

Biodiversity net gain. Good practice principles for development

Case studies

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12 Creation of Priest Hill Nature Reserve, Ewell, Surrey

Details

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12.1 PROJECT SUMMARY

At Priest Hill, Ewell a new 34 hectare nature reserve has been delivered through planning gain alongside a 1.7 hectare development of 15 residential homes from abandoned playing fields plus some previously-developed land. Before purchase the site had been largely abandoned inviting fly-tipping, arson and other urban fringe problems, while the potential diversity of its habitats (rank semi-improved grassland and scrub) was in decline.



Figure 12.1 Priest Hill nature reserve, Ewell, Surrey

The original developer, Combined Counties Properties, funded much of the priority habitat restoration and creation as well as providing a site manager's house and maintenance base, as a significant BNG. Ownership of the reserve and associated buildings was transferred to Surrey Wildlife Trust ahead of development of the remainder of the site, marketed later by CALA Homes. Throughout the process, the Trust worked closely with the developers and the LPA, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, to ensure the full potential of the site was realised.

12.2 ISSUES

The site is located within the green belt so there was local resistance to any development, especially the policy-recommended affordable housing allocation (which was subsequently waived). The site has responded well to applied calcareous grassland restoration and creation techniques (green hay propagation/conservation grazing). In addition, the reserve enjoys added security because of the Trust staff being resident on site (S106 of the NERC Act 2006 [conditioned]), which has also supported more efficient ecological monitoring.

12.3 OUTCOMES

Since establishment of the reserve, the Surrey Wildlife Trust has restored or created lowland calcareous grassland, several native species-rich hedgerows and five field ponds. Removal of the hard-standing on

previously-developed areas has allowed for some simulation of arable field margin habitat over chalk. Also, permanent fencing and other infrastructure has enabled the introduction of conservation grazing.

The site presents a new and important 'stepping stone' between the Trust's nearby Howell Hill Nature Reserve and Epsom Downs to the south, assisting re-connection of strategic GI and the wildlife corridor within a biodiversity opportunity/conservation target area. Targeted species conservation management at Priest Hill has benefited from the recovery of S41 of the NERC Act 2006 priority species, eg Small Blue (*Cupido minimus*), White-letter hairstreak (*Satyrrium w-album*) and Brown Hairstreak (*Thecla betulae*) butterflies, common lizard, skylark and linnet, as well as several Red Listed vascular plants (Cheffings and Farrells, 2005).

Rapid colonisation of the site by target priority species has accelerated its recommendation for adoption as a new local wildlife site. Access enhancements and interpretative signage have improved visitor experience for local people's enjoyment of the reserve. CALA Homes funded Trust membership for all initial occupants of the Priest Hill estate, several of which have been continued.