

APP/19/00768 | Erection of 16 new dwellings with associated access, parking and open space. | Land to the rear of, 15-27 Horndean Road, Emsworth 19.1626

Thank you for consulting me on this application. Following on from our recent discussions, both internally and with the applicants, please find below my comments on the proposal.

The application is accompanied by an Ecological Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment (Ecology Solutions, July 2019) which provide a useful assessment of the application site and its ecological constraints.

SINC status

The site is classified as Land West of Emsworth Recreation Ground (5) Site of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINC) and as such its development would be contrary to Policy CS11 of the Havant Borough Core Strategy March 2011. Following previous discussions, the applicant has undertaken a detailed botanical assessment of the SINC grassland: the applicant and landowner have been seeking de-notification of the SINC and I advised (in May 2019) that Havant Borough Council would need to request a re-survey of the SINC by HBIC botanists. The applicant's botanical survey is perfectly competent and I do not query its usefulness, although it (perhaps understandably) tends to downplay the botanical value of the grassland.

HBIC have carried out botanical assessments of the site in 2001 and 2011 and again in 2019. The 2019 HBIC (re)survey report concludes that the grassland is semi-improved habitat but has become gradually coarser in character (i.e. dominated by certain coarse grass species) over time with diminishing herb content: HBIC state that this change has not significantly altered the wildlife value of the site and that the SINC status remains valid. The validity of the SINC designation will be discussed by the SINC Panel (comprising HCC, Natural England, HBIC and Wildlife Trust representatives) in 2020. HBIC's remit is not to provide judgement on whether or not planning proposals should be granted permission but rather to advise on the condition of SINC habitats and offer objective advice on improving/enhancing their botanical interest. HBIC's report concludes that whilst the SINC grassland habitat is not an exceptional example of such, with the correct management the botanical value could be enhanced/recovered.

Therefore, we have two recent botanical surveys of the site which are broadly consistent in showing a site which is not currently managed for the promotion of a species-rich grass sward and comprises coarse grassland. HBIC maintain that the vegetation retains sufficient value to enable 'recovery' to a more species-rich habitat, whilst the applicant's assessment concludes that the botanical value has declined to an extent that renders the SINC designation no longer justifiable.

SINC protection

The existing and emerging policy framework relating to SINC's is helpful. The current Local Plan (Core Strategy) Policy CS11 states that developed will be permitted where it:

Protects and where possible enhances the borough's statutory and non-statutory designated landscape, habitats and features of biological, hydrological or geological interest. Protection and enhancement will be achieved by appropriate adaptation and mitigation measures including wardening, education and information and the creation of new habitats, water bodies/courses planting of new trees and woodland.

The emerging Draft Local Plan 2036 Policy E14 states that development will only be permitted on or adjacent to a SINC where:

The value of the designation is retained and, where possible, enhanced in line with its original criteria for designation through avoidance and/or mitigation measures; or The benefit of the development can be shown to clearly outweigh the substantive nature conservation value of the site, and where the impact cannot be avoided nor mitigated, compensation is provided.

The underlying policy framework is therefore clear in that Havant Borough Council places significant value on its network of SINCs and that development within, or otherwise affecting, a SINC will be permitted only where certain conditions apply. The value of SINCs and other locally-designated sites in providing essential ecological infrastructure is recognised at the national level also. NPPF states that planning decisions should seek to protect and enhance protected sites, minimise impacts on biodiversity, provide ecological net gain and establish coherent ecological networks.

For the development of the SINC to be acceptable in planning policy terms there would need to be justification for the proposal that outweighs the nature conservation value of the site.

The SINC in context

In our most recent conversations we discussed HBC's preference that development in this location is delivered in a strategic manner through the Southleigh strategic site. From an ecological viewpoint, a strategic approach to delivering development allows for sensible landscape-scale planning of ecological networks and green infrastructure in order to achieve open greenspace with multiple benefits. The proposed Southleigh strategic site would, hopefully, allow for meaningful ecological networks to be an integral part of planned development in this location, with existing protected sites forming the basis for that network. It would therefore be illogical to seek to provide a coherent and resilient ecological network by allowing the loss of, or impacts to, the most valuable existing components of any future network i.e. designated sites of existing ecological value. Much of the strategic site comprises poor-value arable land and therefore the application site, and the adjacent field to the west (also a grassland SINC), comprise one of the only remaining areas of semi-natural vegetation. Their ecological value could be enhanced were they to form part of a wider ecological network under suitable management. Their loss would inevitably mean that any strategically-delivered ecological network would need to start from scratch rather than building upon an existing framework.

Irrespective of the discussion over botanical value, the proposed development will result in the loss of SINC habitat. The fundamental purpose of SINCs is to safeguard habitats (and species) of importance in the county and they form an integral part of the biodiversity of Hampshire. SINCs are not ranked in terms of their value: although some

SINCs will obviously contain a greater diversity of certain species than others, the purpose of the SINC designation is to identify and hopefully promote appropriate management of habitats of value which, as a network, safeguard not only the rare but the characteristic biodiversity features of Hampshire. SINCs are not of SSSI quality but they are essential components of the general fabric of the open countryside.

Whether the loss (partial or complete) of a SINC is deemed acceptable must be viewed in terms of the national and local policy framework and in terms of how any loss can be compensated. In this case, the compensatory habitat will comprise c.30% of the site (encompassing the wetter elements of the SINC) managed as public greenspace. It is proposed to fund and instigate management to encourage greater species diversity within the retained habitat. There is a legitimate question over whether this retained SINC area is of sufficient size or will be of sufficient habitat quality to be considered adequate compensation for the loss: can sufficient 'uplift' be achieved? The use of the retained habitat as open space also raises issues of compatibility: would diverse grassland habitat be maintained in the presence of regular use by residents and dog walkers? Would a private management company be able to maintain the specific management requirements in the long-term?

I recently provided details of a planning appeal decision (Appeal Ref: APP/A1720/W/18/3209865 Rear of 77 Burr ridge Road, Burr ridge, Southampton SO31 1BY) which has relevance to this proposal. The appeal against refusal of permission for residential housing within a grassland SINC was dismissed. The reasons for dismissal included the impact on the SINC, with the Inspector stating that the proposed management of a retained area of SINC '*would neither compensate for the loss of semi-improved grassland nor provide a net gain in biodiversity*'. The parallels with the current application site are obvious.

Achieving net gain at this site will be difficult given the overall loss of semi-natural habitat. I would recommend that the applicant's ecologist provides evidence to demonstrate that net gain can be achieved.

If you have any queries please don't hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,

Tristan

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