

HOGWOOD FARM, FINCHAMPSTEAD

DETAILED REPTILE MITIGATION STRATEGY – NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE

Prepared for CALA Homes Thames Ltd

by

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CONTENTS

Page

1	Introduction	1
2	Neighbourhood Centre Detailed Mitigation Strategy	4
3	Conclusion	6
4	References	6

HDA Document Control and Quality Assurance Record

APPENDICES

A	Phase 1 Habitat Survey Plan (showing Neighbourhood Centre development area and wider site)
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site location and summary description

1.1.1 This report describes a Detailed Reptile Method Statement in relation to the Neighbourhood Centre area of the development of approximately 110ha of land at Hogwood Farm, Finchampstead. The Neighbourhood Centre development area comprises approximately 0.9ha of land, hereinafter referred to as 'the site'. The site centre is located by National Grid Reference SU 77146445. The Detailed Reptile Method Statement was commissioned by CALA Homes Thames Ltd in May 2024.

1.1.2 The Neighbourhood Centre development parcel is located to the north-west of the village of Finchampstead, Berkshire. In general terms, it is dominated by ruderal vegetation with a line of mixed scrub along the southern site boundary and bare ground along the eastern site boundary. The Neighbourhood Centre site is bordered to the east by the Nine Mile Ride Extension South (NMRES); to the south by the Southern Bus Loop road with Parcel 10 of the wider site beyond; and to the north and west by the proposed primary school which will be delivered separately by Wokingham Borough Council (WBC). The location and boundary of the Neighbourhood Centre site is shown in *Appendix A*.

1.1.3 The Neighbourhood Centre site is part of a larger area covering a total of 110ha, hereinafter referred to as the 'wider site'. The wider site includes residential properties associated with Parcel 1 and a construction site associated with Parcel 2 in the north-west and a SANG in the south which comprises a mix of wetland, species-rich grassland, scrub and woodland habitats. In general terms, the western area of the wider site is comprised of three fields of disturbed ground dominated by short ruderal vegetation with scattered areas of tall ruderal vegetation and large spoil heaps bordered by mature trees and woodland with scrub field margins. The central and eastern areas of the site are comprised of areas of hardstanding, construction/disturbed ground and grassland fields bordered by mature treelines and woodland. Woodland shaws and copses are located in the northern, western and central areas of the site, including mixed, broadleaved and broadleaved plantation woodland types, some of which are included on Natural England's Inventory of Ancient Woodland. Wetland habitats within the site include drainage ditches and small streams associated with the field boundaries and several ponds in poor condition are located across the site. The wider site is bordered to the north by a construction site, the Bohunt School and the Hogwood Industrial Estate; to the east by Park Lane beyond which lie residential dwellings and park homes; to the south by Park Lane and farmland; and to the west by A327 Reading Road and Sheerlands Road beyond which lie farmland and woodland. The wider area is dominated by agricultural land interspersed with woodland and residential properties.

- 1.1.4 Further information on the extent and composition of habitats across the Neighbourhood Centre site and the wider site is provided in *Appendix A* (HDA, 2024a).

1.2 Background and legislative context

- 1.2.1 Four species of reptile are widespread in England: Grass Snake *Natrix natrix*, Slow-worm *Anguis fragilis*, Common Lizard *Zootoca vivipara*, and Adder *Vipera berus*. The Sand Lizard *Lacerta agilis* and Smooth Snake *Coronella austriaca* are restricted to certain sand dune and heathland sites.

- 1.2.2 Reptiles can be found in a range of habitats and typically require a mosaic of vegetation types. Habitat interfaces are important, with reptiles requiring woodland, scrub or hedgerow for shelter, longer vegetation for hunting and patches of sheltered short turf, bare ground or log piles for basking areas. Areas that catch the sun (i.e. those with a southerly aspect) are preferred over those where direct sunlight is absent for most of the day. In addition, Grass Snakes favour damp habitats such as those associated with still and running water, grazing marshes, mires etc.

- 1.2.3 All species of reptile are protected through Sections 9(1) and 9(5) of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act (as amended). It is an offence to:

- Intentionally kill or injure any reptile; and/or
- Sell, offer for sale, possess or transport for the purposes of sale or publish advertisements to buy or sell any reptile.

Due to their rarity, Sand Lizards and Smooth Snakes have additional protection.

- 1.2.4 Reptiles across the UK have undergone significant declines in recent years and all species of reptile within the UK are listed as priority species on the UKBAP and listed as Species of Principal Importance under Section 41 of the 2006 Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act. Section 40 of the Act requires that these species are a material consideration in the planning process.

1.3 Development proposals

- 1.3.1 Planning permission (O/2014/2179 and 140764) was granted in January 2017 for a hybrid application. This comprises:

- Outline permission for demolition of all existing buildings on site; up to 1,500 new dwellings; employment floor space; a Neighbourhood Centre; a primary school; sports pitches and associated pavilion building; highways infrastructure; associated landscaping, public realm, open/green space and sustainable urban drainage systems; and
- Full permission for a 29.7ha Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) in the south of the site.

The hybrid planning permission was subsequently amended by a Section 73 application (181194) which was approved in November 2018.

1.4 Scope and purpose of the report

1.4.1 In December 2020, planning consent (202394) was granted for the demolition of the Hogwood Industrial Estate Buildings which were historically associated with this site. Since then the industrial estate buildings have been demolished and the site is now dominated by tall ruderal vegetation.

1.4.2 Reptile surveys of the site and wider site were conducted by HDA in 2017 (HDA, 2018a), 2021 (HDA, 2021a) and 2023 (HDA, 2024b). During the 2023 surveys no reptiles were recorded within the site or wider site. However, during the 2021 surveys a low number of Slow-worm were recorded within the wider site and the presence of Grass Snake was identified within the wider site in both 2017 and 2021. These update previous surveys of the site and wider site undertaken by Entec in 2008 and Amec in 2012 which identified 'low' populations of Common Lizard, Slow-worm and Grass Snake (Royal Haskoning DHV, 2014).

1.4.3 This Detailed Reptile Mitigation Strategy for the Neighbourhood Centre area of the proposed development has been produced as a result of Planning Condition 26, which states:

"Prior to submission of any Reserved Matters applications other than pertaining to the Nine Mile Ride Extension South an outline reptile mitigation strategy shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. All sub phases of the development shall thereafter be designed to incorporate the requirements identified in the approved outline reptile mitigation strategy. All Reserved Matters applications for any sub phase of the development shall include a detailed reptile mitigation strategy that demonstrates how the relevant sub phases have been designed to incorporate the provisions of the outline reptile mitigation strategy and the detailed mitigation strategies shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details unless otherwise approved in writing by the local planning authority."

1.4.4 In recognition of the historic presence of reptiles within the wider site and the requirements of Condition 26, this document provides a Detailed Reptile Mitigation Strategy for the Neighbourhood Centre development area that has been produced to ensure impact avoidance, minimisation and mitigation measures for reptiles are implemented within the Neighbourhood Centre scheme. The measures identified are in keeping with the '2023 Reptile Survey and a Site-Wide Outline Reptile Mitigation Strategy' prepared for the wider site and Neighbourhood Centre site in its entirety (HDA, 2024b).

2 NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE DETAILED REPTILE MITIGATION STRATEGY

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 This section describes the methodology that will be employed to ensure that the Neighbourhood Centre development scheme complements the *Site-wide Outline Reptile Mitigation Strategy* (HDA, 2024b) to maintain compliance with nature conservation legislation afforded to reptiles and maintain the favourable conservation status of the local reptile population. This methodology will be employed during construction of Neighbourhood Centre development unless otherwise agreed with the Local Planning Authority.

2.1.2 Although no reptiles were recorded at the site during the updated 2023 reptile survey, previously low numbers of Slow-worm, Grass Snake and Common Lizard have been recorded within the wider site. On this basis it is conceivable that very low numbers of Slow-worm, Grass Snake and Common Lizard may remain present at the site. The site is therefore considered to support very low numbers of Slow-worm, Grass Snake and Common Lizard and as such does not qualify as a SSSI, SINC or Key Reptile Site. The site is considered to be of no more than site value for Slow-worm, Grass Snake and Common Lizard. Notwithstanding this, the legal protection afforded to all reptiles still applies.

2.1.3 In accordance with the *Site-wide Outline Reptile Mitigation Strategy* (HDA, 2024b), as only very low numbers of Grass Snake, Slow-worm and Common Lizard are likely to be associated with the Neighbourhood Centre site, the small size of the site and the suboptimal habitats present a full translocation exercise is not proposed for this phase of the development. Instead, a cautious approach to site clearance will be employed where suitable reptile habitat is to be lost, including the scrub along the southern site boundary, the ruderal vegetation present and any refuge opportunities such as rubble piles located within the site. This will involve manipulation of habitats to displace reptiles present into areas of contiguous and improved habitats, following the stages set out below:

2.2 Stage 1: Habitat enhancement works

2.2.1 In accordance with the outline reptile mitigation strategy for the Neighbourhood Centre development area and wider site (HDA, 2024b), the creation/enhancement of reptile receptor habitat focuses on the SANG which has been constructed and supports areas of grassland bordered by hedgerows and areas of woodland. Further areas of suitable reptile habitat will however be created in other areas of public open space within the wider site including the Green Corridor to the west of the site¹, currently connected to the site by a continuation of the band of scrub located with the site. The Green Corridor

comprises part of a key habitat corridor crossing north to south through the wider site leading from treelines and Hogwood Shaw Local Wildlife Site (LWS) in the north to the SANG and open countryside to the south, east and west of the wider site.

- 2.2.2 The Neighbourhood Centre site is a small area of land currently dominated by negligible/low suitability habitats for reptiles, which is proposed to be a highly urbanised, developed area dominated by hardstanding and buildings. Further to this the site will be surrounded by habitats of negligible interest for reptiles including roads to the south and east of the site and a school to the north and west of the Neighbourhood Centre site. It is therefore not proposed that reptiles are encouraged into the site and subsequently creation of areas of reptile habitats within the Neighbourhood Centre site are not proposed. The prescriptions for creation/enhancement of reptile habitats within the wider site and the management of these areas are detailed within the Outline Site-wide Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (HDA, 2018b) and the Landscape and Ecological Management Plan – Phase 2 (HDA, 2021c) and shown on the SANG Masterplan (RPS, 2018a) and Overarching Landscape Strategy (RPS, 2018b).

2.3 **Stage 2: Habitat manipulation**

- 2.3.1 Prior to development affecting areas of suitable reptile habitat within the Neighbourhood Centre site, the following habitat manipulation measures will be undertaken under an ecological watching brief by a suitably experienced ecologist, in order to encourage the movement of reptiles from the Neighbourhood Centre site into suitable habitats in the surrounding area.

- Firstly, vegetation cover will be reduced to minimum height of 150mm. This will take place at a time of year avoiding the bird breeding season (typically between March and September inclusive) or otherwise be preceded by a check of suitable habitat for active nests immediately prior to commencement of works by a suitably qualified ecologist or appropriate other. The vegetation clearance works will be undertaken from the east of the site towards the west of the site to encourage the movement of reptiles towards the Green Corridor located within the wider site.
- Where potential for reptiles to be present remains, a minimum period of 5 days with daytime temperatures of >12°C will then be allowed to elapse prior to the second stage of vegetation clearance (see below).
- The second stage will involve clearance of all suitable vegetation to ground level (i.e. <75mm) by hand during mild temperatures (>14°C) at a suitable time of year when reptiles are likely to be active (mid-March to early October inclusive). The vegetation clearance works will again be undertaken from the east of the site towards the west of the site to encourage the movement of reptiles towards the

¹ Details for the proposed reptile enhancement works within this area of the wider site are given in the '*Detailed Reptile Mitigation Strategy – Phase 2*' (HDA, 2021b).

Green Corridor located within the wider site. At this time any potential hibernacula or refugia encountered will be carefully dismantled by hand. This stage of clearance will be undertaken under the supervision of a suitably qualified ecologist who will capture and relocate any reptiles encountered to pre-established refugia in the wider site.

- Where potential for reptiles to be present remains, a further 5 days with daytime temperatures of >12°C will then be allowed to elapse to enable any remaining reptiles to disperse from the area of works, prior to the destructive search.
- Following clearance of vegetation to ground level and removal of any refugia by hand, no suitable reptile habitat would remain and it is expected that any remaining reptiles would disperse from the area of works into adjacent habitat on their own accord.
- In order to be certain that no reptiles are present within the area of works, topsoil will then be progressively stripped from the area of works under the supervision of a suitably qualified ecologist, if required.
- In the event that the destructive search is delayed, the vegetation will be maintained at ground level until the destructive search is carried out. Similarly, following the destructive search, the land will be maintained as unsuitable for the recolonisation of reptiles prior to and throughout the proposed works.

3 CONCLUSION

3.1 Through implementation of the mitigation measures outlined above, the Neighbourhood Centre development would avoid injury or killing of any reptiles present. The loss of limited areas of reptile habitat is highly unlikely to be significant within a local context and the creation and enhancement of areas of reptile habitat within the wider site including the Green Corridor to the west of the site and the SANG would ensure long-term opportunities for reptiles the Hogwood Farm site, as a whole.

3.2 It is therefore concluded that subject to employment of the approach outlined above in line with the *Site-wide Outline Reptile Mitigation Strategy* (HDA, 2024b), the development would protect individual reptiles currently occurring within the Neighbourhood Centre site and ensure that the favourable conservation status of the local reptile population is maintained.

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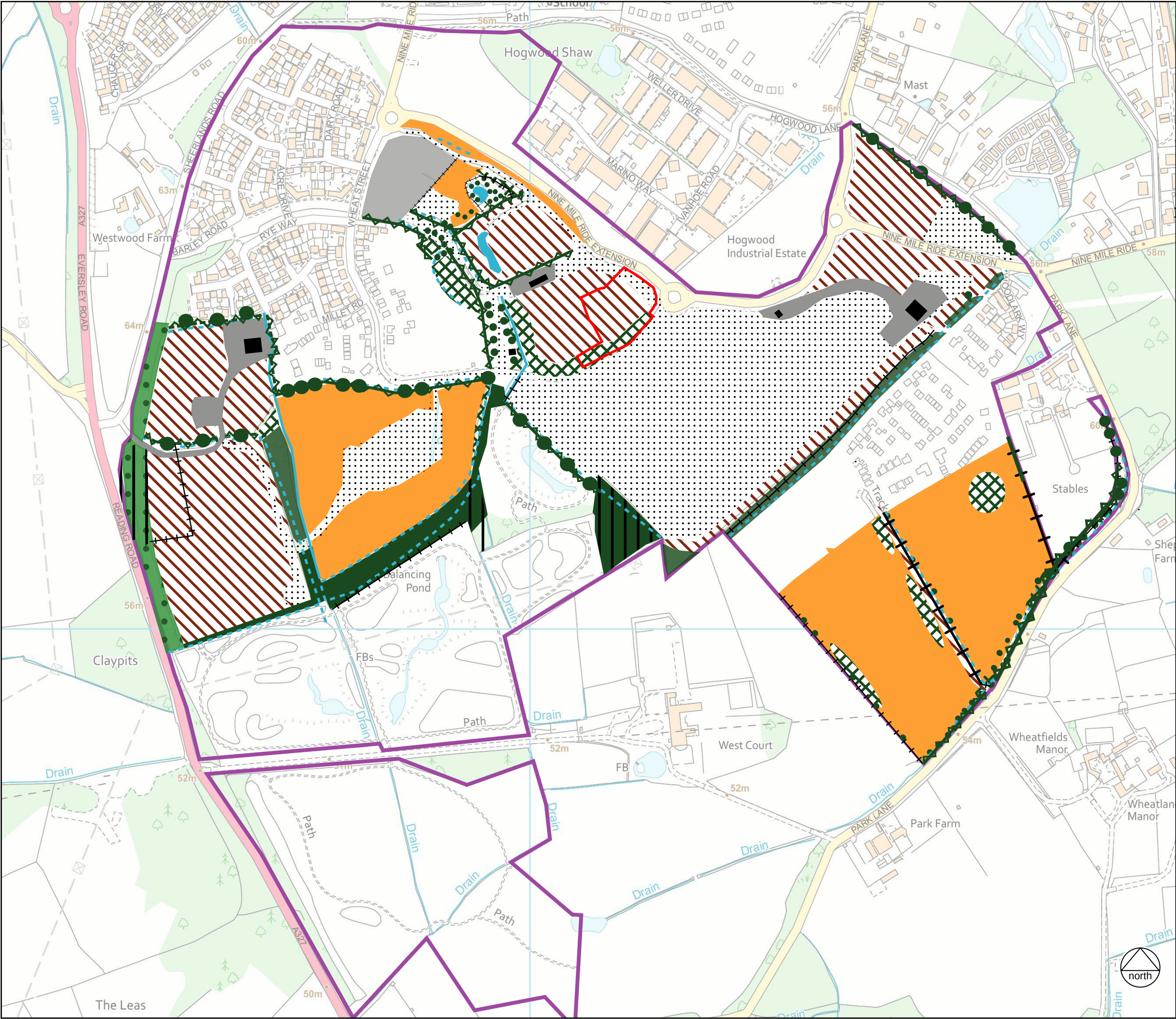
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APPENDIX A

Phase 1 Habitat Survey Plan (showing Neighbourhood Centre development area and wider site)



KEY

Neighbourhood Centre site boundary

Wider site boundary

Lowland mixed deciduous woodland (w1f)

Other woodland - mixed - mainly broadleaved (w1h5)

Other woodland - mixed - mainly broadleaved (w1h5)

Scattered trees

Native hedgerow (h2a)

Non-native and ornamental hedgerow (h3b)

Mixed scrub (h3h)

Ruderal (81)

Modified grassland (g4)

Standing open water (r1)

Wet ditch / dry ditch (50)

Fence

Building

Developed land - sealed surface (u1b)

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PROJECT:
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Phase 1 Habitat Survey Plan - Neighbourhood Centre

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