

Sonning Neighbourhood Development Plan 2023-2040

**A report to Wokingham Borough Council on
the Sonning Neighbourhood Development Plan**

**Andrew Ashcroft
Independent Examiner
BA (Hons) M.A. DMS M.R.T.P.I.**

Director – Andrew Ashcroft Planning Limited

Executive Summary

- 1 I was appointed by Wokingham Borough Council in March 2026 to carry out the independent examination of the Sonning Neighbourhood Development Plan.
- 2 The examination was undertaken by written representations. I visited the neighbourhood area on 15 April 2026.
- 3 The Plan includes a range of policies and seeks to bring forward positive and sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. There is a very clear focus on safeguarding its character and appearance. It also proposes the designation of a series of Local Green Spaces.
- 4 The Plan has been underpinned by community support and engagement. All sections of the community have been actively engaged in its preparation.
- 5 Subject to a series of recommended modifications set out in this report, I have concluded that the Sonning Neighbourhood Development Plan meets all the necessary legal requirements and should proceed to referendum.
- 6 I recommend that the referendum area should coincide with the neighbourhood area.

Andrew Ashcroft
Independent Examiner
19 June 2026

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report sets out the findings of the independent examination of the Sonning Neighbourhood Development Plan 2023-2040 (the 'Plan').
- 1.2 The Plan has been submitted to Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) by Sonning Parish Council (SPC) in its capacity as the qualifying body responsible for preparing the neighbourhood plan. SPC has worked closely with the Sonning and Sonning Eye Society (SSES) to produce the Plan. This is best practice.
- 1.3 Neighbourhood plans were introduced into the planning process by the Localism Act 2011. They aim to allow local communities to take responsibility for guiding development in their area. This approach was subsequently embedded in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2012 and its updates in 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023 and 2024. The NPPF continues to be the principal element of national planning policy.
- 1.4 The role of an independent examiner is clearly defined in the legislation. I have been appointed to examine whether the submitted Plan meets the basic conditions and Convention Rights and other statutory requirements. It is not within my remit to examine or to propose an alternative plan, or a potentially more sustainable plan except where this arises as a result of my recommended modifications to ensure that the plan meets the basic conditions and the other relevant requirements.
- 1.5 A neighbourhood plan can be narrow or broad in scope. Any plan can include whatever range of policies it sees as appropriate to its designated neighbourhood area. The submitted Plan has been designed to be distinctive in general terms, and to be complementary to the development plan. It has a clear focus on maintaining the character and appearance of the neighbourhood area and designating Local Green Spaces.
- 1.6 Within the context set out above, this report assesses whether the Plan is legally compliant and meets the basic conditions that apply to neighbourhood plans. It also considers the content of the Plan and, where necessary, recommends changes to its policies and supporting text.
- 1.7 This report also provides a recommendation as to whether the Plan should proceed to referendum. If this is the case and a referendum has a positive outcome the Plan would then be used to determine planning applications within the neighbourhood area and will sit as part of the wider development plan.

2 The Role of the Independent Examiner

- 2.1 The examiner's role is to ensure that any submitted neighbourhood plan meets the relevant legislative and procedural requirements.
- 2.2 I was appointed by WBC, with the consent of SPC, to conduct the examination of the Plan and to prepare this report. I am independent of both WBC and SPC. I do not have any interest in any land that may be affected by the Plan.
- 2.3 I possess the appropriate qualifications and experience to undertake this role. I am a Director of Andrew Ashcroft Planning Limited. I have 43 years' experience in various local authorities at either Head of Planning or Service Director level and more recently as an independent examiner. I have extensive experience of examining neighbourhood plans. I am a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Neighbourhood Planning Independent Examiner Referral Service.

Examination Outcomes

- 2.4 In my role as the independent examiner of the Plan I am required to recommend one of the following outcomes of the examination:
- (a) that the Plan as submitted proceeds to a referendum; or
 - (b) that the Plan should proceed to referendum as modified (based on my recommendations); or
 - (c) that the Plan does not proceed to referendum on the basis that it does not meet the necessary legal requirements.
- 2.5 The outcome of the examination is set out in Sections 7 and 8 of this report.

Other examination matters

- 2.6 In examining the Plan I am required to check whether:
- the policies relate to the development and use of land for a designated neighbourhood plan area; and
 - the Plan meets the requirements of Section 38B of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (the Plan must specify the period to which it has effect, must not include provision about development that is excluded development, and must not relate to more than one neighbourhood area); and
 - the Plan has been prepared for an area that has been designated under Section 61G of the Localism Act and has been developed and submitted for examination by a qualifying body.
- 2.7 I have addressed the matters identified in paragraph 2.6 of this report. I am satisfied that the submitted Plan complies with the three requirements.
- 2.8 Section 98 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 requires that a neighbourhood plan:

- so far as the qualifying body considers appropriate, and having regard to the subject matter of the plan, must be designed to ensure that the development and use of land in the neighbourhood area contribute to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change; and
- so far as the qualifying body considers appropriate and having regard to the subject matter of the plan, must be designed to take account of any local nature recovery strategy under section 104 of the Environment Act 2021 that relates to all or part of the neighbourhood plan area.

2.9 I have addressed the matters identified in paragraph 2.8 of this report and have taken account of the information in the updated Basic Conditions Statement. I am satisfied that the submitted Plan complies with these two requirements.

3 Procedural Matters

3.1 I have considered the following documents during the examination:

- the submitted Plan;
- the Basic Conditions Statement;
- the updated Basic Conditions Statement (April 2026)
- the Consultation Statement
- the SEA/HRA Determination Statement;
- the representations made to the Plan;
- SPC's responses to the clarification note;
- WBC's response to the clarification note;
- the adopted Core Strategy (2010);
- the adopted Managing Development Delivery Local Plan (2014);
- the submitted Local Plan Update 2023 to 2040;
- the WBC Sustainable Design and Construction Supplementary Planning Document (and its Companion documents) (2010);
- the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024);
- Planning Practice Guidance;
- Relevant Written Ministerial Statements.

3.2 I visited the neighbourhood area on 15 April 2026. I looked at its overall character and appearance and at those areas affected by policies in the Plan in particular. The visit is covered in more detail in Section 5 of this report.

3.3 It is a general rule that neighbourhood plan examinations should be held by written representations only. Having considered all the information before me, including the representations made to the submitted Plan, I was satisfied that the Plan could be examined without the need for a public hearing. In coming to this conclusion, I took account of the comments made on the Plan, the level of detail in the Plan and its supporting documents.

3.4 The enactment of Section 99 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 on 25 March 2026 changed the basic conditions against which a neighbourhood plan is assessed. In order to address this matter SPC produced an updated Basic Conditions Statement. Targeted consultation took place on the Update. Section 4 of this report addresses this matter alongside the broader responses to the Plan. Sections 2.8 and 2.9 of this report have addressed other matters in relation to the contents of a neighbourhood plan as set out in Section 98 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023.

4 Consultation

Consultation Process

- 4.1 Policies in made neighbourhood plans become the basis for local planning and development control decisions. As such the regulations require neighbourhood plans to be supported and underpinned by public consultation.
- 4.2 In accordance with the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012, SPC has prepared a Consultation Statement. The Statement sets out the mechanisms used to engage all concerned in the plan-making process. It also provides specific details about the consultation process that took place on the pre-submission version of the Plan (May to July 2025). It captures the key issues in a proportionate way and is then underpinned by more detailed appendices. It is a good example of a Consultation Statement.
- 4.3 Section 2.2 of the Statement sets out details of the comprehensive range of consultation events and activities that were carried out in relation to the initial stages of the Plan. I am satisfied that they were comprehensive and proportionate to the neighbourhood area.
- 4.4 The Statement also provides details of the way in which SPC engaged with statutory bodies. I am satisfied that the process has been proportionate and robust.
- 4.5 Section 4 summarises the key issues arising from the consultation process on the pre-submission Plan. Appendix 14 of the Statement provides details about the comments received during the consultation process from statutory bodies on the pre-submission version of the Plan.
- 4.6 I am satisfied that consultation has been an important element of the Plan's production. Advice on the neighbourhood planning process has been made available to the community in a positive and direct way by those responsible for the Plan's preparation.
- 4.7 From all the evidence provided to me as part of the examination, I am satisfied that SPC sought to engage with residents, statutory bodies and the development industry as the Plan has been prepared.

Representations Received

- 4.8 Consultation on the submitted plan was undertaken by WBC and ended on 16 March 2026. This exercise generated comments from the following organisations:

- Berkshire Garden Trust
- Canal and River Trust
- Natural England
- Wokingham Borough Council
- Oxfordshire County Council

- Reading Bluecoat School
- Twyford Parish Council
- Historic England
- University of Reading
- Surrey County Council

4.9 Representations were also received from some residents in the parish.

4.10 I have taken account of the various representations as part of the examination of the Plan. Where it is appropriate to do so, I make specific reference to the individual representations in Section 7 of this report.

4.11 A separate consultation exercise was undertaken by WBC on the revised Basic Conditions Statement which ended on 29 April 2026. This generated representations from the University of Reading, the Thames Valley ICB, Sport England, Oxfordshire County Council, and a local resident.

5 The Neighbourhood Area and the Development Plan Context

The Neighbourhood Area

- 5.1 The neighbourhood area is the parish of Sonning. It is located at the southern end of the Chilterns chalk escarpment, on the south bank of the River Thames. It is approximately four miles to the east of Reading. The 2021 Census advises that the parish has 688 properties housing a resident population of 1617 persons. It was designated as a neighbourhood area on 24 October 2019.
- 5.2 The village has a very attractive built environment which complements its riverside setting. It is dominated by St Andrew's Church and its grounds. The historic core of Sonning contains a series of listed buildings from the 15th and 16th centuries, and was designated a Conservation Area in 1971 and which was extended in both 1980 and 1996. The current boundaries of the conservation area are the river to the north-west, the University Farm (Sonning Farm) to the north and north-east and King George's Field and Reading Blue Coat School to the south.
- 5.3 In addition to the attractions of its heritage and beautiful local environment, Sonning benefits from a wide range of local facilities such as a village shop (the Sonning Village Hamper), hair dressing salon and local hostelries (The Bull Hotel and public house, the Sonning Club and the Great House hotel and Coppa Club), good pre-school, primary and secondary level schools (the Sonning Junior school and the Reading Blue Coat school) and a wide range of local community and sporting facilities. Other facilities such as the Mill Theatre and the French Horn Hotel and Restaurant are located in Sonning Eye. Community facilities include St. Andrew's Church (including the Ark and St. Sarik Room), Pearson Hall and Beech Lodge. The Robert Palmer's Almshouse Charity operates the impressive almshouse cottages in Pearson Road. Together with the Pearson Hall and Sonning Club complex, they form the natural centre of the village.

Development Plan Context

- 5.4 The Wokingham Core Strategy was adopted in January 2010. It sets out the basis for future development in the Borough up to 2026. Policy CP9 comments that the scale of development proposals in the Borough must reflect the existing or proposed levels of facilities and services at or in the location, together with their accessibility. It advises that development proposals (in addition to the Strategic Development Locations in Policies CP18-21) within development limits will be acceptable in a series of locations including the modest and limited development locations. Sonning is one of the limited development locations.
- 5.5 The Core Strategy is underpinned by the Managing Development Delivery Local Plan (MDD). It was adopted in February 2014 and includes a series of development management policies and allocates sites for residential development. Policy SAL03 allocates a series of reserve sites which include land at Sonning Farm (off Glebe Gardens), Sonning for the delivery of around 25 dwellings.
- 5.6 The following other policies in the MDD Local Plan are particularly relevant to the submitted Plan:

Policy CC03	Green Infrastructure, Trees, and Landscaping
Policy CC04	Sustainable Design and Construction
Policy CC09	Development and Flood Risk
Policy TB05	Housing Mix
Policy TB24	Designated Heritage Assets
Policy TB26	Buildings of Traditional Local Character and Areas of Special Character

- 5.7 WBC is preparing a new Local Plan that will replace the existing Core Strategy and MDD Local Plan in due course. The Wokingham Borough Local Plan Update 2023-2040: Proposed Submission Plan was submitted for examination in February 2025. Part 1 examination hearings were held in November 2025 and Part 2 hearings began in March 2026 and have continued as the examination of the Neighbourhood Plan has taken place. It is anticipated that the Local Plan Update will be adopted early in 2027.
- 5.8 The submitted Plan has been prepared within its wider development plan context. In doing so it has relied on up-to-date information and research that has underpinned previous and existing planning policy documents in the Borough. This is good practice and reflects key elements in Planning Practice Guidance on this matter.

Unaccompanied Visit

- 5.9 I visited the neighbourhood area on 15 April 2026. I approached from the A4 (Bath Road) from the A404 to the east. This allowed me to understand its connection with the strategic highway network and its wider setting in the landscape.
- 5.10 I looked at the parts of the village directly affected by its policies for Local Gaps, Local Green Spaces and for residential development.
- 5.11 I took the opportunity to look at the historic core of the village. I looked carefully at St Andrew's Church and its wider historic setting.
- 5.12 I then walked along the Thames Path to Sonning Lock. This part of the visit highlighted the significance of the relationship between the neighbourhood area and the River Thames.
- 5.13 I left the neighbourhood area along the A4 heading towards Reading. This provided me with another indication of the way in which it connected with the strategic road network and with other settlements in the surrounding area. I then drove back into Sonning and then crossed the River Thames to Sonning Eye and Playhatch. In both cases these elements of the visit provided me with an indication of the way in which the neighbourhood area connected with the strategic road network and with other settlements in the surrounding area.

6 The Neighbourhood Plan and the Basic Conditions

6.1 This section of the report deals with the submitted neighbourhood plan as a whole and the extent to which it meets the basic conditions. The submitted Basic Conditions Statement and the revised Basic Conditions Statement have helped considerably in the preparation of this section of the report. They are well-presented and informative documents that are proportionate to the Plan.

6.2 As part of this process, I must consider whether the submitted Plan meets the Basic Conditions as set out in paragraph 8(2) of Schedule 4B of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. To comply with the basic conditions, the Plan must:

- have regard to national policies and advice contained in guidance issued by the Secretary of State;
- contribute to the achievement of sustainable development;
- not have the effect of preventing development from taking place which is proposed in the development plan for the area of the authority;
- be compatible with European Union (EU) obligations and European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR); and
- not breach the requirements of Chapter 8 of Part 6 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

6.3 I assess the Plan against the basic conditions under these matters below:

National Planning Policies and Guidance

6.4 For the purposes of this examination the key elements of national policy relating to planning matters are set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) issued in December 2024.

6.5 The NPPF sets out a range of core land-use planning issues to underpin both plan-making and decision-taking. The following are particularly relevant to the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan:

- a plan led system – in this case the relationship between the neighbourhood plan and the adopted Core Strategy and the MDD Local Plan;
- delivering a sufficient supply of homes;
- building a strong, competitive economy;
- recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving local communities;
- taking account of the different roles and characters of different areas;
- highlighting the importance of high-quality design and good standards of amenity for all future occupants of land and buildings; and
- conserving heritage assets in a manner appropriate to their significance.

6.6 Neighbourhood plans sit within this wider context both generally, and within the more specific presumption in favour of sustainable development. Paragraph 13 of the NPPF

indicates that neighbourhoods should both develop plans that support the strategic needs set out in local plans and plan positively to support local development that is outside the strategic elements of the development plan.

- 6.7 In addition to the NPPF, I have also taken account of other elements of national planning policy including Planning Practice Guidance and relevant ministerial statements.
- 6.8 Having considered all the evidence and representations available as part of the examination, I am satisfied that the submitted Plan has had regard to national planning policies and guidance in general terms subject to the recommended modifications included in this report. It sets out a positive vision for the future of the neighbourhood area with a focus on securing high quality design which responds to its distinctive character. The Basic Conditions Statement (and its Update) maps the policies in the Plan against the appropriate sections of the NPPF.
- 6.9 At a more practical level, the NPPF indicates that plans should provide a clear framework within which decisions on planning applications can be made and that they should give a clear indication of how a decision-maker should react to a development proposal (paragraph 16d). This matter is reinforced in Planning Practice Guidance. Paragraph ID:41-041-20140306 indicates that policies in neighbourhood plans should be drafted with sufficient clarity so that a decision-maker can apply them consistently and with confidence when determining planning applications. Policies should also be concise, precise, and supported by appropriate evidence.
- 6.10 As submitted the Plan does not fully accord with this range of practical issues. Many of my recommended modifications in Section 7 relate to matters of clarity and precision. They are designed to ensure that the Plan has regard to national policy.

Contributing to sustainable development

- 6.11 There are clear overlaps between national policy and the way in which the submitted Plan contributes towards sustainable development. Sustainable development has three principal dimensions – economic, social, and environmental. The submitted Plan has set out to achieve sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. In the economic dimension, the Plan includes policies for the mix and type of residential development (Policies HOU1 and HOU2). In the social dimension, it includes policies on Local Green Spaces (Policy ENV2), and on sustainable travel (Policies TRA1 and TRA2). In the environmental dimension, the Plan positively seeks to protect its natural, built, and historic environment. It has specific policies on design (Policy DES1), and on local gaps (Policy ENV1). SPC has undertaken its own assessment of this matter in the submitted Basic Conditions Statement.

Not have the effect of preventing development from taking place which is proposed in the development plan for the area of the authority

- 6.12 I have already commented in detail on the development plan context in Wokingham Borough in paragraphs 5.4 to 5.8 of this report.

- 6.13 I consider that the submitted Plan delivers a local dimension to this strategic context. The Basic Conditions Statement helpfully relates the Plan's policies to policies in the development plan. Whilst the Plan proposes a series of policies relating to its built and natural environment, it does not prevent the potential for new development to come forward for infill development in the village. I have recommended modifications to Policy HOU1 to ensure that the delivery of housing on the site off Garde Road can continue to deliver the level of housing growth identified in the MDD Local Plan. In this broader context I am satisfied that the implementation of the Plan will not have the effect of preventing development from taking place which is proposed in the development plan.

Strategic Environmental Assessment

- 6.14 The Neighbourhood Planning (General) (Amendment) Regulations 2015 require a qualifying body either to submit an environmental report prepared in accordance with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 or a statement of reasons explaining why an environmental report is not required.
- 6.15 In order to comply with this requirement WBC undertook a screening exercise (January 2025) on the need or otherwise for a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to be prepared for the Plan. The report is thorough and well-constructed. As a result of this process, it concluded that the Plan is not likely to have any significant effects on the environment and accordingly would not require SEA.

Habitat Regulations Assessment

- 6.16 The screening statement also included a separate section on the need for a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) of the Plan. It concludes that the Plan is not likely to have significant environmental effects on a European nature conservation site or undermine their conservation objectives (either alone or in combination) and taking account of the precautionary principle. On this basis it concludes that Appropriate Assessment is not required.
- 6.17 The HRA report is both thorough and comprehensive. It advises that the neighbourhood area does not contain any designated international sites. It also assesses the potential impact of the Plan on the following sites which are in relative proximity to the neighbourhood plan area:
- Thames Basin Heaths SPA – in excess of 10km
 - Chiltern Beechwoods SAC – in excess of 3km
 - Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC – approximately 14km
 - Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC – in excess of 18km

It provides assurance to all concerned that the submitted Plan takes appropriate account of important ecological and biodiversity matters.

- 6.18 Having reviewed the information provided to me as part of the examination, I am satisfied that a proportionate process has been undertaken in accordance with the various regulations. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, I am entirely satisfied that the submitted Plan is compatible with this aspect of the basic conditions.

Human Rights

- 6.19 In a similar fashion I am satisfied that the submitted Plan has had regard to the fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and that it complies with the Human Rights Act. There is no evidence that has been submitted to me to suggest otherwise. In addition, there has been full and adequate opportunity for all interested parties to take part in the preparation of the Plan and to make their comments known. Based on all the evidence available to me, I conclude that the submitted Plan does not breach, nor is in any way incompatible with the ECHR.

Summary

- 6.20 On the basis of my assessment of the Plan in this section of my report, I am satisfied that it meets the basic conditions subject to the incorporation of the recommended modifications contained in this report.

7 The Neighbourhood Plan policies

- 7.1 This section of the report comments on the policies in the Plan. It makes a series of recommended modifications to ensure that they have the necessary precision to meet the basic conditions.
- 7.2 The modifications focus on the policies themselves given that the basic conditions relate primarily to this aspect of neighbourhood plans. In some cases, I have also recommended modifications to the associated supporting text.
- 7.3 I am satisfied that the content and the form of the Plan is fit for purpose. It is distinctive and proportionate to the neighbourhood area. SPC, SSES and the wider community have spent time and energy in identifying the issues and objectives that they wish to be included in their Plan. This sits at the heart of the localism agenda.
- 7.4 The Plan has been designed to reflect Planning Practice Guidance (ID:41-004-20190509) which indicates that neighbourhood plans must address the development and use of land.
- 7.5 I have addressed the policies in the order that they appear in the submitted plan. Where necessary I have identified the inter-relationships between the policies.
- 7.6 For clarity this section of the report comments on all the policies in the Plan.
- 7.7 Where modifications are recommended to policies they are highlighted in bold print. Any associated or free-standing modifications to the text of the Plan are set out in italic print.

The initial section of the Plan (Sections 1-4)

- 7.8 The initial parts of the Plan set the scene for the policies. They do so in a proportionate way. The Plan is presented in an effective fashion. It makes good use of well-selected maps. A very clear distinction is made between the policies and the supporting text. It also highlights the links between the Plan's objectives and its resultant policies.
- 7.9 The Introduction addresses the background to neighbourhood planning. It comments about how the Plan has been prepared and how it will be used.
- 7.10 Section 2 provides information about the wider planning process and the production of the Plan. It also comments about the way in which the community was engaged. The neighbourhood area is shown on Map 1. The Plan is not clear about the Plan period and comments generally about the overlap with the Local Plan Update (LPU). SPC advised that the Plan has been designed so that its Plan period overlaps with that of the LPU. This is acceptable, and I recommend that the Plan is modified to comment directly on this important matter. Section 2 also comments about the national and local context within which the Plan has been prepared. In addition, it comments about the way in which local people and organisations were engaged in the production of the Plan. This overlaps with the details in the Consultation Statement (as summarised in Section 4 of this report).

Revise the final sentence of paragraph 2.3.1 to read:

'A formal application was submitted by SPC requesting permission to proceed and approval was granted by WBC on 24th October 2019 for SPC to develop a NP covering the whole Parish of Sonning, the boundaries of which are shown on Map 1. The Plan period is 2023 to 2040 to coincide with the Plan period for the Local Plan Update.'

On the front cover of the Plan add '2023 to 2040' immediately after Sonning Neighbourhood Plan.

7.11 Sections 3 and 4 comment about the neighbourhood area to very good effect. The details help to underpin several of the policies in the Plan. These sections are a key success of the Plan preparation process.

7.12 Section 4 also sets out a comprehensive Vision for the Plan as follows:

'Sonning will continue to be known by people at all stages of their lives as one of Berkshire's best Parish communities in which to live; for its semi-rural historic village character and countryside landscapes; and for its attractive green lanes, green spaces and thriving natural environment. The neighbourhood will be safe, clean, and well connected to the neighbouring parishes by unpolluted roads and pathways. New development will protect or enhance Sonning's rural settlements and provide good quality housing that is in keeping with the distinct character areas across the Parish, and is appropriate for the needs of the community.'

7.13 The remainder of this section of the report addresses each policy in turn in the context set out in paragraphs 7.5 to 7.7 of this report.

Policy HOU1 Delivering Genuinely Affordable Homes

7.14 The policy supports the delivery of a fully affordable housing scheme on the Bull Close site and encourages the provision of Almshouses. The Plan advises that this approach directly aligns with the NPPF's objective of addressing the needs of groups with specific housing requirements (paragraph 61). It also identifies that by identifying a specific need and mechanism (Almshouses), the policy reflects paragraph 63, which requires policies to assess and reflect the size, type and tenure of housing needed for different groups, and paragraph 64, which states policies should specify the type of affordable housing required.

7.15 I looked carefully at the site concerned from Garde Road.

7.16 WBC comment that

'The policy refers to 'Land at Bull Close'. This site was allocated as a reserve site via policy 'SAL03: Allocated reserve housing sites' in the Managing Development Delivery Local Plan (MDD) adopted in 2014 for 25 dwellings. As referenced in the Plan, the site continues to be proposed for allocation in the emerging Local Plan Update (LPU) for 25 dwellings (reference SS14.17). However, in both the MDD and LPU the site is referred to as 'Land at Sonning Farm'. The site is accessed via Garde Road, and the next closest road is the cul-de-sac known as Glebe Gardens to the west. Reference to 'Bull Close' is therefore confusing, with no such road within the vicinity of the site. For

the avoidance of doubt, it is recommended that the site reference is updated to be consistent with the adopted and emerging local plans.

With regard to the provision of almshouses, WBC acknowledges the qualifying body's support for this type of housing and recognises that the existing provision within the parish which has been successful and is supported locally. Notwithstanding, almshousing does not fall within the definition of affordable housing in the NPPF (for example the landlords aren't registered providers), and the allocation eligibility criteria is out of the control of the housing authority, which limits its ability to exercise its statutory role to provide housing for those most in need. There may also be practical deliverability issues given that funding would need to be available to almshouse charities to buy the units without the benefit of S106 contributions which non-registered providers would not be eligible for.

WBC considers, therefore, that while Almshouses may provide a useful practical form of cheaper housing for individuals to meet identified needs within the parish, it should not be seen as a replacement for social rented accommodation. Instead, it should be a potential additional form of affordable rent offer to be considered. In the context of a scheme at Land at Sonning Farm coming forward which delivers 100% non-market housing, then almshouses as part of the mix provided would clearly not be an issue for WBC. More generally however, modifications are recommended to the policy to ensure that almshouse provision is appropriately considered alongside other forms of affordable housing.'

- 7.17 In its capacity as the owner of the site off Garde Road, the University of Reading advises that:

'Part A of this policy aims to encourage the provision of a 100% affordable housing development on the Bull Close Site. The policy refers to the social benefits of providing 100% affordable housing carrying significant weight in the planning balance. As the apportionment of weight to a particular planning matter in the planning balance is a judgement to be made by the decision maker on a case-by-case basis, it is not considered appropriate to include this as part of the policy.

In addition, while the University recognises the aspirations of the Parish for a scheme at the Bull Close site that would provide 100% affordable housing on the site, it is not considered that the delivery of such a scheme would be in general conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan. The Bull Close site is allocated as a reserve housing site 'land at Sonning Farm (off Glebe Gardens)', for around 25 dwellings, under policy SAL03 within Wokingham Borough's Managing Development Delivery Document (MDD). Appendix 12 of the MDD sets out further guidance for the Site. It states that this site will deliver around 25 dwellings, and, subject to viability, will provide at least 40% affordable housing. The MDD does not require a certain mix and type of housing at this site.

Further, the LPU Policy SS14 allocated the site for residential development. The development guidelines in Appendix E of the LPU do not specify an additional requirement of affordable housing greater than what is already required by draft Policy H3 (Affordable Housing), which states a minimum of 40% of affordable housing in

Sonning. Therefore, there is not considered to be any robust evidence provided by Sonning Parish Council to justify a 100% affordable housing policy.'

- 7.18 The ambitions of the policy are clear. Nevertheless, as submitted Part A is a statement rather than a policy and seeks to apportion weight to a material planning consideration. In addition, Parts B and C read as aspirations rather than as land use planning policies. I sought SPC's comments on its approach towards the development of this site. In its response to the clarification note SPC advised that:

'(it) recognises the examiner's concern that Clause A should not seek to determine the weight to be applied by the decision-maker in an individual planning balance. However, the PC considers that the intention behind Clause A remains appropriate. It is not intended to require a 100% affordable housing scheme, nor to prevent a policy-compliant scheme from coming forward. Rather, it is intended to make clear that the community would positively support a scheme that goes beyond the minimum affordable housing requirement, particularly in circumstances where housing that is "affordable" in the technical planning sense may still not be genuinely affordable to many households with a local connection to Sonning.

The PC also notes that paragraphs 29 and 30 of the NPPF recognise the role of neighbourhood plans in setting non-strategic policies for specific areas and in shaping and directing development as part of the statutory development plan. In that context, the PC considers it appropriate for the neighbourhood plan to identify the form of affordable housing provision that would be locally supported.'

- 7.19 I also sought advice from SPC about the current position on its discussions with the landowner. In its response to the clarification note it advised that:

'On 15 September 2025 (it) contacted the Reading University Director of Land Management by email after receiving the Stantec Regulation 14 submission. The email expressed surprise that Stantec had made no reference to the discussions held between the PC, the Director of the University Land Management and its consultant (Ridge) on 12 June 2024 in which the University had supported 100% affordable housing at the Bull Close site, citing a similar development in Didcot in which this had been provided. The email sought a further meeting to clarify the situation but no response to this email was received. The PC remains willing to engage constructively with the University and any future development partner to explore how the site can deliver a high-quality scheme which responds to the affordability evidence and the wider policies of the development plan.'

- 7.20 This is a complicated policy. The site is already allocated as a reserve site in the MDD Local Plan and is proposed as an allocation in the LPU. In this broader context SPC is seeking to encourage a 100% affordable housing scheme to reflect the position on housing need in the parish. Whilst SPC has had discussions with the owner of the site there are no details available on the impact on commercial viability.

- 7.21 The first part of the policy is a statement rather than a land use policy. As the University of Reading comments, the apportionment of weight to a particular planning matter in the planning balance is a judgement to be made by the decision maker on a case-by-

case basis, it is not considered appropriate to include this as part of the policy. As such I recommend its deletion.

- 7.22 I have considered the various comments on the policy very carefully. I recommend that the approach taken is revised so that the thrust of the policy supports the development of almshouses either on the Garde Road site or elsewhere in the neighbourhood area. This will have the effect of safeguarding the level of development anticipated on the Garde Road site in the MDD Local Plan and therefore meet the basic conditions.
- 7.23 I also recommend consequential modifications to the supporting text. Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of each of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the policy with:

‘Development proposals for the residential development of the land at Sonning Farm site which provide Almshouses as part of an appropriate mix of affordable housing tenures will be supported.

All residential development proposals should provide a mix of affordable tenures including social rent, affordable rent (including Almshouses), and affordable home ownership to support a range of housing needs and a balanced community.’

Replace the support text as follows

‘Section 1

Policy HOU1 comments generally about the delivery of affordable housing. It also sets out the Plan’s approach towards the development of affordable housing on the Sonning Farm site. That site was allocated as a reserve site via policy ‘SAL03: Allocated reserve housing sites’ in the Managing Development Delivery Local Plan (MDD) adopted in 2014 for 25 dwellings. The site continues to be proposed for allocation in the emerging Local Plan Update (LPU) for 25 dwellings (reference SS14.17). Policy HOU1 seeks to encourage the delivery of a 100% affordable housing scheme on land at Sonning Farm. This has been discussed with the landowner. The Plan would support such a proposal and makes it clear that the affordable housing thresholds set out in strategic policy are minimum, not maximum thresholds. The social benefits of helping to address the insufficient supply of affordable homes in the village would be significant.’

Sections 2 and 3

The Robert Palmer’s Almshouse Charity already manages Almshouses within the village and as a charity for the benefit of qualifying residents in the village. The policy therefore encourages the owner of Sonning Farm and its future development partner to give appropriate consideration to the strong desire of the local community to see a proportion, or all, of the new homes on this site to be managed by an Almshouse charity. The approach of this policy is supported by the Government’s decision to change the definition of ‘affordable housing for rent’. The intention of such a change is to make it easier for organisations such as Almshouses to develop affordable homes.’

Policy HOU2 Housing Mix

- 7.24 The policy seeks to ensure that genuinely affordable housing is delivered within the housing mix of new residential developments. The Plan comments that it is in conformity with the NPPF by setting out a specific housing mix to meet identified local needs. It requires new schemes to provide at least two-thirds smaller units (1-3 bedrooms) to address the needs of an aging population and allow for downsizing. The Plan advises that this reflects paragraph 63 of the NPPF, which requires policies to assess and reflect the size, type and tenure of housing needed for different groups in the community, including older people. The Plan also comments that the policy's guidance on a 50/50 split between affordable rent and ownership also aligns with paragraph 64 of the NPPF, which allows planning policies to specify the type of affordable housing required.
- 7.25 I note the relationship between the policy and the Housing Needs Assessment. In general terms the policy takes a positive approach to housing mix and has regard to Section 5 and 8 of the NPPF.
- 7.26 WBC advises that:
- 'Part A of the policy sets out this aspiration in slightly less clear terms, as it omits reference to social rented tenures. A minor recommended modification is suggested below for additional clarity. Whilst it is recognised that typically WBC seeks a borough wide split of 70/30 (rent/ownership), WBC is satisfied that the policy is based on robust and proportionate evidence for the parish level and is therefore justified. In part B of the policy, reference to 'the most recent evidence available' is ambiguous and could be interpreted as allowing evidence produced by an applicant to satisfy the policy requirement simply by being produced at a later time. A modification is recommended to this wording to provide additional clarity and to ensure that decisions are made based on evidence endorsed by the council, given its role as local planning authority and housing authority.'*
- 7.27 The University of Reading comments that:
- 'For sites that are relatively smaller, including the University's Bull Close Site, a specific policy requirement for tenure mix would represent an inflexible approach to support the delivery of sites given that the specific nature of need will change over the plan period. Whilst the University acknowledges the policy wording allows a site-by-site basis determination of tenure mix provision, it is considered that having reference to a starting point for tenure mix, at neighbourhood level, would not be effective in the medium to long term given there will be changes in Sonning's housing needs through the plan period. Therefore, Policy SNP/HOU2 should be amended to reflect a flexible approach to provide affordable housing tenure that recognises the need at the time and the deliverability of the site.'*
- 7.28 I have considered these comments carefully. They will help to make the policy more rounded, and capable of implementation throughout the Plan period. On this basis I recommend that the first two parts of the policy are modified accordingly. Otherwise, I

am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the social and the environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace parts A and B of the policy with:

‘Development proposals for new housing should provide affordable housing having regard to the recommendations of the latest the Sonning Housing Needs Assessment. The precise tenure mix of affordable housing will be determined on a site-by-site basis and following discussions with stakeholders.

Proposals for residential development, which address local need in Sonning, and are based on the most up-to-date evidence produced or endorsed by the Local Planning Authority, will be supported. Development proposals will be expected to provide a mix of dwelling types and sizes to address the nature of local needs and contribute to the objective of creating a mixed and balanced community. To achieve this, schemes of 3 or more dwellings should secure at least two thirds of smaller units (1-3 bedrooms) with larger units (≥4 bedrooms) making up the remainder on any given site.’

Policy DES1 Design Codes

- 7.29 The policy seeks to bring ‘clarity about design expectations’ within Sonning. The specific matters included in the policy ‘provide a framework for creating distinctive places’ to deliver a ‘consistent and high-quality standard of design’ as set out in Section 12 of the NPPF.
- 7.30 This is an important policy in the Plan. It is underpinned by the Design Guidelines and Code.
- 7.31 I note WBC’s comments about the potential impact of the emerging update to the NPPF on the details of the policy, and its relationship to the Design Guidelines and Code. Nevertheless, the Plan is assessed against existing national planning policy and planning policy is frequently changing. This is a matter which can be assessed in any review of the Plan which comes forward in due course.
- 7.32 In the round the approach taken is a first-class response to Section 12 of the NPPF. In this broader context I recommend that the first part of the policy is modified so that it can be applied in a proportionate way. Otherwise, I am satisfied that it meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the social and the environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

In the first part of the policy replace ‘Development proposals’ with ‘As appropriate to their scale, nature and location development proposals’

Policy ENV1 Local Gaps

- 7.33 This policy identifies Local Gaps to safeguard the gaps between Sonning and Charvil and Sonning and the Thames Valley Park. The Plan advises that the approach taken in the policy is consistent with paragraph 29 of the NPPF, which recognises the role of non-strategic policies in setting out more detailed approaches to conserving the natural environment. The Plan also comments that the policy reflects paragraph 187 of the

NPPF, which requires planning to contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside.

- 7.34 I looked at the proposed Local Gaps carefully during the visit.
- 7.35 I have considered this policy in general, and the proposed identification of the Local Gaps very carefully. In general terms I am satisfied that the overall purpose of the policy to maintain the separation of the various settlements is entirely appropriate. It reflects the historic relationship of the individual communities to the immediate east of Reading and within the Thames valley.
- 7.36 I am satisfied that the proposed Sonning and the Thames Valley Park Local Gap is entirely appropriate. It is tightly defined around the western edge of the parish and the Thames Valley Park. The Thames Valley Park has a very different character and appearance to that of the neighbourhood area in general, and the various sport and recreational uses along Sonning Lane.
- 7.37 The proposed Sonning and Charvil Local Gap is a much larger expanse of land between the two settlements. I looked at its extent from Garde Road, Charvil Lane and Broadmoor Lane during the visit. I noted that the land concerned was largely flat and in agricultural use.
- 7.38 WBC advises that:

'With regard to the Sonning-Charvil gap, (it) supports the principle of preventing the physical or perceived coalescence of the settlements of Sonning and Charvil. WBC welcomes that the Qualifying Body has partly taken on board our previous comments in relation to the extent of this gap and has therefore reduced its scale from that recommended in the supporting Local Gap Study (as acknowledged at paragraph 4 on page 28 of the plan). However, WBC still considers the Sonning and Charvil gap could be more focussed, specifically with the parcels of land to the north-west of Broadmoor Lane being less justified. These parcels in effect serve as a gap between Sonning and the open countryside to the north rather than between the settlements of Sonning and Charvil, and therefore do not themselves support the intention of the policy. WBC considers that Broadmoor Lane serves as a more logical northern extent to this gap and recommends it is revised.'

In coming to this view, (it) notes that the emerging Local Plan Update proposes areas of Valued Landscape¹ across the borough. The River Thames Valued Landscape encompasses the whole of the area of landscape to the north-east of Sonning as being within this valued landscape (VL), which extends beyond the parish, but the Valued Landscape Assessment 2024 is not referenced within the Plan or within the Local Gap Study. The proposed VL is a strategic policy designation which does include the parcels north-west of Broadmoor Lane. As expected of a local policy designation, the proposed local gap recognises a more focussed area of the wider landscape that comprises the proposed VL. WBC's view that the local gap should not include the area north of Broadmoor Lane does not mean it considers that area to have lesser intrinsic value, but simply reflects that that area of land does not lie directly between the two settlements and there is less justification for its inclusion within the local gap extent.'

7.39 In its response SPC advised that:

'In making their response to the proposed Sonning-Charvil Local Gap, Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) suggest a reduction in the extent of the Sonning-Charvil Local Gap through the removal of the land to the north-west of Broadmoor Lane. However, WBC then state, 'that maintaining the separate identity of settlements through the avoidance of physical or perceived coalescence is an important and legitimate function of the plan led system.' WBC go further by stating, 'with regard to the Sonning-Charvil gap, WBC supports the principle of preventing the physical or perceived coalescence of the settlements of Sonning and Charvil.' The use of the word 'perception' is important. In the context of the proposed Sonning-Charvil gap the main component to the perceived gap between the two settlements is a visual one. The ability to visually perceive the separation between the two settlements of Sonning and Charvil is as important to maintaining the physical separation between the two. WBC ignore the importance of the area to the north-west of Broadmoor Lane in enabling the maintenance of the perceived visual separation of Sonning and Charvil.'

7.40 Based on my own observations and all the available evidence I am satisfied that the irregular parcel of land between Garde Road (to the west), Bath Road (to the south), and Charvil Lane (to the north) has been properly identified within the proposed Local Gap. I have also reached the same conclusion about the parcel of land between Charvil Lane (to the south), Broadmoor Lane (to the north) and Charvil (to the east).

7.41 During the visit I noted that the part of the proposed Local Gap to the north of Broadmoor Lane related well to natural features in the landscape. However, the extent to which it had a direct function in safeguarding the ongoing separation between Sonning and Charvil was less clear.

7.42 I have noted the differing approaches towards this part of the proposed Local Gap between SPC and WBC. I have taken particular account of SPC's comments about the importance of the land to the north of Broadmoor Lane in the wider landscape and its visual importance in the separation of the two settlements. On the balance of the evidence, I am not satisfied that this parcel of land is appropriate for inclusion within the proposed Local Gap. I have reached this conclusion for three related reasons. The first is that the policy is land use based rather than one based on landscape or visual impact. The second is that this element of the proposed Local Gap has a limited role in safeguarding the separation of Sonning and Charvil and does not abut the built part of Charvil. The third is that the parcels of land to the north of Broadmoor Lane relate more closely to the character of the River Thames, rather than to the more built-up areas of the two settlements. This conclusion also reinforces the approach taken in other neighbourhood plans that local gaps should occupy the minimum area to maintain the separation of the settlements concerned. I appreciate the significance of the proposed Local Gaps both to SPC and the wider community. In these circumstances I recommend that the supporting text is modified so that it explains the way in which the examination process caused the Sonning – Charvil Local Gap to be reduced in scale.

- 7.43 The policy identifies the Local Gaps and then comments that development proposals that lie within their defined area must be located and designed in such a way as to prevent the visual coalescence of the settlements.
- 7.44 WBC comments that:
- ‘the intention of the gap policy is principally related to the prevention of physical and visual coalescence. As drafted, Policy SNP/ENV1 currently refers to ‘perceived and visual’ coalescence only, and on reflection this should refer to physical coalescence as well. This would also be consistent with the LCA which references physical separation. On this basis it proposes a modification to the wording of the policy.’*
- 7.45 SPC agreed to the suggested modification in its response to the clarification note. I am satisfied that the proposed revisions to the policy suggested by WBC are appropriate and will bring the clarity required by the NPPF. They will ensure that the focus of the policy is on preventing the physical coalescence of Sonning and Charvil and Sonning and the Thames Valley Park. This approach will allow the policy to be clearly applied through the development management process.
- 7.46 Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and the environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the policy with:

‘The Plan defines two Local Gaps, as shown on the Policies Map, in order to prevent the physical, visual and perceived coalescence of Sonning & Charvil and Sonning & the Thames Valley Park and to protect their setting. Development proposals that lie within the defined Local Gaps should be located and designed in such a way to prevent the coalescence of the settlements.’

Delete the land to the north of Broadmoor Lane in the Sonning and Charvil Local Gap as shown on the Policies Map.

Replace the fourth paragraph of the Context to the policy with:

‘SPC and WBC have had discussions on the geographic extent of the Sonning-Charvil Local Gap. Nevertheless, the Steering Group decided to reduce the size of the proposed Sonning-Charvil local gap following the consultation on the pre-submission Plan in order to take account of WBC’s comment regarding the overall size of the proposed gap. Whilst WBC suggested to reduce the north-western boundary to the alignment of Broadmoor Lane, the Steering Group considered it appropriate to retain the two fields to the north-west of Broadmoor Lane within the proposed local gap as they made a significant contribution to the visual separation of the Sonning and Charvil settlements. The examination process has resulted in a further refinement of the scale of the Sonning-Charvil Local Gap. The examiner concluded that the land north of Broadmoor Lane has a more limited role in preventing coalescence for the purposes of a land-use Local Gap policy. This outcome does not preclude the area from being recognised through other relevant planning designations or considerations, including its proposed designation as part of a Valued Landscape Area in the emerging Local Plan and the presence of flood risk across part of the neighbourhood area.’

Policy ENV2 Local Green Spaces

7.47 The policy proposes the designation of Local Green Spaces (LGSs) in accordance with paragraphs 106-108 of the NPPF.

7.48 I looked at the proposed LGSs carefully during the visit. I noted their different sizes and uses. In general terms this is an excellent policy which is underpinned by the assessment of Local Green Spaces (Appendix 1). The policy takes the matter-of-fact approach in 108 of the NPPF. I am satisfied that the proposed LGSs at King George V Playing Field and The Wharf meet the various criteria in paragraphs 106 and 107 of the NPPF

7.49 WBC advises that:

'Policy SNP/ENV2 seeks to designate three areas of Local Green Space (LGS). Of the three LGS proposed in the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan, two are proposed designations in the Local Plan Update 2023-2040 Proposed Submission Plan2 either as a whole or through smaller, separate designations which amount to virtually the same area proposed in the SNP

WBC's assessment of the proposed sites (along with other nominated areas) is set out in the Local Green Spaces Assessment (September 2024)³. Aside from a few minor amendments, the boundaries of the areas LGS.01 and LGS.03 proposed in the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan are broadly the same as those assessed in WBC's Local Green Spaces Assessment. It should be noted that two separate parcels LGS133 and LGS223 broadly correspond with proposed LGS.03 however the latter in the SNP contains a gap in the centre of the site (see map at page 43 of the plan). WBC considers that the larger area of land proposed for designation through LGS133 and LGS223 in the LPU is suitable and recommends that this larger extent is recognised in the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan.'

7.50 I also note that WBC has addressed proposed LGS.03 in its schedule of proposed modifications to the LPU (February 2025). It proposes a modification to remove LGS223 (the western parcel of proposed LGS.03 in the neighbourhood plan) from designation in the LPU (in Main Modifications 94, 101, and 126). These modifications have been suggested following reflection on Reading Blue Coat School's objection to that aspect of the designation in their representations to the LPU.

7.51 The representation from the Reading Bluecoat School (RBS) comments that:

- it objects to the designation of land at LGS.03 (Ali's Pond and Sonning Field);
- Sonning Field is part of a larger parcel of land that benefits from planning permission F/2005/4490 for the change of use of vacant land to a school sports field and that the permission has been implemented; and
- the School needs to maximise the amount of land needed for playing fields.

7.52 In its response to the clarification note, SPC advised that:

'(it) has considered the representation from Reading Bluecoat School requesting the removal of Sonning Field from LGS.03. The PC understands the School's concern

about retaining flexibility over its land, but does not consider that LGS designation would prevent continued use, management or maintenance of the land for outdoor recreation, education, ecological management, or compatible school-related purposes. The effect of an LGS designation is that Green Belt rules (not Grey Belt) apply. As with Green Belt, there are exceptions which allow some types of development to take place. Paras 154 and 155 of the NPPF clearly state that recreational uses is included in the exceptions. The PC considers that the Government still intends for these rules to be applied since, when Grey Belt was introduced, they did not extend these provisions to apply to LGS.

(it) also considers that Sonning Field should not be assessed only by whether it is used as a formal public playing field. Appendix 1 identifies LGS.03 as having ecological and public-access value. Ali's Pond is a Local Nature Reserve, and Sonning Field provides related habitat, including an amphibian breeding pond, hedgerows, habitat piles and a permissive path linking Ali's Pond to Sonning Lane.'

- 7.53 I have considered these comments very carefully. Based on my own observations and the evidence available to me I am satisfied that eastern part of the proposed Ali's Pond and Sonning Field LGS meets the criteria in paragraphs 106 and 107 of the NPPF. It is an attractive open area which sits adjacent to the King George V Playing Field and has good connections to the Playing Field. I noted that the western part of the proposed site has a very similar character and appearance. I note RBS's comments about the planning permission that exists on Sonning Field for its uses as a sports pitch. I have also taken account of WBC's approach to this part of the proposed LGS in its schedule of proposed modifications to the LPU. In all the circumstances I recommend the deletion of the western part of the proposed LGS.
- 7.54 I note WBC and SPC's comments about combining Ali's Pond and Sonning Field into a single LGS. In principle such a proposal would have merit. However, it has not been considered as part of the consultation process on the Plan. As such it is not within my remit to agree to such an approach. In any event I have recommended the deletion of part of the proposed LGS from the policy.
- 7.55 With the incorporation of the recommended modification to the area covered by proposed LGS.03 I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and the environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Delete the western part of proposed LGS.03 from the Policies Map and from the description in the policy

Policy TRA1 Traffic Calming

- 7.56 The Plan advises that this policy aligns with the NPPF by requiring development to address its transport impacts.
- 7.57 I noted the pockets of traffic congestion during the visit. In general terms I am satisfied that the policy takes a positive approach towards traffic issues and has regard to Section 9 of the NPPF.

- 7.58 In this broader context, I sought advice from SPC about the extent to which the policy adds any distinctive value beyond the content of existing national and local planning policies. In its response to the clarification note SPC advised that:

‘(it) considers that the main value the policy adds beyond the content of existing national and local planning policies is the identification of areas where the local road network in Sonning is particularly constrained. Existing planning policy supports opportunities to alleviate traffic congestion, but this policy adds locally specific detail that will support traffic mitigation measures being directed to the areas that are in most need. Whilst recognising that amelioration of the traffic problems in these areas is not merely a planning matter, the policy responds to the fact that responses from Sonning residents to the questionnaire issued by the PC at the beginning of the Neighbourhood Plan process cited traffic congestion as the most detrimental issue to quality of life.

- 7.59 I have carefully considered this policy and SPC’s response to the clarification note. Given the nature of the issues addressed in the supporting text and WBC’s support for the approach taken I am satisfied that it addresses distinctive issues. Furthermore, Traffic Calming Key Locations are identified on the Policies Map. I am also satisfied that those issues have been raised by the wider community as the Plan has been developed. Nevertheless, I recommend a modification so that the policy can be applied proportionately through the development management process.

- 7.60 Otherwise, I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and the environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

At the beginning of the second sentence of the first part of the policy add: ‘As appropriate to their scale, nature and location,’

Policy TRA2 Active Travel

- 7.61 The policy requires that transport issues are considered from the earliest stages of development proposals so that opportunities to promote walking, cycling and public transport use are identified and pursued. It identifies an Active Traffic Network and comments about specific requirements for development adjacent to the River Thames.
- 7.62 The policy takes an appropriate and locally-distinctive approach to this matter which has regard to Sections 8 and 9 of the NPPF.
- 7.63 WBC raises detailed comments on the overlaps between the policy and the roll out of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). In its response to the clarification note, SPC agreed to the incorporation of additional elements into the policy and I recommend accordingly.
- 7.64 Otherwise I am satisfied that it meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the social and the environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the first two elements of the policy with:

‘A. The Neighbourhood Plan identifies the Active Travel Network, as shown on the Policies Map (Chapter 11), for the purposes of supporting healthy and safe

active travel opportunities in the Parish. This should be read in conjunction with proposed active travel routes in the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) (or any successor document).

B. Development proposals on land that lies within or adjacent to the network shown on the Policies Map or in the LCWIP (or any successor document) should sustain, and where practicable, enhance the functionality of the network by virtue of their layout and means of access and landscape treatment.'

Monitoring and Review of the Plan

- 7.65 Section 10 of the Plan takes a positive approach to these matters. In the same way that there is no need for a parish council to prepare a neighbourhood plan, there is no need for a parish council to review a made plan. However, in the circumstances presented in the timing of the promotion of the submitted Plan and the timetable for WBC's Local Plan Update I recommend that the matter is captured in the Plan in a more explicit way and which highlights the importance of the emerging Local Plan.
- 7.66 In this context I recommend that this section is expanded to advise that the Parish Council will consider the need or otherwise for a partial or full review of the Plan within six months of the adoption of the emerging Local Plan Update. SPC agreed to this proposition in its response to the clarification note.

At the end of Section 10 add a separate paragraph to read

'The Parish Council notes that the Borough Council is now well-advanced in the preparation of the Local Plan Update (LPU), and acknowledges the importance of the emerging strategic planning context for the Borough. It is anticipated that the LPU will be adopted early in 2027. The Parish Council will also assess the need or otherwise for a full or partial review of the Plan within six months of the adoption of the emerging LPU.'

Other matters - General

- 7.67 This report has recommended a series of modifications both to the policies and to the text in the submitted Plan. Where consequential changes to the text are required directly as a result of my recommended modification to the policy concerned, I have highlighted them in this report. However other changes to the general text may be required elsewhere in the Plan as a result of the recommended modifications to the policies. It will be appropriate for WBC and SPC to have the flexibility to make any necessary consequential changes to the general text. I recommend accordingly.

Modification of general text (where necessary) to achieve consistency with the modified policies

Other Matters – WBC Specific Comments

- 7.68 The representations from WBC raise a series of issues on a policy-by-policy basis. I have addressed them earlier in this report.

7.69 The representation also raises a series of more general issues. I recommend that the modifications to the following sections of the plan are made in accordance with the suggestions made by WBC in their representation (and using its referencing system) to ensure that it meets the basic conditions.

- the fourth paragraph of the Introduction;
- Section 2.1 (including any factual updates since the comments were made); and
- Section 2.3.5

Other Matters – Examiner Comments

7.70 The third paragraph of Section 2.1 of the Plan comments about the community's view about WBC's decision on a planning application. SPC and the community are entitled to hold such views. Nevertheless, they are inappropriate within the context of what is intended to be a development plan document. In these circumstances I recommend that this paragraph is recast.

Recast the third part of Section 2.1 of the Plan to read:

'WBC invited comments on the draft Local Plan Update in November 2021/January 2022. Of the two proposed development sites in Sonning, one is an allocated reserve site in the existing MDD and was included in previous LPU consultations, the other extends a recently-approved development site that encroaches on Sonning Golf Course. WBC conducted a consultation on its Regulation 19 Proposed Submission Plan from September to November 2024 and submitted the LPU Update 2023 – 2040 to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in February 2025.'

7.71 There is a missing word in the Vision of the Plan. I have inserted the missing word within the Vision as set out in paragraph 7.12 of this report and I recommend that it is incorporated into the Plan.

In the Vision replace 'Sonning will continue be known' with 'Sonning will continue to be known'

8 Summary and Conclusions

Summary

- 8.1 The Plan sets out a range of policies to guide and direct development proposals in the period up to 2040. It is distinctive in addressing a specific set of issues that have been identified and refined by the wider community.
- 8.2 Following the independent examination of the Plan, I have concluded that the Sonning Neighbourhood Development Plan meets the basic conditions for the preparation of a neighbourhood plan subject to a series of recommended modifications.

Conclusion

- 8.3 On the basis of the findings in this report I recommend to Wokingham Borough Council that subject to the incorporation of the modifications set out in this report the Sonning Neighbourhood Development Plan should proceed to referendum.

Referendum Area

- 8.4 I am required to consider whether the referendum area should be extended beyond the designated neighbourhood area. In my view, that area is entirely appropriate for this purpose and no evidence has been submitted to suggest that this is not the case. I therefore recommend that the Plan should proceed to referendum based on the neighbourhood area as approved by Wokingham Borough Council on 24 October 2019.
- 8.5 I am grateful to everyone who has helped in any way to ensure that this examination has run in a smooth and efficient manner.

Andrew Ashcroft
Independent Examiner
19 June 2026