

# Memo

**To:** Anthony Scholes

**From:** Cathy Holwill (RBC Ecology Consultations)

**CC:**

**Date:** 12 May 2025

**Re:** Planning application ref: PL/24/1659

Address: Land at Atterbury Gardens, Rear of 23-25 Richmond Road, Caversham, Reading, RG4 7PR

Description: Erection of 4no. Dwellings

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The application site comprises an area of land in a residential area of Caversham, Reading where it is proposed to erect four new large houses. The site is surrounded by houses and is located within a Green Link as per policy EN12.

Planning permission was granted for the construction of three dwellings (ref: 200759 - November 2021) on the same area of land and the principle of development on the site has been established.

This application is now for four dwellings within the same site and since our last comments, the proposals have been updated to include slightly smaller areas of hardstanding and buildings.

## **Protected species and Priority Habitats**

An ecology report (Arbtech, October 2024) has been submitted in support of the application.

Habitats on site comprise neutral grassland, areas of concrete hardstanding and bare ground with native and non native hedgerow along the boundary of the site. Overall, the onsite habitats are of limited ecological value and would not be a constraint to the proposals.

However, the site appears to have undergone some clearance. Features such as outbuildings, scrub, ruderal vegetation, and scattered fruit trees which were noted in the 2019 ecology report survey (AE Ecology, May 2019) are no longer present.

The 2019 report also stated that the site hosts the invasive plant species variegated yellow archangel. Given the timing of the latest ecology survey, it is possible that this species was not found during the survey. A condition should be set to ensure that this species is eradicated from the site prior to the commencement of works. Wording is provided below.

The ecology report identifies impacts on protected species during and after construction. The risk of impacting these species is small, however unmitigated, the proposals could have minor adverse ecological impacts on the following features:

- Badgers – while the report states that there are no setts on or within 30m of the site, there are push throughs under fences and it is likely that the site is used by foraging badgers (we have records of badgers in the area and evidence from neighbours has also been provided).
- Nesting birds in trees and hedges.

- Hedgehogs
- Rabbits – two rabbit scrapes were found on the site
- Small numbers of common species of reptiles and amphibians (such as common frog and slowworm)

Should the application be approved, a condition should therefore be set to ensure that a Construction Environment Management Plan (CEMP) for Biodiversity is produced and implemented prior to works starting on site. The CEMP (Biodiversity) should detail, as a minimum, the following requirements:

- Pre-commencement check for nesting birds for any works within the active breeding season March to September (inclusive)
- A pre commencement badger walkover survey within 28 days of commencement of works undertaken by a suitably qualified ecologist (badgers can open up setts overnight)
- Mitigation measures for badgers during and after construction,
- Lighting restrictions (notably for foraging and commuting bats)
- Precautionary working methods/mitigation measures to ensure there will be no harm to reptiles, amphibians, and other wildlife during development. These mitigation measures should also include details of how rabbits will be removed safely from the site

### **Biodiversity Enhancements**

The site is located on a Green Link as per local policy EN12. To ensure the continued functional integrity of the Green Link, and in accordance with paragraph 186 of the NPPF, which states that *“opportunities to improve biodiversity in and around developments should be integrated as part of their design, especially where this can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity”*, a condition should be set, if the planning application is approved, to ensure that enhancements for wildlife are provided within the new development. The enhancements will need to include integrated bat and bird boxes, native and wildlife friendly planting and gaps at the bases of fences to allow badgers and hedgehogs to traverse through the gardens. Wording is provided below.

### **Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)**

The proposals are subject to mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain as well as local policy requirements (EN12) which states: *“On all sites, development should not result in a net loss of biodiversity”*.

An updated BNG calculation has been produced based on a revised site layout. The accompanying report (Arbtech, May 2025) demonstrates that the revised proposals will lead to a net loss of 0.28 area habitat units, equivalent to -26.39% and a net gain of 18.61% linear habitat units (this includes proposed native hedges between parking spaces).

However, the revised calculation does not satisfy the required trading rules and will result in the loss of 0.3 units of medium distinctiveness habitat, primarily due to the loss of the ONG grassland. According to the BNG hierarchy, habitats with a distinctiveness of medium (or higher) must be retained unless there is a compelling justification for their loss.

As per the Biodiversity Hain Hierarchy, and policy EN12 – and in line with our previous comments - the applicant should prioritise on-site biodiversity gains. Our advice remains that the Council must be satisfied that all areas allocated for buildings and hardstanding are essential and that the increased number of houses on the site is justified and acceptable in view of the impact on biodiversity.

Should the council decide that such a loss of biodiversity on a Green Link is acceptable, it will need to then decide whether offsite provisions to mitigate this loss are appropriate.

### **Issues regarding the proposed community grassland area**

The plans and metric show a publicly accessible communal area to the north east of the site. This will be planted up with six native trees.

As previously noted, it would appear that the BNG calculation for this area is overly optimistic in its assumptions. The proposed grassland to the northeast of the site is identified as a communal public space and has been classified in the metric as "*Other Neutral Grassland (ONG) in Good Condition.*" However, it is unlikely that this condition can be realistically achieved within such a small area particularly as it is located beneath proposed tree planting. Shading from the trees will limit the number of species and limit both height and structural variation required for satisfying 'good' condition for ONG.

The proposed area will also be subject to increased recreational pressure from residents and potential pet fouling, both of which are likely to adversely affect its condition.

There is also likely to be pressure from residents to maintain the area in a neat and closely managed state, which will be incompatible with the management requirements for achieving (and sustaining) other neutral grassland in good condition.

Our advice is that the current proposal for this area is unlikely to be acceptable or capable of being discharged when the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) plan is submitted and should therefore be updated at this stage.

### **Lighting:**

The 2024 ecology report states that the development will lead to an increase of lighting on surrounding habitats which may adversely affect commuting and foraging bats. While the report mentions bats it is also very likely that other wildlife will be adversely impacted. As such, should the application be approved, prior to any works starting on site, a sensitive lighting strategy report for bats (and other wildlife) will need to be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The report should:

- a) identify those areas/features on site that are particularly sensitive for bats and other wildlife and that are likely to cause disturbance in or around their resting places or along important routes used to access key areas of their territory, for example for foraging; and
- b) show how and where external lighting will be installed - ensuring that it is clearly demonstrated that any proposed lighting will not disturb or prevent wildlife from areas identified in a)

Example wording provided below:

### **Conditions:**

Condition: No development shall take place (including demolition, ground works, vegetation clearance) until a construction environmental management plan (CEMP: Biodiversity) has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The CEMP (Biodiversity) shall include the following.

- a) Risk assessment of potentially damaging construction activities.
- b) Identification of "biodiversity protection zones".
- c) Practical measures (both physical measures and sensitive working practices) to avoid or reduce impacts during construction (may be provided as a set of method statements).
- d) details of an up to date survey for badgers, carried out in accordance with recognised guidelines
- e) The location and timing of sensitive works to avoid harm to biodiversity features.

- f) The times during construction when specialist ecologists need to be present on site to oversee works.
- g) Responsible persons and lines of communication.
- h) The role and responsibilities on site of an ecological clerk of works (ECoW) or similarly competent person.
- h) Use of protective fences, exclusion barriers and warning signs.

The approved CEMP shall be adhered to and implemented throughout the construction period strictly in accordance with the approved details, unless otherwise agreed in writing by the local planning authority.

**Reason:** To minimise impacts on biodiversity in accordance with Paragraphs 185 and 186 of the NPPF.

**Condition:** Prior to occupation of the development, a report detailing the lighting scheme and how this will not adversely impact upon wildlife shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the LPA. The report shall include the following figures and appendices:

- A layout plan with beam orientation
- A schedule of equipment
- Measures to avoid glare
- An isolux contour map showing light spillage to 1 lux both vertically and horizontally and areas identified as being of importance for commuting and foraging bats and other nocturnal species.

The approved lighting plan shall thereafter be implemented as agreed.

**Reason:** To limit the impact of light pollution from artificial light on nature conservation paragraph 191 of the NPPF.

**Condition:** Prior to the commencement of the development, details of biodiversity enhancements, to include two integrated bird and two integrated bat boxes, tiles or bricks on each of the new buildings and native and wildlife friendly landscaping (including gaps at the bases of fences to allow hedgehogs to traverse through the gardens), shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the council. The biodiversity enhancements shall thereafter be installed as approved and prior to occupation of the development a letter report from a suitably qualified ecologist with photos of the boxes, tiles or bricks in situ shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the council.

**Reason:** To incorporate biodiversity in and around developments in accordance with paragraph 186 of the NPPF.

**Condition:** No development hereby permitted shall commence until a Variegated Yellow Archangel eradication strategy has been submitted to, and approved in writing by, the local planning authority. The strategy shall include details of and timescales for archangel eradication, and, if the archangel has not been eradicated at the time of commencement of works, details of the measures to be put in place to ensure that works do not cause its spread. The eradication strategy shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details unless the local planning authority gives written approval for any variations.

**Reason:** Variegated Yellow Archangel is an invasive weed that can have an adverse effect on biodiversity – this condition will ensure that it is controlled and not spread.