



The New Forest National Park Habitat Mitigation Scheme

**Mitigating recreational impacts on
New Forest designated sites**

Annual Report on Scheme Implementation

(1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021)

1. Introduction

1.1 This is the annual report on the implementation of the National Park Authority's (NPA) Habitat Mitigation Scheme¹. It describes the progress made implementing mitigation measures during the year from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. There were a net total of 11 new dwellings that made contributions to the Scheme during this period that required mitigation.

2. Implementation of Mitigation Measures

2.1 The key mitigation measures in the NPA's Habitat Mitigation Scheme that were implemented during this year included:

- Provision of Rangers
- Delivering messaging across a range of communications channels
- Planning for improvements and installing monitoring for alternative recreational routes outside the designated sites

2.2 The outbreak of Covid made 2020 an unusual and exceptional year for the New Forest and the Habitat Mitigation Scheme. The first lockdown started on 23 March 2020 with no recreational visits to the New Forest allowed. The Forest was empty and Forestry England closed car parks – exercise was only allowed when walking from home with an emphasis on staying at home. With no recreational activity in the New Forest there was no need for any mitigation measures during this period. It is believed that the habitats and wildlife of the designated sites benefitted, particularly as this was part of the breeding season for ground nesting birds and they will have enjoyed no disturbance.

¹ Details of how development can impact the designated sites in the New Forest and the need for mitigation is outlined on the website at: www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/planning/development-impacts-on-protected-areas/

2.3 The Royal College of Policing released advice that ‘it was lawful to drive for a walk’ on 16 April, and by 10 May the Government switched the public message to “stay alert” as people were told they could exercise more than once a day. There was a large increase of visitors during this period and on 13 May Forestry England opened their car parks. The large surge in visitors to much higher-than-normal levels created a range of issues, including a particularly high fire risk with very hot dry weather persisting.

2.4 In response, the Communications team was proactive in releasing some key messages, including a press release on ground nesting birds and launching the New Forest Code, together with starting a campaign to ban disposable barbecues to reduce the fire risks (details of these can be found in the Communications section below.) The ranger team was also extremely busy in providing advice to visitors, including promoting the New Forest Code and advising against the use of disposable barbecues.

Ranger activities

2.2 This was a highly unusual year for the ranger team. The first national lockdown meant that for most of the spring there were no recreational visits to the designated sites and rangers were also not allowed to travel out and about in the Forest. However, once people were allowed to travel further from home to get exercise there was a significant increase in visits to the open areas of the Forest. As people started to seek open uncrowded spaces the number of recreational trips surged to much higher than usual levels, and the ranger team worked tirelessly to promote key mitigation messages and advice.

2.3 Three seasonal rangers were employed to focus on recreational activities during the spring and summer of 2020, with one being retained throughout the autumn and winter of 2020/21. During the spring and summer they engaged with a total of 1,467 people at car parks and other locations. This represented a fall relative to the previous year (3,960), as a large part of the normal season that rangers cover had been lost due to the Covid lockdown. Moreover, there were no public events (fairs, shows etc) held which the rangers would normally attend.

Communications

2.5 A significant element of the Mitigation Scheme is dedicated to delivering consistent key messages about the protected birds, habitats and species and how recreational users can avoid impacting these. This year articles containing these key messages were again included in a range of publications, and messages have been delivered through the NPA’s social media channels including Facebook, Twitter and its website. All these media channels allow messages to be delivered to a very large audience, and even if only a very small proportion of these lead to responsible behaviour in the protected sites, then these measures are expected to be effective.

2.6 The reach of key mitigation messages included the use of:

- NPA website – 17,407 page views.

- NPA Publications², incl Essential Guide, Park Life, Pocket Guides etc – almost 121,000 copies printed.
- E- News Letter – click throughs to article/webpage - 3696
- Social media Facebook / Twitter / Instagram - Engagements 14,339 (post was liked, shared or commented on); Reached: 227,753 (post appeared in a feed, but with no comment, like or share); video views 126,860.

2.7 In response to the surge in recreational trips to the New Forest following the ending of the first lockdown in early 2020, a New Forest Code was launched to provide advice on a range of issues, including many affecting the designated sites. The key messages in the New Forest Code that are designed to help mitigate the impacts of recreation on the designated sites include:

- *No fires or barbecues* (lowers fire risk to wildlife and habitats).
- *Park only in car parks* (avoid damage to verges);
- *Help wildlife by keeping to the main tracks* (avoids wildlife disturbance and habitat damage);
- *Keep dogs under control. Don't let dogs approach or chase any animals* (avoids wildlife disturbance)
- *Stick to permitted cycle tracks* (avoids wildlife disturbance and habitat damage)

The Code was heavily promoted and is supported by a range of New Forest organisations, including Forestry England, the Verderers, the New Forest Commoners, Go New Forest and New Forest District Council. A large media coverage was achieved with over 127,000 engagements (post was liked, shared or commented on) and this reached over 1.25 million (post appeared in a feed, but with no comment, like or share) through the NPA's media channels – a really exceptional level of dissemination of key mitigation messages. This again demonstrates the huge advantage of regularly using communications channels to deliver the Schemes' key messages – a very significant delivery for a relatively modest cost.

2.8 The other main mitigation campaign was to promote the banning of disposable barbecues. The Met Office said it was the third warmest year in records dating back to 1884. The hot and dry weather meant that the fire risk to wildlife and habitats was significant. The scale of the ecological damage done by the fire at Wareham Forest in Dorset that burnt nearly 500 acres in May 2020 was a reminder of the risks to the SAC and SPA in the New Forest. Disposable barbecues brought on recreational trips were identified as a significant risk and a campaign was launched to ban the use and sale locally of these.

2.9 The Authority, partnered with Forestry England and Hampshire Fire and Rescue, persuaded supermarkets, local and independent stores inside and outside the New Forest to join the cause. This was also highlighted on BBC breakfast news and local news and radio. Over 50 retailers removed disposable barbecues from sale in a bid to protect the New Forest from the risk of being destroyed by fire.

² NPA publications are distributed to local attractions, information points and accommodation sites, and distributed by NPA and Forestry England Rangers at public events, fairs, shows, campsites and car parks.

Improvements to alternative recreational routes outside the designated sites

2.10 This project involves improvements to signage on selected rights of way outside the internationally designated areas that would provide an alternative location for recreation. Last year the first route to be identified was at Hale – Woodgreen. A further route at Landford has now been selected. These routes can be seen on the promoted Walking routes page on the NPA's website at: <https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/things-to-do/walking/new-forest-walks/>

2.11 The installation of improved waymarkers is planned for subsequent years following the collection of initial data to show the usage of the route prior to any improvements (see Monitoring section below).

3. Monitoring and Research

3.1 People counters have been installed on the Hale – Woodgreen walking route to gather baseline usage data before new signage is implemented to promote this as an alternative recreation route outside the designated sites. This will enable the monitoring of whether the signage improvements will increase the use of these walks away from the designated sites. It is the intention to install these people counters on a second route in Landford that has also been selected as an alternative recreation route.

3.2 Development of the Walking App now allows monitoring of the number of users. Importantly, it also shows which walking routes people are seeking information about and which walking routes are being used. This data will be helpful in determining whether interventions to promote certain routes away from the most sensitive designated sites will prove to be effective.

4. Financial Position

Balance of funds available for mitigation measures at 31 March 2020

4.1 Funds held by the NPA at 31 March 2020 were £107,228.

Contributions received during 2020/21

4.2 During 2020 – 2021, habitat mitigation contributions towards the New Forest designated sites were received from a number of small-scale residential schemes with the main one being close to the railway station in Brockenhurst. The net total received in developer contributions available for current mitigation measures during the period was £13,750 (with £24,882 received for the In-Perpetuity reserve³ for long-term mitigation measures).

³ The In-Perpetuity reserve has been set up as part of the Revised Habitat Mitigation Scheme SPD and details can be seen at <https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/planning/development-impacts-on-protected-areas/>

Expenditure on mitigation measures during 2020/21

4.3 During the 2020– 2021 reporting year a total of £34,553 was spent on mitigation measures, details of which are outlined in Section 2 above. Expenditure on mitigation measures comprised:

- Seasonal Rangers: Habitat mitigation contributions funded the seasonal ranger resource working in the New Forest SAC and SPA - £26,800.
- Communications: The cost of interpretation information, publications, website and social media development - £5,000.
- A short educational film: The final elements to deliver this film (expenditure last year of £6k), which has strong messages about the potential impacts of people on rare bird species and habitats in the New Forest - £280.
- Monitoring: Censors and data collection system for monitoring footfall for alternative recreation routes - £2,473.

Balance remaining for current mitigation measures at 31 March 2021

4.4 Following the funds received and expenditure during the year, the funds remaining and available for mitigation measures in 2021/22 are £86,425.

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| Starting balance: | £107,228 |
| Contributions received: | £ 13,750 |
| <i>minus</i> expenditure: | -£ 34,553 |
| <u>Funds available for 2021/22</u> | <u>£ 86,425</u> |

Balance of the In-Perpetuity Reserve at 31 March 2021

4.5 As at the end of March 2020 there was £2,262 in the In-Perpetuity fund. £24,882 was received during 2020/21. This means that there was a total £27,144 in the In-Perpetuity reserve at the end of March 2021.

5. Development of the Revised Habitat Mitigation Scheme SPD

5.1 The Revised Habitat Mitigation Scheme Supplementary Planning Document⁴ (SPD) was adopted in July 2020, replacing the NPA's existing Habitat Mitigation Scheme, which had operated since 2012.

5.2 The Revised Habitat Mitigation Scheme updates the previous Habitat Scheme to reflect:

- the scale and type of mitigation needed to reflect the planned increase in development in the new Local Plan;
- the area covered by the Scheme;
- incorporating long term impacts and mitigation (in-perpetuity);
- inflation adjustments to developer contributions; and

⁴ Details can be seen at www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/planning/development-impacts-on-protected-areas/

- clarifying the requirements for visitor accommodation, age related housing, and permitted development.

5.3 The Habitat Mitigation Scheme Steering Group (comprising representatives from the RSPB, Hampshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England, New Forest District Council and specialists from the NPA) will now oversee the implementation of the mitigation measures identified in the Revised Habitat Mitigation Scheme SPD (2020). The principles of this Mitigation Scheme are based on the evidence contained in Habitats Regulations Assessment of the Local Plan.

6. Development of a strategic habitat mitigation approach for the New Forest

6.1 The NPA's Habitat Mitigation Scheme does not address the significant scale of residential development planned in areas outside the National Park boundary and its potential impacts on the New Forest's designated sites. This is the responsibility of neighbouring planning authorities. Consequently, the NPA is committed to working with Natural England and other neighbouring local authorities to develop a longer-term strategic approach to prevent adverse effects on the internationally designated nature conservation sites in the New Forest.

6.2 This work is still progressing. Research into visitor patterns and recreational use of the New Forest has been completed by specialist consultants Footprint Ecology. This research focuses on understanding the impacts of recreation arising from increased housing development in and around the National Park on the New Forest's international nature conservation designations and the potential for mitigation.

6.3 The primary aim of this research is to serve as an appropriate joint evidence base to inform the longer-term development of a cross-boundary comprehensive mitigation approach. However, the future implementation of the NPA's Mitigation Scheme will also be informed by the evidence of visitor patterns and mitigation measures contained in this research. The detailed reports of this research were published in May 2020 and can be seen on the NPA's website at: <https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/conservation/managing-recreation/future-forest/research-into-recreational-use-of-the-new-forests-protected-habitats-footprint-ecology-2020/>.