



SOUTH EAST DEVON
HABITAT REGULATIONS
PARTNERSHIP

South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

*The South East Devon European Site Mitigation
Strategy – effecting positive behavioural change*

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Exeter
City Council



Legal comment/advice:

The report does not raise any specific legal implications requiring comment.

Finance comment/advice:

There are no specific financial considerations to be noted within the report at this stage.

It is difficult to quantify the additional funding required of adapting the public engagement approach for greater effectiveness, though investment in influencing behaviours to protect the sites is a high priority and should be encouraged to prevent damage and the significant costs that could be incurred.

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

Recommendations

It is proposed that the Executive Committee;

- 1) Note the review of the approach to public engagement, education and behavioural change that has been undertaken.
- 2) Note the proposals for adapting this approach to achieve greater levels of understanding and awareness of key issues.

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: Low. This is a report to the Executive Committee concerning a review of current and potential public engagement and education. Promoting awareness and understanding of key messages is an essential component of the mitigation approach.

1. Background

1.1 The Exe Estuary, the Pebblebed Heaths and Dawlish Warren are popular local sites and access to these areas is vital to the local economy and highly valued by local people. Access to such sites has widespread benefits including active leisure, opportunities for education, and general well-being. While much of the access takes place regardless of the wildlife interest, that wildlife interest is also a part of the specific draw for many people.

1.2 Some mitigation measures as outlined in the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy (“the Strategy”) and Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan (VMP) seek to control or limit access in some areas (to be confident of no adverse effect). However, the overall aim is to enhance the existing recreation experience and provide opportunities such that access and nature conservation interests are not in conflict. The (separately reported¹) proposal for visitor access improvements on the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths demonstrates the ongoing commitment to this approach.

1.3 Education is widely regarded as crucial to reducing impacts by visitors to natural areas. Education initiatives, such as interpretation, guided walks, wardening, school visits, community events, etc. are widely used and accepted as they do not overtly regulate or control visitors.

¹ East Devon Pebblebed Heaths visitor access consultation, Jan 2020

1.4 Such approaches are proactive, rather than reactive, but clearly they are unlikely to solve problems in the short term and depend largely on the audience and style of communication. Good communication and education measures can ensure users understand the importance of the sites and why they are managed in a particular way and may also help local people and visitors to develop stronger connections with local sites.

2. Specific mitigation measures.

Signage.

2.1 Promoting behavioural change is the consistent aim of many of the measures in the Strategy and VMP. Whilst a previous report² to the Executive Committee identified the challenges presented in precisely identifying the factors influencing visitor behaviour, it is much more likely that change will occur if a variety of measures are employed. This is reflected in the breadth of approaches outlined in the Strategy.

2.2 Signage is an important means of conveying information to visitors. There are two main types of signage:

- Interpretation – this provides information for visitors, enhancing their understanding of the site and its importance.
- Information – it is important that there is clear messaging relating to expected visitor behaviours on particular sites, insofar as they relate to health and safety advice or where access/activity is limited in order to protect the nature conservation interest.

2.3 Signage has been updated at strategic locations around the Exe Estuary (as shown in Appendix A). This signage includes both interpretation and information messages at key access points to the estuary. It now includes information relating to the importance of the estuary for wildlife, speed limits, the location of wildlife refuges, no landing areas and applicable byelaws.

2.4 All key access points at Dawlish Warren now have updated signage pertaining to the reserve (as shown in Appendix B). This includes information about the special interest of the site, the wildlife refuges, information for dog owners and site byelaws. Provision of new signage is a key part of the emerging proposals for the Pebblebed heaths, where there are already signs promoting the Pebblebed Dog Code at all of the main access points to the heaths.

2.5 It has not been possible to install signage at all locations as identified in the Strategy, for example in Topsham, at Powderham and at the Imperial Recreation Ground. In Topsham and at Powderham this is largely due to the wishes of landowners who do not necessarily want signage on their land/property. EDDC Streetscene wished to include information relating to the wildlife refuges on the beach safety signage at the Imperial Recreation Ground, rather than install the specific signage recommended in the Strategy. This was to avoid what they considered to be a proliferation of signage in the area.

² *Monitoring the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy, October 2019.*

Exe wildlife refuges.

2.5 The Exe wildlife refuges consultation was carried out in partnership with the Exe Estuary Management Partnership (EEMP) over the course of 9 months. Emerging from the EEMP's own proposals³ and the recommendation to review zonation in the Strategy, the refuges seek to protect two critically important ecological areas.

2.6 Consultation started on 8th December 2016 and consisted of 18 specific user group meetings, 2 general meetings, a dedicated website and 2 online surveys. A number of conversations and informal meetings also took place to enable detailed discussion. Comprehensive explanation of the reasons for the refuges were provided by partners including Natural England, EEMP and RSPB.

2.7 The consultation was promoted through a number of press releases, through social media, the Exe Press newsletter, the EEMP and Devon County Council websites, by email, on-site posters and through direct contact with the Habitat Mitigation Officers (HMOs). The HMOs also attended many of the evening meetings with a variety of user groups and clubs during the consultation phase.

2.8 Following approval by the Executive Committee in October 2017, the refuges were further promoted through on-site staff, leaflets, signage, social media, press releases and ITV West Country news. Significant on site support was provided by EDDC Countryside in the months preceding the official "launch" of the refuges (and in the following year) in concerted attempts to communicate the existence of and reasons for the refuges to visitors.

2.9 Officers have also presented to EEMP winter and summer forums to convey key messages about the rationale and initial results of the refuges direct to water users. Despite the considerable outreach and engagement work detailed above (and ongoing) there remains an element of opposition to the work of the Executive Committee by some users of the Exe.

2.10 There have been repeated attempts by mitigation staff and other partners to explain the rationale and evidence for this work through a wide variety of media. Despite this, there remains the necessity for continued effort to communicate the rationale and legal responsibility for the work, whilst recognising that this will not be possible in all circumstances.

Codes of conduct

2.11 Working in partnership with the EEMP and utilising the knowledge and expertise of national bodies and local clubs, a set of 6 codes of conduct for the Exe estuary have been established. These cover all the main water-based activities, information on the wildlife interest and maps which identify the wildlife refuges.

³ *Exe Estuary Recreational Framework, Exe Estuary Management Partnership, 2014.*

2.12 Codes of conduct set out clearly how users undertaking a particular activity should behave, and are most relevant to sporting activities, including watersports. Developing good, clear codes with user groups ensures that safety issues, insurance, consideration of other users and nature conservation issues can be accommodated, ensuring users can enjoy their chosen activities while minimising any impacts.

2.13 During spring and summer of 2018 the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust also worked with local user groups to establish codes of conduct for the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths. Three codes, covering dogs, horses and cycling have been produced and are distributed to users online, through hardcopy prints and at public events. Organisers of cycling and horse events are required to follow and promote respective codes.

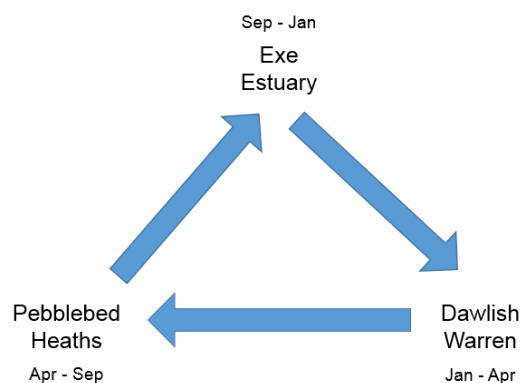
2.14 The results of future visitor monitoring survey work and wider species/habitat monitoring will help to determine the extent to which these codes have been successful. However, there is encouraging work by PHCT to establish a registration scheme for commercial dog walking businesses (20 businesses to date). This requires them to pay a small fee and to follow and promote the Pebblebed Heaths Dog Code. As well as providing a direct link between landowner and frequent business users of the site, this enables responsible businesses (and customers) to demonstrate their support of the heaths.

Wardening.

2.14 Many sites across the UK have wardens who fulfil a range of roles, including interacting with the public and education. Such wardens can work both on-site and off-site, playing an outreach role (e.g. undertaking visits to schools and liaising with local communities).

2.15 The importance of employing wardens (our two Habitat Mitigation Officers) to engage with and educate site users was recognised early in the delivery of the Strategy. In post since October 2016, the presence of the HMOs remain a key element in the approach to public engagement and behavioural change. These staff are the public face of the partnership and target their approach according to the ecological importance and time of year, as shown in Figure 1, below:

Figure 1 – Balance/focus of HMO presence throughout the year.



2.16 A database which records details of interactions between the HMOs and members of the public⁴ shows that in the two years until February 2019 there have been 1875 conversations with over 3600 people. This presence on the ground provides direct delivery of our key messages in areas such as the Exmouth Imperial Recreation ground, where we are aware of acute issues.

Devon Loves Dogs.

2.17 Development of the Devon Loves Dogs scheme started in November 2016 and was formally launched in July 2017. This free membership scheme provides positive messaging, information and resources to local dog owners (including commercial dog walkers) across the region. The overarching aim of the scheme is to enable dog owners and dog walkers to understand where, when (and how) they can walk without causing problems to wildlife.

2.18 Face-to-face contact with dog owners provides a means of engaging with local walkers to building membership and interest in the project. To date, the (part time) scheme has attracted over 500 members, engaged with over 2267 people directly through pit stops, “waggy walks” and public events. Table 1, below, provides an example of some of the key events with highest interaction counts:

Table 1. Devon Loves Dogs – interactions at key events.

Event	Date	Information packs	People spoken to
Killerton Cider Festival	Oct 2017	134	400
Dawlish Countryside Park	Jan 2018	56	127
Devon County Show	May 2018	386	490
Lambing Sunday (Bicton College)	March 2019	154	300
Devon County Show	May 2019	363	476
Killerton Apple Festival	October 2019	176	280
Half term at Dawlish Warren	October 2019	70	96

2.18 In March 2019, the HMOs and DLD officer worked in partnership with the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust (EDPHCT) to deliver a campaign week across the key car parks on the heaths. This targeted and co-ordinated approach to on site engagement was aimed at thanking visitors for enjoying the site responsibly and asking them to pledge to follow the Pebblebed Dog Code.

⁴ See 2018/19 Annual Business Plan, Appendix C, April 2019.

2.19 The scheme is also achieving high levels of engagement on social media. The statistics below as are of December 2019:

Followers

Instagram 559

Facebook 709

Twitter 410

Organic reach last 28 days

Facebook 4833

Facebook average post reach 300+

Twitter 7680 impressions

Website last 28 days

Page views 726

Users 240

The Exe Estuary Management Partnership.

2.19 The Exe Estuary Management Partnership provides leaflets and other information for residents and visitors, including a website with a range of reports, leaflets and other information. The Partnership is not a statutory body and therefore is not subject to the same legal duty as the Executive Committee. Instead, the EEMP as a representative group has an advisory and outreach role, working with schools, undertaking estuary clean-ups, running an estuary forum each year and running large events, festivals etc. in some years.

2.20 The EEMP's role is to bring together a wide range of different stakeholders (including the organisations that have a responsibility for managing the Estuary), to form a coordinated approach. As such the partnership has for some time been active in ensuring that pressures arising from existing users are not harming the special features of the Special Protection Area (SPA).

2.21 The EEMP is recognised in the Strategy as a longstanding organisation with a neutral approach to management of the Exe. Given this unique position and history of involvement with users of the Exe, the EEMP were identified as a means of delivering some of the required mitigation. As described in the sections above, the EEMP worked with many different national bodies, parish councils, user groups and individuals on the wildlife refuges and codes of conduct.

2.22 The Habitat Regulations Delivery Manager and the Exe Estuary Officer continue to work closely on issues of mutual interest. The Exe Estuary Officer sits on the Officer Working Group to offer advice and support recommendations to the Executive Committee. Due to their experience and network of contacts, the input of the EEMP helps to shape and inform some of the mitigation measures, which is more likely to lead to successful implementation.

Social media, website, literature, television.

2.23 The work of the South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership (SEDHRP) continues to be conveyed in a range of different media. Throughout the delivery of the Strategy there has been a careful and considered approach to behaviour change and the provision of information to help effect that change. Regular television and social media coverage by ITV West Country news has helped to increase our reach to more people across the region.

2.24 Information leaflets and posters have been designed to advise people of consultations, wildlife refuges and the fire risk at Dawlish Warren. A newsletter for local distribution to the Warren has been completed which aims to provide updates for local residents and engender an understanding of the sensitivity of the site and a sense of ownership. It is hoped this will encourage more local people to care about the reserve and share that feeling of ownership with other visitors.

2.25 A website for SEDHRP is regularly updated and provides information about each of the protected sites, as well as links to reports, codes of conduct and detailed background about the reasons for the work. We are also active on social media, with accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Our overarching aim is to engage with stakeholder communities to convey a real sense of value and appreciation of the three sites, so that this understanding is shared as widely as possible. Social media is also very useful for reaching and explaining specific information relating to consultations, reports and messages from partners.

3. Future development.

3.1 Whilst the previous section outlines in some detail the extensive work already established to effect positive behavioural change, there is always room for improvement. Circumstances do not remain constant from year to year and it is recognised and understood that our approach needs to be proactive in addressing emerging issues.

3.2 Delivery of the mitigation measures outlined in the Strategy and the VMP fulfils planning obligations established in legislation. However, the way in which we deliver this mitigation and how we frame our messaging is essential to the success of the approach. From the outset, there has been an emphasis on continual improvement to refine our methods and the following section details the ways in which our work will develop in the next 12 months.

Wardening/social media.

3.3 Although the majority of HMO time is rightly focused on face to face interactions with visitors to the sites, it is recognised that additional effort can be directed toward outreach activities, as indicated below in Table 2:

Table 2. Priority events in 2020.

Event	Why	Likely level of interaction (numbers)
Farmwise Devon Schools Day, Westpoint Arena, Exeter.	To communicate key messages, foster activity and interaction.	300 school children.
The Big Bang Fair South West, Westpoint Arena, Exeter.	To communicate key messages, foster activity and interaction. Present, discuss and interpret results of ecological species/monitoring work.	300-400 school children.
Presentations to local clubs and interest groups.	Update local groups on key results, introduce mitigation work and rationale. Communicate key messages.	120 annually.
Work with partners to complement school visits (EDPHCT, EDDC, TDC, and EEMP).	Introduce rationale for mitigation work and promote good behaviours/understanding.	150 annually.
Bicton College Lambing Sunday, East Devon.	Introduce rationale for mitigation work and promote good behaviours/understanding.	300 (based on DLD figures).
Investigate potential night cycle event on Pebblebed Heaths.	Introduce rationale for mitigation work and promote good behaviours/understanding.	30
Regular scrutiny of social media analytics.	To better understand the best content, days and times of day when our audience is online.	A Facebook post on 15 th Nov about plastic pollution was seen by nearly 3,400 people.
A revised and refreshed approach on social media.	To connect with local communities of interest as well as geographical communities, especially through Facebook groups.	500

Wildlife refuges.

3.4 Initial results from the first year of monitoring the Exe wildlife refuges (as reported in July 2019⁵) indicated an improvement in the reduction of disturbance events. However, despite concerted efforts onsite at Exmouth throughout August and subsequent months, it is unlikely that the second year will provide the same outcomes. Results of the ongoing monitoring will be reported in summer 2020 but through late 2019 there were frequent reports of major disturbance.

3.5 Following review with the OWG and HMOs, a number of refinements to the approach have been put forward for investigation, as shown in Table 3, below:

Table 3. Future engagement initiatives for the Exe wildlife refuges.

Initiative	Why
Improved signage at the Imperial Recreation Ground. Further discussion with colleagues at EDDC.	To re-examine and explore opportunities for additional and simplified signage, as identified in the Strategy. To communicate with the general public more effectively.
Further work with colleagues at EDDC and watersports operators.	To ensure clear and consistent messaging to users
Opportunities to advise on the content and provision of messaging at the new Watersports Centre, Exmouth.	The Watersports Centre will be a focal point for water activities and so will be an important place to communicate essential messages about the sensitive nature of the Exe estuary.
Realignment/removal of refuge buoys adjacent to the Powerboat zone.	Feedback from staff and consultants is that this will reduce incidences of misunderstanding of refuge boundary.
Investigate costs of seasonal changeover of Exmouth refuge buoy markers.	To emphasise active/inactive status to users by changing colour/shape.
Investigate potential for seasonal wildlife refuge messaging on car parking pay stations and tickets in vicinity of the Imperial Recreation Ground.	To increase opportunities for messaging and information about the wildlife refuges.
Observe the effect of the wall built as part of the Exmouth Tidal Defence Scheme and consider any further measures required.	By observing the effect of the tidal defence wall on pedestrian access to the Duck Pond we will be able to develop proactive strategies to future engagement in the area.
Continued work with Exe Estuary Officer in relation to shared messaging and further engagement with sailing/windsurfing/kite boarding clubs.	To better understand different perspectives and pursue additional ways of building understanding with water users.

⁵ Exe Estuary wildlife refuge monitoring – 1st Annual report, July 2019.

Devon Loves Dogs

3.6 Staff resources will inevitably play a key role in deciding what more can be done to extend the reach and engagement of this scheme. That said, the development of South West Exeter (SWE) SANGS offers the potential for increased cross-working with the Teignbridge Green Spaces team, as outlined below in Table 4:

Table 4. Future engagement initiatives for Devon Loves Dogs (DLD).

Initiative	Why?
Liaise with TDC Green Spaces team regarding plans for official opening of the first parcel of SWE SANGS.	DLD worked closely with TDC on the opening plans for Dawlish Countryside Park. Collaborative working has (and will continue to) benefit both mitigation measures.
Discuss opportunities with Green Spaces team for increased range of guided walks in Teignbridge to cater for residents west of the Exe and to provide additional choices for dog owners.	Whilst DLD has been able to establish a well-developed presence across the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths, this has not yet been possible to the same extent in Teignbridge. This would help to increase the “offer” for new and existing members and cater for the residents west of the Exe.
Continue work to develop membership “offer” including more alternative walks and traffic light paw print scheme covering more sites regionally.	To encourage members to maintain their engagement with the scheme. The paw print scheme works well in other areas (Dorset) but this is largely reliant upon uptake of the scheme by partners.
Increased focus on efforts to engage with local businesses.	To investigate the possibilities of income generation for the scheme. This would be reinvested to increase our reach and fund other initiatives.

South East Devon Visitor Survey

When complete, results from the South East Devon Visitor Survey (due to begin Feb 2020) will provide valuable insights on visitor motivation, behaviours and awareness of mitigation aims and objectives. Covering a combined 192 hours of survey at 12 locations across the protected sites, these results will enable detailed and informed discussion on future efforts to effect positive behavioural change.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Engagement and education are essential elements of how the mitigation Strategy is delivered successfully. This report reviews the significant time and effort invested in public engagement to date and recognises that further efforts are required.

5.2 Other emerging work (such as the current proposals for the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths) will require close working with our partners to ensure that the intended outcomes are realised. In addition to physical changes on the ground, provision of interpretation, signage and the opportunity for an established warden presence will help to influence how aware visitors are of key mitigation issues.

5.3 There is always room for improvement in any given project and insight to be gained from experience. The success of the Strategy and VMP are closely aligned to how effective the different methods of behavioural change prove to be. The approach to date has been focused on encouraging behaviour change rather than seeking to enforce against inappropriate behaviour, in an attempt to foster genuine understanding and appreciation of the key issues.

5.4 The latter part of this report seeks to reassure the members of the Committee that there is an ongoing process of evaluation and refinement of the approach. Where this evaluation and refinement is of a suitably strategic nature, this is also discussed and agreed with the partner organisations represented in the OWG.

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Natural England comment:

The South East Devon Mitigation Strategy seeks to influence recreational behaviours in the protected sites through a wide range of measures. We recognise that the provision of SANGS are at an early stage of delivery. Once a portfolio of alternative green spaces are available, over time, we expect these will act to further mitigate impacts on the protected sites. The extension of the Devon Loves Dogs activities to new SANGS as they become available for use is welcomed.

The Habitats Regulations Officers have been working effectively with the other relevant bodies on influencing behaviours – clearly this joint working is essential and should continue.