

Neighbourhoods FOR NATURE

Giving people a home needn't mean squeezing nature out. Leading the field, in partnership with the RSPB, Barratt Developments is breathing wildlife into new housing. **Adrian Thomas** finds out how.

With RSPB input, Barratt Homes' Kingsbrook development provides a host of wildlife-friendly features, including wildflower verges.





It's autumn 2017, and I'm walking along the edge of some wildlife ponds, dragonflies criss-crossing the open water, red kites drifting overhead, and a flock of linnets feeding in among the grassy margins. I can see a little egret stalking the margins ahead of me.

Yet I'm wearing steel toe-capped boots and hard hat, with a hi-vis vest over my RSPB fleece, for I'm walking through the middle of a housing development under construction. The reason? This is Kingsbrook, just to the east of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, where Barratt Developments has committed to working with the RSPB on the ambitious goal of setting a new standard for wildlife-friendly housing, as part of a groundbreaking national partnership.

Kingsbrook will be on a grand scale, for this is the company's largest development in the UK, due to deliver 2,450 homes. Now, 18 months into this 10-year construction process, it's a good moment to take stock of how well things are progressing.

But first, let's wind back the clock. Any major housing development starts life long before the first brickie arrives on site, so where did Kingsbrook begin? The site had been proposed for development back in the early 2000s, but the local planning authority, Aylesbury Vale District Council, had said no, due to various concerns including wildlife.

However, with housing pressure mounting, a few years later council staff sat down with Barratt to talk about whether a different kind of scheme might be possible. The council's vision was for a nature-friendly development, and they suggested that the RSPB become involved.

We were keen to do so: with a growing national clamour for new houses, solutions are urgently needed to avoid piling more pressure on the UK's already beleaguered wildlife. We also know that people are becoming increasingly divorced from



Clockwise from above: the development map shows plenty of green space; new homes for both humans and wildlife; a nature pond forms a focal point at Oakfield.

nature, despite growing recognition that our quality of life is enhanced by it.

This vision was the start of a wonderful collaboration at Kingsbrook between the council, Barratt and the RSPB. And the project has offered a chance to prove that new housing for us need not always spell bad news for wildlife.

SETTING THE VISION

"We were clear from the start that the wildlife-friendly features at Kingsbrook needed to be achievable in almost any development," explains the RSPB's Kingsbrook project manager, Mike Pollard. "So, over about three years,

we worked with Barratt and the council's ecologists and planners to agree the kind of features that could feasibly be incorporated.

"We also had RSPB field workers undertake wildlife surveys of the site, prior to any diggers moving in. This was important because we want to be able to go back in the future and see how things have changed."

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The first foundations at Kingsbrook were laid in summer 2016, and by early 2018 about 200 houses were already occupied in Oakfield village, the first of what will be Kingsbrook's three villages.





“Any major housing development starts life long before the first brickie arrives on site.”

In and around the new village streets, installation of wildlife-friendly features is well underway. Hundreds of native trees have been planted, as well as the first community orchard. The roadsides are lined with hundreds of metres of new hedging, and there is bat-friendly street lighting.

What really grabs your attention are the swales (shallow channels) and pools, the first elements of what is called the Sustainable Drainage System. These are designed to hold rainwater in storms, but when planted with native vegetation they are ideal for wildlife.

The first roadside verges have also been planted, not with conventional grass but with native wildflowers for bees and butterflies, and there will be native meadows in the parks.

HOMES FOR WILDLIFE

As you might gather, much of Kingsbrook’s value for wildlife will come from the fact that it will include a lot of greenspace – a whopping 60%, and that’s excluding ▶

NATURE-BOOST YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

Whether you live on a new development or well-established street, we’d love you to keep giving nature a home in your own garden... but here are some tips for ways of working beyond your boundary, with others in your community.



ADOPT ABANDONED AREAS

Is there an area in your neighbourhood that is uncared for and could be doing much more for wildlife? Check out our garden feature on page 79, where two different groups of volunteers are turning forgotten areas into rich havens in Dorset.



SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

Post what you’ve seen and done for wildlife onto community Facebook pages or newsletters, tell people what you saw on Big Garden Birdwatch, give wildlife-friendly plants and cuttings to friends and neighbours – it can help spark connections and shared passions.



OPEN HEDGEHOG HIGHWAYS

If you have impenetrable fences, pop round to your immediate neighbours and see if you can come to an agreement to put in some hedgehog highways. All it takes is a 12cm x 12cm hole in a hidden corner of the boundary.



INSPIRE THE PLANNERS

If housing is planned near where you live, write to your local planning authority and inspire them about the simple conditions they could set to ensure the development is wildlife-friendly. You might even like to send them this article!

Coming soon: We are currently revising our Local Planning Packs to help you respond to planning applications, and our Sustainable Housing for People and Nature project will include a checklist for house-buyers.

• 60% greenspace excluding gardens.

• Avenues of trees and green corridors through the built environment.

• Wildflower verges

HOME BUILDING FOR NATURE

Here are some of the thoughtful features that developments like Kingsbrook use to help wildlife thrive alongside residents.

• Amphibian-friendly kerbing

Swift boxes built into homes

• Wildlife-friendly show gardens

• Permeable paving

• Bat boxes and house martin cups on houses

• Hedgehog highways cut under fences

• Fruit trees planted in gardens

Illustration: Chris Shields

▶ gardens. However, we can't expect such generous swathes of greenery with every development, so it is vital that wildlife measures are also incorporated into Kingsbrook's "built environment".

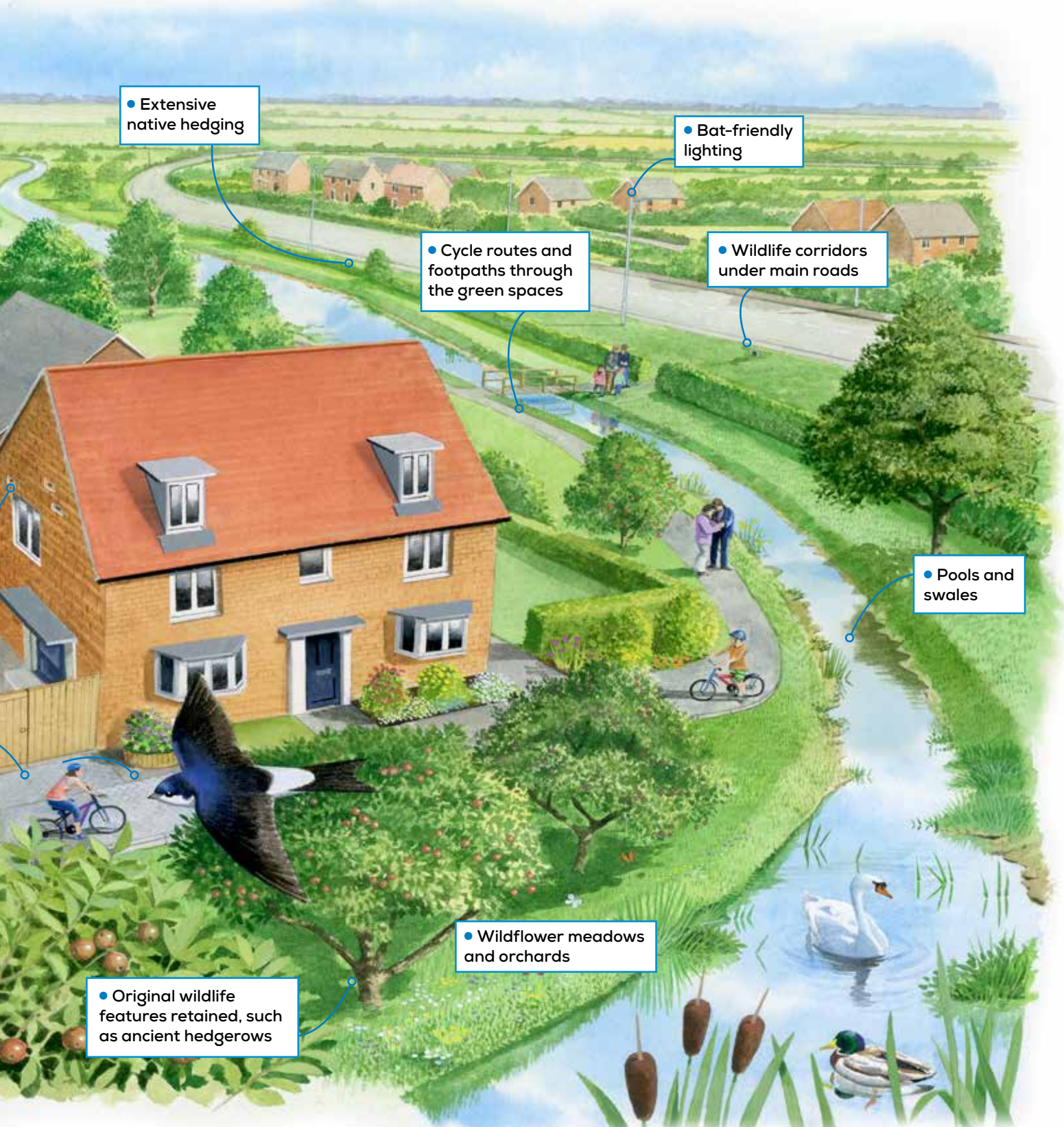
The features include green corridors permeating the built-up areas, but also simple elements such as cutting little holes in the base of fences – so-called 'hedgehog highways' – so that wildlife, including frogs and newts, can move from garden to garden with ease. It sounds easy on paper, but how do you make a hole in hundreds of fences? Barratt came up with the answer: a giant drill-bit that cuts out neat little circles in the fence at ground level in mere seconds.

We also knew we needed to help swifts. This fast-declining species is being lost from old buildings as they are renovated, while new developments just don't have holes they like to use. However, swift nestboxes can be expensive, so the RSPB worked with Barratt, the manufacturing company Manthorpe, and with the experts at Action for Swifts to design a hollow plastic brick that could be built into walls but so that wildlife can't get further into the houses' cavities. This solution is so much cheaper than swift boxes can be incorporated in their hundreds.

ENGAGING THE NEW COMMUNITY

While Kingsbrook is under construction, we can't assume that everyone moving in will understand how glorious it will be once finished. After all, it takes time for trees to grow, for meadows to mature and for wildlife to prosper. So we have been working to help Barratt find ways to inspire new residents about all the measures being taken and how they will evolve and flourish.

The show homes are vital in this. The sales staff have been magnificent,



• Extensive native hedging

• Bat-friendly lighting

• Cycle routes and footpaths through the green spaces

• Wildlife corridors under main roads

• Pools and swales

• Wildflower meadows and orchards

• Original wildlife features retained, such as ancient hedgerows

quickly grasping how Kingsbrook offers something special, in effect a lifestyle choice, and we've been able to provide them with training and materials to guide them. Also, we advised on the design of the wildlife-friendly show home gardens; the sales staff were delighted as the gardens are full of colour. All of this can now be a model for other developments.

Already the new residents are finding plenty to appreciate, as Elaine and Martin McGowan are finding out. "We really enjoy the natural surroundings," says Elaine, "and

our 20 month-old son, Thomas, loves that we have swans and geese swimming just yards away from our home. It makes it a special place to live. We're looking forward to spring and summer, and seeing the trees and flowers grow."

THE HOMEBUILDER'S VIEW

We might be excited about Kingsbrook, but how does Barratt feel about this new approach to homebuilding? I posed the question of their Managing Director for North Thames, Ian Sadler.

"This is absolutely the right thing to be doing," he told me. "We see this as a win-win: the wildlife benefits, our customers benefit, and that has got to be good.

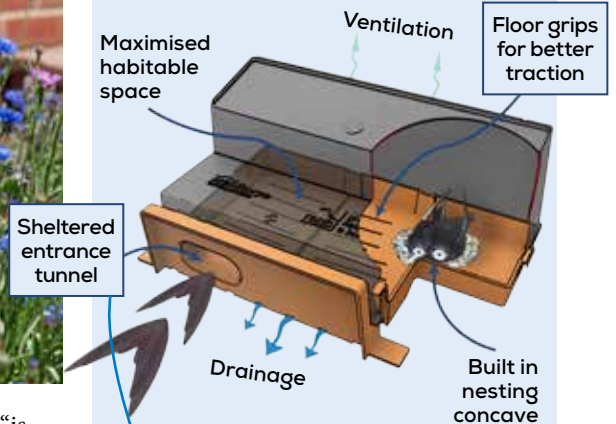
"What has perhaps surprised us is how many of the ideas have so much benefit at little or no extra cost; it is more just a case of changing our ways of working and investing time to train our subcontractors to do the same. We now have our own ecology and landscape design guide called 'Growing with Nature', drawn up in collaboration with the RSPB, and we have ▶

A new homeowner has got in the Kingsbrook spirit, planting wildlife-friendly flowers such as cornflowers and poppies.



INSIDE a swift brick

Barratt has developed a special nest brick, with the help of the RSPB, Manthorpe and Action for Swifts.



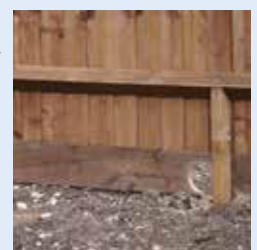
Bat box

External walls include clever provision for roosting bats.



Hedgehog highway

Holes in fences allow hogs to move safely from garden to garden.



► committed to a net positive ecological impact across the company by 2020.

“The results are beginning to speak for themselves, and we are incredibly proud of what we are achieving at Kingsbrook.”

THE WIDER PICTURE

The development of Kingsbrook is timely. With the Government’s ambition to now build 300,000 new houses a year, the RSPB recognises the challenge in delivering the new homes that the country needs.

The bottom line is that, first and foremost, housing must be in the right place; we spend too much of our time objecting to housing developments proposed in the wrong place. For example, our ongoing battle to stop development on the nation’s best breeding site for nightingales at Lodge Hill in Medway, Kent, shows how it can pose the gravest threats to our natural heritage.

“We know there is a need for new housing,” explains our Senior Policy Officer, Juliette Young. “But with this demand comes the opportunity to do things better by looking at how new communities can be built with nature in mind. Our work in Kingsbrook and across the UK with Barratt Homes shows there is a better way, something that works for housebuilders, home owners and nature.”

It is also vital that the lessons learnt at Kingsbrook are quickly disseminated, so we were delighted that it was one of the case studies in the Government’s 25-year Environment Plan, released this January. In autumn 2017, we welcomed the housing minister to Kingsbrook to see the ideas for

himself. As he concluded, the project “is proof that action to increase housing supply can work in harmony with conservation efforts to protect natural habitats”.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Kingsbrook is just the start. Our national partnership with Barratt is going from strength to strength, and a new three-year agreement has just been signed. As well as rolling out ideas from Kingsbrook, we are helping Barratt produce a guide to wildlife-friendly gardening for all its customers, and together we won the BIG Biodiversity Challenge award for the show home garden at its Long Itchington development in Warwickshire. With Barratt, the nation’s biggest housebuilder, building over 17,000 homes each year, the stage is set for us to achieve amazing things for the benefit of wildlife and people, and to inspire nature-friendly development everywhere. ■

FIND OUT MORE

For information on this development, please visit kingsbrook-aylesbury.co.uk



Adrian Thomas is the RSPB’s wildlife gardening expert as well as RSPB project manager, currently leading the #SaveLodgeHill campaign to stop housebuilding destroying the home of endangered nightingales. He also works with the RSPB team to help Barratt build high-quality homes for people and nature.