

Technical Briefing Note

Project: Bengo Nursery, Hertford

Ecology Summary

Date: 5 December 2016

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1. Aspect Ecology is advising Kler Group in respect of ecological matters relating to the site at Bengo Nursery on Sacombe Road in Hertford. It is understood that the site is being promoted for residential development.
- 1.2. The site comprises an existing nursery and associated hardstanding with several overgrown areas of scrub and patches of grassland. The site boundaries are generally delineated by semi-mature to mature trees and shrubs. The wider landscape is dominated by agricultural land to the north and residential development to the south. An allotment abuts the site to the south-east and the site is bound by Sacombe Road to the south-west, beyond which lies public open space.

2. Methodology

Desktop Study

- 2.1. In order to compile background information on the site and its immediate surroundings the Hertfordshire Environmental Records Centre was contacted, with data requested on the basis of a search radius of 2km. In addition, information on statutory designations was obtained from the online Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) database, which utilises data provided by Natural England.

Habitat Survey

- 2.2. The site was surveyed, based on standard Phase 1 Habitat Survey methodology¹, in October 2016 in order to ascertain the general ecological value of the land contained within the boundaries of the site and to identify the main habitats and ecological features present. General faunal activity, such as mammals or birds observed visually or by call during the course of the surveys was recorded. Specific attention was also paid to the potential presence of any protected, rare or notable species.

¹ Joint Nature Conservation Committee (2010) 'Handbook for Phase 1 habitat survey: A technique for environmental audit.'

3. Results

Ecological Designations

- 3.1. The nearest statutory ecological designation is Waterford Heath Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and Local Wildlife Site (LWS) (ref: 59/062), which is located 0.3km north-west of the site. The LNR is designated on the basis of it containing ancient woodland and other habitats that support populations of reptiles. The nearest non-statutory designation is Great Mole Wood Local Wildlife Site (ref: 59/015), which is connected to the above LNR and located 0.3km to the west of the site. This LWS comprises an area of ancient woodland. All statutory and non-statutory designations within the local area are well separated by existing development and given the likely scale of any future development, these designations will not be impacted.

Habitats

- 3.2. Information received from HERC contains numerous records of notable plant species, the majority of which were not accompanied by accurate location data. The records included Priority Species, such as Deptford Pink *Dianthis armeria* and Cornflower *Centaurea cyanus*, none of which originate from the site.
- 3.3. The site is currently dominated by an active plant nursery, comprising of a large greenhouse, water tanks, associated hardstanding and an adjacent gravel car parking area that contains several non-native shrub beds. These habitats are either devoid of vegetation or only support non-native species, such that they of negligible ecological value at the site level. The loss of these habitats to development is of negligible ecological significance.
- 3.4. A portion of the site along the northern boundary is unmanaged and overgrown with dense scrub. Due to the density of the scrub, some areas along the northern boundary could not be accessed and were only surveyed from the site peripheries. Small areas of semi-improved grassland are present in the eastern corner and on the western boundary of the site. These grassland areas have a sward height of approximately 5 – 15cm and appeared to be grazed. Both these habitats are dominated by a limited number of common species and, therefore, are considered to be of low ecological value at the local level. The loss of these habitats to future development is of negligible ecological significance.
- 3.5. The site boundaries are delineated by lines of semi-mature to mature trees and native shrubs, comprising common and widespread species. Nevertheless, given the age of the trees at the site boundaries they are considered to be of low to moderate ecological value at the local level. It is recommended that the trees on site are retained and protected, where practicable. Any losses of trees should be compensated for by native tree and shrub planting within the landscape scheme.
- 3.6. A stand of Russian Vine *Fallopia aubertii* was recorded within the southern corner of the site. This species is listed as an invasive species on Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), making it an offence to allow or cause it to spread in the wild. Therefore, any Russian Vine on site should be sensitively cleared to prevent its spread to the wild.

Fauna

- 3.7. The site generally offers limited opportunities for protected and notable faunal species, given the site comprises an active nursery. However, several of the trees on the site boundary contain features suitable for roosting bats, such as rot holes, cracks and peeling bark.

Furthermore, the site boundaries offer suitable foraging and commuting habitat for bats. Information received from HERC included a number of records of bats within the surrounding area, the closest record is of a Common Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* that is located 30m west of the site. It is recommended that the trees around the site boundaries are retained and protected as part of any future development proposals. If any trees with potential to support roosting bats are required to be removed to facilitate development, further survey work in the form of dusk/dawn surveys may be required to establish the presence/absence of bat roosts.

3.8. Records of several reptile species were returned by the desktop study that are located within the same 1km² grid square as the site. The areas of dense scrub and site boundaries provide suitable habitat for reptiles. Therefore, it is recommended that a reptile presence/absence survey is undertaken to inform the required mitigation measures. Given the size of the site, it is likely that mitigation measures will involve the sensitive clearance of the site under supervision of a suitability qualified ecologist.

3.9. [REDACTED] No evidence of Badger (such as setts, latrines or foraging marks) was recorded on site during the survey. However, the dense scrub that could not be fully accessed offers potential habitat for Badger. Therefore, it is recommended that the dense scrub on site is sensitively cleared under the supervision of a suitably qualified ecologist to establish the presence/absence of any Badger setts. Furthermore, any development will need to incorporate construction safeguards to avoid harming any Badger that may be present in the area. Given the abundance of suitable habitat in the local area, it is considered that any future development will not adversely impact the local Badger population in the long term.

3.10. The dense scrub, trees and shrubs also offer suitable nesting habitat for a variety of bird species. As such, any site clearance works should be undertaken outside of the nesting bird season (March – August inclusive). Given the abundance of suitable nesting habitat in the local vicinity, it is considered that the site is not of significant value to local bird populations.

4. Mitigation Measures

4.1. Based on the habitats and ecological features within the site and faunal species recorded within the local vicinity, it is recommended that the following mitigation measures are implemented under the proposals:

- Retention and protection of all trees on the site boundary, where practicable. Any loss of trees and shrubs should be compensated by incorporating native tree and shrub planting into the design scheme;
- Sensitive removal of Russian Vine from the site;
- If any trees containing features suitable for roosting bats are to be removed, further survey work in the form of dusk/dawn surveys should be carried out;
- Undertake a reptile presence/absence survey to inform the mitigation requirements;
- Sensitive clearance of the site to safeguard reptiles, should they be present, and establish the presence/absence of Badger setts;
- Appropriate construction safeguards to avoid harming Badger and other mammals, such as providing escape routes in any excavations; and
- Timings of clearance works to avoid the nesting bird season.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1. Subject to the implementation of appropriate mitigation measures, it is considered that future development of the site is unlikely to result in significant harm to biodiversity. On the contrary, an opportunity exists to positively enhance the site through native planting, removal of non-native species and species-specific enhancements such as provision of bat and bird boxes.