Oak Court Farm

Ecological Stewardship Statement

Oak Court Farm, (adjacent to Vron Farm), Llewelyn Road, Vron, Tanyfron, Wrexham LL11 5TW

This Statement describes how ecological observation and an evolving understanding of the holding have informed the stewardship, management, and enhancement of Oak Court Farm during the applicants' first year of occupation.

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Annex

Annex XII: Ecological Baseline & Supporting Evidence

1. Introduction

This Ecological Stewardship Statement (ESS) describes the approach taken by the applicants to understanding, managing, and enhancing the ecological characteristics of Oak Court Farm during their first year of occupation.

Rather than viewing ecology as a discrete planning exercise undertaken solely in support of this application, the applicants have sought to integrate ecological observations into the day-to-day stewardship and management of the holding. Routine agricultural activities, habitat management, and general occupation of the site have been accompanied by the ongoing recording of ecological observations, enabling management decisions to be informed by an increasingly detailed understanding of the land and the species that use it.

The applicants' approach has been one of observation informing stewardship. Prior to purchasing the holding, repeated visits over an extended period provided an initial appreciation of the site's principal ecological features, including the River Gwenfro corridor, the ancient woodland, the Offa's Dyke hedgerow, wetter southern habitats, and the broader pattern of habitat connectivity across the holding. These early observations informed a number of initial siting and management decisions before occupation commenced. Those initial decisions subsequently continued to evolve as ongoing observations refined the applicants' understanding of the holding.

Following occupation, ecological monitoring has continued as an integral part of the stewardship of the holding. Photographic records, written observations, habitat monitoring, and routine site observations have progressively expanded the applicants' understanding of the site's ecology. In many cases, these observations have confirmed and refined the initial assessment of the holding, whilst also identifying additional opportunities to improve habitat connectivity, biodiversity, and long-term ecological resilience. Representative ecological observations, photographic records and supporting evidence referred to throughout this Statement are provided within Annex XII: Ecological Baseline and Supporting Evidence.

This ESS therefore describes not only the ecological characteristics observed across the holding, but also the manner in which those observations have progressively informed management decisions during the applicants' first year of occupation. Together with the accompanying Green Infrastructure & Biodiversity Statement (GIBS), it demonstrates an ongoing commitment to managing Oak Court Farm in a manner that seeks to balance productive agricultural use with the protection, enhancement, and long-term stewardship of its ecological value.

2. Developing an Understanding of the Holding

The applicants' approach to ecological stewardship began before the purchase of Oak Court Farm. During repeated visits to the holding between the initial viewing of the site and subsequent occupation, time was spent observing the character of the land under a range of seasonal and weather conditions. These visits provided an initial understanding of the

principal landscape features and the way in which different parts of the holding appeared to function.

From these early observations, several broad characteristics became apparent. The River Gwenfro and its associated riparian corridor formed a distinct ecological feature along the southern boundary of the holding. The ancient woodland, the woodland clump, the Offa's Dyke hedgerow, areas of wetter ground, and the network of existing hedgerows collectively suggested that much of the southern portion of the holding already functioned as an interconnected ecological landscape.

Although these early observations were informal rather than systematic, they proved sufficient to influence several initial management decisions. From the outset, the applicants sought to avoid unnecessary disturbance to the principal ecological features of the holding by concentrating operational activities, infrastructure, and the domestic base within the north-easterly areas of the site, whilst allowing the more ecologically sensitive southern habitats to remain largely undisturbed.

Following occupation, these initial impressions were not simply accepted but continually tested through ongoing observation. Routine agricultural activities provided regular opportunities to record wildlife, habitat features, seasonal changes, and patterns of species movement. Photographs, written notes, and other records were compiled as part of the applicants' day-to-day stewardship of the holding, gradually building a more detailed understanding of the site's ecology.

As this understanding developed, management decisions increasingly reflected not only practical agricultural requirements but also opportunities to strengthen ecological connectivity, retain valuable habitat features, and integrate productive farming with long-term environmental stewardship. In many cases, observations made during the applicants' first year of occupation confirmed the broad ecological understanding formed prior to purchase, whilst also identifying further opportunities to enhance the ecological resilience of the holding. This developing understanding formed the basis upon which subsequent stewardship decisions were made.

3. Ecological Understanding Developed Through Observation

Ongoing observation and day-to-day stewardship of the holding have progressively demonstrated that Oak Court Farm functions not as a series of isolated habitat features, but as a diverse and interconnected ecological landscape.

The applicants' observations have identified a mosaic of habitats including riparian corridors, ancient woodland, woodland edge habitats, hedgerows, scrub vegetation, species-rich grassland, wetland features, and transitional habitat areas. As observations accumulated throughout the applicants' first year of occupation, confidence in the ecological relationships between these habitats also increased.

Repeated observations have demonstrated that wildlife movement is frequently associated with existing landscape features including hedgerows, woodland edges, scrub habitats, field margins, the River Gwenfro corridor, and Offa's Dyke. Evidence of regularly used mammal trails, badger activity, deer movement, pollinator activity, bird observations, and wetland-associated plant species has collectively contributed to an increasingly detailed understanding of the ecological functioning of the holding.

Particular significance has been attached to habitat connectivity. Rather than existing as isolated areas of ecological interest, many of the principal habitat features appear to operate collectively as part of a wider ecological network extending beyond the boundaries of the holding. This understanding has reinforced the importance of maintaining existing habitat connections and has informed subsequent stewardship decisions seeking to strengthen ecological connectivity wherever practical opportunities have arisen.

The applicants' observations have also demonstrated the value of routine monitoring undertaken alongside normal agricultural activities. Many of the ecological records contained within the accompanying supporting evidence were not obtained through dedicated survey work but through everyday occupation and management of the holding. This ongoing familiarity with the land has enabled patterns of seasonal change, wildlife movement, habitat use, and species diversity to be recognised over time.

Taken together, these observations have established an ecological baseline for the holding and have provided the evidence upon which subsequent stewardship decisions have been based.

4. Ecological Stewardship in Practice

Management decisions have not generally been based upon isolated observations. Rather, they have developed progressively as repeated observations have increased confidence in the ecological significance of particular habitats or landscape features. As a result, stewardship decisions have sought to integrate ecological understanding with practical agricultural management, recognising that productive farming and environmental stewardship can frequently be advanced together through considered design and informed decision-making.

4.1 Respecting Existing Ecological Patterns

The applicants' approach to stewardship began before the purchase of Oak Court Farm. During repeated visits to the holding prior to occupation, the River Gwenfro corridor, ancient woodland, Offa's Dyke hedgerow, wetter southern habitats and associated landscape features were identified as appearing to form the principal ecological network across the holding.

Although these early observations were necessarily informal, they informed several important initial management decisions. Rather than distributing operational activities throughout the holding, the applicants deliberately concentrated the domestic base,

principal infrastructure and operational areas within the more northerly parts of the site, allowing the southern habitats to remain comparatively undisturbed.

Subsequent ecological observations undertaken during the applicants' first year of occupation have broadly confirmed the appropriateness of those initial decisions, reinforcing the importance of retaining the principal ecological corridors and habitat areas that had originally been identified through observation.

This illustrates how early ecological understanding informed the overall spatial organisation of the holding before occupation commenced.

4.2 Strengthening Habitat Connectivity

The proposed internal hedgerow provides a further example of ecological understanding influencing the evolution of a practical agricultural proposal. The initial objective was to establish a windbreak within the holding whilst making productive use of naturally regenerated hedge plants that had established along the eastern boundary and required management.

As the applicants' understanding of the holding developed, the proposed alignment was progressively refined to provide substantially greater ecological benefit. Rather than functioning solely as an internal field boundary, the proposed hedgerow has been designed with the aim of strengthening habitat connectivity by linking the proposed northern wildflower corridor with the existing woodland clump situated within the southern part of the holding. Together with the existing northern hedgerow, surrounding woodland and other established habitat features, this approach seeks to create a more continuous ecological corridor through which wildlife may move between habitats whilst remaining associated with natural cover.

The proposed hedgerow also provides a number of complementary benefits beyond biodiversity enhancement, including improved shelter for agricultural operations, the productive reuse of naturally regenerated planting stock, enhanced landscape integration and, once established, increased visual screening of the operational areas of the holding from the adjacent public footpath.

This illustrates how a practical agricultural proposal was progressively refined to deliver wider ecological, landscape, and operational benefits simultaneously.

4.3 Designing Future Agricultural Features

The planned orchard provides a further example of ecological stewardship informing the future development of the holding. Whilst the orchard is intended primarily as a productive agricultural asset, its layout has been carefully developed with regard to the existing hedgerow network and anticipated wildlife use of the site.

Planting locations have been selected to facilitate movement between established cover and fruiting trees, enabling wildlife to make use of seasonal food resources whilst remaining closely associated with existing habitat features. Particular consideration has been given to the relationship between the orchard and the eastern hedgerow, allowing wildlife to move readily between sheltered habitat and fruiting trees and shrubs as the orchard becomes established.

Although orchard establishment is progressing incrementally as the enterprise develops, these ecological design principles have informed the proposed layout from the outset and will continue to guide future planting.

This demonstrates that ecological considerations have informed not only the management of existing habitats but also the design of future productive agricultural features.

4.4 Protecting Established Habitat Features

Ecological stewardship has also influenced routine management decisions following occupation of the holding. During the applicants' first year, repeated observations identified an area of nettle habitat within the second field as supporting breeding activity by Small Tortoiseshell butterflies. These observations built upon earlier records of pheasant activity within the same locality, including observations made during the previous breeding season and the subsequent identification of a pheasant chick and hen emerging from the same habitat area.

Prior to these observations, the applicants had intended to extend sheep grazing progressively across this area as part of routine pasture management. However, as repeated observations increased confidence in the ecological significance of the habitat, those management intentions were revised. The nettle habitat has instead been retained and excluded from routine grazing and strimming in recognition of its importance as a breeding habitat and wildlife refuge.

This example illustrates that stewardship decisions have developed progressively as ecological understanding has increased, with practical management being adapted where appropriate in response to accumulated observational evidence.

The examples presented above are representative rather than exhaustive. Together they illustrate the applicants' wider approach to ecological stewardship, whereby understanding developed through continued observation has progressively informed practical management decisions across the holding.

Rather than treating biodiversity as a separate planning exercise, ecological considerations have increasingly become integrated into the planning, design and day-to-day management of the enterprise. The stewardship approach described within this ESS reflects the applicants' developing understanding of the holding during their first year of occupation and the management decisions that have flowed from that understanding.

5. Conclusion

The applicants' first year of occupation has provided the opportunity to develop a progressively more detailed understanding of the ecological characteristics of Oak Court Farm through continued observation, routine agricultural management, and day-to-day stewardship of the holding.

These observations have demonstrated that the holding supports a diverse and interconnected network of habitats and wildlife, whilst also reinforcing the importance of maintaining and strengthening existing ecological connectivity across the site. More significantly, they have informed a series of practical management decisions that seek to integrate productive agricultural use with the protection, enhancement, and long-term stewardship of the holding's ecological value.

This ESS has described the stewardship approach that has developed during the applicants' first year of occupation and the manner in which ecological understanding has informed management decisions across the holding. Together with the accompanying GIBS and Annex XII: Ecological Baseline & Supporting Evidence, it provides further context regarding the applicants' evidence-based understanding of the site and the stewardship principles that have guided its management.

Taken together, these observations demonstrate that ecological stewardship at Oak Court Farm has developed as an iterative process informed by continued familiarity with the land, routine agricultural management, and adaptive decision-making.

Whilst the observations presented do not constitute a formal ecological survey, they establish an ecological baseline that provides the evidence upon which the stewardship approach described within this Statement has been developed.