

Liz Anderson
North Herts District Council
Council Offices
Gernon Road
Letchworth Garden City
SG6 3JF

10/12/2025

Dear Liz,

**Response to Ecology Comments - Land South of Turnpike Lane, Ickleford
(Planning Ref: 25/02401/OP)**

In response to the ecology-related comments received from North Herts Council received subsequent to the submission of the above planning application, I have set out below some clarifications.

Outstanding Ecological Surveys

An addendum Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) report has been prepared for the Site¹, which sets out the results of all outstanding ecological survey work, provides updated evaluations of ecological features, and any resulting changes to recommendations for mitigation and enhancement.

The survey data provided now encompasses a full season of bat activity surveys, comprising monthly static bat detector surveys from May to October inclusive (seven deployments) and seasonal night-time bat walkover surveys, results of a tree climbing survey, as well as two otter and water vole survey visits. Further information has also been provided on the locations of suitable reptile habitat features within the site, namely the locations of manure piles suitable for grass snake egg-laying.

The findings of the outstanding surveys are consistent with the existing survey data presented in the EclA report and, as such, no significant changes to the impact assessment and associated ecological mitigation and enhancement measures have been proposed.

Biodiversity Net Gain

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) calculations for the site, presented within the Statutory Biodiversity Metric and summarised within the BNG report, conclude that the development proposals will result in a total net loss of 7.68 Habitat Units (HU) constituting a loss of 14.56%, and a total net gain of 2.85 Hedgerow Units (HeU) constituting a 1,517.99% gain within the site. It is proposed that the loss of habitat units will be compensated for through the purchase of off-site BNG units.

In line with the BNG Principle 1 and the Biodiversity Gain Hierarchy, avoidance of adverse effects to on-site habitats has been one of the primary considerations from an early stage. High distinctiveness habitat, namely 'Lowland mixed deciduous woodland', has been retained as far as possible with only 0.08ha of 1.9501ha to be lost as a result of the proposals. Medium distinctiveness 'Other woodland; broadleaved' and 'Rural trees' habitats have been retained in their entirety. All retained habitats on site will be protected during construction through the implementation of suitable buffers, to be secured within the CEMP: Biodiversity for the site.

'Other neutral grassland' (ONG) is also a medium distinctiveness habitat and comprises the majority of habitat area within the site (3.6006ha). The proposed development footprint, including developed land and residential gardens, occupies 1.9005ha; loss of ONG in this area was considered unavoidable in order to facilitate the

¹ Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) Addendum Report – Land South of Turnpike Lane, Ickleford (December 2025)
Clarkson and Woods Ltd.

development. ONG habitat outside of the development footprint is also proposed to be lost on a precautionary basis. This habitat will either be re-created either as ONG in poor condition, or other habitats identified within landscaping proposals, largely of medium distinctiveness such as 'Ponds (non-priority habitat)' and 'Mixed scrub'. This precautionary approach has been taken into account for the potential risk of temporary damage to ONG habitat outside of the development footprint during construction, in line with BNG Principle 4.

As a result of this, however, the loss of ONG habitat within the site comprises the majority of the total habitat unit loss on site (17.08HU of 21.32HU). Compensation of this loss cannot be delivered on site whilst ensuring the habitat proposals remain feasible and deliverable, and maintaining the required footprint of the proposed development. It is therefore proposed that the loss of units resulting from the development is compensated for via the delivery of off-site biodiversity units. The necessary units will be secured post-consent via the Natural England Biodiversity Gain Sites Register to discharge the Biodiversity Gain condition, should permission be granted.

A draft HMMP has also been provided for the site, relating to on-site habitat management only. A finalised version of this document will be provided alongside a Biodiversity Gain Plan to discharge the Biodiversity Gain condition. The Biodiversity Gain Plan will provide the value of proposed on-site habitats based on approved plans, as well as confirmation that the necessary off-site biodiversity units have been secured. An HMMP will also be provided associated with the delivery of off-site habitats, to be produced by the unit provider once the purchase of off-site units has been finalised.

Great Crested Newts and District Level Licensing

In 2025, eDNA surveys of accessible ponds within 250m of the site (identified as P1 and P3 in the EcIA) were conducted, with P3 returning negative results for GCN and P1 returning indeterminate results, likely as a result of high sediment levels in the sample. P1 was also connected to the stream, further reducing its suitability for breeding GCN. Terrestrial habitats within the site varied in their suitability for GCN, with grazed grassland comprising the majority of the site considered to be of limited suitability. Given the lack of GCN species records returned during the desk study within 2km of the site, the location of the site within a Natural England 'Green Risk Zone' for GCN, and results of the surveys, it was considered highly unlikely that GCN are present within the site.

It was therefore recommended that works on site follow a precautionary, non-licensed approach under RAMS, with a suitable Risk Avoidance Method Statement to be provided within the CEMP: Biodiversity for the site. This approach is appropriate given the level of risk of encountering GCN within the site.

As a further precautionary measure, update eDNA surveys are recommended prior to commencement of construction to confirm the continued absence of GCN within P3 and to provide conclusive results for P1. Further surveys were not considered essential, as the specifications RAMS provide suitable confidence that impacts can be avoided during construction, but have been recommended to provide further reassurance. In the unlikely event that these surveys return positive results, a licence will be sought from Natural England (likely comprising entry into a District Level Licensing (DLL) scheme).

The implementation of a RAMS is considered proportionate and justifiable in this case, based on the information available, even in the absence of further survey. It is considered unlikely that entry into a DLL scheme will be required, however, in our experience, it has been possible to pursue this route post-planning where GCN have been encountered on site during construction, for example.

Protective Buffers

Woodland

As raised in the comments provided, Policy NE4 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 states the following, with regard to protective buffers to ecological features:

'12 metres of complimentary habitat should be provided around wildlife sites (locally designated sites and above), trees and hedgerows. It may be necessary to exceed this distance for fragile habitats such as ancient woodland or to provide appropriate root protection for mature trees'

The policies of the Local Plan have been considered from an early stage and, as far as possible, a 12m buffer has been implemented across the site from trees, principally those within woodland habitats bounding the site. In many places, particularly in the south of the site, this buffer has been exceeded, and extensive creation of complementary grassland and scrub habitat is proposed. However, in a number of discrete locations the buffer is reduced, primarily to facilitate key infrastructure features, such as access roads, or creation of residential landscaping (i.e. vegetated gardens). Consideration was given to the location of encroachment into the 12m buffer area, and woodland habitats to the south of the site (W5 and W6), considered to be of highest ecological value, were prioritised and buffers extended in these areas. These woodlands form the riparian corridor of the River Oughton and provide connectivity to the wider landscape; the habitat network has been retained and strengthened in these areas within the proposals through additional planting. Root protection areas of trees have been observed across the site, in line with recommendations of the arboricultural assessment, and appropriate measures will be set out within a CEMP: Biodiversity for the site and implemented throughout construction to ensure impacts to retained woodland areas are avoided. The integrity of complementary habitats is maintained throughout the site and generally enhanced from the baseline value of heavily horse-grazed pasture, with proposed scrub and tree planting providing opportunities for succession over the lifetime of the scheme. In recognition of the reduced buffer size in some areas and minor loss of woodland habitat, a residual minor adverse effect on woodland habitat is anticipated as a result of the proposed development but is not considered to be significant.

Badgers

Four badger setts were identified within the site: Main Sett SE1, Annexe Sett SE2, Outlier Sett SE3, and Outlier Sett SE4. Within the proposals, buffers of over 50m exist between SE2, SE3 and SE4 and any built development; no direct impacts to these setts are therefore anticipated during construction and operation.

SE1, a main sett comprising over 15 partially used entrances, is located within W6; woodland habitat in this area was considered to be of high ecological value, and retention of this habitat has been prioritised. The closest sett entrances are located approximately 25m from proposed built infrastructure, and over 30m from proposed dwellings. The majority of SE1 sett entrances are over 30m from any sealed surface associated with the development. As stated within the EclA, evidence from the National Survey of Badger² indicates that tunnels rarely extend beyond 10m from sett entrances and it is therefore considered unlikely that tunnels associated with SE1 are at risk of direct damage during construction. However, depending on the detailed design within 30m of SE1, it may be necessary to conduct works under licence from Natural England to protect the sett from damage/disturbance and to prevent future conflict with householders. Excavation of a subterranean fenceline is proposed as solution to dissuade badgers from extending the sett towards the developed area, and also to act as a vibration dampener during construction.

The proposed buffers, licenced works (if required), and protective measures to be set out within the CEMP: Biodiversity for the site are considered sufficient to ensure no significant residual effects on badger as a result of the proposals.

Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Hertfordshire has been recently published, with only the draft form available prior to submission of the application. The LNRS mapping identifies the site, or parts of the site, within several action areas, including the following:

- Lowland Broadleaved Woodland and Scrub (Action 4);
- Grassland and Heathland (Actions 1 and 3);
- Rivers, Chalk Streams, and Floodplains (Actions 1 and Action 6);
- Areas of Particular Importance for Biodiversity (APIBs);
- Area that Could become of Particular Importance for Biodiversity (ACIB);
- Grass and Heath Focus Area; and
- Herts Chalk Focus Area.

LNRSs provide a framework for nature recovery across UK to help inform where habitat enhancement or creation measures would be most valuable, to strengthen habitat networks. The site is clearly identified as an

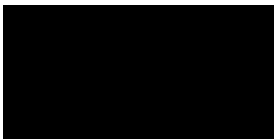
² The Badger (*Meles meles*) in Britain: Present Status and Future Population Changes (1989) Cresswell et al.

opportunity to provide meaningful and strategic biodiversity benefits. The proposals include retention of key woodland habitats and riparian corridor, and creation of a mosaic of habitats including grassland, scrub and tree planting within action areas identified above.

With regards to BNG, given that the LNRS was published following submission of the planning application, reassessment of the site baseline in terms of strategic significance value is not required. However, publication of the LNRS is likely to improve the strategic significance of proposed habitat creation on site, particularly to the south. Documents to be provided to discharge the Biodiversity Gain condition, including finalised HMMP and Gain Plan, will reflect the impacts of the LNRS and an updated Metric will also be provided in line with the Defra Guidance Note 'LNRS and Strategic Significance Multiplier Transition Guidance'.

I hope we have provided sufficient information to address your concerns. Should you require any further information, please do let me know.

Yours sincerely,



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Ecologist