

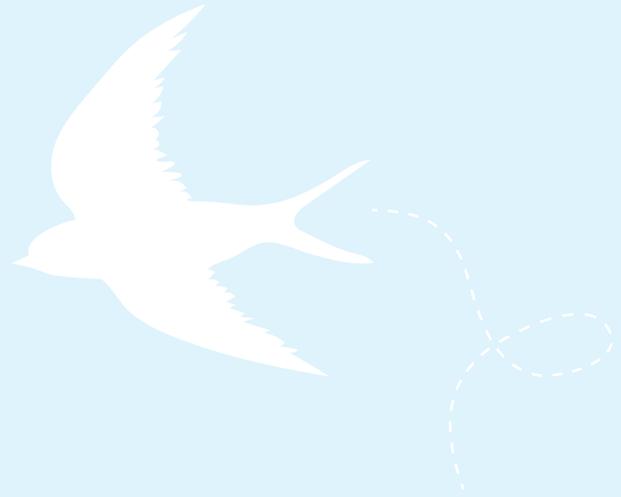
POSITIVE PLANNING NOTE

Swifts and Development Guidance



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Thanks to those involved:



Introduction

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council gave the Swift the status of “Bird of our Borough” in 2015. Swifts are in steady decline and are red listed across the UK and Ireland and as such Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council has a keen interest in taking steps to support and protect the Swift population. The Council has undertaken a number of initiatives to help promote and protect Swifts within the Borough and has also produced this guidance note in association with its new Local Development Plan.

Antrim and Newtownabbey Local Development Plan 2030”

The aim of this Positive Planning Note is to provide guidance to planners, planning agents, builders, architects and our residents about the importance of Swifts and to provide best practice in relation to the protection of Swifts as well as highlighting matters to consider when carrying out building works and/or submitting a planning application.

The Council is proud to have worked with the Northern Ireland Swift Group, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in the production of this guidance note. The Council also welcomes the support from Brian Cahalane and Mark Smyth in promoting the protection of the Swift in the Borough and all their work to date.

“Positive Planning Note: Adding Value

Developers should note that the Swift was given “Bird of our Borough” status by the Council in May 2015 and one simple measure that new development schemes could do to promote biodiversity is to use Swift nest bricks or incorporate Swift nest boxes into the design of their buildings.



The Common Swift

Swifts are Remarkable Birds

The Common Swift (*Apus apus*) weighs under 40 grams (equivalent to the weight of 2 AA batteries). It arrives each year in Northern Ireland during late April to early May, all the way from its winter migration to sub-Saharan Africa, to breed here in the Borough.

After the breeding season it leaves our shores for sub-Saharan Africa flying and meandering through west, central and southern Africa, eventually reaching Mozambique around Christmas time before turning north again on their long journey home.

By the time they return to us these birds will have been flying continuously day and night and sleeping on the wing, while they meander through at least 40 countries. It's calculated that they will have covered anywhere between 25 and 50 thousand miles in their 9 month journey there and back! As the established breeding birds hurtle into their nest sites at dusk on their first night back in Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough, it will have been, for most of them, 265 days since they last landed and felt solid ground beneath their tiny feet. An epic journey indeed since they left Northern Ireland the previous July! Our Borough plays an important role in supporting the Swift population as they choose to come here, nest and breed.

Swifts are Under Threat

Breeding Bird Survey data has documented a significant decline in the Swift population with the Swift being moved to the red list of "Birds of Conservation Concern" in 2021¹. This bird could face extinction if we don't take steps to help it.



¹ UK Red list of birds of conservation concern in the UK



Breeding and Nesting

Swifts are intrinsically linked with our built environment.

Long ago they nested in tree cavities and rock faces. However, as we began building houses and other buildings, the Swift moved in alongside us, nesting in crevices in the stone and brickwork and under eaves. However, with old buildings being renovated or demolished and with new buildings having no nooks or crannies, finding a place to nest can impact on this special bird. The provision of boxes is a good fix for existing buildings, but the installation of Swift bricks into new/refurbished developments, incorporated into the architectural design from the outset, are preferred – as they will last the lifetime of the building and are maintenance free. Swifts may take time to colonise new nesting sites, but the provisions of bricks and boxes are considered worthwhile to help provide nesting sites for these amazing birds.

Swifts' instincts are to always return to the same nest each year and they have a precise memory of its position. They are colonial nesters so immature Swifts will search out possible holes and cracks in the eaves of buildings to look for places to nest the following year.

Swifts and Protection

The Swift, as a wild bird, is protected under law. It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill a Swift bird or its eggs or young or to destroy/interfere with its nest when it is breeding². Swifts are also a Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) Priority Species. Priority Species require conservation because of their decline, rarity and importance.

Planning Policy in Northern Ireland seeks to conserve, protect and enhance our natural environment including Protected Species. The protection afforded to natural heritage interests in planning policy is additional to legislative requirements. This helps to meet national and international commitments to halt the loss of biodiversity including that relating to Protected Species. The Regional Development Strategy and Strategic Planning Policy Statement set out strategic guidance in relation to natural heritage and sustainable development and sit alongside the Council's Local Development Plan - Plan Strategy which sets out local operational Planning Policy³. In addition, the Council also has a statutory duty⁴ to undertake its functions whilst taking into account the protection, maintenance, enhancement and restoration of biodiversity whilst raising awareness of its importance.

²The Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 (as amended).

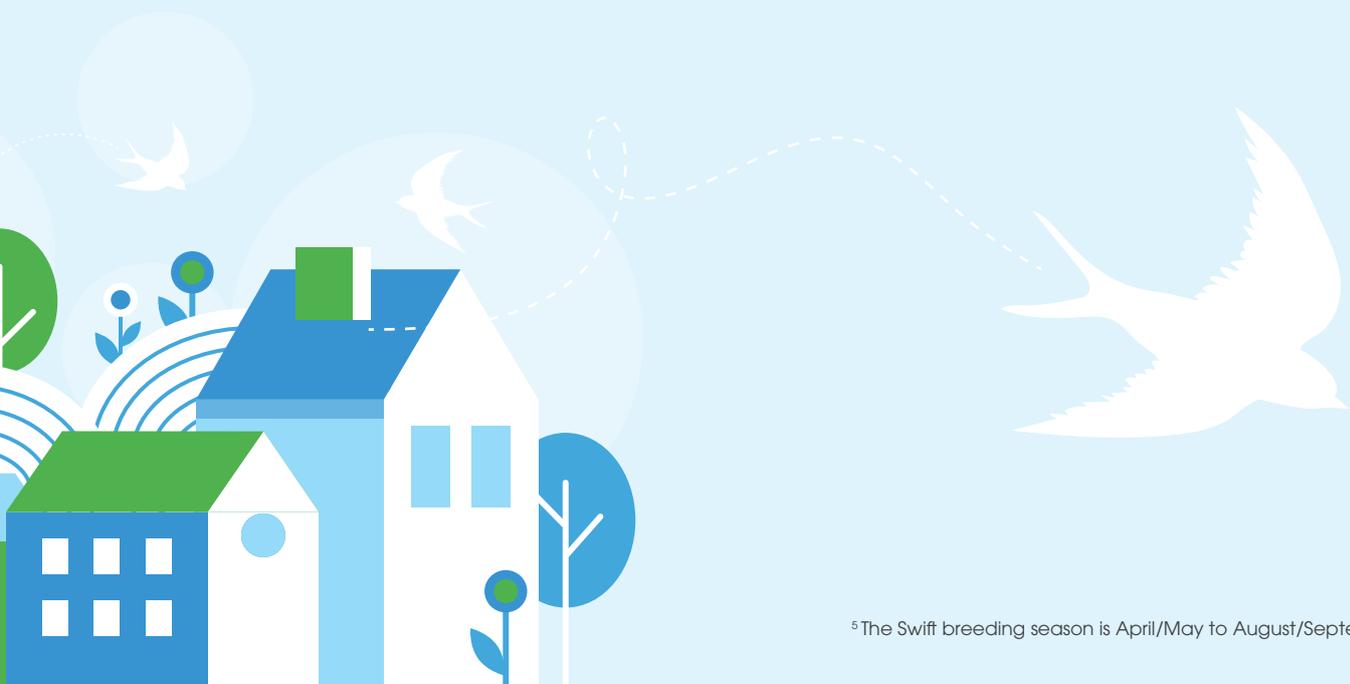
³Refer to the Council's website at antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk

⁴Wildlife and Natural Environment (Northern Ireland) Act 2011



Factors Affecting Swifts

What Happens?	The Result	How Can We Help
Refurbishment of Buildings		
Accidental removal of access to nest sites	Loss of breeding sites – partial or whole loss of colony	Make the nest entrances before works commence and retain nest entrance gaps
Scaffolding or hoarding can prevent adult Swifts from getting to their eggs or chicks	Eggs chill, chicks starve	Make sure works are carried out outside the Swift breeding season ⁵ on sites known to be important for Swifts
Demolition of Buildings		
When a building is demolished, all nesting sites there are lost	The loss of an entire breeding colony	Erect new nest boxes close by and/or integrate nest bricks into new building developments
Modern Building Developments		
They have little or no access for Swifts	Swifts are unable to find suitable nesting opportunities	Integrate nest bricks into the fabric of the building



⁵The Swift breeding season is April/May to August/September

Swifts and Development

The management of all biodiversity, including the Swift, is of concern and in the planning system in Northern Ireland there are certain steps an applicant/developer must undertake in relation to biodiversity. The following sections provides further information and guidance on Swifts and development.

Protected Species and Planning Permission

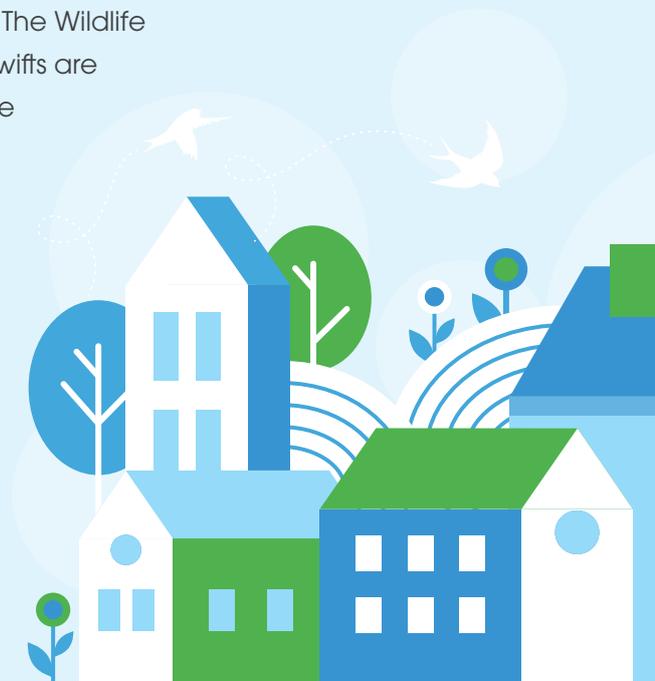
When you submit a planning application you may be required to submit a Biodiversity Checklist. This Biodiversity Checklist is intended to provide a 'step by step' tool for applicants and their agents to use in order to identify what potential biodiversity impacts their development proposal may have and what ecological assessments or surveys would reasonably be required to be submitted with their planning application. It will also enable applicants and their agents to add any necessary avoidance or mitigation measures into their project prior to submitting their application.

In relation to the Swift, is particularly important for applicants to do this where their proposal includes the redevelopment of old buildings as this is where Swifts are likely to nest.

The Checklist is designed to be used for all local development planning applications in Antrim and Newtownabbey where another ecological assessment or survey has not already been completed. It is not intended to apply to larger developments, such as major and regionally significant applications (as it is assumed that for these an ecological assessment will be carried out) or for proposals that require an Environmental Statement.

Further information on the Biodiversity Checklist is available at www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/ni-biodiversity-checklist-documents.

The Council's Planning Section will consider consulting DAERA's Natural Environment Division as part of the consideration of your planning application. As all wild birds and their nests, including Swifts, are protected under The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 (as amended) and where Swifts are identified on a site, appropriate mitigation measures will be required to protect breeding birds and conditions may be included in the grant of any planning permission. This can include the provision of new Swift nest bricks or boxes into the design of new buildings to provide compensatory nesting opportunities for Swifts.



In addition, conditions may be placed on your permission that no demolition or alteration works/tree/scrub clearance works can take place between 1 March and 31 August inclusive unless a competent ecologist has undertaken a detailed check for active birds' nests immediately before clearance/demolition/renovation and provided written confirmation that no nests are present/birds will be harmed and/or there are appropriate measures in place to protect nesting birds.

Minor and Small Scale Works

You may not always need planning permission for works to existing buildings for e.g. if you are repointing a building, re-tiling a roof, carrying out repairs to your roof, work on soffits and eaves or loft repair. You may also carry out certain works to your house under permitted development rights⁶ such as an extension.

These more minor works may affect Swifts by destroying the nest site, blocking the nest entrance, obstructing the flight path or disturbing birds while nesting.

Swifts can nest in very restricted spaces and due to their streamlined shape can squeeze into tiny gaps and their nests may not always be visible. Swift nest sites are found in areas such as inside eaves, in holes, behind flashing, inside gables (behind barge boards and gables on the brick ends), under tiles (loose or displaced tiles or felt) or missing pointing.



Throughout the summer, groups of Swifts can be seen flying around buildings at great speed, along with a screaming noise, these are known as "screaming parties" and mean that Swifts are nesting nearby. However, it is important to remember that whether it is the season for the Swift to be present or not, the Swift is likely to return to its original nest and care should be taken in relation to the existing nests.



⁶The Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (as amended)

Therefore, when you are carrying out such works, before commencing work please consider:-

- ✓ Looking for evidence of Swifts in the area, for example a screaming party
- ✓ Carrying out an inspection particularly at eaves level for existing nest sites
- ✓ Considering whether the work proposed will affect the nest sites
- ✓ Marking existing or potential nest sites with chalk for conservation
- ✓ Contacting RSPB NI , your Council Biodiversity Officer or NI Swift Group for information on options to preserve the nest.

Works should not be initiated or undertaken between early May and late August if Swifts are suspected to be in residence.

In addition to these minor and small scale works, where you have a listed building, you will need consent to demolish, alter or extend the building. Should consent be granted, you will also need to take into account the above matters and to remember that it is a criminal offence to intentionally or recklessly kill a Swift or its eggs or young or destroy its nest.

You should contact the Council's Planning Section if you are not sure if you need planning permission (or listed building consent).

The Council has also published "A Guide to your Home & Planning Permission" which is available on the Council's website at antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk.

Best Practice

The Council would also encourage all developers and property owners to consider installing nest bricks in new/refurbished buildings and boxes in existing buildings where appropriate to assist in the promotion of biodiversity and also to help reverse the decline of the Swift population. The Council will give information in relation to Swifts to applicants and developers when planning permission is granted for new or replacement buildings.⁷

⁷A planning informative will be added to planning permissions.



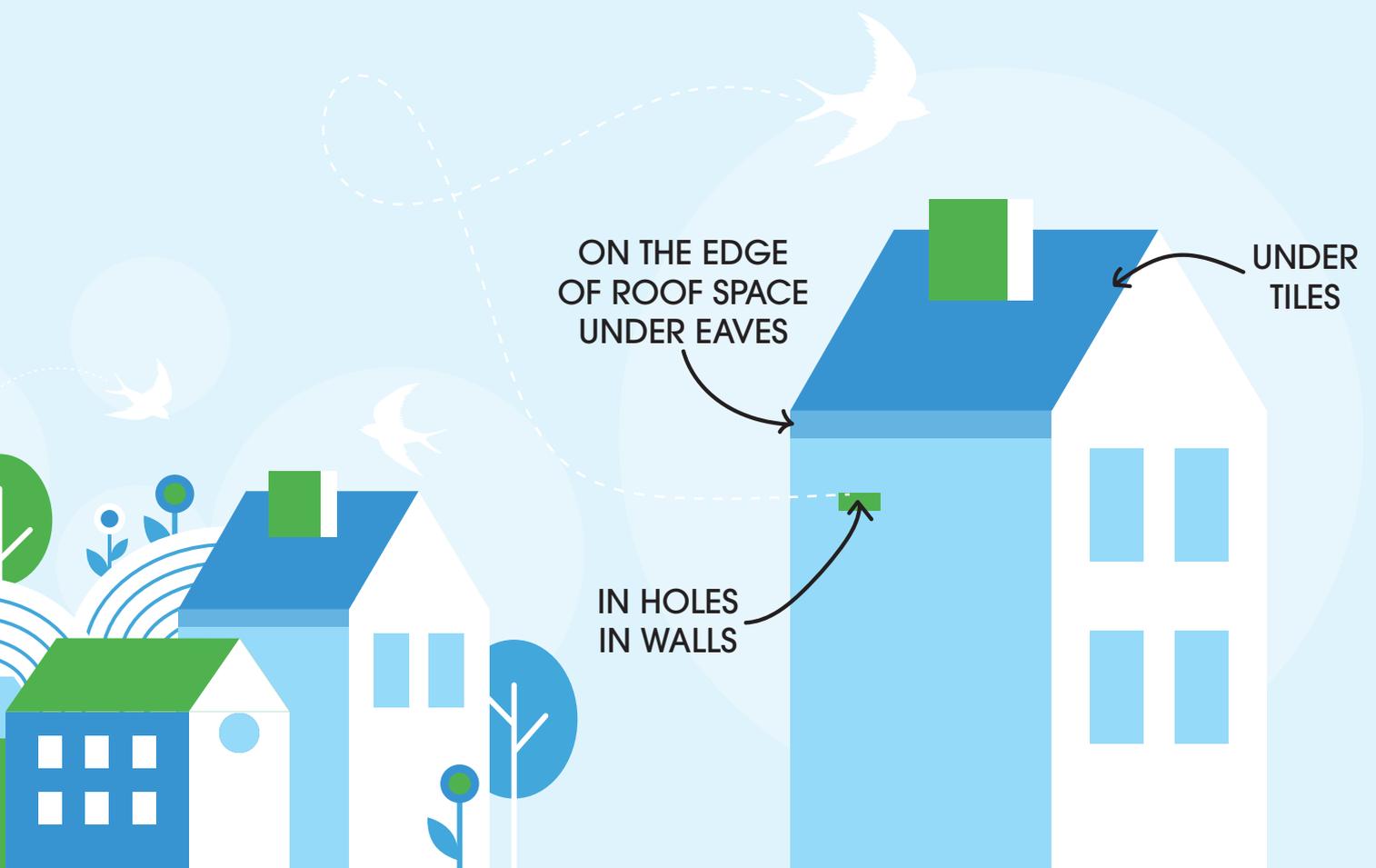
Siting of Swift Bricks and Boxes

These should be: -

- ✓ Placed on North facing walls, but can be orientated East or West if shaded
- ✓ Placed under eaves to protect the nest from the elements
- ✓ At least five metres off the ground
- ✓ Free of obstacles below or in front of them
- ✓ Inaccessible to predators
- ✓ Placed in groups as Swifts nest in colonies
- ✓ At least 500 -1000mm apart
- ✓ The entrance should be horizontal to prevent droppings and should be 28 mm by 62 mm (this measurement is exact for the size of the Swift).



Where possible you should avoid siting Swift boxes above windows or doors. If Swifts haven't nested in the building before you may have to play Swift calls to attract Swifts in, because being colonial nesters, they will listen out for the sound of other Swifts.



Further Information

If you are interested in installing Swift bricks or Swift nest boxes more information can be found here: -

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Northern Ireland

T. 028 9049 1547 or E. rspb.nireland@rspb.org.uk

Northern Ireland Swift Group

E. northernirelandswifts@gmail.com

If you need advice on planning matters please contact at

T. 0300 123 4568 or E. planning@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk

If you would like to contact the Council's Biodiversity Officer please

contact E. parksadmin@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk

To report environmental crime involving wildlife in Northern Ireland please contact the Police Service of Northern Ireland on 101. Describe your call as a wildlife crime report, give details of the (potential) crime, ask for an incident reference number and retain incident number and date.



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