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Stephen Robbie
West Berkshire Council
Council Offices, Market Street
Newbury, RG14 5LD

Dear Stephen,

BERKSHIRE RECORDS OFFICE: Preliminary Ecological Survey

INTRODUCTION

This letter is prepared by **Diversity Environmental Consultants Ltd** on behalf of West Berkshire Council. It provides an ecological assessment of land at the Berkshire Records Office where an extension is proposed. The scope and format of this report is proportionate to a planning application for a low impact scheme, which in this case relates to a two-storey extension to the eastern elevation of the Records Office building. The footprint of the proposal equates to 142m² and impacts grass lawn, ornamental beds and concrete hard-standing.

The area of land surveyed for this assessment falls within the red-line boundary shown at the Site Location Plan. In response to survey findings this letter highlights any ecological constraints facing the proposed development and considers whether, as a result, there is a need for ecological mitigation.

To assess the ecological value of a site attention is given to the types of habitat present plus the range and abundance of its biodiversity. This includes, for example, whether the site supports habitats and species of 'Principal Importance' listed under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. Consideration is also given as to the likelihood for legally protected or notable species being present.

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Where important wildlife is identified, recommendations for conservation are made in line with legislation and best-practice guidance. In accordance with planning policy, measures for ecological enhancement resulting in a net gain for biodiversity are proposed.

PLANNING POLICY

This letter has been prepared with reference to the West Berkshire Core Strategy Development Plan Document (2006 – 2026). Policy CS17 ‘Biodiversity and Geodiversity’ of the Plan Document states the requirement for conserving and enhancing biodiversity across West Berkshire and specifies that *‘in order to conserve and enhance the environmental capacity of the District, all new development should maximise opportunities to achieve net gains in biodiversity...in accordance with the Berkshire Biodiversity Action Plan’*.

This is backed up by the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), updated in February 2019, which discusses sustainability in terms of design and biodiversity. Paragraph 175 of the NPPF states that “opportunities to incorporate biodiversity improvements in and around developments should be encouraged, especially where this can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity.”

The conservation objectives of preserving the natural environment is reinforced by ODPM Circular 06/2005 ‘Biodiversity and geological conservation’, which states that the potential effects of a development, on habitats or species listed as priorities in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), and by Local Biodiversity Partnerships are capable of being a material consideration in the making of planning decisions.

METHODOLOGY

Site investigation in the form of a ‘walk-over’ survey was carried out by a suitably qualified ecologist and licensed bat worker on the 23rd September 2019. The survey recorded habitat types and noted the site’s potential for any notable flora or fauna, such as species of principal importance listed under the NERC Act.

The survey method involved searching for signs of animals, such as tracks and droppings, and assessing in terms of bat roosting potential the existing building that is to be extended. Signs of access by bats would be staining of materials, especially timbers, around potential entrance points, and droppings attached to sills and walls.

A review of publicly available ecological data relating to the study area was undertaken as part of this study. Records sought were from online sources such as the Multi-Agency Geographical Information for the Countryside.

Limitations:

The survey was undertaken in autumn when some plant species are not readily identifiable and there is no breeding bird activity. Notwithstanding the timing restriction limiting the range of species to be found, there were no constraints to the survey methodology.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The study area:

The surveyed area is the grounds of the Berkshire Records Office, at grid reference SU 7089 7286. The site address is 9 Coley Avenue, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 6AF.

The underlying superficial geology is sand and gravel (Lynch Hill Gravel Member) deposited by fluvial processes, however, this is obscured by imported substrates and hardstanding.

The site grounds comprise grass lawn, standard trees, woodland, planted beds, and hardstanding. Within the grounds are: The Records Office - a glass-fronted, flat-roofed, and largely concrete building constructed in 1998, and The Registry Office (Yeomanry House) – a historic listed stone building with slate tile roof built in the early 19th century.

There are no wildlife designations relating to the site location or to adjacent land.

Grass lawn:

The lawn areas on-site support a limited number of species, characteristic of semi-improved grassland. Grasses predominate and include cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*), fescue (*Festuca rubra*), timothy (*Phleum pratense*), perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*), bentgrass (*Agrostis* sp.), Yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*), and smaller cat's-tail (*Phleum bertolonii*). Also present are weed species including yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), dock (*Rumex* sp.), teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*), red dead-nettle (*Lamium purpureum*), bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), creeping cinquefoil (*Potentilla reptans*), daisy (*Bellis perennis*), creeping buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*), common cat's ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*), and nipplewort (*Lapsana communis*).

Woodland and trees:

Along the site frontage is a belt of woodland comprising a mix of planted and self-sown trees and shrubs, a significant number of which are either naturalised or exotic species. The canopy is dominated by cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*), London plane (*Acer hispanica*), and sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), with an understorey of younger sycamore, elm (*Ulmus* sp.), elder (*Sambucus nigra*), cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*), horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), laburnum (*Laburnum anagyroides*), hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and pyracantha (*Pyracanthus* sp.). Ground flora is indicative of disturbed soil benefitting competitive species such as bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.), hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*), fox-glove (*Digitalis purpurea*), common nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and ivy (*Hedera helix*).

The wood has a relatively low degree of 'naturalness' and suffers from a lack of management resulting in widespread growth of ivy and dense stands of holly shading out any other woodland flora. The habitat also contains a large number of dead elm and suffers from rubbish tipping. Within an urban context, however, it provides a wildlife resource for birds and bats.

Additional tree species that are recorded elsewhere within the grounds include: sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*), holm oak (*Quercus ilex*), yew (*Taxus baccata*), and rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*).

Planted beds:

Planted beds around the site support ornamental species such as privet cultivar (*Ligustrum* sp.), silverthorn (*Eleagnus pungens*), and Japanese aralia (*Fatsia japonica*). These have limited ecological value other than possible nesting cover for birds in spring.

Buildings:

The building to be extended is flat roofed with no enclosed roof space, soffit boxes or external features such as hanging tiles or cladding; it therefore has negligible bat roosting potential. The overhanging flat roof it features at each end does provide a potential sheltered niche for birds such as house martin (*Delichon urbicum*) to exploit for nesting in spring and summer.

Amphibians and Reptiles:

At the time of survey there was no habitat on site suitable for amphibians. There is, however, the possibility for reptiles such as slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*) to occur within the grassland/woodland area north of Yeomanry House. There is little or no possibility for reptiles to occur within the area proposed for development.

Mammals:

There is potential for bats roosting within mature trees on site as many of the trees, particularly the large sweet chestnuts, have rot holes which bats could colonise. None of these trees occur within or close to the part of the site that is proposed for extension.

Yeomanry House has high potential as a location for roosting bats. The building has not been internally surveyed as part of this study and is understood not to be affected by the current development proposals.

Birds:

All trees and shrubs on site provide potential bird nesting habitat in spring. In addition, birds such as house martin could potentially nest on the underside of the overhanging roof including where it is to be extended (although there is no evidence of this having occurred in the past). All British birds are protected from disturbance during nesting under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981.

KEY ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

There are considered to be no ecological constraints to site re-development, which affects only garden planting of recent origin and hard-standing. To accord with Core Strategy Policy CS17 and the NPPF, recommendations are set out below for enhancing the wildlife value of the site.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To protect mature trees on site, to avoid damage to soils, and to avoid risk of harm to reptiles, all construction traffic and construction materials must be restricted to existing hard surfaces. In addition, to ensure protection of tree root zones, vehicle barrier fencing may need to be installed. Any fencing would need to conform to British Standard BS5837: 2012 Trees in Relation to Design, Demolition and Construction.
2. Any removal of vegetation from the development area should be in autumn or winter months. If shrubs need to be removed during spring or summer this should be preceded by a nesting bird survey carried out by a suitably qualified ecologist. Only if the area is declared free of bird nesting activity can clearance work take place.
3. If building works commence in the April to September period, prior to works commencing a check for birds nesting on the outside of the building should be carried out. This does not need to be carried out by an ecologist, as it will be obvious if any nests are present, but a photo record is recommended in the event of any subsequent enquiries. Only if the eastern elevation of the building is free of nesting activity can building work take place.

4. To avoid an increase of light pollution in the local area it is recommended that any external lighting associated with the extension is designed with zero upward and lateral spillage, have minimal UV component and be motion triggered to limit the duration. The lighting installed should accord with 'best practice' guidelines such as that produced by the Bat Conservation Trust (Bats and artificial lighting in the UK, guidance note 08/18).
5. Ecological enhancement of the site could be achieved through:
 - Planting native shrubs and trees within existing beds.
 - Incorporating bird nesting features for house martins and other passerines on the existing building, or on the new extension.
 - Managing the existing woodland (and standard trees) to promote an increase in biodiversity.
6. To achieve the above ecological enhancement objectives, it is recommended that a five-year Ecological Management Plan be prepared and implemented for the site. It is not yet a statutory requirement to quantify the level of biodiversity net gain, which is achieved with the production of a Biodiversity Metric such as that published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).
7. It is the duty of all works personnel to remain vigilant for wildlife during the period of works and to exercise best-practice measures to ensure other habitats remain undisturbed. If any wildlife issues arise, this should be brought to the attention of the project manager who can contact an ecologist to determine if any action is necessary.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Craine
Ecologist MCIEEM