



SOUTH EAST DEVON
HABITAT REGULATIONS
PARTNERSHIP

South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

2024-25 Annual Business Plan and 5Yr Delivery Plan

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East Devon District Council
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Exeter
City Council



Legal comment/advice:

EDDC Legal Services have read this report and have no comment.

DEM.1-0007/October/RAH

Finance comment/advice:

The financial implications and proposed spend areas 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. Approves the 2024-25 Annual Business Plan (Appendix A) and the commitments and actions set out therein.
2. Notes the updated 5 Year Delivery Plan also shown in Appendix A.
3. Approves that the projects detailed within the report (section 7.2) at Dawlish Warren are discontinued and funding is reallocated to future mitigation strategy projects there, in areas less at risk from wave and storm erosion.

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: High.

If the 2024-25 Annual Business Plan is not approved there is a high risk that the delivery of the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy would be significantly compromised or further delayed into 2025. This would put the delivery of the partner Authorities' Local Plans at risk due to their continued legal duties under the Habitat Regulations.

1. Summary

1.1 This paper outlines key projects recommended for delivery over the next 12 months by the Habitat Regulations Delivery Manager, agreed by the Officer Working Group. These are listed in Appendix A as the Annual Business Plan (ABP).

1.2 The ABP is part of an updated 5-year delivery plan, also in Appendix A, which provides a budget and project timeline for the short and medium term.

1.3 Some measures in the 5-year plan, especially those for 2025-29, depend on the success of existing projects, such as the Exe Estuary wildlife refuges, and should be viewed as an indicative guide.

1.4 An updated mitigation strategy is nearly complete as part of Local Plan reviews¹. While the 5-year plan anticipates some new measures, further adjustments will be needed once the new strategy is approved by the partner authorities.

¹ An update to the mitigation Strategy is in near-final draft version. It will be presented to partner authorities for consideration/approval by Spring 2025.

1.5 Projects are allocated based on available budget, logical progression, and recommended timelines from the mitigation strategy, using funds from planning permissions.

1.6 The "Balance less expenditure" line in Appendix A reflects the potential carry-forward of income after projected revenue and expenditure, ensuring funding for mitigation projects over their 80-year lifespan.

1.7 The 2024/25 ABP builds on past projects, like habitat fencing at Dawlish Warren or increased funding for Devon Loves Dogs. The timing is guided by the 5-year plan to ensure coordinated, logical progression.

2. Devon Loves Dogs staff resource.

2.1 The 'Devon Loves Dogs' project, launched in July 2017, offers a dog walking code, recommended walks, guided walks, events and helpful information. It has 1379 members, its own website, social media presence, and sends a regular e-newsletter to around 2,447 subscribers.

2.2 The project has gained recognition and works closely with some of our key partners but is limited by staff resources, with only a 0.5 FTE coordinator. The 2020-21 South East Devon Visitor Survey showed just 5% of respondents who were dog walkers were members, indicating potential to reach a wider audience.

2.3 There is room to expand staffing, increase events, and boost engagement. Dog walkers are a key group to target due to their impact on protected sites, and the project's branding provides room for growth.

2.4 Existing budgets can support increasing the coordinator's role to 0.8 FTE and hiring a full-time assistant. The updated mitigation strategy will likely incorporate this additional staffing based on recommendations from stakeholders.

Proposed spend: £40,000 comprised of:

Project Co-ordinator increase from 0.5 FTE to 0.8 FTE - £14,644².

Assistant project co-ordinator (2 year fixed term) 1 FTE - £25,355³

3.0 SANGs and Infrastructure Projects Coordination Officer

3.1 Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs) and infrastructure projects are key off-site mitigation methods. SANGs provide alternative destinations for visitors who would otherwise go to protected sites. For smaller developments or areas like Exeter with limited space, local authorities will focus some mitigation effort on other infrastructure projects which improve access to existing greenspace.

² Amount shown is the increase to existing salary costs. Includes base salary, NI, superannuation and support costs.

³ Includes base salary, NI, superannuation and support costs.

3.2 Local authorities are finalizing their 15-year Local Plans but SANGs and infrastructure projects take years to plan and implement. Early investment in staff is essential to support and coordinate these efforts.

3.3 To ensure effective financial planning and development of off-site mitigation, a dedicated staff role is needed. This person will work with developers, planners, Natural England, and other stakeholders to plan and deliver SANGs and green infrastructure across the region.

Proposed spend: SANGs and Infrastructure Projects Coordination Officer (2 year fixed term) 1 FTE - £50,474⁴

4. South East Devon Visitor Survey

4.1 The Executive Committee approved the first regional visitor survey in the 2019-20 business plan. Footprint Ecology won the contract and began monitoring in February 2020, but fieldwork paused due to the pandemic and resumed in April 2021.

4.2 Visitor surveys support the mitigation strategy by providing insights into visitor access, motivations, and behaviour, helping guide management and measure awareness of site sensitivity and mitigation efforts.

4.3 The strategy calls for surveys every 5 years, with the next due in 2025. Since the 2020 study may have been skewed by the pandemic, the 2025 survey offers a chance to capture more typical visitor behaviour.

4.4 The 2025 survey will:

- Conduct face-to-face surveys at Dawlish Warren, Dawlish Countryside Park, Ridgetop Park, the Exe Estuary, and the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths.
- Gather data on visitor origins, frequency, visit duration, activities, routes, transport, and site choice factors.
- Assess awareness of Habitat Regulations mitigation efforts and initiatives like Devon Loves Dogs.
- Produce a report analysing the data, comparing it to the 2021-22 survey.

Proposed spend: £25,000

⁴ Includes base salary, NI, superannuation and support costs.

5. Exe Estuary patrol boat – change of vessel.

5.1 The Executive approved the current patrol boat in June 2016, but due to budget and supply issues, it became operational in August 2018.

5.2 Since then, wildlife wardens have regularly patrolled the Exe to:

- Ensure boats follow the speed limit.
- Monitor personal watercraft, kitesurfers, and windsurfers for compliance with codes of conduct.
- Ensure activities occur in designated zones.
- Maintain a visible presence to deter antisocial or disruptive activities.

5.3 The patrol boat was approved before Exeter City Council reappraised the operation of the Harbour Authority and appointed a Harbour Master. There have been discussions on sharing a boat with the Exeter Port Authority (EPA). However, logistical and operational differences made this unfeasible (this continues to be the case).

5.4 Although the boat's cabin provides weather protection, it makes navigation difficult in wind, and most users avoid the estuary during bad weather. The hard hull is prone to damage and lacks flexibility for warden duties in the changeable conditions in the estuary.

5.5 Informed by EPA's own decision to change vessels for similar reasons and our experience, it is recommended to replace the current boat with a Highfield Patrol 540 or similar rigid inflatable boat (RIB).

5.6 This type of vessel offers more flexibility, easier operation, better wind resistance, and the ability to beach at Dawlish Warren, improving patrol efficiency. A cabin is not required as the majority of the recreational use of the estuary is during good weather (and this is optimal time for wardens to patrol).

Proposed spend : Part-exchange for the current boat to a Highfield 540 RIB or similar : £10,000

6. Planting of low hedge at the Imperial Recreation Ground, Exmouth.

6.1 The Imperial Recreation Ground in Exmouth borders the Exe Estuary Special Area of Protection (SPA) and the Exmouth wildlife refuge. The area, with slipway access to the estuary foreshore, is popular with watersports users, day visitors, boat owners and dog walkers.

6.2 During the refuge season, birds will feed and rest near the shore if left undisturbed. A sloped concrete revetment currently separates the foreshore from the recreation ground, but visitors often walk down it directly into the wildlife refuge. This can cause disturbance to protected bird species.

6.4 The existing low fence at the top of the revetment is in poor condition and ineffective at preventing pedestrian access. A 150m wildlife-friendly, salt-tolerant hedge is proposed along the revetment to block access while maintaining views of the estuary and access to the slipway. The hedge will also discourage walking on the revetment, which is not designed for that purpose and potentially hazardous due to its irregular grid construction.

6.5 A public consultation should be held to inform visitors about the proposal and gather feedback.

Proposed spend: to plant a 150m wildlife-friendly, salt tolerant hedge and 12 months aftercare. £10,000.

7. Dawlish Warren / Beach Management Scheme

7.1 The Dawlish Warren Beach Management Scheme (BMS) was a £12 million project completed by the Environment Agency and TDC in October 2017, aimed at reducing flood risks to properties around the River Exe.

7.2 The 2020-21 Annual Business Plan of the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy recommended pausing any new major spending on projects at the distal end of Dawlish Warren due to potential storm damage and erosion in the short to medium term. This ensures investments are both cost-effective and impactful in terms of mitigation. The affected measures are:

- Reed screening or landscaping between the north-eastern most fairway on the golf-course and the Bight.
- Relocating the bird hide onto the shore of the Bight at Dawlish Warren.
- Carry out scoping study for creation/ modification of a viable disturbance-free roost at Dawlish Warren.
- Create new/improved high tide roost on site of old bird hide at Dawlish Warren.
- Rationalisation of path network.

7.3 The EA undertook a post-scheme review of the BMS, completed in November 2023⁵. This review is critical to understanding what further changes might be anticipated, over what timescale, what management is proposed for the site and how this might affect the mitigation strategy.

⁵ More information is published on the Exe Estuary Management Partnership website <https://www.exe-estuary.org/dawlish-warren-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-fcerm/>

7.4 Key points from the EA BMS post-scheme review are:

No Major Changes to Current Management: The review recommends maintaining the existing Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) approach at Dawlish Warren, as it aligns with the objectives of the Exe Estuary FCERM Strategy and the Dawlish Warren Beach Management Scheme, which focus on securing the sand spit's storm protection function until the 2040s and reducing flood risk to Dawlish Warren Village.

Environmental Targets Not Being Met: The current management does not support achieving the environmental objectives of improving conditions for the Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) by 2030.

Key Challenges and Trends:

- The sand spit is experiencing ongoing beach lowering, which will increase flood and erosion risks over time both locally and estuary-wide.
- While the main revetment defences and flood wall offer strong protection, further beach recharge is not justified for FCERM purposes.
- Existing geotubes and groynes help reduce flood and erosion risk but are unsustainable and need to be removed by 2049 due to conflicts with natural processes.

Sustainability Issues:

- Temporary repairs will be made to the geotube until its eventual removal by 2049.
- Remnant groynes (16-18) have lost their functionality and should be removed, with ongoing work to remove groynes 17 and 18.
- The spit's wave barrier function will gradually be lost, increasing risks to the wider estuary, especially with the impacts of climate change.

Stakeholder Disagreements: Disagreements between flood risk management, environmental, amenity, and commercial interests are ongoing and unlikely to be resolved in the short term.

Long-Term Risks: Climate change, combined with the removal of unsustainable structures, will increase flood and erosion risks to the estuary in the future. Stakeholders and authorities need to plan for these eventualities.

7.5 With the EA review completed, officers have reconsidered the viability of the projects listed in 7.2 (above). The review highlights significant challenges due to coastal erosion and the dynamic nature of the sandspit, which is at increasing risk from sea level rise.

7.6 Given these risks, with long-term viability issues and increased vulnerability of the area, it is considered that investing further in these projects is no longer justifiable.

7.7 In light of these findings, it is proposed that the funding originally allocated for these projects is carried forward into updated mitigation strategy projects at the Warren⁶ in areas less at risk. By investing in projects in these areas, we can ensure better long-term outcomes and avoid continued expenditure in areas where outcomes are uncertain.

7.8 This approach aligns with our commitment to effective risk management and resource allocation, particularly as coastal erosion and sea-level rise present increasing challenges to the management of visitor access in the area. Access along the beach at high tide is compromised by erosion of safe paths and the bird hide is no longer open to the public.

8. Carry out audit and redesign of information boards at Dawlish Warren.

8.1 Dawlish Warren reserve currently has several information boards, but they provide fragmented information.

8.2 A 2019 audit led to updates of the main signage boards.

8.3 Since then, changes to access and facilities (like the bird hide) due to coastal erosion, along with insights from dog access expert Stephen Jenkinson, have prompted a rethinking of the signage strategy.

8.4 To provide clear information and meet management goals, updated main signage and new behavioural signs at key points are recommended.

Proposed budget: Reviewing, designing, manufacturing, and installing new signs at Dawlish Warren. £20,000.

9. Monitoring of Petalwort translocation at Dawlish Warren.

9.1 One of the key species found at Dawlish Warren is Petalwort, an Annex II species⁷ under the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designation that covers the reserve. It is considered highly likely that without intervention and monitoring, this key species may disappear from the site entirely.

9.2 The mitigation strategy outlines funding to translocate Petalwort. However, this has already been funded by Teignbridge Countryside Rangers, who arranged translocation of the plant during 2024 to areas of the site considered safe from inundation by the sea (in the event of coastal flooding or a significant storm event). This is intended to help safeguard the species at Dawlish Warren.

⁶ An update to the mitigation Strategy is in near-final draft version. It will be presented to partner authorities for consideration/approval by Spring 2025.

⁷ Under the Conservation of Species and Habitats Regulations 2017 (as amended), Annex 2 is a list of animal and plant species of community interest whose conservation requires the designation of special areas of conservation (SAC).

9.3 There remains the need to monitor the success/failure of the translocation and the impact of visitor access (trampling) on the areas in question. It is important to monitor the work as it is vital to understand whether the plant is likely to survive on the reserve.

Proposed spend : Survey fieldwork and report detailing the methodology and results of the Petalwort translocation at Dawlish Warren. £2,000.

10. Fencing/access restrictions to protect habitat from trampling pressure at Dawlish Warren.

10.1 Rangers report increasing pressure on the site as lower beach levels push visitors, especially in summer, into the dunes, harming sensitive ecological communities. Existing fencing can be ineffective, as many visitors climb through it. Adding chestnut paling will help prevent this.

10.2 Changes to the foreshore have also shifted bird roosts to the estuary shoreline, making them vulnerable to disturbance from visitors. Rangers need paling to protect the most important roosts, especially at the end of the sandspit.

10.3 The 2014 mitigation strategy estimated £2,000 annually for this work, but material costs have since risen, requiring increased funding.

Proposed spend: Fencing : £3,500

11.0 Conclusion

11.1 This paper seeks approval for the 2024/25 Annual Business Plan in the context of an updated 5 year Delivery Plan.

11.2 Further work remains in order to integrate the updated mitigation Strategy into the ABP and 5-year plan. The current plan anticipates a number of changes, although further financial planning will be required to facilitate an accurate and viable transition. This will also be subject to approval of the strategy by the partner authorities.

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October 2024

Natural England comment: Natural England have read the report and have no comment.