

Land north of School Road, Arborfield Cross

Information to Inform an
Habitat Regulations Assessment
September 2024



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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 Derek Finnie Associates was commissioned by Croudace Homes, Vortal Homes Limited & Falcon Developments (SE) Limited to provide ecological advice in relation to an area of land referred to as Land north of School Road, Arborfield Cross, herein referred to as the 'Site'. Croudace Homes, Vortal Homes Limited & Falcon Developments (SE) Limited are seeking outline permission for a proposed residential development of up to 95 dwellings together with open space and associated works.
- 1.1.2 The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) lies approximately 4.1km south east of the Site at its nearest point and is designated for its breeding populations of nightjar, Dartford warbler and woodlark. The Site lies within the 5km 'zone of influence' associated with this SPA.
- 1.1.3 Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA), under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) should be undertaken by the competent authority, in this case Wokingham Borough Council (WBC), if a plan or project is deemed "likely to have a significant effect" on a European Site (i.e. a SPA, SAC, or by extension, a Ramsar site, collectively known as Natura 2000 sites).
- 1.1.4 The following report, therefore, has been prepared to provide a sufficient level of information to allow WBC to determine if the proposed development of the Site would have a significant effect on the integrity of the Nature 2000 site listed above. Where potential impacts are identified, avoidance and/or mitigation measures are proposed.

2 RELEVANT EUROPEAN SITES AND THEIR DESCRIPTION

2.1 Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area (SPA)

- 2.1.1 The Thames Basin Heath has been designated as a SPA as it supports significant populations of Annex I species, namely up to 7.8% of British breeding population of nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* (as at 1998 - 1999), 27.8% of the British population of Dartford warbler *Sylvia undata* (as at 1999) and 9.9% of woodlark *Lullula arborea* breeding pairs (as at 1997) according to the JNCC citation sheet for the SPA.
- 2.1.2 The mosaic of habitats which form the internationally important lowland heathland are dependent on active heathland management. Lack of grazing and other traditional management practices therefore pose a threat.
- 2.1.3 Traditional management is being implemented through schemes such as Countryside Stewardship and Wildlife Enhancement Scheme. The development pressure on neighbouring land, and the cumulative and indirect effects of neighbouring developments, have also been said to pose a potential long-term problem. Housing developments have been identified as particularly relevant in this part of south-east England, which has been addressed through Thames Basin Heath Delivery Framework (SPA Delivery Framework).
- 2.1.4 Tenure is a mixture of public bodies, private landowners, local authorities and non-governmental organisations. The Ministry of Defence are significant landowners/managers. At present the MoD land is used principally for firing ranges and military exercises (predominantly on foot). A significant proportion of the site is local authority-owned land. The local authority land is often designated as Public Open Space and is heavily used for informal recreation. For the smaller private ownerships, conservation management has been addressed through the Site Management Statement process.
- 2.1.5 Most of the recreation on the site is informal, such as walking and horse riding. However, in places the use is intense, resulting in damage to rights of way and disturbance to the heath. Where possible these problems are being addressed through the Integrated Management Plan.

3 PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS

3.1 Proposed Development

- 3.1.1 Croudace Homes, Vortal Homes Limited & Falcon Developments (SE) Limited are seeking outline permission for a proposed residential development of up to 95 dwellings.
- 3.1.2 Hence there would be an overall net gain of 95 dwellings within the 5km zone from the Thames Basin Heaths SPA, which based on an average occupancy within Wokingham of 2.4 residents per household would result in an increase of 228 residents within the 5km zone.

3.2 Potential Impacts

- 3.2.1 As the proposed residential development at School Road would involve no land take from any Natura 2000 Site, the issues that require consideration are the potential for significant effects to arise from indirect sources.
- 3.2.2 Given the distance to the SPA at its nearest point and the intervening land uses, the only potential pathway for impact upon the SPA and its qualifying features would be:
- an increase in recreational pressure resulting from an increase in residential dwellings;
- 3.2.3 Therefore, the proposed development would appear to have the potential to lead to a Likely Significant Effect on Thames Basin Heath SPA through an increase residential pressure, hence an Appropriate Assessment is required.

4 APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT

4.1 Impact Assessment

Thames Basin Heath SPA

- 4.1.1 Research has shown human activities can result in the disturbance of birds at a level that may substantially affect their behaviour, and consequently affect the long-term viability of the population.
- 4.1.2 Such disturbing effects can for example result in changes to feeding or roosting behaviour, increases in energy expenditure due to increased flight, abandonment of nest sites, increased predation of eggs and chicks and desertion of supporting habitat (both within or outside the designated site boundary where appropriate). This may undermine successful nesting, rearing, feeding and/or roosting, and/or may reduce the availability of suitable habitat as birds are displaced and their distribution within the site contracts. Disturbance associated with human activity may take a variety of forms including noise, light, sound, vibration, trampling, and presence of people, animals (including dogs) and structures.
- 4.1.3 Visitor surveys have demonstrated that the majority of visitors to the Thames Basin Heath originate from within a 5km radius of the SPA boundary. Therefore, a net increase in the number of residential dwellings within this 5km boundary has the potential to lead to an increase in the number of visitors to the SPA, hence leading to an increase in the recreational pressure.

4.2 Consequences for Conservation Objectives

- 4.2.1 With regards to the Thames Basin Heath SPA, the impact pathway present in Table 1 may be considered in terms of the proposed development, alone or in combination with other developments.

Table 1. Impact Pathways

Impact Pathway	Effect of the development
Adversely affect the extent and distribution of the habitats of the qualifying species	The proposals do not directly affect the extent and distribution of habitats. No effect for Annex 1 heathland birds.
Adversely affect the structure and function of the habitats of the qualifying features	Trampling by an increased number of visitors could adversely affect habitats through damage to vegetation and/or soil compaction/erosion.
Adversely affect the supporting processes on which the habitats of the qualifying features rely	Underlying supporting processes would not be affected.



Impact Pathway	Effect of the development
Adversely affect the populations of the qualifying species	Disturbance could directly interrupt nesting activity or indirectly increase predation.
Adversely affect the distribution of the qualifying species within the site?	Disturbance could directly displace birds on a permanent basis.

- 4.2.2 Therefore, in the absence of avoidance or mitigation, the proposed development would lead to a likely significant effect upon the SPA and its qualifying features. Since the above summaries identify the potential for adverse effects on the integrity of the International Sites, impact avoidance and mitigation measures must be considered.

5 PROPOSED AVOIDANCE/MITIGATION

5.1 Recreational Pressure

Thames Basin Heath SPA

- 5.1.1 In line with Thames Basin Heath Delivery Framework (THH-JSPB 2009), the potential impacts upon the Thames Basin Heath SPA will be avoided the provision of 1.82ha of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) based on the approved rate of 8ha per 1000 residents. An agreement has been made with the University of Reading in relation to acquiring the appropriate amount of SANG capacity at Ridge SANG, Shinfield, which has been granted planning permission for the purposed of a SANG (WBC Ref: VAR/2014/0624).
- 5.1.2 Appropriate contributions to Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) will also be made.
- 5.1.3 Both the SANG and SAMM contributions will be detailed in the Section 106 agreement.

6 SUMMARY

- 6.1.1 It can be demonstrated through the implementation of an appropriate avoidance strategy that any potential negative Likely Significant Effects upon the integrity of the Thames Basin Heath SPA resulting from the proposed development of a net increase of 228 residential units within 5km zone at Land north of School Road, Arborfield Cross can be successfully avoided.