

Blue Pitts Farm, Rochdale

Ecological Appraisal

2023



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Executive Summary

Development Details

The client is proposing to demolish the existing building on the site and create a new building in its place at Blue Pitts farm, Rochdale, hereafter referred to as the 'site'.

This report describes the ecological features of the site and its surroundings and assesses the potential impacts of the development on the ecological interest. Recommendations are provided so that the development is compliant with biodiversity policy and legislation.

Ecological Interest

The site has a low level of ecological interest. Ecological features of interest include the (low) potential for roosting bats within the building. Nesting birds may use the building and shrubs in the garden.

Outcomes

Further survey work is required is required to determine if a bat roost is present on the site and inform mitigation requirements.

The site supports habitats suitable for nesting birds, measures should be taken, such as timing the works outside of the nesting bird season (March-August) or carrying out a nesting bird survey prior to the works to check for active nests, to ensure nesting birds are protected throughout the development.

The habitats on site are of limited value, the inclusion of suitable planting within the proposed development will mitigate the loss of these habitats.



1. Introduction

1.1 Project Brief

- 1.1.1 Rachel Hacking Ecology Limited was commissioned in 2023 by HNA Architects to carry out an Extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey, Daytime Bat Survey and Bird Survey of a barn and land at Blue Pitts Farm, Thornham Lane, Rochdale (O.S. grid reference: SD 89811 09126 – see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map showing the location of the site courtesy of ©2023 Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky, Landsat/Copernicus, Maxar Technologies, The GeoInformation Group, Map data

- 1.1.2 The site is a disused residential property and small garden space within the farm complex of Blue Pitts farm. The site is located in an area of agricultural land dominated by pastoral land and with a small number of residential, commercial and agricultural buildings located within the wider landscape.

Description of Development

- 1.1.3 The site will be the subject of a planning application for the demolition of the existing building and the construction of a new building in its place.

Relevant Planning History

- 1.1.4 No previous surveys or planning applications were found for the site.

1.2 Scope of Work

- 1.2.1 The Client commissioned Rachel Hacking Ecology to carry out the following works:
- Desk-based study to obtain details of designated sites within 2km
 - Record the extent, type, and condition of habitats within and next to the site
 - Search for signs of protected species and assessment of the potential of habitats and features to support protected and notable species

1.3 Site Visit Information

Surveyor Details

- 1.3.1 Kate Reed (Senior Ecologist) visited the site on 8th March 2023.

Weather

- 1.3.2 The weather at the time of the survey was cool and mostly dry with occasional light showers and an average temperature of 3°C.



2. Methods

2.1 Desk Study

- 2.1.1 The Magic (Multi-Agency Geographical Information for the Countryside) was interrogated for the presence of Statutory Designated Sites (and European Protected Species licences) within 2km radius of the site.
- 2.1.2 The Impact Risk Zones for any SSSI within 5km of the site was checked to determine whether the Local Planning Authority will need to consult with Natural England.

2.2 Field Survey

Extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey

- 2.2.1 In accordance with JNCC guidelines¹ the site was walked over and the habitats and features of ecological interest were mapped and described. Habitats and features of particular interest were target noted.
- 2.2.2 During the walkover habitat and features were assessed for their suitability to support of protected and notable species in accordance with CIEEM guidelines². Field signs of protected, notable, and invasive non-native species, if encountered, were mapped, and described.

Badger

- 2.2.3 The site was searched for evidence of Badger activity. This included looking for setts, old bedding, latrines, stray hairs attached to fences or hairs within bedding, scratch marks on posts/tree trunks, tracks and paw prints, snuffle holes and other foraging remains.
- 2.2.4 A If any setts were located, the number of entrances was counted and if possible, the results of this could be then classified according to usage (Harris et al, 1989):

¹ JNCC (2010). *Handbook for Phase 1 Habitat Survey: A Technique for Environmental Audit*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough

² CIEEM (2017). *Guidelines for Preliminary Ecological Appraisal*. Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, Winchester.



- Main Sett: 5–20 entrances (used for breeding).
- Annexe Setts – usually within 150 metres of the main sett connected by Badger paths.
- Subsidiary Sett – 1–3 entrances usually within 50 metres of the main sett.
- Outlier Sett – 1-2 entrances up to 500 metres from the main sett and not used for breeding.

Bats

- 2.2.5 The exterior of the site was surveyed from the ground using binoculars and a high-powered torch. Features offering potential access to roosting bats were recorded. Such features may include suitable gaps in roof coverings, gaps behind external cladding/facia and gaps in masonry.
- 2.2.6 Evidence indicating the presence of roosting bats was also searched for. This may include bat droppings on walls, windows or on the ground below roost entrances or staining from fur oil around roost entry points. Although these features are less likely to be visible during surveys carried out in the winter.
- 2.2.7 The interior of the site, including the roof void, was surveyed to identify any evidence indicating use by roosting bats. Such evidence may include bat droppings, feeding remains, urine splashes, live or dead bats and staining from fur oil on timbers.
- 2.2.8 Any trees on the site that are to be affected by the proposals were given a ground-level assessment, searching for Potential Roosting Features (PRFs), such as flaking bark, woodpecker holes, knot holes and limb splits.

Great Crested Newt (habitat assessment)

- 2.2.9 An assessment of the suitability of the terrestrial habitat and a desk-based assessment of the ponds within 250m of the site located using OS maps and aerial photograph was carried out to establish if GCN could occur on the site.



3. Results

3.1 Constraints

- 3.1.1 Field survey results are valid for a limited duration and no investigation can provide a complete description and characterisation of a site. The composition of habitats and species can change depending on environmental variables and the mobility of species, so the results of a study become less reliable over time. In some cases, surveys that are 3 years old may be acceptable for a project assuming that habitats have not significantly changed in the intervening period, but for protected species it is likely that survey data will need to be no more than 18 months old.
- 3.1.2 There was only partial access to the roof void of the property, the site was otherwise fully accessible. There were no other constraints to the survey.

3.2 Designated Sites

- 3.2.1 The desk study provided information on the designated sites listed below in Table 1.

Table 1. Designated Sites within 2km of the site			
Name	Status	Location/distance	Interest
Rochdale Canal	Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) Special Area of Conservation (SAC)	Lies to the west of the site 1.5km away at the closest point	Standing Open Water and Canals important for submerged aquatic plants and emergent vegetation including extensive colonies of nationally scarce Floating Water Plantain <i>Luronium natans</i> .
Hopwood Woodlands	Local Natural Reserve (LNR)	1.8km West of the site	Woodland areas around Hopwood Hall
Gerrard Wood	Site of Biological Importance (SBI)	0.3km to the south of the site	Woodland
Tandle Hill Country Park	Site of Biological Importance (SBI)	0.4km to the south-east of the site	Birds and Fungi
A627M by Tandle Hill	Site of Biological Importance (SBI)	0.5km to the south-west of the site	Grassland

- 3.2.2 The desk study identified that the site was located within the Impact Risk Zone of one Site of Special Scientific Interest, Rochdale Canal SSSI. The proposed development will not require the Local Planning Authority to consult with Natural England.

3.3 Habitats

- 3.3.1 The habitat survey map is contained in Appendix 2.

Buildings

- 3.3.2 A former residential building covers much of the site. This is described in detail in relation to bats.

Bare Ground and Ephemeral, Short Perennial

- 3.3.3 The stone flagged paths and patio areas around the building and two wooden decking areas have been mapped as bare ground on the Phase 1 Map. Ephemeral, short perennial vegetation has started to develop over some of the patio area this is composed of opportunistic weeds such as Broad-leaved Willowherb *Epilobium montanum*, Chickweed *Stellaria media* and Bramble *Rubus fruticosus* agg. and garden escape species including Columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris* and Ivy *Hedera helix* (see Photograph 1).



Photograph 1 Showing the ephemeral, short perennial habitat on site

Amenity Grassland

- 3.3.4 A small lawn area occurs in the garden, this has been the subject of regular management and has a species poor assemblage dominated by Perennial Rye-grass *Lolium perenne* and Red Fescue *Festuca rubra* (see Photograph 2).



Photograph 2 showing the amenity grassland on site

Introduced Shrub

- 3.3.5 A band of introduced shrub is present on the southern boundary of the site (see Photograph 3). This is composed of mature shrubs and herbs. There is a line of Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* within this habitat which may have been a hedgerow line but is now incorporated with the garden flower beds (see Photograph 4).



Photograph 3 showing the introduced shrub



Photograph 4 showing the Hawthorn line

Invasive Species

- 3.3.6 No invasive, non-native species as listed under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (Section 14 and Part II of Schedule 9) 1981 (as amended) were recorded on the site.

3.4 Species

Bats

External Survey

- 3.4.1 The building on site is a detached former residential development that is now unoccupied and is in a state of disrepair following a flood. The walls are constructed from stone and brick and are rendered on the south-eastern and south-western elevations. The building has a pitched roof covered with slate tiles on the south-western slope and stone tiles on the north-eastern slope. A small porch extension exists on the north-eastern elevation (see Photographs 5 and 6).



Photograph 5 showing the north-western elevation of the building



Photograph 6 showing the south-eastern and south-western elevations

- 3.4.2 A door canopy exists over the door on the south-western elevation of the property. This is constructed from slate tiles with wooden cladding underneath. The wooden cladding on the front is missing off the left-hand side exposing a small cavity between the wooden cladding and the slate tiles (see Photograph 7). The cavity is cobwebbed. As the underside of this feature is constructed from wood with no insulating material it will have poor thermal properties and therefore will be unlikely to be utilised by bats for shelter.



Photograph 7 showing the gap on the door canopy

- 3.4.3 Stone lintels are present above the windows on the south-western elevation with a gap in the mortar (see Photograph 8). The cavity appears to extend deep enough to offer potential shelter for a small number of bats or possibly lead to a more significant cavity. A uPVC bargeboard exists on this elevation of the property, a small gap exists between the board and the walls this is more significant over the windows where the stone lintels are setback slightly from the walls.



Photograph 8 showing the gap between two stones on the lintel

- 3.4.4 The roof of the property is half covered with stone tiles and half covered with slate tiles. All of the tiles are in position but small gaps exist under some of the tiles, particularly under the stone tiles (see Photographs 9 and 10). These gaps are considered to offer potential roosting opportunities for small number of roosting bats and potentially allow access to the internal space.



Photograph 9 showing the gaps under the stone tiles



Photograph 10 showing the gaps under the slate tiles around the chimney

Internal Survey

- 3.4.5 The ground floor and first floor rooms are finished spaces which do not offer potential roosting opportunities for bats.
- 3.4.6 The property has a plaster ceiling and access to the roof void was created via a small hole created in the ceiling. Access to this space was restricted but it was visible through this gap. The roof void was dusty with minimal insulation. The roof is supported by wooden purlins which appear to be complete with no large cracks observed (see Photograph 11).



Photograph 11 showing the roof void of the property

- 3.4.7 The roof is fully lined with traditional felt lining material, this is mostly complete but some gaps occur where the roof tiles behind are exposed (see Photograph 12). Daylight can be seen entering the roof void from behind the roof tiles.



Photograph 12 showing the roof tiles behind an area of damaged roof lining material

- 3.4.8 No signs indicating use by bats was recorded during the survey.

- 3.4.9 The property has a basement, this space is well-sealed with a window providing natural light (see Photograph 13). The flood at the property has led to this space becoming very damp and mould growth is apparent on the walls.
- 3.4.10 The site is located within a rural location with mature hedgerows on the field margins offering suitable foraging habitats for bats.



Photograph 13 showing the basement of the property

Birds

- 3.4.11 The introduced shrub on the site offers suitable nesting habitat for birds.
- 3.4.12 Signs of historical nesting was found within the roof void of the property; feathers and old nesting materials (see Photograph 14).



Photograph 14 showing the historic nesting material within the roof void.

Great Crested Newt

- 3.4.13 No ponds exist on the site. One pond occurs within 250m of the site. This lies 160m to the west of the site. The pond holds very limited connectivity to the site via the hedgerow along Thornham Lane.
- 3.4.14 The habitats on site are not considered suitable to support Great Crested Newt.

Badger

- 3.4.15 No Badger sett or field signs of Badger were found on the site or immediately adjacent to the site during the survey. The site does not offer suitable habitat for Badger.

4. Assessment

4.1 Development Context

- 4.1.1 The following assessment assumes that the building on site will be demolished and a new building will be erected in its place. No specific site plans have been seen prior to the production of this report so it is also assumed all the habitat within the garden space will be lost.

4.2 Impacts on Designated Sites

- 4.2.1 There is no habitat connectivity between the site and Rochdale Canal SAC/SSSI and no impact pathways exist. No impacts to any statutory designated sites are anticipated.
- 4.2.2 No impacts to any non-statutory designated sites are anticipated due to the distance between them and the site and the absence of impact pathways.

4.3 Impacts on Habitats

- 4.3.1 The habitats on site are of negligible ecological value. No mitigation or compensation would be required due to the loss of these habitats.

4.4 Impacts on Species

Bats

- 4.4.1 The building on site supports features that which could be used by individual or small numbers of crevice dwelling bat species; the cavities under the roof tiles between the tiles and the roof lining material and a cavity within the stone lintel above the window on the south-eastern boundary. The building is considered to offer low potential to support a bat roost. Given the lack of insulation and absence of bat droppings it is unlikely that the building supports a maternity roost. The basement is well-sealed and inaccessible to bats.
- 4.4.2 Demolition of the building has the potential to destroy a bat roost and to kill or injure bats, should these be present.
- 4.4.3 The proposed development is unlikely to affect foraging or commuting bats.

Badger

- 4.4.4 No impacts to Badgers or their setts are anticipated.

Great Crested Newt

- 4.4.5 No impacts to Great Crested Newt are anticipated due to the distance from the nearest pond and the poor suitability of the habitats on site.

Birds

- 4.4.6 Demolition of the building and clearance of shrubs in the garden could result in impacts to nesting birds, should these be present.



5. Recommendations

5.1 Further Surveys

Bats

- 5.1.1 The building on site is considered to offer low potential to support a bat roost and therefore a minimum of one dusk emergence survey will be required to determine if a bat roost is present at the site. Emergence surveys can only be carried out between May and September. If bats are found to be using the property, additional survey will be required to define the type of roost on the site and support a licence application to Natural England.
- 5.1.2 Suitable bat roosting features should be incorporated within the new building to maintain roosting opportunities on the site. Two boxes suitable for crevice dwelling bats such as Common Pipistrelle, for example Segovia Pro Build-in WoodStone Bat Box should be installed facing southeast to southwest on the new building. Bat boxes should be installed at eaves height but not directly above windows or doorways.

5.2 Mitigation Measures

Habitats

- 5.2.1 The inclusion of a mix of native and non-native flowering plants within the proposed development will mitigate the loss of the existing habitats.

Nesting Birds

- 5.2.2 Impacts on nesting birds should be avoided in particular, by carrying out site clearance and demolition outside of the bird breeding season (March - August). If this is not possible, checks immediately before clearance by a suitably qualified ecologist will be required. If nesting activity is detected work in that area will need to stop until the ecologist considers that nesting activity is finished.

General Precautions

- 5.2.3 This report is considered to be valid for two years. After this, a suitably qualified ecologist should be consulted to assess its validity. An assessment update may be required.



Appendix 1: Planning Policy & Legislation

National Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2021) describes the Government's planning policy for England and how it should be applied. Within this framework, the requirements in relation to biodiversity are included within several policies. The two most relevant to individual planning decisions are Paragraphs 174 and 180, shown below:

- 174. Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:
 - a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);
 - b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland;
 - c) maintaining the character of the undeveloped coast, while improving public access to it where appropriate;
 - d) minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures; etc...

- 180. When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should apply the following principles:
 - a) if significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided (through locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts), adequately mitigated, or, as a last resort, compensated for, then planning permission should be refused;
 - b) development on land within or outside a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and which is likely to have an adverse effect on it (either individually or in combination with other developments), should not normally be permitted. The only exception is where the benefits of the development in the location proposed clearly outweigh both its likely impact on the features of the site that make it of special scientific interest, and any broader impacts on the national network of Sites of Special Scientific Interest;
 - c) development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons and a suitable compensation strategy exists; and



- d) development whose primary objective is to conserve or enhance biodiversity should be supported; while opportunities to improve biodiversity in and around developments should be integrated as part of their design, especially where this can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity or enhance public access to nature where this is appropriate.

Legislation

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the CROW Act 2000) includes the notification and confirmation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). SSSIs can be notified for their floral, faunal, geological, or physiographical features. Protection against damaging operations and management of SSSIs is also included within the Act. Impact Risk Zones (IRZs) are zones around an SSSI account for the particular sensitivities of the features for which it is notified and identify development proposal which could have adverse impacts.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the CROW Act 2000) protects native animals, plants and habitats. Under the Act it is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take any wild animal listed on Schedule 5 and it is an offence to interfere with places used for shelter or protection, or intentionally disturb animals occupying such places. The Act prohibits picking, uprooting or destroy any wild plant (or any attached seed or spore) listed in Schedule 8.

European Protected Species (EPS) such as bats, Hazel Dormouse, Otter, Natterjack Toad, Smooth Snake, Sand Lizard and Great Crested Newt are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the CROW Act 2000) and the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. The Acts make it an offence to:

- a) Deliberately capture, injure or kill an EPS;
- b) Deliberately impair an EPS's ability to survive, breed, reproduce, rear or nurture young; to hibernate or migrate; or significantly affect the local distribution or abundance of the EPS.
- c) Possess or control live or dead EPS or any part of, or anything derived from a EPS;
- d) Damage or destroy a breeding site or resting place of an EPS;
- e) Intentionally or recklessly obstruct access to any place that is used for shelter or protection by an EPS;
- f) Intentionally or recklessly disturb a structure or place that it uses for shelter or protection that is occupied by an EPS.

All common herptiles are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the CROW Act 2000). Grass Snake, Slow Worm, Common Lizard, Adder are protected against intentional killing or injury.



Common Frog, Common Toad, Smooth Newt and Palmate Newt is protected against sale. In addition, all British reptiles, Common toad and Great Crested Newt are listed as Species of Principal Importance.

All nesting birds are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). It is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take any wild bird or take, damage, or destroy its nest whilst in use or being built, or take or destroy its eggs. It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly disturb a species listed on Schedule 1 of the Act while they are nest building or at or near a nest with eggs or young, or to disturb the dependent young.

The Protection of Badgers Act 1992 makes it an offence to wilfully, or to attempt to kill, injure, take, possess or cruelly ill-treat a Badger, or intentionally or recklessly interfere with a sett. Interference of a sett includes disturbing badgers during occupation of a sett, or damaging or destroying a sett, or obstructing access to the sett.

Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 places a duty on every public authority to have regard to conserving biodiversity. Section 41 of the same Act requires the Secretary of State to publish a list of the living organisms and types of habitats that are of 'Principal Importance' for the purpose of conserving biodiversity. The Secretary of State must take steps, as appear reasonably practicable, to further the conservation of those living organisms and habitats in any list published under this section. The list of species and habitats of principal importance currently includes 943 species and 56 habitats. These are the species and habitats found in England which are regarded as conservation priorities under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework

The Hedgerows Regulations 1997 protect 'important' hedgerows from destruction or damage. A hedgerow is 'important' if it (a) has existed for 30 years or more; and (b) satisfies at least one of the criteria listed in Part II of Schedule 1 of the Regulations. Under the Regulations, it is against the law to remove or destroy 'important' hedgerows unless permitted by the local planning authority.



Appendix 2: Phase 1 Habitat Map

