



**AECOM**

**PLASYFELIN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**OTTER SURVEY REPORT**

**SEPTEMBER 2024**

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**AECOM**

**PLASYFELIN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**OTTER SURVEY REPORT**

**SEPTEMBER 2024**

**PREPARED BY:**

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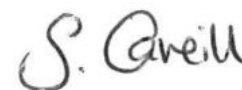
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Appendix 1 Otter Survey Results

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CA13112-001	Site Location Plan	1:5,000 @A3
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CA13112-003	Otter Survey Results Plan	1:2000 @A3

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wardell Armstrong LLP (WA) was commissioned by AECOM in July 2024 to undertake a survey for Eurasian otter on or in close proximity to the proposed development at Plasyfelin Primary School, Caenant Road, Caerphilly, CF83 3FP (hereafter referred to as 'the site'), centred on approximate National Grid Reference ST 15258 87754.

As part of their PEA and BREEAM Report for this site (AECOM, 2023), AECOM identified the site's potential to support otters. The survey area of suitable habitat for otters includes a stretch of 250m upstream, and downstream as far as was possible in a river known as Nant Yr Aber, with a survey corridor of approximately 10-20m width each side of the river as this is where most of the suitable habitats for otter were located.

The survey consisted of searching for field signs including holts, potential holt sites, footprints, feeding remains, couches (lying up sites) and spraints.

Nant Yr Aber is a tributary of the River Rhymney, which flows through Cardiff to meet the Severn Estuary approximately 12.27km away. A public right of way path extends along the right bank top of the river, whilst the dominant habitat on the left bank top is comprised of woodland and grassland. Built up linear features also exist within the survey area, including short walls and pipes feeding the river, and a number of bridges were part of the survey area. The river has been subject to a number of reinforcement techniques, including a concrete beam extending the majority of the survey length between the right bank face and river bed, brick walls, riprap, and a number of wooden baffles/large wood.

Nant Yr Aber river is designated a SINC for almost its entire length. Nant Yr Aber is considered to support breeding otter, plus areas for foraging, laying up and territorial use by otters. This river feeds into the river Rhymney SINC, which acts as a significant wildlife corridor. Otters have been recorded at several locations along its length and are a qualifying feature of the SINC designation.

No otters were observed during the otter survey. However, several field signs indicative of otter activity along the Nant Yr Aber were recorded during the otter survey, including:

- Older spraints located at NGR Grid References ST 15346 88084;
- Fresh spraints located at NGR ST 15346 88130;
- Possible laying up area within gaps in an un-mortared brick wall located at ST 15370 87673;

- Possible laying up area within gaps in riprap river bank face reinforcement located at NGR ST 15342 87824; and
- Possible otter run or slide leading into Nant Yr Aber located at NGR ST 15355 87715.

As much of the river is bordered by public rights of way with regular disturbance, it is considered that otters are unlikely to be using the terrestrial habitats within the survey area during the day or for holt creation. However, several areas were identified where otters could lay up and rest within the river bank face.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Terms of Reference

1.1.1 Wardell Armstrong LLP (WA) was commissioned by AECOM in July 2024 to undertake a survey for Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra* in connection with the redevelopment of the Plasyfelin Primary School site.

1.1.2 The site is located on Caenant Road, Caerphilly, CF83 3FP, as shown on Drawing Number CA13112-001 (Site Location Plan).

1.1.3 The buildings on site are intended for demolition, with a larger school rebuilt in its place.

### 1.2 Survey Area Description

1.2.1 The survey area is located along a section of the Nant Yr Aber river, Caerphilly, as shown on Drawing Number CA13112-002 (Otter Survey Area Location Plan). The site is joined by an area of woodland and is comprised of grassland and buildings. Nant Yr Aber river flows adjacent to the site.

1.2.2 The Nant Yr Aber river is approximately 5.48km long, flowing from the village of Abertridwr approximately 4km north, feeding into the river Rhymney, and eventually into the Severn Estuary, approximately 12.27km southeast of the site. The river is designated a SINC, along almost its entire length, in part for its support of otter populations for foraging, laying up, territorial use, and possible breeding. The river supports populations of bullhead *Cottio gobio* and brown trout *Salmo trutta*, and is used as regular migratory route by anadromous species including Atlantic salmon *Salmo salar*. The support of these species of fish are also a qualifying feature of its SINC designation.

1.2.3 Nant Yr Aber is a tributary of the Rhymney river, which is also designated a SINC. Both rivers meet approximately 1.2km northwest of the site. This SINC comprises the entire length of the River Rhymney. This is one of three main watercourses in the county borough and represents a significant linear wildlife corridor.

1.2.4 Nant yr Aber stream flows along the eastern boundary and curves along the southern boundary of the site and through the housing estate to the south of the school past the boundary fencing. Otter has been recorded at various locations along the length of the river.

- 1.2.5 The survey area of suitable habitat for otters includes a stretch of 250m upstream of the site boundary, with a survey corridor of approximately 10-20m width each side of the river, as this is where most of the suitable habitats for otter were located.
- 1.2.6 Some parts of the river bank and river bed included areas of reinforcement, including riprap, brick walls, concrete beams reinforcing areas of high energy flow between the river bed and bank face, and wooden baffles. Some areas of riprap provided large spaces between/beneath the boulders. At least one drainage pipe was recorded, which may be used to feed Nant Yr Aber.
- 1.2.7 The habitats adjacent to the site are comprised of amenity grassland, woodland, scrub, areas of bare ground and sealed surface footpaths within an area of public open space; habitats unsuitable for supporting otter. Woodland lines the western river bank of Nant Yr Aber for the majority of the survey area. The site is also surrounded by a highly urbanised environment including residential areas, superstores and adjoining car parks, and another primary school whose habitats comprise of amenity grassland and buildings.
- 1.2.8 The wider surrounding habitat to the west of the survey area is mainly urban including residential areas, commercial areas and car parks, A and B roads, and a woodland lined railway line, running North-South, approximately 0.4km from the site. A recreational park lies approximately 0.3km southwest of the site, and Caerphilly Castle with its moat fed by Nant Gledyr lies approximately 0.5km to the south of the site. To the north and east of the site are additional residential buildings and recreational grassland areas.

### 1.3 Background

- 1.3.1 A desk study was undertaken by AECOM as part of their PEA and BREEAM Report for this site (AECOM, 2023) with information received from South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBReC). Records included:
- Two records of otter within 2 km of the site, with the closest record located approximately 1.2 km northeast of the site.

### 1.4 Otter Ecology and Legislation

- 1.4.1 Otters are fully protected under Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended), under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), and within Section 7 of The Environment (Wales) Act 2016. This makes it an offence to:

- Intentionally kill, injure or take an otter;
- Possess or control any live or dead specimen or anything derived from an otter;
- Intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place used for shelter or protection by an otter;
- Intentionally or recklessly disturb an otter while it is occupying a structure or place which it uses for that purpose; and
- Sell, offer for sale, possess, or transport for the purpose of sale or publish advertisements to buy or sell an otter.

1.4.2 Otters are listed as ‘Vulnerable’ on the Red List Status for Wales<sup>1</sup>, and are listed in Caerphilly’s Local Biodiversity Action Plan<sup>2</sup>.

1.4.3 Otters exploit a wide range of aquatic habitats from small ditches to large rivers, estuaries, and coasts. Their range can extend for many kilometres, depending on the conditions in the catchment and the availability of food (fish) and shelter. Otters will use a variety of places as a resting site which are referred to as ‘holts’, ‘den’, ‘couch’ and can be covered or uncovered. Holts are generally considered to consist of tunnels, cavities or other covered structures used by otters<sup>3</sup>.

1.4.4 Otter may be supported in Nant Yr Aber SINC by the three fish species previously mentioned, brown trout, Atlantic salmon, and bullhead, also part of the SINC’s designation, acting as prey for the otter. All three fish species are also included within Caerphilly’s Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

## 1.5 Objectives

1.5.1 The objectives of the otter survey and report are to:

- Determine the presence/absence of otters and the likelihood of breeding;
- Locate all holts, laying up areas, and otter activity within the site;
- Description of the survey methodology;
- Survey results; and

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<sup>1</sup> Mathews F, and Harrower C. (2020). IUCN – compliant Red List for Britain’s Terrestrial Mammals. Assessment by the Mammal Society under contract to Natural England, Natural Resources Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage. Natural England, Peterborough ISBN 978-1-78354-485-1

<sup>2</sup> Biodiversity Action Plan (2022). Caerphilly County Borough, Volumes i and ii.

<sup>3</sup> Chanin, P. (2003). Ecology of the European Otter, Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers Ecology Series No. 10. English Nature, Peterborough.



- Conclusion and recommendations.

## 1.6 **Quality Assurance & Environmental Management**

- 1.6.1 The survey was overseen by and the report checked and verified by a full member of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), whom is bound by its code of professional conduct.
- 1.6.2 The survey was undertaken with reference to the recommendations given in British Standard (BS) 42020, and as stated within specialist guidance, as appropriate, and are referenced separately.
- 1.6.3 All of the participating ecologists have previous experience of undertaking otter surveys and are confident in identifying field signs.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Otter Survey

- 2.1.1 The otter survey was undertaken by suitably experienced ecologists on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2024. The survey broadly followed standard guidance outlined in Monitoring the Otter, Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers, Monitoring Series No. 10 (Chanin, 2003)<sup>4</sup>. This consisted of searching for field signs from the banks of Nant Yr Aber, including holts, potential holt sites, footprints, feeding remains, couches (lying up sites) and spraints.
- 2.1.2 The survey area of suitable habitat for otters includes a stretch of 250m upstream of the site, with a survey corridor of approximately 10-20m width each side of the river as this is where most of the suitable habitats for otter were located.
- 2.1.3 The survey extent is shown on the Drawing Number CA13112-002 Otter Survey Area Location Plan.
- 2.1.4 The locations of field signs identified during the 2024 otter survey are mapped on Drawing Number CA13112-003 Otter Survey Results Plan.

### 2.2 Caveats and Limitations

- 2.2.1 Some areas of the tops of the riverbank were too densely vegetated or steep to safely access which limited the search for field signs, however, it was possible to access the river, and the river was clearly visible from one bank at all points of the survey. This is the same area of dense/continuous scrub located east of the site that could not be accessed as part of the PEA undertaken by AECOM. This habitat may be considered suitable for otter use. However, as the majority of the tops of the riverbanks were visible or accessible, and a number of field signs were successfully recorded, this limitation is not considered likely to have significantly affected the conclusions drawn within this report.
- 2.2.2 Access to the river downstream of the site was very limited due to the river travelling beneath ground. Where possible, otter surveys would include 250m downstream of the site, however due to access restrictions this was not possible at this location.

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<sup>4</sup>Chanin, P. (2003). Monitoring the Otter *Lutra lutra*, Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers Monitoring Series No. 10. English Nature, Peterborough.

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Habitats – Otter

- 3.1.1 The survey area encompasses the Nant Yr Aber river and its banks, and is part of the Nant Yr Aber SINC, which is a tributary of the River Rhymney, which itself forms the River Rhymney SINC. Nant Yr Aber within the survey area is approximately 3m wide, with a slow water current, and an average depth of less than 0.5m. The average western bank height was 3m, which has a steep bank face profile (> 45 degrees), with the average eastern bank height being 2m, which at most points of the survey area had a steep bank face profile. The riverbed and eastern river bank face has a concrete beam acting as reinforcement for the majority of its length within the survey area. The eastern riverbank face was reinforced for the first approximately 50m of the survey area with a brick and mortar wall. Both riverbanks are reinforced with block stones pressed into the earth of the river bank face. Additionally, wooden baffles and large wooden beams have been pinned into the riverbed to act as reinforcement in the latter portion of the survey area, downstream and to slow the flow of water. The bank faces are dominated by riparian scrub and grassland. Areas of woodland meets the scrub on the western bank. However, an area of recreation, with amenity grassland, scattered trees, and a footpath is located on the eastern bank.
- 3.1.2 The habitats that surround Nant Yr Aber include semi-natural broadleaved woodland, developed land and sealed surfaces, modified grassland, neutral grassland, pond (located within the site, as part of the primary school), and dense scrub habitats, as well as the Nant Yr Aber tributary leading to the river Rhymney. The pond is small, lined, and inaccessible to otters due to a large child-safety fence, and is located within the school grounds. The invasive non-native species Japanese knotweed *Reynoutria japonica* and Himalayan balsam *Impatiens glandulifera* are also present along the river banks, and the latter within the broadleaved woodland.
- 3.1.3 There is a moderate-high level of human disturbance within the area. This disturbance is mainly as a result of dog walkers facilitated by the pathway adjacent to the river, and the primary school within the site. Further human disturbance within these habitats also includes the noise and lighting from the adjacent busy roads, including the residential areas, and superstores and adjoining car parks. However, it is evident that otters are utilising habitats along the river and the bridges for resting and sprainting, so the disturbance is considered to be sufficiently low to allow for otters to continue to use the river.

3.1.4 While the disturbance is considered significant enough to discourage otters from resting within the terrestrial habitat during the day, it is likely that human disturbance is less intense at night, and therefore unlikely to deter otters from resting and utilising the terrestrial habitats at night.

### 3.2 **Otter Survey**

3.2.1 Several old and new otter spraints were identified beneath the bridges on Nant Yr Aber river. The older spraints were located at approximate grid reference location ST 15346 88084, and the newer otter spraints were located at approximate grid reference location ST 15346 88131. Photographs of the otter field signs, including potential areas for laying up are provided in Appendix 1 – Otter Survey Results.

3.2.2 The otter spraints were deposited beneath bridges over Nant Yr Aber, both leading to a superstore car park. The older spraints were dry, dark, and crumbly, as well as lacking scent. This is considered to be likely due to the spraints being old. The newer spraints were intact, and had a distinct sweet otter-like scent. This is considered to be due to the spraint being freshly laid. The discovery of old and new spraints along this stretch of the Nant Yr Aber suggests otter are using the river year-round.

3.2.3 Some mammal tracks were found on the banks of the river, leading to the river bank face, although it was not possible to distinguish whether they were evidence of otter use or were likely to have been from domestic dog or mink due to the public right of way path adjacent to the river. Other possible field signs were large gaps between riprap stones which could be used by otters as laying up sites, as well as making potential use of the drainage pipe leading into Nant Yr Aber.

3.2.4 The locations of field signs recorded during the otter survey can be found mapped on Drawing Number CA13112-003 Otter Survey Results Plan.

### 3.3 **Summary**

3.3.1 Following the findings of the otter survey carried out in August 2024, it can be concluded that the river adjacent to the site, the Nant Yr Aber is part of a territory used by otters. It is thought that otters are frequently using the river year-round for feeding and laying up, and potentially breeding.

## 4 NATURE CONSERVATION EVALUATION

- 4.1.1 Survey and desk study results indicate that otters are using the stretch of the river surveyed, due to multiple spraints of different ages found suggesting otters use Nant Yr Aber on a regular basis. Much of the river along the stretch surveyed is bordered by a footpath or roads, which is likely to deter otters from resting in many of these areas during the day, however, the bridges where the spraints were found offer shelter and protection, alongside otters typically being active at night when the superstore and adjoining car park are closed.
- 4.1.2 Nant Yr Aber SINC was designated a SINC in part for supporting otter as well as fish populations. The desk study confirmed the presence of otters within 2km, with a record existing in the last 10 years. Together with the field signs observed, it is therefore considered that the river contains enough food resources to support otter populations and that otters continue to use the wider Nant Yr Aber, and Rhymney river catchment area. The otter survey indicates that otters are using the section of the Nant Yr Aber surveyed, most likely for foraging, commuting, feeding, and laying up.
- 4.1.3 Otters are widely distributed throughout Wales. The following excerpt has been extracted from 'The State of Mammals in Wales Report' (Natural Resources Wales, 2020 ) regarding the distribution of otter in Wales:

*"Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) such as dieldrin, DDT and PCBs have put both human and wildlife health at risk. POPs were the primary cause of the crash in otter populations in the 1960s–70s: being at the top of the freshwater food chain, otters were particularly vulnerable because POPs bioaccumulate and biomagnify. While some areas of Wales fared better than England, only 20% of Welsh sites assessed in the national survey of 1977–78 had signs of otters. Usage of POPs is now controlled, and a clear recovery of otters in Wales is apparent, with 90% of national survey sites being positive for otters in 2009–10.*

*The geographical distribution of the otter is much larger than in the previous review (1995), showing complete recolonisation of Wales. Similarly, the National Otter Surveys showed an increase in the number of occupied 10km squares in Wales, rising from 38% in 1977–1989 to 72% in 2002–2003. Occasionally, individuals are even recorded in highly urbanised areas such as central Cardiff."*

- 4.1.4 Otters have a distribution of 20,643km in Wales, showing a population growth trend. They estimate that there is a population of 1,000 otters across Wales, however, this estimate is uncertain due to data deficiency.
- 4.1.5 Recent records within 2km of the site suggest that otters are present in the locality but not in large numbers (although this may be due to under-recording of signs). Otters are part of the Caerphilly Council's Local BAP<sup>5</sup>, and are a qualifying feature of the Nant Yr Aber SINC. The otters occasionally using the stretch of the river within the site are therefore considered to be of County importance for nature conservation.

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<sup>5</sup> Biodiversity Action Plan (2022). Caerphilly County Borough, Volumes i and ii.

## 5 ENHANCEMENTS

- 5.1.1 In accordance with the requirements of the Planning Policy Wales 2024 and BSI 42020:2013, ecological enhancements should be proposed which will result in a net gain in biodiversity. These enhancement proposals should be included within the Ecological Impact Assessment for the project.
- 5.1.2 As otters are present within Nant Yr Aber as part of the Nant Yr Aber SINC, there are some opportunities to provide enhancement measures.
- 5.1.3 Holts and other otter resting places can be found in dense vegetation which appears inaccessible. There may be the opportunity for additional planting on the river banks to provide cover that will protect otters from disturbance. Coppicing can provide dense coverage at ground level. Where recreation occurs or is proposed in and around water bodies where otters are present, ample vegetation can be particularly important.
- 5.1.4 An artificial otter holt could be created in an appropriate undisturbed location along the banks of the Nant Yr Aber. An artificial holt could be placed into the river bank face alongside the water course, due to the presence of artificial reinforcement already alongside the river, to increase protection and shelter for the local otter populations. There is potential to remove some riprap placed along the eastern side of the river bank face, and insert an artificial holt.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

6.1.1 The otter survey indicates that otters are using the section of Nant Yr Aber surveyed, most likely for foraging, commuting, resting during the night when commuting, and laying up.

6.1.2 As much of the river is bordered by public rights of way with regular disturbance, it is expected that otters are unlikely to be using the terrestrial habitats within the survey area for resting during the day or holt creation. However, it is likely that otters are occasionally utilising Nant Yr Aber for commuting and feeding, resting and laying up during the night, and potentially breeding, and are considered to be of **County** importance.

### 6.2 Report Validity

6.2.1 This report will remain valid for a period of 12 months from the date of the survey. If the proposed development has not commenced within this timeframe, it is recommended that an update otter survey is undertaken.




## 7 REFERENCES



1. Biodiversity Action Plan for Caerphilly County Borough (2022). Caerphilly County Borough, Volumes i and ii
2. Chanin, P. (2003). Monitoring the Otter *Lutra lutra*, Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers Monitoring Series No. 10. English Nature, Peterborough.
3. Mathews F, and Harrower C. (2020). IUCN – compliant Red List for Britain’s Terrestrial Mammals. Assessment by the Mammal Society under contract to Natural England, Natural Resources Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage. Natural England, Peterborough ISBN 978-1-78354-485-1
4. Chanin, P. (2003). Ecology of the European Otter, Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers Ecology Series No. 10. English Nature, Peterborough.

## APPENDICES


**Appendix 1**  
**Otter Survey Results**

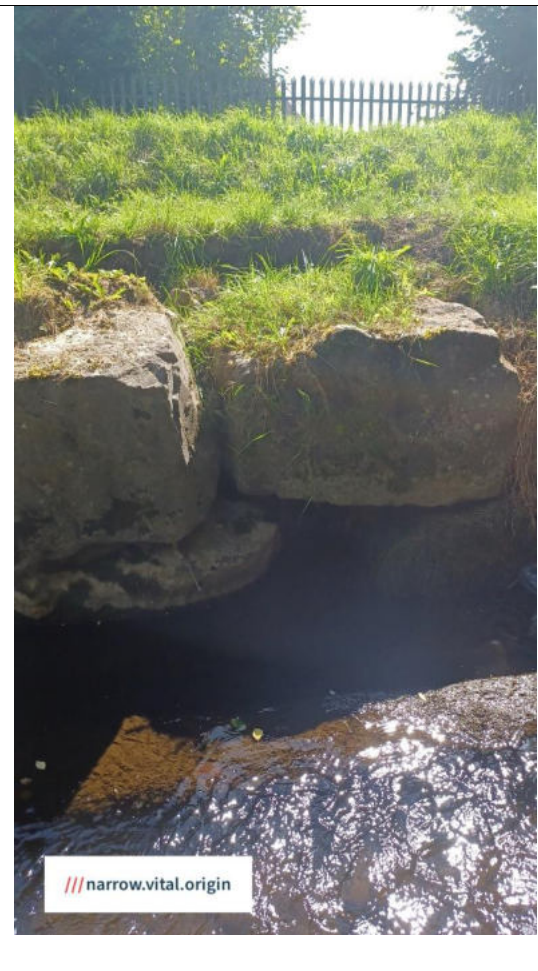
### Appendix 1: Otter Survey Results

Otter Evidence	National Grid Reference	Notes
	ST 15346 88084	Older otter spraints – crumble and lacking a scent indicative of the age of the spraints. Several spraints were found beneath the bridge piers. The first picture shows the location of the spraints, with the second picture showing the spraints themselves.

			
 <p data-bbox="252 1848 598 1921">/// selection.spectacle.blog</p>		ST 15345 88130	Fresh otter spraint found beneath second bridge, with the intact nature and texture denoting that the spraint has been recently laid.



	<p>ST 15370 87673</p>	<p>Possible otter laying up area due to the depth and shelter offered and the area's proximity to the river.</p>
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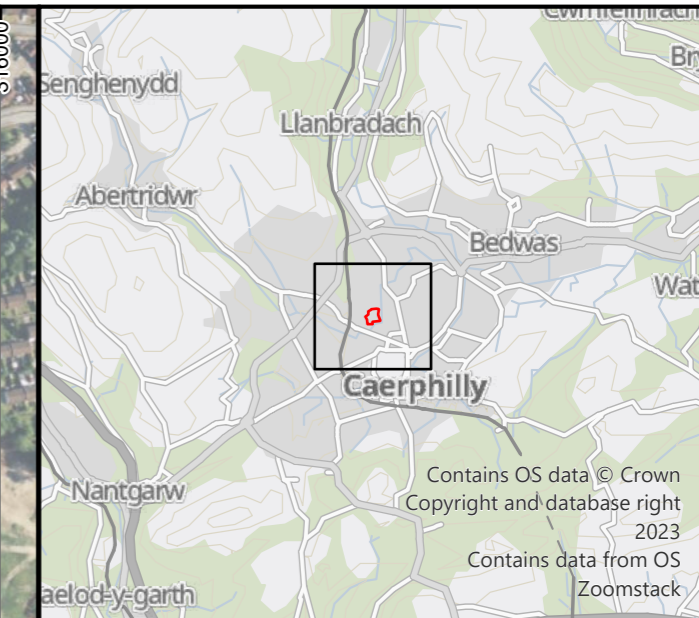
		ST 15342 87824	Possible otter laying up area due to the depth and shelter offered, and the area's proximity to the river.
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	ST 15355 87715	Potential otter run or slide leading into river
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## DRAWINGS





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 Contains data from OS Zoomstack

**KEY**  
 Approximate Site Boundary

**Notes:**  
 Boundaries are indicative. Aerial imagery shown for context purposes only.

A	FIRST ISSUE	26/09/24	BL	GM	SC
REVISION	DETAILS	DATE	DRAWN	CHKD	APPD

CLIENT  
 AECOM

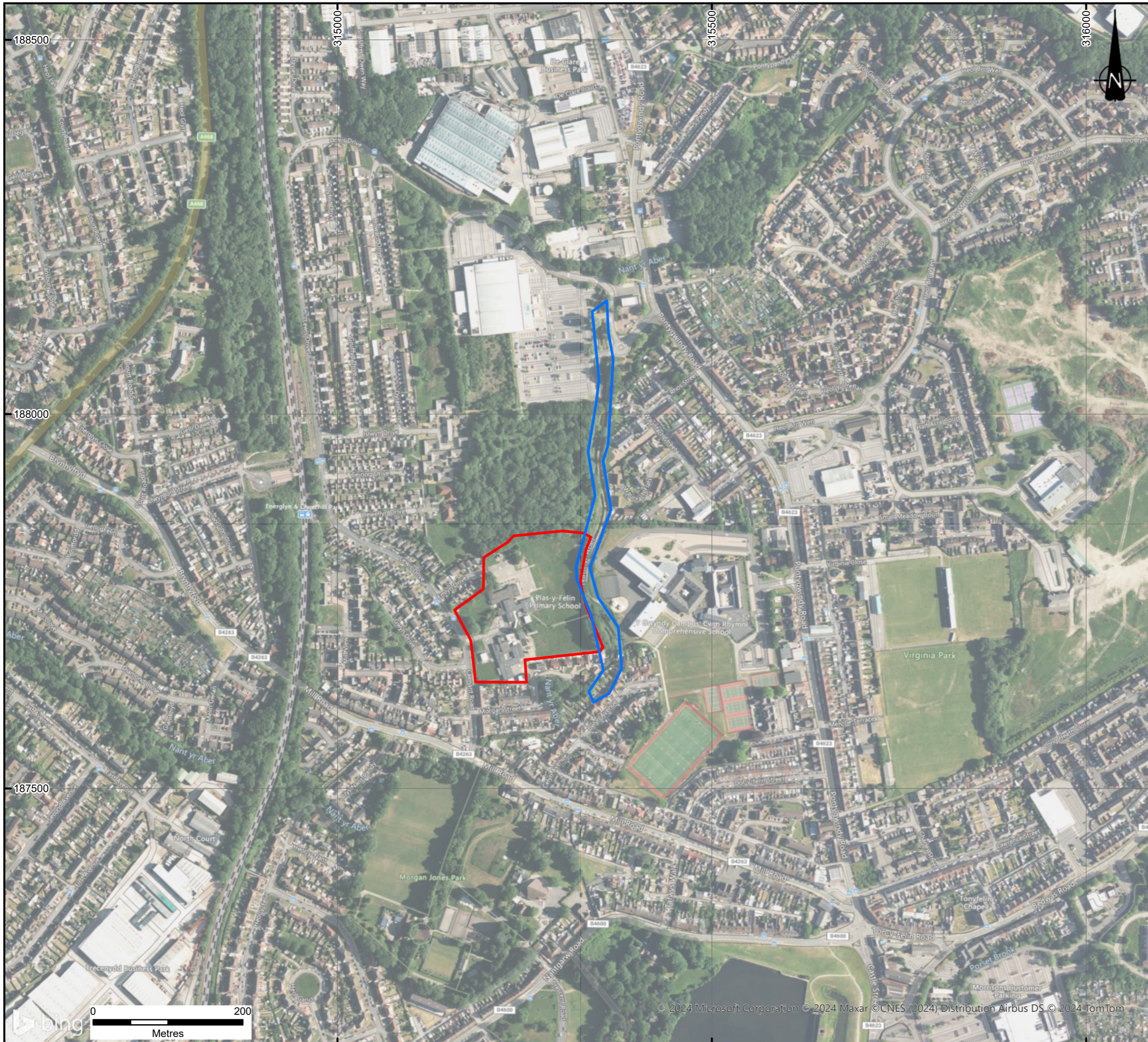
PROJECT  
 PLASYFELIN PRIMARY SCHOOL

DRAWING TITLE  
 SITE LOCATION PLAN

DRG No.	CA13112-001	REV	A	SUIT CODE	---
DRG SIZE	A3	SCALE	1:5,000	DATE	26/09/2024
DRAWN BY	BL	CHECKED BY	GM	APPROVED BY	SC





**KEY**

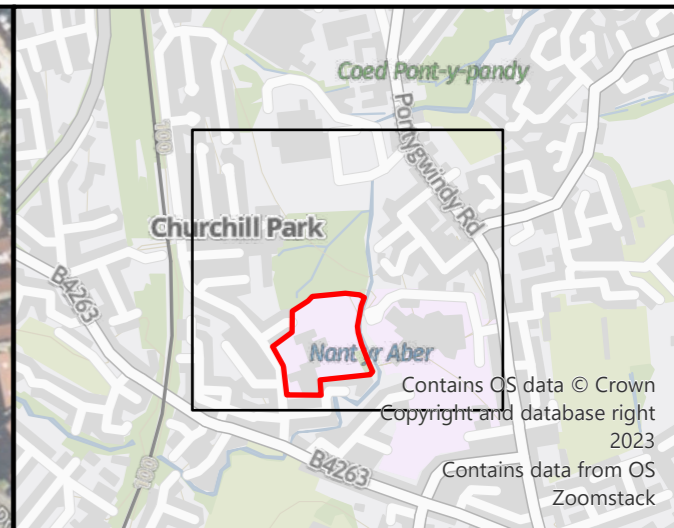
- Approximate Site Boundary
- Approximate Otter Survey Area

**Notes:**

Boundaries are indicative. Aerial imagery shown for context purposes only.

A	FIRST ISSUE	26/09/24	BL	GM	SC
REVISION	DETAILS	DATE	DRAWN	CHKD	APPD
CLIENT					
AECOM					
PROJECT					
PLASYFELIN PRIMARY SCHOOL					
DRAWING TITLE					
OTTER SURVEY AREA LOCATION PLAN					
DRG No.	CA13112-002	REV	A	SUIT CODE	---
DRG SIZE	A3	SCALE	1:5,000	DATE	26/09/2024
DRAWN BY	BL	CHECKED BY	GM	APPROVED BY	SC





- KEY**
- Approximate Otter Survey Area
  - Approximate Site Boundary
- Evidence**
- ◆ Potential laying up place
  - ◆ Potential run or slide
  - ◆ Spraint

**Notes:**  
Boundaries are indicative. Aerial imagery shown for context purposes only.

A	FIRST ISSUE	27/09/24	BL	GM	SC
REVISION	DETAILS	DATE	DRAWN	CHKD	APPD
CLIENT					
AECOM					
PROJECT					
PLASYFELIN PRIMARY SCHOOL					
DRAWING TITLE					
OTTER SURVEY RESULTS PLAN					
DRG No.	CA13112-003	REV	A	SUIT. CODE	---
DRG SIZE	A3	SCALE	1:2,000	DATE	27/09/2024
DRAWN BY	BL	CHECKED BY	GM	APPROVED BY	SC





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