



SOUTH EAST DEVON
HABITAT REGULATIONS
PARTNERSHIP

South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

2020-21 Annual Business Plan – Annual Report

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Growth, Development & Prosperity,
East Devon District Council
April 2021



Exeter
City Council



Legal comment/advice:

The legal considerations are included within the report. Legal Services will assist with any further issues on which advice may be needed as they are raised.

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 progress made in delivering the 2020/21 annual business plan.
2. Notes the status of mitigation measures from previous annual plans, as well as explanations given for measures subject to delay and revised completion dates.
3. Records its thanks to site based staff for the ongoing dedication and adaptability they have shown in meeting the challenges presented during the coronavirus pandemic.

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: Medium.

This report is an update on the progress made in delivery of ongoing mitigation measures set out in previous annual business plans and ongoing measures established in the Plan. It is important that progress continues to be made, or this would put the delivery of the partner Authorities' Local Plans at risk due to the continued legal duties under the Habitat Regulations.

1. Summary/Overview.

1.1 The 2020/21 annual business plan (ABP) was approved at a virtual meeting of the Executive Committee on July 14th 2020. Additional recommendations relating to staff resources were approved at the November 18th meeting of the Executive.

1.2 The measures had been debated and endorsed by the Officer Working Group. The plan outlined the delivery of ongoing measures established in previous ABPs as well as a range of additional measures. In total, the plan earmarked expenditure of an estimated £411K.

1.3 Projects included the continued funding of keystone mitigation measures such as the Delivery Manager, Habitat Mitigation Officers and Project Officer (Devon Loves Dogs (DLD)). Other significant measures approved as part of the plan included phase 1 of the visitor access improvements on the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths and associated signage/interpretation, a new branded gazebo and display equipment for the Habitat Mitigation Officers, replacement signage at Exmouth Imperial Recreation ground and a redesigned website for the "South East Devon Wildlife" brand.

1.4 Tables 1 & 2 report the status of mitigation measures identified in the 2019/20 ABP.

Table 1. 2020/21 Annual Business Plan – ongoing mitigation measures.¹

Site	Measure	Status
Cross Site	Delivery Manager	Completed (ongoing)
Cross Site	Two Habitat Mitigation Officers	Completed (ongoing)
Cross Site	Warden vehicle	Completed (ongoing)
Cross Site	Dog project	Completed (ongoing)
Exe Estuary	Wildlife refuge monitoring	Monitoring complete. Awaiting report ²
Exe Estuary	Patrol boat	Completed (ongoing)
Pebblebed Heaths	Dog bins	Completed (ongoing)
SANGS	Dawlish Countryside Park	Completed (ongoing) ³
SANGS	South West Exeter	Phase 1 complete, open to the public (ongoing) ⁴

Table 2. 2020/21 Annual Business Plan - “new” mitigation measures.

Site	Measure	Status
All	Website redesign	In progress ⁵
All	Gazebo for HMOs	Complete
All	Change of vehicle for HMOs	Complete
Exe Estuary	Signage at the Imperial Recreation Ground	Complete ⁶
Pebblebed Heaths	Interpretation & signage design	In progress ⁷
Pebblebed Heaths	Visitor access improvements – phase 1 works	In progress ⁸

¹ Staffing and associated resources approved by HREC November 2020.

² Overarching review report expected summer 2021.

³ HREC approved funding arrangements November 2020.

⁴ HREC approved funding arrangements November 2020.

⁵ Completion expected summer 2021.

⁶ Final works to EA Tidal defence scheme prevent signage being placed on the wall, other locations complete.

⁷ Completion expected summer 2021.

⁸ Planning application submission expected April 2021, works expected autumn 2021.

1.5 Tables 3 & 4 reflect the status of mitigation measures from all previous annual business plans.

Table 3. Initiated/completed/in progress.

Site	Measure	Status
All	Visitor counts & surveys	Resumed ⁹
Exe Estuary	Codes of Conduct	Completed
Exe Estuary	Procurement, installation, maintenance of buoy markers.	Completed
Exe Estuary	Update signs at public slipways (1)	Completed
Dawlish Warren	Vegetation monitoring	Completed ¹⁰
Dawlish Warren	Regular newsletter	Initiated (ongoing)
Dawlish Warren	Reed screening between Bight & Golf Course	On hold ¹¹
Dawlish Warren	Visitor Management Plan	In progress (ongoing)
Dawlish Warren	Petalwort monitoring	Completed
Dawlish Warren	Changes to car parking management	Partial completion ¹² (ongoing)
Dawlish Warren	Carry out audit of information boards	Completed
Dawlish Warren	BBQ info at local retailers	Completed
Dawlish Warren	Regular Warren Newsletter	Completed (ongoing)
Dawlish Warren	Monitoring of vegetation change	Completed
Pebblebed Heaths	Maps highlighting sensitive areas	Completed ¹³
Pebblebed Heaths	Codes of conduct	Completed
Pebblebed Heaths	Boardwalks/ Path surfacing	Initiated (ongoing) ¹⁴
Pebblebed Heaths	Educational work with schools	Completed (ongoing)
Pebblebed Heaths	Visitor Access Improvements (advisory report)	Completed
Pebblebed Heaths	Visitor Access Improvements (public consultation)	Completed

⁹ Surveys restart April 2021 following pause due to pandemic. Final survey due Oct 2021, report to follow.

¹⁰ Part of the ongoing monitoring programme.

¹¹ Certain measures at Dawlish Warren remain under review, see separate 2021-22 ABP report.

¹² TDC have recently aligned winter & summer charges at a number of car parks, including Dawlish Warren.

¹³ Incorporated into interpretation/signage design and promoted routes work (in progress).

¹⁴ Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust continue work with a contractor to complete schedule of priority works.

Table 4 – mitigation measures carried over from previous business plans

Site	Measure	Status
Dawlish Warren	Removal of Dog Control Order	On hold ¹⁵
Dawlish Warren	Changes to car parking management	On hold
Dawlish Warren	Byelaw preventing fires and barbeques in buffer zone	Under investigation ¹⁶
Dawlish Warren	Monitoring of accretion and erosion	On hold ¹⁷
Exe Estuary	Updates of the Exe Estuary leaflets	On hold ¹⁸

2. Habitat Regulations Delivery Manager.

2.1 The Delivery Manager continues in post, working to organise and implement the approved Annual Business Plans, report progress to the Executive Committee, co-ordinate delivery of the Strategy, liaise with the Officer Working Group and undertake ongoing review of the Strategy.

2.2 Progress is marked by the management of public-facing staff (and associated changes to working practises) during the coronavirus pandemic, delivery of an improved vehicle for the Habitat Mitigation Officers (HMOs), new gazebo and display equipment and improved signage at the Exmouth Imperial Recreation Ground.

2.3 Ongoing work streams are implementation of visitor access improvements on the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths (phase 1), associated interpretation and signage design and redesigning the South East Devon Wildlife¹⁹ website. These measures are expected to complete in summer/autumn 2021.

2.4 Appendix A provides visual examples of the gazebo, vehicle, signage and a first look at the new website homepage.

¹⁵ District-wide Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) regarding dogs enacted by TDC in April 2019. This measure postponed until the effect of the PSPO is known.

¹⁶ Remains a watching brief with TDC Resorts, Rangers and Legal departments. No recent incidents reported.

¹⁷ This is still being undertaken by the Environment Agency (EA) as part of the Beach Management Scheme. Recommend reviewing this measure after EA scheme review complete.

¹⁸ The Exe Estuary Officer was able to source alternative funding for the leaflet updates. This funding reserved for future reprints of leaflets and/or codes of conduct.

¹⁹ www.southeastdevonwildlife.org.uk

3. Habitat Mitigation Officers and Devon Loves Dogs (DLD).

3.1 The main focus of the day to day duties of the HMOs remains public engagement and education across the 3 protected sites. Close working with project partners has become a normal part of day to day operations and essential during the pandemic.

3.2 As anticipated,²⁰ the coronavirus pandemic has continued to significantly affect the ability of our site based mitigation team (the Habitat Mitigation Officers and DLD project co-ordinator) to engage with the public. As a result, there has been significant investment in our approach to planning, executing and monitoring our social media output²¹. This is a direct adaptation to social distancing requirements which necessitate short conversations with the public and have seen the complete cancellation of the events calendar.

3.3 As illustrated in Appendix B, the HMOs have developed and delivered 3 editions of a well-received e-newsletter, named “Shores, Heaths and Dunes”. Subscribers have built to just under 400 in 7 months, with content views monitored and reviewed in order to learn what works best for our audience.

3.4 Also illustrated in Appendix B are examples of the DLD e-newsletter which has built up a subscribership of 573 and enabled 43 local dog friendly businesses to be listed on the website.²² Social media posts and promotion have also received increased focus and attention, which has had success in attracting an additional 107 members since the first lockdown in March 2020.

3.5 Perhaps more effected by the cancellation of events across the region and unable to meet for the regular “waggy walks” with members, the DLD project co-ordinator has willingly adapted work patterns to integrate more fully with the HMOs during the last year. This has enabled closer team working and greater understanding of/learning from different perspectives, as well as provision of essential cover on patrols, during an extended period of staff absence.

3.6 An unexpected consequence of the pandemic for the DLD scheme has been greater cross-project engagement with other dog related mitigation schemes across the southern UK. Starting from email exchanges sharing concerns about the effect of event cancellations across the country, this has developed into regular online meetings and discussion of best practise. It has also led to a joint initiative which will see valuable social media video content shared across the different projects.

²⁰ See Annual Business Plan 2020-21, July 2020.

²¹ See separate report South East Devon Wildlife Key Performance Indicators, April 2021

²² www.devonlovesdogs.org.uk

3.6 Significant time and effort has been spent in ensuring that both the South East Devon Wildlife and DLD websites meet government accessibility regulations.²³

4. Observations of visitor patterns and behaviour

4.1 With the SE Devon visitor survey able to resume questionnaire work from April 2021, the results from this study (expected winter 2021) will provide valuable insight into the level of awareness and perception of the work of the partnership.

4.2 In the interim, a summary of observations made by mitigation staff and partners below is provided to the Committee to enable greater understanding of the evolving picture “from the ground” over the past year:

- All protected sites are busier with greater numbers of people visiting and parking.
- During summer (June-Sep) 2020 at Dawlish Warren, there were too many people at Soft Sand Bay (see picture below) and between groynes 1-7 for the mitigation team to work safely and adhere to social distancing requirements.
- There are significantly increased numbers of new visitors to the protected sites who are unaware of behavioural requirements. Many are assuming that signage is seasonal (at Dawlish) rather than year-round and there is confusion between the resort and the main reserve.
- There has been no “low season” during the traditional Jan-Mar period, visitor pressure remains consistent.
- The Exmouth Tidal Defence Scheme (TDS) and new signage at the Imperial Recreation Ground appear to be working well to reduce shore-based disturbance. There is an observed increase in water-based activities (mainly single paddle boarders) straying into the Exmouth wildlife refuge.
- It is suggested that the past year provides an insight into the future recreational trends and pressures that the protected sites are likely to experience²⁴. The East Devon Pebblebed Heaths site manager has commented that the past year has served to emphasise the need for the measures identified in the visitor access improvement programme.
- This insight further justifies the requirement for mitigation measures in the context of a gradual but sustained increase in the regional population.

²³ *Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018*

²⁴ *See also Core Staff Capacity, November 2020.*

5. Pebblebed Heaths visitor access improvements (phase 1).

5.1 Under the terms of a joint procurement framework between EDDC & Somerset County Council²⁵, during the 2020-21 financial year, WSP have been instructed to undertake the following to enable phase 1 works:

- Finalise and provide design drawings for all Phase 1 sites.
- Identification/confirmation of costs – for project management, design and build.
- Investigate, obtain and deliver relevant heritage/habitat/highway licenses, approvals and permissions.
- Investigate relevant planning requirements for all finalised designs, obtain and deliver planning permission(s).
- Environmental and technical reports detailing the investigations undertaken above.
- Production of all tender documentation (bills of quantities, etc.) and undertake a compliant tender to procure the contractor.
- The consultant shall undertake the Principle Designer role under The Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015, and report back on a regular basis on the planning, management, monitoring and coordination of health and safety during the project.
- Undertake regular consultation with key stakeholders and statutory consultees at key points in the project.
- Work with stakeholders to prepare a communications plan for Phase 1 works.
- Ongoing liaison with the Habitat Regulations Delivery Manager and Pebblebed Heaths site manager.

5.2 A pre-application request for advice on the planning requirements of phase 1 proposals has been submitted to, and received from EDDC. Clarification has been sought on specific elements of the response and detailed conversations have taken place between WSP and the Neighbourhood Highways Officer.

5.3 Depending on the response to the request for clarification on the pre-application advice, some works may not require permission and therefore access improvements could be delivered earlier than anticipated (autumn 2021). Submission of the planning application for (phase 1) to EDDC is expected in April 2021.

²⁵ Somerset County Council Consultancy Professional Services contract 2014-2023

5.4 Follow a competitive tender, The Way Design Ltd have been appointed to deliver creative and innovative visitor engagement solutions for the car parks, interpretation boards, trail guides, waymarkers and behavioural signage across the heaths²⁶. Working in partnership with the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust, this project is expected to deliver print-ready designs in summer 2021. Manufacture and installation of these designs are recommended as part of the 2021-22 annual business plan.

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Natural England comment:

Despite the significant restrictions that have been in place in 2020/21, the adaption of communication methods and the adaptability of staff have allowed delivery of the mitigation strategy to continue. The recreational pressures on protected sites have noticeably increased, making the work of the partnership even more important.