

COYNE ENVIRONMENTAL LTD

Mill Farm,
Charlton,
Hitchin,
SG5 2AB



PRELIMINARY ECOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

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INTRODUCTION

Coyne Environmental Ltd has been instructed by Howkins & Harrison to undertake a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) of Mill Farm, Charlton, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 2AB. The purpose of the PEA is to find if there are any ecological features of significance for a planning application to be submitted to North Herts District Council. This is for the conversion of buildings to residential.

A Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) has already been undertaken by Philip Irving MCIEEM, Countryside Management Trust which is now out of date for a planning application. This found no ecology of importance, including bats (European Protected Species). The survey and results of this PEA have been taken into account in this assessment.



To assess the site's ecology, a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) survey and report will be prepared. This will assist the local planning authority (LPA) in assess what environmental studies may be required when determining the application or which may be appropriately dealt with by a suitably worded planning condition.

The survey and analysis will allow the proposals to be reviewed to ascertain what measures are needed to achieve a satisfactory result for the site. The PEA will enable the LPA to consider the proposal's ecological impact on the environment. It can then discharge its legal obligations under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2018) and any "Outline Mitigation and Compensation Strategy" if required.

The survey was carried out on 6th August 2024 in fair weather conditions and completed by Assistant Ecologist Pierce McKeon AIEEM, in good weather conditions 21C dry, light winds, clear skies.

LOCATION

The survey site is located at Grid Reference TL 17866 28057. It is approximately 0.71 hectares in area and is situated between Charlton Road and Brick Kiln Lane, in the village of Charlton, approximately 600m south of the town of Hitchin.

The immediate landscape is that of an agricultural area. There are several buildings making up the town of Charlton, which is in close proximity to the Site, all near the river Hiz.

Site Name	Designation	Approximate distance to Site	Reason for designation
Chilterns	Area of outstanding natural beauty	1.4km west	A landscape of remarkable beauty and distinctive character with a unique interaction of geological, ecological and cultural heritage features.
Oughtonhead Common	Local nature reserve	2km northwest	wide variety of wildlife habitats
Oughtonhead	Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)	1.8km northwest	National Importance in Geological Conservation

The Site is within the SSSI impact zone for the Oughtonhead SSSI. This Site is designed for its geological importance and has not been considered in this ecological report.

AREA DESIGNATIONS

Management and protection of biodiversity within the UK planning system are set out through European and UK legislation. The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) is the main protection for wildlife. There is also legislation for specific species, the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, the EU Habitats and Birds Directive, and more general guidance, the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2011-2020. This study and report have also taken into account BS 42020 (2013) Biodiversity -Code of Practice for Planning and Development.

The North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 Policy NE1 and NE4 will also need to be considered.

Policy NE1; "Planning permission will be granted provided that development:

- Protects, conserves and where possible enhances the strategic green infrastructure network;
- Avoids the loss, fragmentation, severance or negative impact on the function of the strategic green infrastructure network;
- Creates new strategic green infrastructure where appropriate and is accompanied by a plan for its long-term maintenance and management; and

- Has suitable mitigation measures or appropriate replacement to satisfactorily address adverse impacts on the strategic green infrastructure network.”

Policy NE4; “Planning permission will only be granted for development proposals that appropriately protect, enhance and manage biodiversity.”

“All development should deliver measurable net gains for biodiversity, contribute to ecological networks and/or restore degraded or isolated habitats where possible.”

“Applicants should, having regard to the status of any affected site(s) or feature(s):

- Submit an ecological survey that is commensurate to the scale and location of the development and the likely impact on biodiversity, the legal protection or other status of the site;
- Demonstrate that adverse effects can be avoided and / or satisfactorily minimised having regard to the hierarchy of protection below:
 - locating on an alternative site with a less harmful impact;
 - providing adequate mitigation measures; or
 - as a last resort compensated for.”

SITE

The site comprises several agricultural buildings, surrounded by hedgerows, scrubland, grassland and a river.

A walkover ecological survey has therefore been undertaken using the methodology set out in UK Habitat (UKHab) Classification User Manual. However, if the survey identifies any wildlife of significance, measures will be taken as set out in the UK Habitat Classification User Manual (2018) and CIEEM Guidelines (2017).

Habitats recorded on Site are as follows;

Buildings (UKHab Code; u1b5)

The Site Consists of at least four separate building clusters. It was difficult to separate the buildings as they seemed to extend from one another over time.

The buildings were a mix of brick buildings, corrugated iron/steel and asbestos clad barns and timber outhouses.

Artificial unvegetated land, unsealed surface (UKHab Code; u1c)

A gravel driveway leading to most of the buildings and the road was present in the southeast of the Site.

Artificial unvegetated land, sealed surface (UKHab Code; u1b)

A small patch of hard standing was present adjacent to the gravel driveway. Additionally, another area of hard standing was present in the south of the Site as an alternative entrance to one of the barns.

Native hedgerow (UKHab Code; h2)

The perimeter of the Northeast and the west of the Site was made up of a dense native hedgerow in good condition.

The northeast hedgerow was predominantly made up of blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and elder (*Sambucus nigra*). Common Nettle (*Urtica dioica*), ragwort

(*Jacobaea vulgaris*), cleavers (*Galium aparine*) and spear thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*) were noted growing within the understory of the hedge.

The western hedgerow was a mix of blackthorn, elder, ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), and common hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*). The understory had spear thistle, common nettle, ragwort, bindweed (*Convolvulus sp.*) and English ivy (*Hedera helix*).

Rivers and streams (UKHab Code; r1)

Bisecting the Site was the River Hiz, an important chalk stream, which had dense vegetation growing on its banks.

Aquatic marginal vegetation (UKHab Code; f2d)

The banks of the River Hiz had dense coverings of bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*), spear thistle, great mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) and great willow herb (*Epilobium hirsutum*).

Modified (UKHab Code; q4)

Two areas of modified grassland were present on Site. One area is on the western edge of the Site, and another is on the northeast of the Site. Both areas had been recently mown, so it was not possible to identify the grass species. However, it was possible to identify Forbes within the grassland that indicates a nutrient-enriched soil. This species includes common nettle, spear thistle, ragwort and creeping buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*).

Ruderal/ ephemeral (UKHab code; u1-81)

Patches of ruderal/ephemeral vegetation were present throughout the Site, predominantly growing between the buildings. These patches were dominated by common nettle but also had occasional elder, ragwort, butterfly bush (*Buddleja sp.*) and common hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*) growing in them.



Photo of one of the buildings on Site



A photo of one of the buildings on Site with aquatic marginal vegetation in the foreground



Photo of the unsealed surface path leading from the road onto the Site, with patches of ruderal/epithermal vegetation.



Photo of native hedgerow in the background and modified grassland in the foreground



Photo of the brick building and wooden building. As well as river, aquatic marginal vegetation and modified grassland



Photo of a bird nesting in one of the buildings.

Badgers

Although no signs of badgers were recorded during the survey, the habitat was considered suitable for this species. As such, during construction, contractors should be made aware of the potential presence of badgers and should contact an ecologist if they find them on Site.

Bats

Using the Bat Conservation Trust's Bat Surveys for Professional Ecologists: Good Practice Guidelines 2023 (4th edition) criteria, all the buildings on the Site were considered to have features that were of **negative** suitability for roosting bats.

Bats (European Protected Species) are known to utilise features such as lifted roof tiles, soffit boxes and dense ivy for roosting. All such features were found on the Site, examples of which are noted in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Photos of potential roosting features noted on Site

Great crested newts (GCN)

Charlton Mill Pond is located approximately 30m south of the Site. The Site also has an appropriate mix of dense vegetation suitable for supporting GCN. However, no GCN were observed on the survey. A Habitat Suitability Index (HIS) was therefore considered unnecessary

Nesting birds

Birds are protected from being intentionally or recklessly disturbed while nesting. The buildings and hedgerows on Site were considered to be of value to nesting birds; evidence of nesting was observed (**Error! Reference source not found.****Error! Reference source not found.**)

Therefore, it is recommended that any work proposed be carried out outside of the nesting season (March to August inclusive). Should any clearance of shrubs and trees with the potential to contain nesting birds be required during this period, any such areas to be cleared should be supervised by an ecologist. If an active nest is then found, clearance will have to be delayed within 5 meters of the nest until any chicks present have left the nest.

Otter and water vole

Otters or water voles could potentially use the River Hiz running through the middle of the Site. Both species are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). As such, it is recommended that a Precautionary Working Method Statement (PWMS) should be set out to ensure any potential wildlife present is adequately protected.

Reptiles

The site had a mix of habitats: areas of bare ground, riparian habitat, and long vegetation. As such, the Site was considered suitable for reptiles. It is therefore recommended that the proposed PWMS include working methods to protect possible reptiles on site.

Western European Hedgehog

It is likely that hedgehogs are using the hedgerows and aquatic marginal vegetation for foraging or hibernating. As such, it is recommended that if this vegetation needs to be removed, it be done under the proposed PWMS, with reference to protecting any potential hedgehogs on the site.

PRELIMINARY WORKING METHOD STATEMENT (PWMS)

In order to ensure that any wildlife that may be on site is protected when works are in progress the following PWMS sets out principles that should be adhered throughout the construction period.

The following works are recommended to be undertaken to ensure any existing ecology and wildlife of the site is managed to conserve as much as practical:

- 1 The River Hiz, an important chalk stream, runs through the property and must be protected from any possibility of pollution when the works are being carried out.
- 2 Within the bird breeding season (March-August) work on any vegetation clearing or tree work, should only be considered outside this period.
- 3 If urgent tree work is necessary, a bird nesting inspection should be undertaken by a qualified ecologist and any current nests or nest building found are to be left with a 25m cordon either side of the area and left until any chicks have fledged.
- 4 Works near to possible bat sites should be scheduled for during the winter months to ensure the likelihood of encountering bats is reduced as much as possible.

- 5 It is important to ensure that if clearance does involve wood fires these are inspected to ensure animals, like hedgehogs, have not temporally taken refuge here.
- 6 Any vegetation clearance should ideally be removed in winter (Dec-Feb) to ensure that any possible foraging / migrating reptiles between areas are not affected.
- 7 Contractors will be made aware of all recommendations outlined within this statement to make them aware of the possible presence of any species of wildlife.

BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN

The Environment Act 2021 has a mandatory require for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) on developments of a minimum of 10%. If a BNG metric is required this should form part of the planning application. Any mitigation or required enhancement needed to meet the statutory net gain can then be incorporated into the ecological and landscape design. This could include native species of planting, selected wild flora mixes and habitat creation in the form of bat and bird boxes and other features for fauna (refugia for stag beetle).

CONCLUSIONS

Coyne Environmental Ltd has been instructed to undertake an ecology review of Mill Farm, Charlton, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 2AB, to determine whether there is potential for protected species or sensitive habitats on site prior to assessing the application for development. A Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) review has been undertaken, taking into account the previous study by the Countryside Management Trust. Both studies have now concluded that this site does not contain any habitats of importance or ecology of significance

In accordance with BCT Guidelines and having regard to the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, I conclude that this site does not contain evidence of areas of significance and high biodiversity value, including European Protected Species (EPS). I assess that no further surveys would be needed to confirm this absence.

Therefore, in my professional opinion the Preliminary Ecological Appraisal Report, satisfy the requirements in respect of ecology and biodiversity enhancement, for North Herts District Council. I recommend that the application can be considered on this basis and that no further environment surveys are necessary to determine the application.

REFERENCES

Location Plan

Baseline Site Survey Plan

The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981)



Land at Charlton, Hitchin Preliminary Ecological Appraisal

