

Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service  
Bryant House, Liverpool Road North, Maghull  
Merseyside L31 2PA  
Director: Alan Jemmett, PhD, MBA

Enquiries: 0151 934 4951  
Fax: 0151 934 4955

**Contact:** Rachael Rhodes  
Direct Dial: 0151 934 4963  
Email: rachael.rhodes@eas.sefton.gov.uk

## **Report**

To: John Entwistle  
Organisation: Strategic Development  
Wirral Council

From: Rachael Rhodes  
Ecologist

Your Ref  
File Ref 48/5/7  
W/P Ref RR\Hoylake Langfields  
report Jan09  
Date 3 February 2009

### **Review of the designation of Hoylake Langfields SBI**

Further to my previous memo and your comments I provide the following advice.

#### **Recommendations:**

I recommend that:

- Hoylake Langfields meets SBI designation criteria and would be defensible.
- The current SBI criteria would benefit from review to provide enhanced clarity on features that would merit designation.

1. My previous interim comments advised that the guidelines are subjective and that the use of phrases within the guidelines such as 'the presence of high quality habitat' or the 'presence of high diversity of species' are not quantified leaving their application open to interpretation. To apply the guidelines I have used my ecological knowledge and experience, best practice from elsewhere as well as the use of recognised conservation status such as Biodiversity Action Plan species and habitat, Birds of conservation concern and North West Biodiversity Audit species. To expand on this table 1 below provides detail on how these guidelines have been applied. I am satisfied that the approach taken above to the designation of this site would be defensible on scientific grounds and is in line with Defra Local Sites guidance.
2. From my review I agree with Wirral Wildlife that the site meets Primary Attributes i) ii) and iv) and subsidiary factors i) and iii). You requested that I provide detail on how the site meets each designation attribute, table 2 set out below provides this detail.
3. As requested I have annotated the plan provided previously with the areas of importance. See Figure 1 below. You asked if the whole site is of equal importance and whether there are areas of greatest value. The review we undertook reduced the proposed site area from 113 Ha to 66Ha (see figure 2 below). This reduction was based on apparent lack of survey information for those areas outside of the revised boundary. If survey information is available then the revised boundary may warrant further consideration. In my view and from the review of the site against the SBI criteria all features now within

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the revised boundary are the core area and all areas contribute to the designation. The value of this site is the combination of habitats present on site, which provide a range of habitats for a range of species which in combination with the low intensity use of the site maintains these habitats and keeps disturbance of species to a minimum.

4. There appears to be some confusion over my comments made in the previous memo with regard to designating sites for barn owls and water voles. For clarity, I was not recommending that Hoylake golf course be designated due to the presence of Barn owls but querying whether other sites in Wirral had been designated due to Barn owl presence and if so then the designation of the golf course due to presence of Barn owls may need to be considered. However, it may be that the golf course has other ecological value that may mean that the site warrants review against the SBI guidelines.
5. In relation to Water voles, the Hoylake Langfields SBI revised site boundary has not been drawn around known water vole habitat but rather as water voles are present within the revised boundary water voles are therefore a designating feature. My comments made in relation to the designation of the ditches outside of the revised boundary for water voles was to highlight that other Merseyside districts have designated sites for Water voles and that if Wirral wanted to also designate sites on water vole grounds this approach would be defensible.
6. My previous memo provided some comments in relation to the Capita Symonds report. My comments were made to highlight that further survey would be required to support any planning application for a golf resort at this location rather than as a criticism of the report provided to date. I advise that the following further survey would be required in relation to use of the site by overwintering and breeding birds, protected species surveys for water voles, barn owls, bats, reptiles, amphibian survey of ponds and ditches, survey for BAP species such as Brown hare, further more detailed vegetation surveys to National Vegetation Classification level. In addition, Habitat Regulations Assessment screening and most likely, subsequent Habitat Regulations Assessment will be required.

I would be happy to comment further at your request.

Table 1. Application of Wirral SBI designation criteria by Merseyside EAS

Criteria	Qualifying feature
<b><u>Primary Attributes</u></b>	
i) Presence of a high quality example of at least one habitat: sites will be among the best local examples of the habitat under consideration. Scarce habitats (locally/nationally) have increased value. Habitats where natural processes are likely to lead to rapid loss of ecological interest are usually less valuable, except where the process of ecological change is itself of interest	<p>To assess scarce habitats (locally / nationally), the site has been assessed for the presence of UK, North West and Wirral BAP priority habitat.</p> <p>Wirral Phase 1 habitat survey (1980s) was also consulted to assess which habitats appear to be relatively scarce within Wirral.</p> <p>In relation to assessing high quality habitats identified have also been looked at in relation to their plant species richness and habitat size.</p>
ii) Presence of a high diversity of species to be expected in that habitat. Number of species alone is not a sufficient guide; a heathland for example will have less plant species than a woodland, but still may be a very good example of heathland	<p>Species richness has been assessed for habitats on site both in botanical and faunal terms.</p> <p>High diversity has been assessed in botanical terms as the number of species present, here I have used North Merseyside Local Wildlife Site guidelines as a basis for my judgements on species richness. Within the North Merseyside guidelines for specie diversity sites with more than 100 species being classed as highly diverse. More than 100 plant species have been recorded on site.</p> <p>High diversity in faunal terms has been assessed as the different types of faunal groups present on the site, e.g. invertebrates, birds, mammals as well as numbers of faunal species within these groups.</p>
iv) presence of locally or nationally rare or uncommon species, particularly those that are protected by law e.g. badgers, Great crested newts, bats	<p>Protected species have been classed as those species protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as amended, Habitat Regulations, 1994 as amended and Protection of Badgers Act 1992. Those species for which Dee Estuary SPA and Ramsar and Mersey Narrows and North Wirral Foreshore SPA and Ramsar and Mersey Estuary SPA and Ramsar have been designated, have been listed in relation to protected species.</p> <p>Species classifications such as UK and Wirral Biodiversity Action Plan species, North West Biodiversity Audit species (Regionally important) and Birds of Conservation Concern have been used to assess locally or nationally rare or uncommon species.</p>
<b><u>Subsidiary Factors</u></b>	
i) Large size	<p>Large size has been assessed looking at the size of existing SBI on Wirral, only 3 SBI sites are larger than Hoylakes Langfields.</p> <p>Large size has also been assessed in terms of integrity of the site and its ability to maintain its biodiversity function and value.</p>
iii) Key position as a link between other	Due to the overwintering bird species present this site is

wildlife sites.	linked to European designated sites within the Dee and Mersey Estuaries and North Wirral foreshore.
iv) Presence of geological and / or physiographical features.	This criteria has been highlighted by Wirral Wildlife, however, from the site visit I undertook and information provided I am not sure what these features could be. <b>Clarification is required from Wirral Wildlife.</b>

Table 2. Hoylake Langfields Assessment against SBI guidelines

Criteria	Qualifying feature
<b><u>Primary Attributes</u></b>	
i) Presence of a high quality example of at least one habitat: sites will be among the best local examples of the habitat under consideration. Scarce habitats (locally/nationally) have increased value. Habitats where natural processes are likely to lead to rapid loss of ecological interest are usually less valuable, except where the process of ecological change is itself of interest	<p>The site is a good example of semi-improved grassland and large extent of Lowland grazing marsh (UK and Wirral BAP habitat – Coastal and floodplain grazing marsh). The ditch system is also a high quality example.</p> <p>Gilroy Nature Park, in particular area of disused landfill contains species rich grassland.</p>
ii) Presence of a high diversity of species to be expected in that habitat. Number of species alone is not a sufficient guide; a heathland for example will have less plant species than a woodland, but still may be a very good example of heathland	<p>Grassland on disused landfill and ditches are highly diverse. More than 100 plant species have been recorded across the site.</p> <p>In addition, the site supports a high diversity of faunal species, including birds, invertebrates and mammals, with a range of species recorded within these groups (see below for some examples).</p>
iv) presence of locally or nationally rare or uncommon species, particularly those that are protected by law e.g. badgers, Great crested newts, bats	<p>The site supports a number of nationally rare and uncommon species as well as some protected species. Protected species recorded on site include Water vole, Barn owl and foraging bats.</p> <p>The site provides overwintering habitat for Oystercatcher, Black-tailed godwit, Curlew and Redshank key species associated with the Dee Estuary SPA and Ramsar and Mersey Narrows and North Wirral Foreshore SPA and Ramsar and Mersey Estuary SPA and Ramsar.</p> <p>UK and Wirral Biodiversity Action Plan species recorded on site include: Brown Hare, Common lizard, Common toad, Grey Partridge, Barn owl, Black-tailed godwit, Lapwing, Tree pipit, Grasshopper warbler, Yellow wagtail, Curlew, Tree sparrow, Bullfinch, Lapwing, Water vole, Pipistrelle bat species and Noctule bats.</p> <p>Birds of Conservation Concern Red list bird species include: Black-tailed godwit, Grey partridge, Skylark, Grasshopper warbler, Tree sparrow, and Bullfinch.</p>

	<p>Birds of Conservation Concern Amber list bird species include: Pink-footed goose, Shoveler, Water rail, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Ruff, Barn owl, Swallow, Tree pipit, Yellow wagtail, Grey wagtail, Fieldfare and Redwing.</p> <p>Uncommon plant species of include:  UKBAP species: Pyramidal orchid and Yellow birds nest (recorded once in 1988 – check for this species needed). North West Biodiversity Audit species (regionally important) Grass vetchling, Greater pond sedge, Pepper saxifrage, Pyramidal orchid, Bristly oxtongue, Yellow birds-nest (see above).</p>
<b><u>Subsidiary factors</u></b>	
i) Large size	SBI site put forward by Wirral Wildlife is 113 Ha. The revised boundary would make site 66.26 Ha. Only 3 other SBI are larger than the revised site.
iii) Key position as a link between other wildlife sites.	<p>This site provides a key link for overwintering birds between the Dee Estuary SPA and Ramsar, Mersey Narrows and North Wirral Foreshore pSPA and pRamsar and Mersey Estuary SPA and Ramsar.</p> <p>Species for which these sites have been designated which use these sites are Oystercatcher, Black-tailed godwit, Curlew and Redshank.</p>
iv) Presence of geological and / or physiographical features.	<p>This criteria has been highlighted by Wirral Wildlife, however, from the site visit I undertook and information provided I am not sure what these features could be.</p> <p><b>Clarification is required from Wirral Wildlife.</b></p>



Figure 1. Plan showing features within Hoylake Langfields Site.

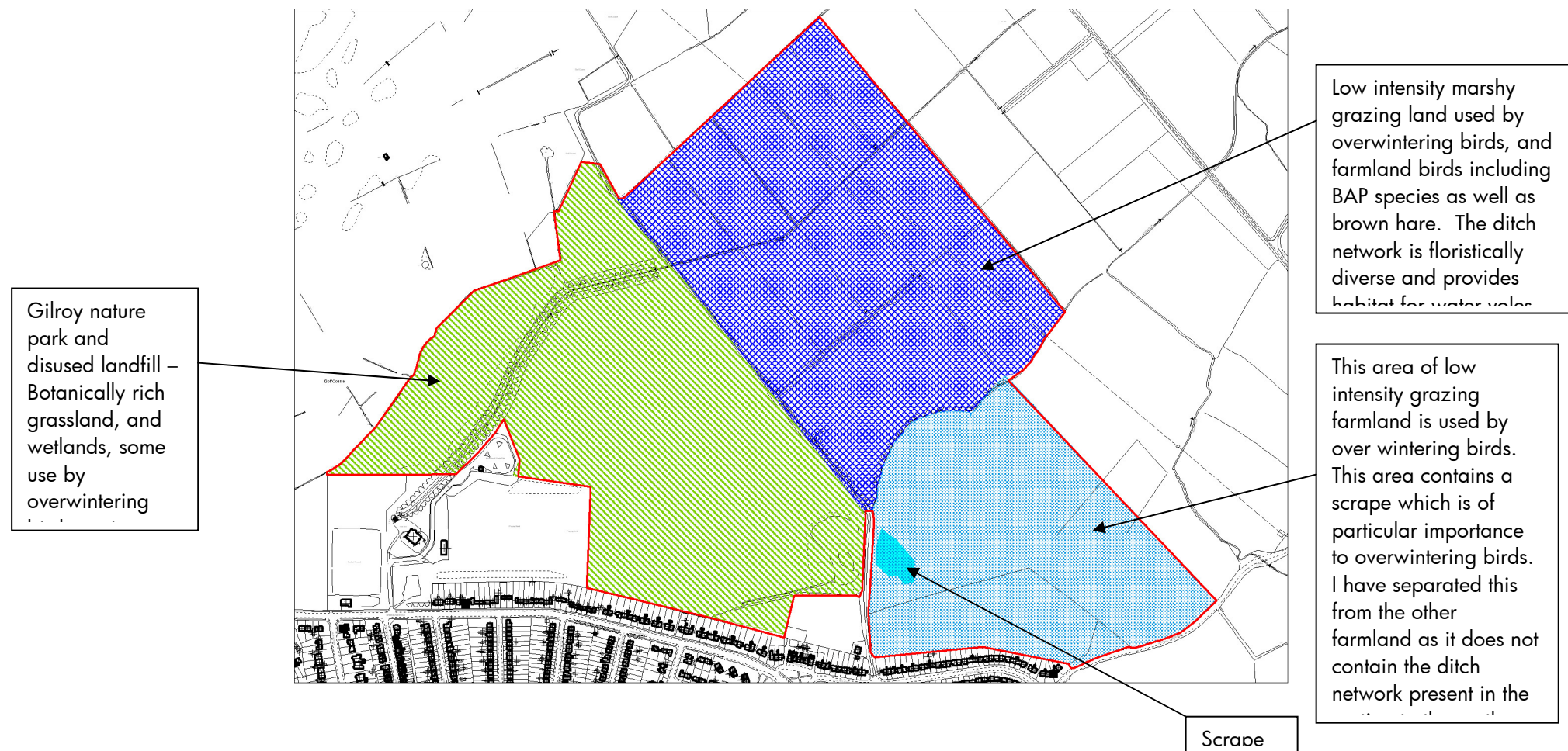
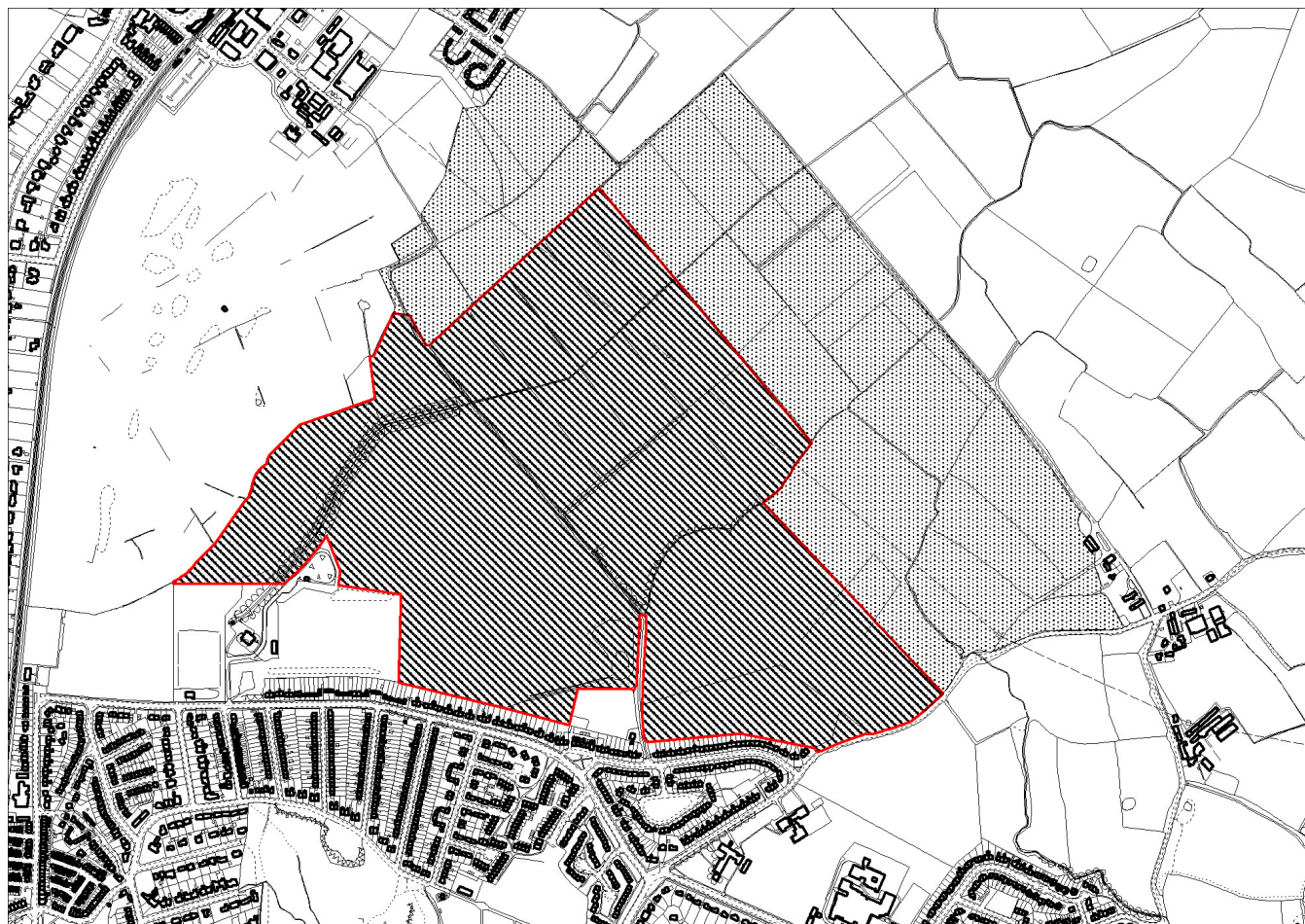




Figure 2. Proposed site boundaries for SBI Hoylake Langfields



The larger area shown by light shading is the site boundary proposed by Wirral Wildlife. The smaller area shown as shaded by lines is the boundary proposed by Merseyside EAS.