

COYNE ENVIRONMENTAL

**Ryburn Valley High School
St. Peters Avenue
Sowerby Bridge
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ECOLOGICAL APPRAISAL July 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Coyne Environmental has been instructed by Surfacing Standards Ltd to carry out an Ecological Appraisal (EA) of Ryburn Valley High School to establish the potential presence or absence of protected ecological features of significance. This is part of a proposal for the submission of a planning application to construct a new 3G Turf football pitch with flood lighting, on part of the school grounds.

It is proposed to undertake a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) survey and Report. This will also assist the local planning authority (LPA) on what environmental studies may be required when determining the application or which may be appropriately dealt with by a suitably worded condition.

From the survey and analysis of the site, it will be possible to review the proposals to ascertain what measures are needed to achieve a satisfactory result for the proposal. The PEA will enable the Metropolitan Borough of Calderdale (MBC) to consider the impact of the proposal on the environment. It can then discharge its legal obligations under the “Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2018)” and any “Outline Mitigation and Compensation Strategy” if required.



I am a qualified Ecologist, Associate of the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (IEEM) with over 35 years' experience in the environmental field. This includes being a licence bat worker (Bat Licence 2015-15943-CLS-CLS). The PEA survey was carried out on the 16th August 2023. This was conducted in the day time, (16c) cloudy conditions with light winds but dry.

PROPOSAL

Sowerby Bridge is a market town of 11,703 (2011) population, clustered around the bridge at the confluence of the Calder and Ryburn, not far from Halifax to the east. It is in a valley surrounded by the Pennines with textiles and engineering forming the main industry, now in decline. The old village of Sowerby is in the Domesday Book, and had a Norman motte and bailey castle and was within the Royal Chase of Sowerbyshire.

The school site is on the south side of the town, with its large sports fields forming a green lung to surrounding residential areas to the north. There has been a school on the site from 1959 with the merger of the former separate boys and girl's school. In 1979 it became a comprehensive school and moved into its current buildings in 2005. The Ryburn Valley High School gained Academy status in 2014 with special Status for Media Arts. In 2014 it was featured in the TV drama Happy Valley.

The school grounds are made up of a grid pattern of tree lined compartments, probably from the former agricultural fields, it displaced. These are mainly sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) with a few ash trees (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and oak (*Quercus robur*). These will form ecological corridors along which wildlife can pass from one habitat to the next.

The new pitch is proposed for one of the open grass areas on the east side of the grounds. This is currently one of the amenity grass areas of the school surrounded by mature non-native trees and a boundary hedge next to housing. It is thus a sports facility with extensive grounds that would appear to be able to easily accommodate the proposal, without unduly affecting the ecology of the site.



The new flood lighting will be by a specialist lighting company who have designed similar installation and who will be submitting their own separate report. This will be designed to mitigate any unnecessary light spill and glare to adjacent areas and contain the light to the application site. Special attention will be taken to ensure the effect on wildlife, and bats in particular, is minimal. Coyne Environmental will work with this specialist consultant to ensure that requirements for the sports pitch do not conflict with the safeguarding of the environment and overall biodiversity.

AREA DESIGNATION

Management and protection of the biodiversity within the UK planning system is set out through European and UK legislation. The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) is the main protection for wildlife. There is also legislation for specific species, Protection of Badgers Act 1992, EU Habitats and Birds Directive and more general guidance, EU Biodiversity Strategy 2011-2020.

Yorkshire County Council became the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) in 2014 and covers this area. The authority has a range of environmental policies, particularly concerning flooding, which affects the area, due to the Calder catchment being steep sided valleys with riverside communities. The proposal for the Northern Forest, across the whole of the

region will not only help reduce water run-off but assist with Climate Change impacts, as well.

As the town is in the centre of the river valley the MBC has produced its own Growing Resilience National Flood Management Plan and a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) is in progress. These all are aimed at ensuring the environment of Yorkshire and its wildlife is adequately protected. This study and Report have also taken into account BS 42020 (2013) Biodiversity -Code of practice for planning and development.

There are no National Nature Reserves (NNR), RAMS, SSSI sites, or local nature reserves (LNR) in the search area. This is not in a Conservation Area (CA) and there are no Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) on the trees being studied. This is thus a relatively small urban settlement, near to expanding Halifax, within a rural moorland upland, whose main employment would appear to be in agriculture.

CONDITION

A full Phase 1 Habitat Survey was not deemed necessary as this is a site with few natural features. However, if the survey identifies any wildlife of significance, measures will be taken as set out in the JNCC guidance Handbook for Phase 1 Habitat Surveys (2010) and CIEEM Guidelines (2017). The application site is a comprehensive school within a large recreation area maintained to a high amenity standard with mainly ornamental planting.

The general grounds of the school are all amenity grass, mown to a standard sports turf level and used as playing pitches as well as a setting for the school buildings. There appeared to be few areas of rough grass or left-over corners, so that there are minimal opportunities for wildlife to take advantage of the grounds.

The remnants of original field boundary vegetation have a few native hedges around the edges of the site leading out to the moors. The current boundary hedges have some hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), among the mainly mature sycamore. This is also the areas, on the slopes between pitches, where the grass has been left and ephemeral weeds including Sheep's Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), Chickweed (*Stellaria media*), silverweed (*Potentilla ariserina*) common vetch (*Vicia sativa*) and others are present.

The grounds currently would appear to be of minimal value for wildlife but small mammals (voles, shrews) and reptiles (lizards, newts) have few areas to use as refugia or hibernacula sites. The boundary open mesh fences, could however, easily be used for wildlife, to pass from one habitat to another.

None of the buildings will be affected by this proposal, so the survey does not need to specifically inspect these. Bats will probably inhabit the area, so the mature trees were also selectively inspected for any suitable holes (woodpecker), or cracks in the bark, that bats could use as roosts. No evidence was found (scratch marks, urine stains). However, the proposals do include the installation of flood lighting and bats may be disturbed at night.

This is thus a typical urban landscape with few natural features and of minimal biodiversity value. Therefore, its wildlife value may not be of importance for species such as bats but which could use the site for foraging for food and commuting to adjacent habitats.

ECOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Ryburn Valley High School is a typical educational establishment where the ecological value of the grounds and sports fields particularly, does not generally appear to have a high ecological value. The vegetation on site is mainly mature non-native tree species, within old boundary hedge lines. On inspection no nests or nest building was found and the only birds that were noted, on site were various gulls. Using the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) guidelines, the site has a low value for avifauna.

It has been shown from this site condition assessment that the school grounds due to its use and management has only limited ecological value. Most of the area is close mown amenity grass maintained for sports activities. It is only at the edges, of the various hedge lines, and changes in level, that there is any ecology of value. Here a few native species occur (*Crepis capilliris*, *Carduus nutans*) and emergent scrub (hawthorn). None of this is of particular value to wildlife for nectar seeking bees, butterflies and other invertebrates.

Animals probably do use the school grounds, given the close proximity to the moors. However, no evidence of droppings (deer) was found or runs that would be used to commute to other areas (red fox). No burrows (voles) along the hedge lines or possible badger set *activity* were found.

The location for the proposed new pitch is near the front of one of the amenity grass areas, so that this should not disturb animals using the site. Large open spaces are generally avoided as wildlife would not feel secure to venture in such territory.

Although the grounds are in the valley of the Ryburn it is on high ground above the river. So, the potential for protected Great Crested Newts (EPS) being in this location is unlikely. Using the Great Crested Newt (GCN) Suitability Index the site would score negative. The managed nature of the site also precluded reptiles such as grass snakes, slow worms and common lizards from using the playing fields for foraging /refugia (sheltering sites).

Extensive native flora is absent in this well-managed landscape and even the boundary hedges has only vegetation of limited ecological value. Thus, this urban habitat offers few opportunities for pioneer species to allow insects such as bees and butterflies to find food and shelter or refuges for small mammals (hedgehogs).

ANALYSIS

The PEA evaluation has shown that the proposed site has minimal ecological value. There is no area of importance for wildlife but the flood lighting could have an impact on sensitive species, in particular bats, as dusk is when they start to forage and this needs to be taken into account. However, the design of the lighting to contain the maximum reflection within the new pitch and the

relatively small area that this facility occupies in relation to the larger size of the overall grounds, will enable the bats to avoid this area. Bats can adapt to changes in light levels and will probably avoid this area when emerging to forage, if the floodlighting is in use at that time.

BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN

The Environment Act 2021 in November 2023 will have a mandatory requirement for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) on developments of a minimum of 10% gain. Within this scheme it is proposed that the BNG should be undertaken as part of the planning permission with suitable mitigation or enhancement requirement to meet the Statutory Net Gain.

This can include native species of planting, selected wild flower seed mixes and habitat creation in the form of bat, bird boxes, hibernacula etc. Areas for wildlife's could be created along with woodland planting, wildflower meadows in other areas of the extensive school grounds. This will increasing overall biodiversity and potentially reducing maintenance costs, in less grass to manage.

CONCLUSION

Ryburn Valley High School has instructed Coyne Environmental to carry out an Ecological Appraisal (EA) of the school site to establish the potential presence or absence of protected ecological features of significance. This is in preparation of a planning application. The site survey and subsequent desk top study of the surrounding areas indicates that the application site is not in an area of high risk for any specific species or sensitive habitats. The only area of concern is for bats and the design and location of the facility demonstrate that this should have minimal effect on this EPS species. There would also appear to be little probability of disturbing birds and no likelihood of encountering species like GCN, slow worms and other reptiles, as well as mammals.

Therefore, in my professional opinion I assess that the proposal for a new playing pitch with flood lighting at Ryburn Valley High School will have minimal impact on the overall biodiversity of the area. This would satisfy the Metropolitan Borough of Calderdale on ecology when the proposed planning application is submitted. I conclude that no further environmental studies are necessary to satisfy the requirement for ecological assessments and that the proposal can be determined on this basis.

REFERENCES

Site proposals

Location map

Bat Conservation Handbook

Bats and Artificial Lighting in the UK

BTO Guidelines



