

Horsham Society

by David Griffiths



Are ecological issues taken into account?

Ecology plays an important role in the design of commercial and residential developments.

Before construction starts on any development the contractor is required to instruct a professional ecologist to undertake a wildlife survey of the site, which usually forms one of the conditions appended to a Planning Approval.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 was introduced to protect uncommon and/or vulnerable wildlife species in England, including birds, bats, snakes, slow worms, great crested newts and freshwater crayfish. If the findings indicate the presence of snakes or great crested newts, measures must be taken to clear the development area of these species.

This is a laborious process involving the erection of a 600mm high black polythene fence around the site, with the lower edge sunk into the ground. The fenced area is then cleared of any reptiles or amphibians by a licenced ecologist, but this operation can only be done during certain seasons.

In agreement with the local authority, any reptiles or amphibians captured are relocated to a release area, which may be



'off site'. Developers or contractors are liable to sizeable fines if they contravene these regulations.

Where evidence of bird activity exists, hedgerows and trees must not be removed until the breeding season has finished – generally from February until August. Ground nesting birds, such as skylarks or lapwing, create another problem. If there

is no suitable area near the development site, the developer/contractor must make provision within the scheme design, by setting aside an area of land. As a result, the winter months tend to be 'open season' for developers to remove from sites vegetation such as hedgerows and trees, that may be habitats for wildlife such as birds. Less scrupulous developers will strip sites bare, leaving the development area devoid of any natural features. However, developers such as Legal & General are indicating the wish to incorporate existing natural features, such as trees and hedgerows, into their proposals.

Bats are a protected species under the Countryside and Wildlife Act 1981 and also under European legislation. There are 17 types known to be breeding in the UK, and one common to our area is the pipistrelle. Bats have at least two roosting habitats, one for use in summer which is often located in trees and the other in winter, possibly in caves or buildings. It is essential that accurate surveys are carried out to record the number and species of bat and their roosts. Trees where roosts are recorded should be retained and incorporated into the development. If this is impractical, it is

possible by negotiation to replace the trees with artificial roosts, such as bat boxes or the incorporation of a bat roost into the roof area of a garage building. However, the alteration of any known roosts will require a development licence to be issued by Natural England.

The proposal to develop Rookwood golf course could result in the decline or total depletion of species occupying Warnham Nature Reserve, which is adjacent to the northern part of the golf course. A large development has also been proposed at West Grinstead, near to the Knepp Castle Estate and which could adversely affect their re-wilding programme.

Do developers, contractors and local authorities take into account all ecological issues on or adjacent to any proposed development and design accordingly?

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 259038.