



SOUTH EAST DEVON
HABITAT REGULATIONS
PARTNERSHIP

South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

Core staff capacity

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November 2020



Exeter
City Council



Legal comment/advice:

There is no direct legal comment to be made at this time, each and any individual issue will need to be considered as it arises.

Finance comment/advice:

The financial implications have been addressed within the body of the report. The total salary budget for 21/22 based upon the current Establishment is £127,820, Central Government receipts from the furlough scheme are under review and have yet to be reallocated back to their originating cost centres

Public Document: Yes
Exemption: None
Review date for release: None

Recommendations

It is proposed that the Executive Committee:

- 1. Approves an increase in non-infrastructure developer contributions to secure ongoing staff requirements as previously approved in July 2019 and updated in Section 5 of this report.**
- 2. As part of the increase to developer contributions referred to in (1) above, approves funding to secure a dedicated Communications Officer resource at 0.2 FTE for a period of 5 years.**
- 3. Approves funding to secure an additional 0.5 FTE Habitat Mitigation Officer for 12 months, from January 2021. For this additional resource to be funded from savings as a result of furlough during the Covid-19 lockdown.**

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: Medium

The report provides an update relating to the core staffing requirements to ensure appropriate mitigation effort can continue. Failure to approve the recommendations would compromise the approach by reducing staff resource at a time when the protected sites are under greatly increased visitor pressure.

1. Core Staff Capacity

1.1 A July 2019 report¹ to the Executive recommended the extension of funding for staff roles considered critical to the successful delivery of the mitigation Strategy.

1.2 The report put forward 3 different options to secure funding for these roles, ultimately recommending option 2 to the Executive. This option utilised funding reinvested from mitigation measures which could be tailored to provide savings or were no longer appropriate to consider as realistic mitigation options. That option left £105K outstanding, which required increasing developer contributions on future permissions to cover the balance.

¹ *Staffing requirements of the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy.*

1.3 Table 1, below, sets out option 2 as at July 2019:

Table 1. Future dwellings to end of current Local Plans/Core Strategy

LPA	Future dwellings to end current LP	Number of "charges" (based on one zone or both) ²
TDC	1,718	3,318
EDDC	5,082	9,191
ECC	937	1,268
Total	7,737	13,777
Overall	17,163	29,079

Required funds	Future dwellings	Per dwelling
£105,000	29,079	£3.61

1.4 However, the report also recognised the potential savings from the Homes England Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) which had just been awarded. The report suggested that utilising Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) savings as a result of the HIF award would be the preferred option if it were possible to do so³. At the time, it was anticipated that the HIF funding arrangements would be completed by the end of 2019 and a swift resolution on staff funding could be reached.

1.5 The HIF funding agreement has been completed over a year later than originally envisaged in the report. During that time, it has been established that it is not possible to utilise CIL funding for non-infrastructure costs such as staff (where those staff are not needed for the maintenance of infrastructure). It is therefore recommended that Option 2 is reconfirmed and increased developer contributions are implemented as appropriate by each partner authority. The following sections set out the updated recommendations.

² As the staffing requirements relate to all sites, it is appropriate to source funding from all partner authorities. Strategy funding is arranged so that dwellings in "overlap" zones pay twice for these cross site measures. This is because officer time is required to address measures at two sites rather than one. See Table 27, pg. 224 of the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy.

³ This is because it would not be necessary to increase developer contributions.

2. Communications

2.1 In the context of increasing pressures on partner authority resources, it is further recommended that other costs associated with the communications requirements of the Strategy are partly borne by developer contributions. At this point in time there is a significant risk that the specialist and dedicated communications support will no longer be available to the mitigation team or Executive Committee if it is not funded.

2.2 To date, communications support has been provided on a hidden/un-costed basis by EDDC. The work of the small mitigation team requires regular and ongoing communications input, guidance and reporting by the EDDC Communications Officer. Resourcing this role should therefore be considered as part of the costs of Strategy delivery and incorporated as a “Cross site” (non-infrastructure) measure.

2.3 Dedicated resources will ensure ongoing and regular input from a Communications Officer required to liaise with the mitigation team to ensure communications strategy planning and advice. The officer currently provides trend and pattern data reporting to the Officer Working Group and Executive Committee. A requirement of 0.2 FTE input is anticipated.

2.4 This will provide resources to each of the three local authorities and is calculated to cost £45,182 over a 5 year period.

2.5 A year has passed since the previous report in July 2019, and it is necessary to also update the housing forecasts to which it would be possible to apply any increase in non-infrastructure contributions. The housing forecast is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of unconsented dwellings as allocated in respective Local Plans/Core Strategies, October 2020.

LPA	Single zone	Overlap
TDC	2014	1209
ECC	400	1200
EDDC	10	7401
Subtotal	2424	19620
Total		22044

2.6 Table 3 shows the required funding and recommended increase in developer contributions for non-infrastructure (Cross Site measures).

Table 3. Required increase in developer contributions.

Required funds (July 2019)	£ 105,000
Communications Officer 0.2 FTE (5 years)	£ 45,182
Total	£ 150,182
Number of charges	22044
Increase per dwelling	£ 6.81

3. Addressing unprecedented visitor pressure.

3.1 Due to the Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020 and associated restrictions on travel, there continues to be unprecedented levels of visitor pressure on the protected sites this year. Moving forwards into 2021, the situation remains unclear and our approach has been adapted as a result, with a much stronger focus on our online offer and messaging and updated working practises regarding public engagement.

3.2 Site managers at both Dawlish Warren and the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths have reported unexpected and sudden, large increases in land and water based recreation. This has led to associated issues of disturbance, litter, fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour as well as pressures associated with the sheer number of visitors.

3.3 The following correspondence has been received from Kim Strawbridge, site manager at the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust:

“This year the Pebblebed Heaths have seen unprecedented use by the public, over and above anything experienced in the past 20 years. The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically changed public use of the site in terms of both the numbers and types of visitors.

By mid-April the heaths were experiencing extreme pressure. Increased levels of littering, fly tipping, BBQs, camping, damaging mountain bike behaviour and inappropriate vehicle parking took significant time for our site team to deal with, taking them away from their core site management duties.

Most of these issues were linked with new people discovering the heaths, or people visiting that had not been to the site for several years, as such many were not aware of the sites’ importance and the requirement of people to behave in certain ways.

Engagement was, and remains, crucial in ensuring the protection of the sites designated features as we adapt to address changing patterns of use and behaviour of the public, particularly taking in to account the open access site nature of the site.

The reinstatement of the Habitat Mitigation Officers following furlough has made a substantial difference in engaging the public to educate on responsible access and challenge damaging behaviour. However, the risk of damage to designated features due to continuing and increased public pressure remains a concern.

Additional capacity within that team, providing the ability to continue their valuable patrol/pitstop work on the Heaths throughout this exceptional period, would continue to realise benefits in positive behaviour change across these new audiences, mitigating the risk of damage.”

3.4 As described, many of these new visitors are first time users. This is a key demographic to reach early in their relationship with our sites. This is because they are often unaware of the required behaviours on the sites and because new visitors are often more receptive to signage and on site advice from staff.

3.5 Dawlish Warren has also seen significant increases in visitor pressure this year, which is evidenced by an 18% increase in car parking tickets over the period 23rd March to 30th Oct. It is recognised, however, that there will have been some decrease in visitors arriving by train as a result of concerns surrounding public transport.

3.5 The mitigation team is small and operating in the context of increased visitor pressure, increased staff input to maximise our online content, revised working procedures and an uncertain outlook over the coming months. The mitigation Strategy acknowledges that additional wardening could be required at certain times, particularly in the early years of delivery⁴ - although it could not have possibly foreseen a global pandemic.

3.6 The mitigation team were furloughed through lockdown, 5 weeks for the Delivery Manager (1 FTE) and 10 weeks for the Habitat Mitigation Officers (2 FTE) and Devon Loves Dogs Project Officer (0.5 FTE). This has resulted in salary savings of £14,476 for the year.

3.7 To ensure an appropriate level of staff resource for the current operating environment, it is recommended that an additional 0.5FTE Habitat Mitigation Officer is employed. The estimated cost of this staff resource is £15,000. The majority of this investment can therefore be funded via furlough savings.

⁴ See the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy, page 168.

4. Conclusion.

4.1 With HIF confirmed it is also now possible to confirm that an increase in non-infrastructure developer contributions should be implemented to pay for essential core staff, as previously approved in principle in July 2019. As part of the increase it is recommended that investment is made to secure the ongoing dedicated support and input of a Communications Officer - a hitherto hidden, unfunded cost to EDDC.

4.2 Unprecedented times have led to extraordinary visitor pressures across the protected sites as people look to stay and holiday closer to home. Engagement opportunities are reduced due to the pandemic and working practises have been revised. Every day, face to face conversation with visitors has become more challenging and so our online offer has been expanded as a result.

4.3 At a time where visitor pressure remains high and the near-term outlook for our sites is uncertain, there is great value in adopting a more flexible approach to additional site staffing resources. An additional 0.5FTE Habitat Mitigation Officer from January 2021 and funded from furlough savings will ensure that the team is resilient in terms of capacity, enhanced in terms of coverage and ready to provide the mitigation which the sites need right now, responding to circumstances which are greatly changed.

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Natural England comment:

We support securing and increasing the staff resource as recommended.