



Preliminary Ecological Appraisal

**Land at Hill House Farm Cottages,
Handcross Road, Staplefield, West Sussex,
RH17 6EE**

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LIABILITIES:

Whilst every effort has been made to guarantee the accuracy of this report, it should be noted that living animals and plants are capable of migration/establishing and whilst such species may not have been located during the survey duration, their presence may be found on a site at a later date.

This report provides a snap shot of the species that were present at the time of the survey only and does not consider seasonal variation. Furthermore, where access is limited or the site supports habitats which are densely vegetated only dominant species maybe recorded.

The recommendations contained within this document are based on a reasonable timeframe between the completion of the survey and the commencement of any works. If there is any delay between the commencement of works that may conflict with timeframes laid out within this document, or have the potential to allow the ingress of protected species, a suitably qualified ecologist should be consulted.

It is the duty of care of the landowner/developer to act responsibly and comply with current environmental legislation if protected species are suspected or found prior to or during works.

1.0 Introduction

Background

1.1 The Ecology Partnership was commissioned by Victoria Hogg to undertake a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) assessment of the land to the south of Hill House Farm Cottages, Handcross Road, Staplefield, West Sussex, RH17 6EE, hereafter referred to as the 'site'.

1.2 The key objectives of a PEA (CIEEM 2017) are to:

- Identify the likely ecological constraints associated with a project;
- Identify any mitigation measures likely to be required, following the 'Mitigation Hierarchy' (CIEEM 2016; BSI 2013, Clause 5.2);
- Identify any additional surveys that may be required to inform an Ecological Impact Assessment (EcIA); and
- Identify the opportunities offered by a project to deliver ecological enhancement.

1.3 This report comprises the:

- Legislative and planning context (Section 1);
- Assessment methodologies (Section 2);
- Results (Section 3);
- Implications for development (Section 4);
- An impact assessment (Section 5); and
- Conclusions (Section 6).

Site Context and Status

1.4 The site is situated between Hill House Farm and Hill House Farm Cottage between the villages of Handcross and Staplefield to the south of Crawley (TQ 27044 29126). The proposed track area is c.4m x 120m and consists of ruderal and ephemeral vegetation in the south and modified grassland in the north. It cuts through an existing field used for cattle grazing with Hill House Farm Cottage to the north and Hill House Farm to the south. The wider surroundings are rural, dominated by pasture, and woodland.

1.5 The aerial photography overleaf (Figure 1) shows the site and its immediate surroundings. The red line depicts the approximate site boundary and survey area.



Figure 1: Approximate location of the red line boundary.

Proposed Development

- 1.6 The proposed development involves an excavation to 400mm of the trackway within the field, placement of water permeable geotextile, 300mm of crushed hardcore, 100mm of type 1 MOT, and a thin layer of soil on top, and will be allowed to naturally revegetate. The existing concrete access through the farmyard is being retained.

Planning Policies

- 1.7 The site was surveyed to assess its ecological value and to ensure the proposals were compliant with relevant planning policy and legislation. Policy guidance is provided by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2024) as well as policies from the Mid Sussex District Plan (adopted March 2018):
- Policy DP38: Biodiversity
- 1.8 The Environment Bill (Environment Act 2021) received Royal Assent on 9th November 2021 and is now enacted as the Environment Act 2021. Part 6 (Nature and Biodiversity) and Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021 insert a new section 90A and Schedule 7A into the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (TCPA), which contain the provisions requiring mandatory biodiversity net gain for development granted planning permission pursuant to the TCPA. These provisions require developments

to provide a biodiversity value post-development that exceeds the predevelopment biodiversity value of the onsite habitats by at least 10%. This was adopted in February 2024 although there are a number of exemptions which may mean that biodiversity net gain is not required. These are listed under government guidance and are as follows:

- Development below a de minimis threshold;
- Householder applications;
- Small scale self-build and custom housebuilding;
- HS2; and
- Biodiversity net gain sites.

1.9 The site has therefore been surveyed to assess its ecological value and to ensure compliance with national and local plan policies and other relevant nature conservation legislation including; Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, and the Conservation of Habitats and Species (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

1.10 The report has been produced with reference to current guidelines for PEA (CIEEM 2017) and in accordance with BS 42020:2013 Biodiversity – Code of Practice for Planning and Development.

2.0 Methodology

Desktop Study

2.1 A desktop study search was completed using an internet-based mapping service (www.magic.gov.uk) for statutory designated sites and an internet-based aerial mapping service (maps.google.co.uk) was used to understand the habitats present in and around the survey area including identifying habitat linkages and features (ponds, woodlands etc.) within the wider landscape. Records were requested from Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre (SxBRC) for great crested newts (GCN) within 1km of the site boundary.

Preliminary Ecological Appraisal

2.2 An extended preliminary ecological appraisal was undertaken on the 11th August 2025 by Matthew Pendry BSc (Hons) MCIEEM (FISC level 4). The surveyor identified the habitats present, following the standard 'UK Hab' auditing method. The site was

surveyed on foot and the existing habitats and land uses were recorded on an appropriately scaled map (JNCC 2010). In addition, the dominant plant species in each habitat were recorded. The potential for the site to support protected species was also assessed.

Protected Species Assessments

- 2.3 Any evidence of protected species was recorded. Standard methods of search and measures of presence or likely absence based on habitat suitability were used for bats in trees and buildings (Collins, 2023), breeding birds¹, dormouse Wells *et al.* 2025), great crested newt (ARG 2010), reptiles (Froglife 2015), badgers (Creswell *et al.* 1990) and water vole (Strachan *et al.* 2011).

Limitations

- 2.4 It should be noted that whilst every effort has been made to provide a comprehensive description of the site, no single investigation could ensure the complete characterisation and prediction of the natural environment. The site was visited over the period of one site visit, as such seasonal variations cannot be observed and potentially only a selection of all species that potentially occur within the site have been recorded. Therefore, the survey provides a general assessment of potential nature conservation value of the site and does not include a definitive plant species list.
- 2.5 The protected species assessment provides a preliminary view of the likelihood of protected species occurring on site, based on the suitability of the habitat and any direct evidence on site. It should not be taken as providing a full and definitive survey of any protected species group. The assessment is only valid for the time when the survey was carried out. Additional surveys may be recommended if, on the basis of this assessment, it is considered reasonably likely that protected species may be present.

¹<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/birdatlas/methods/breeding-evidence>

3.0 Results

Desktop Study

- 3.1 There are no internationally designated statutory sites located within 15km of the site boundary, and a single national statutory designated site with 2km: Cow Wood and Harry's Wood Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), located 215m to the north of the site, designated for its ancient Ghyll woodland (See Figure 2 below)

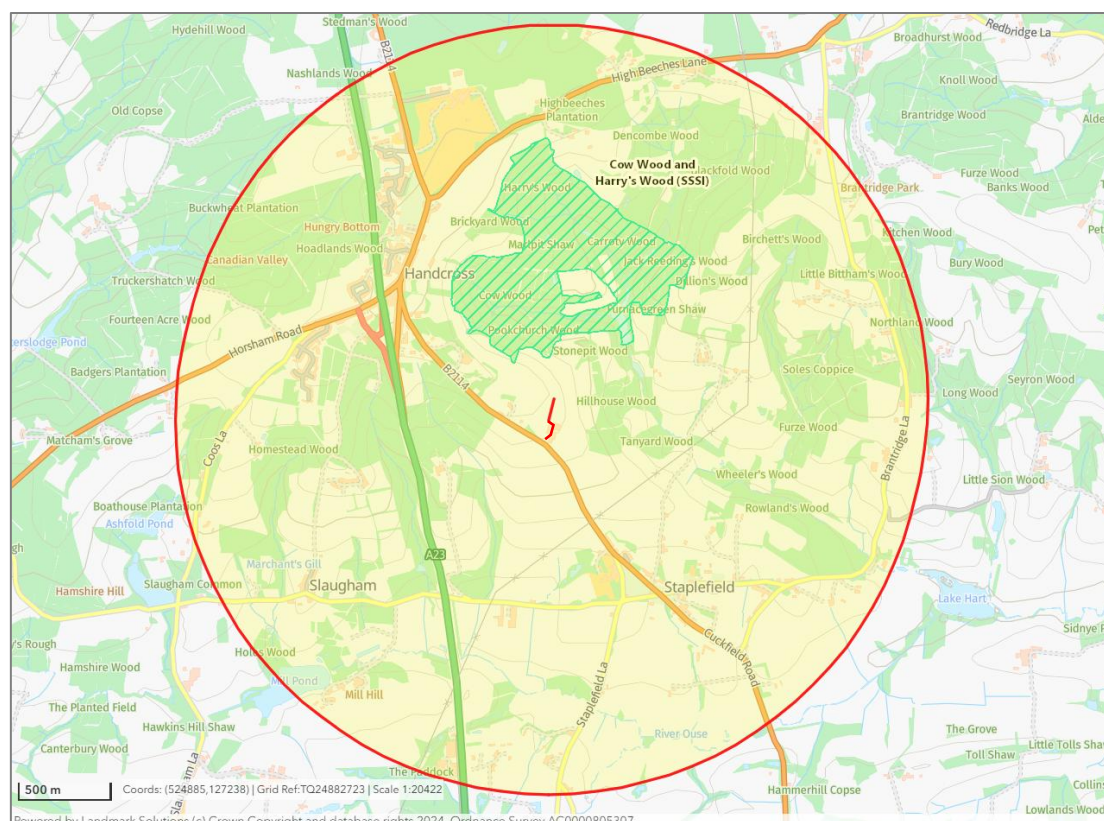


Figure 2: National statutory designated sites within 2km of the site boundary.

- 3.2 There are also several units of priority habitat within 500m of the site (Figure 3), the closest of each type include:
- Traditional orchards, c.10m south;
 - Deciduous woodland, c.200m east;
 - Ancient and semi-natural woodland, c.200m east;
 - Lowland meadow, c.320m north-west of the site boundary.



Figure 3: Priority habitat within 2km of the works area including lowland meadow (bright green), deciduous woodland (dark green), ancient and semi natural woodland (green vertical hatching).

- 3.3 The desktop study revealed seven European Protected Species (EPS) licence which were granted within 2km of the site boundary (Figure 4); this includes five licences for bats (closest 775m NW), two for dormouse (closest 1.12km NW) and one for great crested newts (1km NW).
- 3.4 Four Great Crested Newt (GCN) survey licence returns are present with 2km with the closest being c.700m west of the site (Figure 4)

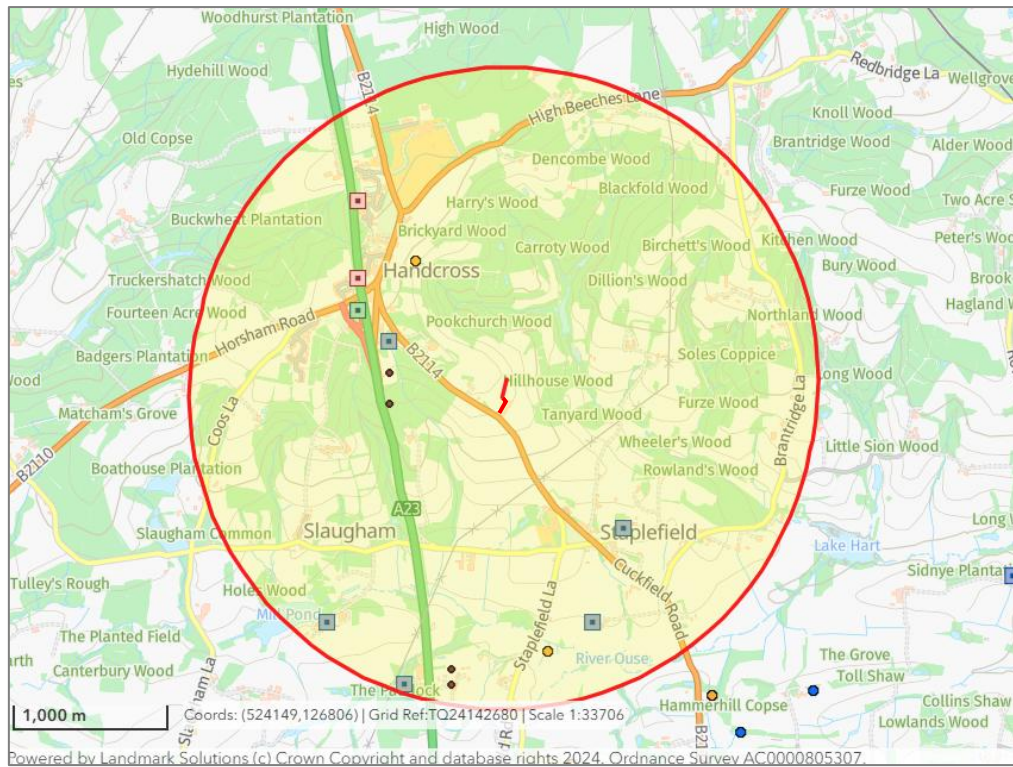


Figure 4: Location of bat EPS licence (blue square), GCN EPS licence (green square), dormouse EPS licence (pink square), GCN class survey licence return (purple dot) and GCN confirmed absence (orange dot), within 2km of the site boundary.

3.5 OS maps and aerial imagery indicated that there are two ponds within 250m of the site boundary: one 90m east and one 170m west (see Figure 5).

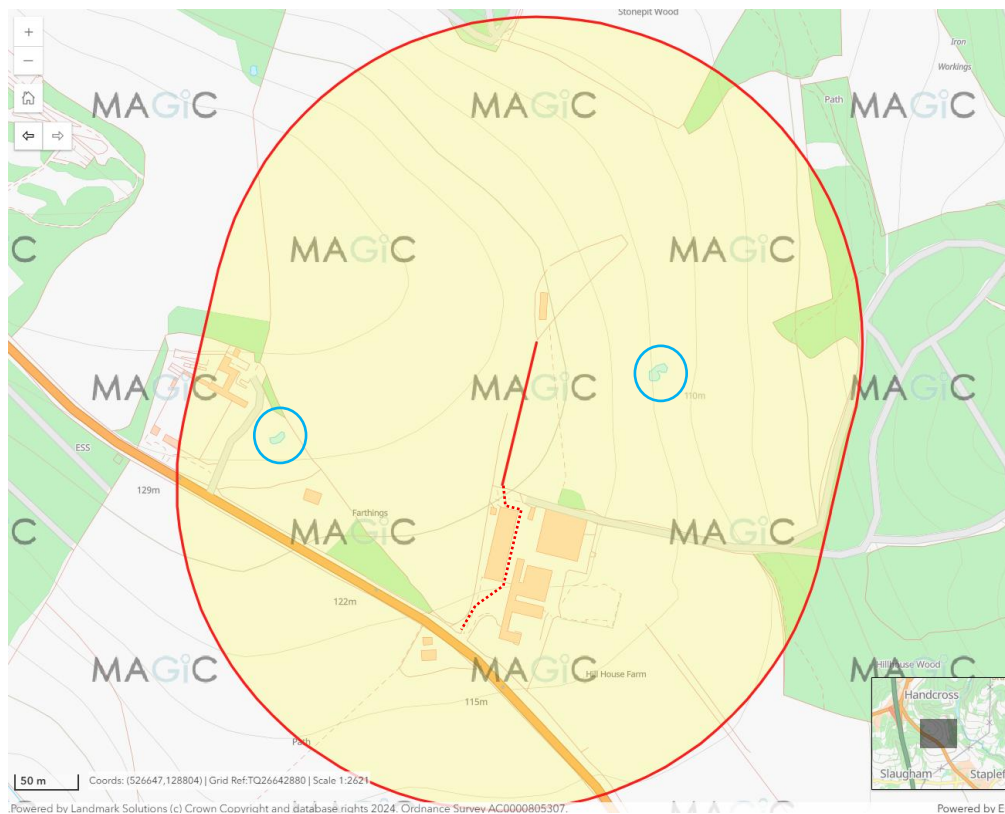


Figure 5: Ponds within 250m of the site, excluding area of retained concrete (dashed line)

- 3.6 A 1km radius data search was requested from Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre (SxBRC) for records of GCN. A total of 14 records were returned across four differing locations, the closest being 520m west of the site. See Figure 6 below:



*Figure 6: GCN records within 1km of the site excluding area of retained concrete.
Each buffer line represents 150m.*

Habitat Survey

- 3.7 The site largely comprised pasture in the north and concrete hardstanding in the farmyard to the south. Broad habitat types identified within the site boundary are detailed below. Only species of note have been listed within this section.
- 3.8 The habitat map is presented in **Appendix 1**, site photos in **Appendix 2**, a full species list in **Appendix 3** and condition assessments in **Appendix 4**.

Modified Grassland (g4)

- 3.9 The majority of the site comprised short sward modified grassland, dominated by perennial rye-grass with abundant white clover and locally dominant creeping thistle.

The mean species richness across five quadrats was 3.2 species per m², and it is likely that the area has been seeded with a fodder mix for the cattle.

Ruderal/ephemeral

- 3.10 The southern part of the site comprised an informal access track with evidence of gravel or hardcore beneath the surface soil. Patchy short vegetation had colonised here including frequent perennial rye grass and annual meadow grass, with occasional greater plantain, even-leaved knotgrass, and rarer occurrence of marsh cudweed, shepherd's purse, pineappleweed, scentless mayweed, and broad-leaved dock.

Protected Species

Roosting Bats

- 3.11 No buildings or trees were present on site.

Foraging and Commuting Bats

- 3.12 The site was dominated by short-sward grassland which provides limited foraging opportunities for bats.

Badgers

- 3.13 No evidence of badgers, including setts, latrines, or holes, was found within 30m of the site. However, given the rural nature of the surrounding landscape, including the presence of badgers commuting and passing across the site cannot be ruled out definitively.

Great Crested Newt (GCN)

- 3.14 Dominated by mostly short sward grassland, the majority of the site was considered to support unsuitable terrestrial habitat for GCN, however taller areas of thistles may be more suitable. GCN are known to be in the wider surrounding area, with the closest record to the works area being 520m west of the site in 2024. The closest pond 85m to the east of the site was inspected and found to be dry with no sign of any pond related vegetation. The only other pond within 250m is located 170m to the west and is located in a private garden and appears to be ornamental in nature with paved edges. It is therefore less likely to support GCN, but, it cannot be ruled out. As such, the potential for GCN to be present on site is considered low.

Hazel dormice

- 3.15 The site is dominated by short-sward grassland, which is considered unsuitable dormice habitat. The hedgerows throughout the site could be considered suitable habitat for dormouse, due to the presence of native woody species and connectivity to a wider woodland/ hedgerow network. However, there are no biological records of dormice within 1km of the site. Overall, it is considered possible dormouse would be present on site, albeit limited to the eastern and southern boundaries.

Reptiles

- 3.16 The majority of the site was considered sub-optimal for reptile species due to the lack of scrub or refugia and limited extent of taller vegetation to provide suitable shelter for reptiles from predators. Whilst the possibility of reptiles being present on site cannot be ruled out, it is unlikely the site could support more than a low population.

Nesting Birds

- 3.17 Due to the grazed nature of the grassland, it is unlikely to support ground nesting birds. However, owing to changing grazing regimes, their use of the site cannot be ruled out entirely.

Other Species

- 3.18 Due to a lack of suitable habitat, the site was not considered suitable for other protected species, such as water voles and otters.
- 3.19 Given the open nature of the site, presence of hedgehogs using the site opportunistically cannot be ruled out.

4.0 Discussion

- 4.1 The following paragraphs consider the effects of the development on designated sites, priority habitats and protected and priority species. Where the desk study and habitat survey provide sufficient evidence for an assessment of effects on any of these groups to be taken through planning, these are detailed below. The need for additional surveys and when and how these should be completed are summarised, if required.

Effects on Designated Sites

- 4.2 There are no internationally designated sites within 15km of the site boundary and only one nationally designated sites within 2km of the site boundary, Cow Wood and

Harry's Wood SSSI. While the site does fall within the SSSI impact risk zone, owing to the small scale of the proposed development, no impacts on this designated site, or any others, are anticipated.

Effects on Priority Habitats

- 4.3 No priority habitats are present on site. The closest priority habitat to the site boundary lowland mixed deciduous (ancient) woodland, located 215m north of the site. Due to the scale of the development and no associated habitat on-site, it is considered that impacts to this or any other priority habitats are unlikely.

Effects on on-site habitats

- 4.4 The modified grassland that dominates the site is common, widespread, and of low biodiversity value. As such, it is considered that the loss or removal of this habitat would result in site level impacts only.

Foraging and Commuting Bats

- 4.5 According to Bat Conservation Trust guidelines it is important that proportionality is employed when recommending further survey work for bat species on a proposed development site. As stated within section 2.2.19 of the latest survey guidelines (2023), the following points need to be considered with regard to planning bat surveys:

- Likelihood of bats being present;
- Type of proposed activities;
- Scale of proposed activities;
- Size, nature and complexity of the site;
- Species concerned;
- Number of individuals.

- 4.6 The site is considered to be of limited value to foraging bats due to the scale of the small site and dominance of heavily grazed grassland. Suitable habitat was limited to the offsite features, including the hedgerows and treeline in the wider landscape.

- 4.7 The proposals should involve no artificial lighting, and as such no significant impact on foraging and commuting bats is anticipated.

GCN

- 4.8 The site was considered largely sub-optimal for reptiles, with the dominance of short-sward modified grassland. However, depending on the level of grazing pressure, the suitability may fluctuate throughout the year. As such, reasonable avoidance measures are recommended:
- Vegetation in clearance are to be cut to 100mm (if necessary) and subject to a fingertip search by an ecologist.
 - Any potential refugia, such as the stored items, within development areas will need to be dismantled by hand or using sensitive machine work under close supervision of an ecologist.
 - The construction area should be checked prior to removal to ensure all potential refugia are sensitively removed.
- 4.9 During development work construction materials, as well as skips and pallets, should be stored on hardstanding / compacted land where possible and furthermore, should be elevated off the ground. This is so that no features are created that GCN could potentially use as refuge habitat.
- 4.10 Where trenches and holes are dug, these should not be left open overnight. GCN (and other amphibians, reptiles and small mammals) may get trapped in vertical-sided trenches. Therefore, where there is a risk of this occurring, the holes should be refilled, or planks of wood should be placed so that any trapped animals may use these to escape.
- 4.11 If a great crested newt is identified on site during works, then the following procedure must be followed;
- If a great crested newt is discovered at the site all works must cease immediately and Natural England and/or a great crested newt licenced ecologist must be contacted immediately to provide further advice.
 - A licence might be required before works can recommence. If so, procedures will be followed to obtain a Natural England European Protected Species Mitigation Licence (EPSML) or the district level licence for the works.
- 4.12 It is considered that if these methods are used on site then it is considered that no individual GCN would be harmed as a result of the proposals.

Badgers

- 4.13 No evidence of badgers, such as setts or latrines, were found on site or within 30m. However, badgers are a mobile animal and due to the woodland and rural farmland in the surrounding area, the presence of badgers on site cannot be ruled out definitively. As such, an update walkover for new badgers setts should be undertaken for all land within 30m of the excavation area prior to works.

Reptiles

- 4.14 The site was considered largely sub-optimal for reptiles, with the dominance of short-sward modified grassland. However, depending on the level of grazing pressure, the suitability may fluctuate throughout the year. If sward height is less than 150mm, at the time of works then it is considered that no further mitigation would be required. If over this length, then it is recommended that the excavation work is done sensitively under supervision of a suitably experience ecologist, following a fingertip search by the ecologist. Any reptiles found would be carefully moved away from the works area.

Nesting Birds

- 4.17 Although no evidence of nesting birds was recorded on site at the time of the survey, it was considered that the grassland may be suitable for ground nesting birds, depending on grazing pressure in the nest bird season. It is recommended that works should be carried out outside of the breeding bird season (March-August inclusive) or immediately after a nesting bird check by a suitably qualified ecologist. If active nests are identified, works in the vicinity of the nest must cease until the birds have fledged the nest.

Other species

- 4.18 The site has limited potential to support hedgehog. However, due to the lack of cover, it is unlikely they would nest on site.
- 4.19 No potential for any other protected species, such as dormouse, roosting bats, otters or water voles was identified within the site boundary and so are not considered to form a constraint on the development.

Ecological Enhancements

- 4.20 As the site does not fall under the direct ownership of the application. Enhancement measures within the redline would not be appropriate. However, it is recommended instead that the following features be incorporated into the garden area of Hill House Cottage, adjacent to the north of the site.
- 4.21 Bird and bat boxes can be hung on mature trees. The boxes should be hung a minimum of 3m off the ground, but preferably higher with potential presence of predation by domestic pets. Woodstone/woodcrete boxes such as Vivara Pro Seville 32mm WoodStone Nest Boxes and Vivara Pro Barcelona WoodStone Open Nest Boxes (Figure 7) are recommended for birds and are suitable for a range of smaller bird species including tree sparrows, wrens and robins. Suitable woodstone/woodcrete boxes for bats could include the Elisa Bat Box and the Beaumaris Woodstone Bat Box (Figure 8).



Figure 7: Vivara Pro WoodStone Nest Boxes



Figure 8: Elisa Bat Box and Beaumaris Woodstone Bat Box

- 4.22 It is also recommended that log piles are created to offer shelter for hibernating reptiles, amphibians, small mammals and insects, as well as a foraging area for some birds. Recommended structures for the log piles are shown in Figure 8 below.



Figure 8: Examples of log piles that can be made on site.

5.0 Impact Assessment

- 5.1 This section of the report forms an EcIA (Ecological Impact Assessment) and is designed to quantify and evaluate the potential impacts of the development on habitats and species present on site or within the local area.
- 5.2 The approach to this assessment accords with guidance presented within the CIEEM Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK and Ireland (CIEEM 2018). In essence, an EcIA assesses the activities associated with a proposed scheme that are likely to generate changes within identified zone of influences, on identified ecological features and receptors. The proposals are subsequently reviewed, and mitigation and compensation measures are outlined which help to reduce negative impacts.

5.3 Table 3 summarises the impacts and required mitigation for each receptor as previously detailed in the discussion.

Table 3: Assessment of effects from the proposal after mitigation and compensation

Feature	Scale of Importance	Mitigation/Compensation Required	Residual Effect
National Statutory Designated Sites	National	None required – sufficient distance from sites. No related habitat to be lost.	Not significant
Priority habitats	Site	None required- no priority habitat on site or within the zone of influence.	Not significant
GCN	Site	Sensitive clearance under ecological watching brief if habitat is suitable at the time of works	Not significant
Reptiles	Site	Sensitive clearance under ecological watching brief if habitat is suitable at the time of works	Not significant
Badgers	Site	Update badger walkover prior to works.	Not significant
Breeding birds	Site	Mitigating direct harm to nests by conducting works outside of nesting bird season or after a check by a suitably qualified ecologist.	Not significant

6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 The site does not lie within or adjacent to any designated sites. Cow Wood and Harry's Wood SSSI, is located 215m to the north, however, no residual negative impacts are anticipated due to the distances between the site, low impact nature of the work, and the lack of any related habitat to be lost.
- 6.2 No priority habitats are present on site, and the closet ancient woodland is 215m away.
- 6.3 The majority of the site is comprised modified grassland, grazed to a short sward, which is not considered to be ecologically significant.
- 6.4 No bat roost potential features were identified on site and, as such, the development is not considered to be constrained by roosting bats.
- 6.5 The wider surroundings are considered to be of interest for foraging and commuting bats, however, as no lighting is proposed, no impact is anticipated.
- 6.6 No evidence of badgers was identified on site or within 30m It is recommended that an update walkover is carried out prior to works to confirm this is still the case.
- 6.7 The grassland on site lacks sufficient cover and was considered sub-optimal for GCN and reptiles, as a precaution reasonable avoidance measures should be followed to avoid the works harming these species, and if a GCN is found works will need to cease and an application may be needed for a mitigation licence from Natural England.
- 6.8 Works should be undertaken outside nesting bird season (March to Aug inclusive) or after a nesting bird check by a qualified ecologist, to avoid impacts on ground nesting birds.
- 6.9 Recommendations for enhancements have been made within this report, aimed at improving the ecological value of the site post-development.

7.0 References

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Internet resources:

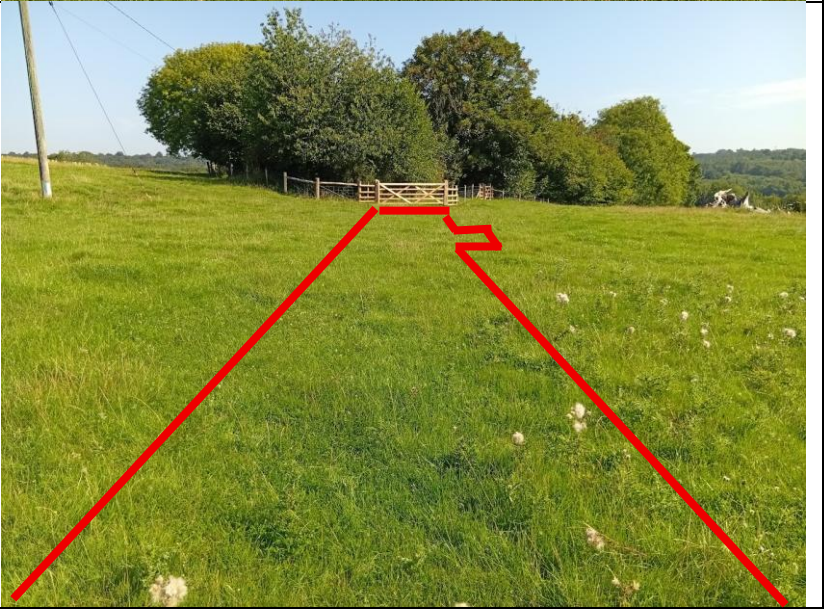
Google Maps: www.google.co.uk/maps

Magic Interactive Map: www.magic.gov.uk

Hart District Council: www.hart.gov.uk



Appendix 2: Photos

Photograph 1: Compacted hardcore with patchy grass, ephemeral and short perennial vegetation in the south of the site.	
Photograph 2: Modified grassland in the centre of the site featuring locally dominant creeping thistle.	
Photograph 3: Modified grassland at the north of the site leading to Hill House Farm Cottage.	

Photograph 4: Area marked as a pond on OS maps but dry at time of survey.



Appendix 3: Species List

Common Name	Latin Name	Quadrat					DAFOR
		1	2	3	4	5	
Perennial rye-grass	<i>Lolium perenne</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	D
Greater plantain	<i>Plantago major</i>	✓					O
Shepherd's purse	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	✓					R
Even-leaved knotgrass	<i>Polygonum suppressum</i>	✓					O
White clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	A
Creeping thistle	<i>Cirsium repens</i>		✓	✓			F
Annual meadowgrass	<i>Poa annua</i>			✓	✓		F
Pineappleweed	<i>Matricaria discoidea</i>						R
Scentless mayweed	<i>Tripleurospermum inodorum</i>						R
Marsh cudweed	<i>Gnaphalium uliginosum</i>						R
Common nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>						R
Broad-leaved dock	<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i>						R
Species richness:		4	3	4	3	2	
Mean species richness:		3.2					

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