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# Swift Bricks

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<b>Committee considering report:</b>	Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee
<b>Date of Committee:</b>	17 March 2026
<b>Portfolio Member:</b>	Councillor Denise Gaines
<b>Report Author:</b>	Rachael Lancaster

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## 1 Purpose of the Report

1.1 This report is to provide Members with information relating to Swifts and swift bricks and their use in West Berkshire following the Motion to Council by Cllr David Marsh and Cllr Carolyne Culver.

1.2 The motion states;

*“That Council notes that swifts, one of the oldest species on earth, fly thousands of miles (spending up to three years on the wing) to breed in the UK. Increasingly, they are finding their nesting sites blocked up. Their ancient forests with nest hollows now gone, they rely on cavities in buildings, but these too are disappearing, leaving this iconic creature on the RSPB “red list” of endangered species.*

*Swifts just need a brick with a hole in it to nest. The average two-storey new house contains 20,000 bricks and swift bricks– costing an estimated £30 each – can help save swifts, as well as other small nesting birds. The Labour government, having promised in opposition to incorporate a swift brick nest box into new buildings by law, has reneged on this pledge.*

*Council further notes, however, that a number of local authorities, with all-party support, have adopted policies requiring swift bricks to be included in new developments. These measures have proved popular with residents as well as local wildlife charities.*

*Council therefore resolves that:*

- A) Swift boxes will be installed at suitable Council-owned properties, including providing audio lures to attract breeding pairs, before the next nesting season in May 2026.*
- B) At least 50% of homes on new developments in West Berkshire shall be required to have at least two swift bricks installed. New commercial and industrial developments shall be required to have at least three swift bricks installed per appropriate unit.*
- C) This condition will be attached to all relevant planning permissions for new buildings, in line with Local Plan policy SP11, Biodiversity and Geodiversity, the Council's Environment Strategy (refreshed May 2025), the Berkshire Biodiversity*

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*Strategy, and other initiatives to maintain, restore and increase biodiversity in West Berkshire.*

*D) This is in addition to any biodiversity mitigation or enhancements normally requested through the planning process.”*

- 1.3 The Motion was referred to the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee, for their input before the motion would return to the Executive for debate.
- 1.4 This paper sets out some information about swift boxes and how they can be used to support swift, and other bird, populations.

## 2 Recommendation

- 2.1 The recommendation is that the motion as drafted cannot be supported for the reasons set out in the body of this report.

## 3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
<b>Financial:</b>	There would be a financial implication from the installation of swift boxes on Council owned properties. The feasibility of exploring the installation of Swift nest boxes would have a resource and cost implication as well as the installation of the boxes. The boxes generally cost between £20 and £150 depending on the material, size and mounting design. The technology to add audio lures generally costs between £64 to £120 for the hardware, in addition they require a mains electricity supply. To install these on all existing suitable Council owned buildings would require budget to be allocated for this purpose. There is no available budget for this purpose in the forthcoming financial year 26/27.
<b>Human Resource:</b>	The development of a project to establish suitable council owned buildings and to source a supplier/contractor to install these would require resource allocation. At present there is no capacity for such a project in the forthcoming financial year 26/27.
<b>Legal:</b>	No legal implications
<b>Risk Management:</b>	No risk implications
<b>Property:</b>	Installing swift boxes upon Council properties would likely have wider impacts related to maintenance and longer term costs.

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<b>Policy:</b>	<p>The draft December 2025 National Planning Policy Framework includes a requirement for swift boxes to be included in new developments.</p> <p>Policy SP11 Biodiversity and Geodiversity of the Local Plan Review, while not making specific reference to Swift boxes does require new developments to consider mitigation for wildlife which could include the inclusion of swift boxes.</p> <p>Policy SP7 Quality Design sets out that design proposals could create habitats for locally characteristic species, with opportunities to design wildlife habitats into the fabric of buildings.</p>
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	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
<b>Equalities Impact:</b>				
<b>A</b> Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		No impact on inequality
<b>B</b> Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		No impact on people with protected characteristics
<b>Environmental Impact:</b>	X			Incorporating swift boxes into new developments or Council buildings will benefit the natural environment.
<b>Health Impact:</b>		X		No health impact

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<b>ICT Impact:</b>		X		No ICT impact
<b>Digital Services Impact:</b>		X		No digital services impact
<b>Council Strategy Priorities:</b>	X			The inclusion of swift boxes in new development or council buildings will support Priority Area 3. Tackling the climate and ecological emergency.
<b>Core Business:</b>		X		No impact on core business
<b>Data Impact:</b>		X		No impact on data

<b>Consultation and Engagement:</b>	<p>Planning Service – conditions on planning applications must be justified on a case-by-case basis and pass the national policy tests for conditions. A general requirement for 50% of dwellings would not meet these tests. However, there is a strong existing policy framework and the draft NPPF indicates national policy will strengthen it further. Swift bricks and boxes are a commonly specified biodiversity enhancement and they are routinely sought on development already.</p> <p>Environment Delivery – there is no available budget to support funding of any potential Swift Boxes on Council owned buildings.</p>
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## 4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 This paper responds to a Council motion regarding the increased use of swift bricks in West Berkshire both within Council owned properties and new developments. The paper outlines the ecological need, current policy framework and practical considerations for implementation.
- 4.2 Swifts, a migratory species have experienced a 60% population decline since 1995, mainly due to the loss of traditional nesting sites in older buildings. Swift bricks which provide integral nesting cavities within new or renovate structures offer a cost-effective means of creating long term habitat. They also benefit other declining bird species such as house sparrows, martins and starlings.
- 4.3 National policy support for swift bricks is strengthening. The draft NPPF (2025) explicitly encourages integrated nest boxes for priority species, including swifts. Locally, the West Berkshire Local Plan Review (2023–2041) already requires biodiversity enhancements, though it does not specifically mandate swift bricks. Swift bricks cannot be counted

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toward Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) calculations, as they are considered artificial features. In practice, swift bricks and boxes are already specified in planning consents.

- 4.4 The Motion proposes four actions and a response to each of these is provided below;
- 4.5 Installation of swift boxes on suitable Council-owned buildings by May 2026, potentially including audio lures. It is not feasible to do this within the timeframe specified. This requires careful site selection, budget allocation, and consideration of potential noise impacts, particularly in residential areas. As such, this aspect of the motion cannot be supported.
- 4.6 Requiring swift bricks on new development – aiming for 50% of new homes to include two swift bricks each and commercial/industrial development three swift bricks per unit. To be applied as a condition on new development. It is not possible to apply this as a planning condition on every planning application as it would not meet the national tests for conditions. Each condition must be justified on a case by case basis, however there is a strong existing policy framework and the draft NPPF indicates national policy will strengthen it further. Moreover, Swift bricks and boxes are commonly specified and already routinely sought as a required enhancement on new developments. Whilst, this aspect of the motion cannot be supported, the Local Planning Authority will continue to secure swift bricks and boxes where appropriate and justified and consideration can be given to more specific policy wording through the next Local Plan.

## 5 Supporting Information

### Introduction

- 5.1 A motion was brought to Council in December regarding swift bricks and supporting the use of them in Council-owned properties and in new developments.
- 5.2 This paper sets out the background to swift bricks, and deals with each part of the motion in turn setting out what the Council already does, and what could be done to support the use of Swift bricks in new development and at Council owned buildings.

### Background

- 5.3 Swifts are a migratory bird which travels to the UK from Africa in April, returning in August. The species is classified as Red under the Birds of Conservation Concern 5 (2021). Traditionally swifts would have nested in trees and on cliffs, however, they have adapted to live in the roofs of old buildings. Swifts are site-loyal and typically return to the same nest site each year.
- 5.4 Between 1995 and 2020 swift numbers have decreased by 60% in the UK, with further decline likely due to the loss of nesting sites from the renovation of older buildings, removing cavities and gaps and the build quality and design of modern homes.
- 5.5 Swift bricks are a construction brick which contains a cavity to allow swifts to nest within it. They operate much like a nest box but can be built into the fabric of a building. They are usually installed high on the exterior of building facades, with their design and installation guided by British Standard BS42021:2022. They cost upwards of £25 depending on the specification of the brick.

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- 5.6 Swifts like to nest in loose colonies, with several families nesting close together, and therefore swift boxes, where installed, should be in groups of 2 or 3, at a height of at least 5m above the ground, and between 50cm and 100cm apart, with no obstruction from trees, ladders, creepers or window cleaning gear. Swift Conservation<sup>1</sup> have published a guide on the installation of swift bricks which suggests that typically a house would have two to four boxes, a small block of flats four to ten boxes, with larger infrastructure such as a school, office or warehouse should have between ten and forty depending on the size.
- 5.7 Swift Bricks have also been known to attract a range of wildlife, including house sparrows, house martins, blue tits and starlings. Therefore, the inclusion of them in new development can support a number of different species.

## Planning Policy

- 5.8 The recently published draft NPPF (published for consultation December 2025)<sup>2</sup> includes specific reference to swifts in policy N2 Improving the natural environment:
- para f: *Minimise impacts on biodiversity and include features for species which support priority or threatened species such as swifts, bats and hedgehogs. Development proposals should incorporate integrated nest boxes (commonly known as swift bricks) into their construction unless there are compelling technical reasons which prevent their use or would make them ineffective.*
- 5.9 This shows that there is a government commitment and expectation that swift boxes are included within new development.
- 5.10 The West Berkshire Local Plan Review (2023 – 2041) includes two policies which support the use of swift boxes, Policy SP7 Quality Design and SP11 Biodiversity and Geodiversity. While there is no specific reference to the use of Swift Bricks, there is the requirement to provide habitat mitigation and enhancements as part of development proposals.
- 5.11 The Council currently use the following condition to secure biodiversity measures, which has been used to secure swift bricks:

*The development hereby permitted shall not be occupied until [stipulate the essential matter, e.g. bat boxes, bird boxes, artificial otter holt or badger sett] has been installed/constructed in accordance with details that have first been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.*

*Reason: To ensure biodiversity enhancements are incorporated into the development. This condition is applied in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework, and Policy SP11 of the West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041.*

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<sup>1</sup> Swift Conservation, Leaflet 4 – Swift Nest Bricks – installation and suppliers <https://www.swift-conservation.org/Leaflet%20-%20Swift%20Nest%20Bricks%20-%20installation%20&%20suppliers-small.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6941965758a21370f58f304e/Draft\\_NPPF\\_December\\_2025.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6941965758a21370f58f304e/Draft_NPPF_December_2025.pdf)

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5.12 On 13<sup>th</sup> October 2025 the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs confirmed that Swift bricks cannot be counted towards Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)<sup>3</sup>. BNG only considers natural features (eg. trees, ponds, lowland meadows), and swift bricks (along with features such as bat boxes) are considered artificial, and therefore cannot be counted in the BNG metric.

## Proposals

5.13 The Motion to Council included four proposals:

- A) *Swift boxes will be installed at suitable Council-owned properties, including providing audio lures to attract breeding pairs, before the next nesting season in May 2026.*

5.14 The installation of swift boxes at suitable Council-owned properties is considered to be appropriate. However, it would not be possible to install these before the next nesting season as suitable sites would need to be identified. Further swift nest boxes generally cost between £20 and £150 depending on the material, size and mounting design. The technology to add audio lures generally costs between £64 and £120 for the hardware, in addition they require a mains electricity supply. The Council does not have a budget or resources available to establish the feasibility of a project to achieve this, nor for the purchase and installation of the boxes or the audio lures.

5.15 Audio lures are used to increase the rate of adoption of swift bricks (although it can still take 12 – 24 months for swifts to occupy the bricks) and the noise can result in noise complaints from members of the public. The audio lures require a loudspeaker, ideally mounted inside the nest box, with a mains electricity power supply and a device that holds the MP3 audio file for the swift call. The volume level should be set as loud as a real swift's call; however, it is acceptable if the call is muffled due to coming from inside the nest box. As the calls would introduce a new sound into a neighbourhood, consideration of neighbours would need to be taken into account. While it may be acceptable to play audio calls in office, school or commercial areas, this is less acceptable in residential areas.

5.16 On the basis of the challenges to find appropriate sites, finance and resources, and the risk of disturbance to residents, it is not recommended that swift boxes are installed at suitable Council-owned properties including providing audio lures to attract breeding pairs at this time. However, it is recommended that this is considered for new development.

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<sup>3</sup> Swift Bricks, Question for Department for DEFRA <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-10-13/81318/>

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### 5.17 Estimated cost of installation:

Estimated cost		Notes / Assumptions
Installation of swift box plus audio lure	£660 per box	Includes hardware, power supply and installation.  Hardware estimate: £260 (based on market estimates)  Installation estimate: £400 (reasoned market estimation)
Ongoing maintenance	£50 per box per year	Swift boxes should last the lifetime of the building.  Inc. visual check, ensuing cable/speaker intact.  Does not include street cleaning.
No. Boxes per Council owned property	3	Based on motion request for new commercial buildings.  Buildings should have more than one box installed as Swifts like to live in groups.
No. Council owned buildings	235	Estimated half Council owned buildings might be suitable for a swift box.  <i>Source: <a href="#">Council-Owned Properties - West Berkshire Council</a></i>
Officer time to support the project	£50,000	<i>General working assumption</i>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£550,550</b>	Includes 1 year maintenance  Maintenance will have an ongoing annual cost of £35,250 (excluding officer time to coordinate and any additional street cleaning required)

*B) At least 50% of homes on new developments in West Berkshire shall be required to have at least two swift bricks installed. New commercial and industrial developments shall be required to have at least three swift bricks installed per appropriate unit.*

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5.18 It is assumed that this element of the motion means that on average across the district at least 50% of new homes should incorporate at least two swift bricks. With all new commercial and industrial development installing at least three swift bricks per unit.

5.19 For larger housing developments and commercial schemes, introducing a swift brick requirement would work well, as a definitive number of swift bricks could be required and secured via condition. Where there are small or single dwelling proposals, a specific requirement for swift bricks could add an unreasonable additional burden for applicants, especially when considered alongside other biodiversity/enhancement requirements (eg, BNG, bat boxes). However, the proposed draft NPPF does include requirement for swift bricks to be installed with new development, so the Council may be able to implement this without the need for specific local policy to be included within the new local plan. Further consideration of how this could be implemented, and what types of development would be included in any Council policy would be required.

5.20 Swift bricks generally cost between £25 and £40 per brick.

- C) *This condition will be attached to all relevant planning permissions for new buildings, in line with Local Plan policy SP11, Biodiversity and Geodiversity, the Council's Environment Strategy (refreshed May 2025), the Berkshire Biodiversity Strategy, and other initiatives to maintain, restore and increase biodiversity in West Berkshire.*
- D) *This is in addition to any biodiversity mitigation or enhancements normally requested through the planning process."*

5.21 A general biodiversity enhancement condition is already used when granting planning permission, which allows for specific enhancements to be listed within the condition. The precise biodiversity enhancement will be determined on a case-by-case basis depending on the nature of the development and its location.

5.22 It is not possible to commit through a Council motion to apply any planning conditions on every planning application, to do so would be *ultra vires*. Each condition must be justified on a case-by-case basis and pass the national policy tests for conditions. However, Council can be reassured that there is a strong existing policy framework, and the draft NPPF indicates national policy will strengthen it further. Moreover, Swift bricks and boxes are a commonly specified biodiversity enhancement, and they are routinely sought by the Planning Service.

5.23 The installation of swift bricks would form one part of the biodiversity mitigation enhancements proposed for new developments. It would be for the ecology team to determine the most suitable biodiversity mitigation for each development when considering the merits of the scheme, including the location and specific proposals.

## 6 Other options considered

6.1 No other options have been considered, as this report is responding to the Motion presented at Council.

## 7 Conclusion

7.1 The motion sets out how the Council wishes to support the migratory swift population, through the installation of swift bricks at appropriate council buildings and through

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requirements placed upon developers in the planning process. For the reasons set out, the Motion cannot be supported as the measures set out are unable to be implemented.

- 7.2 Whilst the Motion cannot be supported, existing Local Plan Policy provides the policy hook to secure swift bricks and boxes and the new draft NPPF (currently subject to consultation) includes a requirement for swift bricks to be introduced in new developments where appropriate, therefore, giving the Council a strengthened planning policy basis to secure swift bricks, where appropriate, along with other biodiversity measures, when considering planning applications.

## Background Papers:

Swift Conservation, Leaflet 4: Swift Nest Bricks – installation and suppliers leaflet

<https://www.swift-conservation.org/Leaflet%20-%20Swift%20Nest%20Bricks%20-%20installation%20&%20suppliers-small.pdf>

**Wards affected:** All

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### Document Control

<b>Document Ref:</b>	Swift bricks	<b>Date Created:</b>	29/01/26
<b>Version:</b>	3	<b>Date Modified:</b>	05/03/2026
<b>Author:</b>	Rachael Lancaster		
<b>Owning Service</b>	Development and Housing		

### Change History

Version	Date	Description	Change ID
1	29/01/2026	Original	
2	23/02/2026	Report updated following Corporate Board.	
3	05/03/2026	Report updated following Executive Briefing (to add estimated costs for installation at Council owned buildings)	