

**Royal Borough of
Windsor and Maidenhead
Local Development Framework**

Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area
Supplementary Planning Document (Part 1)



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Cover picture acknowledgements (left to right):

Nightjar by Mike Richards (RSPB images)

Dartford warbler by Ben Hall (RSPB images)

Woodlark by Chris Gomersall (RSPB images)

Contents

i Foreword	2
ii Executive Summary	3
iii Abbreviations	4
1 Introduction	1
2 Background	3
3 Policy Framework	4
4 Scope and purpose of SPD	5
5 Types of development covered by this guidance	6
6 SPA Zones	7
7 Approach to Mitigation	8
8 Provision of SANG	9
9 Access Management and Monitoring	10
10 Next Steps	11

Appendices

A Glossary	13
B Membership of the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board	14
C SANG Guidelines Produced by Natural England	15

Foreword

i Foreword

The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area is an international designation covering parts of Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey. There has been much co-operation over the past 4 years between the 11 authorities located within the zones of influence and other stakeholders to develop a strategic level strategy. We are fortunate to live in an area surrounded by attractive countryside containing many rare species and important habitats. There is however a need to carefully balance the requirement for additional homes whilst at the same time providing long term protection for this important habitat to preserve it for future generations.

This SPD represents the first step in the development of a local strategy for the Royal Borough. It will enable us to build on the strategic level work already undertaken and devise local solutions so that we may conserve this important area of heathland and the protected species that it supports.

ii Executive Summary

This Supplementary Planning Document provides guidance on how the impact of new residential developments on the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area may be mitigated against. The mitigation will primarily be in the form of the provision of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) and the standards set out will apply to residential development resulting in a net gain in the number of units within the zone of influence surrounding the SPA. In addition to the provision of SANG, a financial contribution will also be required to help fund an access management strategy and a system of monitoring to assess the success of the overall strategy.

The SPD for the mitigation strategy for the Royal Borough will be issued in two parts. Part 1 sets out the standards for SANG provision where a developer provided SANG solution is proposed and also covers access management and monitoring. Part 2 of the SPD will set out the level of developer contributions payable per unit of residential accommodation where a SANG identified by the Royal Borough will be used for mitigation purposes. Part 2 of the guidance will be issued once an appropriate area of SANG has been identified and delivered by the Royal Borough.

Abbreviations

iii Abbreviations

Abbreviations	
AA	Appropriate Assessment
AMR	Annual Monitoring Report
BBOWT	Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust
CE	Crown Estate
JSPB	Joint Strategic Partnership Board
LDF	Local Development Framework
NE	Natural England
PRoW	Public Right of Way
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SA	Sustainability Appraisal
SAMM	Strategic Access Management & Monitoring
SANG	Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace
SPA	Special Protection Area
SPD	Supplementary Planning Document
Thames Basin Heaths SPA	Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area

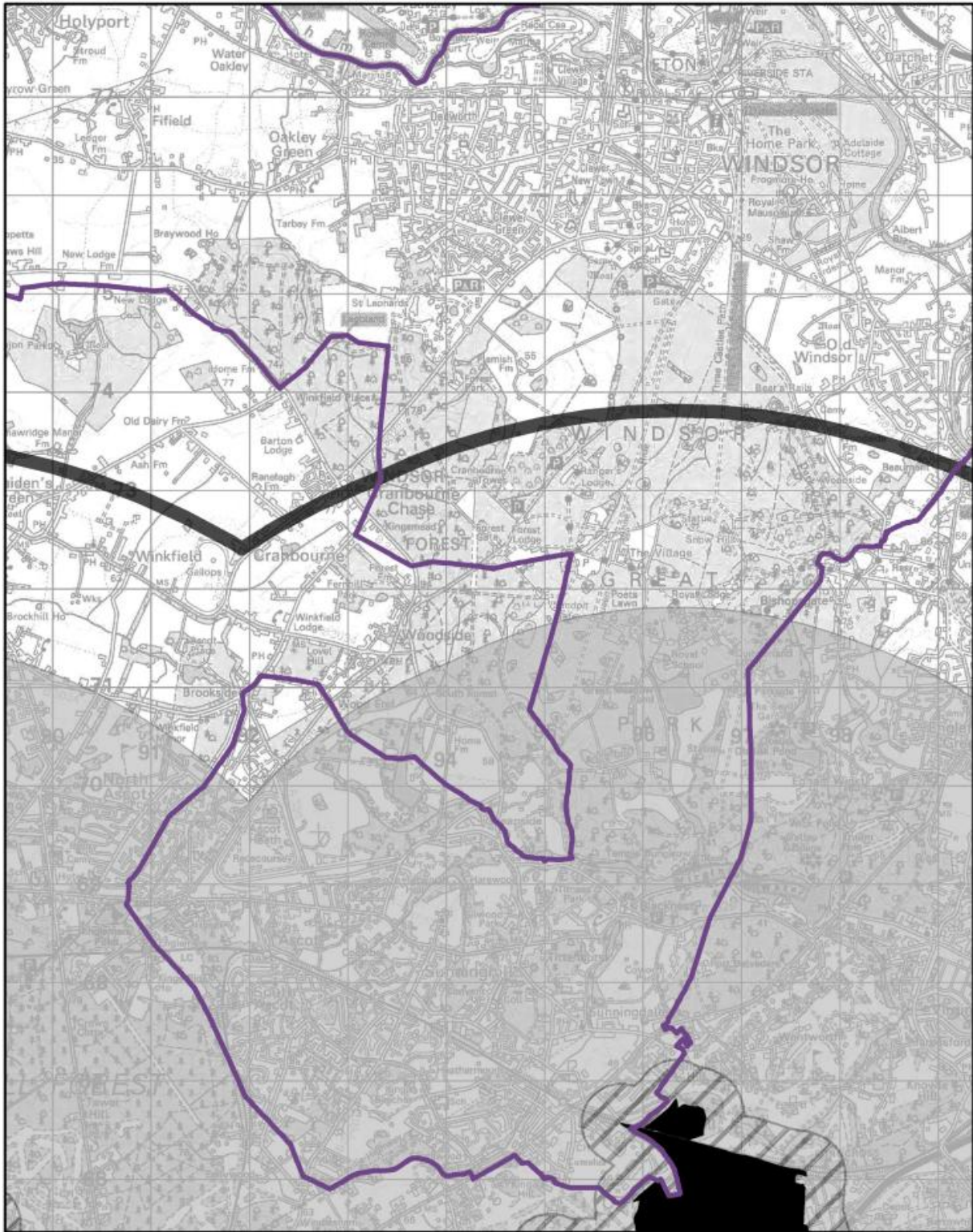
Table 1 Abbreviations

1 Introduction

1.1 The Thames Basin Heaths was designated as a Special Protection Area in March 2005 under the EC Directives 79/409/EEC and 92/43/EEC. The designation protects a network of important bird conservation sites across Europe and in particular protects populations of Dartford warbler, nightjar and woodlark. Special Protection Areas are protected in UK law by The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 which is referred to in this document as the Habitats Regulations.

1.2 The Thames Basin Heaths SPA covers a total of 8400 hectares of which a small area measuring 0.27 hectares is located within the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (See Map 1 overleaf). The SPA is particularly sensitive to increased recreational impacts from visitors as well as the effects of urbanisation such as cat ownership, fires and litter dumping. In acknowledgement of this there are three zones of influence around the SPA: 400m zone of influence; 400m to 5km zone and the 5km to 7km zone (The zones are explained in more detail in Section 6). Under the Habitat Regulations, in order for development proposals to be acceptable, it must be demonstrated that they will have no likely significant effect on the SPA, either alone or in combination with other proposals. ⁽¹⁾If they cannot, measures must be proposed to remove the impact or the Competent Authority is obliged to refuse the proposal. Until Part 2 of the SPD has been issued applications will continue to be determined on this basis. The Competent Authority is the organisation making the determination, which for a planning application would be the local authority or if it is an appeal it would be the planning inspector.

1 Introduction



 <p>This map is reproduced from Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown copyright.</p> <p>Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. Licence Number 1000 18817 2010</p> <p>Scale: 1:50,000</p>	<h3>Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area</h3>			
	 RBWM Boundary	 Thames Basin Heaths SPA	 5km SPA Buffer	
 400m SPA Buffer	 7km SPA Buffer			

2 Background

2.1 Following the advice of the Assessor for the South East Plan,⁽²⁾ a Joint Strategic Partnership Board was set up in 2006. The membership of the group consists of representatives from all of the 11 SPA affected local authorities as well as representatives of other organisations with an interest in the issue. A list of the full membership of the Board is set out in **Appendix B**. The purpose of the group has been to discuss and develop a strategic approach to the SPA issue and this has resulted in the development of agreed measures to both avoid and mitigate the impact of an increased population around the Thames Basin Heaths SPA. The strategy developed has been published as "The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Delivery Framework" (February 2009). It should be noted that the Delivery Framework acts as guidance only and does not itself form part of the development plan, however its primary purpose has been to recommend consistent standards for the implementation of avoidance measures across the whole of the Thames Basin Heaths area.

2.2 On the basis that the Delivery Framework provides strategic level guidance only it has been necessary for the SPA affected local authorities to develop their own detailed mitigation strategies. These follow the agreed approach but also reflect local circumstances. These are being pursued through either Local Development Frameworks or other similar documents.

2 The South East Plan was revoked on 6th July 2010 and no longer forms part of the development plan for the region.

3 Policy Framework

3 Policy Framework

3.1 The Thames Basin Heaths were designated as a Special Protection Area under EC Directives 79/409/EEC and 92/43/EEC. These European regulations have since been transposed into UK national legislation through The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (referred to in this document as the Habitats Regulations) which provides statutory protection for the SPA. Guidance on the protection of sites with biodiversity conservation value is also set out by Planning Policy Statement 9 (Biodiversity and Geological Conservation).

3.2 Until recently the South East Plan provided detailed regional guidance on SPA issues under policies NRM5 (Conservation and Improvement of Biodiversity) and NRM6 (Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area). It was announced on 6th July 2010 that the plan had been revoked in its entirety with immediate effect. Therefore neither NRM5 or NRM6 now form part of the development plan for the region and carry no weight in the determination of planning applications.

Scope and purpose of SPD

4 Scope and purpose of SPD

4.1 The standards set out by this SPD reflect those detailed by the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Delivery Framework (February 2009) which was developed by the 11 local planning authorities affected by the Thames Basin Heaths SPA together with Natural England, RSPB and other key organisations with an interest in the subject. The SPD also draws on work undertaken by Natural England in respect of SANG character requirements.

4.2 The primary role of this document is to provide guidance to developers and the public on how the impacts of new residential developments on the Thames Basin Heaths SPA may be avoided and mitigated within the Royal Borough. This guidance relates to the impacts on the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area resulting from increased residential development within 5km of the SPA. It also indicates the procedures to be undertaken for large scale development up to 7km away from the SPA which may need to be assessed to determine whether it would have a significant impact on the protected area.

4.3 Currently the Royal Borough does not have an area of open space designated for SANG purposes but work is continuing to identify and deliver a suitable area of land for this purpose. This SPD will therefore consist of two parts. Part 1 sets the standards for SANG provision for where a developer provided SANG solution is proposed and gives details of the types of land that could be considered suitable for this purpose. It also covers strategic access management and monitoring proposals for the SPA. This is an integral part of the mitigation strategy and is intended to compliment the provision of SANG to help ensure that adverse effects on the SPA are avoided. It will be jointly funded by all of the SPA affected local authorities and will be delivered strategically across the Thames Basin Heaths area. Access management will include the use of wardens to disseminate information to raise awareness of the sensitivity of the SPA and encourage visitors to behave responsibly. It will also be used to promote the use of other open areas for recreation as an alternative to the SPA. The system of monitoring will measure the operation of mitigation measures across the whole of the Thames Basin Heaths to test the effectiveness of the strategy.

4.4 Part 2 of the SPD will set out the levels of developer contributions payable per dwelling unit where SANG identified by the local authority is to be used for mitigation purposes rather than a developer provided solution. Part 2 of the SPD will be issued once an appropriate area of SANG has been identified and delivered. It should be noted that until a suitable area of SANG has been identified and delivered no developer contributions may be accepted towards it nor planning permissions issued on that basis.

Types of development covered by this guidance

5 Types of development covered by this guidance

5.1 The guidance set out by this document relates to residential development within Use Class C3 which results in net increases in the number of dwellings on a site within 5km of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA. For clarification purposes this will include temporary consents, self contained annexes etc. Large scale C3 developments resulting in a net gain of 50 units or more within the 5km to 7km zone surrounding the SPA may have an impact on the integrity of the SPA and should be considered on a site by site basis for their impact and if necessary an Appropriate Assessment undertaken. Mitigation proposals for such developments must be agreed with Natural England.

5.2 Similarly proposals for increases in the number of units for development falling into Use Class C1 and C2 ⁽³⁾ within the 5km zone of influence will be required to be considered on a site by site basis for their impact on the SPA and if necessary an Appropriate Assessment undertaken.

5.3 Detailed mitigation measures for non-residential developments are not covered by this document since these will have varying degrees of potential impact. Such proposals will be subject to individual assessment under the Habitats Regulations and may require mitigation measures including payment of developer contributions to off set the impact through the provision of SANG and Strategic Access Management and Monitoring. Mitigation measures proposed must be agreed with Natural England.

5.4 It should also be noted that in accordance with Circular 05/2005 on planning obligations, in cases where an item of infrastructure necessitated by the cumulative impact of a series of developments have come forward, the later developments may still be required to contribute the relevant proportion of the costs. This practise can still meet the requirements of the Secretary of States policy tests if the need for the infrastructure and proportion of contributions to be sought is set out in advance. This SPD fulfils that requirement.

3 Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987(Amended 2005) use class C1: Hotels, C2: Residential Institutions and C3: Dwellinghouses

6 SPA Zones

6.1 Natural England considers that any new residential development resulting in a net increase in the number of dwellings within 5km of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA could have a significant impact upon it, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects. This in particular is due to the potential for increased recreational use of the SPA resulting in disturbance to the protected ground and near ground nesting birds.

6.2 The location and extent of the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area is shown on Map 1. This map also shows the zones of influence surrounding the designated area. The three zones shown are the 400m zone, the 400m to 5km zone and the 5km to 7km zone.

6.3 400m zone: This is measured as a linear distance from the edge of the SPA to the nearest part of the curtilage of the dwelling. Within this zone it is not considered possible for mitigation measures to protect the integrity of the SPA from the impacts resulting from a net increase in the number of dwellings. This is due to both additional recreational pressure on the SPA as well as the impact of cat predation on the protected bird species. It is not considered that the one for one replacement of existing habitable dwellings is likely to have an impact on the SPA.

6.4 400m to 5km zone: This is measured as a linear distance from the edge of the SPA to the primary access point to the curtilage of the dwelling. Within this zone of influence it is likely that additional residential dwellings (either alone or in combination with other new dwellings) are likely to have a significant effect on the SPA unless mitigation measures are put in place.

6.5 5km to 7km: Within this zone applications for large scale residential development (50 units or more) will need to be assessed on an individual basis to ascertain whether the proposal would have a significant adverse impact on the SPA. This assessment would involve a screening of the likely significant effects of the development and where required undertake a Appropriate Assessment under the Habitat Regulations.

Approach to Mitigation

7 Approach to Mitigation

7.1 All new residential development resulting in a net increase in the number of dwellings within 5km of the Thames Basin Heaths could have a significant effect on the integrity of the SPA designation either alone or when considered in combination with other development. The agreed approach to mitigating this effect is based on a two pronged approach both of which are required to be undertaken to ensure effective mitigation is provided. These are:

- the provision of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG), **and**
- financial contributions towards strategic access management and monitoring.

7.2 The provision of suitable alternative natural greenspace is intended to draw visitors away from the SPA and reduce the impact of additional residents on the protected area. Developers may provide their own SANG solution using the standards set out in Section 8 below however, the suitability of the land to fulfil a SANG function must be agreed with Natural England. To ensure long term protection of the SPA and compliance with the Habitat Regulations, it will be necessary for any SANG provided to function in perpetuity. How this is to be achieved must be clearly and robustly demonstrated. Where mitigation land is provided by the developer it is likely that an Appropriate Assessment will need to be undertaken to establish that the measures proposed will avoid an adverse effect on the integrity of the SPA. There may be circumstances where alternative mitigation measures are proposed as part of a development. Where these are proposed evidence must demonstrate that the integrity of the SPA can be protected. Any such alternative measures must be agreed with the Royal Borough and Natural England.

7.3 Where it is not possible for a development to provide its own SANG, as an alternative a financial contribution will be able to be made towards a SANG provided by the Royal Borough. The ability to make a developer contribution will only come into effect once a local authority provided SANG has been established and until this time contributions cannot be accepted or planning permission granted on this basis. The requirement for a financial contribution towards SANG provision is over and above any developer contributions required for open space provision.

7.4 In conjunction with SANG provision, a system of access management for the Thames Basin Heaths will be used to help manage the impact of visitors to the SPA and also divert visitors away from it towards the provided SANGS. This function will be co-ordinated by Natural England working closely with both local authorities and landowners.

7.5 Through the use of a combination of both SANG provision and access management it is anticipated that adverse effects on the integrity of the SPA through additional visitor pressure will be avoided. To monitor the effectiveness of the framework for the Thames Basin Heaths, a strategic monitoring process has been put in place. Both the monitoring and access management processes will be funded by developer contributions collected for this purpose from across the whole of the SPA affected area. The details of this are set out below in Section 9 relating to Access Management and Monitoring.

Provision of SANG

8 Provision of SANG

8.1 The provision of SANG is a key part of the strategy for avoiding adverse effects on the integrity of the Thames Basin Heaths as a result of new additional residential development. To achieve this, SANG should exhibit semi natural characteristics so that new residents visit them in preference to the SPA. Detailed guidelines for SANG site characteristics have been developed by Natural England and these outline both desirable as well as essential characteristics of potential SANG land. The guidance has been reproduced as **Appendix C**.

8.2 Where it is proposed that SANGs will be provided by a developer following the Natural England guidance, it is advised that the suitability of the area of land be discussed with both the Royal Borough and Natural England at an early stage. To ensure long term protection of the SPA and compliance with the Habitats Regulations, it will be necessary for any SANG provided to function in perpetuity. How this is to be achieved will need to be clearly demonstrated. The mitigation must also be provided in advance of dwelling occupation. It should be noted that for the purposes of the guidance occupation is taken to mean the occupation of an individual dwelling unit rather than when a whole development is occupied.

8.3 SANG should be provided on the basis of at least 8 hectares per 1,000 population. Natural England believe this standard of SANG provision is sufficient to draw new residents away from the SPA. The average occupancy rate is assumed to be 2.4 persons per dwelling which is based on average household occupancy rates for the Royal Borough in the 2001 census. This information will allow an approximate capacity for a SANG to be calculated. Where there is already public access to an area of land proposed as a SANG, this will need to be taken into consideration. For example, an already heavily used area of land may only have a limited amount of additional capacity before factors such as overcrowding or environmental degradation reduce the sites effectiveness as an alternative to the SPA itself. Capacity may also be influenced by specific site characteristics such as topography, extent and type of vegetation cover, any existing wildlife and ecological designation that might be sensitive to increased visitor pressure etc. It is strongly recommended that if a developer provided SANG solution is proposed that the capacity is discussed and agreed at an early stage with both the Royal Borough and Natural England.

8.4 The calculation of a suitable level of capacity for a particular SANG is important to ensure that the facility does not become saturated and visitors dissatisfied. If this were to occur it would significantly reduce the effectiveness of the SANG to draw visitors away from the SPA.

8.5 The minimum size of site that would be suitable for use as SANG is 2 hectares. The catchment area associated with the SANG will depend not only on site characteristics but also the location of the SANG within the context of more widely available accessible open space and network of existing green infrastructure. As a guide, the maximum catchment areas for a variety of SANG sizes are detailed below. The catchment areas outlined will apply only to development schemes resulting in a net increase in the number of residential units of 10 or more:

1. SANG of 2 – 12 hectares will have a maximum catchment of 2km
2. SANG of 12 – 20 hectares will have a maximum catchment of 4km
3. SANG of 20+ hectares will have a maximum catchment of 5km

8.6 The cumulative impact on the SPA of small developments (those resulting in a net gain of less than 10 units) has also been recognised. Consequently, although developments resulting in a net gain of less than 10 residential units do not need to be within a specified distance of SANG. It will still be necessary for sufficient SANG capacity to be available to cater for the consequent increase in population.

8.7 It is anticipated that in the future a local authority provided SANG will be available and a financial contribution may be made instead of a developer providing their own SANG. However currently no SANG has been identified by the Royal Borough to serve developments within the SPA affected part of the authority so the guidance set out by this SPD relates only to developer provided SANG. Work is on going for the identification of a SANG to serve the Royal Borough and when this has been delivered this SPD will be updated and re-issued to take account of this change.

Access Management and Monitoring

9 Access Management and Monitoring

9.1 A key element of the strategy for mitigating the impact of new additional residential development within the zone of influence around the SPA is access management. This is to be co-ordinated across the whole of the Thames Basin Heaths by Natural England working in conjunction with local authorities and land managers. It will include consistent information dissemination of the SPA / SANG message through educational material such as signs, information leaflets etc; guidance on access management of the SPA and raising public awareness through campaigns, seasonal restrictions etc; and guidance regarding the provision of SANG as an attractive alternative facility.

9.2 To ensure that the strategy of SANG provision and access management is working as envisaged and to ensure compliance with the Habitat Regulations, a monitoring programme has been set up. This will primarily include:

1. visitor surveys of the SPA to ensure that people are being successfully diverted away from the SPA to SANG; and
2. the provision of SANG across the affected area and the delivery of dwellings

9.3 The provision of the access management and monitoring service will be funded by developer contributions collected as part of the tariff levied for each dwelling permitted within the zone of influence surrounding the Thames Basin Heaths SPA. The fee for each dwelling will vary depending upon the bedroom numbers for each dwelling. The methodology for calculating this has been endorsed by Natural England and is to be detailed in the Planning Obligations and Developer Contributions SPD. ⁽⁴⁾ This fee will be **in addition** to the contribution to be made for SANG provision.

9.4 More details on access management and monitoring proposals for the Thames Basin Heaths area, including a breakdown of the tariff charge may be found in the report presented to the Joint Strategic Partnership Board titled "Outline Business Plan for the Thames Basin Heaths Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Project" (June 2009). The document has been produced by the Joint Strategic Partnership Board and it has been agreed by all of the membership of the Joint Strategic Partnership Board.

4 The fee per dwelling will be subject to periodic review.

10 Next Steps

10.1 Once a suitable area of SANG capable of being delivered by the local authority has been identified work on Part 2 of the Thames Basin Heaths SPD will commence. The second part of the document will compliment this existing SPD in that it will provide a mitigation solution where it is not possible or practical for a developer provided SANG to be delivered. The two parts will be merged to form one SPD.

10.2 Until the delivery of a local authority SANG no developer contributions towards it will be accepted. The time frame for this is currently uncertain and will be dependant on the identification of a suitable area of land. The procedure for the development, public consultation and adoption of that part of the document will follow a similar process to Part 1.

Appendices

A Glossary

Appropriate Assessment	The name given to the evaluation of the potential effects of a proposal or project or plan on a Natura 2000 site (as designated for its international importance to nature conservation)
Competent Authority	The decision maker under The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010. This may be the local planning authority, a planning inspector or another body responsible for assessing a plan or project.
Core Strategy	The development Plan Document within the Council's Local Development Framework which sets the long term vision and objectives for the area. It contains a set of strategic policies that are required to deliver the vision including the broad approach to development.
Delivery Framework	Sub-regional guidance on the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area avoidance and mitigation methods, produced and endorsed by the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board.
Developer contributions	Financial contributions made under S106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 as substituted by the Planning and Compensations Act 1991.
Local Development Framework	Will comprise of a portfolio of local development documents which will provide the framework for delivering the spatial planning strategy for the area.
Local Plan	A Borough wide development plan. It will be replaced by the Local Development Framework.
Natura 2000 sites	An ecological network of sites (SPAs and SACs) established under the Habitats Directive to provide a strong protection for Europe's wildlife areas.
Planning Obligations and Developer Contributions SPD	The SPD outlines detailed policy on securing appropriate contributions towards certain infrastructure, services and facilities made necessary by new development. Adopted in December 2005.
South East Plan	A plan produced by the South East England Partnership Board which was published in May 2009. It was announced on 6th July 2010 that the plan had been revoked in its entirety and with immediate effect. The document now no longer forms part of the Regional Spatial Strategy for the region.
Special Area of Conservation (SAC)	Nature conservation site designated under the Habitats Directive for its habitat or species interest.
Special Protection Area (SPA)	A nature conservation site designated for its bird interest under the Birds Directive.
Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Project	Overseen by Natural England and implements monitoring, wardening and public education messages across the Thames Basin Heaths SPA.
Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG)	Open space meeting specific guidelines on quantity and quality for the purpose of providing recreational alternatives to the SPA.
Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership	Partnership of Thames Basin Heaths affected Local Authorities, South East England Partnership Board and key stakeholders, which form and oversee the implementation of sub regional guidance. The Partnership have produced the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Delivery Framework.

Membership of the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board

B Membership of the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board

Bracknell Forest Borough Council

Elmbridge Borough Council

Guildford Borough Council

Hart District Council

Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead

Runnymede Borough Council

Rushmoor Borough Council

Surrey Heath Borough Council

Waverley Borough Council

Woking Borough Council

Wokingham Borough Council

Hampshire County Council

Surrey County Council

South East England Partnership Board

The Board is advised by:

Berkshire Joint Strategic Planning Unit

Defence Estates

Forestry Commission

Government Office for the South East

Federation of Master Builders

Natural England

Open Spaces Society

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Wildlife Trusts in the South East

SANG Guidelines Produced by Natural England

C SANG Guidelines Produced by Natural England

Guidelines for the creation of Suitable Accessible Natural Green Space (SANGS)

Introduction

'Suitable Accessible Natural Green Space' (SANGS) is the name given to green space that is of a quality and type suitable to be used as mitigation within the Thames Basin Heaths Planning Zone.

Its role is to provide alternative green space to divert visitors from visiting the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA). SANGS are intended to provide mitigation for the potential impact of residential development on the SPA by preventing an increase in visitor pressure on the SPA. The effectiveness of SANGS as mitigation will depend upon the location and design. These must be such that the SANGS is more attractive than the SPA to users of the kind that currently visit the SPA.

This document describes the features which have been found to draw visitors to the SPA, which should be replicated in SANGS. It provides guidelines on

- the type of site which should be identified as SANGS
- measures which can be taken to enhance sites so that they may be used as SANGS

These guidelines relate specifically to the means to provide mitigation for housing within the Thames Basin Heaths Planning Zone. They do not address nor preclude the other functions of green space (e.g. provision of disabled access). Other functions may be provided within SANGS, as long as this does not conflict with the specific function of mitigating visitor impacts on the SPA.

SANGS may be created from:

- existing open space of SANGS quality with no existing public access or limited public access, which for the purposes of mitigation could be made fully accessible to the public
- existing open space which is already accessible but which could be changed in character so that it is more attractive to the specific group of visitors who might otherwise visit the SPA
- land in other uses which could be converted into SANGS

The identification of SANGS should seek to avoid sites of high nature conservation value which are likely to be damaged by increased visitor numbers. Such damage may arise, for example, from increased disturbance, erosion, input of nutrients from dog faeces, and increased incidence of fires. Where sites of high nature conservation value are considered as SANGS, the impact on their nature conservation value should be assessed and considered alongside relevant policy in the development plan.

The Character of the SPA and its Visitors

The Thames Basin Heaths SPA is made up of 13 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and consists of a mixture of heathland, mire, and woodland habitats. They are essentially 'heathy' in character. The topography is varied and most sites have a large component of trees and some contain streams, ponds and small lakes. Some are freely accessible to the public and most have a degree of public access, though in some areas this is restricted by army, forestry or other operations.

A recent survey showed that more than 83% of visitors to the SPA arrive by car, though access points adjacent to housing estates showed a greater proportion arriving on foot (up to 100% in one case). 70% of those who visited by car had come from within 5km of the access point onto the SPA. A very large proportion of the SPA visitors are dog walkers, many of whom visit the particular site on a regular (more or less daily) basis and spend less than an hour there, walking on average about 2.5km. Almost 50% are retired or part-time workers and the majority are women. Further detailed information on visitors can be found in the reports referenced at the end of this document.

SANG Guidelines Produced by Natural England

Guidelines for the Quality of SANGS

The quality guidelines have been sub-divided into different aspects of site fabric and structure. They have been compiled from a variety of sources but principally from visitor surveys carried out at heathland sites within the Thames Basin Heaths area or within the Dorset heathlands. These are listed as references at the end of this document.

The principle criteria contained in the Guidelines have also been put into a checklist format which are contained in Appendix 1.

Accessibility

Most visitors come by car and want the site to be fairly close to home. Unless SANGS are provided for the sole use of a local population living within a 400 metre catchment around the site, then **the availability of adequate car parking at sites larger than 10 ha is essential.** The amount and nature of parking provision should reflect the anticipated use of the site by visitors and the catchment size of the SANGS. It should provide an attractive alternative to parking by the part of SPA for which it is mitigation. **Car parks should be clearly signposted and easily accessed.**

New parking provision for SANGS should be advertised as necessary to ensure that it is known of by potential visitors.

Target groups of Visitors

This should be viewed from two perspectives, the local use of a site where it is accessed on foot from the visitor's place of residence, and a wider catchment use where it is accessed by car. **Most of the visitors to the SPA come by car and therefore should be considered as a pool of users from beyond the immediate vicinity of the site.** All but the smallest SANGS should therefore target this type of visitor.

It is apparent from access surveys that a significant proportion of those people who visit the sites on foot, also visit alternative sites on foot and so this smaller but significant group look for local sites. **Where large populations are close to the SPA, the provision of SANGS should be attractive to visitors on foot.**

Networks of sites

The provision of longer routes within larger SANGS is important in determining the effectiveness of the authorities' network of SANGS as mitigation, because a large proportion of visitors to the SPA have long walks or run or bicycle rides. The design of routes within sites at the smaller than about 40 ha will be critical to providing routes of sufficient length and attractiveness for mitigation purposes.

Where long routes cannot be accommodated within individual SANGS it may be possible to provide them through a network of sites. However, networks are inherently likely to be less attractive to users of the type that visit the SPA, and the more fragmented they are, the less attractive they will be, though this is dependent on the land use which separates each component. For example, visitors are likely to be less put off by green areas between SANGS than by urban areas, even if they restrict access to rights of way and require dogs to be kept on leads.

Though networks of SANGS may accommodate long visitor routes and this is desirable, they should not be solely relied upon to provide long routes.

Specific guidance on individual SANGS is summarised in Appendix 2.

Paths, Roads and Tracks

The findings suggest **that SANGS should aim to supply a choice of routes of around 2.5km in length** with both shorter and longer routes of at least 5km as part of the choice, where space permits. The fact that a considerable proportion of visitors were walking up to 5km and beyond suggests **the provision of longer routes should be regarded as a standard**, either on-site or through the connection of sites along green corridors.

Paths do not have to be of any particular width, and both vehicular-sized tracks and narrow PRow type paths are acceptable to visitors.

SANG Guidelines Produced by Natural England

The majority of visitors are female and safety is one of the primary concerns of site visitors. **Paths should be routed so that they are perceived as safe by the users**, with some routes being through relatively open (visible) terrain (with no trees or scrub, or well spaced mature trees, or wide rides with vegetation back from the path), especially those routes which are 1-3 km long.

The routing of tracks along hill tops and ridges where there are views is valued by the majority of visitors.

A substantial number of visitors like to have surfaced but not tarmac paths, particularly where these blend in well with the landscape. This is not necessary for all paths but **there should be some more visitor-friendly routes built into the structure of a SANGS, particularly those routes which are 1-3 km long.**

Artificial Infrastructure

Little or no artificial infrastructure is found within the SPA at present apart from the provision of some surfaced tracks and car parks. Generally an urban influence is not what people are looking for when they visit the SPA and some people undoubtedly visit the SPA because it has a naturalness about it that would be marred by such features.

However, **SANGS would be expected to have adequate car parking with good information about the site and the routes** available. Some subtle waymarking would also be expected for those visitors not acquainted with the layout of the site.

Other infrastructure would not be expected and should generally be restricted to the vicinity of car parking areas where good information and signs of welcome should be the norm, though discretely placed benches or information boards along some routes would be acceptable.

Landscape and Vegetation

SANGS do not have to contain heathland or heathy vegetation to provide an effective alternative to the SPA.

Surveys clearly show that **woodland or a semi-wooded landscape is a key feature** that people appreciate in the sites they visit, particularly those who use the SPA. This is considered to be more attractive than open landscapes or parkland with scattered trees.

A **semi-natural looking landscape with plenty of variation** was regarded as most desirable by visitors and some paths through quite enclosed woodland scored highly. There is clearly a balance to be struck between what is regarded as an exciting landscape and a safe one and so some element of choice between the two would be highly desirable. The semi-wooded and undulating nature of most of the SPA sites gives them an air of relative wildness, even when there are significant numbers of visitors on site. SANGS should aim to reproduce this quality.

Hills do not put people off visiting a site, particularly where these are associated with good views, but steep hills are not appreciated. **An undulating landscape is preferred to a flat one.**

Water features, particularly ponds and lakes, act as a focus for visitors for their visit, but are not essential.

Restrictions on usage

The majority of the people using most of the SPA sites come to walk, with or without dogs. At two or three sites there were also a significant number of cyclists and joggers. A small amount of horse riding also occurs at some sites.

The bulk of visitors to the SPA came to exercise their dogs and so it is imperative that **SANGS allow for pet owners to let dogs run freely over a significant part of the walk. Access on SANGS should be largely unrestricted, with both people and their pets being able to freely roam along the majority of routes.** This means that sites where freely roaming dogs will cause a nuisance or where they might be in danger (from traffic or such like) should not be considered for SANGS.

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It may be that in some areas where dog ownership is low or where the cultural mix includes significant numbers of people sensitive to pets, then the provision of areas where dogs are unrestricted can be reduced. It should also be possible to vary restriction over time according to the specific needs of a community, providing effective mitigation is maintained. SANGS proposals which incorporate restrictions on dogs should be in the minority of SANGS and would need to be considered on a case by case basis in relation to the need for restrictions.

Assessment of site enhancement as mitigation

SANGS may be provided by the enhancement of existing sites, including those already accessible to the public that have a low level of use and could be enhanced to attract more visitors. The extent of enhancement and the number of extra visitors to be attracted would vary from site to site. Those sites which are enhanced only slightly would be expected to provide less of a mitigation effect than those enhanced greatly, in terms of the number of people they would divert away from the SPA. In order to assess the contribution of enhancement sites in relation to the hectare standards of the Delivery Plan, it is necessary to distinguish between slight and great enhancement.

Methods of enhancement for the purposes of this guidance could include enhanced access through guaranteed long-term availability of the land, creation of a car park or a network of paths.

SANGS which have not previously been open to the public count in full to the standard of providing 8ha of SANGS per 1000 people in new development in zone B. SANGS which have an appreciable but clearly low level of public use and can be substantially enhanced to greatly increase the number of visitors also count in full. The identification of these sites should arise from evidence of low current use. This could be in a variety of forms, for example:

- Experience of managing the site, which gives a clear qualitative picture that few visitors are present
- Quantitative surveys of visitor numbers
- Identified constraints on access, such as lack of gateways at convenient points and lack of parking
- Lack of easily usable routes through the site
- Evidence that the available routes through the site are little used (paths may show little wear, be narrow and encroached on by vegetation)

SANGS with no evidence of a low level of use should not count in full towards the Delivery Plan standards. Information should be collected by the local planning authority to enable assessment of the level of increased use which can be made of the SANGS. The area of the site which is counted towards the Delivery Plan standards should be proportional to the increase in use of the site. For example, a site already used to half of its expected capacity should count as half of its area towards the standards.

Staging of enhancement works

Where it is proposed to separate the enhancement works on a site into separate stages, to deliver incremental increases in visitor use, the proportion of the increase in visitor use arising from each stage should be estimated. This would enable the granting of planning permission for residential development to be staged in parallel to ensure that the amount of housing permitted does not exceed the capacity of SANGS to mitigate its effects on the SPA.

Practicality of enhancement works

The selection of sites for enhancement to be SANGS should take into account the variety of stakeholder interests in each site. Consideration should be given to whether any existing use of the site which may continue is compatible with the function of SANGS in attracting recreational use that would otherwise take place on the SPA. The enhancement should not result in moving current users off the SANGS and onto the SPA. The specific enhancement works proposed should also be considered in relation not only to their effects on the SANGS mitigation function but also in relation to their effects on other user groups.

References

CLARKE, R.T., LILEY, D., UNDERHILL-DAY, J.C., & ROSE, R.J. (2005). Visitor access patterns on the Dorset Heaths. *English Nature Research Report*.

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LILEY, D., MALLORD, J., & LOBLEY, M. (2006) The "Quality" of Green Space: features that attract people to open spaces in the Thames Basin Heaths area. *English Nature Research Report*.

Appendix 1: Site Quality Checklist – for a suite of SANGS

This guidance is designed as an Appendix to the full guidance on Suitable Accessible Natural Greenspaces (SANGS) to be used as mitigation (or avoidance) land to reduce recreational use of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA.

The wording in the list below is precise and has the following meaning:

- Requirements referred to as "must" are essential in **all** SANGS
- Those requirements referred to as "should have" should all be represented **within the suite** of SANGS, but do not all have to be represented in every site.
- All SANGS should have at least one of the "desirable" features.

Must have

- For all sites larger than 4ha there must be adequate parking for visitors, unless the site is intended for local use, i.e. within easy walking distance (400m) of the developments linked to it. The amount of car parking space should be determined by the anticipated use of the site and reflect the visitor catchment of both the SANGS and the SPA.
- It should be possible to complete a circular walk of 2.3-2.5km around the SANGS.
- Car parks must be easily and safely accessible by car and should be clearly sign posted.
- The accessibility of the site must include access points appropriate for the particular visitor use the SANGS is intended to cater for.
- The SANGS must have a safe route of access on foot from the nearest car park and/or footpath/s
- All SANGS with car parks must have a circular walk which starts and finishes at the car park.
- SANGS must be designed so that they are perceived to be safe by users; they must not have tree and scrub cover along parts of the walking routes
- Paths must be easily used and well maintained but most should remain unsurfaced to avoid the site becoming too urban in feel.
- SANGS must be perceived as semi-natural spaces with little intrusion of artificial structures, except in the immediate vicinity of car parks. Visually-sensitive way-markers and some benches are acceptable.
- All SANGS larger than 12 ha must aim to provide a variety of habitats for users to experience.
- Access within the SANGS must be largely unrestricted with plenty of space provided where it is possible for dogs to exercise freely and safely off lead.
- SANGS must be free from unpleasant intrusions (e.g. sewage treatment works smells etc).

Should have

- SANGS should be clearly sign-posted or advertised in some way.
- SANGS should have leaflets and/or websites advertising their location to potential users. It would be desirable for leaflets to be distributed to new homes in the area and be made available at entrance points and car parks.

Desirable

- It would be desirable for an owner to be able to take dogs from the car park to the SANGS safely off the lead.
- Where possible it is desirable to choose sites with a gently undulating topography for SANGS
- It is desirable for access points to have signage outlining the layout of the SANGS and the routes available to visitors.
- It is desirable that SANGS provide a naturalistic space with areas of open (non-wooded) countryside and areas of dense and scattered trees and shrubs. The provision of open water on part, but not the majority of sites is desirable.
- Where possible it is desirable to have a focal point such as a view point, monument etc within the SANGS.

Appendix 2: Site Quality Checklist – for an individual SANGS

The wording in the list below is precise and has the following meaning:

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- Requirements referred to as “must” or “should have” are essential
- The SANGS should have at least one of the “desirable” features.

Must/ Should have

- For all sites larger than 4ha there must be adequate parking for visitors, unless the site is intended for local use, i.e. within easy walking distance (400m) of the developments linked to it. The amount of car parking space should be determined by the anticipated use of the site and reflect the visitor catchment of both the SANGS and the SPA.
- It should be possible to complete a circular walk of 2.3-2.5km around the SANGS.
- Car parks must be easily and safely accessible by car and should be clearly sign posted.
- The accessibility of the site must include access points appropriate for the particular visitor use the SANGS is intended to cater for.
- The SANGS must have a safe route of access on foot from the nearest car park and/or footpath/s.
- All SANGS with car parks must have a circular walk which starts and finishes at the car park.
- SANGS must be designed so that they are perceived to be safe by users; they must not have tree and scrub covering parts of the walking routes.
- Paths must be easily used and well maintained but most should remain unsurfaced to avoid the site becoming too urban in feel.
- SANGS must be perceived as semi-natural spaces with little intrusion of artificial structures, except in the immediate vicinity of car parks. Visually-sensitive way-markers and some benches are acceptable.
- All SANGS larger than 12 ha must aim to provide a variety of habitats for users to experience.
- Access within the SANGS must be largely unrestricted with plenty of space provided where it is possible for dogs to exercise freely and safely off lead.
- SANGS must be free from unpleasant intrusions (e.g. sewage treatment works smells etc).
- SANGS should be clearly sign-posted or advertised in some way.
- SANGS should have leaflets and/or websites advertising their location to potential users. It would be desirable for leaflets to be distributed to new homes in the area and be made available at entrance points and car parks.

Desirable

- It would be desirable for an owner to be able to take dogs from the car park to the SANGS safely off the lead.
- Where possible it is desirable to choose sites with a gently undulating topography for SANGS
- It is desirable for access points to have signage outlining the layout of the SANGS and the routes available to visitors.
- It is desirable that SANGS provide a naturalistic space with areas of open (non-wooded) countryside and areas of dense and scattered trees and shrubs. The provision of open water on part, but not the majority of sites is desirable.
- Where possible it is desirable to have a focal point such as a view point, monument etc within the SANGS.