



Item

Report to the Partnership for South Hampshire Joint Committee

Date: 26 September 2023
Report of: David Illsley, Policy & Conservation Manager, New Forest National Park Authority
Subject: Mitigating recreation pressures from planned new development on the New Forest's internationally designated nature conservation sites

SUMMARY

This report outlines the key evidence and work undertaken to date by planning authorities within the 13.8km 'zone of influence' of the New Forest's internationally designated sites. It seeks endorsement for continued joint working on mitigating recreational pressures arising from planned development in South Hampshire through a package of 'Strategic Access Management & Monitoring' (SAMM) measures delivered within the New Forest's designated sites, complementing measures delivered within the local planning authority's own jurisdictions. Natural England are supportive of a SAMM strategy for the New Forest that is to be consistent and proportionate across the zone of influence.

RECOMMENDATION

It is RECOMMENDED that the Joint Committee:-

- a) NOTE the key evidence base studies and joint working undertaken to date by local planning authorities within the zone of influence of the New Forest's internationally designated sites (SAC, SPA and Ramsar); and
- b) ENDORSE the principle of planning authorities continuing to work together to develop an agreed package of mitigation measures to be implemented within the New Forest's internationally designated sites, complementing the measures being delivered within surrounding local authority areas.

BACKGROUND

1. The New Forest's internationally designated nature conservation sites

1.1 The New Forest is a unique ancient landscape, one of the largest tracts of accessible semi-natural vegetation in the country and one of our most important wildlife sites. The area hosts three international nature conservation designations:

- The New Forest was designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) in 1992 for its breeding and over-wintering bird species of European importance. The New Forest SPA covers circa 28,000 hectares and is entirely within Hampshire.
- The New Forest is also designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its habitats and non-avian species of European importance. This designation reflects the New Forest's unique mosaic of habitats, including eight heathland, grassland, woodland, wetland, bog and open water habitats. The New Forest SAC covers 29,000 hectares, predominantly within Hampshire.
- Also relevant is the New Forest's listing as a Ramsar site, under the Ramsar Convention. This designation covers 28,000 hectares of the New Forest and recognises the international importance of the site as a wetland, supporting wetland flora and fauna of international importance.

1.2 These international nature conservation designations are distinct – and designated under separate legislation – from the area's National Park status. The 57,000 hectare New Forest National Park was designated in 2005 and the New Forest SAC, SPA and Ramsar designations fall within the National Park boundary. The issues set out in this report are triggered by the New Forest's international nature conservation designations, rather than its National Park status per se.

1.3 The protection of these sites is set out in the Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations 2017 (as amended), commonly referred to as the 'Habitats Regulations.' Ramsar sites are wetlands of international importance and through national Government policy are treated as designated nature conservation sites.

1.4 Public bodies, including planning authorities, have specific duties under these Regulations to avoid deterioration of habitats and species for which sites are designated; and stringent tests must be met before plans and projects (including development) can be permitted. Importantly, the combined effects of individual plans or projects must be taken into account. This means the combined effects of individual development proposals need to be assessed for their cumulative impact on the nature conservation sites, as well as on an individual basis.

2. Evidence base for recreational impacts from planned new development

2.1 Concerns regarding recreational impacts on the New Forest date back to the 1970s, when fears regarding the lack of restrictions on camping and vehicular access led to the provision of 140+ dedicated car parks, several campsites and restrictions on where people could drive. More recently, the Habitat Regulations Assessments of various local plans (e.g. New Forest National Park Authority, New Forest District Council, Test Valley Borough Council, Eastleigh Borough Council) have highlighted potential impacts on the integrity of the New Forest's internationally protected sites from increased recreational pressures associated with planned new development.

2.2 With increasing levels of housing planned in and around the New Forest, in 2018 a group of planning authorities¹ were successful in a bid for Government funding to support a comprehensive update to the evidence base. The work was carried out by the specialist consultants Footprint Ecology, who have undertaken similar research in protected habitats across the UK (including the Solent Coast). The research focused on understanding the impacts of recreation arising from planned development on the New Forest's international nature conservation sites and the potential for mitigation. The research aimed to inform the preparation of a strategic approach to mitigating recreational impacts, to enable planned development to proceed and meet the legal requirements of the Habitats Regulations. This is in the best interests of planning authorities, communities and developers and is supported by Natural England. The Footprint Ecology work is the most comprehensive survey of recreational use of the New Forest since 2004/5 when Tourism South-East surveyed visitors to the area. The Footprint Ecology survey work included:

- 2,000 telephone interviews with people living in and around the New Forest (within 25km of the designated area).
- Counts of parked vehicles, on 15 dates spread through the year, at 270 parking locations across the designated area.
- Over 5,000 face-to-face interviews, and counts of people, at 60 car parks and other access points.
- A review of planned housing development in the respective local plans. This indicated that circa 130,000 new dwellings were planned within 25km of the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar over the period to 2036 (an increase of 16.4%).

2.3 The research reports were published in 2020 and can be viewed at [Research into recreational use of the New Forest's protected habitats - New Forest National Park Authority \(newforestnpa.gov.uk\)](https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/research-into-recreational-use-of-the-new-forest-s-protected-habitats). Key headlines from the research include:

- 70% of people interviewed in the telephone surveys had visited the New Forest at least once in the previous 12 months. 84% of interviewees in the closer (5km) distance band had visited the New Forest in the previous 12 months; the percentage declined to 54% beyond 15km.
- 83% of the face-to-face interviewees were on a short visit directly from home that day. Those staying away from home on holiday accounted for 14% of interviewees and a further 2% were staying with friends or family.
- For most face-to-face interviewees the main activity was given as either dog walking (55%) or walking (26%).
- Planned housing development within 25km of the New Forest's designated sites will result in an increase of around 11.4% in the number of recreational visits to the designated sites. This level of change solely relates to an increase in recreational visits from new housing within the 25km and additional visitors may come from further afield – for example tourist visits.
- There are many benefits of recreation, including physical and mental health and well-being and connectedness to nature. However, there are also potential impacts on protected habitats and species, including disturbance (causing reduction in the breeding of rare birds), fire (destruction of habitats and mortality

¹ Eastleigh Borough Council, New Forest District Council, New Forest National Park Authority, Southampton City Council, Test Valley Borough Council and Wiltshire Council, together with Natural England and Forestry England

of wildlife), contamination (of habitats and water courses), trampling/wear (erosion of species and loss of breeding sites) and impacts on grazing animals.

- Mitigation options include alternative recreational greenspace sites and routes outside the New Forest's designated sites; access management within the designated sites; educational and communications activities, monitoring, and the siting of development to avoid/reduce impacts.

3. Footprint Ecology report recommendations and the 'Zone of Influence'

3.1 The Footprint Ecology research reports represent a vast body of evidence and are endorsed by Natural England as the best available evidence to inform the work of planning authorities as 'competent authorities' under the Habitats Regulations.

3.2 In addition to the research reports outlined above, the steering group² commissioned further work from Footprint Ecology on the relevant 'zone of influence' for the New Forest's designated sites. Partnership for South Hampshire members will be aware that the equivalent zone for the Solent Coast's designations is 5.6km and this defines the catchment area within which additional housing is likely to have significant effects on the integrity of the designated sites from recreation and where mitigation would be legally required.

3.3 The New Forest 'Zone of Influence' report (2021, available via the link in paragraph 2.3) adopts the same principle as similar studies of using the 75th percentile (derived from the straight-line distance from the interviewee postcode to the designated sites) to define a zone around the New Forest. The zone of influence for those visiting from home was 13.8km, applied from the SAC/SPA/Ramsar boundary (see Appendix 1 – the same approach as that adopted for the Solent, Thames Basin Heaths and Dorset Heaths 'zones of influence'). This zone of influence highlights the appeal of the New Forest as a visitor destination and the need for authorities to work across administrative boundaries to address impacts.

3.4 The evidence base studies conclude that increased housing around the New Forest will exacerbate issues from recreational impacts and result in a marked increase in use. Having identified the range of impacts associated with increased recreational pressures – and the area within which planned development will result in such pressures – the research reports set out a series of key recommendations.

- Mitigation options fall under the broad headings of alternative recreational greenspace provision and routes outside of the designated sites; access management within the designated sites; education and communications activities; monitoring; and the siting of development to avoid/reduce impacts.
- Together, the measures identified could form a 'package' of avoidance and mitigation measures that should resolve the cumulative impacts from recreation associated with housing growth around the New Forest. Such a package should enable local authorities to be able to rule out adverse effects on integrity to the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar as a result of increased recreation associated with Local Plans (and, therefore, allow housing development to proceed).

² The project steering group currently comprises BCP Council, Dorset Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Fareham Borough Council, New Forest District Council, New Forest National Park Authority, Southampton City Council, Test Valley Borough Council and Wiltshire Council, alongside Natural England and Forest England

- Given the broad geographic scope and need for measures to dovetail, it will be important that there is a strategic, proportionate and co-ordinated approach, requiring partnership working across a range of authorities and stakeholders.

3.5 This last recommendation is key, with the approach taken to mitigating recreational impacts on other internationally designated sites nationally (e.g. the Dorset Heathlands, the Thames Basin Heaths and the Solent Coast) highlighting the significant benefits gained from authorities working together on a more strategic approach to addressing impacts. Natural England support the benefits a strategic approach can deliver compared to individual mitigation strategies.

4. Current approaches to mitigating recreational impacts

4.1 Unlike some other issues that have recently arisen in South Hampshire linked to the requirements of the Habitats Regulations (e.g. nutrient neutrality), several South Hampshire authorities within the identified 13.8km New Forest 'zone of influence' have local schemes in place to mitigate recreational impacts on the New Forest. Local planning authorities have acknowledged that impacts on the New Forest need to be addressed and have either established or are working on 'interim' mitigation schemes while the preparation of a more strategic solution takes place. The current approaches are summarised below. It should be noted that Natural England have significant concerns regarding the rationale used to justify the level of greenspace provision in specific interim mitigation schemes.

Planning authority	Mitigation approach	Summary of measures
Eastleigh Borough Council	Eastleigh Borough Council approved an interim New Forest mitigation strategy in March 2022	Delivery of proportionate SANG within the borough (both new provision and improvements to existing) and contributions to access management measures in the New Forest.
Fareham Borough Council	Interim mitigation scheme focusing on New Forest recreational disturbance agreed in December 2021	Focus on greenspace provision and enhancements in the borough, supported by the transfer for contributions to the NFNPA for access management measures within the New Forest's designated sites.
New Forest District Council	Habitat mitigation scheme for recreational impacts first adopted by the Council in 2014, revised scheme adopted 2021	Focus on new and enhanced greenspace provision and rights of way improvements in the district. Also funds a full-time ranger working within the New Forest's designated sites.
New Forest National Park Authority	Habitat mitigation scheme for recreational impacts first adopted in 2012, revised scheme adopted July 2020	Focus on measures within the designated site, such as increased ranger provision and education/awareness raising.
Southampton City Council	Proportion of CIL contributions ring-fenced for New Forest mitigation	Ring-fenced CIL contributions for mitigation to deliver greenspace improvements in the city and contributions to

		access management measures within the New Forest's designated sites.
Test Valley Borough Council	Interim New Forest mitigation framework adopted 2014, in the process of being updated to reflect the latest evidence	Interim mitigation measures being applied to the 13.8km zone of influence. Focus on alternative natural green space provision for recreational use.

5. Future approach to mitigation recreational pressures

- 5.1 As illustrated above, there is a significant level of mitigation being delivered locally by authorities to address the recreational impacts of planned development on the New Forest. This is predominantly focused on new greenspace provision and enhancements within planning authority areas close to the New Forest. The project steering group overseeing the New Forest project do not want to lose these important elements of the overall mitigation package.
- 5.2 However, it is also acknowledged that alone, new (or enhanced) greenspace provision will not be effective in deflecting all recreational pressures on the New Forest. While it undoubtedly has a role as part of a wider package of mitigation measures, the draw of the New Forest's internationally designated sites – covering over 100 square miles of open access land, with 140+ public car parks and over 100 miles of off-road cycle paths – will mean recreational visits will inevitably still be made. This is recognised in several existing local mitigation strategies (e.g. Eastleigh Borough Council, New Forest District Council), which include the delivery of mitigation measures within the New Forest's designated sites to complement measures being implemented closer to planned new housing development.
- 5.3 Natural England advise that a package of measures – both within the designated sites and in surrounding local authority areas – is required to ensure impacts are mitigated. The current approach of local authorities to the delivery of measures within the New Forest itself is a little piecemeal, with proposals for cross-boundary mitigation being discussed and agreed on an individual, case-by-case basis.
- 5.4 To help place this work onto a more consistent foundation, the steering group has commissioned a further piece of work from Footprint Ecology on the broad approach by which mitigation measures within the New Forest itself can address recreational impacts from new housing. This work focuses specifically on 'Strategic Access Management and Monitoring' (SAMM) measures within the New Forest, rather than greenspace provision in surrounding areas. The latter forms a separate, discrete mitigation thread that will remain primarily the responsibility of the relevant planning authority in whose area the development is located.
- 5.5 Strategic Access Management and Monitoring measures typically include: (i) ranger provision – a key component of mitigation schemes such as those on the Solent Coast and the Dorset Heaths; (ii) changes to recreational infrastructure – such as access routes, parking provision, signage and interpretation materials; and (iii) monitoring – both the visitors and key habitats and species. The latest work commissioned will advise on the mechanism for securing appropriate contributions towards New Forest SAMM measures and a reasonable approach for apportioning costs. The earlier Footprint Ecology evidence base studies indicate that recreational visits to the New Forest's designated sites decline with distance from the boundary

of the sites to the edge of the 13.8km catchment area. Contributions should therefore be proportionate to visit rates and there should be flexibility for each planning authority to vary the tariff according to dwelling type (e.g. flats vs houses) or number of bedrooms as is relevant to the authority.

- 5.6 This latest report is due to be completed by the end of 2023 and will form an important part of the evidence base. Natural England are supportive of this latest research and the preparation of a SAMM strategy for the New Forest's designated sites that is consistent and proportionate across the 13.8km zone of influence. Planning authorities will continue to take the lead on delivering mitigation measures within their respective areas, with a focus on new and enhanced greenspace provision. This contributes towards the objectives of the Partnership for South Hampshire to improve the environment and quality of life for residents, with new greenspace provision also being able to deliver multi-functional benefits (e.g. biodiversity net gain) alongside recreation mitigation.
- 5.7 The experience of operating multiple individual mitigation schemes in recent years has highlighted that planning authorities need a consistent and transparent approach to the delivery of SAMM measures within the designated sites. Partnership for South Hampshire members are therefore asked to endorse the principle of planning authorities within the New Forest's 13.8km zone of influence continuing to work together to progress a robust and equitable package of SAMM measures that will form a key part of the overall mitigation package for addressing recreational impacts on the New Forest from planned new development.

RECOMMENDATION

It is RECOMMENDED that the Joint Committee:-

- a) NOTE the key evidence base studies and joint working undertaken to date by local planning authorities within the zone of influence of the New Forest's internationally designated sites (SAC, SPA and Ramsar); and
- b) ENDORSE the principle of planning authorities continuing to work together to develop an agreed package of mitigation measures to be implemented within the New Forest's internationally designated sites, complementing the measures being delivered within surrounding local authority areas.

Appendices: Appendix 1 - Map showing the New Forest SAC, SPA and Ramsar sites and the 13.8km zone of influence

Background Papers: The evidence base studies referenced in the report can all be viewed at [Research into recreational use of the New Forest's protected habitats - New Forest National Park Authority \(newforestnpa.gov.uk\)](https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/research-into-recreational-use-of-the-new-forest-protected-habitats)

Reference Papers: None

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Map 1: New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar and 13.8 km zone of influence.

