Response to the Community Governance Review Consultation on Draft Recommendations – Cllr Adrian Betteridge, Barkham and Arborfield Ward

Introduction

This response addresses the Community Governance Review (CGR) for the Arborfield Strategic Development Location (SDL). I am aware there remain some conflicting views being expressed by parishes with an existing footprint in the area and will seek to give a perspective not linked to any one parish. This response is consistent with my original response from May 2025.

I will make a separate online submission relating to the South Wokingham development in my role as a Wokingham Town Councillor, where I observe the potential for the issues experienced in the Arborfield SDL to be repeated.

Context

Parish councils play a vital role in local communities, and boundary changes must be considered in the context of the long-term benefits to residents. Whilst Arborfield SDL is viewed as a single community for strategic planning, it is neither homogenous nor entirely new, with some areas having long-standing or emerging characters of their own.

The historic villages of Arborfield, Barkham, Finchampstead and Swallowfield are all some distance from the SDL. Only Arborfield and Newland Parish Council (ANPC) had a significant number of permanent residents in the SDL area before the start of the new build, and these are noticeably more engaged with their parish council, evidencing the benefits of an effective parish council.

However, more recently arrived residents across all parishes appear less engaged. Having multiple parish interests in the SDL inevitably dilutes the profile of the parish council and the influence that parishes have in the community and its development as a whole.

Draft Recommendation

I emphatically support the recommendation for new housing in the SDL to be consolidated into a single Parish, to the extent that is practical, across all four current parishes. The choice of Barkham Parish as the host for this is logical as it already has the largest stake, which would also increase with proposed further development to the north of the SDL.

There is a strong bond between ANPC residents and their parish council in longer standing housing areas, a reflection of the good work of that council. I support the draft recommendation not to relocate these communities. I also support the proposed move of former MOD housing bounded by Biggs Lane and Princess Marina Drive to ANPC, which rationalises a part of the former ANPC-BPC boundary that divided individual streets.

I note discussions between ANPC and BPC about the boundary in the area of Princess Marina Drive (south). There is an argument for the current and future housing between Princess Marina Drive and Sheerlands Road to be included in a future Barkham Parish. However, the playing fields adjoining Venning Road appear most naturally associated with that road and ANPC accordingly. These issues are relatively minor and a decision either way on them should not derail the existing draft proposal.

I am aware that Finchampstead Parish Council may change their previous position regarding the new houses in the SDL currently within their parish. Their original response stated a belief that "*the Arborfield SDL, including Finchwood Park, should form a cohesive community represented by a single parish, ensuring effective governance and encouraging a strong sense of community identity and enabling future investment in the maintenance of facilities and infrastructure.*" The draft recommendation achieved this, and I cannot see a reason to revert to new housing being separated into 2 parishes. From my discussions with residents in locations such as Woodlark Way at the far-end of Finchwood Park and Coronation Fields, both temporarily somewhat separate from the centre of the SDL pending new footpaths and further development, I am clear that the majority of residents in these areas see themselves as a part of the SDL community, rather than villages further afield. Placing these areas in a different parish from most of the SDL would materially impact the cohesion of the community.

Anticipation of the adoption of the draft recommendation is already leading to positive change. Barkham Parish has co-opted 3 new councillors from new housing in the SDL and demonstrated renewed energy in helping to progress the SDL community centre project. They already have their parish office in the SDL and have discussed renaming the parish to reflect the majority population. These examples confirm in my mind that consolidating new housing into a single parish will deliver tangible benefits to residents.

Conclusion

The draft recommendations for boundary changes in the Arborfield SDL are evidence-based, appropriate, will benefit the community and should remain. The 2 further issues that could be considered by the committee are:

- A possible variation between Princess Marina Drive and Sheerlands Road.
- Whether the proposal to rename the Barkham Parish needs to be taken within the CGR process or could be made later.