Swift Bricks – the 'universal' nest brick

The purpose of this document is to:

- outline emerging evidence that integrated nestboxes, commonly known as 'swift bricks', are significantly more effective for sparrows than sparrow bricks and terraces, whilst also providing nesting opportunities for swifts and a range of other small birds;
- propose that swift bricks are specified as 'universal' nest bricks for small cavity-nesting birds;
- highlight the significant advantages of integrated nest bricks over external nestboxes;
- provide examples of good practice for the level of nest brick provision in new developments.

The article '*The Swift – A Bird You Need to Help!*' in issue 104 June 2019 of CIEEM bulletin '*In Practice*' (https://cieem.net/resource/the-swift-a-bird-you-need-to-help/) highlights the plight of the swift and provides practical solutions to help save this amazing bird, at the same time as benefiting other small endangered bird species.

Photos courtesy of Hugh Hastings and the Duchy of Cornwall

House sparrows nesting in swift bricks

The Government has recognised and supports the need to build more houses but with due regard for biodiversity[1], and swift bricks are specifically highlighted in national planning guidance as providing important benefits to wildlife[2].

The current consultation regarding the planning process in England refers frequently to advice from the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission's report '*Living With Beauty*' which recommends: *'Bricks for bees and birds in new build homes'* [3].

With funding stretched for Local Authorities (LAs), the reports provided by ecologists have an important role in the ecological mitigation and enhancement conditions set by LAs for developers. This knowledge can be enhanced by using the more specialist expertise of the many voluntary nature groups we are lucky enough to have in the UK.

Swifts, for example, only visit the UK for the summer months and are therefore often not present when an ecological survey is undertaken. Even if the survey is undertaken in the brief period they are here, they are elusive birds who enter and leave their nest sites, in the nooks and crannies of buildings, in the blink of an eye and so nest sites are very easy to overlook.

Swift conservation groups have been observing for some time now that house sparrows often nest in integral swift bricks. In fact, they appear to prefer them to the frequently specified sparrow terraces.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2
[2] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment
[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-with-beauty-report-of-the-building-better-building-beautiful-commission

Studies are now showing that these observations are representative and that swift bricks are also occupied by other small bird species, and so provide a successful practical biodiversity enhancement in line with government planning policy.

The case for integral swift bricks as a 'universal' brick

- The house sparrow is a red-listed species which results in sparrow bricks and terraces being a popular choice of nesting provision. Installing integral 'universal' swift bricks instead not only increases the chance of them being used very quickly, but also increases the number of species being given a helping hand.
- Sparrows, like swifts, are colonial birds. Observation of their nesting habits has shown that not only do they prefer swift bricks, but that very few sparrow terraces are occupied by more than one pair, possibly because the entrance holes are too close together.
- Swifts are unable to use sparrow bricks and terraces.
- Evidence is now emerging from studies being undertaken at various sites across the country showing that swift bricks are being used by a variety of small birds and could be described as a 'universal' brick for small building-dependent species. This link is to a press release from a Duchy of Cornwall site that is in its second year of collecting data: https://nansledan.com/nansledan-residents-asked-to-help-with-bird-box-survey/
- Swifts, house sparrows, house martins, blue tits, great tits, starlings and nuthatches have all been recorded nesting in swift bricks.
- This is particularly good news for the red-listed house sparrow and starling as well as the amber-listed swift, expected to be red-listed at the next review. All three species are undergoing major decline caused by the loss of nesting sites on existing buildings due to re-roofing and replacement of soffits and fascias. Swifts, for example, have experienced a catastrophic decline of nearly 60% in the last 20 years.
- It is also very good news for developers as it means that one brick type will provide a very cost-effective ecological enhancement for a variety of bird species.
- Bricks are very easy to include in routine building practices resulting in an inexpensive biodiversity enhancer with the nest site confined within the brick with no access to the roof space.

Integral Bricks v External Boxes

- more aesthetically pleasing
- maintenance free
- long lasting
- less prone to predation
- less prone to temperature variations

Photos courtesy of Hugh Hastings and the Duchy of Cornwall, Dick Newell, and Clive Cooper

House martins (L) and swifts (C & R) nesting in swift bricks




Photos courtesy of Arc Consulting Photos courtesy of Tanya Hoare

From left to right: a blue tit emerging from a swift brick; a great tit about to enter a swift brick; a Schwegler Type 25 swift brick, its entrance narrowed with mud by a nesting nuthatch; a starling at the entrance hole of a swift brick with a house sparrow showing a keen interest.

Examples of the level of nesting provision in new developments

A ratio of at least 1:1 nest bricks per dwelling is generally accepted now as good practice – a level of provision outlined in the award-winning Exeter City Council '*Residential Design Guide SPD'* (2010)[4]. The RSPB South West Regional Office has been working with Exeter Planners over a period of 10 years on the implementation of the biodiversity requirements of this guide, and there is acceptance that in many cases the most suitable box type for cavity nesting birds is the swift brick.

A similar standard was adopted by the Town and Country Planning Association and the Wildlife Trusts in *'Planning for a Healthy Environment - Good Practice for Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity'* (2012)[5], and by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in '*Designing for Biodiversity'* (2013)[6].

The Duchy of Cornwall adopted the same principles in 2015, and a good example of the provision of a general type of integral box for all cavity nesting birds is the Nansledan development by The Duchy of Cornwall in Newquay[7].

The Cornwall Council '*Planning for Biodiversity Guide'* (2018)[8] states prescriptive measures for the provision of bat and bird boxes, again at the rate of 1 nest place per new dwelling. This document also includes a case study on Nansledan mentioned above.

The Oxford City Council '*Technical Advice Note 8 – Biodiversity'* [9] states an '*expected provision'* of bird nest sites for building-dependent birds (e.g. swifts) at a rate of 1 per house and 1 per 2 flats, with separate provision for bats at a rate of 1 per 5 houses. Provision of such nest boxes in schools, student accommodation and hotels is addressed by a ratio of 1 per 250 m^2 floor space.

From 1st June 2020, Brighton & Hove City Council have conditioned swift nest boxes (to be integral bricks wherever practical) in all new developments that are five metres high or above; e.g. for smaller developments a minimum of three boxes, or two per residential dwelling, or one per 50sqm of commercial floor space, whichever is the greater.[10] [11] [12]

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[4] https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4CpCORtOQdTRTNYSENnUXdoNTQ/view

[5] https://www.sustainabilitywestmidlands.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Planning_for_a_healthy_environment_report.pdf

[6] Gunnell, K., Murphy, B. and Williams, C., Designing for Biodiversity: A technical guide for new and existing buildings, RIBA Publishing & Bat Conservation Trust (2013)

[7] https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/rspb-news/news/stories/the-duchy-of-cornwall-giving-swifts-a-home/

[8] https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/38341273/biodiversity-guide.pdf

[9] https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/6219/technical_advice_note_8_-_biodiversity

[10] https://new.brighton-hove.gov.uk/news/2020/helping-swifts-find-safe-haven-brighton-hove

[11] https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/sites/brighton-hove.gov.uk/files/Swift%20Guidance.pdf

[12] https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/sites/default/files/migrated/article/inline/Proposed%20Submission%20City%20Plan%20Part%20Two%20April%2025%202020%20PRINTERSa.pdf (DM37 paragraph 2.281, pages 114-115)

Appendix

Swift bricks in the national planning context

- **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2019)**[13] states: *"Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by: ...minimising impacts on and providing **net gains in biodiversity**..."* (Section 170d).

- **National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG, 2019)**[14] states: *"…relatively small features can often achieve important benefits for wildlife, such as incorporating '**swift bricks**' and bat boxes in developments and providing safe routes for hedgehogs between different areas of habitat"* (Natural Environment**,** Paragraph 023, Reference ID: 8-023-20190721).

- **Living With Beauty (Government's Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, 30/01/20)**[15] recommends: *"**Bricks** for bees and **birds** in new build homes"* (Policy Proposition 33, page 110).

- **Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government press release (21/07/19)**[16] stated: *"For the first time the government has set out its expectations on how developers can protect specific species, including using 'hedgehog highways' and hollow **swift bricks** – which are installed into the walls of new build homes, allowing the birds to nest safely. This follows public interest for protecting these much-loved animals, with one petition receiving support from over half a million people."*

- **Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006**[17] states: *"Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, **to the purpose of conserving biodiversity**"* (Section 40).

Useful websites

- **Swift Conservation** - https://www.swift-conservation.org/
- **Action for Swifts** - http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/
- **RSPB** - https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/swift/
- **RSPB Swift Mapper** - https://www.swiftmapper.org.uk/

- **Types of integral nestboxes available** - https://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/p/swift-bricks.html

This document has been issued on behalf of Swifts Local Network, an informal network of over 90 conservation groups in the UK: https://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/p/sln.html.

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[13] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2
[14] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment
[15] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-with-beauty-report-of-the-building-better-building-beautiful-commission
[16] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/brokenshire-orders-house-builders-to-protect-wildlife
[17] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/16/pdfs/ukpga_20060016_en.pdf