

Blackthorn Farm, Meopham 20250802

Response to KCC Ecology

- 1.1 On the 20th October 2025, Helen Forster of Kent County Council's Ecological Advice Service (KCC EAS) responded to planning application 20250802 - Blackthorn Farm Wrotham Road Meopham Gravesend Kent.
- 1.2 The proposal is an Outline planning application for up to 100No. residential dwellings (including affordable housing), with all matters reserved except for access and creation of a new access from A227/South Street.
- 1.3 This response to KCC EAS has been prepared by Ecological Planning and Research (EPR) and it seeks to clarify several matters that have been raised. It addresses matters in the same order (for the most part) as that in the KCC EAS letter.
- 1.4 We would like to take this opportunity to thank Helen Forster for her comments, and we would like to assure KCC EAS and Gravesham Brough Council that the detailed survey reports and an Ecological Impact Assessment will be submitted once all the remaining ecology survey work has been completed, data analysed, and an Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) completed. Further detail is provided below.

Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA)

- 1.5 KCC Ecology State:

“An Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) must include the following:

- *Details of the impacts of development proposals on the ecological baseline established via a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) and any necessary additional surveys undertaken*
- *Details of any necessary and achievable ecological mitigation and/or compensation measures*
- *Details of ecological enhancement measures (including soft landscaping as well as habitat features such as hedgehog highways, bat boxes and bird boxes), and;*
- *Provision of sufficient information to determine whether the project accords with relevant nature conservation policies and legislation.*

An outline EclA has been submitted, and it does not address all the above points instead it refers to survey reports which have or will be submitted as part of the application.”

- 1.6 The Habitats, Flora and Vegetation Survey Report has now been completed and has been submitted alongside this letter. The survey report provides the required level of information needed in relation to Habitats, Vegetation Communities and Flora. The report has been produced to inform the EclA Report, which will follow in due course.

- 1.7 The Habitats, Flora and Vegetation Survey Report is not meant to, or intended to provide the baseline information associated with Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). It does however set out what habitats are present in relation to UK Habitats Classification (also referred to as UK Habs); and where needed more detailed and technical information is provided (including detailed quadrat level data and species list). The results have been set out in a transparent and comprehensive way to facilitate ecological review in relation to the vegetation communities present. In accordance with guidance^{1,2}, the first step in determining the BNG baseline for terrestrial habitats, is to first determine what habitats are present according to the UK Habitats Classification³. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the report content with KCC EAS once they have had an opportunity to review it.
- 1.8 As you will be aware, the Ecological Impact Process is different to BNG, and this is why a detailed and comprehensive Habitats, Flora and Vegetation Survey Report was provided to demonstrate, in an evidence-based way, the current baseline conditions, which in turn aims to aid the Local Planning Authority in their decision making.
- 1.9 Similarly, Herptile and Breeding Bird Survey reports have also been submitted that establish the baseline with respect to these ecological features.
- 1.10 The project will, in due course, also be submitting a Hazel Dormouse and other Terrestrial Mammals Survey Report, alongside a Bat Survey Report. Both will provide the required level of baseline information needed for planning purposes, and these will inform the Ecological Impact Assessment. Further information is provided later in this letter.
- 1.11 Our expectation is that the suite of ecology reports detailed above will provide sufficient information to allow Gravesham Borough Council to meet its obligations as a planning authority, especially given that the scheme has been submitted in Outline, and it is not a detailed planning application. We would like to highlight that because the application is in Outline form it provides an opportunity for Gravesham Borough Council to secure detailed information at the Reserved Matters stage, as and when required.

Breeding Birds

- 1.12 KCC EAS state:

"We note that only four breeding bird surveys were carried out and only covered May and June... [and they] advise that further information must be provided detailing why best practice was not followed during the breeding bird surveys and plans must be provided confirming the locations of the species recorded.
- 1.13 We appreciate KCC EAS thorough review, and we would like to provide additional context regarding the Breeding Bird Survey. Paragraph 3.3 of the Breeding Bird Survey Report details that the Site is dominated by short, horse grazed paddocks, and this habitat does not provide suitable habitat for ground nesting birds (or any other breeding birds). In addition, the Site is relatively small, and it only provides habitat for common and widespread species. Furthermore, the Outline Ecological Impact Assessment, details how Ecologically Important Trees (EITs),

¹ Durkin, F., and Baker, J. 2024. Mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain in England. A Guide. Produced by CIEEM, IEMA and CIRIA.

² DEFRA. 2024. The Statutory Biodiversity Metric User Guide. Updated 3rd July 2025.

³ UKHab Ltd (2023). UK Habitat Classification Version 2.0 (at <https://www.ukhab.org>).

historic hedgerows, woodlands and tree-line boundaries have been protected, and impacts avoided.

- 1.14 This is a crucial point that we would like to highlight for KCC EAS's consideration. Given all the above, the scope of the Breeding Bird Survey was adjusted to account for the sensitive approach to design, where impacts to breeding bird habitat have been avoided. Furthermore, the scheme intends to enhance the quality and quantum of breeding bird habitat, and further detail will be provided in the EclIA report.
- 1.15 Furthermore, Paragraph 2.2 of the Outline Ecological Impact Assessment highlights the importance of 'proportionality.' This concept is also highlighted in paragraphs 1.9 to 1.11, 5.35, as well as Box 5, of CIEEM's (Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management) Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK and Ireland⁴.
- 1.16 The Bird Survey Guidelines states⁵ "*Six visits is considered sufficiently robust to identify the majority of bird species using lowland deciduous woodland in the breeding season and establish a good understanding of the numbers and distribution of species present.... Additional survey effort may need to be considered for large-scale projects with the potential to have significant impacts on birds, and/or for high profile, sensitive projects. On the other hand, fewer survey visits may be justified for projects with very limited impacts, or sites with habitats of low value for birds."* [our emphasis].
- 1.17 Given that most of the Site is horse paddocks, which are of low value for breeding birds, and given that the scheme has been specifically designed to avoid impacts to the small woodland shaw and other habitats (as detailed in the submitted documents), our view is that it would be disproportionate to complete six survey visits.
- 1.18 We acknowledge KCC EAS concerns and we would like to reassure them that on this matter that Dr David W. Smith, who is a bird specialist and the lead ecologist on the project used his extensive professional experience to judge what level of survey effort would be proportionate to provide a sufficiently accurate baseline to inform planning. Three to four survey visits are recommended for several passerine species-specific surveys⁶, and beyond the four visits completed in this instance, the species detection curve (at Blackthorn Farm) would have significantly flattened out compared to larger, more complex development sites, which are of much greater value to birds.
- 1.19 The survey visits between May and June (inclusive) are within the peak period of breeding bird activity, and therefore the data collected is a fair and accurate estimate of the bird assemblage present. Further survey visits were highly unlikely to materially change the number of species recorded or change the ecological evaluation detailed in the submitted report. This is evidenced by that only one additional bird species was recorded during other ecology survey work, which was Sparrowhawk, and we would like to highlight this is detailed in **Appendix 2** of the Breeding Bird Survey Report.

⁴ Gilbert, G., Gibbons, D.W., and Evans, J. 1998. Bird Monitoring Methods. RSPB. Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM). 2018. Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK and Ireland: Terrestrial, Freshwater, Coastal and Marine version 1.3. Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, Winchester.

⁵ <https://birdsurveyguidelines.org/methods/survey-method/>

⁶ Gilbert, G., Gibbons, D.W., and Evans, J. 1998. Bird Monitoring Methods. RSPB.

1.20 Completing survey visits in March/April or July were highly unlikely to materially change the results of the ecological evaluation either given the context of the Site and habitats present.

1.21 The mitigation associated with the legal protection afforded to nesting birds will not be different (as detailed in paragraph 6.10 of the Outline EclA Report). Nor will the ecological enhancement proposed be different had more survey work been completed. We would also like to take this opportunity to confirm integrated Swift bricks will be provided within the new housing (as alluded to in the submitted Outline EclA report, in paragraph 4.5). Further detail will be provided in due course, and we are expecting this that between 50 and 100 Swift bricks will be installed across the scheme.

1.22 The Breeding Bird Survey details the transect walked (in **Figure 2**), and **Appendix A2.1** provides detailed information of the birds recorded, the estimated territory numbers, and breeding status for each species. This is more than sufficient for planning purposes. Furthermore, to complete this work, hand-drawn territory maps were produced. We would welcome an opportunity for an on-line MS teams meeting to show you the the hand drawn territory maps and have a more detailed discussion about this. However, given the location of bird territories change between years, the need to formally map territories for the submitted report was not deemed necessary.

1.23 We respectfully suggest that the requirement stated by KCC EAS, i.e. "*plans must be provided confirming the locations of the species recorded*," may not be necessary in this context. We note similar projects in Kent have been granted without this specific requirement. Furthermore, the Breeding Bird Survey Guidance uses the word 'should' in relation to this specific matter (and not 'must').

1.24 In conclusion, in relation to breeding birds, we believe the information submitted provides a sufficient basis for planning decisions and are confident that this adequately addresses the breeding bird consideration to allow Gravesham Borough Council to fulfil their associated duties as a planning authority. Especially, given the developer has sensitively designed the scheme to avoid impacts to the on-site woodland shaw and provided buffers to adjacent woodland habitats.

Herptiles

1.25 KCC EAS state:

"It is not clear if further GCN surveys are required, or, as access to the off-site ponds was not granted, if the applicant will use the District Level Licencing scheme to avoid an impact on Great Crested Newts."

1.26 The Herptile Survey Report, in paragraphs 2.13 to 2.14 explains that that despite our best efforts, including formal written requests, access was not obtained for eDNA surveys. Therefore, further surveys for Great Crested Newt cannot be completed.

1.27 Paragraph 3.8 of the Herptile Survey Report then states that...." *No records of Great Crested Newt or associated licence data were returned within 2km of the Site. The Site also lies with the 'Green Zone' associated with the Kent Great Crested Newt Risk Zones. This means there is a low risk of Great Crested Newt presence.*"

1.28 Given the above, and the low number of ponds close to the Site, it means impacts on Great Crested Newt are highly unlikely/negligible, and therefore a District Level Licence is not required based on the current level of information available. In the unlikely event a Great Crested Newt is found on-site prior to or during works, they will cease immediately and an application for a Natural England licence will be made (as per paragraphs 6.1 and 6.1 of the submitted Outline EclA report).

Bat, Badger, Botany and Hazel Dormouse

1.29 Various bat surveys have been completed, the results of which will be provided in a Bat Survey Report. No bat roosts have been recorded on-site, and the data relating to the bat assemblage using the Site is still being analysed, including static data from October.

1.30 No field evidence of Badger was recorded during any survey work.

1.31 As previously mentioned, a detailed and comprehensive Habitats, Flora and Vegetation Survey Report has now been submitted.

1.32 A Hazel Dormouse Survey Report will be submitted, which will include data from a November survey visit. However, to date, no field evidence of Hazel Dormouse has been recorded.

1.33 The 'final' EclA will summarise the ecological baseline information, because the level of ecological information collected to inform this planning application is significant to ensure the local authority has all the information needed to determine '*whether the project accords with relevant nature conservation policies and legislation.*' The final EclA report will also address the remaining KCC EAS in relation to the process of ecological impact assessment.

Biodiversity Net Gain

1.34 As previously mentioned, a detailed and comprehensive Habitats, Flora and Vegetation Survey Report has now been submitted. This will be used to update the baseline information associated with the submitted Defra Metric.

1.35 The submitted validation statement details the required information needed by Article 7 of the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 (as amended by The Biodiversity Gain (Town and Country Planning) (Modifications and Amendments) (England) Regulations 2024). It also confirms that the Applicant believes that planning permission, if granted, would be subject to the biodiversity gain condition. Consequently, we remain of view that because the development will be subject to the biodiversity gain condition and because the application is in outline form only, the main information that is needed to inform planning is the associated baseline. This will be updated with minor amendments, following the detailed survey work and vegetation analysis detailed in the Habitats, Flora and Vegetation Survey Report.

1.36 With respect to Lowland Meadow, the botanical survey data collected indicates the MG5 *Cynosurus cristatus-Centaurea nigra* grasslands and the MG6 *Lolium perenne-Cynosurus cristatus* grasslands are of ecological importance at a Local Level (not greater), and that the grassland suffers from disturbance and is heavily grazed by horses.

1.37 EPR and the applicant, Esquire Development Ltd, would welcome a meeting with Gravesham Borough Council and KCC EAS to discuss and agree the principles associated with the

restoration/enhancement of retained on-site grassland; and also, to agree the principles associated with off-site provision of Lowland Meadow. The applicant is currently engaging with third parties about the delivery of any on-site short-full to ensure the scheme is policy compliant, as well as ensuring the proposals are compliant with the associated BNG trading rules.

- 1.38 Once the applicant and EPR have had an opportunity to discuss and agree the principles associated with the on-site and off-site delivery of Lowland Meadow Habitat with Gravesham Borough Council and KCC EAS, the principles can be secured via the standard BNG condition, and an updated BNG validation statement.
- 1.39 Given the 'Outline' status of the application, that discussions about off-site delivery of Lowland Meadow are commencing, and that there are other technical matters the applicant is currently reviewing as a result of third party comments about other technical matters (such as highways), the applicant would be happy to agree to a pre-commencement planning condition that secures the submission and approval in writing of an Ecological Management Plan that covers all on-site habitats.
- 1.40 Therefore, we would also welcome an opportunity to discuss and agree a proportionate and appropriate framework to ensure information in relation to off-site provision of Lowland Meadow is also provided via a pre-commencement planning condition. This is of particular relevance given that third parties (rather than the applicant) are likely to be responsible for off-site delivery.

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6th November 2025