



SOUTH EAST DEVON
HABITAT REGULATIONS
PARTNERSHIP

South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

*Covid-19 – impacts on protected sites and
considerations for future management.*

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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 are set out in the report.

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

Recommendations.

It is proposed that the Executive Committee:

- 1. Notes the identification, categorisation and assessment of impacts to the protected sites as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.**
- 2. Notes the discussion of the impacts and considerations for future management of the sites.**

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: Low.

The unprecedented impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been felt across all sectors of society. This has posed a severe risk to both operational, economic and strategic elements of the delivery of the mitigation strategy. At the time of writing it is unclear as to how this risk can be fully mitigated in the current circumstances or with the emergence of new variants of the disease. Continued partnership working and regular updates on changes in the operational environment will assist, however. Continued and effective delivery of the Strategy and the development this enables remains of very high importance to all partners.

1 Summary

- 1.1 The ongoing global coronavirus pandemic continues to impact all aspects of society. In terms of disruption to everyday life, neither the significance of the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001 or the H1N1 (Swine flu) outbreak of 2009/10 come close to the sheer scale of the events we have collectively witnessed since January 2020. No peacetime event in living memory has had such an impact across the globe.
- 1.2 With the movement and behaviours of people subject to restrictions not previously seen in peacetime, measures such as the various lockdowns and

the furlough scheme have had significant consequences for greenspaces and protected sites across the UK.

1.3 At the same time, the pressures exerted on these green spaces and protected sites also serve to reinforce the significance of their value for health and wellbeing to society at large and this should not be underestimated.

1.4 It should be noted that none of the existing Strategy monitoring schemes have been (nor should they be) specifically designed to scientifically quantify and assess the impact of Covid-19 on the protected sites. The condition of the protected sites and their conservation features are the remit of Natural England and the respective managing partners.

1.5 Therefore, this report presents an assessment of the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on the protected sites of Dawlish Warren, the Exe Estuary and the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths. This is composed of direct feedback from site-based staff centred on their experience of managing the protected sites during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

2. Impacts

2.1 It is accurate to state that even before the pandemic, the protected sites already experienced a wide variety of impacts associated with human activity. It is therefore, perhaps not surprising that a sudden and significant increase in visitors would serve to exacerbate existing issues.

2.2 Impacts from the pandemic can be organised into two separate categories:

- Impact on sites – the “pathways” by which the protected sites have been affected.
- Impact on staff and operations.

2.3 Impact on sites:

- Unprecedented levels of visitor pressure at all protected sites. Levels of use not seen in living memory.
- Sustained, ongoing use – sites are still busy – a footpath counter on the East Devon AONB trail still shows usage at 65% above prepandemic rates.
- Increased disturbance to wildlife.
- Increased littering.
- Increased number of fly-tipping incidents.
- Increased use of watersports activities (paddleboarding in particular).
- Increased use of BBQ's/fires.
- Increase in wild camping.
- Increase in inappropriate parking, blocking entranceways and emergency access points (Pebblebed Heaths).
- Human waste (Dawlish Warren).

- Habitat/species management regimes disrupted.
- Evidence of regular visitors being displaced to other parts of sites as popular areas are crowded by new visitors.
- New visitors often unaware of required behaviours.
- Increased dog ownership often with novice owners.

2.4 Impact on staff and operations

- Health & Safety of staff – risk of transmission of Covid-19.
- Communications with partners impacted.
- Volunteering ceased, impacting habitat management work.
- Cancellation of events, guided walks, patrols.
- Changes to normal operating procedures, having to rethink entire approach.
- Anti-social behaviour increased.
- Closure, vandalism of bird hide (Dawlish Warren).
- Operational logistics – management, sharing of vehicles, working rotas, work programmes, lone working all affected.
- Monitoring/surveys delayed, postponed.
- Impact of staff absence (on furlough or shielding/isolating) on remaining staff in small teams.
- Underlying stress of the wider situation for visitors affecting the tone of interactions, how staff are received and increased aggression.
- Additional stress on staff already affected by pandemic but also dealing with high numbers of people, inappropriate behaviour, lack of social distancing or different ‘standards’ or expectations of what social distancing means in practice.
- High levels of fatigue both physically – no time off in some cases – and psychologically.
- Lack of organisational support in some instances – fewer people at work both on site and in the offices. Significant delays in decision making.
- Increased difficulty in enforcement/engagement – more people drinking away from pubs. More drink = more aggression, litter, fires, vandalism. Engagement in these conditions more hazardous.
- “Lock down release fever” – a sense of “I can do what I want because I haven’t been allowed out”.
- Activity around sites in formerly less busy seasons has continued to be higher than pre-pandemic.

3. Discussion.

3.1 On March 16th 2020, the whole country was asked to stop non-essential contact and travel. On March 23rd, people were ordered that they “must stay at home” and were only permitted to leave for essential purposes. All non-essential

high street businesses were closed and supermarkets experienced shortages of food and other goods.

3.2 From May 2020, these laws were slowly relaxed. People were permitted to leave home for outdoor recreation from 13 May. On 1 June, the restriction on leaving home was replaced with a requirement to be home overnight, and people were permitted to meet outside with up to six people.

3.3 Different phases of different lockdown restrictions have resulted in different impacts to the sites. When people could not leave home at all, except to shop for food, there was effectively no human presence across any of the protected sites. In the short term at least, we can say with some confidence that this would have massively relieved human pressures on the sites and their wildlife, due to the near total removal of disturbing activities.

3.4 However, when the restrictions on outdoor recreation were (partially) lifted, to allow 30 minutes of exercise, or to meet in a group of 6 or less, it is clear that people were drawn to green spaces in particular. A number of elements helped to drive this trend, including the large scale furloughing of workers (and the subsequent increase in “free time” for people) and the closure of schools, non-essential retail and pubs. The time available for recreation was dramatically increased at the same time that traditional past times such as shopping, visiting friends or going to the pub were restricted.

3.5 In the early crisis days of the first lockdown in particular, there was huge uncertainty about the severity of the virus and confusion about what constituted “key”, “critical” and “non-essential” workers. The mitigation team were furloughed, 5 weeks for the Delivery Manager (1 FTE), 10 weeks each for the Habitat Mitigation Officers (HMOs) (2 FTE) and Devon Loves Dogs Project Officer (0.5 FTE). Feedback received from operational partners indicates that communication about this decision could have been improved, albeit during unprecedented and challenging circumstances.

3.6 When staff did return to work, Covid-19 risk assessments rightly identified the hazard of transmission of the virus as a significant risk to health and safety. The safety of staff and duty of care is always of paramount importance. Well established working procedures such as vehicle sharing, face to face public engagement, patrols, public events and guided walks were, and in some cases are still no longer possible. This has had a significant impact on the ability of mitigation staff to carry out normal operations.

3.7 The circumstances brought about by the pandemic dictated that working practices were completely reappraised, to enable officers to continue their work, whilst keeping themselves and the public safe. A much stronger focus on the web and social media offer evolved as a way of continuing to safely engage with people whilst (arguably more effective) face to face engagement was restricted and/or impossible. The HMOs developed and continue to deliver quarterly editions of a well-received e-newsletter, named “Shores, Heaths and Dunes”. They have

established over 600 subscribers, with content views monitored and reviewed in order to learn what works best for our audience.

3.8 In recognition of the ongoing pandemic and subsequent increased visitor pressures, additional staff capacity for a 0.5 FTE Habitat Mitigation Officer (funded via salary savings realised by furlough) was approved by the Executive Committee in November 2020. This fixed term post, until Oct 2021, continues to enable greater coverage of sites, additional capacity and flexibility in working practices across the team.

3.9 Recreational users of the River Exe and Exeter Canal were instructed to stop using the waterway from 23rd March to 13th May 2020 and from 4th January to 8th March 2021. Recreational use for leisure vessels, kite surfing and paddle boarding was not considered essential and were subject to fines for those taking part.

3.10 The “stay at home” orders applied to everyone (with key workers excepted) and therefore monitoring schemes either planned or taking place were affected and had to be postponed. This affected the following monitoring projects:

- Exe wildlife refuge monitoring Year 3 (although no surveys were missed)
- South East Devon Visitor Survey
- Seagrass extent survey monitoring (EA)
- Water quality assessments (EA)
- Delays to mussels and cockles monitoring (D&S IFCA)

3.11 By its very nature, the pandemic was sudden and unexpected – for this reason it is obvious to state that there were no specific empirical monitoring projects in place to measure the impact on wildlife, nor is that within the remit of the mitigation team.

3.12 With scheduled monitoring projects either suspended or unable to take place during lockdown, it is therefore not possible to quantify any specific short term effects upon the species or habitats across the protected sites. However, the impacts identified by the experienced staff “on the ground” during the pandemic serve to illustrate *how* sites have been effected.

3.13 Based on all the research, study and observation which has fed into the creation and delivery of the mitigation strategy, it is possible to say with some confidence that:

- Less human activity on site generally results in less disturbance to wildlife.
- Less disturbance to wildlife means species experience fewer external pressures or stress in terms of feeding/resting/breeding/migrating.
- Conversely, more human activity on site generally results in greater disturbance to wildlife (and increased levels of external stress).
- Increased restriction on holiday destinations and/or types of indoor recreational activities (shopping, restaurants, pubs, etc.) and fewer

restrictions on outdoor activities (walking, cycling, water sports, etc.) will lead to significantly more people in the countryside.

- Conversation and research with other mitigation approaches indicate that the issues and patterns are comparable throughout the UK.

4. Considerations for future management.

4.1 In considering what particular lessons can be learnt from the pandemic for the future, it is very important to first identify which future scenario is being considered. There are significant differences between planning for future population growth and future population growth in the context of a global pandemic.

4.2 Whilst it remains the responsibility of respective Local Plan teams to bring forward a mitigation strategy for future growth, there is some useful learning to contribute.

4.3 One main theme which has been fed into this report by operational partners is the fact that there is no effective substitute for an onsite staff presence. Signage, social media and leaflets are important engagement tools but cannot be solely relied upon. Increasingly, visitor pressure is apparent at each protected site at the same time rather than split by season.

4.4 Additional capacity within the (2 full time equivalent (FTE)) Habitat Mitigation Officer team would provide the ability to continue their valuable patrol/pitstop work across the protected sites. A further two officers would ensure continued coverage across the region, rather than risk leaving sites unattended. This would continue to realise benefits in positive behaviour change across new audiences, mitigating the risk of damage.

4.5 Another increasingly evident theme is that people need accessible green space – we have seen this everywhere. Existing open spaces are much loved, but the success of Dawlish SANGS and the sheer numbers of visitors (and the associated impacts) to protected sites illustrates the need for more; and the demand.

4.6 Strategic approaches to statutory legislation usually benefit from the appropriate research, development and resource to ensure they are enacted. However, in sudden and unexpected circumstances, there is discernible benefit in quick and effective resourcing and decision making (for example, employing temporary staff or bringing forward new, innovative projects) which may not conform to a structured, long term programme. The mitigation strategy would benefit from the inclusion of a contingency fund, with which to respond to changing costs or circumstances, or to enable new projects to come forward. Facilitating faster decision making in such circumstances, either with changes to include emergency governance arrangements or enabling an authorised officer to make

expenditure decisions to a specified limit would ensure greater efficiency, flexibility and efficacy.

4.7 As described, many new visitors to the protected sites are first time users. This is a key demographic to reach early in their relationship with our sites. Such visitors are often unaware of the required behaviours on the sites and new visitors are often more receptive to signage and on site advice from staff. Whilst new codes, leaflets and signage have been delivered (with further signage for the heaths due this summer), the mitigation Strategy currently only provides resource for one exercise to update these media. By making provision for updates of a website, signage, codes and other literature periodically (say every 10 years), this would ensure that they are kept relevant and up to date with inevitable changes to the operating environment(s).

4.8 Experience has been gained throughout the evolution of the pandemic and our operational approach has also evolved as a result of changing circumstances and better understanding. There is certainly a great deal of merit in recommending a larger team to deal with an increasing number of visitors across the sites. However, if in future, a highly transmissible and deadly respiratory virus were to break out, it is difficult to envisage making a different decision and asking public-facing staff to continue “non-essential” engagement activities. When onsite engagement comprises 80-90% of the role, there is a limit as to how much can be achieved working at home for these staff.

4.9 The decision to furlough staff during the first lockdown was made in the context of the information that was available at the time, when all parts of society were operating in “crisis” mode. However, moving forwards, it is clear that there is scope for improving communications with our operating partners in such circumstances.

4.10 Whilst the local population increases, there will be an increasing demand for local recreational opportunities. As the current mitigation strategy illustrates, there are a variety of ways in which the impacts of a gradual increase in recreation can be addressed.

4.11 At the same time, the ongoing pandemic presents a unique set of circumstances which have essentially pushed everyone to visit local green spaces by restricting nearly every other “normal” day to day pastime. This is why feedback from site managers refer to most days being “bank holiday busy” every day during the strictest restrictions. This kind of surge in activity is difficult to plan for, but by building in some contingency resource and planning for the future, it will at least provide some options and flexibility to respond.

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Natural England comment:

The increased use of local green spaces, including protected sites, through the pandemic, makes a review of the 2014 mitigation strategy yet more urgent. The importance of progressing alternative public open space (SANGS) to the protected sites is clear, especially in Exeter and East Devon.

We agree with the suggestions in paragraphs 4.6 and 4.7 and propose these are made recommendations.