

MEMORANDUM

From:	Duncan Fisher Ecology Officer		
Service	WBC Ecology	App No:	251086
Address:	Land At Stanbury House, Basingstoke Road, Spencers Wood, RG7 1AJ.		
Proposal:	Outline application for the proposed development of up to 63 dwellings with 50% delivered as affordable homes. (All matters reserved except for means of access.)		
Type of Development:	Major Dwellings (10+)		
Site Visit Made:	Yes/No		

Summary Of Recommendations

- ☐ No comment
- ☐ No objection
- ☐ No objection subject to conditions (and reasons) **stated below**
- ☐ Request further information before determination as **stated below**
- ☐ Objection due to the reason(s) **stated below**

Comments On Proposal

Thames Basin Heaths SPA

The submitted Ecological Appraisal (EclA) by Aspect Ecology (ref: 1083-03 EcoAp vf MMC/LP/AH, March 2025) includes a Technical Briefing Note to inform a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA).

The site is within 5km of the Thames Basin Heaths special protection area (TBH SPA) and the proposed net increase in dwellings triggers the need for an appropriate assessment under the Habitat Regs 2017 (as amended) due to the risk of likely significant effects on the designated features from additional disturbance – also known as the recreational pathway.

A delivery framework of mitigation through the provision of suitable alternative natural greenspace (SANG) and strategic access management and monitoring (SAMM) can be considered at the point of appropriate assessment, if secured.

The Technical Briefing Note does propose the securing of SAMM and SANG capacity as per the delivery framework. The development would need to purchase capacity at a strategic SANG and it is proposed to consume capacity at the adjacent Stanbury House SANG. Looking at the illustrative masterplan, it is likely that all 63 new dwellings will be within the 5km linear mitigation zone. Therefore the proposal would require 1.21ha of SANG capacity (calculated as per the delivery framework

and rounded to the nearest 2 decimal places). I have checked against the current remaining capacity at Stanbury House SANG and this SANG does have sufficient capacity to be able to supply this proposal. Stanbury House SANG is complete and open and has been tested against the Natural England criteria and is considered effective in its current design and context.

Provided that suitable SANG and a SAMM contribution (total to be finalised at reserved matters but inline with the proportionate rates calculated for Wokingham Borough) are secured by planning obligations and delivered prior to first occupation, I would be able to recommend that this proposal passes appropriate assessment under the Habitat Regs.

However, I do have one concern regarding the impact of the proposed development on the adjacent SANG that it proposes to rely upon. Whilst this is an outline application and therefore layout of the built form is a reserved matter, the density of development proposed leads to an illustrative masterplan that introduces built form to a significant length of the boundary of the existing SANG. This development will have an urbanising effect on the SANG that will reduce its attractiveness as a semi-natural greenspace experience.

The illustrative masterplan has very limited greenspace between built form and the SANG. I am therefore concerned that there is little opportunity for the development site to mitigate the urbanising impact of this built form.

At this stage, in order to be able consider the potential for degradation of an existing mitigation measure required to make development in proximity to the TBH SPA acceptable and any required mitigation measures that need to be secured, I recommend that the local planning authority seek further information about proposed design and landscaping along the western and north-western boundaries of the site.

Veteran Trees

The EcIA recognises that notable and veteran trees on site are identified on the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory. It then relies on the tree survey by Barrell Tree Consultancy to conclude that none of the trees on site are veteran or ancient (and therefore irreplaceable habitat) with reference to The Tree Council's 2013 publication for an assessment process used. I note that the Arboricultural Impact Appraisal and Method Statement submitted appears to only refer to Figure 1.3 of the 2013 publication as a guide for assessing whether a tree is veteran or ancient.

I am therefore concerned that the EcIA and tree survey together have not considered all three pathways to a tree being recognised as veteran (and therefore irreplaceable habitat), as set out in the irreplaceable habitat part of the biodiversity net gain regulations in relation to the Environment Act 2021. The trees on site appear to have not been assessed for significant decay features nor for their high value for nature, especially to host rare or specialist species.

Reviewing the tree survey information available, I recommend that further information is needed at this stage as to the potential for trees T31, T67, G69, T72, T73, and T75 to qualify as irreplaceable habitat under one of the other pathways to

being recognised as veteran. This is important to resolve at this stage as it has implications on the biodiversity net gain baseline and in approving a footprint for development that fixes appropriate buffers between irreplaceable habitat and built form, as per national guidance. It may be that some parts of the built form, for instance the pipe network that is required to connect the attenuation basins, cannot be delivered as currently indicated if one or more of these trees is considered irreplaceable habitat.

Biodiversity Net Gain

A line by line comment on the baseline habitat survey for biodiversity net gain (BNG) has been given in an LPA Comments version of the spreadsheet. There are a number of concerns raised about the baseline, which needs greater substantiation or amendment. It is good to see that the degradation of the grassland, caused by the recent use of part of the field for construction material and temporary office space, has been recognised – although the baseline habitat type needs further justification.

I recommend that the local planning authority seek further information and submission of a revised iteration of the BNG metric to address the concerns raised in the metric. If the baseline cannot be agreed, the proposal should be refused on the grounds that the local planning authority cannot be confident that the mandatory 10% biodiversity net gain can be achieved.

A detailed post-development scenario is submitted within this first iteration of the BNG metric. I have not reviewed this in detail as it is not a matter to approve at this stage in the planning process. However, it is useful to understand the broad strategy. There is a clear requirement for off-site units to be able to deliver the 10% BNG target. However, there are also habitats proposed on-site that are a significant contribution to the overall target – including 110 individual trees. I am of the view that these habitat proposals would be high risk of failure if a clear line of responsibility for maintenance and monitoring is not in place. If the baseline can be agreed and the proposal is recommended for approval, I would recommend that management and monitoring of these significant on-site habitats is secured by planning obligation.

Bats

The EcIA has considered the potential for bat roosts to be present in trees on site. A number of trees are identified as having potential roost features. Paragraph 5.2.10 identifies that two trees, T10 and T11 in the EcIA (but T72 and T73 in the tree survey), as containing PRF-M features and being proposed for removal. It then goes on to recommend further survey work to determine presence or likely absence of a bat roost.

I am concerned that further survey work for a European Protected Species has been recommended and the application has been submitted seeking to determine permission before the results of this further survey work are known. The presence or otherwise of a protected species and the nature of the use of the site by a protected species that is present is a material consideration and should be considered at determination. The presence of a protected species may have a bearing on parameters that are relevant to set at outline and other mitigation

measures that need to be secured by condition or obligation. I therefore recommend that the further survey work is conducted and a report submitted to be able to consider protected species before granting permission.

Section 2.3 of the EclA explains the faunal survey method undertaken. The site was not subject to activity surveys. This is a deviation from what would be expected under the bat survey guidelines. Please can the applicant's ecologist justify why activity surveys were not conducted. At this stage, I am not confident that sufficient survey effort has been conducted for the local planning authority to be able to consider the implications of the proposed development on bat protected species.

Dormouse

Similarly, no surveys have been conducted for the European Protected Species the Hazel Dormouse. In 2021 evidence of Dormouse presence was recorded by Aspect Ecology as part of surveys to support a nearby development – approximately 600m to the North-West. This site has reasonable hedgerow and woodland connectivity to the application site now being considered.

I can see no justification for considering Dormouse as likely absent at this stage (as assessed in Table 5 of the EclA). I recommend that the local planning authority seek further information on this species, a clear justification of the assessment made, and, if the assessment is revised, any further supporting evidence to be able to consider the presence / likely absence and use of the site by protected species. This information must be submitted prior to granting permission as it may be directly relevant to plans that are approved and mitigation measures that need to be secured by condition.

Reptiles

The EclA confirms presence of at least one species of widespread reptile and considers it likely that another species remains present locally and so has the potential to be present on site. The presence of a juvenile Common Lizard on site during the 2023 survey is interesting. My experience is that this is a species that is less likely to use artificial refugia compared to other widespread reptiles and more likely to be missed during surveys of artificial refugia due to scattering on approach. I suspect the single record is an under-recording of the use of the site.

Nonetheless, the confirmed presence of a juvenile intimates that there is a replicating population locally. This is already likely to be under pressure from an increased predation risk due to recent development locally. I think it reasonable to accept that the site population size category is likely low. I think it reasonable to conclude that the proposed development will likely result in loss of the site population. The proposal to include hibernacula (EE7) in the landscaping is welcomed for amphibians but is likely to be ineffective for reptiles given the development density,

All the widespread reptile species are considered species of principal importance. It is therefore relevant for the local planning authority to consider the local favourable conservation status of the species as well as its status as a protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). This is also reflected in core

strategy policy CP7 which includes species of principal importance as relevant and requires a stepped process inline with the mitigation hierarchy.

In this instance, I recommend that it would be reasonable to accept that the need for the development proposal outweighs the harm to site conservation status of the species.

Moving on to the next step in the process, I note that mitigation MM8 of the submitted EclA is for a translocation and destructive search exercise during construction. I do have some reservations as to the scope for a translocation exercise to be viable within the site, considering the illustrative masterplan is indicating a near complete redevelopment of the site. However, I accept that it could be possible for a translocation exercise to work with an off-site receptor. I therefore recommend that it is possible for suitable mitigation measures to be put in place.

This leaves the remaining step in policy CP7 to consider. There is a question as to what would be appropriate compensation to offset the loss of the site population of reptiles. I am not convinced that appropriate compensation is deliverable within the site boundary, considering the illustrative layout. It may be that appropriate compensation could be delivered within the adjacent SANG. I recommend that the local planning authority requests further information from the applicant as to what their proposed compensation strategy is. If being delivered off-site it may need to be secured by planning obligation rather than via a condition.

Badgers

Surveys for signs of Badger on-site have been undertaken in 2023 and 2025. I can recommend that sufficient survey effort has been undertaken to be able to consider the impact of the development proposal on this protected species.

The indication is that there are no Badger setts on or immediately adjacent to site which would be at risk of destruction or disturbance. There was limited indication of foraging on-site, although this may have been due to seasonal survey limitations. I am of the view that the loss of current foraging habitat on-site would not be compensated by landscape planting within the development. However, I think the loss would not be significant to the local Badger population, should the development proceed.

The EclA outlines mitigation measures to implement before and during construction – see MM5, MM6, and MM7. Provided that detailed mitigation measures for Badger during construction are secured by a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) condition, I can recommend that the local planning authority can be confident that there will not be significant harm to this protected species.

Invertebrates – Small Heath Butterfly and Cinnabar Moth

The EclA identifies that the presence of Small Heath butterfly and Cinnabar moth has been recorded on-site. Both these species are species of principal importance and are therefore relevant to consider under local plan policy CP7.

I consider it likely that the site supports breeding of both these species as the larval foodplants for both species have also been identified as present within the description of the grassland on-site.

The proposed development will lead to significant loss of grassland habitat and very limited creation – which is likely to have a high pressure amenity use. I consider it unlikely that the developed site will continue to support a Small Heath population and will only support a reduced population of Cinnabar moth.

Stepping through the process of CP7, I can recommend that it would be reasonable to accept that the need for the development proposal outweighs the harm to site conservation status of both the species. I can also recommend that there need not be any specific mitigation measures during construction or operational phases for these species.

However, I do recommend that the local planning authority seeks further information as to what the proposals for appropriate compensation are and how they satisfy the stepped process of policy CP7 for these species of principal importance.

Summary

The submitted ecological information is insufficient to give the local planning authority the confidence that the impacts of the development on an important mitigation site for impacts on the TBH SPA, on protected species, and on species of principal importance are adequately avoided, mitigated or compensated. I cannot recommend that this proposal is compliant with national guidance, national planning policy or local plan policies.

It may be that further information can address the concerns raised. This may lead to further recommendations in terms of conditions and planning obligations required to make the development acceptable. The single condition recommended below is only in reference to the recommendation regarding Badger mitigation and should not be taken as a full list of recommended conditions.

Conditions & Reasons (if required)

Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP)

As per British Standard 42020:2013 standard condition D.4.1

Reason: to secure mitigation measures for protected species during construction as appropriate under local plan policy CP7 and TB23.

Date:	29 July 2025	Signed:	D. Fisher
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