

Ecological Appraisal

Report for:

***Hampshire County Council –
Property Services***

Woodcroft Primary School, Waterlooville

*Construction of a grass playing field and path
through some trees*

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SUMMARY

This report constitutes an assessment of the potential impacts arising from the proposal and site set out below and provides recommendations to ensure that this proposal can reasonably avoid or mitigate such effects identified. If the proposal differs from that set out below, then this assessment and recommendations may not be applicable.

- Hampshire County Council proposes the construction of a new school field on an area of pasture to the north of Woodcroft Primary School in Waterlooville. Proposals require the construction of an access path through a treed boundary and hedgerow to link the school site with the new school field. The proposals include the creation a new 205m long native species hedgerow around the outside of the new school field. No lighting is included within proposals.
- The precise of location of the access path has yet to be finalised, but it is understood that arboricultural advice will be sought to devise a route that does not require the removal of any mature or semi-mature trees.
- The school field site will be located adjacent to the proposed Woodcroft Farm development, a proposed residential development of 288 properties which was granted planning permission in May 2015. This development proposal was informed by a suite of ecological surveys which largely covered the proposed location of the sports pitch, excluding the northern boundary vegetation of the school.
- A review of ecological documentation pertaining to the Woodcroft Farm site and a site visit were undertaken to inform the proposals for the sports pitch. In summary, it is concluded that designated sites should not be impacted by the proposals, whilst great crested newt and dormice are considered to be likely absent form the site. It is considered that reptiles are unlikely to be present but could be encountered, breeding birds are likely to nest within woody vegetation and although no bat roosts were recorded within the school field site, some trees in this area could have the potential to support roosting bats.
- The following recommendations are made to avoid impacts to identified ecological receptors:
 - o Ecological supervision is required in the setting-out and clearance of hedge line habitat required for the construction of the footpath into the site, in order to avoid potential impacts to bat species which may be roosting
 - o Necessary clearance of woody vegetation should be undertaken outside of the breeding bird season (*i.e.* works September- March inclusive) or the absence of active nests would need to be confirmed; and

- o Contractors should be briefed that reptiles could be present and if encountered allowed to retreat of their own volition.
- It is noted sensitive management of the proposed hedgerow and sports pitch could enhance their ecological value. Recommendations include cutting the hedgerow no more than once every 2-3 years and retaining long grass margins to the field.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Description

Hampshire County Council is applying for planning permission to create a new grass playing field to serve Woodcroft Primary School, Waterlooville, Hampshire. The existing school field located to the west of the school is required to create an access road to serve the Woodcroft Farm development, which is a proposed residential development of 288 properties, granted planning permission by Havant Borough Council in May 2015 (APP/13/00804) to be located on farmland to the north of the school.

The new playing field will be located north of the school site and adjacent to the new development. An existing bridleway running alongside the northern boundary of the school will be re-routed around the outside of the sports pitch. Landscape proposals for the playing field include the creation of 205m of species rich native hedge around the outside of the field including a number of standard native tree specimens. The proposals include the construction of a new pathway through boundary vegetation north of the school to allow access to the sports pitch. It is understood that no mature or semi-mature trees will be removed or significantly altered to facilitate the path, and that the path will be constructed in accordance with arboricultural advice with regards to root protection. No external lighting is proposed in association with the sports pitch. An aerial photograph of site is shown on Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: A new school field will be created to the north of the school (approximate location). In order to allow access to the field it will be necessary to construct a path (dashed red - yet to be finalised) through the boundary vegetation north of the school.

1.2 Requirement for Ecological Survey/Assessment

Numerous ecology surveys were undertaken to inform the Woodcroft Farm development (hereafter referred to as '*the wider development*') which included the area of land proposed for the new school field (hereafter referred to as '*the school field site*'). This ecological assessment comprises a review of these documents in the context of the proposed school field, informed by a site visit undertaken by the author.

2 METHODS

2.1 Review of Previous Ecological Information

Ecological surveys were undertaken between 2009 and 2011 of the wider site, including an ecological desk studies, phase 1 habitat survey, bat surveys, dormouse surveys, breeding bird surveys and hedgerow surveys. The results of these surveys are summarised within *WSP Report 22947/002 Woodcroft Farm Ecological Assessment Report 2013*, hereafter referred to as WSP (2013). A review of this document was undertaken with reference to the school field site.

2.2 Site Visit

A walkover survey was carried out by HCCET on 8 July 2015 to identify potential ecological constraints associated with the proposals and to confirm the validity of the previous ecological work carried out at the site.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Review of Previous Ecological Information

3.1.1 Designated sites

A number of designated sites occur within the vicinity of the wider site including five European designated Natura 2000 sites within 10km of the wider site (closest 7km), one Site of Special Scientific Interest (1.8km away) and twenty three locally designated sites within 2km of the wider site, the closest of which is 0.02km north of the wider site, and comprises an area of ancient semi-natural woodland.

3.1.2 Habitats

The wider development site largely comprised poor semi-improved grassland alongside small areas of woodland with a network of mostly species rich hedgerows and scattered trees. The school field site was entirely classified as poor semi-improved grassland. Such grassland was considered to be of site level ecological value including common and widespread plant species recorded including smooth meadow grass *Poa pratensis*, creeping bent *Agrostis stolonifera*, creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens*, self-heal *Prunella vulgaris*, daisy *Bellis perennis*, white clover *Trifolium repens* and dandelion *Taraxacum officinale*.

Three species hedgerows with trees were recorded occur on the southern boundary of the school field site, including one hedgerow forming the southern boundary of the pasture and one either side of the bridleway located between the school and the wider development site. These hedgerows were subject to Hedgerow Survey and all of them were considered in WSP (2013) to be *Important* under ecological criteria as defined under the Hedgerow Regulations (1997). It is not clear whether boundary vegetation on the northern edge of the school site was included within this survey.

3.1.3 Great crested newt

It was concluded that the wider site, including the proposed sports pitch, provides terrestrial habitats of limited suitability for great crested newt. A single potential breeding waterbody, comprising a small garden pond, occurs within 500m and it was concluded that this was not sufficient to support a population great crested newt, and the wider site was assessed to have negligible potential for supporting great crested newt.

3.1.4 Reptiles

It was concluded that whilst reptiles could on occasion occur within the wider site, the habitats are not of significant value, and therefore no reptile survey was undertaken.

3.1.5 Birds

Breeding bird surveys undertaken (comprising four survey visits between April-June 2012) found a range of common and widespread species breeding on the wider site including *priority species* including song thrush *Turdus philomelos* and dunnoek

Prunella modularis. Nesting occurred within habitats including hedgerows and areas of woodland.

3.1.6 Dormice

Dormouse surveys were carried out between September 2011 and July 2012 including all suitable habitats on the site and an adjacent area of woodland. The survey was carried out in accordance with good practice guidelines (English Nature, 2006). No dormice were identified and this species is considered to be likely absent from the site.

3.1.7 Badger

No evidence of badgers was observed within the wider site boundary although outlier setts occur outside of the site. It was concluded that badgers could on occasion occur within the site boundary.

3.1.8 Bats

Bat surveys carried out at the wider site during 2011-2012 comprised daytime inspections of trees and buildings, tree climbing surveys, emergence/ re-entry surveys of trees and buildings and activity surveys across the site. Numerous trees with potential to support roosting bats were identified across the wider site and three roosts were subsequently identified. None of the confirmed roosts occur within the vicinity of the school field site, although two trees assessed to have moderate/ low potential are located within the hedgerow that forms the southern boundary of the sports pitch. It is noted that trees within the northern boundary of the school through which the access path will be created were not surveyed.

3.2 HCCET Site Visit 2015

It was found that the habitats at the site have not changed significantly from the conditions reported within WSP (2013). The school field site comprises closely horse-grazed, species-poor semi-improved grassland and the continued presence of species rich hedgerows was confirmed.

Vegetation on the northern boundary of the school includes mature trees which may have the potential to support roosting bats although no formal inspection of the trees was undertaken as the route of the new footway will be routed to avoid any removal or modification of such trees.

4 Assessment of Impacts and Recommendations

4.1 Impacts

4.1.1 Designated Sites

The sports pitch does not overlap with or occur directly adjacent to any designated sites, and it is therefore considered that the school field proposals should not result in any negative impacts to designated sites in the area.

4.1.2 Habitats

The existing species poor semi-improved grassland habitat is not considered to be of significant ecological value and therefore its replacement with an improved amenity sports pitch is not considered to represent a significant negative ecological impact.

Construction of the access path to the new school field will require the removal of small amounts of species rich hedgerow, which is a priority habitat as identified under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities act (2006). This habitat is therefore a material consideration in the planning process and all public bodies should have regard to the conservation of this habitat type. As the proposals are the subject of a planning application, the Hedgerow Regulations (1997) are not applicable. The proposal for the school field includes the creation of a significant amount of new hedgerow which should compensate for the loss of hedgerow and provide a net gain in this habitat type in the context of the sports pitch site.

4.1.3 Great crested newt

As outlined in Section 3, this strictly protected species was considered to be likely absent from the site, and it is considered that this conclusion remains valid.

4.1.4 Reptiles

As outlined in Section 3, reptiles were considered to be unlikely to occur on the site and it is considered that this conclusion remains valid. Providing conditions remain the same and sward height remains low, reptiles should not be impacted by the proposals. However it is noted that reptiles could on occasion occur on the site, and precautionary recommendations are therefore included in Section 4.2.

4.1.5 Birds

The proposals will require the removal of small amounts woody vegetation which could support breeding birds. As all species of bird, including active nests and eggs, are legally protected, clearance of this habitat within the breeding bird season (approximately defined as March - August inclusive) has the potential to cause legal offences.

The provision of new hedgerow should provide additional habitat for breeding birds, including priority species identified within breeding bird surveys.

4.1.6 Dormice

Surveys during 2011/12 concluded that dormice are likely absent from the wider site, and it is considered that this conclusion remains valid.

4.1.7 Badger

No badger setts are known to occur within the school field site; there should therefore be no issues with regard to this species and the proposals.

4.1.8 Bats

Although trees which could have the potential to support roosting bats occur within the school field site, as proposals currently do not involve removal of trees or artificial lighting, there should be no negative impacts from the proposals upon bats.

In order to avoid the removal or modification of mature trees, ecological supervision during setting out of the exact route, and during the removal of vegetation will be required.

4.2 Recommendations

4.2.1 Reptiles

Contractors should be briefed that reptiles could be present and that clearance of vegetation should be done in a careful manner. If reptiles are encountered they should be allowed to retreat of their own volition.

4.2.2 Breeding Birds

If the removal of woody vegetation is required during the breeding bird season (March-August) inclusive, the absence of breeding birds from impacted vegetation should be confirmed by a suitably qualified individual. Any active nests would need to be retained and protected until such time that they became inactive.

4.2.3 Bats

It is understood that the removal or modification of mature or semi-mature trees is not required to facilitate the construction of the access path. Though an approximate location has been determined which would accommodate the existing trees, the precise route of the path is to be finalised prior to construction under the supervision of the ecologist and arboriculturist. Supervision during the setting out of the exact route, and the removal of vegetation will be required to ensure that no impacts to trees which may support roosting bats will arise from the proposal.

4.3 Enhancements

In the context of the sports field site, the provision of the new native hedgerow should provide a significant ecological enhancement. It is noted that favourable management of the hedgerow and grassland could further enhance the site ecologically. The following recommendations are made:

- The value of the hedge to wildlife such as breeding birds could be enhanced by only every 2-3 years once established; and
- Mowing regimes for the sports pitch could seek to retain tall grass margins, which would provide habitat for wildlife including invertebrates, reptiles and small mammals.

5 CONCLUSION

Providing recommendations made regarding reptiles, breeding birds and bats are followed within this report are followed, there should be no ecological constraints associated with the proposals.

6 REFERENCES

English Nature (2006) *The Dormouse Conservation Handbook*

WSP (2013) *Woodcroft Farm, Wecock: Ecological Assessment Report*