Chorlton Community Land Trust

Environmental Protection and Enhancement

Report of a working group of CLT members

RYEBANK FIELDS TODAY

Due to its boundary with Longford Park and the minimal level of management of the site over the last 25 years, Ryebank Fields has become a sort of urban wilderness, where improved grassland has begun to take on a savannah-like quality of high grasses interspersed with dogwood, rose bay willow herb, thistle and ragwort. The existing mature trees and small areas of woodland at various points around its boundary, are complemented by a number of young oaks within the grasslands, as well as the steadily spreading aspen grove at the northern end. Large expanses of bramble scrub around the perimeter and across the central Nico Ditch area also contribute to its unmanaged character, which is much loved and valued locally.

The site also has a higher than average biodiversity value for an urban greenspace, providing habitat for numerous birds, small mammals, bats and some amphibians, although the fields' historic land-uses, including as a clay pit, brickworks, landfill site and playing fields, limit the range and ecological value of the vegetation which has proliferated in recent years. The Ecological Report (Ascerta, June 2020) confirms that certain aspects of the site are of local value for nature conservation, mainly the small areas of mature, semi-natural woodland and sections of species rich hedgerow, while other areas are of low to negligible value. However, it is clear that the site provides habitat for wildlife, as well as a wide range of trees and plants, which are highly valued by large sections of the local community. In addition to the strictly ecological value of these natural features, a wider view, based on principles of ecosystem services, would also take into account their importance for the environmental resilience of the area as well as their value for health and wellbeing.

CONSERVATION AND ENHANCEMENT

The protection and enhancement of the existing vegetation and biodiversity on the site is one of the most important priorities for local people, as demonstrated in the strength of feeling reflected in consultation workshops carried out by the CLT, as well as the support for the Save Ryebank Fields campaign and wider debates in the press and on social media.

The Environment Bill, anticipated to be adopted into legislation during the current parliament, includes a provision for Biodiversity Net Gain, a measure which will require developers to demonstrate a minimum 10% increase in biodiversity on any site. This is set against a widely held assumption that development for housing, on the scale anticipated, will diminish or eliminate its value for wildlife.

Existing habitats will need to be replaced and strengthened alongside new housing and associated infrastructure and we will expect developers to meet and exceed this 10% level, whilst also enhancing its contribution to ecosystem services. While some short-term negative impacts are inevitable, due to the disruption of site clearance and construction, in the medium to long term we think that a sensitive and imaginative approach to site design can safeguard and enrich existing vegetation, as well as introducing a range of new biotopes, which will diversify the site's habitat and amenity value.

We believe that good design and management can ensure that this ambition is achieved. In this document, we set out a number of key principles against which we will hold developers to account on behalf of the

wider community, as well as a number of more specific suggestions which we believe should be included in the final design proposals:

KEY PRINCIPLES

1. Conserve the Spirit of Ryebank Fields: The existing site vegetation and its informal character is a positive asset from multiple perspectives and must be conserved and enhanced as far as possible.
2. A Green Framework: Site development should respect and strengthen the structure created by the perimeter vegetation, and retain the central band along the Nico Ditch, to conserve its amenity and ecological value.
3. Urban Forest Living: Unless identified as a danger, or of very low value, trees should only be removed as a last resort and should be replaced by species appropriate to the site's existing vegetation.
4. Integrated Housing: New housing should be integrated sympathetically into the existing green framework rather than imposed on it, and the design of houses and gardens should contribute to this.
5. Maximise Biodiversity: Take every opportunity, throughout the site design and long-term management proposals, to retain and reinforce its value for wildlife.
6. **A Community-Managed Environment:** Ensure that the local community has a direct say in - and control over - the on-going management of the green and blue infrastructure on the site.
7. A Low Impact Development: Ensure that the site's development eliminates or minimises impacts on the surrounding area in terms of run-off, traffic, demands on services, noise, and visual intrusion.
8. A Permeable Neighbourhood: Retain and enhance public access through and around the site ensuring that routes are not damaging to sensitive vegetation or habitats.

SPECIFIC MEASURES

1. Trees

   The range of tree species in Ryebank Fields is one of its most important distinguishing characteristics and also of its main contributions to the amenity and environmental quality of the area. Tree cover should be conserved, reinforced and diversified as part of any development.

   - Retain all mature, perimeter trees identified in the tree survey as Categories A and B, especially the Hybrid 'Manchester' Poplars along the Longford Park boundary and areas of semi-natural woodland, leaving a substantial offset to any construction around them.
   - Retain as many as possible of the healthy young oak trees within the grassland areas as features for public open space and gardens.
   - Retain a significant proportion of the 'aspen grove', enough to conserve at least its main through route as part of a perimeter footpath.
   - Protect all individual and groups of trees for retention during (and beyond) construction according to BS 5837:2012.
   - Where less significant trees within the central areas of the site must be removed, replace with appropriate species consistent with the existing site character.
   - In perimeter areas of the site and other areas of woodland or scrub, leave fallen branches and trunks to rot, as dead wood is an extremely valuable habitat for a wide range of fungi and invertebrates.

2. Hedgerows

Native, mixed hedgerows can be an extremely valuable habitat, attracting a wide range of insects, including valuable pollinators as well as cover and food for many birds and small mammals. It is important therefore to:

- Protect and reinforce existing species rich hedgerow
- Replant other areas of perimeter hedging (e.g. school boundary/Longford Road boundary) with mix of suitable native species and manage to create a site boundary of wide, species-rich, native hedgerows.
- Include hedgerow tree planting where feasible.
- Ensure a wide margin of longer grass and meadow species along hedgerows.

3. Scrub

- Retain a wide margin of mixed, low scrub around the site boundaries, selectively clearing and replacing bramble with other suitable native species to diversify these areas while retaining their character and habitat value.
- Ensure they are actively managed to maintain species diversity and avoid reversion to a monocultural, bramble-dominated state.

4. Wetlands and retaining ponds

Wetlands are some of the richest habitats for wildlife, especially invertebrates, which will then attract a more diverse range of birds. They may also form part of a sustainable drainage system which we would help to minimise the impacts of the development on surrounding areas in terms of flood risk. Historically, the site contained a number of water features, and even today, the damp conditions in some areas may provide an excellent opportunity to incorporate a range of constructed wetlands into the design, although given uncertainty about the extent of landfill and subsurface conditions, all the recommendations below will be subject to more detailed investigations.

- Every opportunity should be taken to incorporate strategies to slow and absorb run-off throughout the development, through green roofs, permeable paving, rain gardens, swales, and retention ponds, etc.
- These features, if feasible, (see Section 8 of our 'Expectations and Aspirations' document for details), should also be designed to maximise the potential to provide a range of wetland habitats.

5. Grasslands and Meadows

- The existing grasslands are one of the distinguishing features of Ryebank Field but are of significantly less ecological value than the scrub, hedge and woodland areas around the perimeter. It is likely that the majority of these areas will be lost to development but, wherever possible within public and community green spaces, it would be desirable to replace these with potentially more ecologically diverse and attractive areas of wildflower and meadow grasses.

6. Green Roofs

- Green roofs on housing and ancillary buildings (garages, shed, etc) can make a significant contribution not only to the biodiversity of the site, but also to slowing and absorbing run off and reducing flood risk, as well as to building insulation.

- As often as possible, these should be extensive green roofs, using crushed rubble or gravel aggregates seeded with wildflowers to provide habitat for a range of insects and birds, rather than sedum or other forms of more intensive green roofing which has less ecological value.

7. Management and Maintenance

The protection and enhancement of habitats and environmental features is not just an issue in the design and planning stage but requires a long-term commitment to careful management and maintenance of these features. It is absolutely vital that the development includes an integrated long term management plan; and we suggest below some considerations for this aspect of the project.

- **Long term maintenance to be considered at the very outset of planning the development:** These discussions should begin at the pre-application discussions and be re-visited through the planning process. the best way for ensuring cost-effective solutions is to 'upfront' thinking on the GBI network through the site at the early stages – drawing on relevant expertise – particularly when it comes to SuDS solutions.
- **Explore relationships opportunities with the CLT to establish community-led arrangements for long-term maintenance:** Given the strength of local interest in maintaining and enhancing the natural environment there are good opportunities to ensure community-led stewardship of the land. See also section 2 of the Expectations and Aspirations document.
- **Build maintenance planning into green space/SuDS design:** the arrangements for the future maintenance of the system should be considered during the early stages of SuDS design, as this will influence the design. Designing SuDS in particular to deliver more than surface water management is not necessarily costly, but depends on early consideration at master planning stage, creativity, consultation, and partnership. For example - using the landform to reduce the need for elaborate, hard control mechanisms, using geotextiles to prevent clogging, incorporating inspection points, and including gently shelving slopes to allow safe access.

8. Targeted Measures for Wildlife

In addition to the above general habitats, it will be important to provide a range of specific measures to conserve and support small populations of protected wildlife on the site. These might include:

8.1 Hedgehogs

Hedgehogs are a protected species.[1]

Habitat can be protected in new developments by:

- Putting 5”x 5” holes (hedgehog highways) at suitable points in all new and existing fences
- Planting native hedgerows
- Providing log piles to increase nesting options
- Building ponds (with shallow sides and/or wildlife ramps for safe access and exit) to provide water and insect food
- Being mindful of the dangers of disturbance, disrupted access, traffic and drowning during the development process
- Having a post-development management plan, e.g. monitoring use of strimmers and reducing chemical use

[1] UK organisations working to protect hedgehogs and increase their numbers include The British Hedgehog Preservation Society and Hedgehog Street.

- On Ryebank Fields, permeability should be maintained with Longford Park, and encouraged with adjoining houses in Firswood prior to/during development. Measures to facilitate hedgehog access are likely to benefit other small mammals, as well as frogs and toads.

8.2 Large mammals [2]

There is the possibility of finding fox earths and badger setts on Ryebank Fields. Badgers are a protected species.

- A full survey should be conducted to check for the presence of these mammals
- If evidence is found, developers would have a legal obligation to protect any badger setts and put in place appropriate mitigation plans.
- Developers should also be urged to preserve any fox earths.
- Access, protection from disturbance, biodiversity and safety from traffic/other machinery are key
- Permeability should be maintained with Longford Park.

8.3 Bat boxes

Bats became a protected species in the UK in 1981 but due to a loss of roosting and feeding habitats populations have not recovered much since then. There have been unconfirmed sightings of bats on the site. Measures should be taken to support the growth of existing bat populations.

- Bat boxes and/or bricks should be installed in suitable retained trees and/or integrated into new buildings.
- Improvements to existing habitats and establishment of new wetlands, could also help support these populations by providing a greater number of insects.

8.4 Bird nesting boxes

- In addition to habitat improvements already described, nesting bird habitat can be further enhanced by the provision of open fronted nest boxes.
- Swift boxes and house sparrow terraces can be attached to retained trees or integrated within new dwellings.

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[2] There is useful advice in the following link on the Government's Website on the requirement for surveys and mitigation plans in relation to the impacts of development on badgers Badgers: surveys and mitigation for development projects. The Mammal Society is a useful source of information on the conservation of native mammals.