

**Vegetation clearance of at land at:
Former site of Johnny Owen Centre,
Forsythia Close, Gurnos,
Merthyr Tydfil, CF47 9DS.**



METHOD STATEMENT

Background and Executive Summary

Spectrum Ecology was initially instructed to conduct a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal of the land at the former site of Johnny Owen Centre, Forsythia Close, Gurnos, Merthyr Tydfil, CF47 9DS, as part of a planning application for the construction of a temporary car park for contractors working on the redevelopment of the nearby Prince Charles Hospital, Merthyr. The purpose of the survey was to identify whether any habitats with high conservation value were present and to evaluate the likelihood of the site supporting any protected species or those with high conservation value.

The site is the former location of the Johnny Owen Centre and is comprised of the compacted materials resulting from the demolition of the previous structure, which has subsequently vegetated over. The ecological appraisal found the current state of vegetation to be species poor rank grassland grading to scrub through the ecological process of succession. The site was found to have little conservation value in and of itself, and no priority or protected species are considered to be present or likely to be impacted. However the habitat types and certain features do hold some potential for reptiles, amphibians, nesting birds and small mammals such as hedgehog. The purpose of this method statement is to safeguard such species during the clearance phase of the works. Once the site has been cleared and construction is underway, such species are likely to avoid the site due to lack of habitat and disturbance.

There were several items and accumulations of fly-tipped waste on site, including plastics and large mattresses, with evidence of anti-social behaviour such as fire-lighting. Some of these might be deemed as suitable basking spots or refugia for reptiles. Other animals such as amphibians and small mammals may also potentially make use of such items. However, the isolated nature of the site with lack of connectivity to the wider natural landscape led to the conclusion that it was unlikely that these areas were routinely used as it is unlikely that a reptilian population exists at this site. A general walkover survey of the site was carried out as part of the Preliminary Ecological Appraisal survey, checking under potential refugia where possible. No reptiles, amphibians or other animals were found on site during this limited initial survey.

Whilst there are a number of young, scrub-level trees on the boundaries of the site, there are no trees within the boundary of the site which will be impacted by development. It is understood that no trees are to be removed as part of the proposed development.

Purpose of the current document:

Although the Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) concluded the site was not likely to support populations of reptiles or amphibians due to the small size and isolated nature with no connectivity to the wider natural landscape, the habitat type is known to support such species. The SEWBReC datasearch report commissioned as part of the PEA also showed a record for hedgehog within 110 metres of the site, suggesting the species was present in the immediate vicinity. Some taller scrub such as bramble encroaching from the margins also has potential for nesting birds.

As part of the planning application therefore, the local county ecologist has requested a method statement to guide any vegetation clearance ahead of development works.

It is proposed to cut the emerging ruderal vegetation and scrub once planning consent has been obtained. The clearance works will be overseen by a qualified Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW) who will carry out a walkover check beforehand, ensuring that no nesting birds or other animals are present.

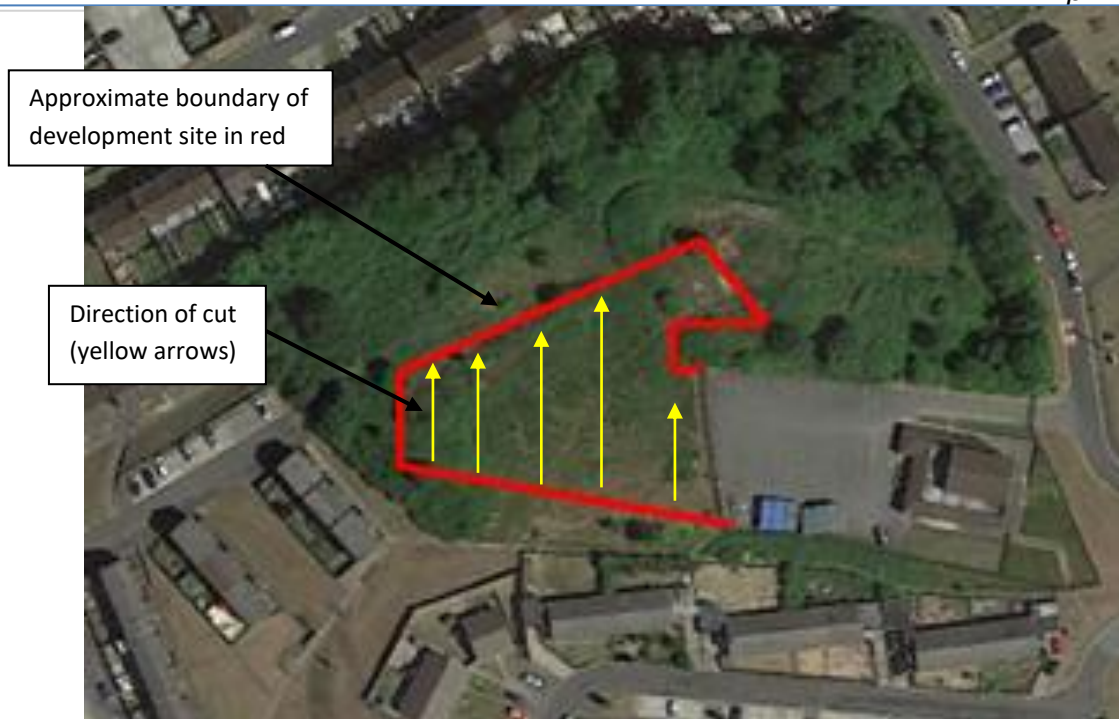
The arisings from the mowings and scrub cuttings will be raked into piles and removed from site. Any woody brash scrub will be chipped and removed. The vegetation / scrub will be cleared with hand-held plant such as 'strimmers' or brush-cutters, with arisings manually raked into piles and removed.

The clearance of the vegetation will be carried out under the supervision of an experienced ecologist from Spectrum Ecology who will act as Ecological Clerk of Works.

The extent of the vegetation clearance will include the ruderal vegetation which has become established since the previously occupying structure's demolition and will comprise all such vegetation within the boundary of the development site. No trees are to be removed as part of the development.

1.0 Proposed working method

- Prior to vegetation clearance, the site will be walked by the ECoW to thoroughly check the ground for any potential natural and artificial refugia, which will include the fly-tipped waste, rubble / stones where these occur in the development site and any other features considered as suitable for reptiles, amphibians and small mammals (which may include hedgehog, mouse and vole species). Where these features are found, they will be checked by hand for presence of reptiles or other animals where appropriate. If this cannot be done without causing potential harm, such features will be marked with 'taped' sticks to avoid tracking over and any other undue disturbance.
- The EcoW will also carry out checks for the presence of nesting birds in any suitable habitat features. The species-poor grassland that comprises the vast majority of the development site is unlikely to support nesting birds although it does hold some potential for ground nesting birds. The relatively small size of the site will allow for a comprehensive search. The bramble/ scrub towards the west of the site largely lies beyond the development boundary and will likely not be subject to clearance. However as this holds most potential for nesting birds, this will be checked as thoroughly as possible prior to any clearance works, including works occurring within 5 metres. If nesting birds are found to be present anywhere within the development site, all works within a minimum 5 metre radius will not be allowed to proceed until the nest is no longer in use.
- The pre-clearance walkover surveys will also incorporate a final check of the onsite flora, as the initial PEA botanical survey was undertaken at a sub-optimal time (March). Should significant / priority species not previously identified in the PEA be observed then all works will cease until the approach has been re-evaluated. Depending on the species encountered and the implications, this may include further discussion with the county ecologist and / or Natural Resources Wales in order to develop the new approach and any associated mitigation measures.
- Following the site check and marking of potentially sensitive features, the vegetation will be cleared using a directional cutting approach, working from the southern boundary of the site (which most closely borders the urban development) then through the site towards the northern boundary and habitat beyond, ensuring any reptiles or other animals within are driven toward the safety of the more optimal habitat beyond the site's northern boundary. The aerial image of the site shown below provides further clarification of this.



- The vegetation will be cleared in two stages. The first pass over the site will cut the vegetation to approximately 30cm in height. Where vegetation is dense making initial investigation of potential features difficult, this will enable identification of any further areas considered as suitable for reptiles and amphibians or sheltering hedgehogs. These can then be checked and avoided where necessary. A higher initial cut working from the southern boundary towards the habitat in the north will also encourage any animals present to vacate the site in that direction without being harmed by the cutting tools.
- A second pass over the vegetation will then be made, cutting the vegetation to ground level.
- If any features of interest for reptiles or other species are found, these will be investigated by the ECoW. Where investigation cannot be conclusive prior to the first cut, such areas will be tracked around and not cut to ground level, allowing for closer inspection once surrounding vegetation is removed.
- The arisings from the vegetation clearance will be collected using a vehicle and trailer and / or manually where appropriate and removed from site.
- If any reptiles or amphibians are found during the walkover check or during the clearance itself, these will be temporarily held in appropriate containers by the ECoW before being released into the suitable adjacent habitat to the north once the clearance has been completed. Small mammals such as mouse and

vole species are likely to vacate the features themselves immediately upon being disturbed.

- Given the proposed timing of works (over the summer period) any hedgehogs discovered during the clearance process should be assumed to be females with dependant young unless proven otherwise. Relocation would therefore not be appropriate. Should any hedgehogs be encountered, all works shall cease in the affected area until the ECoW has made an assessment and an appropriate course of action determined. This is likely to be that the affected area or feature will remain untouched or in situ until later in the season when /or until the animals have left of their own accord.
- **If 5 or more individual animals (including reptile, amphibian or hedgehog) are found, or if 3 reptiles of the same species are found, this could indicate a more significant population has become established at the site or that the site is more important than previously understood. All works will then cease until the approach has been reviewed. This may include additional surveys, eg in order to better understand reptile use of the site and inform the approach going forward.**
- During the construction phase, any / all steep sided excavations should be covered or fitted with an escape ramp whilst not in use to allow any animals that inadvertently enter a safe means of escape. Any essential night-time lighting should be kept to a minimum.

2.0 Timing of works and reporting

2.1 Vegetation clearance works are proposed to take place once planning consent has been obtained, most likely during the summer of 2020. It is envisaged that vegetation clearance works can be completed in 1 day.

2.2 All contractors must work under this method statement. All contractors must read the method statement. A copy of the document must be retained on site and brought to the attention of all contractors involved in the vegetation clearance.

2.3 As stated above, it should be noted that in the event of any evidence of protected species being found during the vegetation clearance operations, then all works will cease until the ECoW has assessed the situation and if necessary has contacted the County Ecologist or the local office of NRW for further advice. As detailed above, a threshold of 5 individual animals (including reptile, amphibian or hedgehog) or 3 of the same species being discovered is considered to be the point at which all works cease while an alternative approach is developed.

3.0 Relevant Legislation.

3.1 Reptiles

Common lizard, slow worm and grass snake are all afforded partial protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Under this legislation it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill or injure these species. As such it is necessary for developers to demonstrate that reasonable measures have been taken to avoid such an eventuality.

In addition all three species have been listed as Priority species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

3.2 Nesting birds

All birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law under Part 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Under this legislation it is an offence to injure or kill a nesting bird, and/or damage or destroy an active birds nest.

Species listed on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981 as amended) are afforded special protection and for these species it is also an offence to disturb birds while they are building or at a nest, or to disturb the dependent young of such a bird.

3.3 Amphibians

The four widespread species of amphibian (common toad, common frog, smooth newt and palmate newt) receive partial protection under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) in respect of Section 9(5).