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ROSSWYN HOTEL, ROSS-ON-WYE, HEREFORDSHIRE

INITIAL ECOLOGICAL APPRAISAL AND BAT INSPECTION

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This report has been prepared by *James Johnston Ecology* on behalf of BDG Property Ltd. It presents the findings of an 'initial ecological appraisal and bat inspection' (alternatively called an ecology scoping survey), undertaken across a parcel of land in central Ross-on-Wye, supporting a former hotel, cottage and grounds. The site is proposed for renovation, re-development and conversion to make additional housing provision. The pre-application consultations with Hereford Council resulted in the following ecology request:

As the proposal involves some conversion of this property presumably with intrusion into service areas such as roof spaces, an inspection for protected species notably bats and nesting birds will be necessary. There are records of bat roosts within 200 metres of the site and I advise appointing an appropriately qualified and experienced ecologist to carry out an inspection of the property. This will determine whether there are any issues in relation to the development proposal and presence of protected species through a scoping survey of the site.

This scoping survey may identify evidence for bats utilising the buildings. In the event of finding evidence for bats, a set of emergence surveys will be required to ascertain species, numbers and type of roost site in order to formulate a mitigation plan with possible . However, this can only be done in the bat activity season and in that case I would be advising withdrawal of the application until such time as the survey information and mitigation is available. Furthermore, finding a substantial roost site for bat may subsequently involve the applicant's representative in preparing an application for a 'development licence' from Natural England in order to carry out the works after planning permission has been granted.

This report supports the planning application by responding to this bat-related request, and in addition identifying any potential other ecological constraints and opportunities at the site (such as nesting bird issues or potential for reptiles).
This appraisal is based upon background ecology records held by Herefordshire Biological Records Centre (HBRC); and upon a habitat and walkover field survey conducted by James Johnston Ecology in mid-December 2014. The survey included a broad habitat appraisal exercise, and a preliminary fauna survey (assessing evidence of or potential for notable or protected species such as bird nesting habitat, badgers, bat evidence, reptiles, and great crested newts).

The remainder of this report presents the appraisal methods, the findings, potential impacts, and recommendations. Photographs are incorporated into the text to help show the context, and a plan at the rear shows recommended enhancements.

2.0 METHODS

Background Records

HBRC were consulted and provided their records of bat roosts and bat activity within 0.5km of the application site. The writer (James Johnston) also considered the results of past ecology appraisal reports and fauna surveys for nearby development sites that they have been involved with over the last 10 years, to assist in setting the local fauna context for this planning application site.

Extended 'Phase 1' - Habitat Surveying

An ecology walkover, buildings inspection, and Phase 1 habitat survey was conducted across the planning application site on 11/12/14, during a period of relatively mild and overcast winter weather (12-7^{0}C, max/min), with some drizzle.

During this exercise the site and its boundary was walked, and any evidence of protected species presence was noted (along with any areas or habitats potentially suitable for use by protected species). Habitats were noted and assessed for their potential for notable ecology. No detailed habitat mapping or botanical survey was conducted.

Fauna Appraisal

Birds – Whilst walking the site, note is made of any birds seen nesting or foraging within the site, or any evidence of earlier nesting. The habitats are also appraised for their potential as bird nesting habitat.

Bats – All buildings on site were subject to a detailed inspection, inside and outside, for any bat roost evidence and to assess their potential to support hidden bat roosts. Long ladders, an endoscope and bright torches (including a 1 million candle power

torch) were used to assist in this, so that architectural recesses and gaps could be thoroughly examined and internally illuminated even in daylight. No bat activity survey or dusk emergence survey was deemed necessary, since the buildings were found to offer no or negligible bat roosting potential, no bat evidence, and the site habitat types are unsuitable for bat activity.

Other – The site's habitat was assessed for its potential to support protected reptile species, such as grass snake or slow worm, based upon its provision of grassland features favoured by reptiles (such as 'fine' grasses, ant hills, grass tussocks, and matted dead-grass). Badger setts were looked for in boundary banks.

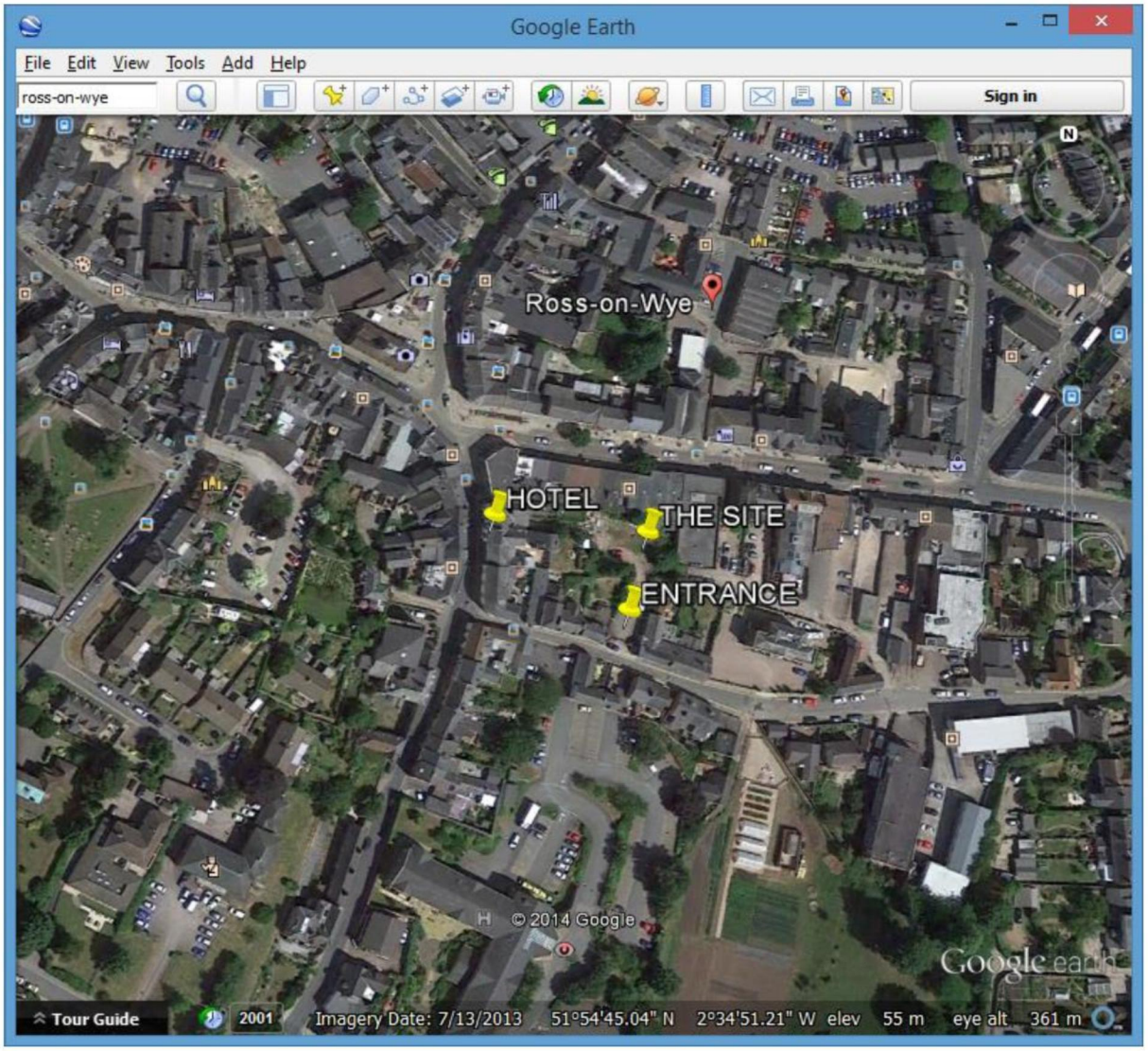
Personnel

All the ecology survey, appraisal work and 'writing up' was conducted by James Johnston (MCIEEM / CEnv), who has over 20 years habitat and fauna survey experience and who holds survey licences for bats, great crested newts and barn owls.

3.0 FINDINGS

Location / Landscape

The site is in the centre of the town of Ross-on-Wye. It is shown in the aerial photo below (courtesy of Google Earth). The surroundings are consequently densely built up, with little nearby tree provision and an obvious lack of semi-natural vegetation. Such landscapes tend not to be of ecology merit, but bat roosts remain possible, due to the provision of old buildings and nearby parks.



Site-centred aerial photo courtesy of Google Earth

On-site Habitats

There is no semi-natural habitat on site. The open space has all been either hard-surfaced, or cleared leaving bare earth. There is one small line of four mature Leyland cypress trees on a central site boundary, but no native trees are present.

Surfaced parking at entrance

Bare ground after clearance

Leylandii trees on central southern boundary

Buildings

There are a range of building types of mixed ages associated with the site, going back several hundred years. The older ones are on the site's western boundary. These involve brick walls and slate roofs, with bitumen felt. The slates and ridge tiles are all close-fitting, creating negligible bat roosting potential. There are almost no roof voids / attics, since those features have been converted into accommodation in the distant past.

Buildings on western boundary

Rear of hotel buildings

Close-fitting slates

One large attic space is present above the old hotel (overlooking the High Street), and this was seen to be 3m tall, with a roof above of slate and bitumen felt. No 'open' beam mortise joints were found to be associated with the roof structure.

Attic over old hotel

Same attic over old hotel

The part of the hotel in the south-western corner of the site is derelict and has been internally stripped out (all floors and ceiling materials removed).

Derelict south-western part of hotel

A series of cellars run through beneath the western portions of the hotel, and these have been mostly used as bar rooms, and for beer storage. They were properly decorated (plastered and painted).

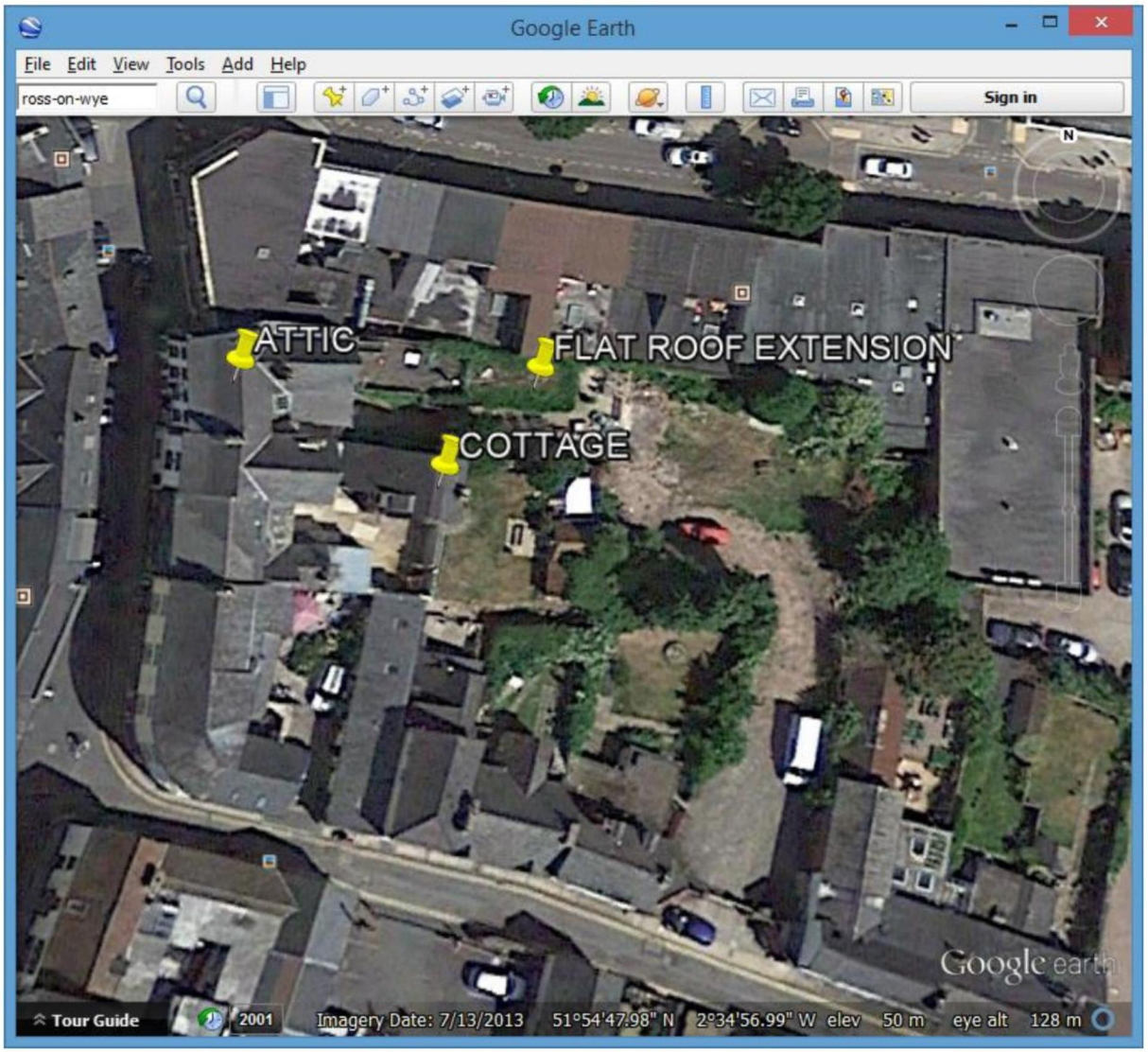
At the rear of the old hotel running eastwards are a series of poor quality single-storey flat-roofed extensions. The flat roofs are bitumen laid over plyboard and softwood beams, all in poor condition and leaking. There is some dense climbing vegetation on these extensions.

Flat-roof extensions

There is also a small 3-storey detached cottage at the rear of the hotel. Part of it has a small mono-slope (lean-to) slate roof that creates a triangular-profile attic, 1.8m tall, with bitumen felt.

Cottage

The buildings and features mentioned above are located and marked on the following aerial photo (courtesy of Google Earth).



Locations of Buildings and Features

Fauna

HBRC Bat Records – HBRC hold records of one or two past roosts for pipistrelles and brown long-eared bats, in and around Ross town centre. The nearest to the application site is 200-300m northwards and relates to a 2002 record of 16 pipistrelle bats. There is also a 2006 record of roosting brown long-eared bats around 500m away to the north (numbers not recorded). There is also an older (1985) record of 48 roosting pipistrelles at a location 300m to the south-east of the application site.

Bat Roost Potential – There are no past bat roost records for the site or for any adjacent building. The detailed inspection of all the site's buildings, attics and architectural crevices revealed no evidence of bats and negligible potential for roosts to be active without leaving evidence. The single large attic above the hotel was closely inspected throughout, and no bat roost evidence was found. Cobwebs around internal ridges also indicated no bat roosting. The close-fitting ridge tiles and slates were noted as offering negligible bat access potential. One barge board (south-facing) of the detached cottage was noted as having minor bat roost potential, as there is a 1-2cm gap behind it. However, it was closely inspected via ladder and no bats or bat droppings were found inside the barge board gap. This feature is also unaffected by the development proposals. There are no trees suitable for bat roosting, as the four boundary leylandii were not seen to support any potential bat roost features such as rot holes or deep splits.

Birds - The site walkover survey during December 2014 indicated only a very poor assemblage of birds active around the general area. Only very low numbers of common garden species were noted around the site margins, with species sightings limited just to robin, blue tit and wren. No old bird nests were noted around the buildings, but the four boundary leylandii trees and the dense climbing vegetation over the rear flat-roof extensions do provide moderate potential for bird nesting during the March to August nesting season.

Other Fauna – The walkover survey at the site confirmed the habitats to offer negligible opportunity for reptiles such as slow worm, grass snake or common lizard. This is because there is no provision of the types of grassland or grassland features

favoured by reptiles (no ‘fine’ grasses, tussocks, south-facing banks, matter dead-grass, or ant hills). The long-term isolation of the site from suitable reptile habitat also makes reptile colonisation highly unlikely.

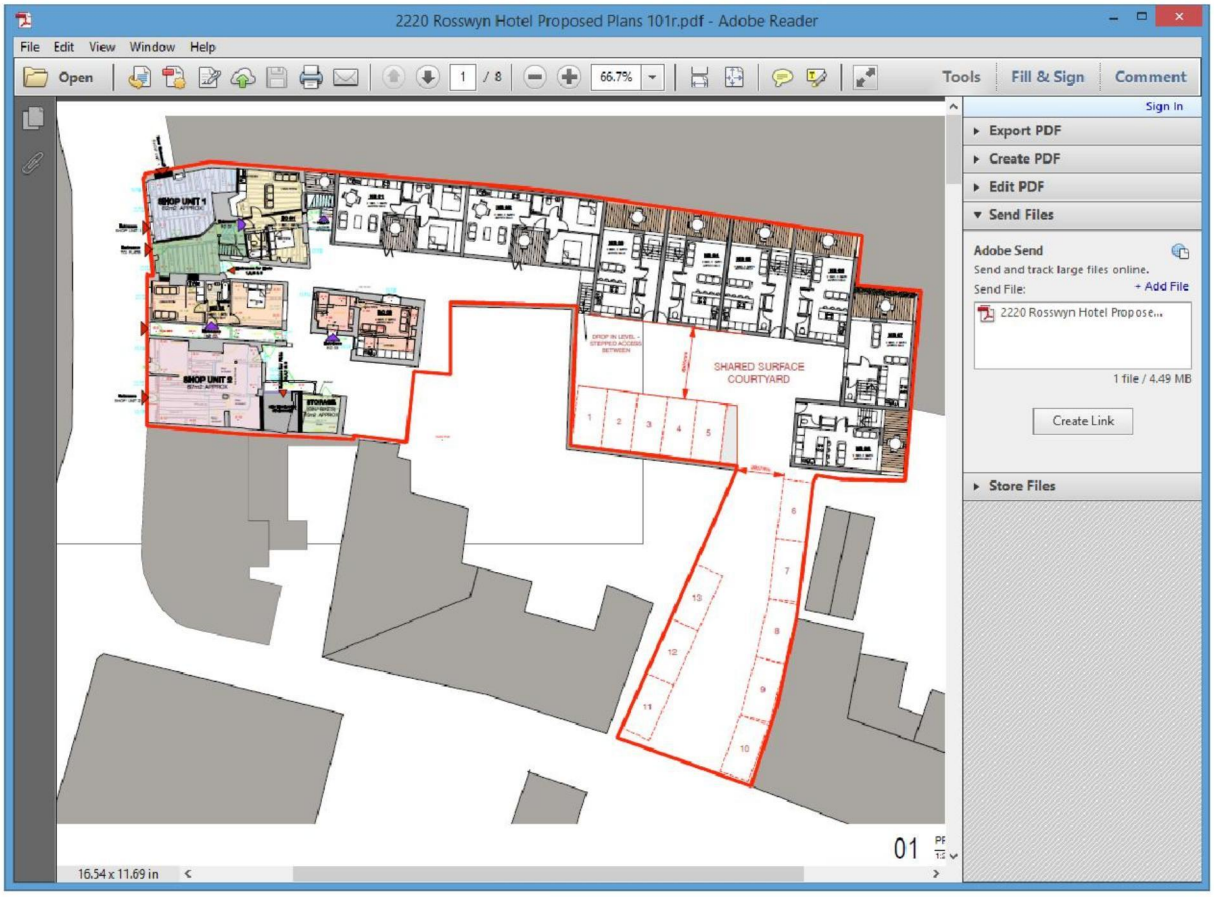
Similarly, the lack of ponds on site and nearby, and the habitat isolation of the site provides negligible opportunity for great crested newts (GCNs) to be present in the area.

No badger setts were found anywhere within the site, and no badger evidence was noted. This species is considered absent.

4.0 POTENTIAL IMPACTS

The Scheme

The proposed development scheme is shown in the following plan.



Proposed Scheme

The scheme involves renovating the old hotel buildings in the west of the site and converting the ground-floor space to shop units with accommodation above; Minor internal renovations / re-fitting to the cottage; Residential conversion of the rear flat-roof hotel extensions to make bungalow accommodation; And, construction of six attached 2-storey houses around the northern and eastern boundaries. Landscaping will be minimal and will simply involve car parking around the site margins and a surfaced courtyard where there is currently bare ground. The four leylandii boundary trees would be cleared.

Impacts

Designations - No designated nature conservation site will be affected or impacted by this development scheme, since none are present within or adjacent to the site.

Habitat - The ecology appraisal confirms that the habitats of the site are all of negligible value for ecology, and so any habitat loss to the scheme causes no significant ecological impact.

Fauna

Bats – The scheme does not involve clearance of any trees with any bat roosting potential, and similarly no buildings with any bat roosting evidence or potential are affected by the proposals. One barge board of the cottage (on the southern wall) was found to offer slight bat roost potential (although no roost evidence), but the cottage is only subject to minor internal renovation and the barge board is unaffected, which therefore provides no potential for impacts to a bat who could roost there in future. There is consequently considered to be no potential for impacts to any bat roost around the site, and so there are no bat roost mitigation requirements or recommendations for further detailed bat survey. However, it is recognised that bat roosting patterns can change in short time frames, new roosts can form at any time, and there are past records of brown long-eared and pipistrelle roosts in central Ross (within 200-300m of the application site), and so some minor precautionary recommendations are made art Section 5 below.

Birds – The scheme requires clearance of the dense climbing vegetation from over the flat-roof rear extensions, plus felling 4 leylandii trees, where small garden birds are likely to nest during the nesting season. Insensitive timing of this vegetation clearance would allow the potential for unlawful disturbance to nesting birds (eg – if clearance occurred within the March to August nesting season). This is avoided by the precautionary method statement at Section 5 below.

Other – No other potential fauna issues have been identified on-site.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Precautionary Method Statement

The following minor precautionary measures will be followed, to avoid the small identified potential ecology impacts still further, and to avoid the potential for any legal infringements:

Bats – Contractors should always look out for bats at all times during any building renovations works, and especially during any re-roofing (because bats can form new roosts in unexpected locations at any time). Any tiles or ridge tiles that need removal should be removed carefully by hand and their undersides should be inspected before they are stacked (as bats can cling to the underside and be harmed by stacking). If a bat is seen at any time on site works must stop in that area whilst the Project Ecologist is contacted, in order that the evidence can be reviewed and Natural England can be consulted.

If any re-roofing will include addition of a breathable roof membrane (BRM) or replacement of bitumen felt with a BRM, then the ridge tiles must be closely fixed down or fully cemented, so that no gap wider than 6mm is created beneath ridge tiles. This is because bats must not be encouraged to roost beneath ridge tiles where a BRM is present, since bats' claws get entangled in the BRM leading to death.

Birds – Conduct the clearance of the climbing vegetation from around the flat-roof extensions, and the tree felling, outside the March to August bird nesting season, eg – clear the trees and vegetation during the period 1st September to the end of February, unless an updated bird survey by a Suitably Qualified Ecologist (SQE) at the time confirms no active nests in affected areas.

Enhancement – The Government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) suggests that LPAs should seek ecology enhancement (net biodiversity gain) within all planning applications. Some appropriate minor fauna enhancement measures are therefore recommended to be incorporated into this scheme:

- Erection of a Schwegler 1FF bat box onto the wall-top of the south-facing gable wall of the detached cottage (fixed at around 7m height above ground). This box type is suitable for use by brown long-eared bats and pipistrelles (which both occur locally);

- Erection of 3 'sparrow terrace' nest boxes onto external walls around the site, at 2.5m above the ground, facing into courtyards, to encourage declining sparrow species to nest. Proposed nest/roost box locations are shown in the Enhancement plan below.

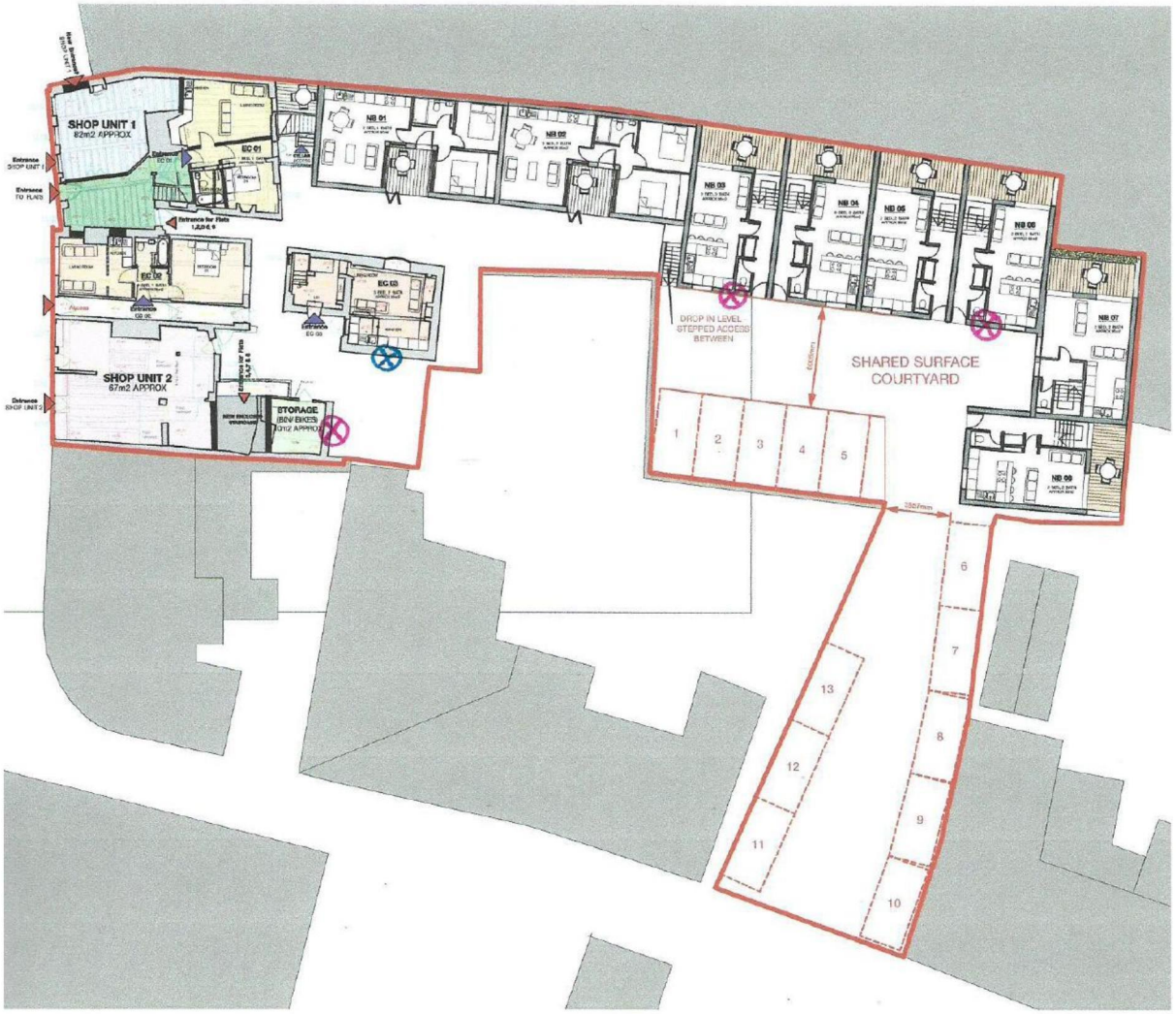
Sparrow terrace nest box

Schwegler 1FF bat box

Conclusions

This initial ecology appraisal and bat inspection confirms no bat roosting evidence and negligible opportunity for a roost to be impacted by the development proposals. The only minor ecology issue is the requirement for some removal of possible bird nesting habitat. This habitat clearance therefore simply needs to avoid the nesting season. Overall, there are no significant ecology impacts associated with the proposals, and with the precautionary method statement followed there is no risk of impact to protected species. The recommendations should be guaranteed through use of a Planning Condition. No ecology 'reasons for refusal' were identified.

PLAN



⊗ - 1 Schwegler 1FF bat box erected at 7m above ground

⊗ - 1 Sparrow terrace nest box fixed at 2.5m above ground (x3 in total)

- Rosswyn Hotel, Ross-on-wye
- Ecology Enhancement

(JJ541 9/1/15)