



The New Forest National Park Habitat Mitigation Scheme

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

Annual Report on Scheme Implementation

(1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022)

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 2021 to 31 March 2022. Contributions to the Scheme were received from new dwellings, visitor accommodation, and temporary camping sites during this period.

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 additional ranger resource
- Delivering messaging across a range of communications channels
- Contribution towards monitoring

2.2 The continuation of the Covid pandemic during 2021/2 meant the unusual circumstances for the New Forest and the Habitat Mitigation Scheme remained during this period. The fluctuation of national restrictions on meeting in public meant that the volume of recreational visits varied throughout the year, but with large numbers visiting when restrictions were lifted.

2.3 The number of new dwellings and other development coming forward remained at relatively low levels and this meant that the overall income from developer contributions also remained modest.

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/

Ranger activities

- 2.1 This was another unusual year for the ranger team. Social distancing and other restrictions limited the number of visitors early in the year, which meant less pressure on the rare birds during the ground nesting season. However, these restrictions were gradually eased in the late spring and early summer, so that by mid-summer and early autumn the number of visitors had increased markedly. Like the previous year, as restrictions were lifted and people started to seek open uncrowded spaces, the number of recreational trips surged to higher than usual levels, and the ranger team needed to work extensively to promote key mitigation messages and provide advice.
- 2.2 Three seasonal rangers were employed to focus on recreational activities during the spring and summer of 2021, with one being retained throughout the autumn. This ranger resource is in addition to the core NPA ranger team (and those of partners) working in the New Forest and is focused specifically on mitigating the recreational impacts arising from new development in the National Park. It was decided that sufficient mitigation work would be achieved during the year without the need to retain a ranger throughout the winter months. Therefore, the funding for a 'winter' extension for a ranger was postponed.
- 2.3 It was considered that relative to last year many visitors were either more receptive to the messages from the rangers or had already some understanding of the vulnerability of the wildlife and the potential impacts visitors might have. It was thought that this partially reflected the significant media campaigns over the last few years to raise awareness of the vulnerability of the wildlife and habitats.
- 2.4 This year there was a change in the signs put out into key locations in the Forest to warn visitors that they were approaching a sensitive area for wildlife (including ground nesting birds). They were coloured red compared with last year's yellow and the language of the warning was stronger.

Communications

- 2.5 A significant element of the Mitigation Scheme is dedicated to delivering consistent key messages about the protected SPA and SAC 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 – 29,525 page views.

- NPA Publications², including Essential Guide, Park Life, Pocket Guides etc – almost 400,000 copies printed.
- E-Newsletter – click throughs to article/webpage - 1662
- Social media Facebook / Twitter / Instagram - Engagements 51,924; Reached: 897,292.

2.7 The New Forest Code continues to be an important medium for distributing key mitigation messages. About 40,000 flyers and posters (and a few boards) were printed, and it was also included in the Pocket Guide and Park Life publications.

2.8 Overall, the number of people accessing and receiving messages across the various NPA communication channels remained high this year, but it is lower than the exceptional levels during the pandemic last year. This reflects the very high levels of coverage last year following the launch of the New Forest Code and the lower level of messaging about the risk of fires in 2021 (following the launch of the campaign to ban the use of disposable barbeques in 2020) with the much wetter summer conditions in 2021.

2.9 However, this year's extent and reach of delivering key mitigation messages again demonstrates the huge advantage of regularly using communications channels to deliver the Schemes' key messages – a very significant delivery for a relatively modest outlay.

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. 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 and signs for these routes has been delayed (to take advantage of a bid to the National Grid's Landscape Enhancement Initiative) and is planned for subsequent years following the collection of initial data to show the usage of the route prior to any improvements.

3. Monitoring and Research

3.1 People counters have been installed on the Hale & Woodgreen and Landford & Hamptworth walking routes to gather baseline usage data. Four gate counters were deployed, which also emit an electronic pulse to detect any smart phones in the area as a further way of counting users. A contribution was made to the data collection system for monitoring footfall.

3.2 We are also constantly developing and improving our Walking App, adding more routes, more information points and better accessibility functions. From the App

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.

we can gather information about the use and popularity of each of our promoted routes. We continue to monitor the number of downloads and have upgraded the app software to estimate the number of people using each route. 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 and to monitor the success of signage and route promotion. The app has yearly costs in addition to one-off payments for feature improvements.

4. Financial Position

Balance of funds available for mitigation measures at 31 March 2021

4.1 Funds held by the NPA at 31 March 2021 were £86,424.59 for current plan period spending, and £27,144 in the in-perpetuity fund – giving a total of £113,568.59

Contributions received during 2021/22

4.2 During 2021 – 2022, habitat mitigation contributions towards the New Forest designated sites were received from small-scale residential schemes, visitor accommodation at Walhampton, the RSPB centre at Franchises Lodge, and from some campsites. The net total received in developer contributions available for current mitigation measures during the period was £35,065 (with a further £35,570 received for the In-Perpetuity reserve³ for long-term mitigation measures) giving a total received of £70,635.

Expenditure on mitigation measures during 2021/22

4.3 During the 2021 – 2022 reporting year a total of £28,614 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 - £16,117.
- Communications: The cost of interpretation information, publications, website and social media development - £5,000.
- Volunteers: A contribution towards a new Ambassador initiative to get more volunteers involved in looking after the Forest, including the distribution of the New Forest Code, reporting of incidents and recording verge parking - £5,000.
- New Leaflets - £500
- Monitoring: Data collection systems for monitoring footfall for alternative recreation routes - £2,000.

Balance remaining for current mitigation measures at 31 March 2022

4.4 Following the funds received and expenditure during the year, the funds remaining and available for mitigation measures in 2022/23 are £92,876.

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/>

Starting balance:	£86,424
Contributions received:	£35,065
<i>minus</i> expenditure:	-£28,614
<u>Funds available for 2021/22</u>	<u>£92,875</u>

Balance of the In-Perpetuity Reserve at 31 March 2022

4.5 As at the end of March 2021 there was £27,144 in the In-Perpetuity fund. £35,570 was received in contributions during 2021/22. This means that there was a total of £62,714 in the In-Perpetuity reserve at the end of March 2022.

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

5.1 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, who are the 'competent authorities' under the Habitats Regulations. 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.

5.2 This work is still progressing. Research into visitor patterns and recreational use of the New Forest was completed in May 2020 by specialist consultants Footprint Ecology – this evidence of visitor patterns will inform the future implementation of the NPA's Mitigation Scheme and can be seen on the NPA's website at: <https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/conservation/managing-recreation/managing-recreation/research-into-recreational-use-of-the-new-forests-protected-habitats-footprint-ecology-2020/>

5.3 Following the publication of the research reports in 2020, the planning authorities commissioned Footprint Ecology to undertake additional work relating to the 'zone of influence' of the New Forest's designated sites. This follow-up work defines the catchment area within which new development would have an impact on the designated sites due to visitor pressure. Defining this catchment area provides a basis for the relevant planning authorities to seek mitigation for the recreational impacts arising from new development on the protected sites of the New Forest. The zone of influence is defined as the area within 13.8 kilometres from the New Forest designated sites. Natural England has endorsed the conclusions of this work and the earlier research reports and supports their use as the best available information. The zone of influence report can also be found at <https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/conservation/managing-recreation/managing-recreation/research-into-recreational-use-of-the-new-forests-protected-habitats-footprint-ecology-2020/>