

**The New Forest National Park**

**Habitat Mitigation Scheme**

**Mitigating recreational impacts on**

**New Forest designated sites**

**Annual Report on**

**Scheme Implementation**

**(1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023)**

**1. Introduction**

* 1. This is the annual report on the implementation of the National Park Authority’s (NPA) Habitat Mitigation Scheme[[1]](#footnote-2). It describes the progress made implementing mitigation measures during the year from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. Contributions to the Scheme were received from new dwellings, the conversion of offices to residential units, and temporary camping sites during this period.
1. **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 ranger resources
* Delivering messaging across a range of communications channels

2.2 Development levels in the New Forest were slow to recover from the Covid pandemic during 2022/23, but visitor numbers increased. This meant the circumstances for the New Forest and for the Habitat Mitigation Scheme remained somewhat unusual. 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 would have been very modest if we hadn’t seen a large one-off conversion of offices to residential units through national permitted development rights.

**3. Ranger activities**

3.1 Two rangers were employed during the spring and summer of 2022, and one was retained through the winter until the Spring 2023. They engaged with people during the season through ground nesting bird patrols, engagement sessions, campsite activities, public events, and local wild play days. The mitigation ranger team worked closely with Forestry England Keepers to identify, prioritise and target the areas of work for mitigating the impacts on ground nesting birds and to ensure that the information shared with the public was current.

3.2 The rangers held 42 dedicated ground nesting bird focussed sessions, of which 27 utilised our mobile display vehicle resource. An additional 8 sessions focussed upon New Forest code messaging and engaged directly with 167 people and there was engagement with a further 2,305 members of the public through our attendance at 6 community/partnership events, including a Forestry England Reptilary “Wild Wednesday”, Furzey Gardens Bio-blitz, Bucklers Hard Conservation Day and an Open Farm Sunday at Bisterne Farm.

3.3 During the summer rangers engaged with over 4,800 members of the public and 1,230 visitors through a successful programme of 36 New Forest code themed events held on New Forest camp sites throughout the main holiday periods.

3.4 The main observation to draw from the rangers work this year has been that rangers, interacting face to face with members of the public, really do make a difference to individual perceptions, awareness and understanding of the potential impacts on the designated nature conservation sites. Members of the public often express their gratitude for a ranger highlighting the importance of following the New Forest code, and, critically, it has been observed that they have then gone on to modify their behaviour in order to follow the code (as seen by the same rangers on subsequent patrols in the Forest).

3.5 Key engagement resources used this year were photographs and videos of ground nesting birds, including their nests, eggs, and chicks (iPad pre-loaded with video clips of the birds) together with bird models on the mobile display vehicle – all of which were very effective at initiating or facilitating conversations about human behaviour and the impacts on the rare birds and habitats.

3.6 The ongoing difficulty with recruiting and training seasonal rangers who are only employed for 3 or 6 months was highlighted at the Steering Group meeting in October 2022. A proposal to put the provision of the Scheme rangers on a more permanent footing was agreed at this meeting. This involved an increase in funding for rangers so that one of the ‘seasonal’ rangers could be retained as a ‘year-round’ post with the other ranger being employed to cover the spring and summer only. The benefits of a full-time year-round post include a reduction in the cost and time of annually recruiting rangers on short term contracts, together with their initial training; and the fact that the knowledge, information, and relationships built up each year would be retained for future years by a year-around ranger.

3.7 This ranger resource is, of course, in addition to the core National Park Authority ranger team working in the New Forest and is focused specifically on mitigating the recreational impacts arising from new development in the National Park.

**4. Communications**

4.1 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.

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

* NPA website – 15,000 page views.
* NPA Publications[[2]](#footnote-3), including Essential Guide, Park Life, Pocket Guides etc – almost 400,000 copies printed.
* E-Newsletter – click throughs to article/webpage - 418
* Social media Facebook / X (Twitter) / Instagram / LinkedIn, Youtube - Engagements 63,700; Impressions: 667,850.
	1. The New Forest code also continues to be an important medium for distributing key mitigation messages. It was included in the Pocket Guide and Park Life publications. No print materials were commissioned in the 2022/23 financial year. Print materials for the 2022 visitor season were completed in the 2021/22 financial year. Materials for the 2023 season will be printed later in the 2023/24 financial year as we await the Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) messaging to be confirmed.
	2. 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 years. This reflects the very high levels of coverage following the launch of the New Forest code.
	3. This year’s extent and reach of delivering key mitigation messages continues to demonstrate the huge advantage of regularly using communications channels to deliver the Schemes’ key messages – a very significant delivery for a relatively modest outlay.

**5.0 Improvements to alternative recreational routes outside the designated sites**

5.1 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 routes to be identified were at Hale – Woodgreen and at Landford. 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/>

5.2 The installation of improved waymarkers and signs has been delayed and is now planned for 2023 following the collection of initial data to show the usage of the route prior to any improvements.

**6. Monitoring**

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

**7.** **Financial Position**

**Balance of funds available for mitigation measures at 31 March 2022**

7.1 Funds held by the NPA at 31 March 2022 were £92,876.05 for current plan period spending, and £62,713.70 in the in-perpetuity fund – giving a total of £155,589.75

**Contributions received during 2022/23**

7.2 During 2022 – 2023, habitat mitigation contributions towards the New Forest designated sites were received from small-scale residential schemes, a conversion of offices to residential units in Netley Marsh, and from some campsites. The net total received in developer contributions available for current mitigation measures during the period was £44,469.19 (with a further £77,453.37 received for the In-Perpetuity reserve[[3]](#footnote-4) for long-term mitigation measures) giving a total received of £121,922.56.

**Expenditure on mitigation measures during 2022/23**

7.3 During the 2022 – 2023 reporting year a total of £20,111.54 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 ranger resource working in and around the New Forest SAC and SPA - £15,111.54.
* Communications: The cost of interpretation information, publications, website and social media development - £5,000.

**Balance remaining for current mitigation measures at 31 March 2023**

7.4 Following the funds received and expenditure during the year, the funds remaining and available for mitigation measures in 2023/24 are £117,233.70.

 Starting balance: £92,876.05

 Contributions received: £44,469.19

 *minus* expenditure: -£20,111.54

 Funds available for 2023/24 £117,233.70

 **Balance of the In-Perpetuity Reserve at 31 March 2023**

7.5 As at the end of March 2022 there was £62,714 in the In-Perpetuity fund. £77,453 was received in contributions during 2022/23. This means that there was a total of £140,167 in the In-Perpetuity reserve at the end of March 2023.

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

8.1 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.

8.2 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/>

8.3 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/>

8.4 Surrounding local planning authorities, together with the NPA, have now commissioned Footprint Ecology to produce a set of recommended mitigation measures for access management in the New Forest. These measures will be designed to mitigate against the increased levels of visitors (from new housing in the zone of influence) once they arrive in the New Forest to enjoy their recreational trips. It is intended that these Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) measures could sit alongside the additional greenspace provision within the boundaries of each of the local planning authorities. The Report is expected in late 2023 or early 2024.

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/](http://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/planning/development-impacts-on-protected-areas/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)