Boyer
PLANNING

Christchurch and East Dorset Councils
Core Strategy-Local Plan
Examination in Public

MATTERS AND ISSUES 10: ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Prepared by Boyer Planning on behalf of Linden Homes Strategic Land
August 2013

REPORT CONTROL

Project: Land north of Ringwood Road, Verwood

Client: Linden Homes Strategic Land

Job Number: 10.221

File Origin: \\MARTIN\Boyer Planning\Project Folders\10.221 Land North East of Ringwood Road, Verwood\08 Representations\Examination Sept 2013\Hearing Statements\Matters and Issues 10\130827 Matters and Issues 10 - Environmental Issues.docx

Document checking

Primary author: Donna Palmer	**Initialled:** DP

Review by: Mike Newton	**Initialled:** MN

Issue	Date	Status	Checked for issue
1	16//08/2013	Draft	MN
2	27/08/2013	Final	MN

Contents

Appendix

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 These representations have been prepared by Boyer Planning Limited on behalf of our clients, Linden Homes Strategic Land who control land north of Ringwood Road, Verwood which was proposed for allocation under Policy VTSW5 of the Pre-Submission Core Strategy.

1.2 Our clients have submitted representations in relation to all stages of the development of the Joint Core Strategy and have now instructed us to represent them through participation in the Examination process and the submission of representations upon relevant matters.

1.3 Our representations to the Core Strategy are directly relevant to the list of matters to be examined, and this statement specifically addresses the questions that have been raised that are relevant in the context of our representations along with applying these to the tests of soundness set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

1.4 In respect of the tests of soundness, we consider that, the Core Strategy is unsound in that it is not justified, effective or consistent with national policy.

1.5 We set out our response to the questions posed by the Inspector in Section Two of this report. Our comments have regard to national planning policy guidance and other material considerations.

2. MATTERS TO BE EXAMINED

1. Does Policy ME1 provide a robust framework for safeguarding biodiversity and geodiversity?

2.1 Policy ME1 is considered to be a robust framework for safeguarding biodiversity and geodiversity. The Policy proposes a number of criteria which should be assessed when development is proposed. It is assumed that the principle of these criteria has also been utilised by the Council in selecting the sites proposed for allocation as new neighbourhoods.

2.2 We act on behalf of Linden Homes who control land north of Ringwood Road, Verwood, which was proposed for allocation under policy VTSW5 of the Pre-Submission version of the Core Strategy, but was subsequently deleted. We assess the merits of our client's site below against the criteria set out in Policy ME1, with reference to the outline application for its development, which is currently with the Council for consideration (Application Reference: 3/13/0480/OUT). A copy of the Ecological Assessment which accompanied the application, including the SANG strategy, is included at Appendix Two. The Tree Quality Survey, Development Implications & AMS for Vehicular Access is included at Appendix Three.

2.3 The assessment below demonstrates how we have responded to Policy ME1 in the context of site VTSW5 and should assist in demonstrating the robustness of this policy framework through its practical application to the site (as well as the justification for the allocation of the site itself). This statement therefore provides important additional information in relation to the case for the re-allocation of site VTSW5.

Avoidance of harm to existing priority habitats and species through careful site selection, development design and phasing of construction and the use of good practise construction techniques

2.4 The Ecological Assessment prepared by Tyler Grange included at Appendix Two (The Tyler Grange Strategy) advises that the site is of limited ecological value. The site lies within 5km of the Dorset Heathlands Special Protection Area (SPA) and as such an appropriate mitigation strategy is required. The strategy has been agreed with both Natural England (NE) and the Forestry Commission (FC) and is discussed in greater detail below.

Retention of existing habitats and features of interest, and provision of buffer zones around any sensitive areas

2.5 The development as currently proposed has been designed to retain the shaded, poor fen habitat of local value. Other habitats, including dwarf gorse of local value, will be affected, but impacts will be more than mitigated through a combination of woodland enhancement strategies and off-site works. Protected and/or priority species that occur within the development site, or on land proposed as a SANG, can be protected and in some instances, their conservation status could be improved. The mitigation measures proposed as a result of the site's proximity to the SPA are discussed below.

Enhancement of biodiversity through improving the condition of existing habitats and achieving net gains in biodiversity, where possible. Particular attention should be paid to priority habitats and species referred to in Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and the Dorset Biodiversity Strategy, and the Strategic Nature Areas identified on the Dorset Nature Map.

2.6 The SANG strategy involves creation of 2ha of dry heath and 13 ha of mire habitat (UK BAP Priority habitats that are characteristic of the local area) that would make the important existing bird and reptile populations more robust to likely increased disturbance of Ringwood Forest (itself a non-statutory SINC), close to the development.

2.7 It is important to note that, in line with national and local policy, and the objectives of the FC's Forest Design Plan, this quantum of habitat creation would lead to significant biodiversity gain, whilst making Ringwood Forest a more diverse and interesting recreational resource. Site VTSW5 therefore provides an important example of how the net gains in biodiversity sought by the policy can be achieved.

Where harm is identified as likely to result, provision of measures to adequately avoid or adequately mitigate that harm should be set out. Development may be refused if adequate mitigation or, as a last resort compensation, cannot be provided

2.8 To mitigate potential impacts on the SPA, a SANG strategy has been agreed with NE and the FC for site VTSW5. The proposed SANG strategy relies upon the enhancement and diversification of habitats to encourage public access and enjoyment of conifer forestry/woodland owned by the FC within the adjacent Ringwood Forest and will be of benefit to both new and existing residents and the wider ecological value of the area.

2.9 In relation to the potential impacts on the SPA and Dorset Heathlands SAC the Tyler Grange Strategy states:

The SANG strategy necessitates creation of 2 ha of dry heath and 13 ha mire habitat (UK BAP Priority habitats that are characteristic of the local area) that would make the important existing bird and reptile populations more robust to likely increased disturbance of Ringwood Forest (itself a non-statutory SINC), close to the development. In line with national and local policy, and the objectives of the Forestry Commission's Forest Design plan, this quantum of habitat creation would in fact lead to significant biodiversity gain, whilst making Ringwood Forest a more diverse and interesting recreational resource.

Impacts to Dorset Heaths SAC would be avoided by appropriate drainage design, as well as mire restoration work in Ringwood Forest."

Provision of adequate management of the retained and new features

2.10 Linden Homes has agreed with the FC that the SANG strategy, together with a negotiated commercial financial contribution, will form the basis for the delivery and maintenance of the SANG provision, associated with a planning application. The financial contribution and mechanism for securing any contributions to the FC by Linden will be agreed between both parties during the course of application discussions for the site. Both parties are actively engaged in this process.

Monitoring of habitats and species for a suitable period of time after completion of the development to indicate any changes in habitat quality or species numbers, and put in place corrective measures to halt or reverse any decline

2.11 As set out above, the proposed strategy for the SANG includes provisions for the delivery and on-going maintenance of the SANG. Any monitoring considered necessary would form part of this package.

2.12 There would also be a commitment to a plan for management and monitoring of habitats within the site boundary.

2.13 It is therefore considered that site VTSW5 meets the criteria for site selection in relation to safeguarding biodiversity and geodiversity proposed in the Core Strategy and as such is a suitable site for allocation.

2. Does Policy ME2 provide a robust basis for the protection of the Dorset Heathlands?

2.14 Although the principles of Policy ME2 are supported, concerns are raised regarding the practicalities of its implementation. The purpose of the policy is to provide the framework from which the Councils can satisfy the Habitats Regulations, and secure contributions from development that will provide the necessary avoidance or mitigation measures required to protect the Dorset Heathlands from the effects of new residential development. The mechanisms available to the Councils to do this, either individually or collectively, will be to use planning obligations secured by way of Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

2.15 It is a key requirement within the CIL Regulations (and accompanying statutory guidance) for local authorities to ensure that developers are not charged twice for the same item of infrastructure, and therefore any policy that seeks to underpin a dual system of Section 106 and CIL for a single infrastructure issue such as Dorset Heathlands has to clearly set out the role each mechanism will play. However, Policy ME2 as drafted does not do this and could lead to instances of double charging.

2.16 For example, the draft policy requires SANG to be secured by way of a legal agreement, which is assumed (but not confirmed) would be through a Section 106 agreement. The policy then goes on to state that CIL will be used for 'heathland mitigation'. In the absence of any clear definitions within the policy, 'heathland mitigation' could still include the provision of SANG in addition to that delivered within strategic sites as required in other policies in the draft Core Strategy.

2.17 Therefore, this could lead to the situation where a strategic site would have to provide on-site SANG as well as pay CIL, which could then be used to provide SANG elsewhere; this would lead to clear double charging contrary to the CIL Regulations and statutory guidance.

2.18 Any policy that does not accord with statute would lead to considerable uncertainty over its practical implementation. However, to ensure Policy ME2 (and associated strategic site policies within the plan) can be found to be sound and in accordance with the habitats regulations, the Councils need to be certain that the proposed framework for mitigating the harm from residential development on Dorset Heathlands as set out in ME2 will be effective in its operation.

2.19 As shown in this response, the draft policy will lead to uncertainty in its effective operation and without sufficient amendments being made, cannot provide a robust basis for the protection of the Dorset Heathlands.

2.20 In terms of the tests of soundness set out in The Framework, draft Policy ME2 is therefore not 'justified', 'effective' or 'in accordance with national policy'.

3. Is there a strategy to avoid double counting SANG / mitigation and payment of CIL (ME2)?

2.21 As identified in our response to Q3, draft Policy ME2 will not provide an appropriate basis from which any related strategy for heathland mitigation (through the Dorset Heathlands DPD or associated CIL documentation) could be effective in avoiding double counting for SANG/mitigation and payment of CIL.

2.22 The practical strategy for SANG/mitigation and avoidance of double counting would appear to logically rest within the Dorset Heathlands DPD and associated CIL documentation (such as the CIL Regulation 123 list of infrastructure). However, it is noted that the Dorset Heathlands DPD has not yet been submitted for examination and therefore it is likely that it will not be adopted until after the Core Strategy for Christchurch and East Dorset is adopted by the Councils.

2.23 It is therefore imperative that in order for the Dorset Heathlands DPD to be found sound in the future it will need to be based on an effective and robust strategic policy within the joint Core Strategy that clearly sets out the roles Section 106 and CIL will play in delivering mitigation.

2.24 Policy ME2 therefore needs to be amended to ensure that any practical implementation strategies relating to SANG/mitigation and payment of CIL that are linked to ME2 can be operated effectively, and without leading to double counting.

4. Should Policy ME2 clarify that payment of CIL would be a trigger which would allow development to commence?

2.25 The policy should avoid stipulating a trigger that requires payment of CIL before development can commence as this would not recognise that some residential development may not pay CIL (for example a conversion of a building), or the fact that the CIL Regulations allow development to commence prior to making the CIL payment.

2.26 Instead, the policy should ensure that the Councils make a commitment to prioritise the use of planning obligations and CIL monies to put in place the heathland mitigation required to accommodate residential development in a timely manner and in line with the pace of growth. It is ultimately the Councils' responsibility (other than on the strategic sites) rather than individual developers to ensure that sufficient heathland mitigation is put in place to support development and the payment of monies does not in itself guarantee that this will be done.

2.27 Therefore, what is required is for the strategic policy framework within ME2 to confirm that the Council will prioritise the use of CIL to deliver sufficient heathland measures to mitigate the impact of all development, (i.e. using monies collected from the development that can pay CIL to mitigate the impact from all development that has an impact). This commitment then needs to be supported by a clear delivery framework of what projects are required to facilitate this, which could be through the Dorset Heathlands DPD, and then monitored on an annual basis. Should this strategic delivery

approach be recognised in Policy ME2, development can then simply commence in the knowledge that the Councils had considered whether there was an appropriate strategic delivery framework in place or not at the point planning permission was granted.

5. Do Policies ME4 and ME5 set local requirements in a way which is consistent with paragraph 95 of the NPPF?

2.28 It is considered that Policies ME4 and ME5 set local requirements in a way which is consistent with paragraph 95 of the NPPF. As with Policy ME2 however we would highlight the need to ensure there is a strategy to avoid double counting on-site energy provision and payment of CIL. The policy as currently drafted states that:

"Energy provision should normally be provided on-site, particularly on larger developments, or if not viable, through the Community Infrastructure Levy."

2.29 It will be important therefore that the Council ensure that where energy provision is provided on site that the provision of CIL does not lead to double counting.

6. Is Policy ME8 consistent with ME1 with regard to impacts on biodiversity and ecological impact?

2.30 We have no comments to make in relation to this question.

7. Do the SANG guidelines:

- **Provide clear and adequate guidance regarding the location and accessibility of SANG?**
- **Provide clarity regarding the quality and characteristics of SANG?**
- **Provide sufficient flexibility to allow for site specific circumstances?**

2.31 The guidelines have been informed by the changes required to the Purbeck Core Strategy following receipt of the Inspector's Report. It is considered that the guidelines provide clear and adequate guidance regarding the location and accessibility of SANG, provide clarity regarding the quality and characteristics of SANG and provide sufficient flexibility to allow for site specific circumstances. As such we do not propose any amendments to Appendix 5 as currently drafted.

3. RECOMMENDED CHANGES

3.1 In summary we recommend that the following changes are made to the Joint Core Strategy:

- Site VTSW5 should be reintroduced as an allocation for residential development of up to 65 dwellings.
- Policy ME2 should be amended as set out in Appendix One.
- The Councils should review the wording of Policies ME4 and ME5 to ensure this would not lead to double-counting through onsite provision and CIL payments.

APPENDIX ONE – PROPOSED AMENDED WORDING FOR POLICY ME2

APPENDIX 1 – PROPOSED AMENDED WORDING FOR POLICY ME2

Policy ME2 – Protection of Dorset Heathlands

In accordance with the advice from Natural England, no residential development will be permitted within 400m of protected European and internationally protected heathlands.

Any residential development within 400m and 5km of these areas will provide mitigation through a range of measures as set out in the Dorset Heathlands Joint Development Plan Document, and the Dorset Heathlands Joint Supplementary Planning Document which sets out guidance in the intervening period prior to the adoption of the Development Plan Document, including:

- *Provision of on-site Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (provided in accordance with guidelines set out in Appendix 5)*
- *Contributions to off-site greenspace or recreation projects*

The Councils will operate a dual system of planning obligation (secured through Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990) and CIL in order to deliver Dorset Heathlands avoidance or mitigation measures necessary to enable the grant of planning permission for residential development. The Councils will operate this dual system in full accordance with the CIL Regulations and take the appropriate steps to ensure that development is not charged twice for the same item or type of infrastructure. The dual system will be operated using the following general approach to on-site and off-site measures.

~~*The avoidance or mitigation measures are to be delivered in advance of the developments being occupied and must provide for mitigation in perpetuity.*~~

Provision of on-site Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANGs)

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs) that is required to be delivered on-site as part of development proposals, will be secured by way of a legal agreement between the developer and the relevant council. Where on-site provision is secured by way of a Section 106 planning obligation, the Councils will ensure through their CIL implementation strategy that the developer is not charged twice for that same type or item of infrastructure when applying CIL to the same development proposal. ~~*Heathland mitigation measures will be secured through CIL in the majority of cases. The authority will ensure that mitigation measures to avoid harm are given priority as required by this policy.*~~

Off-site Mitigation

On all other residential development proposals ~~*of approximately 50 dwellings,*~~ *where adequate mitigation measures cannot be provided on-site as part of the development, a financial contribution to the Councils will be required.*

Financial contributions collected in this way for heathland avoidance or mitigation measures not being delivered through Section 106 provision will be secured through CIL in the majority of cases.

Prioritisation of developer contributions for avoidance or mitigation measures

The Councils will prioritise its use of planning obligations and CIL to deliver heathland avoidance or mitigation measures to ensure sufficient provision is put in place to meet the demands from all development. The Councils undertake to ensure that avoidance or mitigation measures are delivered in a timely manner and in advance of developments being occupied, and must provide for mitigation to address the demands of all residential in perpetuity.

The Dorset Heathlands Joint Development Plan Document will set out the type of development circumstances, a list of projects which will be funded by developer contributions, ~~*and*~~ *the calculated amounts as they apply to different types of development and whether the contributions will be secured through Section 106 or CIL. Projects delivered through the Development Plan Document will include Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG), heathland access and visitor management, wardening, education, habitat re-creation and other appropriate avoidance measures. The combination of the 400m exclusion zone with the heathland mitigation measures set out above function together as an effective package avoiding the harmful effects of additional residential development on the European and internationally designated heathlands.*

APPENDIX TWO - ECOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

21 May 2013

Land off Ringwood Road, Verwood, East Dorset

Ecological Assessment

Report Number: 1522_R11a_LW_RW

Author: Lauren West

Checked by: Julian Arthur MCIEEM CENV

Contents

Appendices

Plans

Section 1: Introduction

1.1 This report has been prepared by Tyler Grange LLP on behalf of Linden Homes Strategic Land. It sets out the findings of an ecological assessment of land at north east Verwood, East Dorset, hereafter referred to as the 'site'.

1.2 The site is 3.69ha in area and is centred on National Grid Reference SU 107 080. It is within Dorset, though borders Hampshire to the east. An outline planning application for residential development with all matters reserved except for access into the site for vehicles in terms of the positioning and treatment to the access of the site, but excluding accessibility within the site, in terms of positioning and treatment of access and circulation routes is to be submitted to East Dorset District Council.

1.3 This report:

- Describes and evaluates the ecological resources within the likely 'zone of influence'[1] using available background data and results of field surveys;
- Assesses the issues and opportunities that would arise as a result of its future development; and
- Describes the potential consequences in terms of legislation and policy, and where appropriate describes mitigation and enhancement proposals, and a mechanism for controlling them.

[1] Defined as the areas/resources that may be affected by the biophysical changes caused by activities associated with a project

Section 2: Methodology

Scoping

2.1 The scope of the ecological assessment was determined by undertaking a desk-based assessment of available records and published sources, together with an initial survey of the site. With this information, the zone of influence of the proposed development was established, together with any further detailed work – such as detailed surveys – that might be necessary.

2.2 Consultation was undertaken with the Dorset County Council ecologist Dr Philip Sterling and Natural England Conservation Officer Nick Squirrell, in order to agree the scope of the ecological assessment.

Data Search

2.3 The data search was conducted in April 2012. Obtaining existing records is an important part of the assessment process as it provides information on issues that may not be apparent during a single survey, which by its nature provides only a 'snapshot' of the ecology of a given area.

2.4 Dorset Environmental Records Centre (DERC) and Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC) were contacted for:

- Species records for a 2km radius surrounding the site; and
- Records of non-statutory designated sites for the area within a 2km radius of the site.

2.5 The online Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) website (Ref 1) was consulted to identify any sites subject to statutory protection under national or European nature conservation legislation within 5km of the site.

2.6 Information supplied by these organisations has, where relevant, been incorporated into the following account with due acknowledgement.

2.7 In addition, the Natural Area profile (Ref. 2), as defined by Natural England, was consulted to determine the important ecological resources at a regional level. Natural England recognises 120 such Natural Areas, the boundaries of which are derived using the distribution of geology, wildlife and natural features, and on the land use pattern and human history of each area.

2.8 The Biodiversity Action Plans (BAP) for the UK, Dorset and Hampshire (Refs. 3, 4 and 5) were reviewed to identify whether any of the habitats or species within or adjacent to the site are BAP-listed and therefore the subject of conservation action. The BAPs contain information that can assist with the evaluation of ecological resources and can inform site enhancement strategies.

2.9 Lastly, relevant planning policies and supplementary planning documents relating to biodiversity were consulted.

Extended Phase I Survey

2.10 An extended Phase I survey of the site was undertaken on 17th April 2012 by Lauren West, an experienced ecological consultant and associate member of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM). Further investigation of habitats within the site was undertaken on 28th June 2012 in order to update the botanical species list for the site and for areas of off-site habitat within the adjacent Ringwood Forest. Weather conditions during the survey were warm, 19°C, 3/8 cloud cover with a light breeze.

2.11 The habitat survey was based on guidance set out in the 'Handbook for Phase I habitat survey' (Ref. 6). This entailed recording the main plant species and classifying and mapping broad habitat types present. Nomenclature for plant species follows that of BSBI (2007) (Ref 7).

2.12 Note was taken of the more conspicuous fauna, and any evidence of, or potential for the presence of protected/notable flora and fauna.

2.13 A basic inventory of the habitats and a representative species list was produced. Where access allowed, adjacent habitats were also considered, in order to assess the site within the wider landscape and to provide information with which to assess possible impacts within the zone of influence of the proposed development.

Detailed Fauna and Flora Surveys

Breeding Birds

2.14 Breeding bird surveys were conducted within the site and on land adjacent to the site within 500m. Surveys comprised three visits including an evening survey, ending after dark (when nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* become active) followed by a morning survey, beginning before first light. Each of the survey visits was undertaken when the weather conditions were suitable, i.e. not during high winds and/or heavy rain. The dates and weather conditions of the surveys are shown at Table 2.1.

Date	Times	Weather conditions
14th – 15th May 2012	19:00 – 21:45 04:20 – 06:40	1/8 cloud, light westerly breeze.
8th – 9th June 2012	19:45 – 22:20 04:00 – 06:20	8/8 cloud, wind SW3, though lighter in the early morning.
26th – 27th June 2012	20:00 – 22:30 03:40 – 06:10	8/8 cloud, humid and still. Misty early morning.

Table 2.1: Dates, times and weather conditions of breeding bird surveys

2.15 A detailed description of the methodology is provided at **Appendix 1**.

Invertebrates

2.16 An invertebrate assessment was undertaken on 22nd June 2012 in order to assess the potential importance of the habitats within the site for invertebrates, and to undertake invertebrate sampling where possible for identification purposes, focussing on areas offering most potential to support notable species. The weather conditions during the survey were 2/8 cloud, 16°C with a light breeze.

2.17 The detailed methodology employed during the survey is provided at **Appendix 2**.

Reptiles

2.18 A reptile survey of suitable habitat within the site and land within a 400m radius of the site within the adjacent Ringwood Forest was undertaken. The detailed methodology employed during the survey is provided at **Appendix 2**.

2.19 The dates and weather conditions of the surveys are shown at Table 2.2.

Date and time	Weather conditions	Temperature (°C)
14/08/12, 12:05	Cloudy, no wind, sunny intervals, 8/8 cloud cover	17.5
16/08/12, 11:00	Overcast, drizzle, gentle breeze, sunny intervals, 7/8 cloud cover	17
17/08/12, 15:10	Sunny, gentle breeze, 3/8 cloud cover	21
23/08/12, 11:15	Sunny spells, 4/8 cloud cover	19
24/08/12, 14:00	Showers with sunny spells between. 5/8 cloud cover	18.5
28/08/12, 11:30	Sunny spells, light breeze. Cloud cover 4/8	17.8
29/08/12, 15:45	Showers, overcast. Slight breeze	17.8

Table 2.2: Dates, times and weather conditions of reptile surveys

Evaluation

2.20 The evaluation of habitats is defined in accordance with the 'Guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment' (2006; Ref. 8). The level of value of specific ecological receptors is assigned using a geographic frame of reference, with international value being most important, then national, regional, county, district, local and lastly, within the context of the site.

2.21 Value judgements are based on various characteristics that can be used to identify ecological resources or features likely to be important in terms of biodiversity. These include site designations (such as SSSIs), or for undesignated features, the size, conservation status (locally, nationally or internationally), and the quality of the ecological resource. In terms of the latter, quality can refer to habitats (for instance if they are particularly diverse, or a good example of a specific habitat type), other features (such as wildlife corridors or mosaics of habitats) or species populations or assemblages.

Quality Assurance

2.22 This assessment and the terminology used are consistent with the 'Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment' published by the Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM, July 2006; Ref. 8). All ecologists at Tyler Grange LLP are member of CIEEM and abide by its Professional Code of Conduct.

Limitations

2.23 Please note that the findings of this report are valid at the time of writing. Owing to the dynamic nature of ecological resources, if more than six months have elapsed since the report was written, advice should be sought to determine whether update work is required. The findings of the report should not be relied upon without this advice.

Section 3: Baseline Conditions

Site Context

3.1. The site is situated within the Dorset Heaths Natural Area (Number 81), as defined by Natural England. This Natural Area includes the internationally important Dorset Heathlands and mires. The centre of the area, once all heathland, is now a complex mosaic of heathland and other associated habitats. Valley mires are a particular feature of the Dorset heathland, and fen vegetation of different types occur in some of the river valley wetlands and on the edge of the heathland where the water is affected by the nearby chalk. Four significant rivers flow within floodplains through the Dorset Heaths and these support important plant and dragonfly communities. The floodplains are important for wintering wildfowl and waders. To the north of the Natural Area, ancient woods survive in an intensively farmed landscape, and are rich in epiphytic lichens and butterflies.

3.2. The site is situated off Ringwood Road near Ebblake, between the eastern edge of the town of Verwood and the western extent of Ringwood Forest, along which the Dorset/Hampshire County border is located. The southern and eastern boundaries of the site are bordered by residential housing, predominantly low density dwellings with gardens abutting the boundary. The northern and western boundaries abut Ringwood Forest, which is owned and managed by the Forestry Commission.

Protected Sites

3.3. Please refer to **Appendix 4** for protected site locations.

Statutory Sites

3.4. The site is not covered by or adjacent to any statutorily-protected sites of nature conservation interest; however, there are 12 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) within 5km (three of which are also Local Nature Reserves (LNR)). Ten SSSI's are also designated as component parts of the Dorset Heathlands Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Table 3.1 identifies the statutorily-designated sites within 5km.

Site name	Designation	Distance and direction from site (N/S/W/E)	Description/Summary of reason for designation
Statutory Sites			
Ebblake Bog	SSSI Dorset Heathlands SPA, Dorset Heaths SAC and Ramsar	730 m S	Acid mire with accumulation of relatively deep peat due to poor hydraulic gradients. An internationally scarce habitat and saturated throughout the year. Supports a large population of bog bush-cricket *Metrioptera brachyptera* and rich in dragonflies.

Noon Hill	SSSI Dorset Heathlands SPA and Dorset Heaths SAC	750 m NW	Part of the Dorset Heathlands SAC/SPA/Ramsar. Dry heathland typically dominated by ling *Calluna vulgaris* and rich in lichens of the genus *Cladonia*, including the scarce *C. gracilis*. The rare brown beaksedge *Rhynchospora fusca* occurs in one of the wetter areas. The dry heathland supports strong populations of the rare heathland reptiles, sand lizard *Lacerta agilis* and smooth snake *Coronella austrica.* The heath grasshopper *Chorthippus vagans* which is restricted to some of the heaths of Dorset and the New Forest also occurs on the dry heath and the wet heath supports the local bog bush cricket.
Moors River System	SSSI	Closest record 900 m S	A small lowland river which supports exceptional diversity of aquatic and wetland plants, aquatic invertebrates, fish, birds and aquatic mammals. Associated habitats include wetlands such as swamps, tall-herb fen and fen woodland.
Potterne Hill	Dorset Heathlands SPA, Dorset Heaths SAC and Ramsar LNR SNCI	1.2 km SW	A small lowland heath with a secondary woodland edge. Smooth and palmate newts have been recorded on the site, as well as common lizard *Zootoca vivipara* and adder *Vipera berus*.
Stephens Castle	SPA SAC LNR SSSI SNCI	1.6 km NW	Wet and dry lowland heath featuring an Iron Age barrow at the top of an old sand and gravel quarry. Has a rich fauna including sand lizard, smooth snake, nightjar, Dartford warbler *Sylvia undata* and several species of dragonfly and damselfly and flora including sundew *Drosera* sp., bog asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum* and bladderwort *Utricularia* sp.
Bugdens Copse & Meadow	SSSI LNR Dorset Heathlands SPA and Dorset Heaths SAC DWT Reserve	1.7 km W	The remnants of an ancient forest and has a rich flora and fauna diversity. The adjoining meadow is an old grassland community with a rich floristic composition and uncommon both nationally and in Dorset.
Cranborne Common	SSSI Dorset Heathlands SPA, Ramsar and SAC	1.9 km N	Wet and dry heathland, bog and acidic grassland. All areas rich with species of flora and fauna which is local rare and scarce. The sand lizard and smooth snake are found within the SSSI as well as Dartford warbler and nightjar. Several rarer heathland invertebrates have been recorded.

Verwood Heaths	SSSI Dorset Heathlands SPA, Dorset Heaths SAC and Ramsar	2 km NW	Three areas of dry, humid and wet heathland. Very mature, dry heathland dominated by ling that is lichen rich. Area supports strong populations of sand lizard, smooth snake, heath grasshopper and bog bush cricket.
Avon Valley (Bickton-Christchurch)	SSSI Ramsar Site SPA SAC	3.2 km SE	A range of habitats supporting nationally and internationally important flora and fauna including a diverse range of notable invertebrates, migratory wildfowl and wading birds, 27 species of fish and otter *Lutra lutra*. An Annex I habitat - Water courses of plain to montane levels an Annex II species - Desmoulin's whorl snail *Vertigo moulinsiana*, population along 20 km of the margins and associated wetland of the River Avon. A rich and varied calcareous chalk stream with over 180 species of aquatic plant having been recorded, one of the most diverse fish faunas in Britain and a wide range of aquatic invertebrates
Horton Common	SSSI Dorset Heathlands SPA, Dorset Heaths SAC and Ramsar	3.2 km SW	A dry and wet heath with areas of bog with plants and animals typical of these habitats. Rare plants include Brown Beak-sedge and Pale Butterwort *Pinguicula lusitanica*. The rare Long Winged Conehead *Conocephalus discolor*, Sand lizard and the Dartford warbler occurs on the site.
Lions Hill	SSSI Dorset Heathlands SPA, Dorset Heaths SAC and Ramsar	3.9 km S	Heathland with a rich fauna, including species of restricted distribution and varied plant communities such as dry and wet health, bog, pine and birch woodland. Important habitat link between the heathlands of Dorset. Smooth Snake, Sand Lizard and Heath Grasshopper are present on this site
St Leonards & St Ives Heaths	SSSI Dorset Heathlands SPA and Dorset Heaths SAC	4.3 km SE	The largest parts of the present-day Dorset heathlands comprising of acidic grassland, dry and wet heath and mire vegetation types. Nationally scarce flora and fauna including Dartford warbler, Nightjar and Woodlark and wintering populations of hen harrier and Merlin and all six native reptile species including smooth snake and sand lizard.
Holt & West Moors Heaths	SSSI National Nature Reserve Dorset Heathlands SPA, Dorset Heaths SAC and Ramsar	5 km SW	Wet and dry heathland supporting a rich and typical fauna, including heathland birds, sand lizard and smooth snake and a variety of scarce invertebrates.

Table 3.1: Statutory designated sites within 5km

Non-statutory ('local') Sites

3.5. In Dorset non-statutory sites are named Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI), whilst sites in Hampshire are named Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINC). There are nine such sites within 2km. SNCIs and SINCs are selected for their habitat or species interest. Table 3.2 identifies the non-statutorily designated sites present within 2km.

Site name	Designation	Distance and direction from site (N/S/W/E)	Description/Summary of reason for designation
Ringwood Forest & Home Wood	SINC	Adjacent to eastern site boundary	Various notable species present including European nightjar, smooth snake, southern wood ant *Formica rufa* and annual knawel *Scleranthus annuus*
Boveridge Heath	SNCI	320 m NW	Two pieces of remnant heath under pylon wires bordered by conifers.
Kings Farm	SNCI	570 m S	Woodland and species-rich grassland.
Potterne Wood	SNCI	700 m S	Oak and birch woodland.
Potterne Hill	SNCI	1.2 km SW	Dry heath being invaded by scrub.
Cottage Farm	SNCI	1.4 km SW	Damp semi-improved grassland.
Stephen's Castle	SNCI	1.6 km NW	Old workings with regenerating heath, scrub and grassland.
Bugden's Copse	SNCI	1.7 km W	Deciduous woodland with an area of scrub over acid grassland.
Somerley Closed Landfill	SINC	2 km SE	Presence of notable plant species hairy bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus subbiflorus*.

Table 3.2: Non-statutory designated sites within 2km

Site Habitats

3.6. Detailed habitat descriptions are given below and should be read in conjunction with plan **Habitat Features 1522/P08c**. Locations of target notes can be found on the habitat features plan and are described in **Appendix 5**.

3.7. The site topography is relatively flat, though with lower, wetter ground to the east, adjacent to Ringwood Forest.

Semi-natural Coniferous Woodland

3.8. Approximately half of the site comprises semi-natural coniferous woodland, dominated by semi-mature to mature and naturally regenerating Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris*. The woodland is open in structure, with a sparse under-storey of occasional silver birch *Betula pendula*, holly *Ilex aquifolium*, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, rowan *Sorbus aucuparia,* alder buckthorn *Frangula alnus,* English oak *Quercus robur* and hazel *Corylus avellana*. The sparse ground flora comprises common ivy *Hedera helix*, honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum*, wood sage *Teucrium scorodonia*, heath wood-rush *Luzula multiflora* and a variety of mosses and lichens. Photograph 1 illustrates the woodland within the site.

Photograph 1: Coniferous woodland habitat

3.9. Within the northern section of the woodland is a part-shaded undulating rocky area comprising partly-vegetated piles of rocks and rubble, and areas where garden brashings have been dumped. There are several active European rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* burrows and a European fox *Vulpes vulpes* earth present. Species noted include bramble *Rubus fruticosus* agg., bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*, honeysuckle, laurel *Prunus laurocerasus*, soft rush *Juncus effusus*, wood sage and mosses. Immediately surrounding this area are occasional stands of tussocky grassland where there are gaps in the tree canopy.

3.10. The woodland is of a more closed structure at its southern extent, with frequent Scots pine and silver birch, hazel, holly, blackthorn and English oak. Occasionally present is dwarf gorse *Ulex minor*, a Dorset notable species (indicative of good unimproved or semi-improved habitat) (Target Note 1).

Poor Fen

3.11. Located near to the eastern boundary of the site there are small depressions where the high water table has resulted in poor fen (an acid mire habitat) (Target note 2). It may also be fed by periodic flood water from the adjacent Ebblake Stream. This supports occasional mosses, including sphagnum moss *Sphagnum* spp., purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, sparse mats of floating sweet-grass *Glyceria fluitans*, and bog myrtle *Myrica gale.* Birch and grey willow *Salix cinerea are p*resent, with occasional soft rush and frequent heath wood-rush on surrounding dryer ground (see photograph 2).

Photograph 2: Poor Fen habitat

Continuous and Scattered Scrub, Introduced Shrub

3.12. There are small areas of continuous bramble scrub with honeysuckle, located in the southern extent of the site, and bramble scrub with common nettle *Urtica dioica*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, goat willow *Salix caprea*, silver birch and occasional common gorse *Ulex europaeus*, present along part of the south-eastern boundary fence.

3.13. Scattered stands of common gorse, dwarf gorse and heather *Calluna vulgaris* are present alongside the woodland edge adjacent to the area of disc-harrowed land, and also alongside the north-western boundary.

3.14. Scattered scrub is present along the south-western boundary and includes hawthorn, bramble, ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, English oak and privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, along with occasional broom *Cytisus scoparius* and foxglove *Digitalis purpurea*.

3.15. There is a small stand of introduced shrub – rhododendron *Rhododendron ponticum* - in the southern-extent of the site, alongside the boundary.

Scattered Coniferous and Broad-leaved Trees

3.16. There is a large, mature Scots pine in the centre of the disc-harrowed land. Along the Ringwood Road frontage are semi-mature oak trees within a grass verge.

Poor Semi-improved Grassland

3.17. Poor, semi-improved grassland is present where the land has not been harrowed, alongside the north-western and south-western site boundaries. Along the south-western boundary the grassland is rank, with scattered occasional scrub. Forbs include yarrow *Achillea millefolium*, dandelion *Taraxacum officinale* agg., ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, curled dock *Rumex*

crispus, cut-leaved crane's-bill *Geranium dissectum*, common nettle, germander speedwell *Veronica chamaedrys*, dove's-foot crane's-bill *Geranium molle* and common mouse-ear *Cerastium fontanum*. Where adjacent trees cast shade, occasional yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*, field forget-me-not *Myosotis arvensis*, cleavers *Galium aparine* and soft rush are present.

3.18. Alongside the north-western boundary adjacent to woodland is a 4m wide strip of short, sparsely-vegetated rabbit-grazed grassland supporting additionally ragwort *Senecio jacobeae*, dove's-foot cranesbill, daisy *Bellis perennis,* common cudweed *Filago vulgaris,* scarlet pimpernel *Anagallis arvensis* and sheep's sorrel *Rumex acetosella*.

3.19. Alongside the western site boundary is rank, tussocky grassland adjacent to bramble and gorse scrub. Dominant species include cock's-foot *Dactylis glomerata*, Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*, common soft-brome *Bromus hordeaceus*, red fescue *Festuca rubra* and false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*, along with ribwort plantain, common nettle, dandelion, lesser stichwort *Stellaria graminea,* cleavers and yarrow. Taller herbs and shrubs include teasel *Dipsacus fullonum*, honesty *Lunaria annua*, great mullein *Verbascum thapsus*, goats'-beard *Tragopogon pratensis*, broom *Cytisus scoparius* and some ornamental species.

Arable (disc-harrowed grassland)

3.20. The majority of the site comprises an expanse of flat land that at the time of survey had recently been disc-harrowed. Photograph 3 illustrates this area of habitat. No crops had been sown in this area and the land appeared to have been sparsely-vegetated, poor semi-improved or improved grassland. It is understood that this area has been managed in this way for the last five years, and prior to that it was a playing field (*pers. comm.*).

Photograph 3: Disc-harrowed land with woodland edge in foreground

Buildings

3.21. A disused chicken shed and pig shelter, constructed of wood and corrugated iron, are present within the woodland. Both structures are open and single-storey.

Offsite Habitats

3.22. Semi-natural coniferous woodland within the site is contiguous with similar plantation woodland habitats to the north and east within Ringwood Forest. The Ebblake Stream follows a course adjacent to the eastern site boundary, and alongside a public footpath. The stream is small and shaded, with no riparian vegetation present on the section alongside the site. A small, dry ditch forms the northern boundary, largely shaded by the woodland edge and scattered scrub.

3.23. Ringwood Forest close to the site is primarily conifer plantation, though to the east is an area of dry heath restoration, dominated by ling and purple moor-grass. A number of rides and footpath support similar vegetation.

3.24. The south-western and south-eastern boundaries abut the gardens of adjacent residential properties. There are a number of large, mature English oak standards present within the private gardens which back onto the south-western site boundary.

Fauna

3.25. Protected and notable fauna recorded during surveys are described below, and shown on the **Fauna Results Plan 1522/P11b**.

Amphibians

3.26. No records of great crested newt *Triturus cristatus* within 2km of the site were returned; there are no suitable ponds within the site and no other ponds are shown on the Ordnance Survey mapping within 500m, the nearest pond being some 650m south. There are records of common toad *Bufo bufo* (a UK BAP species and hence also Species of Principal Importance (SoPI[2])) approximately 1km to the north-west. There are suitable terrestrial habitats in the form of woodland and scrub, and whilst common toad could use the site, great crested newts would not be expected.

Badger Meles meles

3.27. The local landscape is suitable for badgers, with woodland providing cover and opportunities for sett construction and seasonal foraging. The site supports some grassland that is likely to be used by foraging badgers. A sett with two active holes was recorded only a few metres from the site. Other setts are highly likely within woodland to the north and east; indeed several records of badger, including setts, were returned in the area surrounding the site. No setts were found within the site itself.

Bats

3.28. Several records for bats and bat roosts within the 2km search area were returned, the closest records being for common pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* and brown log-eared bat *Plecotus auritus* some 150m south of the site. Other records exist for serotine *Eptesicus serotinus* 1.6km south-west and noctule *Nyctalus noctula* 500m west. Records for Greater Horseshoe bat *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum* were also returned for the 2km search area, although the nature of the record and exact location is unknown.

3.29. No trees within the site itself were considered to be of sufficient maturity or supported features such as splits, rot holes or flaking bark that could support roosting bats. However, potential for roosting

[2] As required under Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, local authorities must have regard to the conservation of biodiversity, when carrying out their normal functions. Section 41 requires the Secretary of State to publish lists of Species of Principal Importance (SoPIs) and Habitats of Principal Importance (HoPIs) for the conservation of biodiversity in England

bats to use the mature oak standards located within private gardens near the south-western site boundary was identified, where features such as splits, cracks, woodpecker holes and rot holes and missing branches or limbs were noted.

3.30. Bats would be expected to use the woodland margins for foraging, though the majority of the site is unsuitable.

Breeding Birds

3.31. A large dataset was returned in respect of notable bird species for the vicinity of the site, which including a number of wetland and wader species, which would not be expected to use the site or its immediate surrounds. Other notable woodland and garden species which are likely to use the habitats within the site include: dunnock *Prunella modularis*, tree pipit *Anthus trivialis*, mistle thrush *Turdus viscivorus*, common whitethroat *Sylvia communis*, willow warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*, common starling *Sturnus vulgaris* and house sparrow *Passer domesticus*.

3.32. Records of qualifying species of the Dorset Heathlands SPA within 1km of the site have been returned, i.e. populations of European importance to conservation listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive (refer to **Appendix 6**). These include breeding populations of Dartford warbler (recorded 900m north west of the site) and nightjar (recorded 850m north west). Records of woodlark *Lullula arborea*, the third Annex I heathland species known in the SPA, were returned for the 2km search area, although the exact location is unknown. There are records indicating the presence of over-wintering populations of qualifying SPA species hen harrier *Circus cyaneus* within the 2km search area; there are no records for merlin *Falco columbarius*.

3.33. The detailed 2012 breeding bird survey results are provided **Appendix 1**. In summary:

- Breeding bird activity within the site is restricted to the woodland plantation, which supports a limited range of the commonest species found in the adjacent forest, including 'generalist' species such as woodpigeon, wren, robin, chaffinch and possibly pheasant and blackcap, together with conifer specialists goldcrest and coal tit. These species are common and widespread in the wider area and generally have robust breeding populations;
- Notable species were found to be breeding in adjacent parts of Ringwood Forest. The majority of these were recorded in the vicinity of clearing 2 (refer to plan in **Appendix 1**), around 500m east of the site boundary, including a selection of typical 'heathland' species: woodcock, cuckoo, nightjar, tree pipit, stonechat and yellowhammer, with wood warbler possibly breeding nearby.
- Nightjar was the only Annex I species recorded during the survey. One territory includes both clearing 1 (approximately 100m east of the site) and the northern section of clearing 2. Nightjars are highly mobile and can cover large distances at night whilst feeding (on flying invertebrates). As well as within the forest, they are likely to forage over the proposed development site as well as over the gardens in the area.
- None of the other Annex I heathland species - woodlark or Dartford warbler, were recorded during the surveys, although it is noted that suitable habitat for these species exists and that, additionally, Dartford warbler populations have suffered due to recent cold winters.

Dormouse Muscardinus avellanarius

3.34. One record for dormouse at Verwood, 1.6km south-west, was returned.

3.35. The woodland and scrub within the site and surrounding area are considered to provide sub-optimal habitat for dormice, with the woodland being of open structure, with little under-storey, and with few of the fruiting or flowering species present that are considered to provide important foraging resources for dormice, such as hazel, oak, bramble and honeysuckle.

Invertebrates

3.36. A large number of protected and notable invertebrate records, primarily associated with woodland and heathland habitats, were returned. These include: Lesser marsh grasshopper *Chorthippus albomarginatus*, butterflies such as marsh fritillary *Euphydryas aurinia*, grayling *Hipparchia semele*, small heath *Coenonympha pamphilus* and a number of moth species including broom moth *Melanchra pisi*, oak hook-tip *Watsonalla binaria* and buff ermine *Spilosoma luteum*. There is potential for some of the above species, such as grayling, buff ermine and broom moth to use the habitats within and adjacent to the site, although none of these species were recorded during the invertebrate scoping assessment.

3.37. Detailed survey findings are provided in **Appendix 2**. In summary, three key invertebrate species were recorded within the site. These include two nationally scarce species: tawny cockroach *Ectobius pallidus* (found in rough grassland in the north west of the site) and lesser cockroach *Ectobius panzer (*found in grassland on the woodland edge in the centre of the site*).* Of most significance is a diving beetle *Hydroporus necopinatus,* found in a pool within the wetter, poor fen habitat in the north of the site. This species is a rare UK BAP species listed in the red data book as endangered, and in the UK, it is only known from a few sites on the lowland heaths of Dorset.

3.38. No other species of note were recorded within the site, the majority of which is of low interest for invertebrates.

Other Mammals

3.39. Records of otter *Lutra lutra* (a WCA protected species, UK BAP priority species and SoPI) 1km south-west of the site were returned; however, the Ebblake Stream is shallow and offers little cover for this species, and given the disturbed and open nature of the site, this species would not be expected.

3.40. Records of water vole *Arvicola amphibious* were returned for Ringwood Forest, approximately 1.2km south-east of the site. However, this species would not be expected to be present on the Ebblake Stream alongside the eastern site boundary, which provides sub-optimal habitat for this species, with very limited vegetation cover present.

3.41. A record for European hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus*, a UK BAP priority and SoPI, exists 400m west of the site and this species may use private gardens adjacent to the site, scrub located along the south-east boundary, and potentially compost and brushwood piles located in the western corner of the site. However, the majority of the site offers little cover and therefore little suitable habitat for hedgehog.

Reptiles

3.42. Records for the common species of reptile (slow-worm, common lizard, grass snake and adder), indicate their presence within 1km of the site. Records for sand lizard (1.1km north) and smooth snake (900m north-west), both European protected species, UK BAP priority species and SoPI, have been returned.

3.43. The surveys confirmed that common reptile species are present within the site and comprise a ‘good’ population of slow worm (based on a peak adult count of 15) and a ‘low’ population of common lizard (based on a peak adult count of 2), when comparing peak adult counts with the

criteria set out in Froglife Advice Sheet 10 (Ref. 9). No specially-protected reptiles were recorded within the site.

3.44. Surveys of suitable heathland habitat within the adjacent off-site Forestry Commission land recorded a population of sand lizard (closest record 150m east of the site) and smooth snake (closest record 180m south east of the site). Common lizard and slow worm were also recorded.

Section 4: Evaluation

Protected Sites

4.1. By virtue of their designation as nationally important sites on account of their ecological interest, all SSSIs are of **national ecological value**.

4.2. Some of these are further protected as SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites, which are selected on account of them representing part of the European network of important high-quality conservation sites that will make a significant contribution to conserving the 189 habitat types and 788 species identified in Annexes I and II of the Habitats Directive (as amended) and Annex I of the Birds Directive. Consequently, SACs and SPAs are of **European ecological value**.

4.3. SNCIs and SINCs are identified on the basis that they support ecological resources that are of importance within the district or county. They are therefore of at least **district ecological value**.

Habitats

Semi-natural Coniferous Woodland

4.4. The majority of the woodland is species poor and open in structure, with a sparse, species-poor understorey and ground flora. Such coniferous woodland is common in the wider landscape, and not considered to be of particular intrinsic value. It is not representative of more important habitats nearby; this habitat is therefore valued as being of **value within the site** only.

4.5. A series of damp, poor fen habitat near to the eastern boundary of the site supports mosses including sphagnum, purple moor-grass, bog myrtle, heath wood-rush and soft rush. This is likely to be a relic of former mire habitat that has since succeeded to less valuable, conifer-dominated woodland. Given no species of particular note were recorded and the limited extent of this habitat it is likely to be of no more than **local value**, although it is of supporting value to invertebrates (see below) .

Continuous and Scattered Scrub, Introduced Shrub

4.6. Areas of continuous and scattered scrub comprise common species and are common and widespread habitats in the landscape; these habitats are considered to be of **value within the site**. Scattered stands of dwarf gorse are present along the boundary between the woodland and the disc-harrowed field. The species was also recorded just off-site in the woodland. This is a Dorset notable species considered to be of **local value**.

Poor Fen

4.7. This is limited in extent and is heavily shaded. It is a poor example of the more valuable mire habitat known locally. It is considered to be of **local value**.

Scattered Coniferous and Broad-leaved Trees

4.8. The mature Scots pine within the centre of the disc-harrowed land, and the semi-mature oaks on Ringwood Road are common species locally, and of **value within the site**. Other scattered juvenile trees present within the scrub habitats are of **negligible value**.

Poor Semi-improved Grassland

4.9. Poor semi-improved grassland at the site boundaries comprise of common species (though are likely to be of greater supporting value to fauna, including reptiles) and are assessed as being of **value within the site**.

Arable (disc-harrowed grassland)

4.10. This sparsely-vegetated area comprising of bare ground along with remnants of poor semi-improved grassland is considered to be of **negligible value**.

Buildings

4.11. The chicken shed and pig shelters located within the woodland do not have any intrinsic ecological interest and are therefore assessed as being of **negligible value**.

Offsite Habitats

4.12. The adjacent Ringwood Forest is typical of conifer plantations locally, comprising planted woodland of relatively uniform age structure. Rides and clearings close to the site support greater botanical diversity, and there is an area of restored dry heath, a UK BAP habitat, to the east. These open areas support sand lizard and smooth snake and breeding nightjar (all UK BAP species and SoPIs). The forest falls within Hampshire and Dorset. That part within Hampshire has been identified as a SINC (Ringwood Forest & Home Wood SINC) on the basis of the fauna it supports; consequently this is of at least **district ecological value**. The part of the forest north of the site is within Dorset and is not similarly designated, but given it is contiguous and similar in nature, it too is of **district value**.

Species

Amphibians

4.13. Common toad is a UK BAP species and SoPI, but is common and widespread. If present, any population would be considered to be of **value within the site**.

Badgers

4.14. Badger is a common and widespread species that is protected as a result of welfare concerns rather than owing to conservation concern. Consequently, whilst an active sett exists close to the site and suitable foraging habitat is present, badgers are considered to be of **negligible value**.

Bats

4.15. There are no trees or other features within the site itself considered to offer potential habitat for roosting bats, although a series of mature oaks within private gardens immediately adjacent to the site boundary are considered to offer potential for roosting bats, as could nearby residential properties and several mature trees along Parkland Close.

4.16. Whilst some foraging bats would be expected along woodland edges, trees and scrub, there are much more valuable foraging habitats nearby such as woodland, grassland and heathland mosaics, river corridor and associated tributaries.

4.17. The bat assemblage using the site may include some uncommon species, but given the habitats present, is not expected to be of greater than local value.

Birds

4.18. Results of bird surveys indicate that the site is not of substantive value to birds, with only common and widespread species recorded. The bird assemblage within the site is therefore considered to be of no more than **site value**.

4.19. The adjacent off-site woodland supports notable species, including breeding nightjar - there are also reports of bird species using suboptimal habitats in the locality (Nick Squirrell *pers. comm.*), and it is possible that nightjar may forage over the site, although none were recorded during the surveys. Other species recorded in Ringwood Forest are red-listed birds such as cuckoo, tree pipit and yellowhammer and amber-listed woodcock; none of these is considered likely to be dependent on the habitats within the site, although they may occasionally use the site for foraging.

Invertebrates

4.20. The majority of the habitats support an assemblage of common and widespread invertebrates of **site value.**

4.21. However, two nationally scarce species (tawny cockroach and lesser cockroach) found in rough grassland habitat are of **local value**.

4.22. A diving beetle *Hydroporus necopinatus*, an endangered UK BAP species and SoPI*,* was found in the poor fen in the north of the site. This species has a restricted range occupying, often ephemeral shallow pools on the lowland heaths of Dorset; this is a new record for the locality and the stability of the populations is unknown (Ref. 10). It is likely to be present elsewhere locally but on the basis of limited information, it is considered to be of **regional value**, **possibly of national value**.

Reptiles

4.23. The site supports populations of common reptiles including a 'good' population of slow worm and a 'low' population of common lizard; whilst these are relatively common both species are UK BAP priority species and SoPIs, although they are not targeted for conservation action in the Dorset BAP. The reptile assemblage present at the site is considered to be of **local value**.

4.24. Populations of smooth snake and sand lizard have been identified in the adjacent Ringwood Forest; these are notable and of at least **district value**. Populations of common reptiles are of **local value**.

Section 5: Potential Ecological Effects, Mitigation and Enhancement

Proposed Development

5.1. Up to 65 units are proposed, with access off Ringwood Road along an existing track and via the existing field gate.

5.2. Potential effects on valuable ecological resources - and the mitigation strategy to address them - are described below, with reference to relevant policy (in the Local Plan and the Core Strategy Pre-Submission) and legislation, which is set out in **Appendix 6**.

5.3. In accordance with the NPPF and local policies, ecological enhancements that deliver biodiversity gain are also described, which have been informed by local and national strategies, including BAPs.

5.4. The most significant issue in respect of future development is the potential for adverse effects upon Ebblake Bog and Noon Hill SSSI, part of Dorset Heathlands SPA, and Dorset Heaths SAC and Ramsar. The SSSIs, SPA and SAC are designated for different reasons, which need to be considered separately.

Dorset Heathlands SPA

Potential Impacts

5.5. Whilst it would be directly affected by the proposed development of the site, there is the potential for indirect effects of development – both at the site and in combination with other developments – to affect the qualifying interest for which the Dorset Heathlands SPA is designated.

5.6. The SPA comprises of a number of fragmented heathland sites within the county, the closest being Ebblake Bog 730m to the south and Noon Hill 750m to the north (see Table 3.1 and Appendix 4). Such sites are protected under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (the 'Habitats Regulations'; see **Appendix 6**). Annex I ground-nesting bird populations (a qualifying feature of the SPA), namely Dartford warbler, woodlark and nightjar, are particularly sensitive to increased recreation pressure, with increased use by dog walkers being the key issue.

5.7. This is a common issue with respect to proposed development sites identified in the Core Strategy Pre-Submission that are within 5km of the SPA. Consequently, as required under the Habitats Regulations, Christchurch Borough Council and East Dorset District Council have undertaken a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) of the emerging Core Strategy (Ref. 11). The HRA has informed Paragraph 13.13 of the Core Strategy Pre-Submission which states that: "*There is strong evidence to support the conclusion that the Dorset Heaths are under significant pressure from urban development across South East Dorset. It is the view of Natural England that further residential development should not be permitted within 400m of a designated Heathland, and that between 400m and 5km, residential development would still have a significant effect such that it should be required to mitigate its impact*".

5.8. As well as triggering the legislation, unmitigated impacts to the protected site would be contrary to policies protecting designated sites.

Mitigation and Enhancement Strategy

5.9. A Suitable Accessible Natural Greenspace (SANG) strategy has been agreed with Natural England to address potential adverse effects to the SPA.

5.10. The SANG strategy is included at **Appendix 7**. This was initially devised to provide Natural England and East Dorset District Council (EDDC) with sufficient information to address the reason for the site's omission from the Core Strategy Pre-Submission March 2012 (in which it is referred to as 'North East Verwood New Neighbourhood' under deleted Policy VTSW5), so that the site could be reinstated in the Core Strategy. The proposed allocation refers to a 50 unit development.

5.11. The SANG strategy reflects the requirements of policy in the Core Strategy Pre-Submission Response Analysis (November 2012), and specifically ME2 'Protection of the Dorset Heathlands'. Detailed guidelines for SANG provision are set out in Appendix 5 of that document; these reflect design standards set out in the Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework 2012-2014 Supplementary Planning Document (the 'SPD')(September 2012) and the Dorset Heathlands Development Plan Document Preferred Options Consultation (February 2013) (Refs. 12 and 13).

5.12. The strategy relies upon the enhancement and diversification of habitats to encourage public access and enjoyment of conifer forestry/woodland owned by the Forestry Commission within the adjacent Ringwood Forest. The strategy is summarised as follows:

- To attract dog walkers away from the Dorset Heathlands SPA, a variety of attractive, waymarked circular walks of up to 2,350m linked to the development site would be provided, with leaflets informing new residents of their presence;
- The existing plantation woodland containing the SANG would be made more diverse and hence attractive to dog-walkers than elsewhere by creating open glades supporting heathland vegetation, and through the restoration of 13ha mire habitats that will make the area wetter;
- Paths and surrounding habitats would be maintained, as required;
- To seek to avoid adverse effects to sensitive habitats in Ringwood Forest, signage would state the need to pick up dog litter, and open space in the development site will include dog litter bins and a pond for dogs to use; and
- The SANG features would be secured in perpetuity.

5.13. Whilst there is some data in respect of the existing recreational use of Ringwood Forest, Nick Squirrell of Natural England considered it would be beneficial to undertake a recreation audit during the spring and summer months within the forest. This would provide a baseline and would assist in determining whether the SANG is likely to be effective. It was agreed that this could be made the subject of a planning condition.

5.14. The Forestry Commission and the developer have agreed the strategy and the principles of a mechanism to secure its delivery. Natural England has confirmed that this provides confidence that the SANG strategy will be implemented and mitigation secured to the standards required by the Habitats Regulations.

5.15. Ringwood Forest is, as stated earlier, of inherent ecological value, supporting populations of birds that are found in the SPA, as well as strictly protected reptile species. In order to address potential adverse effects associated with increased use of the forest by the 50 units being promoted through the Core Strategy process (refer to para 5.8, above), Linden Homes would fund the creation of 1.5ha of dry heath habitat and 13 ha of mire habitat would be restored. This would be achieved through plantation felling and management, and modification of drainage in the upstream

catchment. This habitat creation and restoration is in accordance with an existing strategy for enhancement of Ringwood Forest set out in the Forestry Commission's East Dorset Forest Design Plan Design Concept. As well as mitigating potential adverse effects, this will deliver significant benefits as a result of development, creating a large expanse UK BAP priority habitats.

5.16. The proposed planning application is for a slightly larger development than that being promoted in the Core Strategy (up to 65 units as opposed to 50). This does not affect the principles of the SANG in terms of recreation provision, however, it would result in a probable increase in the number of recreational users with concomitant increases in disturbance to valuable ecological resources in Ringwood Forest. Using the same rationale as that for 50 units, the quantum of heath created would be increased by 0.5ha (a total of 2.0ha) to address possible effects associated with an additional approximately 15 units. As agreed with Natural England, an addendum to the SANG strategy has been prepared to reflect this (**Appendix 8**).

Ebblake Bog SSSI, and Dorset Heaths SAC and Ramsar

Potential Impacts

5.17. The SAC supports important wetland habitats that are dependent on nutrient poor water. The nearest component of the SAC, Ebblake Bog, is 730m to the south. Whilst unlikely, there is the potential for development of the site – alone or in combination with others – to increase flow in the Ebblake Stream, which follows a course along the eastern boundary of the site and through Ebblake Bog. This could result in nutrient rich water overtopping the banks and spilling into the Ebblake Bog SSSI, SAC and SPA downstream.

5.18. Given the nature and scale of the development, other impacts to SAC qualifying habitats resulting from dust or nutrient deposition are not anticipated.

5.19. Similarly, owing to the distances involved, impacts that might affect the conservation status of populations of European protected species within the SAC, such as great crested newt, smooth snake or sand lizard, or invertebrates would not be expected.

5.20. As well as triggering the legislation, unmitigated impacts to the protected site would be contrary to policies protecting designated sites.

Mitigation and Enhancement Strategy

5.21. The SANG strategy in **Appendix 7** also describes how potential impacts to wetland habitats at Ebblake Bog SSSI, SAC and Ramsar site will be avoided, by adopting appropriate drainage design as part of the development such that there should not be an increase in flows in Ebblake Stream. Furthermore, the proposals to restore the mire habitats in the upstream catchment should reduce flows in Ebblake Stream, reducing the risk further.

5.22. The increase in development size would not require modification to the existing drainage strategy to avoid impacts to Ebblake Bog.

Other Statutory Sites

5.23. The Ebblake Stream adjacent to the site's eastern boundary is within the catchment and upstream of the Moors River System SSSI and Avon Valley (Bickton-Christchurch) SSSI and SAC. Given the distances involved and dilution of any contaminants in the unlikely event of polluting incidents, it is not likely that such events would affect the integrity of these sites.

5.24. By adopting usual best practice techniques during construction, and through appropriate design, impacts to Moors River System SSSI and Avon Valley (Bickton-Christchurch) SSSI and SAC resulting from pollution entering the Ebblake Stream would be avoided.

Non-statutory ('local') Sites

5.25. Potential effects to Ringwood Forest and Home Wood SNCI adjacent and to the east of the site relate to increased recreational use and associated disturbance to important fauna. These issues have been addressed as part of the agreed SANG proposals described above. With the proposed dry heath and mire creation proposed, the quantum of UK BAP habitat and opportunities for important fauna that depend on it, would be improved, resulting in biodiversity gain.

5.26. Owing to the scale of development and distances involved, no adverse effects to other non-statutory sites are anticipated.

Habitats

5.27. The proposed development is designed to avoid the poor fen habitat of local value within the woodland, which supports the diving beetle *Hydroporus necopinatus*. This lower lying part of the site could not be developed in any event as it is within the flood plain. The drainage design described above should ensure that the quality and quantity of water within this habitat is not adversely affected.

5.28. Development would result in loss of less valuable habitats:

- Some dwarf gorse of local value, though some can be retained;
- Coniferous woodland, poor semi-improved grassland, semi-mature oaks and a mature Scots pine of site value; and
- Harrowed land, scattered juvenile trees, buildings of negligible value.

5.29. These limited losses would be more than compensated by the extensive habitat creation proposed in Ringwood Forest.

5.30. That said, it is necessary for arboricultural and visual impact reasons to enhance the retained coniferous woodland. The reasons for this are:

- Retain a woodland backdrop to development, providing a level of amenity consistent with the existing Tree Preservation Order over time; and
- Screen views from outside of the site, along the footpath adjacent to Ebblake Stream.

5.31. A strategy, provided in **Appendix 9**, has been devised to address these effects. In summary, it involves creation of the following zones:

- Mosaic of new grassland and dry heath bounded by hedgerows, all of which managed to maximise botanical diversity (and containing elements of the SANG, as described above);
- woodland/grassland transition habitat ('ecotone') supporting light scrub (such as dwarf gorse and common gorse) and rough grassland that will be managed less frequently. A 'scalloped' edge to this woodland will be created, which will benefit invertebrates, particularly butterflies, and reptiles; and