



**Excellence in Other Planning Work**  
**Winner in category**  
**Silverlake (entered by Savills)**

# The RTPI South West Awards for Planning Excellence 2019

Our Awards champion the very best examples of planning and planners in the South West. They demonstrate the positive impact planning has on our quality of life and celebrate professional expertise. The Awards are open to all planners, both members and non-members, and all other built environment professions and community groups. **Entry to our Awards is free.**

Being shortlisted or winning is a clear demonstration of the high quality of your work and professionalism. All shortlisted and winning entrants will be provided with a RTPI South West Awards for Planning Excellence logo, which can be used on your own website, email, social media and promotional materials. We wish you the best of luck!

## Summary

(100 word summary)

Savills managed the planning process for Habitat First, delivering a unique development of 1,000 holiday units and leisure facilities on 230ha of quarry workings. The collaborative approach obtained full local authority backing, commendation from Natural England and the EA, and successful community engagement generated local support. Co-investing in commercial development and natural capital will generate 123 local jobs, a range of community benefits and public access, diversifying year-round tourism and boosting the local economy by a projected £22m pa. The first 60 units and leisure facilities are complete (+30 under construction), within 100ha of managed habitat, awarded 'Excellent' status in the Building with Nature Accreditation.

## Background

Please outline the background to the project:

- context
- timeline

### **Silverlake, an exemplar of nature conservation management, bringing people and nature together for mutual long term benefit - delivering sustainable holiday accommodation and generating significant net environmental gain.**

The starting point with this unallocated site was the preparation of a 'Vision for Silverlake', which formed the basis for meetings and engagement, to communicate the concept and obtain feedback from statutory bodies (including Natural England and the EA), planning and highways, 3 parish councils and, importantly, local people.

The Vision was to create a sustainable and inclusive holiday and leisure opportunity in West Dorset where visitors will integrate with the natural environment, enjoy open space, landscape and recreation. In effect, holidaying in a nature reserve, where the landscape and wildlife take precedence and people have to integrate. A creative contemporary design approach combined influences from the Dorset vernacular and waterside character with the use of local materials, sustainable development principles, energy efficiency and biodiversity. The development has since been awarded 'Excellent' status in the Building with Nature Accreditation, meeting 23 standards regarding wellbeing, water and wildlife.

Discussions were assisted by reference to a Habitat First scheme in Cotswold District. We were able to reassure the planning authority and other parties by putting them in contact with officers at CDC. Although Silverlake is different, there were similarities including S106 restrictions to preclude it from becoming unrestricted housing.

Initial uncertainty evolved into a welcoming and supportive approach from all parties, but with the clear need to substantiate the benefits and to establish the environmental acceptability of the scheme; this is a sensitive context, the site is within 500ms of a Dorset Heathland SPA and within the catchment of Poole Harbour SPA, SSSI and Ramsar site, where nitrates and nutrient run-off is a major issue and a constraint to development. Savills' suggested approach was that the scheme should not just show its acceptability, but it should demonstrate significant net environmental gains, the extent of these to be determined through rigorous assessment of drainage, water quality, nature conservation, heritage and other key aspects, including sustainable transport, job creation, benefits to the local economy, opportunities for public access to facilities on the site.

### **Timeline**

Habitat First acquired the 230ha quarry in 2012 following planning advice from Savills. Engagement and communication began immediately with the local authorities, consultees and the local community, followed by an outline application in 2013 supported by EIA. Savills Planning and EIA team managed the entire process. Outline approval was granted in 2014 with a Site Wide Development Framework then being agreed pre-reserved matters. Design Codes, variations to the Minerals permissions, reserved matters approvals and conditions were discharged in 2015/16 and construction started in 2016/17.

The first holiday units, first phase leisure facilities and 100ha of open space opened in 2018. A total of c90 holiday units will be complete and in use by the end of 2019. The build is programmed to be at a relatively slow pace (30 units per year) enabling environmental management to develop concurrently with, or ahead of, visitor numbers and built development.

## Outcomes

Please outline what positive impacts the project has provided for:

- the local community
- the economy
- the environment

**Bringing people and nature together for mutual long term ongoing benefit, Silverlake provides a diversity of benefits for the local community, the economy and the environment, co-investing in commercial development and natural capital.**

By restoring and creating a variety of UK Biodiversity Action Plan habitats and maintaining these in a long-term effective management programme, delivering key environmental benefits, Silverlake delivers open space, allotments and public accessibility, relieving existing pressures on European protected heathland and providing jobs and facilities for local people.

Community allotments and orchards and 11ha of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) are being provided, with increased public access, bridleway, cycleway and footpath connections across the site, and canoe 'safaris' through the reed beds. A leisure facility, with pools, tennis and squash provides a quality resource for holiday guests and the local community, and an accessible heritage trail interprets the history of former WW2 airfield use.

Sustainable energy solutions include a combination of biomass, heating from landfill gas, passive solar and solar PV. Effluent will be treated on site using bio digesters and reed bed filtration. The scheme reduces nitrates and nutrient run-off to Poole Harbour SPA. Silverlake received 'Excellent' status in the Building with Nature awards.

Commenting on the application and its approach to nature conservation management, biodiversity enhancement, habitat creation and its self-financing long-term management approach, Natural England stated that they *'recognise the potential for the scheme to provide long term benefits for nature conservation in Dorset...the creation of a single large area of extensively grazed heathland is a key component of the scheme which will provide valuable supporting habitat for the area's SPA bird interests...The proposal presents a significant opportunity to incorporate features into the design of the buildings and areas of green infrastructure which are beneficial to wildlife such as the incorporation of roosting opportunities for bats, the installation of bird nest boxes, sand martin walls, otter holts, etc....A key ecological advantage identified by the scheme is the provision of long term conservation and recreational management for the site.'*

A key objective was to actively involve the local community and West Dorset District in the planning and future management of the development, including the establishment of a Community and Conservation Fund to finance local nature conservation and community projects in the wider area. The specialist holiday accommodation takes pressure off the local housing market where many West Dorset properties are used as second homes.

Silverlake will be a key economic driver through inward investment, local spend and employment generation. The completed scheme will create 123 jobs on site and up to 275 in the wider area with additional spend of £22m pa in the local economy. The development generates year-round tourism, diversifying the tourism sector, extending it inland from the coastal strip and raising the tourism bar for West Dorset. The construction stage will generate £470m of investment over a 20-30 year period and the club facilities will generate an investment estimated at £10m. Regarded as a success by the local authority, the scheme also generates significant additional Council Tax revenue.

## Planning contribution

Please outline how the project has benefitted from the involvement of a planner or planners:

- providing strong and effective leadership and vision
- working in partnership with others
- managing implementation and delivery

### **From initial site appraisal, through engagement and consultation, managing the consenting process to delivery on site, and ongoing involvement.**

Savills appraised the site before acquisition, setting the scope for an innovative form of development, encapsulating this within a Vision document as the basis for early engagement. Planners at Savills managed extensive engagement and consultation with consultees, the authorities and the public, coordinated and led the formulation and submission of the planning application and prepared the landscape masterplan, led the planning, design and EIA processes, coordinating a multi discipline team of consultants and designers, engineers and economists, ecologists, hydrologists and heritage advisers, coordinated the comprehensive Environmental Statement, and produced the Planning, Design and Access Statement.

The site was not allocated for development and would have been subject to a dated 'restoration' plan approved as part of old minerals permissions. Analysis found that the waterbodies and connecting waterways shown in the 'restoration' scheme would have failed, reducing environmental benefits and causing drainage problems. The new approach represented an innovative solution, integrating economic, social and environmental benefits. Importantly it was deliverable.

Communication and engagement obtained feedback from a wide range of individuals and bodies, across three parishes and two local authority areas. Savills team worked collaboratively to provide an ecologically diverse and attractive setting for the new development, including heathland, wetland, lakes and woodland habitats, managed alongside a range of leisure opportunities. These included walking, cycling and horse riding trails, bird hides and areas for nature conservation including specialist habitats (sand martin cliffs, tern beaches and dormouse bridges to allow movement around the site), interpretation, information and managed interaction between people and wildlife.

Savills Planning played a crucial role in understanding the technical and environmental issues, steering the project towards solutions that worked and met the requirements of NE, EA and other consultees. Early discussions with the Council agreed the approach to maximising sustainability and net gain in biodiversity. Savills coordinated data sharing amongst the consultancy team to ensure that informed, iterative and inter-disciplinary solutions were found.

Early scoping of the key issues was shared with the team and consultees at the start to ensure each specialism could advise on how it affected their work, and to engage the consultees. A rolling summary of the intended outcomes to meet planning and minerals policy ensured the key objectives were retained at the forefront of design and assessment work, meeting and intentionally exceeding technical, environmental, policy and procedural requirements.

Early and comprehensive engagement was essential throughout and continues during delivery, with Parish Councils, local residents, land owners, a nearby mobile home park, upstream and downstream landowners and farmers. The old minerals permissions had to be amended to enable a different form of restoration, through applications to the Minerals Planning Authority.

Silverlake, because of the approach taken, engendered an effective partnership approach between the applicant team, District, County, Parishes, local residents, the EA, NE, Dorset Wildlife Trust and the public. The s106 agreement defines and delivers a range of contributions, secures mitigation and related trigger points and ensures that the approved uses are precluded from becoming residential or other unintended uses. Savills involvement has continued through the detailed stages to implementation and is still ongoing.

## Sustainable development

Please outline how the project has supported:

- positive short, medium and long term public benefit
- a balance of economic, social and environmental objectives
- the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

**The principles of sustainability identified in the NPPF underpinned the evolution of the proposals, which fully reflect Government policy on the natural environment, delivering a net gain in biodiversity and creating Natural Capital as an exemplar ahead of its time, and meeting UN sustainable development goals in the short, medium and long term.**

The location outside of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, beyond the designated Heritage Coast, provided scope for net gains in biodiversity, landscape enhancement and increased natural capital. The scheme protects, enhances and manages nature conservation, heritage, landscape and biodiversity interests. There was no long-term use plan or management strategy for the quarry prior to the Silverlake scheme. Natural England have praised the innovative solution which increases biodiversity, reduces nitrate and nutrient flow into Poole Harbour SPA / SSSI/ Ramsar from this 230ha site and removes nutrients from water coming into, across and out of the site along existing waterways, by filtration through on-site reed beds and bogs.

Multiple habitats integrated with a high-quality resort facility provide short, medium and long-term benefits for the economy, society and the environment, with hands-on full time site management. Silverlake is phased, delivering quite slowly (30 holiday units per year). The supporting facilities are being delivered from Day 1, with early environmental gains, including habitat creation, the SANG, allotments for local people and hands-on site management.

This full year-round facility supports the local economy, assisting tourism as a key economic component in West Dorset. It promotes sustainable transport with staff and occupier mini buses linking to the rail station, with walking and cycling routes. It is of high quality design and award-winning sustainable development credentials. The rationale is to positively embrace and enhance nature conservation and biodiversity, delivering a holiday community located within a nature reserve. It conserves and enhances the localised archaeology on the site (Bronze Age Barrows and WWII heritage), managing these and providing interpretation facilities in collaboration with the RAF Warmwell Preservation Society and the County Archaeologist.

The scheme delivers an integrated range of social, economic and environmental benefits at the local, district and sub regional levels. Importantly, the local community will have a key say in how finance generated by the development will be spent. The Conservation and Community Fund, set up via the s106 agreement, directs an element of finance to local community projects. This is already happening and the amount will increase proportionally as each new holiday unit is added. School and other local groups will have managed access to the site and facilities for projects, nature conservation awareness and outdoor pursuits.

The location close to a rail station on the Weymouth to Waterloo line facilitates sustainable travel. The scheme accommodates energy efficient development, generating its own energy through solar, re-use of landfill gas, utilisation of bio-mass, bio-digestion of effluent. Re-use of the waste as bio mass for on-site willow growing is an example of the sustainable approach.

In relation to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, the scheme promotes good health and wellbeing, improved education, clean water, clean energy, decent work and economic growth, a sustainable holiday community, responsible consumption and production, enhanced life in water and on land, and partnerships through the Conservation and Community Fund and education initiatives.

## Community benefit

Please outline how the project has provided:

- positive and constructive engagement and dialogue with local people and businesses
- a better quality of life for people, especially for disadvantaged communities
- tangible benefits for communities such as facilities, infrastructure, jobs, training etc

### **Positive engagement, quality of life, community benefits, facilities, public access, infrastructure, jobs and training – key ingredients of the Silverlake approach**

Engagement and consultation with the local community, stakeholders and consultees was critical to developing the ideas and early concepts for the project. This was led by Savills and included early engagement to share initial ideas for the site and garner feedback from stakeholders and the public. These initial meetings were advanced alongside early pre-application meetings with District and County Council officers and consultees to explore the principle of development and the site's potential to accommodate a high quality sustainable leisure and holiday development.

Local businesses were contacted, including a nearby holiday homes park (who were provided with additional planting and buffering along an access road), nearby Country Estates (whose forestry thinnings will now be utilised as bio mass, and whose animals will seasonally graze parts of the 230 hectare site). The high level of management of the environment, delivering increased biodiversity and managing heritage assets was of significant interest to local people and this led to ideas being incorporated regarding the neglected on site RAF heritage, delivery of community allotments and orchards and public access, school groups utilising the site and public access to facilities.

Although local communities are not significantly disadvantaged, they are not wealthy areas and are lacking in a diversity of employment opportunities. As well as direct new employment opportunities at the site, the trade at local shops and other facilities will be assisted greatly as Silverlake grows. Schools and other groups will be able to use the on-site facilities in a managed and organised manner. The economic benefits that will derive from Silverlake are welcomed locally.

The projected 123 new jobs provided by the scheme will add considerably to the local income base filtering through to local businesses to underpin their expansion and viability. The initial positive impact from the construction so far has already made a positive impact and will increase significantly as the site becomes fully operational and permanent year-round local jobs are created alongside expenditure in the local area from visitors to the site.

The scheme also offers wider economic benefits to West Dorset, including a significant boost to annual GVA and local expenditure. The first two phases have delivered 60 holiday units, with a further 30 under construction. This is accompanied by access to 100ha of lakes, wetlands, heathland and woodland delivered so far. The finished scheme of 1,000 units will deliver 230ha of wider habitat and managed countryside, including extensive publicly accessible areas, allotments and the SANG.

The residents of Crossways will also benefit from access to the site with its trails, heritage interpretation and outdoor recreation / nature conservation as well as use of allotments and membership of the indoor leisure facilities. The Conservation and Community Fund, funded by HFG through contributions from those taking vacations, also offers opportunities for local community and conservation projects, enriching the lives and environment of local residents. The funds can be spent on schemes advocated by the local community, administered jointly by the Silverlake management company and the Parish Council.

## Leading practice

Please outline how the project:

- is creative and innovative
- is an exemplar that is transferable across the UK
- promotes equality and diversity

### **Innovative planning-led sustainable leisure development, transforming a former quarry into a mosaic of habitats managed for wildlife and biodiversity, delivering local jobs, access and community benefits.**

Silverlake is an innovative exemplar development, embodying nature conservation management, bringing people and nature together for mutual long term benefit. It combines excellence in architecture, design, facilities and services to create a sustainable nature-based resort facility which delivers jobs and community benefits, upgrades the tourism offer and boosts the local economy. It develops despoiled former mineral workings into a unique holiday community, sustainably constructed and operated.

It shows it is possible to sustainably develop very large former mineral workings into an attractive holiday community located within a managed nature reserve which benefits the local community whilst prioritising the natural environment. The Silverlake concept is now capable of being transferred and utilised as the basis for site specific solutions at other major despoiled sites across the UK. In fact, since Silverlake, Savills has led the promotion of another scheme, now approved, at Birchwood Lakes near Barnstaple in north Devon, comprising 220 units and leisure facilities on a former despoiled mineral working.

Extensive engagement with Council officers and the public was critical to delivering the vision of a sustainable and inclusive community of holiday units in a nature conservation setting that combines people and community with wildlife, habitat, landscape and leisure. The very detailed engagement exercise also comprises an approach that can be applied elsewhere. Another key lesson from Silverlake is that sites not suitable for normal housing or other development purposes can accommodate a use that is economically viable and which can deliver major benefits, assisted by the lower base land value.

In relation to equality and diversity, areas of public access including the 11 ha SANG will be available for the local community, including disabled parking and level wheelchair access to view waterside areas. The new allotments are for local residents, again with disability access. The Community and Conservation Fund (dealt with elsewhere, funded by the development on a rolling annual programme) is available for local projects and initiatives, to enable local school, youth and other groups to deliver projects which might otherwise be beyond their reach. Access to the proposed RAF WW2 heritage trail is agreed with the local society. Extensive footpaths, cycle routes and bridleways cross the site. Throughout Silverlake, access to and use of facilities and holiday accommodation is available for people with disabilities.

The jobs created at Silverlake range from part time and full time site maintenance and ground staff, drivers, catering and other trades to site management / financial / nature trail guiding etc. There are significant opportunities for training and HF has a training programme aimed specifically at local people. Most of the staff employed at the site to date are from the immediate area.

Access to and use of the range of Silverlake facilities can be arranged for local schools and other groups. A wide range of footpaths, bridleway and cycle routes through the site are fully available to the public either as rights of way or discretionary. The District and Parish Councils will both endorse the success of the scheme in relation to local and community benefits, and they regard Silverlake as an example of good practice.