

To: Planning Development, Havant Borough Council

Re: Planning Application APP/26/00574 – Havant Thicket Reservoir, Phase 9 – Visitor Centre, Bird Hide, Hub Building and North-West Area

Formal Objection

Dear Planning Officer,

I am writing in my capacity as a Horndean district councillor to formally object to the Phase 9 reserved matters application for Havant Thicket Reservoir, particularly the proposed location and design of the Visitor Centre and its potential impact on wildfowl, waterbirds and other wildlife.

I fully recognise the importance of Havant Thicket Reservoir and the significant benefits it will provide in terms of water security, recreation, environmental education and biodiversity. I also support the principle of a Visitor Centre which will enable local residents, families, schools and visitors to enjoy and learn about the natural environment.

However, I have serious concerns that the current proposals, particularly the decision to locate the Visitor Centre within the wetland conservation area, could compromise the very habitats that the reservoir is intended to create and protect.

I believe the environmental objectives of this project must take precedence over the desire to provide an architecturally distinctive visitor attraction.

1. Location of the Visitor Centre within the wetland conservation area

My principal concern relates to the proposed location of the Visitor Centre out over the water within wetland compartment 4, rather than on the shoreline.

This area is intended to provide an important habitat for wildfowl, waterbirds and other species, offering opportunities for feeding, resting, roosting and potentially breeding.

The presence of a busy Visitor Centre within this sensitive environment could introduce unnecessary disturbance through human activity, noise, movement, lighting and associated recreational use.

Wildfowl and other waterbirds require areas of relative tranquillity. Frequent disturbance can discourage birds from using otherwise suitable feeding and resting areas, potentially reducing the ecological value of the wetland.

I am particularly concerned that locating the Visitor Centre offshore will extend the area affected by human disturbance further into the conservation wetland than would be necessary if the building were situated on the shoreline.

I therefore question whether sufficient consideration has been given to alternative locations.

A suitably designed shoreline Visitor Centre could still provide excellent views across the reservoir and wetland while reducing the impact on sensitive wildlife habitats.

I request that HBC requires a robust comparison of the ecological consequences of the proposed offshore location and a shoreline alternative.

The applicant should clearly demonstrate why the offshore location is necessary and how it represents an environmentally preferable solution.

2. Protection of wildfowl and the ecological value of the wetland

Havant Thicket Reservoir represents an important opportunity to establish valuable freshwater habitats for waterbirds and other wildlife.

However, the success of the wetland should not be measured solely by the area of water and vegetation created, but by whether birds and other animals can use those habitats without excessive disturbance.

Although the reservoir is not yet established, the absence of an existing bird population within the proposed wetland should not be regarded as justification for introducing potentially avoidable disturbance.

The long-term ecological potential of the habitat must be considered.

Once established, the wetland could provide important feeding and resting areas for wildfowl and other waterbirds throughout the year, including during winter and seasonal movements.

I am particularly concerned that the proposed Visitor Centre, external terraces, walkways and recreational activity could discourage birds from using areas of the wetland closest to the development.

I also believe that the assessment of potential bird disturbance must be based on scientific evidence appropriate to the freshwater habitats proposed at Havant Thicket.

Studies of bird behaviour on exposed tidal mudflats may not adequately reflect the response of birds using the reservoir wetlands.

The Council should therefore satisfy itself that the assessment is relevant to the conditions that will exist at the reservoir.

Where uncertainty remains, further ecological evidence should be required before approval is considered.

3. Avoiding unnecessary loss of wetland habitat

I am concerned that the offshore Visitor Centre will occupy an area that could otherwise contribute to the conservation value of the wetland.

The reservoir's environmental design should follow the mitigation hierarchy, prioritising the avoidance of ecological harm before considering measures to minimise or compensate for it.

If a shoreline location could deliver the same educational and recreational benefits while reducing the loss of habitat and disturbance to wildlife, I believe that option should be properly considered.

I am also concerned about whether the proposed creation of reedbed habitat elsewhere within the development would adequately compensate for the wetland area affected by the Visitor Centre.

Different wetland habitats provide different ecological functions. Shallow reedbeds cannot automatically be regarded as equivalent to deeper open-water habitats.

I therefore request that the Council obtains clear ecological evidence demonstrating that the current proposals will not unnecessarily reduce the future conservation value of wetland compartment 4.

4. External terraces and walkways

I have particular concerns about the proposed external terraces and walkways on the north-eastern and south-eastern sides of the Visitor Centre facing the conservation wetland.

These areas would allow visitors to gather directly alongside sensitive habitats, potentially introducing noise, movement, litter and additional disturbance.

The purpose of a Visitor Centre should be to allow people to appreciate wildlife without adversely affecting the animals they are there to observe.

I question whether extensive external terraces projecting into the wetland are necessary when views could be provided from within the building through appropriately positioned windows.

The north-eastern terrace is of particular concern because it could increase disturbance in the area of wetland intended to be viewed from the education Bird Hide.

If birds are repeatedly disturbed by human activity, the value of the Bird Hide as an educational and wildlife-watching facility could be diminished.

I therefore request that the external terraces and walkways on the north-eastern and south-eastern sides of the Visitor Centre be removed or substantially reconsidered to minimise disturbance to wildlife.

5. Evening use, artificial lighting and nocturnal wildlife

I am concerned by references in the application material to potential evening use of the Visitor Centre, including dining, bar facilities and the use of educational space for restaurant functions.

This raises important questions about the potential impact of nighttime activity on the surrounding environment.

The original environmental approach to the reservoir sought to minimise disturbance after dark, including vehicle movements and artificial lighting.

The surrounding woodland and wetland habitats are important for species such as bats, nightjars, woodcock, badgers and other nocturnal wildlife.

Artificial lighting, noise and increased vehicle movements could interfere with the behaviour and movement of these species.

Lighting associated with an offshore Visitor Centre is particularly concerning because of the potential for light to reflect from the water, extending its effects beyond the immediate building.

I am also concerned about the implications of nighttime vehicle movements through the surrounding woodland, particularly in relation to the wildlife corridor between Havant Thicket and Bells Copse.

Condition 18 of the original hybrid planning permission included a requirement for barriers at the northern and southern entrances to be locked at night to prevent anti-social behaviour.

The Council should therefore carefully examine whether regular evening use of the Visitor Centre would be consistent with the environmental assumptions and safeguards associated with the original permission.

I request that the proposed hours of operation are clearly established and that any after-dark use is supported by an appropriate ecological, lighting and traffic impact assessment.

Unless the applicant can demonstrate that nighttime activity would not cause unacceptable ecological harm, I believe the Visitor Centre should be restricted to daytime operation.

There should be no external lighting on the north-eastern and south-eastern sides of the building facing the sensitive conservation wetland, except where an overriding safety requirement has been demonstrated and the ecological effects appropriately addressed.

6. Protection of wildlife from people and dogs

The north-western area of the reservoir will attract visitors, families and dog walkers, and public access must be carefully managed to protect the conservation habitats.

I am concerned that the proposed arrangements may not provide adequate physical barriers to prevent people and dogs accessing the shoreline, reedbeds and retaining-structure islands.

Uncontrolled access could disturb feeding and resting birds, damage vegetation and prevent new habitats from becoming properly established.

This may be a particular concern during periods of lower reservoir water levels when exposed margins become more accessible.

I believe that robust and suitably landscaped barriers, including appropriate fencing and hedging, are essential along sensitive sections of the wetland boundary.

These should be designed to prevent disturbance without unnecessarily compromising the natural appearance of the site.

I request that HBC requires detailed plans showing the location and design of all proposed barriers and access controls.

Such measures must be implemented before the recreational facilities open to the public.

7. Bird Hide design and accessibility

I welcome the proposed Bird Hide and the opportunities it could provide for environmental education and wildlife observation.

However, I am concerned that the proposed facility may be too small to accommodate the needs of schools, families, older people, wheelchair users and the wider community.

The proposed footprint of approximately 7.7 metres by 7.7 metres is significantly smaller than the maximum building envelope of 9 metres by 20 metres allowed for in the original reservoir proposals.

I believe the opportunity should be taken to provide a genuinely accessible, multi-purpose facility capable of supporting educational groups and wider community use.

I am also concerned about the proposed approach to the Bird Hide through the reedbed.

Visitors walking along the boardwalk could disturb birds in the wetland before they even reach the viewing area.

This could undermine the primary purpose of the facility.

I therefore request that the approach route is reconsidered, with greater emphasis on screening visitors from wildlife and providing access from a discreet land-based path.

The design should also incorporate appropriate viewing windows and measures to prevent dogs accessing the immediate Bird Hide area.

8. Wider ecological impacts

My concerns extend beyond wildfowl to the broader range of wildlife that depends upon the reservoir and its surrounding habitats.

The project has the potential to create a valuable network of wetland, woodland, grassland and other habitats.

It is important that the design of visitor facilities, access routes, car parks and recreational spaces does not unnecessarily compromise these ecological connections.

Particular consideration should be given to the cumulative impact of lighting, noise, movement and recreational pressure on bats, birds and other animals.

These effects should be assessed together rather than treating each element of the development in isolation.

Long-term habitat management is also essential.

Adequate facilities and resources must be provided to enable the wetland and surrounding habitats to be properly maintained and protected.

9. Landscape and long-term sustainability

Although my principal concern is the effect on wildlife, I also question whether the offshore location represents the most sustainable and practical solution over the lifetime of the Visitor Centre.

A building situated over water may create additional challenges for maintenance, servicing, deliveries and waste removal.

The offshore design could also have a greater visual impact within the rural and woodland landscape, including views from the Grade II listed park and gardens.

These matters reinforce the need to examine whether a shoreline Visitor Centre would offer a more practical, sustainable and environmentally appropriate alternative.

I believe the design should complement the natural setting rather than become a dominant feature within it.

10. Matters requiring resolution before approval

I request that Havant Borough Council requires the following matters to be satisfactorily addressed before the application is determined:

1. A robust and balanced comparison of the environmental impacts of locating the Visitor Centre offshore rather than on the shoreline.
2. Scientifically appropriate assessment of potential disturbance to wildfowl, waterbirds and other wildlife using the proposed freshwater wetland habitats.
3. Clear evidence demonstrating that the siting and design of the Visitor Centre follow the mitigation hierarchy and avoid unnecessary ecological harm.
4. Reconsideration of the external terraces and walkways on the north-eastern and south-eastern sides of the building.
5. Confirmation of the proposed hours of operation, together with a comprehensive assessment of any evening use and associated lighting, traffic and noise.
6. Provision of effective barriers, screening and access controls to prevent dogs and members of the public entering sensitive wetland habitats.
7. Improvements to the Bird Hide, including its size, accessibility, viewing arrangements and approach route.
8. Confirmation that the development remains consistent with the environmental commitments and relevant planning conditions associated with the original reservoir permission.
9. Consideration of the long-term ecological management, landscape impact and sustainability of the proposed Visitor Centre.

I also request that HBC obtains clear advice from its ecological specialists and ensures that these concerns are fully addressed in the planning officer's report.

Conclusion

Havant Thicket Reservoir presents a significant opportunity to create a valuable environmental asset for Hampshire, providing a secure water resource alongside important new habitats for wildlife.

The success of the project must be judged not simply by the recreational facilities provided or the number of visitors attracted, but by the lasting ecological benefits it delivers.

As a Horndean councillor, I believe we have a responsibility to ensure that the decisions taken now do not compromise those benefits for future generations.

I am not opposed to the principle of providing a Visitor Centre. However, I remain unconvinced that locating it within the conservation wetland, together with the proposed external terraces and potential evening activities, represents the most environmentally appropriate solution.

A shoreline Visitor Centre could potentially provide the same educational and visitor benefits while reducing disturbance to wildfowl and other wildlife.

That alternative deserves proper consideration.

I therefore formally object to planning application APP/26/00574 in its present form and request that Havant Borough Council requires further ecological assessment and reconsideration of the Visitor Centre's location and design before granting reserved matters approval.

Should the Council nevertheless be minded to approve the application, I request that robust and enforceable planning conditions are imposed to protect sensitive habitats, restrict inappropriate nighttime use and lighting, and ensure effective management of public access.

Above all, we must ensure that the Visitor Centre enables people to appreciate and learn about the natural environment without compromising the very wildlife they have come to see.

I request that this representation is placed on the planning application file and considered in full as part of the determination of the application.

Yours faithfully,

James Hogan

Cllr James Hogan

Horndean Downs District Councillor

East Hampshire District Council

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