

A33 Basingstoke (South Drive and Wildmoor Lane junctions) Road Widening: Interim Technical Note and vegetation clearance Method Statement

Introduction

As part of the planned maintenance programme, road widening works at two locations on the A33 Basingstoke Road near Sheffield on Loddon are proposed.

Initial survey work by Hampshire County Council Ecology Team (HCCET) identified that the sites have some potential to support protected or notable species and would result in some loss of general biodiversity through the need to remove sections of hedge, scrub, and trees.

It is understood that the works are planned to take place in the Summer of 2019 to coincide with the school holidays. However, due to the extent of vegetation at the site, it is necessary to remove much of the vegetation during the preceding winter (early 2019) to ensure that the main works do not encounter nesting birds.

Document scope

A formal Ecological Appraisal for the works is currently being produced by HCCET. However, to facilitate the initial vegetation clearance, this Interim Technical Note briefly summarises the ecological constraints at the site and potential ecological impacts and sets out a Method Statement to allow the initial vegetation clearance to proceed without resulting in any adverse impacts to biodiversity.

The final Ecological Appraisal report will include a more detailed assessment of the scheme's likely impacts that may result from the more extensive main civils works in the summer of 2019.

Relevant legislation

Certain species ('European Protected Species', or EPS), including hazel dormice and GCN are legally protected under EU law via the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (commonly called the Habitats Regulations) as well as domestic law via the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). The Habitats Regulations make it a criminal offence to kill or injure these species and to damage / destroy their breeding sites and resting places. Breeding sites and resting places are covered by the legislation even if the animals are not currently occupying those habitats at the time any impacts occur.

Occupied birds' nests and the more widespread native reptile species (grass snake, slow worm, common lizard, and adder) are legally protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

Summary of findings

Analysis of existing ecological data held by Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC) did not identify any legally protected or notable habitats or species at the site.

However, records of hazel dormouse were present in woodlands close to the site, approximately 250m to the north-east and south-east of the South Drive site.

There are also records of breeding great crested newt (GCN) in two ponds in Sherfield on Loddon approximately 400m to the north of the South Drive site.

On-site habitats are bare ground, sparse scrub, a ditch, grass verge, and small patches of denser bramble. The highways land extends to a strip of vegetation approximately 13m wide between the edge of the carriageway and the timber post-and-rail field fence marking the highways boundary.

Hazel dormice

Dormice are highly associated with denser woodland, scrub, and hedges. The woody vegetation along the sections of road at the site is relatively sparse, with limited understorey (see Photos 1 and 2).



Photo 1 Woody vegetation between carriageway and field



Photo 2 Woody vegetation between carriageway and field

The vegetation is generally characterised by a somewhat patchy row of lower scrub along the fence line, and a row of semi-mature willow and birch trees along the line of the ditch. The area between these is generally bare ground with leaf litter and occasional scattered younger trees.

Connectivity between the roadside vegetation and the woodland where there are known dormouse populations is poor.

It is therefore considered that dormice are unlikely to be present at the site.

Great crested newts

There are records of GCN in the wider area, as identified during the desk-based elements of the assessment. There is however some possible connectivity between

the known GCN breeding ponds and the site, as the highways ditch appears to possibly connect to the ponds to the north.

The ditch does hold water in the winter, although the quality of the water is likely to be low due to pollution runoff and silt from the road. Visually, it appeared to be of low ecological quality at the time of the February 2019 visit. There were minimal amounts of marginal / aquatic plants suitable for egg-laying, although it should be noted that vegetation cover will be low in the winter and may become more suitable in the spring.

It is not known how much water the ditches hold during the breeding season or if the ditches dry.

GCN inhabit ponds / ditches during the breeding season (generally March-June) although may be present in waterbodies earlier if warmer weather is prevailing. When not in waterbodies, GCN are present in areas of suitable terrestrial habitat such as scrub, longer grassland and ruderal (e.g. tall nettles, dock etc.) vegetation, woodland, and spoil piles.

The winter clearance work will not affect the ditch. However, in the absence of measures to avoid impacts, the works could result in killing or injury of individual newts if present in terrestrial habitat and could result in the damage or destruction of their resting places.



Photo 3 Ditch



Photo 4 Ditch

Nesting birds

The site has high suitability for supporting a range of bird species during the breeding season.

Bats

The trees along the area to be cleared were assessed for their potential to support roosting bats. None of the trees were seen to have potential roost features such as cracks, rot holes, flaking bark, or other cavities of suitable depth and condition to support bats. It is considered that bat roosts are likely absent from the affected area.

Other species

No evidence of badger activity (e.g. sett building, foraging signs) was seen on site.

The site is unsuitable for supporting otter. The ditches are largely unsuitable for supporting water vole.

The site is unlikely to support reptiles, although small numbers of more widespread species such as slow worm may be present on the field side of the highways fence and may occasionally be present in the area alongside this fence line.

Potential impacts during winter 2018/19 clearance

The Winter 2018/19 clearance will remove the taller woody vegetation between the carriageway and the fence line. The sparse hedge / scrub along the fence will be retained, although some minor pruning may be required.

In the absence of measures to avoid / mitigate ecological impacts the works have the potential to harm any animals hibernating or seeking refuge in ground-level features such as fallen deadwood, old stumps, or deeper leaf litter.

If the works resulted in the damage or destruction of resting places of dormice or GCN, this would be likely to be a contravention of the Habitats Regulations.

There is a small potential for reptiles to be present in some of the site alongside the highways fence line. In the absence of measures to avoid impacts, the works could result in inadvertent killing or injury of any reptiles present.

The works are planned to take place during the winter; therefore, they are unlikely to adversely affect nesting birds.

Recommendations

In order to avoid impacts to GCN terrestrial habitat or to individual GCN, it is recommended that the vegetation clearance works proceed under a precautionary Method Statement that sets out how vegetation will be cleared, how to ensure potential ground-level habitat features are protected, and measures to be followed in the unlikely event that any animals are encountered.

This Method Statement is set out below.

Method Statement

It is understood that works are likely to take place at night, to reduce impacts to road users.

- A copy of this Method Statement will be retained on site by site contractors.
- Ecological supervision will be required. Ecological supervision at night is not recommended due to the risks of not identifying suitable features in the dark periods. Therefore, a detailed ecological walkover should be carried out within 2-3 days of the site works commencing. This walkover would include a precautionary and careful search of any areas of potential refuge habitat. If any such areas are identified that are considered likely to support animals, these will be clearly marked with stakes and high-visibility tape. The locations of these will be communicated to the project team before site works commence.
- Site staff will be instructed to carry out no work within any taped-off areas.
- Particular habitat features to be identified and assessed would be areas of fallen deadwood, fallen vegetation, and deeper areas of debris.
- Access through the site by contractors should be confined where possible to the more open areas of bare ground that generally lies centrally through the vegetated strip.
- The woody vegetation must be removed to a height no lower than 250mm to reduce ground-level habitat disturbance. Any arisings should be carefully removed from site through dedicated routes to reduce disturbance of any ground-level features.
- There must be no stump-grinding or grubbing-up of tree roots.
- No habitat features at or near ground level must be removed unless previously checked by the supervising ecologist and deemed not to support any protected species.
- In the unlikely event that GCN or dormice are encountered, works must stop immediately, and further advice sought from the Ecology Team.

Main works

The main works are to take place in the summer of 2019.

Further clearance

This work will include full clearance of the site down to ground level, diversion of the existing ditch, construction of the widened carriageway, and new footpath.

Further ecological survey and assessment will take place to better understand the potential impacts of the main works. This will include further consideration of the potential for the works to affect GCN. This may require further detailed pond / ditch surveys, and – if GCN are found to be present – may require an EPS Mitigation Licence from Natural England to be obtained before the main works commence.

No further works at the site beyond the initial vegetation clearance should take place until the final ecological assessment work and reporting is completed.

Habitat compensation and enhancement

Upon completion of the main works, it is important that new planting is established to compensate for the losses during the works. As well as ensuring that the project does not result in the net loss of biodiversity at the site, this will ensure that the vegetation along the highways land becomes established as a more diverse and better-connected part of the wider ecological network.

The new plantings should incorporate a diverse mix of typical locally-relevant hedge and scrub species such as hazel, hawthorn, blackthorn, spindle, dogwood and field maple.