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Solihull Local Plan Review

Draft Local Plan Supplementary Consultation

Land at Barratts Farm

15.03.19

Background

Ecology Solutions was instructed by Greenlight Developments in 2016 to undertake a suite of detailed survey and assessment work at a site in Balsall Common. This land parcel falls within the Barratts Farm proposed allocation within the emerging revised local plan. Survey and assessment work is currently on-going however, at this stage key conclusions can be drawn in relation to the sites value in ecology and nature conservation terms and judgements can be made regarding the acceptability of development at this site and those mitigation and enhancement measures which would be required in order to address legislative and planning policy provisions.

This submission is made by Ecology Solutions, on behalf of Greenlight Developments pursuant to the Draft Local Plan Supplementary Consultation and specifically, the fact that the relevant land parcel has been excluded from any form of development allocation, instead being listed as an "area of significant ecological value".

In addressing this matter, Ecology Solutions has reviewed relevant documents including:

- "Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment: Barratts Farm"[1].
- "Preliminary Ecological Report – Parish Neighbourhood Plan for Berkswell Parish Council"[2].

Relevant information contained within these two documents is discussed below, together with an analysis of the conclusions reached, with reference to Ecology Solutions own site-specific survey and assessment work.

The land in question is located in the west of the Barratt's Farm "proposed housing allocation", situated west of Barratt's Farm itself and is annotated within the above documents as forming

[1] Produced by the Habitat Biodiversity Audit Partnership for Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull – Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, Ecological Services Warwickshire County Council. December 2016.
[2] Produced by the Habitat Biodiversity Audit Partnership for Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull – Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, Ecological Services Warwickshire County Council. January 2018.

part of a development constrained buffer. Hereinafter the relevant land parcel is referred to as the "study site")

Key points arising from the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment - 2016

It is understood that this is the primary source of information used to inform the masterplan (allocations) associated with the Draft Local Plan Supplementary Consultation.

As a headline point, on review Ecology Solutions consider the report to be very broad in nature and lacking, in most cases, detailed information on which to make informed judgements on a site-specific basis.

It is noted that the study site is not subject to any statutory or non-statutory designation.

The constraints plan (taken to be Figure 1 of the document) shows the site to be an area where "development should be avoided and ecological enhancement encouraged". This is qualified by reference to the following provisions:

- 30m buffer around woodland;
- 8m buffer either side of adjacent to watercourses;
- 8m buffers around ponds;
- 5m buffer either side of intact hedgerows;
- Areas of medium to high distinctiveness grassland (Values 4, 5 & 6).

Regarding the habitat descriptions, it is noted that the land parcel is listed as being of medium (possibly medium to high) distinctiveness.

The target note information includes the following relevant descriptions for habitats within the site:

SP27N41 – "Neglected semi-improved grassland meadow dominated by tall grasses including cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*) and creeping soft-grass (*Holcus mollis*) alongside patches of meadow vetchling (*Lathyrus pratensis*) and oak (*Quercus robur*) saplings throughout."

SP27N18 – "Mesotrophic pond with mostly open water with floating sweet-grass (*Glyceria fluitans*), yellow iris (*Iris pseudacorus*) and water plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*)".

In relation to connectivity the land parcel is considered to have low to attain a low to medium connectivity score.

Regarding protected species, the key relevant constraint reported relates to breeding populations of amphibians including Great Crested Newt, which were recorded at locations adjacent to Barratts Lane and Sunnyside Lane in 2015. Figure 7 of the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment (2016) shows a large area shaded in green, annotating a 500m buffer zone for reptiles and amphibians.

Key points arising from the Preliminary Ecological Report – Parish Neighbourhood Plan

Whilst a more comprehensive document in comparison to the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment, it adds little to the baseline information presented in the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment (2016).

It is again noted that the study site is not subject to any statutory or non-statutory designation. However, as with the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment, the Preliminary

Ecological Report cites the land as being a Development Constraint Buffer, with 5m hedgerow protection buffers, an 8m pond protection buffer and habitat Constraints 4,5 and 6 all being relevant. In addition, in relation to protected species, the local metapopulation of Great Crested Newts is cited as a constraint and Figure 10 (page 29) shows a record for Great Crested Newt from within the study site.

Discussion

Habitat distinctiveness

Regarding the quality and distinctiveness of the "semi-improved neutral" grassland, cited as being of "medium distinctiveness", the following points are raised.

The study site has been cited as a development constrained buffer, with a blanket buffer applied across the site. With reference to the commentary on pages 30 and 31 of the Preliminary Ecological Report (2018), which relates to proposed housing allocations at Barratt's Farm, it is noted that specific reference is made to the neglected state of viable semi-improved grasslands. This is also reflected strongly in the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment (2016) and in both documents reference is made to the restoration of such grassland. Further, reference is made to the need for a long-term management plan to prevent domination of the sward by scrub and aggressive species.

Ecology Solutions can confirm that the value of the grassland within the study site is indeed degraded through neglect which has resulted in domination by scrub and ruderal vegetation in many parts. Restorative measures and appropriate future management are certainly required if degradation of the ecological value is to be halted / reversed. Such measures could be secured through the delivery of a suitably designed development scheme where future management of retained and enhanced habitats is the subject of a suitably worded planning condition, for example.

In the absence of this security, there is no legally binding mechanism to secure appropriate management and the management undertaken (or lack of management) is entirely at the discretion of the landowner.

Hedgerows

Regarding hedgerow buffers, as referenced in the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment (2016) and Preliminary Ecological Report (2018), it is considered that the recommended blanket 5m buffer is not appropriate.

To protect a hedgerow, the buffer should conform to that required in respect of root protection zones and this will vary between hedgerows depending on the age and previous management of the hedgerow. 5m may be appropriate, but equally a larger or indeed smaller buffer may be necessary in order to protect the hedgerow and any supported flora and fauna. Consideration in respect of other protected species, and the need to deliver closely associated habitat of ecological value will be critical to the acceptability of any proposals. Any judgements would necessarily have to be guided by detailed site-specific survey work and any faunal constraints identified through detailed surveys.

With reference to Figure 2 (habitats constraints map) of the Preliminary Ecological Report (2018), it is noted that the 5m hedgerow buffer has been applied throughout the site. However, on review of the phase 1 habitat map, included as Figure 6 (page 23 of the Preliminary Ecological Report), it is clearly shown that the vegetated boundaries in question are considered to represent "linear scrub" as opposed to any of the hedgerow categories.

Notwithstanding this, as discussed above the hedgerow could be retained within a development proposal and subject to an appropriate buffer (as determined through site survey and assessment work).

Ponds

In relation to ponds, it is considered that the blanket application of an 8m buffer is not appropriate.

Any requirement for pond retention and the application of a buffer should be determined through appropriate and specific surveys and assessments in relation to a pond's intrinsic value and also any value afforded to it by virtue of the species which it is known to support. The application of a blanket buffer zone around identified ponds effectively disregards the ecological evaluation process, affording the same protection to ponds of no or limited ecological value, with those properly identified to be of high value.

With reference to Figure 10 (page 29 of the Preliminary Ecological Report), it is noted that records for amphibian species exist for the site itself and locations in very close proximity. The presence of Great Crested Newts and other amphibian species is also referenced in the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment (2016).

The cited records include several for Great Crested Newt, and one such record is for a field pond located within the study site. It should be noted that Ecology Solutions undertook a suite of specific Great Crested Newt surveys and assessments relating to the study site and also, ponds close by in 2016. These specific surveys did not record Great Crested Newts within the study site, including the field pond shown as present in the Preliminary Ecological Report. The species was however recorded in an off-site pond to the north east. Further, background records do indicate Great Crested Newt presence in the local area, but no records were returned for the study site itself.

It is accepted that there would be a requirement for any scheme being brought forward at the study site to include appropriate mitigation for Great Crested Newts, but this must be proportionate to the likely impacts. On current evidence there would be no impact on any breeding pond or any core habitat (that of greatest value to the breeding population).

It is considered that an appropriately designed development scheme could easily be brought forward which avoids a negative impact on the metapopulation of Great Crested Newts present in the local area. Indeed, enhanced breeding and foraging / shelter habitat delivered as part of a suitably designed scheme would represent a net gain for Great Crested Newts and other amphibian species at the local level.

Conclusions

Ecology Solutions consider that the emerging masterplan and the constraints maps included within the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment (2016) and Preliminary Ecological Report (2018), are misguided in relation to the study site. The classification of the study site as being one where development should be avoided and (instead) ecological enhancements delivered does not fit with the available ecological baseline information when sound ecological judgement is applied.

It is recognised that within the planning system, weight should be afforded to the presence of habitats of ecological value and that impacts on such habitats will be of material consideration when planning applications are being determined. However, the weight afforded to any such impacts must be determined in the light of the baseline situation and the ability of any

development proposals to mitigate those impacts and deliver appropriate enhancements where appropriate. This is set out within adopted planning policy (including the National Planning Policy Framework) and relevant guidance.

It is clear that the land parcel is not considered to be of high habitat distinctiveness and looking to the description of the grassland habitat included within the Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment (2016), it is clear that this neglected grassland does not comprise a species compliment which would enable a classification as species rich or of existing high ecological value. This evaluation is consistent with Ecology Solutions own findings.

The pond within the study site can be considered to be of some ecological value and the same is true for the boundary features, however these features could be retained and enhanced through the sensitive design of any development proposal.

There is no basis in legislative or planning policy terms to preclude development at the study site and available ecological information does not support the preclusion of development. It is accepted that Ecological constraints exist at the study site, as they do on many sites and indeed, with reference to the documents reviewed as part of this submission, constraints will likely exist for all allocations. However, these can be addressed through an appropriately designed scheme at the study site which has regard to any impacts which could arise, following detailed assessment of baseline information.

So long as any scheme being brought forward is sensitive to the need to maintain functional ecological links, deliver enhanced species rich grassland areas, enhanced aquatic habitat and retained / enhanced boundary habitat, all subject to long term management; there is no reason why the site could not support residential development. The recognised value of habitats for certain protected species, means that specific mitigation would be required but it is considered that this could easily be delivered in tandem with within a sensitively designed development scheme.