

Ecology and Conservation

An ecological assessment has been undertaken of the site, which has been based on information obtained from ecological surveys (habitat and species surveys) during 2009 and 2010, a full desk study and on-going consultation. Surveys were undertaken in accordance with standard best practice guidelines.

The majority of the area proposed for development constitutes well managed pasture (species poor semi-improved grassland), with a small proportion of other habitats including two small copses, hedgerows, trees and two ponds.

This data has informed the assessment of the ecological value of the site and the development of the masterplan, such that the ecological features of value are retained and incorporated into the design where possible. A series of further ecological surveys are proposed to follow and therefore, ecological considerations have taken a precautionary approach to the protection of and provision for protected species likely to occur on site by assuming they are present, which has resulted in the provision of generous areas of the site to be managed for wildlife, in particular great crested newt. This approach has been approved by Wiltshire County Council.

A full assessment of the ecological impacts of the proposals was undertaken in accordance with current guidelines for assessing ecological impacts to determine the ecological significance of the impact issued by the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (IEEM) in 2006. The assessment identifies mitigation measures where appropriate. Consideration has been given to National, Regional and Local planning policies throughout the assessment and mitigation process.

In general, the assessment identifies that whilst some habitats would be lost, the majority of the ecological value of the site would be retained (such as all species rich hedgerows, a pond, a large area of grassland around the pond, a small copse and the majority of standard trees suitable for roosting bats). The majority of the existing network of natural habitats around the site (such as species rich hedgerows) will be retained and new green corridors created (grassland, hedgerows and public open spaces) to link ecological features. This will help to promote the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of species in the wider environment. Where severance has been unavoidable, provisions have been made to mitigate loss of habitat connectivity, such as provision of underpasses, alternative corridors and strategic planting.

In mitigation for habitat loss, new habitats will be created and existing habitats enhanced for wildlife. A large wildlife area would be created in the north of the site with new ponds, wildflower grassland, shrub and tree planting for the benefit of amphibians and reptiles. Mitigation also includes replacement hedgerows and tree planting to improve species diversity.

Measures have been proposed to protect the species present that receive statutory protection, as well as other species identified as requiring conservation action, during construction. Through retention and protection of existing habitats, combined with habitat enhancement and creation, and the implementation of a long-term management plan the long-term residual impacts anticipated for the majority of species are positive, including badger, bats, breeding birds, amphibians and invertebrates, with negligible impacts predicted to reptiles. No negative long-term impacts are predicted.

The development provides the opportunity to contribute to national, regional and local biodiversity targets by enhancing and creating habitat that is valuable to European protected species, including bats and great crested newt, and to nationally protected species including badger and breeding birds through the creation of additional habitat such as hedgerows, tree planting, bat and bird boxes and the creation of wetland features (balancing pond, reedbed and swales).