

NATURAL ENGLAND'S LOCAL PLANNING CONSULTATION ADVICE FOR DEVELOPMENT WITHIN OR CLOSE TO WOODLAND DESIGNATED SITES

April 2020

Natural England's initial screening of this planning application has identified that this proposed development has the potential to adversely affect a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) designated for its woodland interest, i.e. the relevant Impact Risk Zones have been triggered.

The likely impacts arising from the proposal are straightforward to assess with confidence by following the advice notes provided below, and where necessary, requesting further information from the applicant where uncertainties exist. We therefore advise you to review the planning application under consideration, and apply the principles described, as appropriate.

Please note that this advice (where specifically referred to in our consultation response) only applies to development proposals within Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, Suffolk and Norfolk planning authorities.

Standing Advice on ancient woodland and veteran trees

Natural England and Forestry Commission have produced [standing advice](#) entitled '*Ancient woodland and veteran trees: protecting them from development*' which outlines what planning authorities should consider for developments near ancient woodland and veteran trees. Advice is given on determining impacts and how to avoid, reduce or compensate for the impacts. Note that planning authorities should refuse planning permission for developments that would lead to loss or deterioration of irreplaceable ancient woodland habitats unless the need for, and benefits of, the development in that location clearly outweigh the loss. This principle is outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework (2019) paragraph 175.

Ancient woodland and veteran trees within the application site

We strongly advise the retention of ancient woodland and veteran trees *within* the application site as they have important roles to perform as local landscape features and possibly as visual screening, as wildlife habitats for woodland species (including NERC Act s41 priority species such as stag beetle) and ecological corridors for mobile species. Depending on the configuration of the proposed development, they may also act as buffers to the designated site.

Larger sites have more options for green infrastructure in general, but we suggest that woodland/veteran trees within the application site are designed into an ecological network / local landscaping which includes connections to other wooded habitat and transitions to semi-natural habitats, such as long grassland.

Reasons for Notification of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Background information on SSSIs and their notified interest features can be found on the [Magic map system](#) website. The SSSI citation should be referred to in order to understand the special interest of the SSSI and its sensitivities.

SSSI Impacts which may need to be addressed

(i) Air quality during construction

Best practise measures should be deployed during construction to minimise the likelihood of dust and other airborne pollutants, which in excess can smother leaves and hinder normal photosynthetic functioning of plants.

(ii) Increase in access

Any new access points into the SSSI from adjacent developments should be avoided. If a development shares a boundary with a woodland SSSI, the application should include details of a suitably robust (full height) boundary fence. The SSSI must not be used for access by construction vehicles or storage of materials (even temporarily). For larger sites which may be transferred to a grounds maintenance company, the specification of their responsibilities should include any boundary treatment monitoring and maintenance.

Where public access into the woodland already exists, new housing development is likely to increase visitor pressure to woodland SSSIs, and may result in an increase in impacts such as the trampling of ground flora, and nutrient enrichment from dog waste in particular. General disturbance impacts to other (non-notified) wildlife may also increase. Natural England may provide bespoke advice where in our view these issues are significant for certain SSSIs, either individually or cumulatively, however you may wish to consult with the woodland owner / manager with a view to identifying whether any proportionate developer contribution to specific visitor management measures may be appropriate (such as improved signage, dog bins, path surface treatment etc.).

(iii) Root compaction

An appropriate root protection zone should be clearly marked on plans, and no buildings (or other operations likely to result in soil compaction) should be constructed within this zone. The root protection zone should be in accordance with British Standard BS 5837:2012 '*Trees in relation to design demolition and construction*'. We recommend that the advice of a Tree Officer/professional arboriculturalist is sought where root protection zones may be required.

(iv) Tree surgery works

Trees growing within the SSSI close to the boundary of the application site may also have boughs and branches extending within the red-line boundary. Our advice is that these branches should not be removed or cut back for aesthetic reasons, e.g. to increase light levels to a garden or reduce leaf drop in Autumn, but might be permitted for health and safety reasons. If necessary, the advice of a Tree Officer/professional arboriculturalist should be sought, and a full tree health survey commissioned prior to permission being granted. The site layout may need to be adjusted to take account of both limitations on tree surgery works as well as the root protection zone.

(v) Surface water runoff

During the construction phase, surface water drainage must be directed away from the SSSI, and care should be taken to ensure that contamination does not enter drainage ditches which feed into the SSSI. For the operational phase, SuDS should be used to maximise groundwater infiltration rates where appropriate.

(vi) Foul water disposal

The application should confirm that foul drainage will be to mains sewer. Additional advice may be needed from Natural England if alternative arrangements are proposed. Care should be taken that pollutants do not enter local watercourses feeding the SSSI once development is completed.

(vii) Groundwater changes

Some woodland SSSIs are dependent upon ground-water supplies remaining undisturbed (for example, if there is a significant alder/willow component (wet woodland or carr) within the SSSI). Any activities proposed by the development which might interfere with groundwater supplies, such as increased abstraction, should be assessed as part of the decision-making process.

(viii) Development Buffering

Natural England advises that, notwithstanding any root protection zone required, that a buffer zone of at least 15m between the development and the SSSI should be designed into the layout plan where possible, with the view to ensuring that the SSSI is buffered from any remaining possible impacts (such as increases in lighting and noise), and that the SSSI is sensitively designed into local landscaping. This would also help to reduce anti-social activities, such as fly-tipping.

If the developer requires substantive pre-application advice in addition to that provided above, Natural England advises that the applicant/developer consults Natural England directly, so that they have the opportunity to express an interest in using our chargeable Discretionary Advice Service (DAS).

The first step is for the developer to fill out a simple form, so we can register their interest, and make sure they have the right adviser for their case. Please visit our website (<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/planningdevelopment/spatialplanning/das/default.aspx>) for more information and a downloadable request form [here](#).