion of Para 4.20 which states that the site does not strongly share the same characteristics of the '*Bearwood Estate*', as this is not what is being assessed as part of the Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape. As previously indicated in my comments, any site needs to be assessed within the wider landscape context and based on my assessment of the site, I consider the site forms part of the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape and consequently will have a high landscape value.

2.4.4 I do not consider the site character is influenced by its proximity to The Coombes Primary school (para 4.21) nor any other residential development in the village of Arborfield Cross. The reason for this is the settlement is a nucleated settlement built on higher ground and is well contained, i.e. very limited linear development outside the settlement boundary. The northern and eastern boundaries to the settlement are strongly vegetated and limit views to the settlement edge even though on higher ground. There is a clear sense of leaving and entering the village on all routes into the settlement, beyond which is open countryside. The site forms no direct relationship with the existing residential development within the village. The site's only common boundary with the edge of Arborfield Cross is with the school (the playing field is outside the settlement boundary) which is set in a wooded context with many of the buildings within the school area visually contained in views by vegetation from School Road or from adjacent public rights of way. I would consider the site very strongly relates to the landscape beyond the settlement boundary which WBC considers forms part of the Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape, rather than having any connection to built development within Arborfield Cross. Therefore I consider the site has a high sensitivity to residential development.

➤ **Landscape effects**

- 2.4.5 In considering the impact of the development on landscape features, the LVIA indicates the new vehicular access from School Road will result in a number of trees being removed, but indicates these losses will be mitigated by additional tree planting at the site entrance.
- 2.4.6 As previously discussed, the rural, verdant and well treed character to School Road is an essential component to the setting of Arborfield Cross which is now enhanced by the lack of through traffic. The new junction into the site as shown in the application information will require the removal of a section of vegetation approximately 55m in length (based in the Tree Protection Plan and area shown to be removed) and associated embankment on which the hedgerow is growing. Although the Arboricultural Impact Assessment (AIA) has assessed the individual trees and group to be removed as Category C trees, their value as a group is far greater than the individual assessments. The photos below indicate the section of hedgerow to be removed within the yellow lines. Photo 1 is taken looking east out of Arborfield Cross with the new junction within the yellow lines. Photo 2 is taken looking west up School Road towards the settlement edge. The new access will remove all the vegetation within the yellow line to the north of the road and will continue slightly beyond the edge of the photo 2.



Photo 1



Photo 2

- 2.4.7 The removal of this section of vegetation will have a substantial detrimental impact on the rural character of the road significantly urbanising this Green Route which will be exacerbated by the formalisation of the road, adjacent footways and crossings at this new junction. It is also noted that the roadside vegetation is growing on an embankment adjacent to School Road, and at the point at which the new section of School Road connects back into the existing road, the height of the embankment is approximately 1.5m. This is also likely to require various ground level changes which may further impact on the vegetation beyond which is shown to be removed.
- 2.4.8 Although the LVIA indicates that tree losses will be compensated by new planting within the site, the new access and junction will adversely affect the rural character of the road designated as a Green Route and setting of the village entrance, which cannot be mitigated by new planting.
- 2.4.9 In terms of the effects on landscape character the LVIA comments on this aspect in paragraphs 5.30 – 5.36. The LVIA again indicates that the site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character, quality or value and again highlights that the Valued Landscape Assessment, which identifies the site as being located within the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape, has yet to be tested through public examination and has been subject to a number of objections. WBC have identified a number of Valued Landscapes through a rigorous process and in line with the requirements of the NPPF and best practice. The VLA considers the site falls within the boundary of the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape and I have assessed the site and its setting in an earlier part of my comments. I concluded that the site does significantly contribute to and is an integral part of the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape as demonstrated by the valuable landscape attributes I have identified.
- 2.4.10 Paragraph 5.34 of the LVIA discusses how the new development of the site will be closely associated with the existing settlement, set within a well treed landscape framework which will be enhanced by additional planting and, there would be no intervisibility from the Bearwood Estate. Therefore the

conclusion of the LVIA is that the landscape effects of the proposed development on the wider countryside would be limited. As I have considered in paragraph 2.4.4 the only common boundary the site has with the edge of Arborfield Cross settlement is with the school and not the playing field. This is set in a wooded context with many of the buildings within the school area visually contained in views by vegetation from School Road or from adjacent public rights of way providing a strong wooded horizon to these views as Arborfield Cross is located on high ground. Therefore there is already a clear and robust boundary to the northern settlement edge of Arborfield Cross and any housing development within the site, in my opinion would considerably weaken the settlement setting and harm the Valued Landscape.

2.4.11 The existing landscape framework of hedges and wooded shelterbelts will not individually be significantly affected around the site apart from where access is taken from School Road, however these form part of the overall fabric of the wider agricultural countryside in which the site is located. Therefore in considering landscape character, these individual elements should not be considered in isolation and their retention around the housing development should not be interpreted as reducing the harm caused by development, on the wider landscape character.

2.4.12 In assessing how the site relates to the Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape I have identified a number of valued landscape attributes in my paragraph 2.3.5, based on a site visit and assessment. Paragraph 5.35 of the LVIA again appears to link this valued landscape to the Registered Park and Garden and the Bearwood Estate and the associated valued landscape attributes which it considers are largely derived ‘...*from its invisibility with higher ground in the Bearwood Estate.*’ Firstly the Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape is identified as a much wider landscape area than the Bearwood Estate as indicated in my paragraph 2.4.3 above. Secondly the wooded context extends well beyond the Registered Park and Garden to the south into The Coombes and woodlands, copses, shelterbelts and overgrown hedgerows that line the fields and public rights of way extending to the site. Thirdly the landscape in which the site sits is reasonably complex, and these are reflected in the valued landscape attributes I have previously listed and are not solely focused on the Bearwood Estate as suggested by LVIA paragraph 5.35.

2.4.13 I consider the site does form part of the Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape and therefore development within the site will have a Substantial Adverse effect on this landscape (based on High landscape sensitivity and High Magnitude of Change). I don’t consider the development or the proposed mitigation can protect and enhance the valued landscape as required by Paragraph 187a) of the NPPF.

➤ **Visual Effects**

2.4.15 The LVIA has identified a number of viewpoints to assess the site’s visibility. What seems to be most noticeable from the photos provided are that they show very well the rural character of the site and the surrounding area, with very few urban influences within the photos including along School Road. I

am in some agreement that the site is relatively well enclosed by existing vegetation, however this doesn't mean that there will not be views of the proposed development from some locations especially during the winter months when there are no leaves on the hedgerows and trees. As I have already established the site doesn't sit in isolation to its surroundings regardless of the relatively strong landscape structure on the site boundaries, but forms part of an interconnected landscape incised by streams and ditches with associated vegetation with views across the landscape from higher ground, where vegetation allows.

2.4.16 Paragraph 4.8 of the LVIA starts by stating: *'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.'* The first part of this statement needs to be clarified. It is not clear what is meant by *'well contained'* as I have already established that in my assessment, the site has no direct relationship with the existing settlement of Arborfield Cross. The school site is mostly visually and physically contained by vegetation as shown in Context Photos 4 & 5 in Appendix C of the LVIA which clearly defines the edge of the settlement beyond which is open agricultural countryside.

2.4.17 The main change in view will be from School Road where in order to gain access into the site at least 55m of hedgerow and hedgerow bank will be removed opening up views into the site. As already discussed the effects on the character of the road will be significant adverse not only due to the removal of the vegetation but also in terms of the formalisation and urbanisation of this stretch of road due to the new road junction, engineering works to accommodate the change in levels, new lighting and works to increase in width of existing footway.

2.4.18 Paragraph 5.22 of the LVIA recognises there will be a change in the character of this part of School Road, and considers that due to its location close to the school and settlement boundary the impacts on rest of School Road will be minimised *'.....retaining most of the wooded character of the route in and out of the village.'* I disagree with these findings as this part of School Road has very special landscape qualities which I have previously discussed, and therefore contributes to the Green Route designation and rural context of the village and which will substantially impacted by these changes.

2.4.19 The tree belt along Cole Lane (BOAT ARBO9) along the north-western boundary of the site will restrict the majority of views in the summer months, however during the winter there will be some views into the site of the development. This application shows the proposed development limits are now much closer to this boundary than the previous application and so it will be more visible in glimpses through the vegetation especially during the winter months. At present filtered views are of a continuation of the agricultural landscape on either side of the BOAT where walkers using the PRoW quickly gain a sense of leaving the settlement edge at Arborfield Cross and entering the rural countryside with qualities as set out in the valued landscape description and with the absence of any development related to the village. The proposed development will therefore change the perception

of settlement extent from the north-west which will be extended by another 280m along Cole Lane and which will be to the detriment of the views gained from this PRoW.

2.4.20 Views from the BOAT (ARBO10) to the north-east of the site are limited due to intervening vegetation on the field boundaries. However there are views gained across the Barkham Brook valley from a high point along this byway, to the wooded edge of Arborfield Cross with the field of the site being partially visible in this view, this is shown in Photo 3 below taken from a field gate on ARBO10. Although parts of the Sewage Works are just visible just beyond the field in the foreground, the settlement of Arborfield Cross is not visible as it is contained by a strong vegetated boundary, and which contributes to the wooded skyline. Development within the site will form a small part of the view, but the change to that view will have a detrimental effect on the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape. I am therefore unable to agree with the findings in the LVIA that views from this part of the PRoW will have a neutral visual effect. I consider housing development on the site will have moderate / slight adverse effect on these views, but should be considered in the context that this area is identified as a valued landscape.



Photo 3

2.4.21 The conclusion of the landscape assessment section including comments on the LVIA is that I find the site does contribute to and forms part of the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape and therefore Paragraph 187a) of the NPPF does apply. This requires development to contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment, and to protect and enhance valued landscape, which this proposal does not do by virtue of the type of development proposed.

3 ARBORICULTURAL INFORMATION

3.1 An Arboricultural Implications Report by SJA Trees and dated March 2025 is provided with the application. This document sets out the proposed tree removals as a result of the proposed development and which is shown on the

Tree Protection Plan. The tree removals relate to the new site access off School Road, which has been discussed in terms of landscape character earlier in my comments, and a section of the narrow tree belt / overgrown hedgerow between Parcels A & B in order to get vehicular access into Parcel A. Some minor vegetation clearance will be required to create a pedestrian link onto Cole Lane.

- 3.2 In terms of the tree resource within and adjacent to the site the Arboricultural Implications Report identifies only four category C trees and partial tree groups are to be removed, however there are greater implications of these removals especially along School Road in terms of degrading the character of the area which has been discussed within the Landscape Character section.

4 DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

4.1 Design and Access Statement

- 4.1.1 The application is accompanied by a Design and Access Statement (DAS) by Marrons for Croudace Homes dated March 2025.

- 4.1.2 The vision outlined in DAS states that the proposed development will *'....create a well-integrated neighbourhood that compliments and respects the existing Local Character of Arborfield Cross.'* I cannot agree with this as Arborfield Cross is a small, nucleated settlement which has strongly defined vegetated settlement boundaries especially on the northern side of the settlement which visually and physically contains the limited existing development on the northern side of School Road. This is clearly shown on the Character Analysis plan in section 3.4. The DAS recognises the rural character of the village noting *'Edges of the village soften into open countryside with clusters of homes integrated with green buffers.'* However it is disappointing that the DAS does not describe in its Character Analysis section (page 16) any features in relation to the existing development off School Road where the new access will be taken from. This is a clear omission from the document.

- 4.1.3 In describing the elements of the site in the DAS on page 20, it is important to note that the description of the topography of the site is not as suggested i.e. rising slightly from the northeast to southwest. The high point of the site is actually adjacent to the eastern boundary of the school site with the land falling away to the northern, western and eastern boundaries of the site, with a change in level of approximately 12m between the highest and lowest points of the site. This is important to understand as the undulating landform of the site is interrelated to the wider landscape characteristics and views into and towards the site from public viewpoints.

- 4.1.4 Section 3.7 of the DAS lists a number of design cues which are taken from the existing settlement to inform the proposed development *'.....making sure that the development integrates and responds to the grain of the rural village setting.'* This is then considered as part of the design proposals relating to local placemaking where one of the elements is to create *'.....a new*

neighbourhood that responds to the local character and feels rural.' As previously discussed as part of the landscape assessment of the site and surrounding character including the form of the village, I consider the site extent and location does not relate to or responds to the grain of the rural village setting or local character in any way but forms a separate and isolated estate type development extending way beyond the current settlement boundaries to the north and east.

4.2 Layout

4.2.1 A concept masterplan is provided in the DAS with further detail given on the Illustrative Masterplan drawing (Rev G) and the Landscape Strategy Plan (Rev A). This revised scheme has made a number of changes to address issues raised as part of the previous application and include the following:

- A central green space with play area.
- Sustainable drainage scheme to include overland conveyance features.
- Housing orientated to back onto the southern boundary of the site with the school.
- Space provided within verges and street scene for larger species trees.
- Pedestrian and cycle access onto Cole Lane relocated closer to the centre of the village.

Although it is important to recognise these changes / improvements, I have a number of other concerns regarding the illustrative layout proposed.

4.2.2 The current site layout does include landscape buffers to the existing field boundaries on the northern, western and eastern boundaries; however these have been substantially reduced from the previous application especially adjacent to Cole Lane. The width of this landscape buffer has halved from 55m of green space adjacent to Cole Lane in the previous application to 22.5m at its closest point, taken from the Parameters Plan. Development closer to Cole Lane will be more dominant in views from the PRow into the site especially in the winter months. As previously identified users of the PRow gain a sense of quickly leaving the settlement edge at Arborfield Cross and entering the rural countryside with qualities as set out in the valued landscape description and with the absence of any development related to the village, however development on the site will therefore extend the settlement edge much further into the countryside and along Cole Lane which will have a detrimental impact on the Valued Landscape.

4.2.3 It is my understanding there are discussions to possibly upgrade the surface of the PRow along Cole Lane to the new site access as part of the application proposals. There are likely to be several issues related to any upgrade to BOAT. Firstly improving the surface could impact the root protection area of the adjacent mature trees (possibly veteran trees) on either side of the track. Secondly the formalisation of the surface will urbanise the rural character of the PRow and effect the landscape elements of the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape which will be unacceptable on both accounts.

- 4.2.4 Although the size of the proposed development has reduced, the access into the site will still need to be from School Road. I have identified through my comments on the LVIA that the new access will have a significant adverse effect on the landscape character of the road designated as a Green Route as well as the visual effects. There is no direct access to the site so part of the field to the east of the development parcel needs to be used to accommodate the access. This in itself will extend the settlement boundary further to the east beyond the school site into the Valued Landscape which I consider unacceptable.
- 4.2.5 The Landscape Strategy Plan indicates a number of swales and rain gardens alongside streets and these are also indicatively indicated on the Drainage Strategy although not currently incorporated fully into drainage strategy at this stage. The Drainage Strategy drawing indicates a large attenuation basin and foul pumping station in the northern area of the site which takes up a considerable part of the green buffer space in this area. The basin is shown as having a total depth of 1.8m with 1 in 5 sides however the extent and form of the basin in association with the foul pumping station doesn't address the rural context of the site as there is very limited space to create a more naturalistic form.
- 4.2.6 It is noted that there are a number of visitor parking bays surrounding the central green space of along the adjacent streets that are three or more spaces long. These are unacceptable within the street scene and will need to be broken up with street trees and rain gardens.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 Although the illustrative site layout as provided indicates a number of improvements to a scheme that was previously refused, I consider the proposed development will cause significant harm to the Bearwood and Barkham Valued Landscape as it does not ensure this landscape can be protected and enhanced. The development will also harm the open rural countryside that makes a significant contribution to the setting of Arborfield Cross village, and the rural character of School Road which is identified as a Green Route where there will be major changes to the road layout, including formalisation of the road and removal of vegetation.
- 5.2 To conclude, I consider the proposal would be at odds with NPPF paragraph 187a), and contrary to Core Strategy Policies CP1, CP3 and CP11, Local Plan Policies CC03 and TB21, and Policies IRS1, IRS2 of the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan, and I object to the application.

Conditions & Reasons (if required)

N/A

Date:	28 th May 2025	Signed:	C. Brimble
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