I am writing to propose that parishes along the Pang Valley be linked in to a single ward or possibly two adjacent wards. The parishes concerned are Tidmarsh with Sulham, Bradfield, Stanford Dingley, Bucklebury, Frilsham, Hampstead Norreys, Compton, East Ilsley and West Ilsley. The Pang is a rare chalk river and these parishes are within the North Wessex Downs AONB.

The Pang Valley was subject to extensive flooding three years ago. The flooding was caused largely by groundwater, but fluvial and sewer flooding added to the problems for the communities along the valley. In response to these problems the Pang Valley Flood Forum (‘PVFF’) was formed (see www.floodalleviation.co.uk) which allows the communities to work with agencies such as West Berkshire Council, Thames Water and the Environment Agency. All the parishes have come together and have each been represented on the PVFF mostly by their flood wardens. The collective knowledge base within the members of the Forum has demonstrated strong technical capabilities and an historical perspective which has been lost from within many of the agencies.

The PVFF has evidenced that the communities and parishes face similar challenges brought about by changes in demography and cuts in local authority spending. West Berkshire is urging rural communities to do more for themselves largely through volunteering. In my own parish, there is a gang of volunteers that does river maintenance, clears ditches and gullies, sweeps up leaves and picks litter from the roads and verges. The communities have not enlarged significantly since 2001, but there has been change brought about by more commuting, as opposed to local working, and a dearth of housing to support local need, particularly for rural workers.

The transport links have been further reduced such that nearly all these communities are very reliant on car transport. There has been evidence of one parish setting up its own community bus service, mainly to get children to school, but also for others to get in to town to do some shopping. These services are expensive to operate and need a critical mass such that neighbouring communities can club together. There are community groups that take people to the doctor, or to the hospital which can be 10-20 miles away. Care of the elderly in these communities will be an increasing challenge as their numbers increase and public services reduce. Countering loneliness is a common theme.

Most parishes have village halls, pubs, a shop and churches but many parishes are facing common challenges in sustaining them. It is hard to believe that all these community assets can be be sustained indefinitely and that some rationalisation, or consolidation, is inevitable. Arguably, this will be easier to plan if there is a Pang Valley perspective rather than at parish level, particularly if parishes are working together for their mutual benefit and may club together to support a community shop or a pub threatened with closure..

There is often a mutual interest amongst these parishes over planning decisions particularly relating to development in the countryside and the maintenance of a good mix of housing in the various settlements. Issues such as affordable and low cost housing are relevant to maintaining the right mix and meeting local need.

Access to the countryside is also a common theme amongst these parishes, where visitors are welcomed and help support the pubs and shops in the communities. The Pang Valley offers a very attractive landscape and
there is a general view that "chalk rivers should be protected or restored to a quality which sustains the high conservation value of their wildlife, healthy water supplies, recreation opportunities and their place in the character and cultural history of the landscape.” see https://www.wwf.org.uk/where-we-work/places/uk-rivers-and-chalk-streams

In conclusion, I believe that there is merit in linking the rural parishes along the Pang Valley. The river is the common link and the opportunities and challenges for the communities along the river are much the same,

Mark Hawkesworth