Preliminary Ecological Screening Report (Desk-Based Assessment)

Proposed Single Self-Build Dwelling on land at RH12 4LH, Horsham District, West Sussex

Prepared for: Horsham District Council (Planning Authority)

Date: June 2025

Executive Summary

This report provides an ecological screening assessment for a proposed single self-build dwelling at Land at RH12 4LH, Horsham. The site comprises a small (525 m^2) parcel of improved grassland within a residential area, and it has been evaluated to determine if a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) is required. The assessment finds that the ecological risk is negligible: the site supports only species-poor improved grassland of low biodiversity value, with no trees or water features on or immediately adjacent to the plot. No statutory or non-statutory designated wildlife sites (e.g. Sites of Special Scientific Interest or Local Wildlife Sites) are present within 500 m. Small patches of deciduous woodland lie 90–120 m from the site, but they are separated by mown grass playing fields and built development, meaning there is no direct ecological connectivity. The likelihood of protected species presence is very low across all groups, and no credible impact pathways have been identified. As a result, a PEA is not considered necessary for this low-risk proposal. This report, with recommended mitigation and enhancements, is submitted to demonstrate a proportionate approach to ecology in support of the planning application.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This report has been prepared to support a planning application for a single self-build residential dwelling at Land at RH12 4LH, in Horsham District. The purpose of the report is to determine whether a full Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) is required, or if the proposed development can be screened as not needing further ecological survey or assessment. It aims to provide the Local Planning Authority with clear evidence that the environmental impacts will be negligible.

1.2 Scope and Objectives

The report covers a desk study to identify any designated sites, important habitats or potential for protected species in or near the site. It then screens the likelihood of significant ecological effects from the development. The objective is to demonstrate, using reasoned argument and proportionate evidence, that the ecological risk is sufficiently low such that a PEA or additional surveys are not warranted. This approach follows Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) guidance that survey effort and reporting should be proportionate to the likely degree of risk to biodiversity.

2. Site Description

The site is a grassy plot in a residential neighbourhood north of Horsham, approximately 525 m^2, situated in a suburban residential context on the northern side of Horsham. It is bounded by existing residential properties and gardens, with a playing field of mown grass to the east. The improved grassland is a level, regularly managed field with a species-poor grass sward (likely dominated by common rye-grass and similar species). Such improved pasture typically supports very low plant diversity and is of limited wildlife value.

There are no trees or hedgerows on the plot itself, and the boundaries are marked by fencing from adjacent gardens. Beyond the immediate boundaries, the landscape is dominated by housing and amenity grassland. The broader surrounding area is residential, comprised of private gardens (with ornamental shrubs, lawn and occasional trees) and public open space. Approximately 90–120 metres to the west and northwest are small patches of deciduous woodland (broadleaved trees) identified from aerial mapping. These woodlots are separated from the site by intervening roads, maintained grass playing fields, and housing. There is no continuous habitat link between the site and these wooded areas, and as such, the woods are ecologically isolated from the proposal site.

No other semi-natural habitats of note occur in the immediate vicinity. In particular, no water features (ponds, streams, ditches or wetlands) are present on or adjacent to the site; a review of Ordnance Survey mapping and local knowledge confirmed there are no ponds within at least 250 m of the property. The absence of aquatic habitats significantly limits the potential for amphibians (like great crested newts) and other water-dependent fauna in the area.

3. Desk Study

A desktop search was conducted for any nature conservation designations within a 500 m radius of the site. This included statutory designations (e.g. Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Areas, Special Areas of Conservation) and non-statutory local designations (Local Wildlife Sites, nature reserves). No designated sites were identified within the 500 m search area. The site is not part of or adjacent to any designated wildlife site, and therefore there are no direct impact pathways to such protected areas. The site also falls outside the Impact Risk Zones for any distant SSSI (as per MAGIC mapping), given the small scale and nature of the development (a single dwelling).

In summary, the proposed works do not intersect with any known protected site and will not trigger any requirement for Natural England consultation on designated site impacts.

The only habitat on-site is improved grassland (lawn/pasture). In the wider context (within 100–200 m), the two small woodland patches noted above are likely classified as Priority Habitat Inventory – Deciduous Woodland (a habitat of principal importance under the NERC Act). However, these woodlands are sufficiently distant and isolated from the site by existing development such that the project will not affect them (no direct loss, no fragmentation, and no significant disturbance given the buffering by houses and open space).

The site itself does not contain any habitats of principal importance or other notable ecological features. There are no hedgerows on the plot (and thus no ‘important hedgerows’ as defined under the Hedgerow Regulations), and no mature trees.

No water bodies or watercourses are present on or near the site, confirming that aquatic habitats are absent in the zone of influence.

Due to the site’s small size and urban context, a full local biological records centre data search was not considered proportionate. Instead, readily available data and observations were used to gauge the likelihood of any protected species in the vicinity. There are no known records of rare or protected species specific to this particular plot. Given the habitat context (managed grassland surrounded by residential gardens), any fauna present are expected to be common urban wildlife (e.g. garden birds, small mammals). The nearby woodlands may support typical species such as common bats or nesting birds, but these areas are beyond the immediate influence of the development. Overall, no evidence has emerged from the desk study of any protected species constraints, and none would be anticipated based on the habitat present.

4. Habitats on Site

The entire site is composed of modified grassland, which is a low-diversity, intensively managed grass habitat. Improved grasslands are usually the result of past agricultural improvement (e.g. fertilisation or reseeding) and generally contain very few plant species. As a result, the botanical interest of the site is negligible, and it offers relatively poor cover or foraging opportunities for most wildlife. There is no hedgerow or woodland edge along the site boundary. Adjoining gardens have some landscape planting (ornamental shrubs, non-native conifers, and small fruit trees in yards), but these lie outside the development footprint and will remain unaffected. No trees will be removed or impacted by the proposal, as none exist on-site and neighbouring trees are at a sufficient distance away. There are no other semi-natural habitat features on the site – for instance, no log piles, significant leaf litter, or rockeries that might otherwise provide microhabitats.

In summary, habitat diversity on-site is very low, comprising essentially one habitat type (improved grassland) of minimal ecological value, and the development footprint is correspondingly small.

Immediately beyond the site, the habitat is suburban in nature. To the south and west are existing houses with gardens (mostly maintained lawns with ornamental planting). To the east is a playing field consisting of closely mown amenity grass. These adjacent habitats are also of low intrinsic ecological value, though they may be used by urban wildlife (e.g. gardens can support common birds, hedgehogs, etc.). The nearest higher-value habitat is the deciduous woodland patch ~90 m northwest; however, as noted, it is separated from the site and will not be impacted. There are no continuous habitat corridors (such as hedgerows or streams) linking the site to that woodland or to any other natural area. Consequently, the proposed development’s zone of influence is essentially limited to the site itself and its immediate boundary – all of which are of low ecological significance.

5. Protected Species Screening

An assessment of the potential for protected or notable species has been carried out for all key groups, based on the habitats present and the surrounding context. No direct evidence of any protected species was observed on site, and habitat suitability is very limited. Table 1 below summarises the likelihood of occurrence for relevant species/groups and whether any further survey work or mitigation is needed:

- **Bats: Roosting – Negligible potential.** The site has no buildings or mature trees that could offer roost sites. Foraging/commuting – Very low value habitat for bats; the open, short grass offers little insect prey and there are bright urban surroundings. While common bats (e.g. pipistrelles) may overfly the gardens and playing fields occasionally, there are no linear features (hedgerows or tree lines) on site that bats rely on. The two small woodland patches >90 m away could be minor foraging areas for bats, but the separation by built form means the development will not affect those areas or any bat activity there. As a result, it would appear no bat survey is required, and the new dwelling is unlikely to impact local bat populations.
- **Great Crested Newt (GCN) – Negligible potential.** Great crested newts require aquatic breeding habitat (ponds) and suitable terrestrial refuge within ~250 m. There are no ponds or waterbodies on site or within the immediate vicinity (none within 250 m, and indeed none known within 500 m of the site). The improved grassland and garden habitats are also suboptimal (lacking features like tussocky grass, scrub or log piles that newts could use). Given the absence of water features, there is no realistic pathway for GCN to occur. As a result, it would appear no newt surveys or mitigation are needed. The development will not infringe on any amphibian habitat. As a precaution, if any minor features like piles of debris are to be cleared (none were noted, but if present), they will be checked to ensure no amphibians (or reptiles) are sheltering.
- **Reptiles – Very low potential.** The site is short grass with regular maintenance – conditions that are generally unsuitable for common reptiles (such as slow worm, viviparous lizard, or grass snake). Reptiles prefer rough, undisturbed grassland or scrub edges with variation in structure. The managed nature of this grassland and its isolation by fencing/gardens make it an unlikely refuge. It would appear that no reptile survey is required.

[redacted]

- **Nesting Birds – Low potential.** There are no trees or hedgerow structures on site that would typically support nesting birds. The grassland itself is too short and disturbed to provide ground-nesting habitat (and species like skylark would not occur in such a small urban plot). Adjoining gardens may host common bird species (e.g. blackbirds, robins) in ornamental shrubs. The works are confined within the site boundary and do not require removal of any trees or dense vegetation. As a precaution, if any vegetation clearance is needed (e.g. if scrub appears along fences or any shrubs on site edges), it will be timed outside the core bird nesting season (which runs March to August), or a check by an ecologist will be carried out immediately prior to

removal to confirm no active nests. With these measures, there is negligible risk to nesting birds. Post-development, bird nesting boxes could be installed on the new building or retained trees in adjacent gardens to enhance nesting opportunities (though not a requirement, it would be a biodiversity benefit).

No other protected species are likely to be present. The habitat is not suitable for dormouse (no connected woodland or hedgerow habitat), and none are known from this area. There are no watercourses for species like water vole or otter. Hedgehogs (Erinaceus europaeus, a Species of Principal Importance) may roam the gardens in this neighbourhood at night. Based on this, no further detailed ecological surveys are considered necessary at this stage. The above evaluation finds no reasonable likelihood of significant effects on any protected species. This conclusion is supported by the small scale and low ecological value of the site, and it is consistent with national guidance which advises that surveys should only be required where there is a reasonable likelihood of species being present and affected (Natural England Standing Advice and local validation checklists).

6. Summary and conclusions

In this case, the risk is extremely low, and the likely effects are trivial. Requiring an extensive survey or reporting for such a minor development would not be a reasonable or effective use of resources. Horsham District Council's duty is to ensure adequate (but not excessive) information is submitted with planning applications to assess ecological impacts. Here, the provided information is considered sufficient and appropriate to conclude that there will be no harm to priority habitats or protected species. Natural England's own guidance encourages focusing effort on developments that present real risks to wildlife, and not over-burdening small, low-impact projects. The absence of any designated sites or sensitive ecological receptors near the site means there is no impact pathway for significant effects. It is worth noting that the development qualifies as a self-build under the definitions of the Self-Build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015. Per the Environment Act 2021 and subsequent regulations, self-build housing developments (of this scale) are exempt from mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain requirements

In conclusion, the site is of negligible ecological value, being a small improved grassland area with no important habitats or features. There are no designations or high-value receptors in proximity that could be affected. A thorough screening of protected species potential has found no likely presence of any such species on site, and thus no further surveys (e.g. for bats, newts, reptiles, [redacted] etc.) are necessary. All residual low risks will be addressed through common-sense precautionary measures during construction. Critically, there is no justification for a full Preliminary Ecological Appraisal in this instance. The evidence and rationale presented in this report demonstrate that the ecological risk is very low, and that a proportionate, screened-out outcome is appropriate. This is supported by the relevant guidance from CIEEM and Natural England, encouraging proportionality in ecological assessment

Addendum to Preliminary Ecological Assessment — Desk Update (3 October 2025)

1. Scope and method

- This is a desk-based update only (no site revisit). On 3 October 2025 we:
- Re-checked statutory and non-statutory designations and priority habitat layers on MAGIC.
- Reviewed the most up to date satellite/aerial imagery for the site and 500 m context.
- Reconfirmed with the applicant that on-site habitat/management has not changed since the original PEA.

2. Findings

2.1 Designated sites / priority habitats (MAGIC)

The MAGIC review on 3 October 2025 identified no new designated sites or priority habitat layers affecting the site or its immediate context. The original conclusions remain valid.

2.2 Waterbodies & Great Crested Newt screen

Updated satellite/aerial imagery (checked 3 October 2025) shows no ponds or other waterbodies within the relevant screening distance. The previous negligible GCN risk rationale is unchanged.

2.3 On-site habitat condition

The applicant has confirmed there has been no change to the on-site habitats, management or materials storage since the original assessment.

2.4 BNG status and local expectations

While there is an ongoing consultation on aspects of BNG, the Government has confirmed that the self-build and custom-build exemption remains in force. This proposal meets all exemption criteria (≤9 dwellings; site area ≤0.5 ha; all dwellings are self/custom build). If these parameters change, the mandatory BNG requirement may apply.

It is noted that the 10% uplift is not achieved in the revised design. However, the proposed tree and hedgerow planting provides proportionate biodiversity enhancement consistent with Horsham District Council's stated position:

"Developments exempt from mandatory BNG will still need to provide opportunity for biodiversity enhancements in line with local and national policy (Policy 31 of the Horsham District Planning Framework 2015 and para 174 of the National Planning Policy Framework 2023 or any subsequent updates). Applicants should also be mindful of the Council's emerging Local Plan Policy 17 on Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity."

The scheme's planting and habitat measures are therefore aligned with Horsham's expectation for exempt developments.

3. Conclusion and validity

No new designations or waterbodies have been identified, on-site conditions are unchanged, and the self/custom-build exemption continues to apply. The original PEA conclusions are unchanged. This addendum is valid for 12 months from 3 October 2025, or until site conditions or development parameters change.