

5. Ecology

5.1 Background

5.1.1 Aspect Ecology has been appointed to advise Gallagher Estates in respect of ecological matters relating to promotion of land at Home Farm, Sandhills, Walsall through the Issues and Options Review of the Black Country Core Strategy.

5.1.2 An extended Phase 1 Habitat survey of the site was conducted in December 2013, to record main habitat types and species, identify areas of ecological interest, and provide an assessment of the potential use of the site by faunal species. A desktop study was also undertaken to source known records of protected or notable species and details of local site designations. This desktop study has since been updated in October 2015 to ensure background information is up to date.

5.1.3 This note provides a summary of the survey findings with regard to promotion of the land through the emerging plan making process, providing an overview of ecological issues with a focus on potential constraints and opportunities and overall ecological deliverability of the proposed allocation.

5.2 Site Description

5.2.1 The site comprises an 'L' shaped area of land to the north and east of Home Farm, Sandhills, located to the east of Brownhills in Walsall. The site is bordered by residential properties associated with Chester Road (A452) to the west, the Wyrley and Essington Canal to the north, and Lichfield Road (A461) to the south. Home Farm and associated farm buildings, residential properties and surrounding farmland lie to the east, excluded from the site itself but included as part of the wider survey area.

5.2.2 The site itself is dominated by arable farmland with a number of hedgerows and treelines at its margins. A track also runs through the middle of the site from Chester Road to the west to Home Farm, along which a small woodland area is located.

5.3 Ecological Baseline Conditions

Ecological Designations

5.3.1 Desktop study information received from the Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) online database, Staffordshire Ecological Record and EcoRecord indicate that the site is not subject to any statutory nature conservation designations.

5.3.2 However, information returned from EcoRecord identifies part of the site as a Potential Site of Importance (PSI), namely Sandhills Arm Canal PSI, which includes the small woodland area and

associated hedgerow along the track which divides the site. PSIs are sites that potentially contain areas of important semi-natural habitat but currently fall outside of the Local Site system. The PSI is described as “former canal arm, now infilled, and triangular block of woodland depicted on historic map (1st ed OS map 1880s)”.

- 5.3.3 Wyrley and Essington Canal, forming the northern boundary of the site, is also subject to non-statutory designation as a Site of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINC). The SLINC is designated for its generally good quality water conditions supporting a diverse aquatic flora.
- 5.3.4 A number of ecological designations are also located within the surrounds of the site, as shown on Plan 3586/BN1 contained at the end of this Chapter.
- 5.3.5 The nearest statutory designation is Shire Oak Park Local Nature Reserve (LNR) located 200m to the south of the site. This comprises an old sand and gravel quarry supporting lowland heathland, grassland, woodland and pond habitats.
- 5.3.6 A number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are located within the wider surrounds of the site, the nearest being Chasewater and the Southern Staffordshire Coalfield Heaths SSSI, located approximately 1250m to the north of the site. The SSSI is designated for its heath, fen and standing open water habitats, supporting two nationally scarce vascular plant species.
- 5.3.7 A number of European designations are also located within the wider surrounds of the site including Cannock Extension Canal Special Area of Conservation (SAC) 3.3km to the west of the site and Cannock Chase SAC 9.8km to the north of the site.

Habitats

- 5.3.8 A plan of habitat types and features within the site and wider survey area is provided at Plan 3586/BN2, contained at the end of this Chapter.
- 5.3.9 The site is dominated by arable farmland under cultivation for a range of crop types at the time of survey. This appears to be relatively intensively farmed with few arable weeds evident, and is largely open in nature with few hedgerows or other boundary features. Aside from a small area sown with a wild bird seed mixture (see below), the farmland also lacked areas of set aside or field margins at the time of survey. As such, the arable farmland is considered to provide limited opportunities for wildlife, and is of low ecological value at a local level.
- 5.3.10 Habitats of elevated value are generally limited to the margins of the site, and include:
- *Woodland* – a small woodland copse is present along the track which bisects the site (forming part of Sandhills Arm Canal PSI). This supports numerous semi-mature to mature trees, likely

planted in origin, with species including frequent Sycamore and occasional Beech, Oak and Pine. A moderate understorey of Holly and young Sycamore is present, although ground flora is very species poor, dominated by Ivy with occasional Common Nettle and Bramble. Based on its poor diversity of species and the lack of an established woodland flora, the woodland is not considered to be of high importance, although provides some value in association with the treelines and hedgerows as an area of wooded habitat within an otherwise open landscape.

- *Hedgerows and treelines* – several hedgerows and treelines are present at the boundaries of the site. These are species-poor, although are generally intact, offering value in terms of wildlife habitat and connectivity around the margins of the site. Occasional standard trees are present along the hedgerows, and established treelines occur in the southern part of the site, largely dominated by Pine and Sycamore.
- *Wild bird seed plot* – a small area in the south of the site was sown with a wild bird seed mixture at the time of survey, comprising a grass dominated sward with frequent pea and cabbage species. This area provides some interest as a foraging resource for farmland birds, although given its recently established nature, is not of any particular ecological value.

5.3.11 Further habitats of elevated value occur within the wider survey area, including established treelines with some notable mature trees, additional woodland areas, and an area of grass pasture with scattered mature trees. The offsite canal to the north of the site also provides a valuable wildlife corridor, with areas of emergent vegetation and associated tree and scrub habitats.

Fauna

5.3.12 The majority of the site is of limited value for faunal species, being dominated by arable farmland with few boundary habitats or areas of ground cover providing shelter or nesting opportunities. Nevertheless, some potential exists for farmland species, whilst boundary habitats provide potential opportunities for a wider range of faunal species. A discussion of potential opportunities for faunal species is given below:

- *Bats* – roosting opportunities are largely absent from the main part of the site, although a small number of trees within the woodland and along boundary treelines were noted to have developed features such as rot holes and splits which may offer bat roosting potential, whilst offsite farm buildings also offer potential roosting habitat. Boundary features (notably along the offsite canal) are also likely to provide habitat for foraging and commuting bats, including species such as Noctule, Common Pipistrelle, Soprano Pipistrelle and Whiskered Bat for which records were returned as part of the desktop study. The main part of the site however, being dominated by arable farmland, is unlikely to support any significant bat activity.
- *Badger* – A record of a Badger sett was returned from EcoRecord as part of the desktop study, located along the offsite canal to the north of the site. However, no evidence of this species was recorded within the site during the field survey.

- *Other mammals* – No evidence of any other protected or notable mammal species was recorded during the field survey and generally the site is considered to provide few opportunities for such species being dominated by arable farmland with few areas of wooded vegetation. Some potential occurs for species favouring open farmland such as the UK BAP species Brown Hare, although no sightings of this species were made during the field survey. The offsite canal provides potential habitat for riparian species including Water Vole (for which records were returned as part of the desktop study) and Otter.
- *Birds* – the site is likely to provide some interest for farmland bird species, with species recorded during the field survey including UK BAP and Red listed¹ House Sparrow, Linnet and Starling. However, nesting habitats are largely limited to the boundaries of the site (aside from ground nesting species such as Skylark), whilst a lack of associated field margins or extensive areas of set aside mean that the site is unlikely to support any significant bird interest.
- *Reptiles* – the site is dominated by arable farmland with no substantial areas of rough vegetation, providing unsuitable habitat for reptile species.
- *Amphibians* – a pond is shown on OS mapping close to Home Farm, approximately 160m from the site boundary. However, this was noted to be dry at the time of survey, and is understood to be a temporary drainage feature (see Plan 3586/BN2). The next nearest waterbody is a large lake within a sand and gravel pit 380m to the south of the site. Given the separation from the site by residential housing and a main road, it is unlikely there would be any significant movement of amphibians between this waterbody and the site, particularly given the low suitability of terrestrial habitat within the site (being dominated by arable farmland). As such, this species group is not considered to form a constraint at the site.
- *Invertebrates* – the site is generally considered to be of low value for invertebrate species, being dominated by arable farmland. Wooded vegetation provides some elevated potential for this species group, although such habitats are generally limited to the site margins.

5.4 Constraints and Opportunities

5.4.1 The survey work undertaken has found the site to be largely unconstrained in respect of ecology. However, a number of minor constraints have been identified, including presence of nearby ecological designations, boundary habitats of elevated value, and potential opportunities for a number of protected and notable faunal species. A discussion of these potential constraints is given below in relation to any future proposed development, together with consideration of any required actions or mitigation. Potential opportunities for ecological enhancement in accordance with national and local policy are also identified.

¹ RSPB (2009) 'The population status of birds in the UK - Birds of Conservation Concern: 2009'

Ecological Designations

- 5.4.2 With the exception of Sandhills Arm Canal PSI and Wyrley and Essington Canal SLINC, all ecological designations are well separated from the site and are unlikely to be subject to any direct effects as a result of the proposed development. Some potential exists for increases in recreational use, although nearby designations such as Shire Oak Park LNR are managed to accommodate recreational use, whilst there is unlikely to be any significant increase in recreational pressure at more distant designations.
- 5.4.3 In regard to European designations, the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) for the Black Country Joint Core Strategy², identifies some uncertainty in regard to effects on Cannock Chase SAC as a result of air pollution and recreational pressure and disturbance, and Humber Estuary cSAC, SPA and Ramsar and Severn Estuary cSAC, SPA and Ramsar as a result of water quality and water supply. Preliminary work undertaken by Walsall Council as part of the HRA process to inform the emerging Site Allocations Document has narrowed these issues further, to Cannock Chase SAC only, although an agreed approach in regard to this designation is yet to be established. As such, it will be necessary for the approach in regard to Cannock Chase SAC to be confirmed at an appropriate stage, although given the separation between the site and this designation (beyond an 8km zone of influence) and available options for mitigation if required (e.g. provision of open space to offset increases in recreational pressure), it is considered likely that any potential issues can be addressed.
- 5.4.4 In regard to Sandhills Arm Canal PSI, this can readily be retained under the proposals together with an appropriate buffer of open space. Road access may be required across the hedgerow which forms the western part of the PSI, although subject to sensitive road design and new planting, this could be achieved with minimal loss of connectivity. Furthermore, long-term management of habitats within the PSI and provision of improved wildlife connectivity through new landscape planting and habitat creation would provide benefits under the proposals.
- 5.4.5 Wyrley and Essington Canal SLINC is separated from the site by a tow path and hedgerow, ensuring no direct disturbance or damage to bankside habitat. Under the proposals, there is an opportunity to create an area of open space alongside the canal, forming a buffer to the proposed development, whilst implementation of an appropriate drainage and pollution control strategy would avoid adverse effects as a result of surface water runoff. As such, subject to implementation of appropriate mitigation, it is considered that this designation can be fully safeguarded under the proposals.

² UE Associates (2010) 'Habitats Regulations Assessment of the Black Country Joint Core Strategy: Appropriate Assessment Report'

Habitats

- 5.4.6 The site is dominated by arable farmland of low ecological value, not considered to form a constraint to the proposed development, whilst habitats of elevated value including hedgerows, treelines and woodland are mostly restricted to the site margins, allowing them to be readily retained under the proposals. Some minor losses of hedgerow habitat may be required to accommodate road access, although given the species-poor nature of the hedgerows at the site, this is unlikely to constitute a significant impact.
- 5.4.7 Under the proposals, there are significant opportunities to deliver ecological benefits through new habitat creation and enhancement of existing habitats. Such enhancements could include the following:
- As discussed above in relation to ecological designations, there is an opportunity to create an area of open space adjacent to the offsite canal. This could incorporate a range of wooded, grassland and wetland habitats (such as wet scrapes and ponds), forming additional habitat for species associated with the canal such as waterfowl and bats, and strengthening the function of the canal as a wildlife corridor;
 - Native tree and shrub planting within areas of open space and around the perimeters of the built development, providing new wildlife habitat and contributing to the habitat linkage provided by existing woodlands and hedgerows.
 - Provision of wildflower grassland margins along hedgerows and woodland edges;
 - Specific measures to benefit farmland bird species such as wild bird cover plots and scrub creation;
 - Enhancement of existing woodlands/hedgerows through sensitive management in accordance with ecological principles.

Fauna

- 5.4.8 The site generally provides few opportunities for wildlife, and is unlikely to be subject to any significant constraints in regard to protected or notable species. However, habitats at the site provide some potential for species including bats, Badger, Brown Hare and farmland birds, and as such these species will require consideration at an appropriate stage. Further detail is given below:
- *Bats* – boundary features such as hedgerows and the offsite canal provide potential habitat for foraging and commuting bats, and consideration will need to be given to treatment of these boundary habitats to ensure suitable habitat for bats is maintained, particularly in respect of lighting. It is recommended that this is supported by further survey work at the planning application stage. In addition, it is recommended that any trees proposed for removal are subject to survey to provide an assessment in regard to roosting activity. Following implementation of the habitat measures set out above, bats are likely to benefit under the proposals, whilst provision of bat

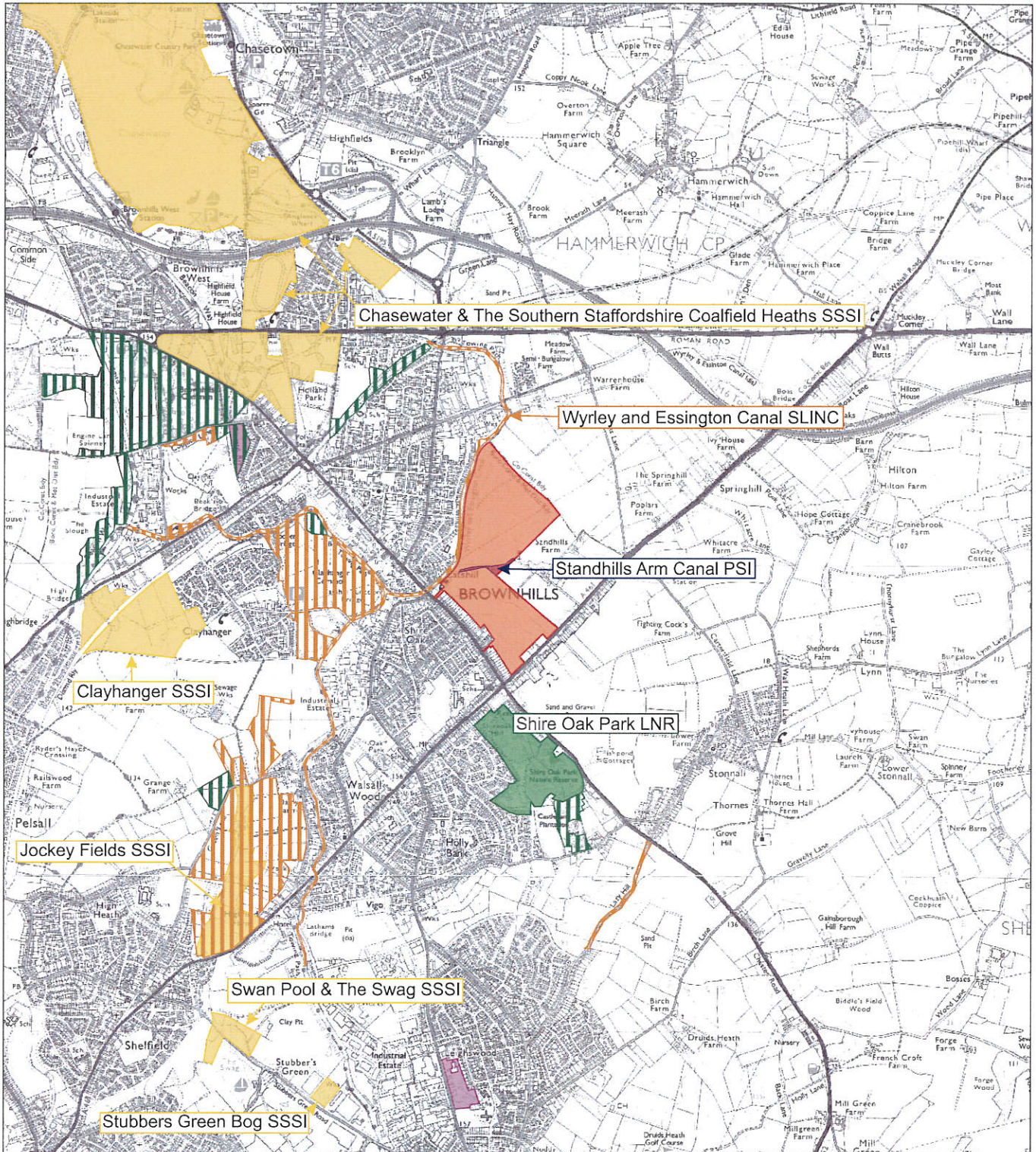
boxes on retained trees and within the fabric of new buildings would provide additional roosting opportunities for this species group.

- *Badger* – based on current evidence, no Badger setts would be affected under the proposals. However, it is recommended this is confirmed by further survey at the planning application stage.
- *Brown Hare* – it is recommended that searches for Brown Hare are undertaken as part of other survey work at the site at a planning application stage to determine presence/absence of this species. If present, consideration could be given to enhancements to the wider survey area to ensure suitable habitat is maintained for this species.
- *Birds* – it is recommended that further survey work is carried out at the planning application stage to provide a full assessment in relation to this species group. However, boundary habitats likely to be of value to bird species can be readily retained under the proposals, whilst new habitat creation can be provided within areas of open space to maintain and increase opportunities for bird species at the site. Measures such as provision of nest boxes on retained trees and within the fabric of new buildings would also provide enhancements for this species group.








5.4.9 The habitat measures set out above would also deliver benefits for other faunal species such as invertebrates, whilst increasing the likelihood of species such as reptiles and amphibians colonising the site.

5.5 Feasibility Assessment of the Proposed Development

5.5.1 Based on the results of the work undertaken, the majority of the site is considered to be unconstrained in terms of ecology. A number of minor potential constraints have been identified including Sandhills Arm Canal PSI and the presence of woodlands, hedgerows and treelines, along with the potential for protected and notable species including bats, Badger, Brown Hare and birds. However, these constraints are largely restricted to the margins of the site or established boundary features and as such it is considered that with a sensitively designed masterplan, together with the provision of appropriate avoidance and mitigation measures, the proposed development would be unlikely to result in significant effects in terms of ecology. Indeed, the proposed development provides the opportunity to create areas of new wildlife habitat within areas of open space, providing significant benefits for wildlife. As such, the proposed development is considered to be highly deliverable in ecological terms.



KEY:

-  SITE LOCATION
-  SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST (SSSI)
-  LOCAL NATURE RESERVE (LNR)
-  ANCIENT & SEMI-NATURAL WOODLAND (ASW)
-  SITE OF IMPORTANCE FOR NATURE CONSERVATION (SINC)
-  SITE OF LOCAL IMPORTANCE FOR NATURE CONSERVATION (SLINC)
-  POTENTIAL SITE OF IMPORTANCE (PSI)*

Information on non-statutory sites was returned for a 4x4km area around the site. Any such sites beyond this boundary may not be included on this plan.
 *Full information relating to PSIs has only been provided for sites at the centre of the search area, so only PSIs relevant to the site or immediate surrounds are shown on the plan.

aspect ecology

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LAND AT HOME FARM,
 SANDHILLS, WALSALL

ECOLOGICAL DESIGNATIONS

3586/BN1



OCTOBER 2015

PROJECT
 TITLE
 DRAWING NO.
 REV.
 DATE