Athlone House

Athlone House,
Hampstead Lane, London N6:

Play house

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report assesses the implications in terms of biodiversity, historic landscape/Conservation Area and trees to accompany the planning application of a proposal for a play house located in the northern part of the grounds forming Athlone House, off Hampstead Lane, London.

Background

1.2 The grounds of Athlone House are subject to the following designation:

Highgate Conservation Area

Hampstead Heath Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation

Outline

1.3 There follows an outline description of the proposals with sections 2-4 covering biodiversity, the Conservation Area and historic landscape, and trees. Each of these sections assesses the likely implications of the proposals and associated mitigation and enhancement. All plans have been included in the Design and Access Statement submitted with the planning application.

1.4 A photo sheet provides illustrations of the site and adjoining area. Appendix I provides the description of Hampstead Heath Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation and Appendix II the tree survey schedule.

Description of the proposed play house area

1.5 The play house would form a small wooden platformed structure raised above the ground by some 1.5m as described in the Design and Access Statement (Drawing 102 revD). The main part of the house would have a pointed cedar shingle roof that would extend to a height of c.6m above ground level. Access into the play house would be by way of a spiral stairway on the north east side, and raised walkway with a short rope bridge to the south of the house.

1.6 Play house would be limited to the private use by the residents of Athlone House with access by way of an existing surfaced path into the northern woodland area, and/across an area of grass from the east.

1.7 The small areas of ground immediately under points of access around the play house and associated play structures would be mulched with wood chip.

1.8 Lighting would be installed inside the main play house and around the deck with power taken off an existing nearby service cable. External lighting would be downfacing of low laminar and/or small LED lights round the decking (Drawing 103 rev. B).

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2 BIODIVERSITY

Introduction

2.1 A phase one ecological survey was undertaken of the application site on 17 June 2020.

Biological records

2.2 The application site forms a very small area (460m2) of the northern part of the grounds of Athlone House located within the north eastern corner of Hampstead Heath Site of Metropolitan Nature Conservation Importance (site number M072, total c.318ha), a non-statutory designation for a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI) (Appendix I). The SNCI forms a unique mix of semi-natural and formal habitats, including ancient woodland, relict acid grassland and a small wet flush.

2.3 Previous surveys (Catherine Bickmore Associates 2016a) associated with planning applications for the restoration of the house and grounds of Athlone House are the most recent for the site. These have occasionally recorded species of bat foraging or commuting across the grounds included brown long eared, noctules, Leisler's bats, soprano pipistrelles, Nathusius' pipistrelle and Myotis bat (including Daubenton's).

2.4 Hedgehog have been recorded within the grounds including on grassland. Shrubberies, wood piles and leaf piles are beneficial for hedgehog. They hibernate over the winter period from November to April making use of woodpiles and compost heaps.

2.5 A breeding population of grass snake was primarily associated around the edges of the grassland lawn to the west, and to the north of Athlone House, with a recent 2019 sighting along the eastern end of the southern drive. Frogs and common toad were also recorded near the pond by the western boundary of the property.

2.6 A tawny owl (amber listed bird species) and a little owl were heard during the bat surveys, and a green woodpecker was seen in the grounds. Bird boxes have been provided in the wider grounds to attract BAP species (NERC Section 41 list) such as dunnock, house and tree sparrow, and London BAP species such as starling, together with swift, an amber-listed species.

Site description

2.7 The application site is located between the northern extension of Athlone House and the eastern edge of a wooded area just off a historic (restored) path providing access through the wooded area.

2.8 The gently sloping ground along the edge of the grassland(photo1) had provided pedestrian access during the construction period and at the time of the survey was currently bare ground scheduled for the re instatement of acid grassland. Also, the ground between the cedar and the birch is scheduled for the establishment of additional acid grassland (in the autumn 2020).

2.9 Trees on the edge of the wooded area included a large cedar, a small group of mainly immature holly (photo 4) and a small group of young oak and birch around a mature birch tree (photo 7) (see tree survey section). To the east of the wooded area a retained earth bank was more ornamental in character with a mature sycamore, false acacia and yew tree. There was significant ivy cover within the canopies of the sycamore and false acacia. The area under the tree canopies on the wooded edge and earth bank was mainly bare ground with some leaf /needle litter and patches of ivy. Wood dock was locally frequent and there were rare occurrences of creeping bent, false acacia suckers and soft grass. There was evidence of (dead leaves) of ornamental bulbs on the bank.

2.10 A large oak (photo 12) with an extensive canopy and some veteran features together with a horizontal (fallen) moribund hawthorn were located to the south of the application site. These

were deliberately avoided, in particular on account of ‘pressures’ to remove decaying overhanging branches.

2.11 The application area was unlikely to form critical habitat for protected species previously recorded in the grounds. The wooded edge provides a sheltered foraging area for bat as part of the wider area.

2.12 The area has some conservation interest as a very small part of the Hampstead Heath Site of Metropolitan Nature Conservation Importance however the habitat present is not a critical component to the overall designation.

Assessment

2.13 The play house structures and adjacent area would retain all existing significant trees (Blue Forest 2020). The foot print of the play house would be relatively small, raised above the existing ground by around 1.5m enabling penetration of light below the platforms. Other than the loss of a small group of holly trees there would minimal implications to existing vegetation with minimal loss of the habitat or structure. However, there would be a small loss c 5-10m2 allocated for the re-establishment of acid grassland. Additional play equipment (wooden train and swing) would be positioned just to the north east of the play house itself along the foot of an earth bank.

2.14 During the construction period heras fencing would define the edge of the working area to limit potential effects to the acid grassland and trees (as described in section 4). The majority of works would be undertaken by hand with materials transported by small machinery.

2.15 It is unlikely that there would be indirect effects to protected species recorded in the grounds. The proposed lighting would be very low level and unlikely to significantly affect species such as bat.

2.16 In line with planning policies and by means of enhancement planting of locally occurring native woodland edge shrubs and vernal species would be undertaken on the retained northern bank for example species such as hazel, bluebell, foxglove, primrose, wood anemone, wood melick. Any suckers of false acacia would be removed as part of on-going management. The arisings from the felled hollies would be used to establish a log pile as natural protection of the nearby moribund hawthorn to the south and providing dead wood habitat with added benefit for invertebrate and hedgehog populations.

Conclusion

2.17 In line with planning policies the play house and associated structures would result in minimal implications for integrity of Hampstead Heath Site of Metropolitan Nature Conservation Importance with a neutral to minor biodiversity gain created by the addition of locally occurring native woodland shrubs and vernal species, and log piles.

3 HIGHGATE CONSERVATION AREA AND HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

Background

3.1 The grounds of Athlone House are located within the Highgate Conservation Areas and form a local heritage asset. The historic landscape is of significance including structures relating to works by Pulham, Milner, Jeykll and Guthrie (Catherine Bickmore Associates 2016). The amenity landscape has been re furbished within the historical and ecological framework to meet the requirements of the occupier and following planning conditions.

3.2 The application area would be located on the eastern edge of the northern wooded area off set from the nearby historic woodland path (re-laid).

Assessment of effects

3.3 The play house has been located to be contained on the edge of the northern wooded area . Wider views of the play house structures would be limited to the immediate area and unlikely to have any implications in terms of the known historic landscape significance of the grounds of Athlone House.

3.4 There would be minimal implications to either the Highgate Conservation Area or the local heritage asset or the historic landscape structure.

4 TREE SURVEY

Introduction

4.1 A tree quality survey was undertaken in 17 June 2020 incorporating trees within the play area to inform decisions on tree retention and protection measures relating to proposals. The survey was undertaken to accompany the planning application.

Method

4.2 The tree quality survey was undertaken from ground level with a visual inspection of trees from all sides where accessible. A pro forma (Appendix II) was completed recording measurements of the physical characteristics, and assessing tree quality and condition following recommendations in BS5837: 2012. This information enabled an assessment of the tree retention category as set out in Table 1 of BS 5837:2012. The values inevitably include an element of subjectivity.

4.3 To calculate the root protection area the girths were measured using a calliper and in accordance with the procedures set out in the BS 5873:2012. The survey used the topographical survey for measurements relating to tree location, height and average spread. It is likely that there are minor differences to these original measurements.

Assessment

4.4 An assessment was made of the implications to the trees of the likely temporary and permanent construction works relating to the construction and use of the play house with recommendations for tree protection measures forming part of the preliminary tree protection plan.

4.5 The survey area is contained within the Highgate Conservation Area which means that trees with a trunk diameter of 75mm or greater at a height of 1.5m are protected and require consent to undertake any works not approved by planning consent.

Constraints

4.6 The survey was undertaken from ground level on 17 June 2020, a fine dry sunny day. Survey work was subject to seasonal and access conditions reflecting the conditions on site at the time of the survey.

Description

4.7 The site is located near the northern boundary of the grounds on the edge of a wooded area alongside grassland. The area alongside the edge of the grassland was used as a pedestrian access track during the construction period of the restored house. The access track, along with a wider currently bare area is scheduled to be restored to acid grassland. A surfaced historic path passes through the site dividing the area allocated for the play house from a bank where other play equipment would be sited. The bank is retained by a wall close to the boundary of the property.

4.8 A total of 13 trees were included in the survey. Of these one was allocated grade A quality with three as grade B and the remainder grade C.

4.9 The mature cedar no 2654 (photo1,2,3,5) had a lopsided canopy to the west. Significant branch drop in 2011 and subsequently from storm damage has resulted in a lopsided crown. Tree works were undertaken to cut back the split branches to the trunk. The canopy included low lying branches on the east over the grass (photo 1). It has been allocated a Category B retention class.

4.10 To the immediate south of the cedar 2654 under the canopy were a group of four holly trees no 2655-2658 (photo 3,4). The largest no. 2655 was classified as mature with 2656 as immature and the other two as early mature. All the trees had cleared trunks to 3/4m in height. Other than 2656 the trunks lent out likely to be on account of suppression by the cedar. They were all allocated a grade C retention class.

4.11 To the south west of the cedar was a group comprising a mature birch no 2664 with a smaller birch and two oak all exhibiting signs of suppression and with slight leans (photo 6,7). The birch no 2664 had an un even lower level canopy with branches mostly absent on the north side. The tree provided a feature along the edge of the grassland and was allocated a grade B retention class. Within the canopy spread of the mature birch the nearby other birch no 2678 was a small, young tree of no significance. The suppressed oak no 2668 was early mature and had a significant cover of ivy with bark damage to a lower limb. The other oak no 2669 also under the mature birch canopy was young and of no significance.

4.12 To the north west of the birch group was a large mature oak no. 2636 (photo 12)with a dbh of 1m, had an extensive canopy spread (to 14 m to the east). It included some veteran features and was allocated a grade A retention category under the applying cultural/ecological criteria.

4.13 On the retained bank to the north side of the historic path and considered outside the main wooded area were three mature trees with trunks all slightly leaning in a southerly direction: a yew no 2646, sycamore no. 2647 and false acacia no 2658 (photo 9). The yew no. 2646 had a low fork with its canopy nearly extending to the sloping ground on the southern/eastern sides. It was allocated a grade C retention class. A large sycamore no 2647 with a dbh of 1m was allocated retention class B. It was growing close to the edge of the retaining wall and included significant ivy cover in the canopy. The canopy extended some 10m to the south, Dead wood included some of the lower branches to the south (photo 10,11). The adjacent false acacia no 2658 also had significant ivy cover with some dead wood in the canopy was allocated grade C retention class.

4.14 Drawing playhouse plan 102 rev D shows the arboricultural retention quality and the calculated root protection area (RPA). The implication of the works to the trees are described below with recommendations as to protection measures and necessary tree works.

Assessment and recommendations

4.15 The proposals have been positioned to avoid the majority of the canopy of oak 2668 and also the moribund hawthorn further south. Other than the group of four holly trees to the southern side of the cedar, the play house has been positioned to retain all the significant trees.

4.16 The main part of the play house would be set off the woodland path, positioned on the eastern side of the cedar trunk no 2654, an area with relatively little over hanging branches. However, there would be a need to raise the canopy on the east side of the tree by some 3m for clearance of the rope walk affecting one low lying branch. The decking of the raised structure including walkway at a height of c 1.5-2m above ground would positioned c 15cm away from the trunk itself. The overall height of the play house itself would extend to peak of 6m above ground level. The structures would be secured in the ground by augured foundation posts 70mm diameter to a depth of 90cm that would limit the contact within the root protection area. The precise position of the individual posts would be adjusted on site to avoid affecting large roots. Woodchip mulch would be laid to a minimum depth of c.50mm around the area at the base of the slide to reduce potential effects of wear and ground compaction.

4.17 A raised rope walkway would connect the play house with the satellite deck constructed round the trunk of birch tree no 2663 at a deck height of 2.2m. above ground. It would be separated from the trunk by a small gap of c 10cm. fitted with a rope. The structure would incorporate the lower small south westerly branch of the birch into the platform. The lower easterly branch of oak 2669 would be retained also. The augered foundations for the platform would located within the RPA of the birch and nearby trees together with the ramp. The area around the ramp would be covered with a minimum 50mm depth of wood chip to reduce potential ground compaction and wear.

4.18 Other play equipment associated with the play house include a swing, wooden static train set and a small sand pit. These would be located to the north east of the playhouse at the base of the bank. The sand pit would be on the edge of the overlapping RPAs of the sycamore and false acacia with minimal implications. The train and swing set would be located on the lower part of the bank some 5-6m to the south of these two trees. The swing would have augured foundation posts. A layer of woodchip bark would be localised around the footprint of the bases of both the swing and the train set. In the case of the swing the woodchip would be contained. Deadwood on the southerly overhanging limb of the sycamore would be removed with minimal implications.

4.19 At completion of the structure in localised areas where there is ground access to the play equipment, mulch would be laid at a depth of c 50mm to reduce localized areas of potential compaction.

4.20 The construction works would be undertaken by a small specialist team mostly be hand with minimal use of driven machinery.

4.21 The following recommendations form a preliminary tree protection plan based on available information on the design, and the construction methods (Blue Forest 2020a).

4.22 Tree protection barriers would be in accordance with BS 5837:2012. This provides guidance as to the type of fencing (figure 2): weld mesh panels fixed onto a scaffold framework with all-weather exclusion notice. The protective barriers would limit the extent of the working area such that it extended no further than the red line application area. On account of the works Drawing playhouse plan 102 rev D on Design and Access statement shows the tree survey superimposed onto the development proposals. It shows the theoretical tree root retention area RPA based on the BS calculation of 12 times the dbh at 1.5m (or otherwise for several stems as per BS 5837: 2012).

4.23 As part of the future contract documents it is recommended that a tree and acid grassland protection plan should locate the positions of the protective barrier fencing. Fencing should be erected prior to the commencement of the start of works. The fenced off tree protection /acid grassland areas should only be entered for essential works.

4.24 In most instances retained trees would be located away from areas likely to be affected by the construction works. In vulnerable locations around the cedar and birch the extent of the root damage can be minimised by supervision of the augured foundations by an arboriculturalist. No storage of materials would take place within the working area with the only stored materials relating to the requirements of the work on the day (other materials would be stored by the cottage).

4.25 Limited tree works would comprise localised crown raising and dead wooding and would be in accordance with recommendations given in BS 3998:2010 tree work-recommendations and be undertaken by a specialist arboriculture contractor.

4.26 Planting of native shrubs is proposed to the northern bank to reinforce the extension of the wooded area.

4.27 The limited domestic use of the play house and localised mulching means that any significant ground compaction within the root protection areas under would be unlikely.

Conclusion

4.28 The play house would retain all significant trees within the application area and with the implementation of recommendations would have limited implications with some supplementary planting on the adjacent bank area.

REFERENCES

Blue Forest (2020) Design and Access statement

Blue Forest (2020a) Construction method statement

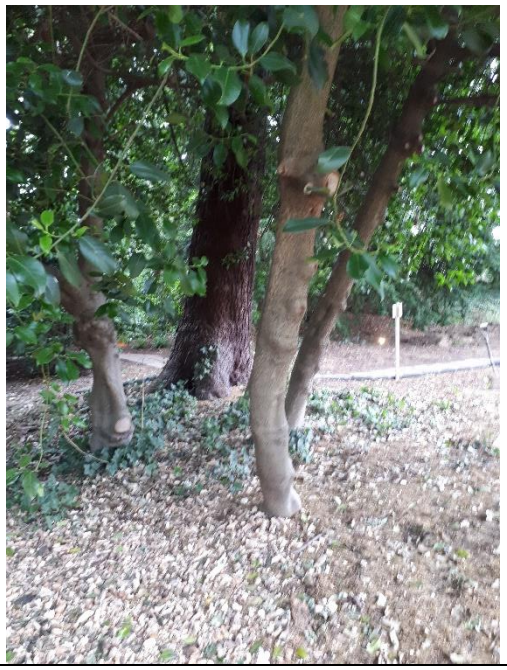
British Standard (2012) BS 5837: 2012 Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction-Recommendations.

British Standard (2010) BS 3998:2010 Tree work: Recommendations

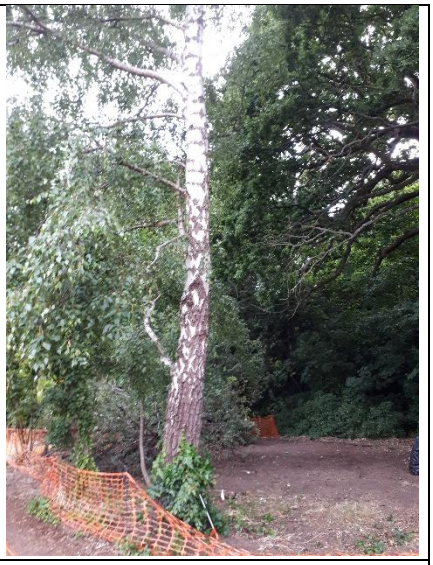
Catherine Bickmore Associates, (2016) Historic landscape appraisal for Athlone House, Hampstead Lane, London N6.

Catherine Bickmore Associates (2016a) Ecological survey & appraisal for Athlone House, Hampstead Lane, London N6.

Nature Conservancy Council (1990) Handbook for Phase 1 habitat survey – a technique for environmental audit. NCC

	
1. View from house terrace showing general location for playhouse on edge of acid grassland towards showing birch and cedar tree	2.Cedar no 2654 in relation to historic woodland path
	
3. Cedar no 2654 with four hollies no 2655-2658 (to be removed)	4. Group of hollies no 2655-2658 viewed from south side with cedar trunk behind

5. Cedar no 2654



6. Birch no 2663

7. Birch no. 2663 by edge of grassland

8. Bank area to far side of path: location for wooden train set and swing

9. View towards sycamore and false acacia on bank no. 2647 & 2658

10. Sycamore no. 2647

	
11.Sycamore no. 2647 die back in lower over hanging branch to be removed	12. Large oak no. 2636 to south west- avoided

APPENDIX I: HAMPSTEAD HEATH SITE OF METROPOLITAN NATURE CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE

Approximately 2ha of the western part of the grounds of Athlone House form the north eastern corner of Hampstead Heath Site of Metropolitan Nature Conservation Importance (SNIC) (site number M072, total c.318ha), a non-statutory designation for a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI). The SNCI is designated as it forms a unique mix of semi-natural and formal habitats, including ancient woodland, relict acid grassland (noted as containing pignut and heath bedstraw) and a small wet flush. Part of the Athlone House grounds are included on the basis of relict acid grassland found within the lawns (noted as containing sheep's sorrel and heath bedstraw) which extends the habitats found within the adjacent Heath, and also the mature trees and shrubs such as oaks, horse chestnut and sweet chestnut are mentioned as contributing to the interest of the area (Waite et al 1990).

APPENDIX II: TREE SURVEY SCHEDULE