

Date: 23 October 2025
Our ref: 526484
Your ref: DC/25/1312



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BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Mr Hawkes,

Planning consultation: Hybrid application for a phased, mixed-use development.

Location: Land West of Ifield, Charlwood Road, Ifield, West Sussex.

Thank you for your consultation on the above dated 04 September 2025 which was received by Natural England on the same date. Natural England has previously provided comment on the Water Neutrality aspect of this application in a letter dated 01 October 2025; the comments below should be read in conjunction with this response.

Natural England is a non-departmental public body. Our statutory purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

Bechstein's Bat Species

As outlined in our previous letter (dated 01 October 2025), Natural England provided advice on this site throughout 2024 as part of Horsham's Local Plan review process and confirmed in a letter dated 17 July 2024 (our ref. 482468) that Hyde Hill Wood and the immediate surrounding area supports a notable population of Bechstein's bats.

We have continued to engage with Homes England on the layout of the proposed development, as well as a suitable mitigation strategy, and are pleased to see that our advice has been considered, with the final parameter plan securing buffers and (potentially) high-quality habitat to help mitigate the effects of the development on the maternity colony within Hyde Hill Wood.

We do however have some further points to make on the biodiversity chapter within the Environmental Statement in relation to the approaches for bats proposed throughout the development.

Firstly, while we welcome the broad parameters for the lighting strategy outlined in paragraph 8.10.127, it is our advice that assurances are included within the document in relation to implementation of 'dark sky hours' along the western site boundary- particularly adjacent to the sports pitches, along the River Mole corridor (particularly underneath the bridge/bat crossing point) and throughout the habitat corridor running through the centre of the site. These are in addition to the measures mentioned for the residential areas at the south of the site, adjacent to the retained buffer at the site boundary with Hyde Hill Wood.

In addition, paragraph 8.10.135 mentions the monitoring and review of the lighting strategy,

potentially in years three and six (post-construction), however it is not clear how this will be undertaken. We therefore advise that the factors to be considered in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the lighting strategy are included within the Environmental Statement.

We note that the mitigation strategy outlined in paragraph 8.10.124 mentions a '*clear-span bridge structure to be constructed as part of the long-term scheme design which will provide a safe crossing point for bats to pass beneath the road and continue to follow the River Mole corridor*'. We advise that further details relating to the fundamentals of the bridge design, including surrounding lighting, habitat planting and management principles be outlined within the document.

The suitability of the retained and enhanced habitat areas throughout the site for all bats, particularly Bechstein's bats, is dependent on appropriate habitat management and maintenance specific to species needs. This should be secured in perpetuity, and we note that a '*Habitat Management and Monitoring Plan (HMMP) will be secured via planning condition for each phase of the development*' which is welcomed. We do however advise that disturbance of sensitive habitats, such as those within Hyde Hill Wood, from increased footfall needs to be monitored and provision in place to address any identified issues.

Paragraph 8.10.131 specifies that '*a significant area of new woodland planting will be created at the south-west corner of the site, and managed for nature conservation purposes, with Bechstein's bats as the primary target species*'. You will be aware that Bechstein's maternity roosts are present on the edge of Hyde Hill Wood, adjacent to the proposed buffer, and therefore care should be taken to ensure that any planting will not negatively affect the microclimate around these maternity roosts. This should be addressed within the Habitat Management and Monitoring Plan (HMMP).

Furthermore, it is advised that further surveys of potential and confirmed roosting features subject to disturbance or destruction will be required prior to works being undertaken to update the status of the roost.

Finally, given the presence of Bechstein's across the wider landscape, it is critical that connectivity across the landscape is maintained. It is noted that the development includes the first phase of the Crawley Western Multimodal Corridor, a strategic piece of infrastructure that relates to development beyond this site alone. Given the importance of the Bechstein's bat colonies, significant records of Bechstein's within the local landscape and their sensitivity to fragmentation and disturbance, we advise that further development of this corridor and consideration of cumulative effects from associated development needs to be very sensitively considered by both future applicants and your authority as there is a risk of causing severance between colonies from this infrastructure if it is not sensitively designed.

Final Comments

If you have any queries relating to the advice in this letter please contact me on Sophie.Moore@naturalengland.org.uk.

We would be pleased to provide advice on the discharge of planning conditions or obligations attached to any planning permission to address the issues above.

Should the proposal change, please consult us again.

Yours sincerely,

Sophie Moore

Senior Officer for Sussex – Sustainable Development
Sussex & Kent Area Team