Ardington and Lockinge Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan

2026-2041

A report to Vale of White Horse District Council on the Ardington and Lockinge Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan

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Executive Summary

1 I was appointed by the Vale of White Horse District Council in July 2026 to carry out the independent examination of the Ardington and Lockinge Parish Neighbourhood Plan.

2 The examination was undertaken by way of written representations. I visited the neighbourhood area on 28 July 2026.

3 The Plan is a good example of a neighbourhood plan. It includes a variety of policies and seeks to bring forward positive and sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. It includes policies on environmental and landscape issues and to safeguard community assets.

4 The Plan has been underpinned by community support and engagement. All sections of the community have been engaged in its preparation. It has been prepared in short order.

5 Subject to a series of recommended modifications set out in this report, I have concluded that the 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
27 October 2026

1 Introduction

1.1 This report sets out the findings of the independent examination of the Ardington and Lockinge Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan 2026-2041 ('the Plan').

1.2 The Plan was submitted to Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC) by Ardington and Lockinge Parish Council (ALPC) in its capacity as the qualifying body responsible for preparing the neighbourhood plan.

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) in 2012, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023, 2024 and 2026. 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 indirectly from 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 and 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 existing development plan. It includes a variety of policies and seeks to bring forward positive and sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. It includes policies on environmental and landscape issues and to safeguard community assets.

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 that referendum results in 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 VWHDC, with the consent of ALPC, to conduct the examination of the Plan and to prepare this report. I am independent of both VWHDC and ALPC. 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. In previous roles, 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 significant experience of undertaking other neighbourhood plan examinations and health checks. I am a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Neighbourhood Planning Independent Examiner Referral System.

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 should proceed 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 Section 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 and am satisfied that they have been met.

2.8 Section 98 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 came into force in March 2026. It 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 these two matters and have taken account of the comprehensive information in the Basic Conditions Statement. I am satisfied that the submitted Plan complies with these two requirements. Section 6 of this report comments more widely on the basic conditions.

3 Procedural Matters

3.1 In undertaking this examination I have considered the following documents:

- the submitted Plan.
- the Basic Conditions Statement.
- the Consultation Statement.
- the Design Code
- the Evidence Base
- the VWHDC SEA/HRA screening reports.
- the representations made to the Plan.
- ALPC's responses to the clarification note.
- VWHDC's responses to the clarification note
- the adopted Vale of White Horse District Local Plan Parts 1 and 2.
- the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024 and August 2026).
- Planning Practice Guidance.
- relevant Ministerial Statements.

3.2 I visited the neighbourhood area on 28 July 2026. I looked at its overall character and appearance and at those areas affected by policies in the Plan in particular.

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 concluded that the Plan could be examined by way of written representations. I was assisted in this process by the comprehensive nature of many of the representations and the way in which the Plan has been developed.

3.4 A revised version of the NPPF was published in August 2026. The implementation arrangement in its Annex A advise that plans submitted before its publication date (17 August 2026) will have been prepared on the basis of the 2024 version of the NPPF. This applies to the submitted Plan. The examination has continued on this basis. Any references to the NPPF in this report are to the December 2024 version of the document.

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 (as amended), ALPC prepared a Consultation Statement. It is proportionate to the neighbourhood area and its policies. It sets out key findings in a concise report which is supported by more detailed appendices. The appendices helpfully reproduce some of the material used by ALPC to engage people in the plan preparation process. Appendix 1 provides a timeline of the various consultation exercises that took place.

4.3 The Statement comments about specific issues as follows:

- Section 2: The Consultation Aims
- Section 5: The Initial Residents Survey
- Section 6: The Detailed Household Survey
- Section 7: The Business Survey and meeting
- Section 8: The Workshops and Working Groups

4.4 Section 9 of the Statement provides specific details on the consultation processes that took place on the pre-submission version of the Plan (November 2025 to January 2026).

4.5 Appendix 3 of the Statement also provides the details of the ways in which the Plan was refined because of this process and the detailed comments received. This helps to describe the way in which the Plan evolved.

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. From all the evidence provided to me as part of the examination, I can see that the Plan has promoted an inclusive approach to seeking the opinions of all concerned throughout the process. VWHDC has carried out its own assessment that the consultation process has complied with the requirements of the Regulations.

Consultation Responses

4.7 Consultation on the submitted plan was undertaken by VWHDC. It ended on 2 July 2026. This exercise generated representations from the following organisations:

- Ardington House Limited
- Network Rail
- Vale of White Horse District Council

- Historic England
- Thames Water
- National Highways
- Natural England
- Oxfordshire County Council

4.8 I have taken account of all the representations in preparing this report. Where it is appropriate to do so, I refer to specific representations on a policy-by-policy basis.

5 The Neighbourhood Area and the Development Plan Context

The Neighbourhood Area

5.1 The neighbourhood area is the parish of Ardington and Lockinge. Its population in 2021 was 480 persons. It was designated as a neighbourhood area on 10 January 2024.

5.2 The villages of Ardington and East Lockinge are located about three miles east of Wantage and ten miles southwest of Abingdon. A Conservation Area covers parts of the villages of Ardington and East Lockinge. The parish also contains four other small settlements at Ardington Wick; Betterton; West Ginge; and West Lockinge. The neighbourhood area is typical of downland parishes in the Vale of White Horse. It consists of a long narrow area of land, initially falling steeply northwards, and then more gently from the high ground of the chalk of the Berkshire Downs to the greensand and clay towards the River Thames tributaries in the north. The villages are surrounded by arable and livestock farmland and by belts of mature trees. These provide a major part of the landscape. The villages are made up of small groups of houses and former farm buildings along the various chalk streams which merge and wind their way towards the boundary with West Hendred Parish.

5.3 The area of the Parish south of the A417 lies within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape (NWDNL). The Ridgeway National Trail also crosses through the southern part of the area. There are three internationally significant chalk streams within the parish (Ginge Brook, Lockinge Brook and Goddard's Brook). In the round it is a very interesting area within which to produce a neighbourhood plan.

Development Plan Context

5.4 The Vale of White Horse Local Plan (Part 1): Strategic Sites and Policies was adopted in December 2016. It sets out the basis for future development in the District up to 2031. All the policies in this part of the Local Plan are strategic policies of the development plan. The Vale of White Horse Local Plan (Part 2): Detailed Policies and Additional Sites was adopted in October 2019. It is this broader development plan context against which I am required to examine the submitted Neighbourhood Plan.

5.5 Ardington is identified as a Smaller Village within the South East Vale Sub-Area in Local Plan Part 1 (Core Policy 15). None of the other settlements in the neighbourhood area feature in the settlement hierarchy in the policy.

5.6 The strategy for the South East Vale Sub Area provides a comprehensive context for development in and around the neighbourhood area as follows:

'*The South East Vale Sub-Area will consist of thriving communities that have benefited from sustainable growth and the successful delivery of major infrastructure. The area will continue to be a vital economic area for Oxfordshire, including employment of international importance, where new jobs have been provided alongside housing and community facilities.*

Wantage and Grove will be places where people are proud to live and work and recognised as a vital part of the Science Vale area. Growth in these settlements will have been balanced alongside the delivery of community facilities. This will have included new schools and significant highway improvements, including the Wantage Eastern Link Road and the Grove Northern Link Road. The area will benefit from improved public transport and strategic growth in these settlements will have provided more local job opportunities.

The ecological value of the Letcombe Brook as an important wildlife habitat will have been enhanced. The strategic development sites will have successfully extended the network of green spaces in the area for both recreation and wildlife benefits. Strategic development in Harwell and Milton parishes, to the west of Didcot, will have provided a sustainable urban extension of high-quality homes and community facilities. The strategic road and public transport improvements identified in the Science Vale Area Strategy will have been delivered and will be helping to reduce traffic congestion.

The town centre in Wantage will have been conserved and enhanced and the local centre in Grove will have been strengthened. The countryside and villages will have maintained their distinctive character. The Larger Villages will have retained their separate identities and their services will provide for residents' day-to-day needs. New residents in the villages will be helping to sustain the services and social life of the rural communities.'

5.7 The Basic Conditions Statement usefully highlights the key policies in the development plan and how they relate to policies in the submitted Plan. 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 existing planning policy documents. This is good practice and reflects key elements in Planning Practice Guidance on this matter.

5.8 VWHDC is working with South Oxfordshire District Council on a Joint Local Plan for the two districts. The Plan is now being examined. Once adopted it will replace the existing development plans. The Local Development Scheme (June 2026) anticipates that the emerging Plan will be adopted in May 2027.

Visit to the neighbourhood area

5.9 I visited the neighbourhood area on 28 July 2026. I approached it along the A417 from the A34 to the east. This helped me to understand its position in the wider landscape in general, and its accessibility to the strategic road network.

5.10 I looked initially at Ardington. Its character and appearance were self-evident. I looked at both the inside and outside of Holy Trinity Church

5.11 I then looked at the Ardington Millennium Stones to the west of the village. It was a fascinating part of the visit alongside a very pleasant walk

5.12 I then drove to Lockinge. I noticed that it had a different character to that of Ardington.

5.13 I then looked at the smaller settlements. I also noticed the difference in the landscape character in the neighbourhood area to the north and to the south of the A417

5.14 I left the neighbourhood area on the A417 and drove to Wantage. This part of the visit helped me to understand the relationship between the neighbourhood area and this important settlement in this part of the District.

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 has helped in the preparation of this section of the report. It is an informative and well-presented document.

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 (or any part of that area), and if it took place, would provide housing;
- not breach, and otherwise be compatible with, the assimilated obligations of EU legislation (as consolidated in the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 (Consequential Amendment) Regulations 2023; and
- not breach the requirements of Chapter 8 of Part 6 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

I assess the Plan against the basic conditions under the following headings:

National Planning Policies and Guidance

6.3 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 December 2024 (NPPF).

6.4 The NPPF sets out a range of land-use planning principles to underpin both plan-making and decision-taking. The following are particularly relevant to the Ardington and Lockinge Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan:

- a plan-led system - in this case the relationship between the neighbourhood plan and the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031;
- 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.

6.5 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.

6.6 In addition to the NPPF I have also taken account of other elements of national planning policy, including Planning Practice Guidance and the recent ministerial statements.

6.7 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 subject to the recommended modifications in this report. It includes a variety of policies and seeks to bring forward positive and sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. It includes policies on environmental and landscape issues and to safeguard community assets.

6.8 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 was reinforced with the publication of 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.

6.9 As submitted the Plan does not fully accord with this range of practical issues. Most of my recommended modifications in Section 7 relate to matters of clarity and precision. They are designed to ensure that the Plan fully accords with national policy.

Contributing to sustainable development

6.10 There are clear overlaps between national policy and the contribution that the submitted Plan makes to achieving sustainable development. Sustainable development has three principal dimensions – economic, social, and environmental. I am satisfied that the submitted Plan has set out to achieve sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. In the economic dimension, the Plan includes policies for the Ardington settlement boundary (Policy AL2), and for commercial development (Policies AL12 and AL13). In the social dimension, it includes policies on community spaces (Policy AL7), and on leisure facilities (Policies AL10 and AL11). In the environmental dimension, the Plan positively seeks to protect its natural, built, and historic environment. It has policies on key views (Policy AL6), and on habitats (Policy AL8). This assessment overlaps with the details on 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 (or any part of that area), and if it took place, would provide housing

6.11 I have already commented in detail on the development plan context in the District in paragraphs 5.4 to 5.8 of this report.

6.12 The Basic Conditions Statement comments about the way in which policies in the Plan would not have the effect of preventing development proposed in the development plan from taking place where that development would provide housing. It also comments that the development plan does not allocate specific sites for development and that its policies are aligned with the policies within the Local Plan that support appropriate housing development within the neighbourhood area and would not prevent this development from taking place. I agree with this assessment and 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. Furthermore, Policy AL2 of the Plan provides a general context within which residential development can take place.

Strategic Environmental Assessment

6.13 The Neighbourhood Plan (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 why an environmental report is not required.

6.14 In order to comply with this requirement, VWHDC undertook a screening exercise in December 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. It concludes that the Plan is unlikely to have a significant effect on the environment and therefore does not require a Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Habitats Regulations Assessment

6.15 VWHDC also prepared a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) of the Plan at the same time. This part of the report is similarly thorough and well-constructed. It assesses the potential impact of the Plan's policies on the following protected sites:

- Cothill Fen SAC (Approx. 11km);
- Little Wittenham SAC (Approx. 13km);
- Hackpen Hill SAC (Approx. 7km); and
- River Lambourn SAC (Approx 13km)

6.16 The HRA concludes that the neighbourhood plan will not give rise to likely significant effects on these protected sites, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects, and that Appropriate Assessment is not required.

6.17 I have reviewed the information provided to me as part of the examination. In this context, I am satisfied that a proportionate process has been undertaken in accordance with the various regulations. None of the statutory consultees have raised any

concerns regarding either neighbourhood plan obligations. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, I am entirely satisfied that the submitted Plan is compatible with this aspect of the regulations.

Human Rights

6.18 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. 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. On this basis, I conclude that the submitted Plan does not breach, nor is in any way incompatible with the ECHR.

Summary

6.19 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 the various policies have the necessary precision to meet the basic conditions.

7.2 The recommendations focus on the policies in the Plan given that the basic conditions relate primarily to this aspect of neighbourhood plans. In some cases, I have also recommended changes 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 Plan area. The wider community and ALPC 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 should address the development and use of land. Appendix 2 sets out a series of Community Actions.

7.5 I have addressed the policies in the order that they appear in the submitted Plan. I comment on the Community Actions thereafter.

7.6 For clarity, this section of the report comments on each of the policies in the Plan.

7.7 Where modifications are recommended to policies they are highlighted in bold print. Any associated or free-standing changes to the text of the Plan are set out in italic print.

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

7.8 The Plan is well-organised and presented. It makes an appropriate distinction between the policies and their supporting text. The initial elements of the Plan set the scene for the policies. They are proportionate to the neighbourhood area and the subsequent policies.

7.9 The Introduction defines the neighbourhood area (in Figure 1). The Plan period is addressed in the Preface and on the front cover. Figure 2 sets out how the Plan has been prepared.

7.10 Section 2 comments about the plan policy context within which the Plan has been prepared.

7.11 Section 3 comments about the neighbourhood area to good effect. This part of the Plan provides a solid context for several of the policies.

7.12 Section 4 sets out the vision, aim and objectives for the Plan. It makes a strong functional relationship between the various issues and, in several cases, they set a useful context for the resulting policies. The Vision neatly summarises the approach taken as follows:

'*To create a Neighbourhood Plan for the Parish of Ardington and Lockinge that includes policies based on the outcomes of community engagement and consultation, is in general conformity with strategies and policies in the Development Plan for the district, and has regard to National planning policies and guidance.'*

7.13 A key success of the Plan is the way in which each policy provides details about the way in which it delivers the objectives of the Plan, relates to national and local planning policies and the way in which it relates to the Evidence Base. This is best practice.

7.14 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 AL1 – Separation of Settlements

7.15 This policy seeks to ensure that future development maintains the separation of the Parish's settlements, to maintain the distinctive settlement character, historical context and land use of the neighbourhood area in line with Sections 2, 11, 12, 15 and 16 of the NPPF.

7.16 I saw the distinctive separate identities and physical separation between settlements during the visit. The policy takes a non-prescriptive approach to this important matter.

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

Policy AL2 - Ardington Settlement Boundary

7.18 This policy defines a settlement boundary for Ardington and seeks to ensure that future development is focused on optimising 'infill sites' within that part of the neighbourhood area.

7.19 A key element of the policy is the ambition to achieve high quality design reflecting the recommendations of the Ardington and Lockinge Design Code and the District Councils' Joint Design Guide. The Ardington and Lockinge Design Code takes a very positive approach and has been brought forward as part of the wider Plan preparation process.

7.20 In relation to the proposed definition of the Settlement Boundary, VWHDC comments that:

'We are aware that, following comments made by the District Council at the Regulation 14 consultation, the qualifying body has provided further clarity on the methodology used to define the proposed settlement boundary. This additional information is welcomed.

However, notwithstanding this additional explanation, the Council remains concerned that in several locations the proposed settlement boundary has been drawn very broadly, resulting in the inclusion of areas of undeveloped land that do not form part of the built-up area of the settlement.

We note that the explanation for the drawing of the settlement boundary provided in the appendices sets out that certain areas have been included within the settlement boundary for the explicit purposes of supporting future development, specifically those areas to the north of the playground and to the south of Westfield House. Additionally, other large areas of open space on the edge of the settlement are included.

Settlement boundaries are effective in distinguishing the built-up area of a settlement from the surrounding countryside. Core Policy 4 of the Vale of White Horse Local Plan Part 1 sets out that within smaller villages, which Ardington is, limited infill may be appropriate within the existing built areas of these settlements and that development in the open countryside will not be appropriate unless specifically supported by other relevant policies as set out in the Development Plan or national policy. Additionally, associated policies AL2 and AL3 of the neighbourhood plan sets out that within the defined settlement boundary, development proposals will be supported provided they constitute infill or the redevelopment of previously developed land, and outside of the boundary, development will not be appropriate unless specifically supported by other relevant polices as set out in the development plan or national policy.

It is therefore unclear why these areas have been included within the settlement boundary, particularly those identified in the evidence base as being suitable for development. The inclusion of these areas appears inconsistent with the relevant development plan policies, as development in these locations would not constitute infill development and these areas instead relate more closely to the surrounding countryside. We therefore recommend that the settlement boundary is amended to exclude these areas. If the intention is to support development in these locations, this should be pursued through a clear and transparent policy mechanism, supported by appropriate evidence and justification, such as the allocation of specific sites for development.'

7.21 In its response to these comments ALPC advised that:

'The methodology for defining the settlement boundary for Ardington is described in section 2.3 of the Evidence Base. The position of the settlement boundary considered various factors including the boundary of the Conservation Area, and the proposal was explicitly reviewed and approved by the community through successive consultations conducted under the appropriate Regulations, including the consideration of alternative options. The selected boundary option allowed for some limited infill. In order to address the points raised by VOWHDC, an expanded explanation of the reasons for the variations to the boundary of the Conservation Area will be provided in section 2.3.3 of the Evidence Base.'

7.22 I have considered these issues very carefully and I looked at the proposed settlement boundary during the visit. On the one hand, the proposed Settlement Boundary is drawn more loosely than those included in other neighbourhood plans. However, on the other hand, ALPC highlights that the process has been supported by the community and that alternative options have been considered. ALPC is also clear that the boundary has been drawn to allow some limited infill to take place.

7.23 I also note that the village is within the NWDNL. I also note that the policy includes appropriate safeguards on design (criterion b), on heritage matters (criterion e) and on the NWDNL (criterion h).

7.24 Based on all the evidence I have concluded that the principal issue is the extent to which the settlement boundary as proposed would facilitate infill development (as defined in the development plan) as opposed to development on the edge of the settlement. Most of the land within the proposed settlement boundary would facilitate infill development. However, there are two areas within the proposed boundary which would allow development on the edge of the settlement. The first is on its north-eastern edge to the north of The Close. The second is the parcel of land to the north of School Road. I noted during the visit that both of these parcels of land sit to the south of the extensive belt of trees and woodland that occupies land to the north of the village.

7.25 Given the nature of the land to the north of School Road and its relationship to adjacent built development, I am satisfied that any development that may come forward on this parcel of land would be infill development. However, I am not persuaded that any development on the parcel of land to the north of The Close would be infill development. Whilst there is built development to its south and west, it is a site on the edge of the village which has a much closer relationship to the surrounding countryside. On this basis I recommend that this parcel of land is removed from the settlement boundary.

7.26 In terms of the details within the policy, VWHDC suggests that:

'the policy is restructured to distinguish between the criteria that establishes the principle of development within the settlement boundary, and those that relate to the detailed assessment of development proposals. At present, all criteria are presented as a single list of requirements that proposals must satisfy in order to be supported. This approach risks making the policy unnecessarily rigid. We recommend splitting the policy up as follows to provide a clear distinction between the acceptability of development in principle, and the detailed considerations that should inform the design and assessment of proposals, subject to their scale nature and location.'

7.27 ALPC agreed to this approach in its response to the clarification note, and I recommend accordingly. The revised policy will bring the clarity required by the NPPF and introduce a proportionate element to its detailed matters. Otherwise, I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of each of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

In c delete 'Local'

After c) add:

'As appropriate to their scale, nature and location development proposals should:'

Thereafter change the letters to bullet points.

On Figure 8 remove the rectangular parcel of land to the north of The Close from the proposed Settlement Boundary.

Revise the Settlement Boundary as shown on Figure 7.

Policy AL3 - Outside the Ardington Settlement Boundary

7.28 This policy supplements Policy AL2. It advises that development in open countryside will not be supported unless a series of criteria are met. This approach reflects the approach taken in the NPPF which highlights that development in the open countryside will only be considered acceptable in specific circumstances. The second part of the policy sets out six criteria that development in the countryside should comply.

7.29 I am satisfied that the policy takes a balanced approach to this matter. In this context I recommend that the first part of the policy is modified to bring the clarity required by the NPPF. It also corrects an error in relation to the figure in which the Settlement Boundary is shown. Its purpose is unaffected. Otherwise, I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the first part of the policy with:

'Land outside the Ardington Settlement Boundary as shown in Figure 8 is identified as 'open countryside'. Development in open countryside will not be appropriate unless specifically supported by relevant policies as set out in the development plan or national policy.'

Policy AL4 - Resource and Access

7.30 This policy provides a framework which sets out requirements that future development proposals will have to incorporate in their design to ensure well designed places with appropriate infrastructure.

7.31 The supporting text comments that it is essential to ensure that effective measures to mitigate the effects of climate change are incorporated in all new development, as this will assist the District Council with meeting their net-zero carbon emission targets. This will also ensure the villages within the parish will continue to grow in a sustainable way which will also preserve its character and protect it for future generations.

7.32 The policy takes a positive approach to this matter and has regard to Section 14 of the NPPF. It is helpfully worded so that it can be applied in a proportionate way. In addition, the detailed issues addressed in the policy are locally-distinctive. In this context I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Policy AL5 - Energy Efficiency

7.33 This policy draws particularly upon Chapter 14 of the NPPF and supports development proposals which deliver higher energy efficiency and renewable energy standards.

7.34 The policy takes a positive approach to this matter and has regard to Section 14 of the NPPF.

7.35 VWHDC suggests that the policy is expanded to address heritage matters. ALPC agreed to this suggestion in its response to the clarification note. Whilst my role is not to recommend that policies are expanded, I am satisfied that VWHDC's suggestion will ensure that the policy takes a rounded approach and will have regard to Section 16 of the NPPF. On this basis I recommend that the policy is modified accordingly. Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

At the end of the policy add:

'Development proposals for energy efficiency and renewable energy measures affecting a designated or non-designated heritage asset, or its setting, should be designed and implemented so as to avoid unacceptable harm to that significance, having regard to the relevant national and local heritage policies.'

Policy AL6 - Key Views

7.36 This policy seeks to ensure that the natural environment, character and key views of the Parish are protected to maintain its rural character & historical context in line with Sections 12 and 15 of the NPPF.

7.37 I looked at a selection of the views during the visit. They capture the relationship between the settlements and the surrounding countryside. The policy takes a positive and non-prescriptive to this matter and is underpinned by the information in the Evidence Base.

7.38 I recommend that the final part of the policy is modified to bring the clarity required by the NPPF. Otherwise, it meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the final part of the policy with:

'Development proposals which would have a significant adverse impact on the local character of an identified important view (listed above) will not be supported.'

Policy AL7 - Community Spaces and Landmarks

7.39 This policy seeks to support enhancement of existing community facilities, addressing particularly Sections 8 and 12 of the NPPF.

7.40 I noticed the importance of the identified community facilities during the visit. In general terms the policy has regard to Section 8 of the NPPF.

7.41 VWHDC suggest a series of refinements to the policy to bring the clarity required by the NPPF and to allow it to be applied through the development management process. ALPC agreed to the suggestions in its response to the clarification note.

7.42 The suggested revisions to the policy will bring the clarity required by the NPPF and I recommend accordingly. Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the policy with:

'The following facilities and landmarks, as identified on Figure 10, are recognised as important community assets:

a) The Allotments, Ardington
b) Playing Fields, Ardington
c) Community Woodlands, Ardington
d) Millennium Stones (in Community Woodlands)
e) East Lockinge Allotments
f) Parkinsons.me Garden, West Lockinge
g) Community Orchard

Proposals to improve access to or enhance the use of such spaces will be supported.

Development proposals that would result in the loss of an identified community asset will only be supported where it can be demonstrated through appropriate, detailed and robust evidence that:

- **they would lead to a significant improvement of the asset, or the replacement of the asset concerned with one equally convenient to the local community; or**
- **where relevant, the asset is no longer economically viable for the established use; or**
- **the asset is no longer required.'**

Policy AL8 - Conservation of Key Habitats

7.43 This policy seeks to protect significant habitats that support biodiversity that are of particular value to the community in the framework of the National Landscape and Sections 12 and 15 of the NPPF.

7.44 This is an interesting and well-researched policy. I sought ALPC's comments on the meaning of management plans in the opening element of the policy. In its response to the clarification note it advised that:

'*The "management plans" we refer to are the planned land management activities under taken by the owners, occupiers and managers of the farmland, woodland, water courses and other land areas that are such a distinctive feature of our parish. These are not intended to encompass wider national or regional management strategies per se although these should be consistent with and encompass broader policies.'*

7.45 Given that management plans are not directly affected by the planning process, I recommend that this element should be deleted from the policy.

7.46 On the one hand, the policy is commendably detailed and generally has regard to Section 15 of the NPPF. However, on the other hand, its individual components are difficult to follow. In this context I recommend that its individual components are more clearly distinguished and that their wording is revised to bring the clarity required by the NPPF. In recommending that the policy is recast I also incorporate elements about the practicability of the approaches suggested. This will acknowledge that the ambitions of the policy may not always be able to be delivered on a site-by-site basis.

7.47 Finally I recommend that elements of the policy which refer to process matters are repositioned into the supporting text

7.48 Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the policy with:

'Development proposals within or affecting the key habitat assets (as shown on Map 11) should respond positively to their character and appearance as well as their geological and ecological significance.

Wherever practicable, key habitat assets should be enhanced through new areas of habitat creation, improving habitat condition through positive management interventions, and improving habitat connectivity to form wildlife corridors.

Wherever practicable development proposals should be set back at least 10m from the top of bank of a chalk river and 10-20m away from the edge of a woodland, consistent with LNRS evidence on water-quality and habitat benefits. In addition, development proposals should take opportunities to provide ecological enhancements (e.g. bat boxes, swift bricks, hedgehog highways) in all new structures. Proposals that adversely impact on the character or appearance of such habitats will not be supported.'

At the end of paragraph 7.3.6 add: 'Measures to enhance the Key Habitats and species should be considered and can be found in Oxfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy.'

Policy AL9 - Dark Night Skies

7.49 The Plan comments that by encouraging good design, this policy seeks to minimise light pollution within the parish in order to maintain its rural character in the context of Sections 12 and 15 of the NPPF.

7.50 The Plan advises that community consultation on environmental issues revealed that the relatively dark night skies and the scarcity of street lighting are qualities that are valued by residents. The few street lights in the Parish are confined to Ardington, East Lockinge, and West Lockinge, and are generally Victorian or Victorian style lamp posts fitted with low voltage white lights. I saw this important characteristic of the parish during the visit.

7.51 The policy comments that development proposals should conserve and enhance tranquillity in relation to light pollution and dark night skies, and respond positively to

the Institute of Lighting Professionals guidance and other relevant standards or guidance. It reinforces the lighting hierarchy and sets out four criteria that development proposals should meet.

7.52 This is an excellent policy which takes a locally distinctive approach to this important matter. I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Policy AL10 - Impact on Leisure Facilities

7.53 This policy seeks to support existing community facilities and services, guarding against their loss other than where justified, addressing particularly Sections 8 and 12 of the NPPF. It is the first of two policies on leisure facilities. The second is Policy AL11 which comments about the enhancement of leisure facilities.

7.54 In general terms the policy takes a positive approach to this matter and has regard to Section 8 of the NPPF.

7.55 VWHDC comment that:

'*We recommend combining these two policies together to reduce duplication as they largely cover the same issues. We recommend a series of modifications to this new combined policy to ensure it brings the clarity required by the NPPF by separating it into two sections, one which supports development that enhances existing leisure facilities, and one which resist their loss outside of specific circumstances. It is unclear what is meant by "appropriate locations" or how decision-makers would be expected to respond to this. We recommend a modification to set out that new leisure facilities will be supported where they are located close to the community and do not result in unacceptable harm to the character of the area. We also recommend modifications to better align with the wording found in the Vale of White Horse Local Plan Part 2 and recommend additional modification to ensure that the policy brings the clarity required by the NPPF.'*

7.56 In its response to the clarification note, ALPC commented that:

'Policy AL10 and AL11 will be kept separate, but modifications will be made to the text to include aspects suggested by VWHDC.'

7.57 I have considered this matter carefully. Whilst VWHDC's approach has merit, I am not persuaded that it is a basic conditions issue, Furthermore ALPC's suggested revisions to each policy improve their legibility and bring the clarity required by the NPPF. On the balance of the evidence, I recommend that the policy is recast based on ALPC's suggested changes.

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

Replace the policy with:

'Development proposals which either enhance, expand or improve the viability of an identified community leisure facility or identified village hub (see section 8.2.1 and 8.2.2) will be supported.

Development proposals that would result in the loss of an identified community facility or village hub will only be supported where it can be demonstrated through appropriate, detailed and robust evidence that:

- **the identified facility is no longer economically viable for the established use; or**
- **the identified facility is no longer required; or**
- **the identified facility is replaced with one equally convenient to the local community provided it conforms to Policies AL1, AL2, and AL3 and will not have an unacceptable impact on the local character of an identified important view (Policy AL6).**

Policy AL11 - Enhancement of Leisure Facilities

7.59 This policy seeks to support enhancement of community facilities and services.

7.60 The same circumstances apply to this policy as to Policy AL12. As such I recommend an identical outcome.

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

Replace the policy with:

'Development proposals for enhanced leisure facilities or development of new leisure facilities in locations that are accessible to the local community and do not result in unacceptable harm to the character of the area will be supported particularly where they would enhance the special character of the Conservation Area and/or the National Landscape.'

Policy AL12 - Commercial Development

7.62 This policy seeks to support development of new businesses as part of the economic development of the Parish in line with Section 6 of the NPPF.

7.63 VWHDC suggests a package of modifications to the policy to bring the clarity required by the NPPF and to ensure that it can be applied consistently in decision-making. ALPC agreed to the proposed changes in its response to the clarification note and I recommend accordingly. The modified policy will make a positive and locally distinctive response to Section 6 of the NPPF. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the policy with:

'Development proposals for employment uses will be supported where they contribute to the diversification and sustainability of the local rural economy and are appropriate to the scale, character and setting of the parish.

As appropriate to their scale, nature and location, development proposals for employment uses should:

- **provide opportunities for existing or new businesses, including small-scale commercial, office, service and rural enterprise uses;**
- **be located and designed to maximize opportunities for access by walking, cycling and public transport, where practicable;**
- **conserve and enhance the special qualities of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape;**
- **avoid unacceptable harm to heritage, local biodiversity and key views;**
- **avoid the unnecessary loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land**
- **not involve the loss of a residential dwelling, unless appropriately justified;**
- **demonstrate how the proposal responds positively to the Ardington and Lockinge Design Code and the District Councils' Joint Design Guide amenity principles so as not to cause nuisance to adjoining residential properties;**
- **avoid unacceptable impact on highway safety or cause severe cumulative impacts on the road network that could not be mitigated; and**
- **protect dark night skies.**

Policy AL13 - Businesses in Residential Properties

7.64 This policy seeks to support development of new small businesses located in residential properties in line with Section 6 of the NPPF.

7.65 I have considered VWHDC's representation to the policy. I am satisfied that there is no need for it to be expanded to refer to other policies. This acknowledges that the development plan is intended to be read as a whole.

7.66 I am satisfied that the policy takes a positive approach to this matter and has regard to Section 6 of the NPPF. In this context, I recommend the deletion of the unnecessary reference to the NPPF in part b of the policy. Otherwise, it meets the basic conditions and will contribute to the local delivery of each the three dimensions of sustainable development.

In part b of the policy delete 'comply with paragraph 116 of the National Planning Policy Framework to'

Monitoring and Review

7.67 Section 10 addresses these issues in a very positive way. Paragraph 10.4 provides a context for ALPC to assess the need (or otherwise) a full or partial review of the Plan once the emerging Joint Local Plan has been adopted.

Community Actions

7.68 Appendix 2 of the Plan includes a series of Community Actions. It highlights that consultation with the community highlighted a number of issues of interest and concern that cannot be the subject of formal policies in a Plan because they do not relate to the land use planning system. In this context it advises that the matters are identified to inform follow up by ALPC and other elements of local government.

7.69 The Plan follows national best practice in setting out such Actions in a separate part of the Plan so that they are distinguished from the land use policies.

Other Matters – General

7.70 This report has recommended a series of modifications both to the policies and to the supporting text in the submitted Plan. Where consequential changes to the text are required directly because 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 because of the recommended modifications to the policies. Similarly, changes may be necessary to paragraph numbers in the Plan or to accommodate other administrative matters. It will be appropriate for VWHDC and ALPC to have the flexibility to make any necessary consequential changes to the general text. I recommend accordingly.

Modification of general text to achieve consistency with the modified policies and to accommodate any administrative and technical changes.

Other Matters – Specific

7.71 VWHDC has made a series of helpful comments on the Plan. I have included them in the recommended modifications on a policy-by-policy basis where they are required to ensure that the Plan meets the basic conditions.

7.72 I also recommend a series of general modifications to the text of the Plan based on VWHDC's comments insofar as they are necessary to ensure that the Plan meets the basic conditions. In the main, they relate to factual corrections and typographic errors. For clarity I use the reference numbers in the VWHDC's representation.

- *Point 1*
- *Points 2 (Vision) and 3 (Aims)*

7.73 VWHDC also suggest that a built heritage policy should be included in the Plan and proposes a policy which is based on a made Plan for Beckley and Stowood. This approach would have merit. However, it is a matter for a qualifying body to determine

the issues to be included in its Plan. Furthermore, I am not persuaded that the inclusion of such a policy is required to ensure that the Plan meets the basic conditions.

7.74 I have considered the other representations received. Whilst they raise interesting comments and suggestions, I am not persuaded that the suggested changes to the Plan are necessary to ensure that it meets the basic conditions.

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 2041. It is distinctive in addressing a specific set of issues that have been identified and refined by the wider community. It includes a variety of policies and seeks to bring forward positive and sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. It also incorporates policies on environmental and landscape issues and to safeguard community assets.

8.2 Following the independent examination of the Plan, I have concluded that the Ardington and Lockinge Parish 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 Vale of White Horse District Council that, subject to the incorporation of the modifications set out in this report, the Ardington and Lockinge Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan should proceed to referendum.

Other Matters

8.4 I am required to consider whether the referendum area should be extended beyond the defined neighbourhood area. In my view, the neighbourhood 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 the District Council on 10 January 2024.

8.5 I am grateful to everyone who has helped in any way to ensure that this examination has run in a smooth manner. The Parish Council's responses to the clarification note were detailed and informative and the District Council managed the process in a very effective way.

Andrew Ashcroft
Independent Examiner
27 October 2026