The Worcestershire Parkway scheme involves the creation of a new regional railway interchange, located at the intersection of the Cotswold railway line and the Birmingham to Bristol main railway line approximately 3km from Junction 7 of the M5 and approximately 7.5km southeast of Worcester city. Worcestershire is currently not directly served by national (intercity) rail services, despite the Birmingham to Bristol line passing directly through the County. The scheme would allow access to many long distance cross country trains currently bypassing Worcester.

The Cooksholme Meadows Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) lies within 2km of the scheme and at its closest point, is located 200m away. The SSSI is designated for its grassland community National Vegetation Classification (NVC) MG5 Cynosurus cristatus - Centaurea nigra lowland meadow and is considered to be of high importance and rarity at the national scale. During consultation with the local planning authority and statutory consultees it was felt that the scheme could impact upon the SSSI, for example, changes in drainage at the application site which is downstream from the SSSI could have an adverse impact upon the functionality of the SSSI. Therefore, it was decided not to request a screening opinion, but continue directly with an environmental impact assessment (EIA) and submit an Environmental Statement (ES) in accordance with the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2011 (the ‘EIA Regulations’) with the planning application.

A number of constraints were identified prior to and during the development of the building design proposals for the scheme, these being:

- Protected species (Great Crested Newts, Slow Worms, Lesser Horseshoe Bats and Badgers);
- Existing flood risk conditions and drainage;
- The location of residential dwelling to the north of the application site;
- Existing bridge levels; and
- Existing public rights of way including a level crossing.

During the design process all of these constraints were taken into account to ensure the preferred design overcame these while meeting the scheme objectives. A scoping report was submitted to Worcestershire County Planning Authority in July 2014. Following consultation with relevant statutory bodies, the Authority determined that the following technical topics were to be scoped into the assessment: socio-economic effects, air quality, cultural heritage, landscape and visual impacts, nature and conservation, ground conditions and contamination, waste and materials, noise and vibration, water resources, transport movement and access. Specialist assessments were undertaken for each of the key environmental topic areas. Key sensitive receptors included protected species and the water environment, these are discussed further below.

Ecological impacts relate to the potential loss and fragmentation of habitats and possible harm or disturbance to protected species both during the construction and operation phases.
The scheme design includes mitigation for habitats and species such as: hibernacula creation, compensatory replanting of hedgerow and grassland, and scrub creation. Proposed mitigation for protected species includes appropriate construction and operational lighting for bats; reptile and amphibian habitat creation and enhancement; and habitat compensation and enhancement measures for breeding and wintering birds. By these means potential significant adverse impact to valuable resources, such as protected species and habitats, will be avoided.

Consultees were concerned that changes to the drainage on the application site could impact the SSSI upstream, due to increased flood events. The impact of drainage on the SSSI were mitigated through the drainage design, by providing flood compensatory areas and attenuation ponds. The drainage design will ensure that there is no change to the existing flows passing through the site from the SSSI via the ordinary watercourse. Therefore there will be no change on the current flows from the site which could affect the SSSI.

The existing level crossing will be replaced with a footbridge connecting the existing public right of way into the station thereby removing a potential hazard to pedestrians. Cycle storage will be provided within the main station area and at the foot of the new footbridge, providing cyclists with two options to enter the station. The existing public right of way will be diverted away from the car parking areas and along the flood compensation area. In the event of flooding users of the public right of way can use the footpaths along the access roads into the site.

The EIA demonstrated that with appropriate mitigation incorporated into the design and construction, the proposed scheme would not have an adverse impact upon the SSSI because the drainage design has ensured that existing levels of flow will be maintained. Ecological mitigation delivered through integrated design will to enhance habitats for Slow Worms and Great Crested Newts. The Worcestershire Parkway site will provide long term beneficial impacts for the residents and businesses of South Worcestershire.

Isabelle Shaw, CH2M Hill, April 2015.