

GA2 comments regarding Badgers

At the request of Nikki Hamilton who has undertaken badger surveys for the Herts and Middlesex Badger Group I visited the GA2 proposed development area on the 12th March 2020 to investigate the use of the area by badgers. I am a professional ecologist with a degree in zoology and PhD in veterinary medicine (animal behaviour) and full member of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) with experience of providing specialist protected species advice to both Local Planning Authorities and developers. I am also the Records Officer for the Herts & Middlesex Badger Group and have 40 years' experience of studying mammals.

The GA2 development site comprises fields with parcels of semi-natural broadleaf woodland connected by old hedgerows that provide an important ecological network of wildlife corridors through the area. In the area walked, badger setts were identified in the locations listed below. Confidential Ordnance Survey grid references have been removed due to the sensitive nature of the species.

Newberry Grove Woodland

- Main sett with 5 active holes
- Annexe sett with 3 used and 3 disused holes
- Outlying sett with 1 active hole

Hedgerow connecting Newberry Grove and Nine Acre Spring

- Outlying sett 2 active holes, latrines and badger paths extending across the fields.
- Outlying sett 1 active hole

Nine Acre Spring Woodland

- Main sett north end of wood active sett extending from edge of field into wood. 18 used holes. Latrines
- Annex sett south end of wood in chalk pit with 1 used hole 12 disused (previously in March 2019 had 7 active holes). The surveys over the years suggest that the same social group of badgers move between the established setts in the woodland.

Hedgerow extending east from Nine Acre Wood

- Outlying sett with 3 active holes in hedge and 1 hole in field

Brooches Wood section by Cleveland Way

- Main sett in chalk of woodland by Cleveland Way
- 8 active holes.

Brooches Wood/New Spring Wood (Area of proposed access road)

- Main sett in woodland 10 active holes (2 active holes in more open area with 8 active holes within scrub behind.
- Paths from this sett extend to outlying set previously recorded.

Each social group (clan) of badgers will have more than one sett in the group's territory that will vary in use but it is usual for each clan of badgers to have one main

breeding sett. The number of active setts observed in the proposed development area is high. Badger paths were identified through the woodlands and along the hedgerows with many paths also crossing through the fields.

The highly active badgers in the area will be dependent on the fields for foraging and therefore their replacement (gardens of the new houses) are likely to become their new foraging areas. Houses built in badger foraging habitat and across their pathways is highly likely to lead to badgers digging up the resident's gardens for food and causing problems. The potential for conflicts between humans and badgers is high. There is also the added issue of road casualties. Stevenage already has a high number of badger road casualties and a further increase in roads along badger routeways through the GA2 development is likely to result in an increase in badger casualties.

The badgers using Brooches Wood will be particularly threatened by the GA2 development. No bait marking has been undertaken to fully establish the different badger territories in the area but it is probable that the badger clan at Brooches Wood is a separate clan to the group using Nine Acre Spring and the group using Newberry Grove. There is an active main sett (at least 8 active holes) in the belt of woodland by Cleveland Way and also a main sett with 10 active holes that will be destroyed as a result of the construction of the access road.

The previous surveys of the area by the Herts and Middlesex Badger Group from 2016 onwards and survey on the 12th March 2020 identified more badgers setts (including more main setts) than the original survey undertaken in March 2017 documented in the Ecological Evaluation Report (December 2017). This report acknowledges that the status of the badger population could change at any time and should not be relied upon beyond 2017. One major change that needs to be addressed is the presence of a main sett in the location of the proposed access road where Brooches Wood joins New Spring Wood.

The construction of the access road to the GA2 development in its current location will destroy a main sett and sever existing badger routeways. Destruction of a main sett will have more serious consequences than the destruction of an outlier and it would be preferable to design the developments to avoid this by relocating the access road to an alternative location and retain the sett in situ. In the event that the destruction of the sett cannot be avoided a development licence would need to be granted by Natural England (Protection of Badgers Act 1992). Natural England is likely to require the construction of a suitable nearby artificial sett with preferably signs of use prior to any loss of the existing main sett. Any artificial sett however would need to be situated where there is sufficient foraging habitat, not in an area likely to flood and not within the territory of a separate clan.

To address the likely adverse impacts on the badger populations (loss of existing setts, increase in road casualties, loss of foraging habitat and the risk of conflicts between the new residents and badgers entering the gardens), further detailed mitigation is required to demonstrate how the development will ensure that there is no adverse impact on the badger populations in the area. The NPPF (2019) requires developments to contribute to the Government's commitment to halt the decline in biodiversity and provide net gains. Any adverse impacts should be avoided.

Report by Dr Jenny Jones CIEEM 09/09/2020