

Cold Ash Parish Council,
The Parish Office,
Hermitage Road,
Cold Ash,
RG18 9JH

EXAMINER: Andrew Mead BSc (Hons) MRTPI MIQ

CC: Laila Bassett, Principal Planning Officer, West Berkshire Council

Re: INDEPENDENT EXAMINATION OF THE COLD ASH PARISH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Examination Ref: 02/AM/CANP

24 November 2023

Dear Mr Mead

COLD ASH PARISH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN EXAMINATION

Thank you for your communication of 13th November 2023 in which you proposed one question for CAPC and invited CAPC to opine on a second question, posed to WBC.

Cold Ash Parish Councils response on these points are:

Policy CAP1: Location of Development

Para 130 (c) of the NPPF seeks to ensure that development is *“sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change (such as increased densities)”*.

The purpose of defining more distinctly the green gaps within the Neighbourhood Plan is to ensure that development does not individually or cumulatively result in physical and/or visual coalescence and loss of separate identity of the individual settlements in the parish (Cold Ash or Ashmore Green) from neighbouring settlements, and from each other. The area where coalescence could most likely take place is as a result of any northern extension to Thatcham. At the moment, this area of landscape that could lead to coalescence, located to the south of the villages (Cold Ash and Ashmore Green), is not protected by way of a designation.

Policy CS 19 (Historic Environment and Landscape Character) of the [adopted Core Strategy](#) emphasises the importance of this, requiring that *“In order to ensure that the diversity and local distinctiveness of the landscape character of the District is conserved and enhanced, the natural, cultural, and functional components of its character will be considered as a whole”*. It also states that development proposals should be informed by *“The distinctive character areas and key characteristics identified in relevant landscape character assessments including Historic Landscape Characterisation for West Berkshire and Historic Environment Character Zoning for West Berkshire”*.

The emerging [Local Plan Review](#) retains the need for a landscape led approach to development (Policy SP 8: Landscape Character) referencing the WBC [Landscape Character Assessment \(2019\)](#) (LCA).

From a landscape perspective, the area is defined within the LCA as falling within Landscape Character Area WH4 (Cold Ash Woodland and Heathland Mosaic). The LCA describes the key detractors within this area, including of particular relevance:

- **Detractor 5: Decreasing separation/coalescence between settlements** - The expansion of Thatcham and Newbury since the mid-20th century, and also of villages within the character area, has reduced the physical and perceptual separation between settlements. This is particularly evident at the western end of the character area, where there is near coalescence along the main connecting roads between Newbury and Thatcham, Cold Ash, Ashmore Green, Curridge and Hermitage.
- **Detractor 6: Increased suburbanisation** - Modern housing along main routes and on adjacent cul-de-sacs, together with street lighting and pavements, has introduced suburban characteristics to some places, particularly where there is less tree cover to mask changes e.g. the southern end of Cold Ash and linear development along the B4009 Long Lane just north of Shaw. Incremental development of the countryside settlements is also an issue, including the enlargement of curtilages, security lighting, entry gates etc.
- **Detractor 7: Loss of gradation between settlement and countryside** - Farm buildings and small pasture fields adjacent to settlements have proved vulnerable to development (typically of small residential clusters), due in the former case to presence of existing structures and in the latter to the screening/containment provided by boundary features. However, farm buildings, even when development has left them adjacent to settlement edges, contribute to rural character when they retain a relationship with farmland; and small enclosures, even when used as paddocks, form a transition between settlement and countryside that can contribute positively to landscape character, particularly when they retain a relationship with a historic settlement core.

The strategy for managing this landscape includes notably:

- **Retain the distinction between and individual identity of settlements** - Retain a sense of distinction between individual settlements through a clear understanding of the role of landform, tree cover and rural buildings in characterising settings and in forming boundaries that conserve and enhance distinctions in character – e.g. the historic farmstead at Henwick, along a rural lane, contained by tree cover and on rising ground, marks a rapid change to a rural landscape from the nearby edge of Thatcham. Avoid extended linear development along roads, which creates a more developed character resulting in the loss of individual settlement identity. More small-scale focused development set back from main routes often has less impact on character and can be more readily contained by landscape.

The LCA strategy was referenced in [WBC's HEELA](#) when considering sites in this location:

“West Berkshire LCA (2019) - the site lies within the Cold Ash Woodland and Heathland Mosaic LCA. The decreasing separation/coalescence between Cold Ash and Thatcham, increased suburbanisation and the loss of gradation between settlement and countryside have been identified as key detractors in this area. The landscape strategy is therefore to retain the distinction between and individual identity of settlements such as Thatcham and Cold Ash and to conserve elements

that mark a transition between settlement and countryside. Development over the whole site is therefore not considered appropriate in the context of the existing settlement form, pattern and character of the landscape”.

CAPC therefore considers that it important to consider how to maintain the existing separation, notably between Thatcham and the two villages.

The adopted Core Strategy does not include a policy on green gaps.

Policy DM 2 of the Local Plan Review seeks to introduce such a policy, acknowledging that the *“pressure for development has the potential to lead to the loss of the separate and distinct identity of both settlements and the settlements surrounding them through coalescence. This could either be by physically or perceptually reducing the gaps between them or by introducing an increase of activity which has an urbanising effect. The visual break and sense of openness between these settlements is very important in maintaining the separate identity of individual communities and the Council considers it important that the integrity of this openness is maintained”*. This has not yet been adopted, however, and the Local Plan Review is currently at examination.

WBC’s report, [Appropriate Countryside Designation Study](#) (2022), explores the area in question in more detail. It quotes a number of studies, in addition to the 2019 LCA, including:

Study	Finding
Landscape capacity assessment of potential housing sites within and adjacent to the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: Thatcham (2015)	<p>Further major expansion of Thatcham northwards towards the AONB may impact on the landscape setting of the AONB.</p> <p>The open fields are an important part of the open wider landscape above Thatcham.</p> <p>The open countryside separates the settlements and separate identities of Cold Ash and Thatcham</p>
Thatcham Landscape Sensitivity Study (2009) Local Landscape Character Areas	<p>Well defined edge to Thatcham</p> <p>The settlement of Cold Ash forms a distinctive linear pattern along the ridgeline. Loose grain, with large gardens, in marked contrast to Thatcham.</p>
Landscape sensitivity & capacity study for land north east of Thatcham (2021)	<p>The landscape separates northern Thatcham from small village settlements at Cold Ash and Upper Bucklebury. Thatcham is at a relatively low elevation within the Kennet valley, with the villages at higher elevations. This vertical differential contributes to their separation.</p>

CAPC consider that a green gap in this area is justified. It considers however that the green gaps proposed by WBC in the Local Plan Review are inadequate to achieve the desired outcome of maintaining the villages of Cold Ash and Ashmore Green as separate entities, from the urban settlement of Thatcham and meeting the strategic aims of Landscape Area WH4. As mapped in the LPR, the gaps appear to be predominately restricting development of the villages southwards, as opposed to

restricting development of Thatcham northwards. Any Green Gap would be more appropriately placed adjacent to Thatcham than to the villages, as the aim is to stop urban encroachment into the countryside. Allowing development adjacent to Thatcham would extend the urban settlement boundary into the open countryside of Cold Ash Parish. CAPC believe it's important that the Green Gaps demonstrably establishes the countryside setting of the villages and reduces the threat of development that encircles the villages.

In terms of whether this is a strategic or local matter, Para 128 supports the involvement of the community in developing policies that are "*grounded in an understanding and evaluation of each area's defining characteristics*", stating that, "*Neighbourhood planning groups can play an important role in identifying the special qualities of each area and explaining how this should be reflected in development, both through their own plans and by engaging in the production of design policy, guidance and codes by local planning authorities and developers*".

There are numerous examples of Neighbourhood Plans that include policies seeking to retain local character and identity, including through the identification of green gaps. These include [Storrington, Sullington and Washington Neighbourhood Plan](#) (Policy 9), [Stone Neighbourhood Plan](#) (Policy GS4), [Battle Neighbourhood Plan](#) (Policy HD7).

Overall, therefore CAPC consider that in the absence of an adopted policy on this matter, and in the context of the evidence relating to this part of the parish, the green gaps proposed in the NDP are justified in identifying the areas most vulnerable to development, preventing coalescence between Thatcham and the villages, supporting the management aims of the LCA and maintaining the rural character and special qualities of the area and villages.

Policy CAP8: Iconic Views

1. V2: The position and angle of the photo doesn't really capture the view, which should be across to the outskirts of Reading. I've taken a photo to show the view from the right angle and from a public location, on The Ridge. It's not a very good photo as it was gloomy when I took it, and I only had my iPhone with me. Is this adequate to answer your question (we'll be able to get a better photo)? The view is important for the reasons provided in our Neighbourhood Plan and because it provides a sense of open space and a countryside setting.



V6: The photo was taken by a drone. Is it a requirement that views can only be supported if they're viewable by the public and from a place?

Yours sincerely,

Ivor McArdle

Chair, Cold Ash NDP Steering Group & Vice-Chair, Cold Ash Parish Council

On behalf of Cold Ash Parish Council