LAND OPPOSITE THE OLD POST OFFICE, NEWTOWN, NEWBURY, BERKSHIRE

PROTECTED SPECIES SURVEY AND MITIGATION

On behalf of

MRS E. A. HUTCHINS

Final Report

2nd August 2021

Prepared by

MALFORD
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Contents

1 Introduction

The client is seeking consent from Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council for the conversion to a residential dwelling of a storage barn located on land opposite The Old Post Office, Newtown, Newbury, Berkshire, RG20 9AP. The conversion will retain the building on the existing footprint, and it is understood that the proposed dwelling will be constructed with timber clapper board walls and a pitched metal roof.

A small plot of land to the immediate northwest of the barn will be used as the residential garden. There is an existing vehicle access track leading to the building, but to improve highway access visibility a small section of roadside hedge will be removed. The building and immediate surrounding land is shown in Appendix A.

Malford Environmental Consulting was commissioned to undertake a Phase 1 bat (roost inspection) and ecology survey of the building and immediate surrounding land. The survey was undertaken by Dr Stephen Dangerfield who is a Natural England licensed bat worker Class Licence CL17, Licence no. 2015-11600-CLS-CLS), Chartered Environmentalist and a full member of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) with over 25 years' professional experience.

The survey concentrated on identifying the presence of, or potential for, roosting bats and other protected species (e.g. nesting birds) inhabiting or using the building and land. This report sets out the findings of the survey, and where necessary makes recommendations for actions to ensure the proposed development complies with nature conservation legislation and meets the requirements of planning policy.

Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC Act) requires all public bodies to have regard to biodiversity conservation when carrying out their functions. Under the NERC Act the local planning authority should not determine a planning application if there are any surveys outstanding for European protected species. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), July 2021, requires the planning system should conserve and enhance the natural environment (Section 15) by, *inter alia*, 'protecting and enhancing sites of biodiversity value' and 'minimising impacts and providing net gains for biodiversity' (para 174) and 'protection and recovery of priority species' (para 179).

2 Scope of Work and Methodology

A Phase 1 bat roost inspection and protected species survey was undertaken on 16th July 2021. The survey was undertaken by a licensed bat surveyor in accordance with Bat Conservation Trust guidelines[1]. The survey included an internal and external inspection of the storage barn, other small outbuildings and any mature trees looking for signs of, or the assessing the potential for the buildings/structures to support, roosting bats. A ladder, high-powered torch and binoculars were available and were used where necessary to examine roof space, crevices and other small spaces potentially suitable for roosting bats to occupy.

Evidence of bats, considered during the search included:

- Droppings.
- Urine staining.
- Feeding remains (such as moth wings).
- Smudge marks and scratches around potential bat roost holes.
- Live roosting bats, bat skeletal remains or dead bats.

Conditions indicating an absence of bats can include the presence of spider webs, bird nesting material and wasp nest material blocking access holes or possible roosting gaps, or sheltering live butterflies/moths or cluster flies.

Bat roost potential was established using the following scale:

1. *Negligible potential/not a roost*: no suitable features

2. *Low potential*: one or more suitable features that could be used by individual bats opportunistically

3. *Moderate potential*: one or more suitable features that could be used by bats, but unlikely to support a roost of high conservation status

4. *High potential*: one or more suitable features that are suitable for use by larger numbers of bats on a regular basis

5. *Confirmed roost*: evidence of current/recent bat occupation

The survey also assessed the barn and immediate surrounding land for the presence of nesting birds and other protected animals.

[1] Collins, J. (ed.) (2016). *Bat Surveys for Professional Ecologists: Good Practice Guidelines (3rd edn*). The Bat Conservation Trust, London

3 Results

3.1 Building descriptions

Photographs of the building exterior and interior are presented in Appendix A.

3.1.1 Storage Barn

This building comprises a single storey storage barn orientated on a northeast to southwest alignment. External walls are mainly single-skin timber boards, with the front and southern end walls also having a low concrete blockwork base wall. There are some sections on the end walls where corrugated fibreboard and metal sheets have replaced missing timber boards. The roof is pitched and clad in corrugated metal sheets (powder coated on upper surface) with a metal ridge cap and ten translucent plastic skylights. There is a metal roof overlap along one gable end while timber fascia boards, which sit proud of the wall with the gap sealed, line the other gable end roof line. The building is accessed *via* a double wooden door, and there are a number of small glazed windows along the front and rear of the building, which are sealed with chicken wire and covered with corrugated fibreboard/metal sheets.

There are gaps under the ridge capping, under the gable end metal roof overlap, between a section of abutting roofing sheets, and on end walls and around the doorway, but these gaps all lead directly into the building interior and provide no suitable crevices for bats to exploit.

The internal roof structure comprises tight-fitting modern timbers, which include uprights, A-frame trusses and purlins. There is no ridge beam, with the roof apex being open between two widely spaced purlins. There are no gaps/recesses associated with the roof structure. Internally, the metal roof sheets are lined with synthetic roofing liner, which is affixed tightly between the roofing sheets and the timber purlins leaving no gap. The majority of the roof apex is open and unlined.

Within the building is a small vehicle inspection pit approximately 2m wide by 5m long and 1m deep, which is covered with timber boards.

The building is open, light (including electric lighting) and draughty, and there is a strong petroleum smell within the building, all of which makes this structure generally unsuitable for roosting bats.

3.1.2 Outbuildings

Within the land to the immediate north of the barn are some small outbuildings, as follows:

- A dilapidated timber shed, constructed from timber walls and a shallow pitched timber roof covered with bituminous roofing felt. The walls and roof are collapsing, with one side wall completely missing. The shed is now shrouded in bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg).
- A dilapidated waggon, constructed from corrugated metal. Two walls and the roof are completely missing, and the waggon is now shrouded in bramble.
- Two small greenhouses constructed from metal frames and glass, now both shrouded in bramble.

These outbuildings are totally unsuitable for supporting roosting bats.

3.2 Immediate surrounding land

The building is set within and heavily shaded by a mix of deciduous and coniferous/evergreen trees and shrubs, which abut the rear and sides of the building. Trees include cypress (*Cupressus* sp), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), alder (*Alnus* sp), hazel (*Corylus avellana*), willow (*Salix* sp), apple (*Malus pumila* agg), shrub honeysuckle (*Lonicera nitida*) and bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg). Ground is either bare or sparsely vegetated with bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), nettle (*Urtica dioica*), cleavers (*Galium aperine*) and lesser celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*).

The land immediately north of the barn until very recently was completely overgrown with bramble and other ruderal/tall herb vegetation including nettle, bracken, thistles (*Cirsium vulgare*, *C. arvense*, and c.f. *C. palustre*), broad-leaved dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*), burdock (*Arctium* sp), hedge parsley (*Torilis japonica*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) and c.f. common valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*). Parts of the land have very recently been cleared and there are now patches of bare soil. Smaller areas support common grasses and forbs including cock's-foot (*Dactylus glomerata*), false oat grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*), rough meadow grass (*Poa trivialis*), Timothy (*Phleum pratensis*), Yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*), silverweed (*Potentilla anserine*), ragwort (*Jacobaea vulgaris*), ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*) and c.f. hawkweed (*Hieracium* sp).

Around the edge of this small plot are trees and shrubs including silver birch (*Betula pendula*), field maple (*Acer campestre*), ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), apple (*Malus pumila* agg), hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*).

As well as the few small dilapidated outbuildings the land has also been used to store vehicles and equipment.

3.3 Vehicle access track and roadside hedge

The existing vehicle access track is mainly grasses and forbs, with some smaller areas recently cleared to bare earth. Ground flora supports the same grasses as the development plot plus forbs, many of which are ruderal or shade-tolerant species, including nettle (*Urtica dioica*), thistles (*Cirsium* spp), silverweed (*Potentilla anserine*), broad-leaved dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*), hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*), ragwort (*Jacobaea vulgaris*), cleavers (*Galium aperine*), field horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*), teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*), ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*), hedge bindweed (*Calystegia sepium*), selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*), hedge woundwort (*Stachys sylvatica*), knapweed (*Centuarea* sp), lady's-mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris* agg), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) and broad-leaved plantain (*Plantago major*).

The track is lined with a mix of native and ornamental trees and shrubs including hazel (*Corylus avellana*), cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*), hybrid black poplar (*Poplar x canadensis*), ornamental dogwood (*Cornus* sp), ornamental maple (*Acer* sp), sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), dog rose (*Rosa canina* agg), bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg) and bamboo.

The short length of roadside hedge that is proposed to be removed to improve highways visibility comprises mainly hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) with a single hazel (*Corylus avellana*), horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). The hedge is maintained as a box-cut hedge approximately 1.5 high. Ground flora includes common grasses and forbs similar to those found along the track. Associated with the hedge is a short length of brick/stone wall, but this is over-shaded by the hedge and associated tall herb vegetation.

3.4 Bats

The storage barn is generally unsuitable for supporting roosting bats having no external or internal gaps/recesses or hidden voids, and a tight-fitting roof structure with tightly affixed synthetic liner. There is access into the building interior, which has some exposed timber roof beams, but the building interior provides sub-optimal environmental conditions for roosting bats being open, light, draughty (thermally unstable), having a strong petroleum smell within the interior, and with the rear roof shrouded by trees/shrubs.

The small dilapidated outbuildings are totally unsuitable for supporting roosting bats.

No evidence of bat roosting or other bat activity (no live bats, no dead bats, no accumulated or scattered droppings, no urine droplets or staining, and no insect feeding remains) was found within or outside the barn or other outbuilding surveyed, including on the floor or other surfaces, caught in webs etc.

The exterior and interior of the barn supported established spider webs, including the roof timbers, roof eaves/corners, across any gaps in walls/roof etc., between the roofing sheets and liner, and between the windows and covering corrugated sheets. The barn supported live insects including spiders, bees, wasps, butterflies and flies.

The barn and outbuildings are all classed as Category 1 (not a roost) and the building/structures are classed as having no-negligible potential to support roosting bats in the future.

The trees surrounding or within the property curtilage were visually inspected and found not to support any potential bat roosting features (e.g. no holes, cracks, splits, lifting bark etc.), and are therefore classed as Category 1 (not a roost/negligible roost potential).

No further bat survey is considered to be necessary for this proposed development.

3.5 Nesting birds

There is no evidence of current bird nesting associated with the barn or other outbuildings. No evidence of barn owl (*Tyto alba*) nesting or roosting was found associated with the barn. There is a single bird nest box on the north-eastern side wall of the barn, but no evidence it was occupied.

Birds seen or observed in the immediate surrounding plot included robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), blackbird (*Turdus merula*) and wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*). It is possible a few common garden birds could nest within the larger/denser shrubs, trees, hedge or buildings in the future.

The development site is not suitable for supporting ground nesting bird species as the site is very small and enclosed.

3.6 Other protected species

There was no evidence of any other protected or notable mammal species found within or immediately adjacent to the development site. No badger (*Meles meles*) sett is present and no confirmed signs of badger (e.g. latrines/dung pits) were observed during the survey, and there are no waterbodies within the development footprint that could support water vole (*Arvicola amphibius*).

Given the combination of bramble scrub and shrubs/trees and dilapidated outbuildings/equipment etc. it is possible that hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) could frequent the site.

Notable mammals are not a significant constraint for the proposed development, although a precautionary approach to clearing the site during the construction phase is recommended.

The habitat directly affected by the proposed development is largely unsuitable for supporting reptiles being predominantly the barn plus a small plot that until very recently was completely overgrown by bramble scrub and tall herb vegetation, and much of which is in shade, all of which greatly reduces foraging and basking opportunities for reptiles. Reptiles are not considered to be a constraint for the proposed development, and no further survey is required.

There are no ponds within the development plot, and the habitat directly affected by the proposed development is considered largely unsuitable for supporting great crested newt in their terrestrial phase being predominantly the barn plus a small plot that until very recently was completely overgrown by bramble scrub and tall herb vegetation. There are waterbodies located ca. 200m to the southwest of the development plot, but these appear to be connected to a surface water drainage network and therefore are likely to support fish, which are a known predator of great crested newt and deter GCN form entering waterbodies. However, there are dilapidated buildings and stored equipment, which could potentially provide refugia for amphibians if present in the local landscape (considered unlikely). As such great crested newt is considered unlikely to be present on-site, but a precautionary approach to site clearance is recommended.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Bats

There is no evidence that the barn or other garden outbuildings covered by this report are used by bats for roosting or as a place of rest, and the buildings are classed as having no or negligible potential to support roosting bats in the future. It is considered that the conversion of the barn and the removal of the dilapidated outbuildings does not require a Natural England licence under the provisions of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

No mitigation for the protection of bats is necessary for this proposed development. A design feature that can be incorporated into the new building that will provide an enhancement for bats is presented in Section 5.4.

4.2 Nesting birds

The site is unsuitable for ground-nesting birds, and although no evidence of other nesting birds was found during the survey the possibility of individual or low numbers of common garden birds nesting in shrubs, trees, hedge or buildings, scheduled for renovation or removal, cannot be completely discounted. Appropriate mitigation will be enacted to ensure protection of nesting birds (see Section 5.1), while a design feature that can be incorporated into the new building to provide an enhancement for birds is presented in Section 5.3.

4.3 Other species

There are no legally protected mammals within the development plot, but there is potential for hedgehog to be present. The site provides unsuitable habitat for reptiles, while it is considered highly unlikely that great crested newt will be present on-site.

It is considered that the integrity of any surrounding habitats, communities or species will have negligible reliance upon the building or habitat within the development footprint.

There is no specific mitigation required for species other than nesting birds, except a general precautionary recommendation to clear the development plot carefully (see Section 5.2).

5 Mitigation and Enhancement

5.1 Protecting nesting birds

To ensure compliance with the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981 (as amended) the following actions will be undertaken:

- If work to the barn (especially removal of roof) or removal of dilapidated outbuildings or removal of woody vegetation needs to be undertaken inside the bird breeding and fledgling season, which is generally considered to be from 1st March to 31st August (to cover all bird species, particularly multiple brood species), an inspection for nesting birds should be undertaken immediately prior (maximum of one week in advance) to work commencing. The presence of nesting birds (including birds constructing a nest, nest with eggs or hatchlings) will result in work being delayed to allow birds to vacate the nest.
- Any work undertaken outside the bird breeding and fledgling season will not require an ecological inspection immediately prior to work commencing.

Regardless of previous survey findings or timing of work, if nesting birds are found on-site and affected by site clearance or the construction phase then work should stop and an ecologist consulted.

5.2 Protecting animals during site clearance

Clearance of the development plot will be undertaken carefully using the following protocols:

- Removal of vegetation and the outbuildings will proceed with care and undertaken between March and October, inclusive.
- If animals, such as hedgehog, are found during site clearance they will be carefully picked up in gloved hands and moved to an area of the site that is not impacted by the proposed development.
- Any logs/brashwood that may be generated through site clearance will be relocated and stacked on the edge of the development plot.
- In the highly unlikely event that great crested newt is found during the site clearance, work will immediately stop and an ecologist consulted to define an appropriate mitigation strategy, which could include obtaining a mitigation licence.

5.3 New bird nesting feature

One bird nesting box will, if possible, be incorporated into the new building. An integrated nest-box (installed in the fabric of a wall) should be installed to target house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*). The sparrow terrace box should be installed on the northeast gable end wall (at apex or under eaves). This will provide shelter from direct sunlight. An integrated sparrow terrace box is shown here as an example. Boxes can be viewed and purchased on-line (www.nhbs.com or www.wildcareshop.co.uk).

5.4 New bat roosting box

To provide an enhancement for roosting bats, one integrated bat roosting box (placed within the fabric of a cavity wall) will, if possible, be installed on the new dwelling to provide roosting habitat for crevice-dwelling bat species.

The bat box should be installed as close to the roof apex on the southwest gable end wall of the new property. No external lighting must be used adjacent to or shine directly at the bat box entrance slot. Clear lines of flight to the bat roost box entrance must be maintained at all times.

Alternative bat bricks can be viewed and purchased on-line (www.nhbs.com or www.wildcareshop.co.uk), with a Habibat bat box, which can be faced with timber, shown here as an example.

Appendix A Site Photographs

Storage barn front elevation looking south (left) and looking north (right)

Storage barn northeast end (left) and southwest end (right)

Storage barn rear elevation looking south (left) and looking north (right)


Storage barn interior


Storage barn gaps between adjoining roof sheets (left) and open ridge (right)


Dilapidated wooden shed covered in bramble

Dilapidated waggon with no roof (left) and a small greenhouse covered in branble (right)

Land immediately north of storage barn recently partially cleared of bramble/nettle

Land immediately north of storage barn around dilapidated wooden shed recently cleared

Exisitng vehicle access track looking north

Entrance to vehcile access track looking south (left) and short length of hawthorn hedge to be removed to enhance highway visibility (right)