
Meeting of the Cabinet – 27th October 2022

Report of the Director of Regeneration and Enterprise

Nature Conservation Site – Designation of Corbett Meadow

Purpose of report

1. This report informs Cabinet of the results and recommendations of an ecological survey (nature conservation habitat survey) carried out on Corbett Meadow, Amblecote (Corbett Hospital Grounds) the site required an up-to-date ecological survey to ascertain if the previously identified existing ecological habitat status remained valid and appropriate.

The resulting recommendation is required to ensure that the Council's Local Plan and planning decision making is based on up-to-date evidence and can continue to be used as the basis for robust and defensible planning decisions.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that the Cabinet approve the proposed upgrade of Corbett Meadow SLINC to a SINC with boundary amendments (as detailed in this report).

Background

3. Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC's) and Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINC's) are designations identified in Dudley Council's adopted Dudley Borough Development Strategy 2017 (DBDS, 2017) and form part of the Borough's environmental infrastructure. Environment infrastructure also includes green space, community parks, canal corridors, and Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). Incorporating environmental infrastructure principles into Local Plan documents will help

meet the existing adopted Black Country Core Strategy 2011 vision for environmental transformation.

4. The most important sites outside the statutory system are designated as SINC for their regionally important nature conservation interest across the West Midlands. SINC can be designated for both their ecology and geological interest. These are sites of substantive nature conservation values in the context of Birmingham and the Black Country.
5. SLINCs and SINC do not receive statutory protection but are protected from harm by local policy set out in the Dudley Borough Development Strategy, (DBDS, 2017), the existing adopted Black Country Core Strategy (BCCS, 2011) and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2021). Therefore, they are crucial in maintaining and enhancing the Borough's environmental infrastructure and ecological habitats.
6. Sites that support important wildlife habitat and geological features, form links between protected sites, and are part of the overall network supporting biodiversity are identified as SLINCs. SLINCs are of significance at the Ward to Borough level and frequently form important links between other designated nature conservation sites. Examples of SLINCs that are important linear features are canals and watercourses.
7. It is important that there is a robust, accurate, up-to-date, and defensible evidence base in place in relation to the nature conservation habitat quality, and ecological condition of both existing designated nature conservation sites and those areas of green space which currently have no designated nature conservation value in Dudley Council's adopted Local Plan – DBDS 2017 but may have potential to provide important habitats for wildlife and could therefore be upgraded to SLINCs or SINC.
8. For these reasons the site at Corbett Meadow has been subject to an ecological survey by independent suitably qualified ecologists so the Council can ensure that its records and information on the condition and habitat quality of sites is kept up-to-date, and accurate. This is in line with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2021 and Dudley Council's Nature Conservation Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) 2016.
9. The proposal for the new designation on the site at Corbett Meadow has been endorsed by the Birmingham and Black Country Local Sites Partnership (LSP) which is advisory body made up of ecologists and local representatives to ensure that site selection and designation is constant across the area and that sites are meeting the relevant criteria to be designated as a SINC or SLINC.

10. The report will now deal with the site outlined in the recommendations, to provide more details on the proposed boundary changes:

Corbett Meadow, Amblecote

11. This site was surveyed due to the submission of a planning application (P22/1050) to develop the site for 84 dwellings. This site is currently designated as a SLINC. The site is a significant landscape feature that is dominated by long-established pasture with mature standard trees and has an attractive park style character. Scattered throughout and particularly around the perimeter of the site are specimen mature and veteran parkland trees.
12. The site comprises the grounds of a former Georgian country house known as the Hill which was gifted by local businessman and philanthropist John Corbett for the purposes of building a local hospital in 1893. In the early 21st century Corbett Hospital was redeveloped, with the former country house and later hospital buildings being demolished and replaced with a consolidated hospital building and housing.
13. There are two ponds within the site, one of which is of significant ecological value. The site's grasslands represent a rare surviving example of long-standing permanent grassland on semi-acidic Wildmoor Sandstone-derived soils. LIDAR imagery indicates historic plough marks that pre-date the 18th Century.
14. The meadow is an important historic site in the urban area, that has benefited from the continuity of management over a long period. The site supports an associated range of important ecological features (as outlined above) and a high diversity of habitats and species. The Birmingham & Black Country Local Site Selection Criteria Corbett Meadows scores High or Medium-High against all of the ecological criteria and High or Medium-High against most of the social criteria. The site therefore meets the threshold for selection as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation - SINC.
15. The proposed boundary for the SINC differs from that of the existing SLINC designation. It is proposed to include a small area of scrub and young semi-mature trees to the south of the site (outside of the current designated boundary) and remove an area adjacent to the outpatient's centre of amenity grassland and young planted trees. The proposed boundary can be seen in the site designations map in Appendix 1.

Finance

16. The costs of undertaking the survey were funded from existing budgets and resources.

Law

17. This piece of work is a key element for the evidence base of Dudley Local Plan work. The surveying of existing SINC's and SLINC's is also essential to ensure that such designations are based on robust and up-to-date evidence.
18. The potential for planning decisions to be challenged increases where it can be shown that Local Plan allocations are based on out-of-date or incomplete information. Ensuring that there is current information relating to the Borough's inventory of nature conservation sites, including SINC's and SLINC's, reduces this risk.
19. In addition, the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC Act) and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) both place a legal duty on local authorities to conserve and protect biodiversity in the exercise of their functions.

Risk Management

20. There are not considered to be any material risks from this report.

Equality Impact

21. The content of this report complies with the Council's policy on Equality and Diversity given that the Ecological Surveys in question play an important role in helping to conserve and protect important wildlife sites from inappropriate development pressures within the Dudley Metropolitan Borough.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

22. There are no HR/OD impacts resulting from the report as any requirements will be managed from within existing resource in line with the timescales outlined.

Commercial/Procurement

23. There are not considered to be any commercial/procurement implications because of this report.

Environment/Climate Change

24. Local nature conservation sites form an important part of the boroughs green infrastructure, as they include community parks, canals and open spaces. Protecting nature conservation sites will help the Councils work to address Climate Change and achieve our Net Zero target by 2041

Council Priorities and Projects

25. The designation of this site will assist with current wider Council and Borough activity and projects including:

- Climate Change and our Net Zero target by 2041
- Public Health and Wellbeing
- Green spaces and the safety of the community



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Appendices

Appendix One – Site Designation Map