

Interim Solent Recreation Mitigation Strategy

Second Annual Report on Implementation

June 2016



1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The Solent coast stretches from near Lymington to West Wittering and includes the northern shore of the Isle of Wight. It is internationally important for its wildlife, with 90,000 waders and over 10 per cent of the global population of Brent Geese. Many of these birds travel thousands of miles to over-winter here. Three Special Protection Areas (SPAs) were designated on the Solent to protect these over-wintering waders and wildfowl.
- 1.2. A substantial amount of housebuilding is planned around the Solent and this new housing is likely to have potential impacts on the SPAs. One of these potential impacts is increased recreational activity at the coast resulting from population increases associated with the new homes. Increased recreational activity is likely to lead to increased disturbance to over-wintering waders and wildfowl within the SPAs. Such disturbance reduces the birds' opportunities to feed which can mean they have insufficient energy to survive the winter or to complete their migratory journey back to their summer-time habitats. If that occurred, there would be a reduction in the bird population.
- 1.3. The Interim Solent Recreation Mitigation Strategy aims to prevent the additional recreational activity from harming these over-wintering birds. It was prepared, and will be implemented, by the Solent Recreation Mitigation Partnership which was established in 2014.
- 1.4. This is the second annual report on implementation of the strategy. It describes the progress made during the year 2015/16 and sets out the Partnership's plans for the year 2016/17.
- 1.5. The Partnership comprises the fifteen Solent local authorities, Natural England, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, and Chichester Harbour Conservancy. The authorities are: Chichester District Council, East Hampshire District Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Fareham Borough Council, Gosport Borough Council, Hampshire County Council, Havant Borough Council, Isle of Wight Council, New Forest District Council, New Forest National Park Authority, Portsmouth City Council, Southampton City Council, South Downs National Park Authority, Test Valley Borough Council, Winchester City Council.
- 1.6. Political governance is provided by the Joint Committee of the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH) with the involvement of the representatives of the three non-PUSH authorities¹. The PUSH Joint Committee approved the 2016/17 work programme and budget at its March 2016 meeting, and approved this Annual Report at its June 2016 meeting.
- 1.7. More information about the mitigation strategy and the Partnership can be seen at: <https://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/ext/community-and-environment/environment/solent-recreation-mitigation-strategy.aspx>

¹ Chichester District Council, New Forest and South Downs National Park Authorities

2. PROGRESS DURING 2015/16

Overview

2.1. Many of the homes which were built during 2014-2016 and some which will be built over the next few years were permitted before the introduction in 2014 of the requirement for a developer contribution towards the mitigation measures. In addition, the requirement is generally for the developer contributions to be paid on the commencement of dwelling construction. For these reasons, the money available for implementing the mitigation measures is only increasing gradually. Consequently, relatively limited funding was available during 2015/16: it enabled some mitigation measures to be started and funded preparatory work for further measures in the coming year. Those are described below. The Partnership's expenditure to 31 March 2016 is set out in Appendix 1.

Mitigation measures

2.2. The key achievement in 2015/16 was the establishment of the Partnership's ranger team. The rangers - who began work in December 2015 - aim to encourage responsible visitor behaviour by helping visitors to better understand the over-wintering birds and their vulnerability to disturbance. The aim is that the rangers' friendly approach and visible presence in Partnership uniforms will encourage people not to disturb the birds (or allow their dogs to do that). The birds need to be able to feed undisturbed in order to recharge their energy reserves ahead of their migratory journey back to their summer-breeding grounds.

2.3. The Partnership Lead Ranger is Karima Englefield and during winter 2015/16 there were two other seasonal rangers: one on the mainland coast and one on the Island coast. The rangers have visited every publicly-accessible part of the 250 kilometre coastline to compile a picture of the use of each section by birds and people, and the interaction between the two. This has helped establish priorities to be for future ranger deployment, such that disturbance 'hotspots' are visited more frequently. The ranger team has also established links and liaison with other organisations' rangers and many local groups. A sound foundation has been established for next winter, when the Partnership aspires to have a larger ranger team.

2.4. The package of mitigation measures in the Interim Mitigation Strategy includes "*Initiatives to encourage responsible dog walking and encourage dog owners to go to less sensitive parts of the coast*". To help identify appropriate and effective initiatives, the Partnership commissioned two pieces of consultancy work in 2015/16. The first - from a specialist in managing walkers with dogs - was a comprehensive review of initiatives which have been successfully deployed elsewhere. The second was market research to establish which initiatives would secure the desired behavioural change and would be broadly acceptable to the majority of dog walkers. The market research involved face-to-face interviews with dog walkers at the coast and an on-line survey. The Partnership will take this work further forward during the coming year.

- 2.5. A successful bid was made, in conjunction with the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire, for funding from the Solent Local Growth Deal towards four new/enhanced strategic greenspaces. These will help mitigate the impact of planned new housing by providing inland alternatives for some recreational visits which would otherwise be made to from the coast. £0.6m was made available in 2015/15 to the Alver Valley Country Park in Gosport Borough and to Manor Farm Country Park in Eastleigh Borough. The Solent Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) which is managing the Solent Local Growth Deal intends to make funding available for two further projects in 2016/17.
- 2.6. The Alver Valley Country Park is being created by Gosport Borough Council on 200 hectares of land between Gosport and Lee-on-the-Solent. The Solent Local Growth Deal funded the provision of car parking, interpretation facilities etc. at two gateways into the Park. At Hampshire County Council's Manor Farm Country Park, the Growth Deal funded land purchase for a 12 hectare Park expansion.

Monitoring

- 2.7. Monitoring of the effectiveness of the mitigation measures is vital. To ensure robust monitoring and to avoid wasted expenditure on ill-judged survey work, a specialist consultancy was commissioned to provide advice on what to survey and where, and how to do that in the most economical way. The consultancy presented their advice in early 2016, which enabled the Partnership to draw up a monitoring programme for the next five years.
- 2.8. The Interim Mitigation Strategy includes a financial contribution towards a pilot project - the creation of the Alver Valley Country Park in Gosport Borough - to test the effectiveness of providing alternative recreation opportunities which would lessen the pressure on the SPA coast. During 2015/16, the Partnership funded a study by consultants into how the emerging new Country Park is being used by the public. The consultants found that the Alver Valley is a popular site and draws a range of visitors. It appears to be playing some role as an alternative to the coast, they say, and is likely to continue to do so as the site is enhanced as a Country Park. Additional sites of this sort may have play a role in a package of mitigation measures, the consultants conclude, if closely linked to the management at the coast and targeted in the right locations. The study conclusion will inform the preparation of the definitive mitigation strategy. The consultants report can be seen at:
<http://www.gosport.gov.uk/sections/your-council/council-services/planning-section/nature-conservation/>

Information, communications and financial contributions

- 2.9. The establishment of the ranger team took the Partnership more into the public eye, so a logo was devised for the organisation (reproduced on the cover of this report). Two press releases were issued during the latter part of the year - one about the commencement of the rangers and the other to publicise the on-line survey of dog walkers. Work began towards the end of the year on a communications strategy for the Partnership.

- 2.10. The rangers are making use of social media (Facebook and Twitter) to engage with a wider range of coastal visitors beyond those they meet in person. Through that medium, the rangers can keep people informed, raise awareness of wildlife issues, and encourage coastal visitors to avoid bird disturbance. A Social Media Policy document was drawn up by the Partnership to ensure consistent and appropriate use of social media.
- 2.11. A set of answers to frequently asked questions about the rationale, content and implementation of the Interim Solent Recreation Mitigation Strategy was produced and posted on the Partnership webpage.
- 2.12. A half-day seminar for local authority officers was held by Partnership to facilitate a wider sharing of experiences in implementing the various types of legal agreements for securing developer contributions.
- 2.13. The Partnership established its initial web presence in the form of a single page hosted on Portsmouth City Council's website. In early 2016 work began on expanding this into a larger, separate Partnership website which will be launched later in the year.
- 2.14. The Partnership's expenditure is funded by developer contributions in association with planning permissions for new housing around the Solent. The Interim Mitigation Strategy states that the £172 per dwelling contribution figure will be updated on 1 April each year in line with the Retail Price Index (RPI). The figure was increased to £174 in April 2015 and to £176 from 1 April 2016. Those rises mirror the RPI increase over the preceding twelve months rounded to the nearest whole pound. (NB: The Partnership recognises that some authorities are not able to implement an increase because the developer contribution figure is fixed in an adopted Supplementary Planning Document and cannot be changed without revising the whole SPD.)

Planning permissions and appeals

- 2.15. Developers whose schemes will have a recreational impact on the Solent SPAs have the option of paying a developer contribution towards mitigation measures as set out in the Interim Solent Recreation Mitigation Strategy, or providing their own mitigation. During 2015/16, planning permission was granted for 3729 dwellings which were judged to require mitigation. All of the planning applicants opted for the developer contribution option, which underlines that the Strategy provides a way for developers to address the mitigation issue quickly and simply, with contributions set at a level which do not prejudice the viability and therefore deliverability of housing schemes.
- 2.16. Portsmouth and Southampton city councils judge that purpose built student accommodation in their city centres will have a lesser impact on the SPAs, so consequently they require a developer contribution which is half of that for other residential properties. Planning permission was granted for 618 such properties during 2015/16. (NB: These are included in the total in the preceding paragraph.)

2.17. It is encouraging that during the year, there were four appeal decisions on individual planning applications in which the planning inspector either supported/endorsed the principle of the developer contribution or cited the absence of mitigation as a ground for dismissing the appeal. The appeals were spread across the Partnership area and included a scheme for Retirement Living (use class C3) and Assisted Living (Extra Care) accommodation (C2), as well as a proposal for several hundred dwellings. The appeal reference numbers are:-

- APP/Z1775/W/15/3005296
- APP/P2114/W/14/3001191
- APP/W1715/W/15/3130826
- APP/C1760/A/14/2224913

2.18. The appeal documentation can be seen at: <https://acp.planningportal.gov.uk/>

2.19. In addition, there were several other appeals in which the inspector accepted the legitimacy/need for a developer contribution to Solent recreation mitigation but dismissed the appeal for other unrelated reasons. The Partnership is not aware of any planning appeals where the inspector did not support the need for a developer contribution to Solent recreation mitigation.

2.20. Overall therefore this demonstrates that the Interim Mitigation Strategy is being supported by appeal inspectors who consider that it provides a mechanism for mitigating the potential recreational impact of new housing developments on the SPAs.

3. PLANS FOR 2016/17

3.1. The local authorities are pooling the developer contributions through the Partnership. To ensure sound financial management, the Partnership sets its annual budget on the basis of the amount of developer contributions received during the preceding year. On that basis, an expenditure budget has been set for 2016/17 totalling £300,000. This budget (reproduced in appendix 2) will fund the implementation of some mitigation measures and associated costs including a part-time officer to coordinate the Partnership's activities, prepare documents such as this annual report, update the website, etc.

3.2. The budget also includes an inaugural contribution into an 'in-perpetuity fund'. Regular payments will grow the fund over the coming years, such that eventually the interest generated from it can pay for the mitigation measures in-perpetuity. In 2016/17, it will be a partial contribution in order not to unduly limit expenditure during the year; in future years the Partnership will have a larger income which will enable a full contribution to be made.

3.3. The decisions, mitigation measures and other initiatives which are planned to be undertaken during 2016/17 include:-

- a larger ranger team
- identify appropriate and effective initiatives to encourage responsible dog walking, and begin implementing them;

- implement two new enhanced strategic greenspaces to provide alternative inland recreational opportunities for some people who would otherwise have gone to the coast;
- undertake the first phase of surveys to monitor the effectiveness of the rangers and the other mitigation measures;
- hold a seminar to facilitate closer working between partners and with other organisations who are not members of the Partnership;
- complete the Partnership's communications strategy;
- build and launch an improved website;
- prepare the draft definitive mitigation strategy for approval by Council Leaders.

APPENDIX 1: ACCOUNTS

These accounts cover the 18 month period since October 2014 when the Partnership began to receive contributions transferred from the local authorities.

	£'s	£'s
Income from contributions:		
Contributions - 2014/15	161,166	
Contributions - 2015/16	407,684	
Total contributions		<u>568,850</u>
Expenditure:		
Rangers	(49,938)	
Dog walking initiatives consultancy advice	(9,100)	
Effectiveness monitoring consultancy advice	(7,718)	
Alver Valley Visitor survey	(6,818)	
Partnership coordination officer	(22,552)	
Total Expenditure:		<u>(96,126)</u>
Balance before transfer to in-perpetuity fund:		<u>472,724</u>
Transfer to in-perpetuity fund		(143,500)
Remaining balance		<u><u>329,224</u></u>

APPENDIX 2: 2016/17 BUDGET

Item	£000s	Comment
Rangers	100	
Dog walking initiatives	20	Consultancy support and design/printing of media/materials
Partnership initiation officer	28	Part-time post: 3 days per week
Operating budget	15	Website, seminars/events, etc
Monitoring	15	
Sub-total	178	
In perpetuity funding	122	See paragraph 3.2
Total budget	300	