

Finchampstead Neighbourhood Development Plan

Topic Paper - Key Gaps – Edition 2



Finchampstead is a semi-rural parish and it is the overriding concern of residents that it retains the features and attributes which support its character. The parish has no single centre but there are a number of distinct settlement areas, each with their own sense of place and community.

Some settlements are clearly separated while others have been linked by ribbon development but even where this has occurred, there is still a perception of ‘different place’ between them.

It is the strong wish of the community that green gaps between the individual settlements around the parish, which give it its semi-rural nature, should be protected and maintained [[public consultation, November 2019](#)].



There is also a wider concern that without explicit policy protections, the parish may eventually be consumed into an urban continuum linking Wokingham Town with Bracknell to the east and Sandhurst and Crowthorne to the south and now Arborfield and Barkham to the west and north.

The FNDP has identified a number of locations where development will be supported in order to meet both the needs of the parish and also the wider Local Plan area. It is therefore not unreasonable that the Plan should also reflect the expressed wish of the community that a few small locations which help define the semi-rural nature of the parish should be given additional protection.

This Plan uses the term ‘**Key Gaps**’ to describe four locations within the parish that represent the last green space between Development Locations or Areas of Habitation and which are easily visible to residents travelling by car or on foot (or cycling or riding).

Key Gaps preserve the physical and visual separation of settlements. As a result, they also protect the individual identities of settlements. Key gaps therefore have a landscape function to prevent coalescence of settlements, rather than being related to landscape quality or being a policy to protect landscape character. For this reason, key gaps may have areas of poorer quality landscape or rural fringe uses (including ‘Brownfield Sites’) which do not necessarily detract from their function as a gap.

In most cases, they represent the ‘ground level’ view when travelling along a road or path, giving a sense of arrival and departure between one settlement area and another. The sense of distinct place and community exists notwithstanding that settlements may not have full 360-degree separation when viewed from an aerial perspective. The fact that those two settlements may be linked via development that occurs elsewhere than along the route being travelled does not detract from the visual value of the ‘gap’ to local residents.

The Key Gaps

Fig 1 - Finchampstead Key Gaps Overview

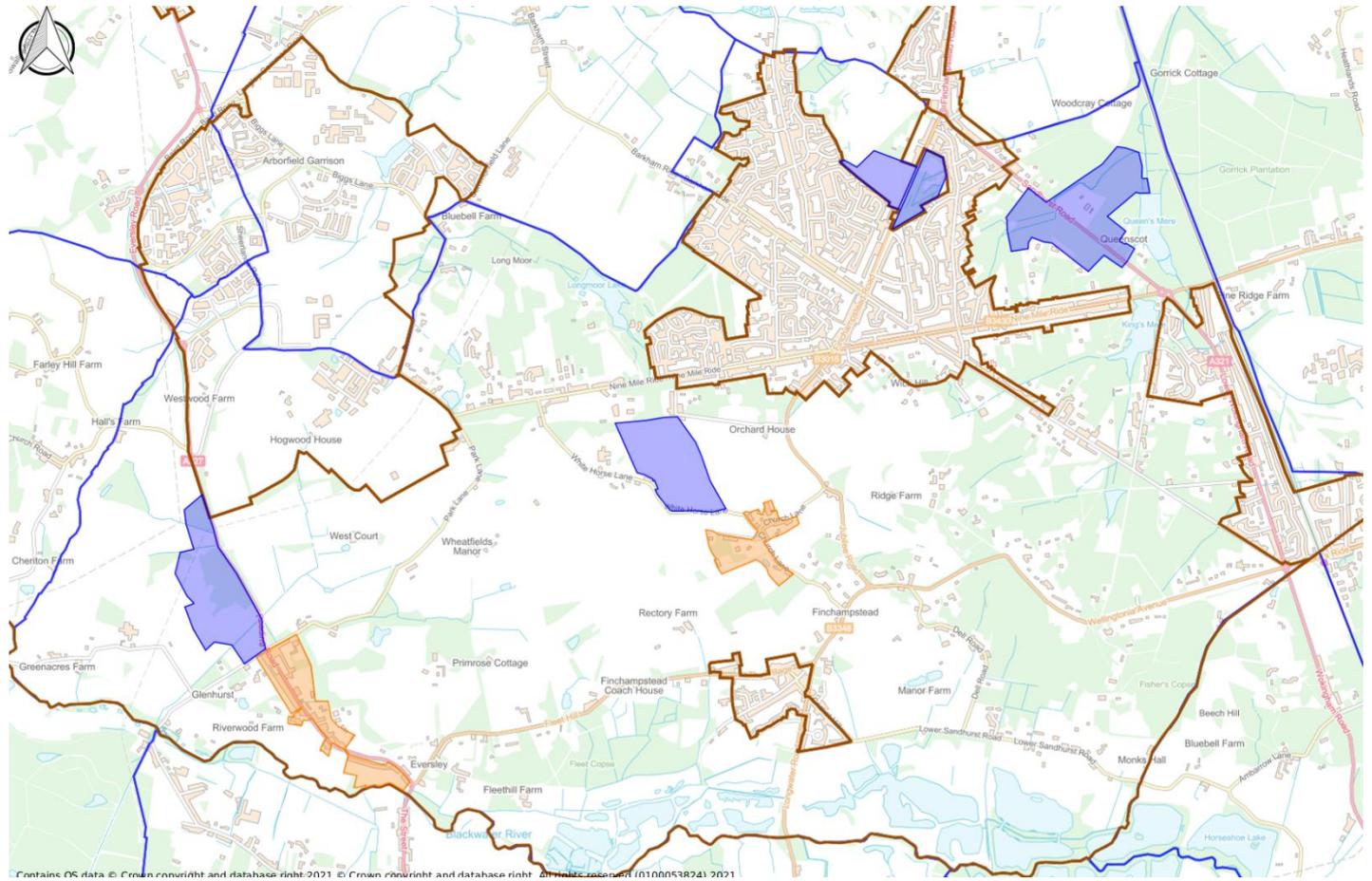


Figure 1 - Development Locations (Black), Key Gaps (Purple) and other Areas of Habitation (Orange)

1. The fields either side of the B3016 in front of Sand Martins Golf Course, as a visual separation between Finchampstead and Wokingham (also known as 'Washington Fields')

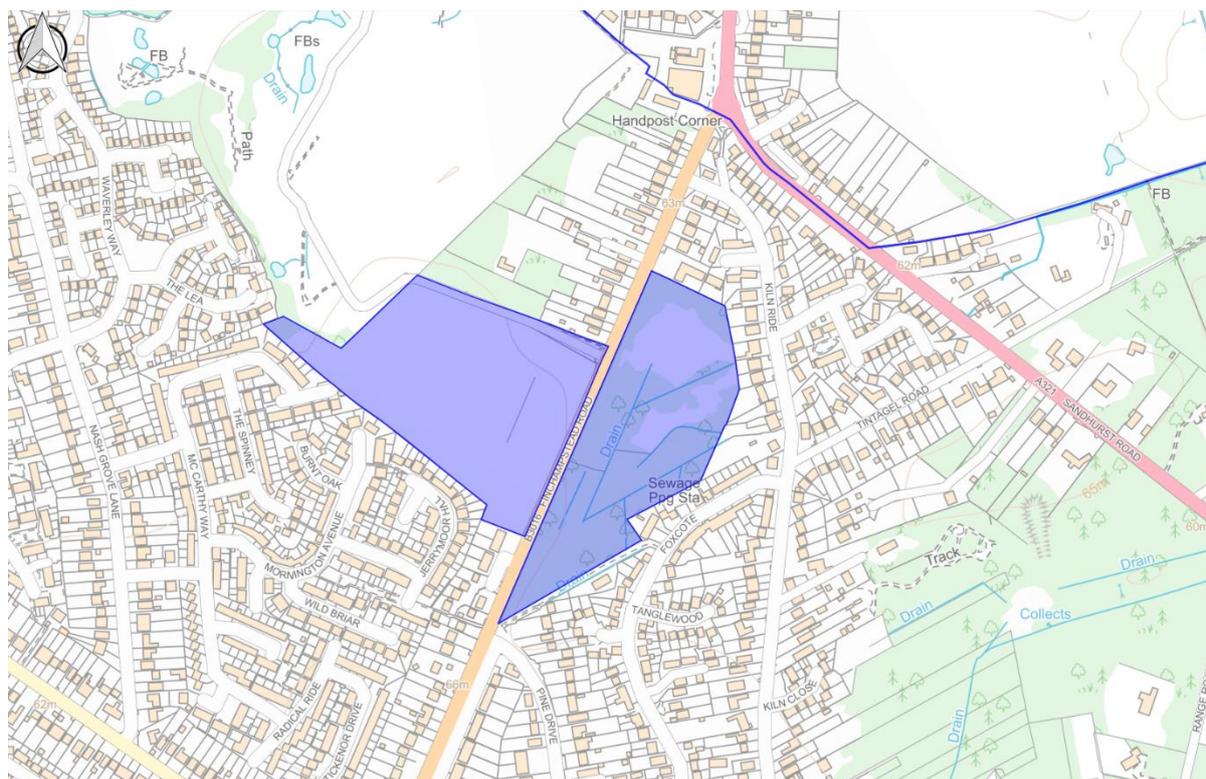


Figure 2 - - Sand Martins and Washington Fields

Two fields on opposite sides of the B3016 Finchampstead Rd, near to Sand Martins Golf Course sit astride the primary route from Wokingham Town into Finchampstead. The primary nature of this route is evidenced by more than 7,300 car movements per day in 2019.¹

Although development exists beyond the fields to the South-East, this is almost totally screened by a mixture of mature and young trees.

The Golf Course sits behind the fields to the North West, but this is not visible from the road, being screened by two lines of trees and part-hedgerow.

This is the only remaining location on this route where green spaces exist opposite each other, giving the sense of departure and arrival.

The distinctness of the area is marked by roadside signs announcing the boundary of Finchampstead.

The value of this gap to the community is such that when an application to build up to 80 dwellings on these fields was submitted in 2018, it attracted very large amounts of opposition, with c800 letters of objection to the council; a petition collecting 2,243 signatures (equivalent to about half the number of registered voters in Finchampstead North); the establishment of a well-supported residents campaign group (753 followers on Facebook) and a significant public attendance at two public meetings and at the subsequent Planning Appeal hearing.

In rejecting the applicants appeal against the decision of WBC to refuse the application, the inspector found that:

¹ See Appendix O – Traffic Flow Information, Finchampstead Neighbourhood Development Plan

"Whilst there are dwellings to the north and south of the appeal site on this side of the road, the site itself, together with the open land opposite (the subject of the SANG appeal) forms a natural verdant break when travelling along the road. On plan, the settlements of Finchampstead North and Wokingham have a contiguous boundary in part, with the houses just to the north of the site lying within Finchampstead North as defined in the development plan, not Wokingham. On the ground however, the visual break provided by the appeal sites when travelling along the road gives a very strong impression of passing through an area of countryside between the two settlements. That impression is particularly reinforced when leaving Wokingham and travelling south along the main road, by the pair of large road signs at the southern end of the appeal site, which announce a change in the speed limit to 30mph and clearly state 'Welcome to Finchampstead'".

*"Whilst technically the appeal site does not lie 'between' two separate settlements it is experienced on the ground as a relatively tranquil, **distinct gap**, providing a welcome 'breathing space' of distinctive rural character between built forms. As such, I consider it to be a sensitive area of open land that plays an integral role in defining the individual identity of the settlement of Finchampstead North in this location. I am mindful, in this regard, that one of the stated purposes of the Core Strategy is to maintain the distinct and separate identity of the Borough's settlements."*²

² Appeal A: APP/X0360/W/18/3213163

Land west of Finchampstead Road, Finchampstead North,
Wokingham RG40 3JT

2. An area either side of the A321, designated by WBC as 'Local Wildlife Site' and additionally, the property known as 'Silverstock Manor', (which is not part of the designated 'Local Wildlife Site'), and on the south west side of the road, a strip of land extending 100 metres back from the road, from the boundary of the area designated as 'Local Wildlife Site' to the northern boundary of the property known as 'Kingsmere House'.

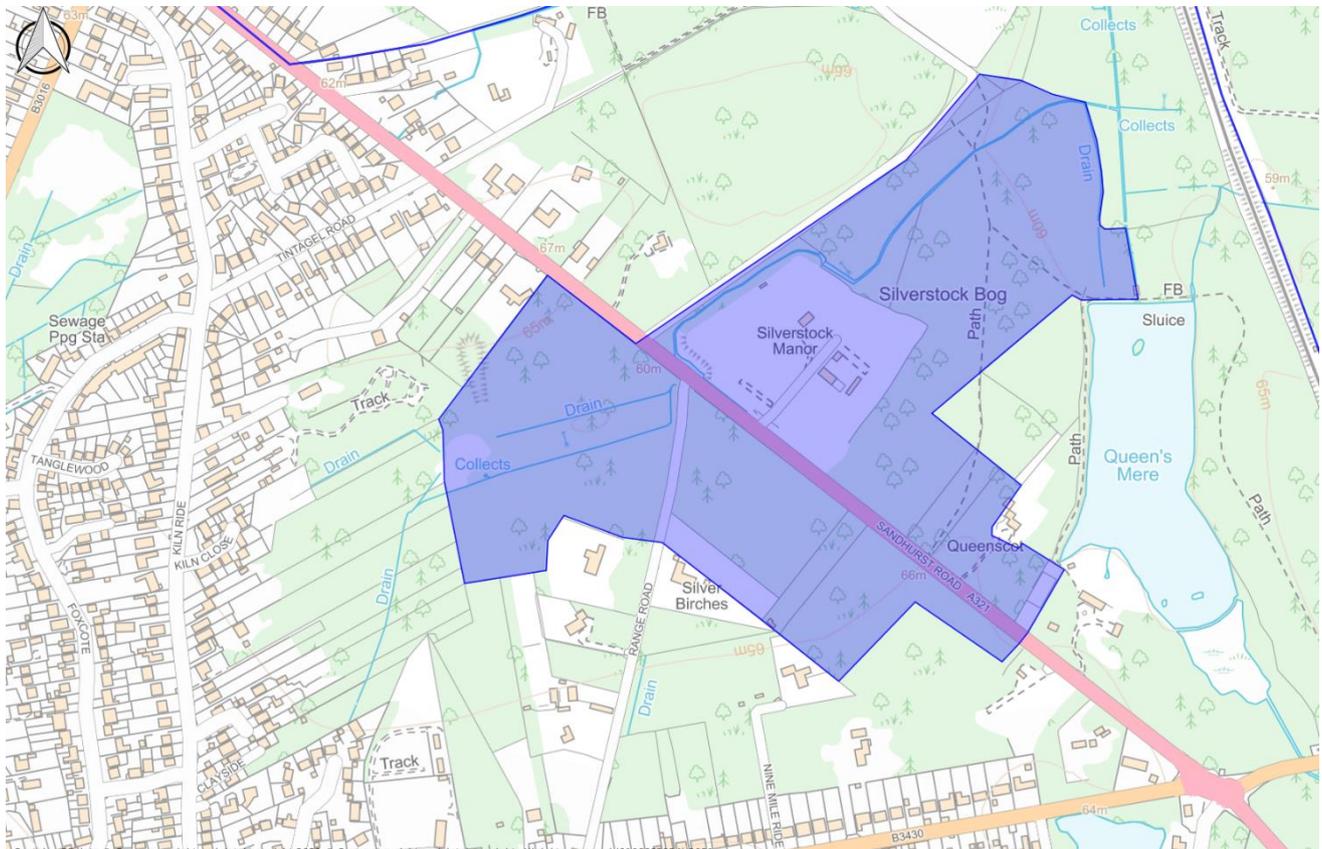


Figure 3 - A321 Green Gap

The A321 is the single major route south from the town of Wokingham to towards Sandhurst and Camberley. South of the junction with the B3430 (Nine Mile Ride), it has been the site of continuous ribbon development all the way to the parish boundary at the Wellingtonia Roundabout junction with the B3348, and the houses and side roads along this section are now effectively coalesced with the neighbouring settlement of Crowthorne.

This is clearly illustrated in Fig [x] below, where the ribbon development running north-west from point B towards Point A and south of the junction with the B3430 (Nine Mile Ride), is clearly visible.

However, from the boundary of the property known as 'Graiswold' on the south-west side of the main road, to the northern boundary of the property known as 'Kingsmere House', close to the junction with the B3430, there exists an area of largely unmanaged woodland, extending back from the main road. On the corresponding opposite side of the road, from the boundary of a property known as 'Wychbury' to the junction with the B3430, there is also an almost uninterrupted area of woodland and field space. The only incursions into this are the residential properties known as 'Queens Cot' and 'Queens Mere' (both of which are sited well back from the road, in the woodland) and also the property known as 'Silverstock Manor', an open area with a small house, a barn and four outbuildings in a concrete courtyard, all being mostly screened by a large earth bund.

This gap in development is also clearly visible in Fig 4 below

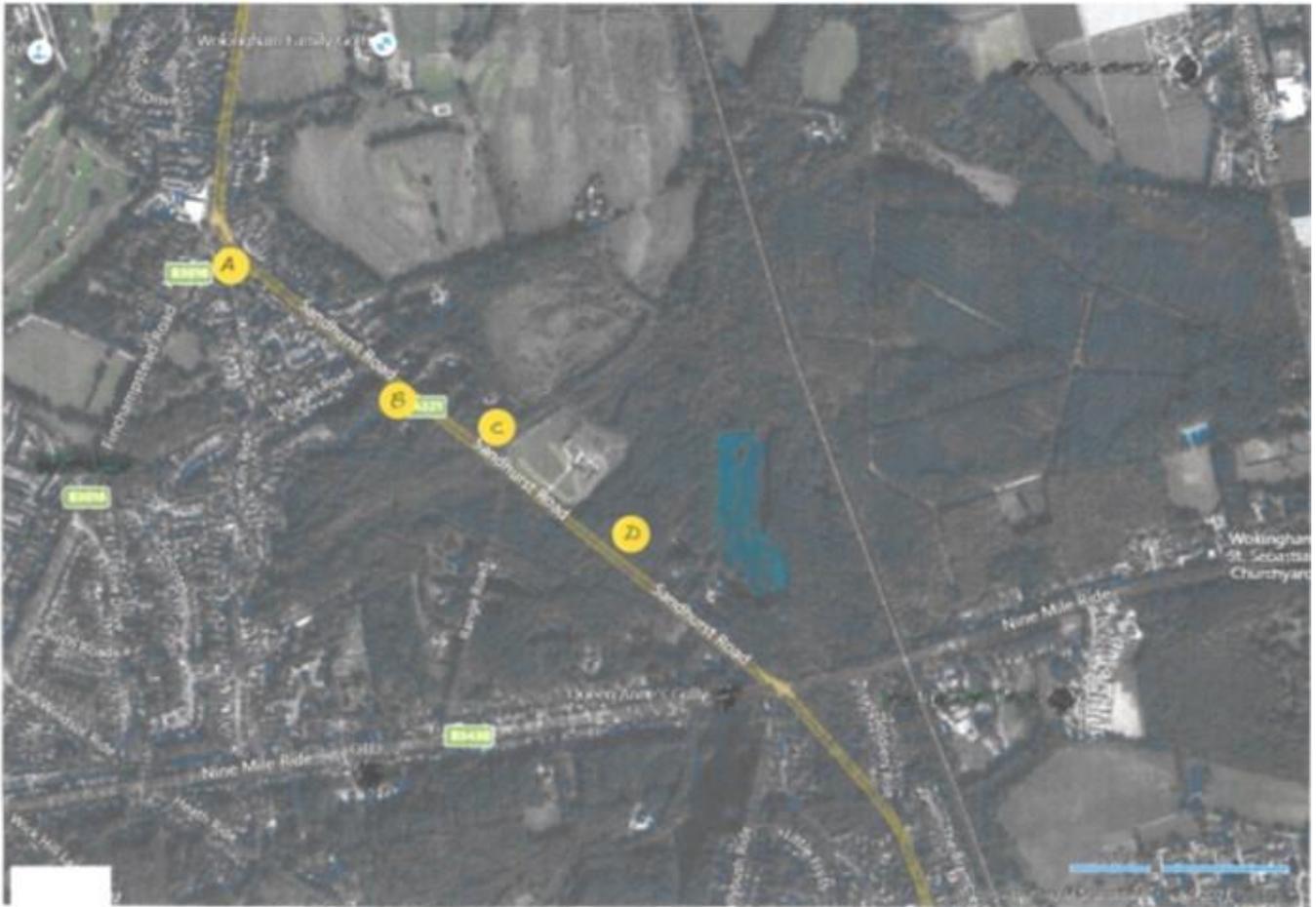


Figure 4 - Sandhurst Road heading south from Finchampstead boundary at The Throat roundabout to Nine Mile Ride: aerial map (Google) and roadside photos



Figure 5 - Point A: start of Sandhurst Road at The Throat



Figure 6 - Point B: brow of first rise, where the Residential Development' ends

The majority of houses are in the northern extent of the road within development limits, whereas the areas outside development limits have a much more countryside feel in keeping with their countryside designation in the WBC Core Strategy – there isn't a single character for the road as a whole.



Figure 7 - Point C: Footpath 51 next to Silverstock Farm



Figure 8 - Point C Eastwards to Footpath 51



Figure 9 - Point C The frontage of Silverstock Manor, looking eastwards



Figure 10 - Point D: brow second rise near Queensmere



Figure 11 - Point D: Westwards into BW 43 Range Road area

This is the only remaining location on this route where the road ceases to be 'residential' and where green spaces exist opposite each other. On a route frequently used by runners and cyclists as well as motorists, it creates a very real and specific sense of having left one area of settlement before entering another.

Although Silverstock Manor itself is a 'brownfield site', its physical nature and appearance still contributes to the 'Green gap', and the value of this gap to the community is such that several applications to develop Silverstock Manor have been rejected.

In an appeal decision against a proposal to build 10 houses at Silverstock Manor, (27th April, 2016) the inspector noted that *"I agree with the Council that the area does have a rural context and that there is a sense of remoteness and solitude as identified within the key characteristics of the Council's Landscape Character Assessment"*. The planning history of the site is not disputed; it is a fact that several recent applications for residential development (162865 – 7 dwellings) and (152100 – 10 dwellings) have been refused and dismissed at appeal.

3. The fields immediately to the west of the A327 north from the junction with Park Road and New Mill Road to a point in line with the northern perimeter of the proposed SANG on the eastern side of the road.

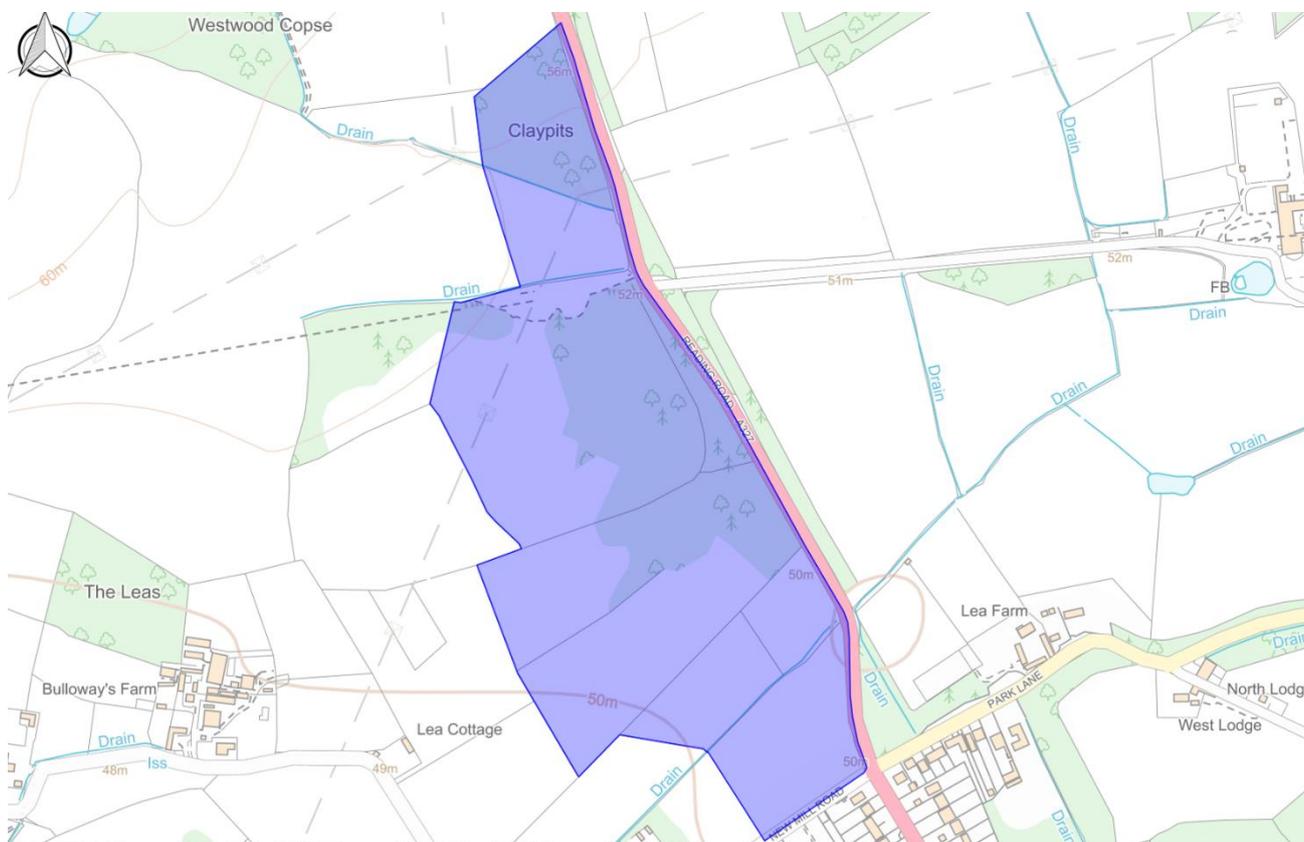


Figure 12 - A327 Reading Rd and 'The Leas'

The A327 Reading route is one of the three principal routes in and out of the parish from the south. Although in an area designated as 'Countryside', extensive ribbon development has taken place south of the Park Road / New Mill Road crossroads so as to produce a continuous line of development which effectively joins up with Eversley Village.

North, of this junction, the route of the A327 has traditionally been very rural but this is now changing with the development at Arborfield Garrison SDL and Finchwood Park. An area to the east of the road has been designated as a SANG but this will be heavily devalued visually if development is allowed to occur in the future to the west of the road. Protecting the fields immediately to the west, with their views across the Blackwater Valley and to Farley Hill will help to prevent the developments at Arborfield being co-joined in a thread of urbanisation all the way to Eversley.

This area also includes Westwood Copse and Claypit Copse, which are both TVERC designated Wildlife areas, link across to the Blackwater conservation area and has the listed buildings of Bulloways Farmhouse and Lea Farmhouse in view. The Plan seeks to retain the openness between West Finchampstead and South Arborfield with these assets in a protected area.

4. Three fields, north and east of White Horse Lane and south of Green Acres farm, bordered by White Horse Lane to the west and south, the boundary of Green Acres farm to the north, Bridleway 11 to the east and footpath 5 and the boundary of Wheatlands farm to the west. This protection also includes the hedgerows and trees which border White Horse Lane on both sides of the road adjacent to these three fields.

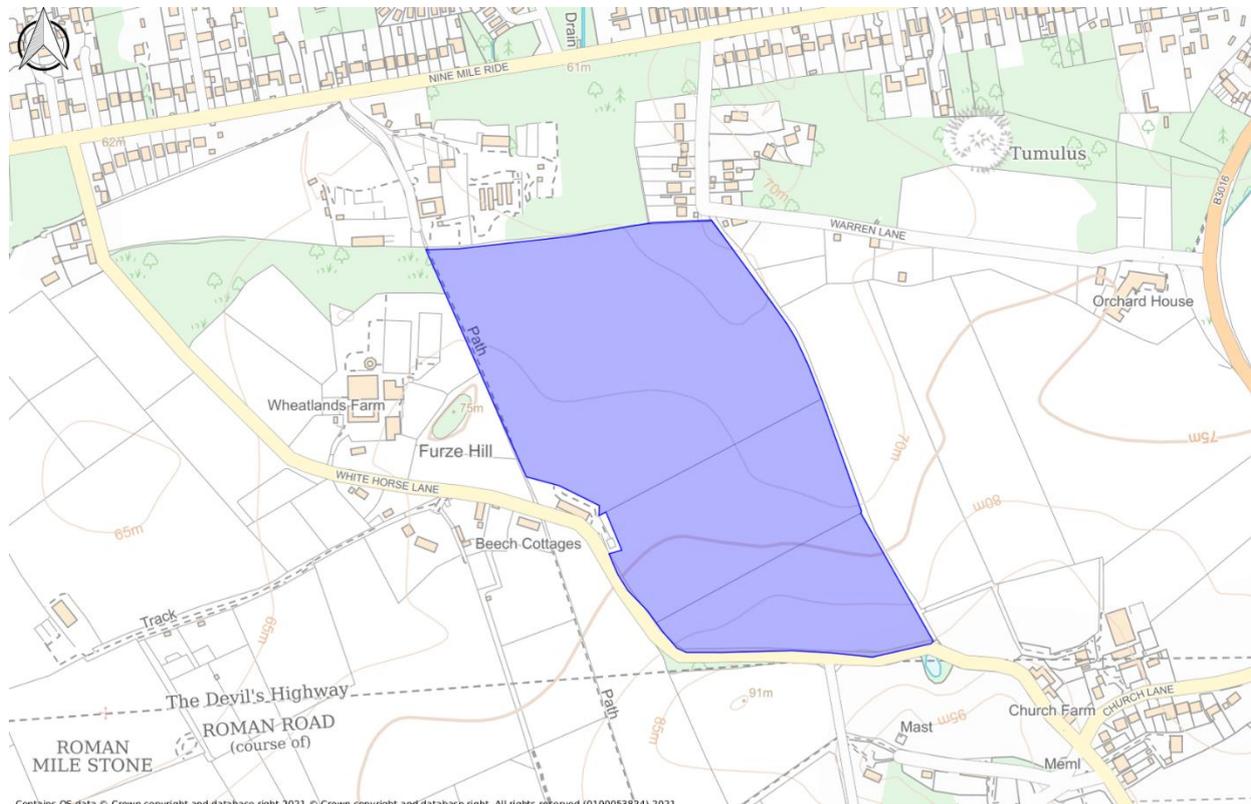


Figure 13 – Fields north of White Horse Lane/Furze Hill

White Horse Lane links the areas of habitation around the ancient church and Queens Oak Public House with the ribbon development along Nine Mile Ride. At the southern end, it climbs a hill which gives wide ranging views over the fields in question and to a considerable distance to the north.

From the point where White Horse Lane meets Footpath 5 to the junction with Nine Mile Ride, there have been numerous examples of 'improvement' to buildings that were previously farms and agricultural buildings, some of them significant in size. Just south of Footpath 5, permission was given for an 'Agricultural Workers Dwelling', which is now a substantial building. There has also been a recent planning application for a business development in the vicinity of this dwelling. Together with the development of the equestrian centre at Wheatlands Farm, this is slowly creating an environment of Ribbon Development.

The fields in question, at the southern end of White Horse Lane now represent the last genuinely open spaces between the area around the church and Nine Mile Ride.

Whilst evident from the road, this is even more the case when travelling on foot on either the bridleway or footpath. The two rights of way which cross them are amongst the most heavily used in the parish, both being part of circular routes but also the only 'off-road' connection between the northern and southern halves of the parish. They are very frequently used by walkers, runners and riders and are the 'route of choice' for the many people in Finchampstead North who take choose to leave a car behind and walk to the Queens Oak Public House near the church.

The elevation of the ground allows for extensive views to the north and a very real sense of tranquillity and space exists. Almost no development is directly visible, due to the screening effect of the trees and hedges along the northern boundary.

The topography of the surrounding landscape and the nature of the hedgerows and other boundaries is such that when traveling along either of the footpaths or the road, the natural line of sight is always across these fields rather than elsewhere.



Figure 14 -The fields in Key Gap 4, showing existing development along White Horse Lane



Figure 15 - The view North West from the junction of BW 11 and White Horse Lane



Figure 16 - The view South West from BW 11 near Greenacres farm, showing the rooftops of the recent developments in White Horse Lane