

Statement of Case from John Meed: the Cambridge South East Transport project

This *Statement of Case* is in response to the proposed *Cambridge South East Transport* project (CSET) put forward by Cambridgeshire County Council and the Greater Cambridge Partnership. I will not focus on the broader issues raised by the busway (notably the rail option and alternative route along the A1307) but will limit my comments to the impact on biodiversity of the two fields crossed between Francis Crick Avenue and Granham's Road (as shown in Figure 3.5 on page 23 of the *Environmental Statement Volume 2: Main Report*).

I have for the last thirteen years conducted ecological surveys of the arable fields around Nine Wells and White Hill, including the two fields that will be crossed by the busway. My study has shown that the fields support unusually good populations of threatened farmland birds, in particular 12–18 pairs of **grey partridge** (which declined by 93% between 1970 and 2018 and are now classified as '*vulnerable to extinction*' in the UK); 8–11 pairs of **corn bunting** and 1–3 **yellow wagtail** (which have declined respectively by 89% and 68% and are now classified as '*near threatened*'); as well as **yellowhammer**, **skylark** and **linnet**, also '*red-listed*'. There are also **brown hare** and **water vole**, and butterflies, dragonflies, bees and other invertebrates. See my most recent *report*, attached.

The two fields north of Granham's Road support an important proportion of these species:

- grey partridge (3–5 pairs, 3–5 autumn / winter family groups with 16–34 individuals)
- corn bunting (typically 4 territories)
- yellow wagtail (1 pair)
- skylark (10–18 pairs)
- yellowhammer (4–5 pairs)
- linnet (up to 8 pairs)
- up to 10 brown hares (and water voles in Hobson's Brook).

Clearly, the proposed busway route would cause considerable disruption to these important populations of threatened species, especially during construction. If the inquiry rules that the proposed busway should still cross these fields, this *Statement of Case* suggests changes to the plans that would help provide some mitigation of the project's impact under the following headings:

- The construction phase
- The hedgerow
- The rabbit fence
- The planting mix for the enhanced grass margin

The construction phase

The *Environmental Statement Volume 2: Main Report* describes the construction phase:

- Page 20 sets out two phases of construction that will affect the two fields (I and J, right). Phase J is scheduled to take place over months 1–5 of the project and Phase I over months 4–12. This means that during a twelve month period, including at least one breeding season, the lives of the farmland wildlife using the two fields will be severely disrupted.
- The small field nearest to the Nine Wells LNR has been identified as ‘temporary land required for construction compound and material storage’ and ‘Compound 7’ (page 23). It is unclear when this area will be dismantled: after 5 months, 12 months, or later. There is a further ‘Compound 6’ close to Granham’s Road.



This raises a number of issues:

- If construction in either field were to begin after the start of the breeding season this would put skylark nests at risk, and also possibly nests of grey partridge, corn bunting and yellow wagtail. All four species are ground-nesting birds.
- Even if construction begins outside the breeding season it will reduce the number of nesting sites available.
- These problems would be exacerbated if construction covered two breeding seasons.
- Outside the breeding season construction will reduce the land available, notably for autumn/ winter family groups of grey partridge as well as skylark and finch flocks.
- I question whether it is necessary to use the whole of the small field close to Nine Wells for Compound 7. In addition to a loss of habitat for farmland wildlife there is a risk of impacts on the Nine Wells LNR and Hobson’s Brook.

Effective planning and delivery can help control some of the risks:

- Establish the margin strip between the busway and the hedge in Phase I before construction starts to provide shelter, food and cover for wildlife.
- Ensure that construction of each phase is completed on time.
- Restrict Compound 7 to the area currently used by Murphy for a similar purpose as part of the Cambridge South station development. This is a smaller area, and farmland wildlife has had time to adapt to the disruption. *Note* that the fenced grassland habitat on the south bank of the Addenbrookes Road bridge is important for flora (including pyramidal orchids) and invertebrates (including small copper and brown argus butterflies) and should not be damaged.
- Dismantle Compounds 6 and 7 as soon as possible once construction of Phases I and J respectively is complete.

The hedgerow

While I recognise the importance of tree planting, this has to be in the right place. Page 10 of *Appendix 2.2 LEMP* offers two hedgerow options: 'New hedgerow' and 'New hedgerow with trees' which includes large trees such as oak. Then pages 23 and 24 (also in the *Proposed Site Plans – Volume 2* Pages 3 and 4), which cover the stretch from Francis Crick Avenue to Granham's Road, indicate the 'New hedgerow with trees' option. This standard option should be reconsidered.

The evidence and guidance from key organisations all underlines that it would definitely be better for the arable birds – and especially grey partridge – to plant a hedgerow without, or with fewer, smaller, trees:

- The RSPB guidance *Farming for Birds: Grey Partridge* states 'Avoid planting trees and do not increase the height of hedgerows above 2 metres in areas used by nesting partridge.'
- The GWCT guidance *Providing nesting cover for wild grey partridges* states 'Hedges with more than 10 trees per kilometre of hedge are avoided because they contain too many look-out posts for birds of prey, crows and magpies.'
- The Working for Wildlife guidance *Conserving the Grey Partridge* states 'Keep the hedge trimmed (preferably after the berry crop has finished) to under six foot in height to avoid them being used as lookout posts by avian predators.'
- Francis Buner, Head of the Interreg North Sea PARTRIDGE project, and one of Europe's leading grey partridge experts commented: 'I would not recommend planting any trees'.

My own observations also suggest that the grey partridge prefer 2 metre hedgerows – most notably the one that runs along the field that will be crossed by the busway. So the 'New hedgerow' option is much preferable and large trees such as oak should be avoided – species such as crab apple, wild pear, walnut or service tree would be preferable.

The rabbit fence

It is difficult to be certain about the impact of a busway on farmland wildlife as research is limited. However, research into other infrastructure projects shows that they can disrupt movement and lead to habitat fragmentation, and it is important to avoid increasing these risks.

The diagrams on pages 24–25 of *Appendix 2.2 LEMP* specify a rabbit fence for this section of the busway, rather than a timber post and rail fence.

A good number of brown hares and other farmland wildlife regularly move between these fields and neighbouring fields raising the question of whether a rabbit fence might create an obstacle to this movement. It would reduce impact of the busway if the fence (if necessary) can be crossed, in particular by brown hare.

The planting mix for the enhanced grass margin

I welcome the proposed enhanced grass margin and am confident that it will be positive for the wildlife in the area. The *HF02: Wild bird seed mixture* would be good but I'm conscious that it is again the standard option across the project. It may be worth considering other options; for example, *AB9: Winter bird food* has been used with success on a 4 hectare plot on White Hill where the mixes have included cereals (such as millet, barley or oats), brassicas (such as kale, which provides good cover), and other seed-bearing plants. In the winter of 2020-21 it held almost 40 grey partridge, and in late 2023 attracted up to 60 linnets as well as yellowhammers, meadow pipits and larks.

There are several other alternatives such as the *Advanced partridge mix* (picture right) and *Grey partridge mix* from the local seed producer (just outside Huntingdon) Oakbank (<https://oakbankgc.co.uk/products/gwct-mixes/>) which are long-lasting and good for invertebrates and pollinators as well as farmland birds.



Although mixes like this may be more expensive to establish, they would have longer-term benefits.

John Meed, June 2025

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Attachment: Meed, J (2025) *The value of green belt south of Cambridge to populations of farmland birds* (2024): *Report of a 13-year study*