

MEMORANDUM

From:	Brigitte Crafer Landscape Architect		
Service	WBC Landscape and Trees	App No:	243099
Address:	Land North Of Reading Road, Arborfield.		
Proposal:	Outline application for the proposed erection of up to 111 no. dwellings with associated works, parking, landscaping, publicly accessible open space and access from Reading Road. (All matters reserved except for means of access.)		
Type of Development:	Major Dwellings (10+)		
Site Visit Made:	Yes/No		

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

1.0 SITE LOCATION, CHARACTER AND SETTING

The site measures 6.44 ha. and is located on the north side of Reading Road, to the west of the small hamlet of Arborfield Cross. The site comprises a number of paddocks that stretch from Church Lane in the west and a hedgerow and water course that forms the western edge of Locket Farm to the east of the site. Roughly to the south centre of the site are a small number of single storey dilapidated buildings and possibly a shelter for 2 horses, who were grazing in the northern part of a paddock whose southern part was flooded (at the time of my visit in January '25).

There is a noticeable area of scrub that wraps itself around the north of the horse paddock and continues westwards to the site boundary with Church Lane. The scrubland consists of mature and young trees, and native shrubs. The land has been left unmanaged for a number of years and in the process has created a small area of rewilded land.

To the west end of the bus shelter along Reading Road, the footpath ends, but it is possible to look into the site between the stretches of native hedgerow with mature hedgerow trees, at least 1 of which is a Veteran tree. Looking across the site the layering of the vegetation from grassy open space to native scrub, emerging into small to mature trees some of which mark the field boundaries from the historic landscape. It is these trees that

mark the field boundaries that provide the internal structure of the site which demonstrates historic land use of small fields and paddocks that is typical of the J2 - Arborfield Cross Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay LCA.

The 1873 OS map shows little on the site other than field boundaries but there is a focus of activity along Church Lane including St. Bartholomew's Church to the NW of the site, the Rectory and Arborfield Grange and a village school just to the SW. The intersection of Church Lane/Reading Road is a key settlement node of historic focus due to the presence of educational and religious activities as well as farms and cottages.

The area around the site is peppered with footpaths; ARBO 16 to the NE of the site, ARBO1 to the NW, ARBO22 to the SW, ARBO 19 to the SE. Ponds were a feature of the historic landscape many of which are retained and a common feature of the C1 - Arborfield River Terrace LCA today – see just offsite to the NW a pond, and a swamp and one ephemeral pond and another permanent pond within the site.

The existing settled character around the site is sparse; to the north and west along Church Lane (a narrow lane with priority traffic), consisting of large dwellings in generous plots set within a pastoral landscape. Along Reading Road is a more recent development of detached modern 2 storey, and 2 storey and single storey dwellings with smaller gardens in Walden Avenue (a cul de sac), perpendicular to Reading Road.

2. VALUED LANDSCAPE AND LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The site is not in a Valued Landscape (VL) but occupies an area of land that is surrounded by the River Loddon VL to the west, Barkham and Bearwood VL to the east and Farley Hill VL to the south. The site is trapped between the valued landscapes and is therefore heavily influenced by them. The site itself is almost equally split between 2 landscape characters areas; C1 and J2, although most of the site to the east is within J2.

2.1 LCA C1

The key characteristics of the C1 Arborfield LCA (the west side of the site) include; valued for farming, water features; ponds, streams, drainage channels, and field boundaries marked with post and wire fencing, some gappy hedges, tree lined narrow lanes, tracks and byways, as well as wooded copses which contribute to the rural character, a sense of remoteness and low density settlement character. Most of these features are recognised as the Valuable Landscape Attributes of the C1 LCA.

Key issues for the C1 LCA include; loss of hedgerows and hedgerow trees, from intensification of agriculture and fields and decline in hedgerow management, loss of structure and species diversity of the traditionally coppiced woodlands, lack of recruitment of young trees, effects on tree health/species composition of woodland and wet woodland. Demand for residential and commercial development is impacting the tranquil character of the area.

The *Landscape Strategy* is to conserve and enhance the quiet, rural and agricultural landscape with its scattered rural settlement and rural lanes.

Landscape Guidelines include; conserve and enhance small woodlands, increase deciduous woodland and hedgerow planting. Conserve the open qualities of the landscape and to reinstate and repair hedgerows with native species. Maintain the sparse settlement pattern of Arborfield.

2.2 LCA J2

The Valuable Landscape Attributes of LCA J2 are; 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, 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 across the river valleys to the west and to the wooded hills to the north and south provides a loose sense of enclosure.

The Landscape Strategy is to conserve and enhance the remaining rural character of the landscape. The key aspects to be conserved and enhanced are the field pattern with mature hedgerow trees, wetland and woodland habitats, rural lanes and historic features. In terms of development, the aim is to integrate new development into its landscape setting, *and retain the open and rural character of the landscape between settlements*. Landscape Guidelines include; conserve woodlands including ancient and remnant standard trees. *Conserve the open rural qualities of the farmed landscape.*

3.0 ARBORICULTURE

Arboricultural Impact Assessment and Tree Condition Survey for Proposed Residential Development – Ruskins Reference 1024-100809 – Nov. '24

Report includes drawings; 'Arboricultural Impact Assessment, Tree Retention and Removals Plan and outline arboricultural method statement.

3.1 TPO0272/1984 protects some trees on the western side of the site which includes 2 groups of trees and 4 individual trees;

- G1 in SE corner of triangular land parcel consisting 4 Hornbeam, 1 Horse Chestnut, 3 Oak,
- G2 hedgerow along the western boundary; 6 Ash, 8 Hornbeam, 3 Lime
- Single trees; T1 Oak (WDTVA) - (T4 on survey) – Oak 2 (WDTVAVet) T2 on survey T3 Horse Chestnut (WDTVAVet), (not on survey / site) T4 Lime (WDTVAVet) (T39 on Survey)

The amount of tree removals proposed means the Forestry Act is enacted meaning no more than 5m³ in any one quarter can be felled.

Of the G2 TPO group, the Ash is showing signs of die back – I counted 8 Ash in G36 group (on tree survey) the removal of these trees would open up clear views through the site so provision needs to be made to plant successional replacement trees within a Soft Landscape Plan as a condition in the event of planning permission.

3.2 VETERAN TREES ON THE SITE

There are 3 trees identified on the site included in the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory; 2 Veteran trees and 1 'Notable' tree. The Tree Survey has identified 2 additional Veteran trees; 1st (T39 Lime) to the western side within land that is provisioned for open space, and 2nd (T56 Oak) along the northern boundary. All of the trees identified within the site that are recorded on the ATI and WDTVA are retained, although one of these (Horse Chestnut) is no longer on the site.

The AC explains how different tree species 'veteranise' at different rates specifically that an Oak can live for many centuries over which time its canopy reduces and the trunk can become hollow and live on. Furthermore, a Lime tree has the ability to regrow from the stump or a broken trunk a process that can recur and go on for centuries, meaning that a Veteran Lime tree may consist of a ring of relatively young stems. Other species such as Horse chestnut may only be a veteran for a short space of time after which they decay, the Oak and Lime will last a lot longer making them much more valuable especially in terms of biodiversity.

Veteran trees on the site are;

T39 Lime – western of site – newly discovered Veteran Lime tree

T50 Oak – on southern site boundary - TPO 272/1984 – ATI Ref. 218111

T56 Oak – close to northern site boundary – newly discovered veteran Oak

T72 Oak – growing on boundary with most eastern field – ATI Ref. 45537

In addition to this T4 growing close to boundary is ATI Ref. 218573 – the tree survey grades this as B2 , but as the tree is on the ATI it must be regarded as Veteran tree and the appropriate buffer zone applied.

The AC states that all Veteran trees can be protected according to the Natural England Advice – however the buffer zones are not correctly shown on the Illustrated Masterplan which may be giving a false impression of what is achievable in terms of layout. Tree T56 Veteran tree along the northern boundary has its Buffer Zone in a rear garden – which is contrary to the Government Standing Advice.

Paragraph 6.2. of the AIA provided information on how the area of open ground beneath the Veteran trees needs to be treated which is to avoid laying turf or cultivation of formal lawns which can be detrimental. Instead the areas beneath the trees can be mulched to improve their growing conditions. The Veteran trees can also be fenced off to deter access around and under these trees.

The Tree Survey identifies / recommends tree surgery and removal of dead branches associated with ageing Oak trees where there is possibility of harm such as over the highway, however the dead branches are good for biodiversity so as many as possible should be retained.

Tree surgery should be carried out as specified and as part of ongoing management of these important landscape features. Should the application be successful, a Management Plan

for Veteran trees, and other trees, hedges and other landscape features on the site will be required as a condition of planning permission.

3.3 TREE REMOVALS

In addition, the AC includes a number of trees to be removed that includes; T14 classified 'B' an early mature Oak located on the southern boundary and will be removed to facilitate access, I cannot see why it is necessary for T14 to be removed where there is plenty of space between trees T11 and T12 resulting in no tree removals and retention of all the trees, and the hedgerow along the southern site boundary with Reading Road.

In addition, the following trees within the southern boundary hedgerow will be removed; 2 Ash T23, T24 , 1x T25 Blackthorn and 1 x T26 Goat Willow, to make way for development. These trees contribute to the boundary vegetation and will be lost to a new paths and a road. Working around retained trees could make for a more interesting layout.

T69 and T71 Turkey Oak , T70 Oak, G73 a group of Oak. T74 Oak, G81 group of Willow, T82, Oak, G83 Willow, G84 Ash, T88 Hawthorn, G90 Willow all will be lost to the masterplan, but retaining more of the Goat Willow (*Salix caprea*) is a species indicative to the site, and is an early source of nectar for bees and other insects. The Willows form linear structures around the site and more should be done to retain these trees for their contribution to the site character and biodiversity.

It looks as though G81 Willows and T82 Oak can be retained and is alluded to on masterplan, also G91 mixed species could be retained with some slight adjustments to the layout.

BS5837:2012 states;

5.3 Proximity of structures to trees

5.3.1 *The default position should be that structures (see 3.10) are located outside the RPAs of trees to be retained. However, where there is an overriding justification for construction within the RPA, technical solutions might be available that prevent damage to the tree(s) (see Clause 7).*

No tree constraints plan showing development overlaid with the existing trees has been submitted which may have identified the possibility to retain more trees and scrub within the layout. Also, the retention of T14 Oak where there are alternative locations for the site entrance which would not involve to removal of significant trees. Although a lot of the trees are being retained these are chiefly to the site edges, and there are trees within the site that respond to the qualities of the site's geology, topography and drainage which is influenced by the River Loddon.

3.4 HEDGEROWS AND SCRUB

The vegetation along Reading Road comprises mainly of mature trees that have prevented the establishment of a hedge (according to the AC). The hedges are not included in the tree survey but they are surveyed by the Ecologist who says that H2 hedge (along Reading Road) is a species rich hedge consisting of Oak, Hazel, Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Hornbeam, Ash and

Sycamore and runs parallel to the ditch. The AC mentions Elm in this hedge that is outgrown and dying off. Elm can be successfully retained within a native hedge and should not be grubbed out but allowed to remain in the event that the application is successful. The Ecologist has also surveyed the western hedge with 4 species including Ash, Lime, Hawthorn, Dog Rose, Elm, Hornbeam. Between the paddocks there are remnants of hedgerows and these include just Goat Willow, Oak and Elder.

Its important to state the landscape features on site have *not* been maintained in the way that a garden hedge would be, and managing a hedge with mature hedgerow trees requires more effort and attention to detail than a roadside hedge trimmer may be able to give.(and cost more), however maintaining the boundaries to 'short back and sides' would not be the correct approach in this countryside location.

Both hedges and scrub should have been included in the Tree Survey to get a well rounded picture of the contribution of the different types of vegetation and their contribution to the site character and to understand the important contribution these habitats make to the site and its biodiversity now and particularly in the future. Its important to acknowledge the connected landscape characters within the site that are provided by the topography, drainage and vegetation.

Restoring native hedges may mean managing the younger trees within the hedgerow – perhaps laying them and promoting the larger trees as hedgerow trees would provide acceptable screening to a development – although this may mitigate the visual impact of development in the summer there will be views through to housing in the winter.

The Tree Survey does not include a survey of the areas of scrub present on the site, which the Ecologist says makes up a significant proportion of the habitats on the site of which bramble thickets are the most abundant, but also includes Willow, Blackthorn, Edler, Dog Rose, Oak, Silver Birch, Ash, Hazel, Hawthorn. Herbaceous plants include; Willowherb, Fleabane, Golden Rod, Creeping thistle, Hogweed, hemlock, soft rush, nettle, Fern, Cocksfoot, False Oat grass.

3.5 SITE WATER FEATURES

The site includes 2 seasonally wet ditches one associated with an area of Willow scrub, is heavily shaded and lacks aquatic vegetation. There are 2 ponds on the site one close to Reading Road, which looks ephemeral, and another pond located along the northern site boundary which is permanent and contains a lot of reedmace, fleabane, water mint and bur reed and ducks weed on the surface. There is an area of swamp close to the NW boundary. The faunal survey found a population of juvenile grass snakes on the site.

The ponds will be lost to development and it is recommended by the Ecologist that the engineered attenuation basins proposed should contain standing water compensate for the removal of the pond habitat from the site so there is an area for amphibians to breed. Reduction in the site's habitat will have an adverse impact on bats using the site. If the attenuation basin is designed to hold standing water it will compensate for some of this impact. Removal of the scrub and unmanaged grassland will result in much of the value of

the site being lost especially the range of birds using the site, but the attenuation ponds should of value to some species.

4.0 LANDSCAPE VISUAL ASSESSMENT

4.1 Assessment of Landscape Value (Table 2.1 of LVA)

My assessment of the landscape of the site and its surroundings using the Tables included in the LVA.

In consideration of **landscape value** – the site has a sense of abandonment in the form of dilapidated buildings in the central area of the site, and its overall unmanaged character and that has effectively been naturally rewilding itself.

The site has a **diversity of native trees, shrubs and scrub** including Veteran and notable trees, mature and semi mature trees particularly to the boundaries some of which are protected by TPO 0272/1984. There is young woodland/scrub particularly around the 2 pony paddocks. In this way **the site is healthy performing a function**

The species are various and include; Goat Willow, Oak, Birch, Hawthorn, Scots Pine, H. Chestnut, Hornbeam, Sycamore, Lime. There are areas of native scrub and lots of Goat Willow that is often growing as linear features to field boundaries along with Oak and a feature of the wet character.

Views of the site from Reading Road of the vegetation of the interior are enhanced by the sun, mist, and brooding skies, that captures the **senses in terms of its scenic quality** and **sense of wildness** that comes from its abandoned unmanaged character so its *perceptual qualities* are strong and like all landscape is enhanced by beneficial weather conditions.

The landscape is not in ‘good’ condition in the sense it is well maintained in a traditional gardenesque sense – but its in **good condition** in view of its varying habitats, its linear structures enhanced by trees and its ongoing rewilded character.

The site also has **historic and cultural heritage value** from its Veteran trees, and historic setting close to St. Bartholomews Church to the north and its proximity to the historic ruins of the former church to the west and the site of Arborfield Hall.

A. Landscape Value Criteria (Table 2.2 of LVA), I selected sentences in the descriptors that mostly align with the site’s value;

High – contains features that are very attractive or have an attractive scenic quality and in part rare. The site has a sense of remoteness in terms of it being of totally different to a ‘settled character’.

Medium – Reasonably distinctive landscape or with some strong contributing characteristicsmay exhibit some detracting features. A strong sense of place.

Resulting in Med/High Landscape Value

B. Landscape Susceptibility Criteria (Table 2.3 of LVA)

High – Landscape receptor of particular distinctive character susceptible to relatively small changes

Resulting in High Susceptibility to changeC. Landscape Sensitivity Criteria (Table 2.4 of LVA)
High – The landscape has a high susceptibility to change and has high value
Resulting in High Sensitivity to change

4.2 Visual impact of Development

There are several footpaths around the site; ARB01-NW, ARB02-N, ARB03-N, ARB016-(NE), ARB019-SE, ARB022-SE, ARB20SW, as well as the main Reading Road adjacent to the south of the site, and Church Lane to the west and north of the site, a mainly residential lane.

Table 2.7 of LVA sets out the value of each visual receptor group; 17 views are identified around the site categorised as close, medium distance there are no long views. In some views the full extent of visual receptor has not been included such as additional road users at View 6 along Reading Road by Cross Lanes Farm pedestrians and cyclists as medium receptors. Also at View 9 must be pedestrians (medium receptor) also check View 15, View 17.

4.3 Landscape and Visual Baseline Conclusion

The LVA assesses the local character areas in relation to the site as having low sensitivity meaning the site *is* able to accommodate a medium change related to the new development without undue consequences arising on the condition or quality of its defining characteristics. Some individual elements have been assigned a medium sensitivity and as such can accommodate a small change without undue consequences.

I disagree – as discussed above, the site and its surroundings have a high sensitivity to change and cannot accommodate any change related to the proposed development without undue consequences arising on the condition or quality of its defining characteristics. It has not been demonstrated on the masterplan that the Veteran tree buffer zones can be implemented, or the water features can be sensitively designed as inadequate space is allocated around them. There is nothing in the layout that matches with the existing sparse pattern of development, and the open and rural character between the settlements cannot be retained.

The visual sensitivity conclusion states that the site is largely enclosed by vegetation and views into it are heavily filtered. However, this does not take account of the impact of trees removed for development – such as the Ash that take up quite a large span of the western boundary hedge, and the plan to remove all of the interior vegetation to facilitate development. The layering of landscape features across the site and the screening they provide will be lost. In addition, the boundary screening will be clipped and managed in ways that are synonymous with human habitation and perception of development will be clear in views from Reading Road by all users. There will be views from some dwellings along Church Lane that back onto the site as Church Lane appears to have higher topography. The views may just be from 1st floor windows of t dwellings.

Development will change the landscape character of the views and the site character itself, from countryside to suburbia, which is **not** its present character despite assertions in the LVA that the site has a suburban feel. The site is and has been in agricultural use, in this case a rural farm. Travelling along Reading Road past the site is characterised by

countryside features; hedgerows and hedgerow trees and grassy verges framing the views along the road, with the occasional glimpse of dwellings. Only the dwellings to the east of the site are all facing the road. Only the 2 dwellings adjacent to Reading Road along Walden Avenue are perceived in the view, as Walden Avenue is perpendicular to Reading Road.

5.0 LANDSCAPE STRATEGY AND MITIGATION –

Section 6 of LVA – Response in italics

- Retention of existing landscape structure, particularly around the site boundaries. Internal vegetation should be retained where feasible to do so – *this is an aspiration that is clearly not possible with the layout proposed*
- Existing vegetation around the site boundary should be enhanced using native hedgerows 50% of which should be evergreen species. There will inevitably be a time lapse with regard to screening whilst new planting gets established. *There is little indication of incidental landscaping within the built areas of the site that matches the rural character of the setting. The layout is innately suburban which is out of character.*
- A new landscape buffer to the northern site boundary (which currently has no existing vegetation) should be introduced including native hedgerow/scrub and tree planting including at least 50% evergreen species. – *There is no buffer that I can see and rear gardens are forming what could be a buffer – also note that Veteran Tree T 56 has no buffer zone away from development*
- Allow for sufficient space for tree planting within the residential parcels to reflect the wooded character of the surrounding and aid with blending the built form with the surrounding landscape.- *Proposed tree planting within the site is not consistent especially the SW quarter,.*
- Footpath links should be included within the site connecting to the wider landscape to create sustainable connections to local facilities and the existing PRow network. – *2 links to Church Lane are proposed but Church Lane has no footways, is a narrow road and cars appear to travel at speed along the road , a link to Reading Road is proposed but is there a footway that links to it? Note there is no footpath between the bus shelters on the north side of Reading Road.*
- Views of the Church spire from the wider landscape should be retained through the site, this will require careful consideration of development along the eastern side of the site.
- Dwellings should be offset from Reading Road and Church Lane to minimise built form immediately adjacent to the site boundary, this will minimise visibility of the built form, as well as retain the wooded character (particularly that associated with Church Lane). – *If development is to be hidden – does that mean it is not acceptable?*
- Vehicular access should be limited to access of Reading Road – *Its not clear what impact the visibility splays will have on hedges*

- Development should be maximum 2.5 storeys to tie into the surrounding built form.
– *2.5 storeys is too high suburban and out of character – the dwelling adjacent to the east are set back into the site that gives impression of slightly higher level . Development proposed does not follow the established pattern of development of single dwellings 3facing Reading Road to the east.*
- POS should be located to the eastern side of the site, to create a softer transition to the adjacent countryside – *The site is wholly within the countryside which is contrary to Local Plan Policy CP11*

There is no mention of the SuDS proposals. The Illustrated Masterplan shows the edges of the attenuation basins very close to the roads / adjacent to the roads. There appears to be no landscaped edges and there is no indication of the gradients which need to be very softly sloping to be of maximum benefit to biodiversity. Taking out the Veteran tree buffer areas reduces the amount of usable space in the POS areas.

6.0 SUMMARY

The proposals are contrary to Local Plan Policy CP11 being located in the countryside on a site not allocated for development.

The proposals do not maintain rural character and settlement pattern of Arborfield or avoid the spread of development in the area. The proposals do not conserve the open and rural qualities of the farmed landscape that provides a physical and visual separation or gap between settlements, and fails to conserve and protect the landscape patten of mixed pasture and arable fields.

There are Veteran trees within the site that are not protected sufficiently in the design and as such is contrary to NPPF Policy 193c and the Government Standing Advice.

The development will remove most of the vegetation within the site and the impact on the landscape character will be clear. Development is not compliant with NPPF paragraph 187 b as it fails to 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*,

The development fails to enhance the ability of the site to support fauna and flora and fails to contribute to a sense of place in the way development integrates with its surroundings as such is contrary to Policy CP3.

The proposals are contrary to Policy CC03 as the scheme fails to protect and retain trees, hedges and other landscape features in a way that results in the loss of areas of green infrastructure and is therefore also contrary to Policy TB21 as proposals fail to retain or enhance the condition, character and features that contribute to the landscape.

The proposals are contrary to the following policies of Arborfield and Barkham VDS Policies.;

Policy IRS1; Preservation of the separation of settlements.

Policy IRS2: Recognise, respect and preserve identity and rural setting of settlements.
Policy IRS3; Protection and enhancement of the natural environment and green spaces

Conditions & Reasons (if required)			
Date:	26.2.25	Signed:	B. Crafer