



# South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

*2025-26 Annual Business Plan and 5Yr Delivery Plan*

*Neil Harris  
Countryside, Environment & Ecology  
East Devon District Council  
October 2025*



**Exeter**  
City Council



Legal comment/advice:

EDDC Legal have read the report and have no comments to make.

DEM.1-0007/October 2025/RAH

Finance comment/advice:

The financial implications are set out in the report.

<b>Public Document:</b>	Yes
<b>Exemption:</b>	None
<b>Review date for release</b>	None

## Recommendations

It is proposed that the Executive Committee:

1. Approves the 2025-26 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. Receives a further report detailing progress with the 2025-26 Annual Business Plan in Oct 2026.

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: High.

If the 2025-26 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 2026. 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 (OWG). These are listed in Appendix A as the 2025-26 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 2026-31, depend on the success of existing projects, such as the Exe Estuary wildlife refuges, and should be viewed as an indicative guide.

1.4 The South East Devon Wildlife – Joint Habitats Mitigation Strategy has been approved by all partner authorities. As such, the measures recommended for delivery in the 2025-26 ABP follow the direction laid out in the updated mitigation strategy and as prioritised by the Habitat Regulations Delivery Manager and OWG.

1.5 Analysis has been undertaken to assess the partnership's financial position, allocate funds in line with the updated strategy, and identify the implications for setting appropriate planning obligations across the region. The findings are reported separately.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2025 Financial report.

1.6 In line with the approved Strategy, this report recommends targeted investment in staffing, vehicles, operational budgets, site-based management measures, and monitoring to strengthen the delivery of mitigation across the region. The proposals build on recent progress by ensuring sufficient staff capacity, supporting operational effectiveness, and enhancing visitor engagement and habitat protection.

1.6 A balance of investment in people, infrastructure, and site-specific interventions will enable the partnership to deliver measurable outcomes and adapt to ongoing pressures.

## **2. Wildlife Wardens staff resource.**

2.1 Wildlife wardens play a vital dual role, combining on-the-ground ranger duties with awareness-raising and community engagement. They patrol in pairs for health and safety, which ensures effective coverage, though this does limit the overall area they can cover at any one time. In recent years there have been lengthy periods of time where only one wildlife warden has been in post and this has required other staff (e.g. delivery manager) to join them on patrols at least 1 day per week, taking time away from other duties.

2.2 The wardens need to cover around 27km of shoreline along the Exe Estuary plus an area of around 1,600ha (the combined area of the East Devon Heaths and Dawlish Warren). There is clear scope to expand the warden team to provide better coverage.

2.3 Historically, warden time has been allocated seasonally, focusing on the Heaths in spring and summer and the Estuary in autumn and winter. While this approach has effectively targeted seasonal priorities, a team of four (2 FTE) is currently stretched due to leave, sickness cover, and the need to balance public-facing activities and administrative duties with on-site work. Travel distances between the sites also present logistical challenges.

2.4 Sustained and enhanced staff capacity is essential to deliver mitigation, enforcement, and community engagement. Wardens are a cornerstone of the mitigation and additional wardens are needed to provide year-round cover and work effectively.

The following new posts are recommended:

### **2.5 Team Leader – Wildlife Wardens (1 FT, 2-year fixed term) – £49,000**

Provides leadership and coordination of the warden team, ensuring consistent delivery across sites, enhanced supervision, and improved public engagement.

### **2.6 Wildlife Warden (1 FTE, 2-year fixed term) – £45,000**

Adds direct capacity on the ground, increasing visibility and enabling proactive site management, education, and monitoring.

**Total proposed spend: Team Leader – Wildlife Wardens and Wildlife Warden  
£94,000<sup>2</sup>**

### **3.0 Vehicle and operational support.**

3.1 With the expansion of the Wildlife Warden service to two teams operating simultaneously, a second vehicle is needed to ensure efficient coverage across multiple sites. Vehicles are essential for maintaining a visible presence, travelling between sites, and transporting equipment and engagement materials.

3.2 The existing electric vehicle will continue in use, while the new vehicle is recommended as a hybrid, such as a Volkswagen Caddy. This provides reliable performance across the operating area, avoids challenges with limited EV charging, and maintains improved environmental performance compared with conventional petrol or diesel vehicles.

3.3 Purchasing the vehicle outright is preferred, as replacing vehicles every 10–15 years offers better long-term value than leasing and allows future resale opportunities.

3.4 An operational budget for both the Wildlife Wardens and the Devon Loves Dogs (DLD) scheme is essential. Funding covers a new gazebo for the DLD team, the production and refresh of literature, signage, seasonal campaigns, and educational materials, which are critical for raising awareness, encouraging responsible behaviour, and maintaining consistent messaging.

3.5 Investment in an additional vehicle and dedicated operational budgets is recommended to ensure the expanded team can operate effectively and continue to maximise their impact.

- Additional warden vehicle (purchase, livery, insurance, fuel) – £26,000
- Devon Loves Dogs operations/development – £7,500
- Wildlife Wardens operations/development – £3,000

**Total proposed spend: New warden vehicle and team operations budget  
£36,500**

### **4. Production of monitoring strategy.**

4.1 As the new strategy is implemented, a robust monitoring programme is essential to ensure mitigation measures are targeted effectively and resources are used efficiently. Monitoring will help focus the time of Wildlife Warden teams, patrol boat operations, and other interventions where they are most needed.

4.2 It is proposed to use consultancy support to work with the partnership and stakeholders to design an integrated monitoring programme. This will cover data collection by warden teams, volunteer surveys, reporting protocols, and report production, ensuring that data is both accessible and actionable.

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<sup>2</sup> Includes base salary, NI, superannuation and support costs.

4.3 Embedding efficient monitoring within the mitigation strategy will enable evidence-based decision-making, refine operational priorities, and enhance the overall effectiveness of visitor management and habitat protection measures.

**Proposed spend: Production of monitoring strategy £7,000**

## **5. Exe Codes of Conduct**

5.1 Originally developed in 2018 by the Exe Estuary Management Partnership (EEMP) on behalf of South East Devon Wildlife (SEDW), there are 7 Codes of Conduct relating to activities on the estuary.

5.2 Codes fulfil an important role in terms of information on how visitors are expected to behave and guidance for visitors. It is essential they are up to date, relevant and fit for purpose. As such, SEDW ran an interactive review of the codes as part of the EEMP's winter forum in September.

5.3 This review resulted in some useful recommended updates, amendments and suggestions for better and more targeted distribution of paper copies.

**Proposed spend: £3,000 to cover updates, reprints and distribution.**

## **6. “No BBQs at the Warren” banner redesign and print**

6.1 Existing “No BBQ” campaign banners at Dawlish Warren were implemented 3 years ago and have since been exposed to the harsh marine environment and effects of strong sun and wind. They have been situated in areas of high footfall and are working well to convey this key requirement for visitors visiting the Warren.

6.2 Updating the campaign banners to communicate the “No BBQ” message at the Warren is required to maintain clear and consistent messaging for visitors. New designs will incorporate consistent visual features aligned with recent signage updates at the Warren, reinforcing brand recognition and improving the likelihood that key messages are noticed and followed.

6.3 Refreshing the banners ensures they remain visible, legible, and engaging, supporting behaviour change, protecting sensitive habitats, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the ongoing visitor management strategy.

**Proposed spend: Redesign and print of campaign banners £4,000.**

## 7. Schools

7.1 A review of education provision and materials for the Exe Estuary is necessary to ensure resources remain relevant, engaging, and aligned with current conservation priorities. Working with schools and young people is an effective way to reach the wider local community and foster awareness of estuary management and habitat protection.

7.2 While the EEMP and other organisations have previously produced packs and run education programmes—including materials developed prior to Covid, and a range of existing online resources—there is scope for the mitigation partnership to support this work by creating updated materials.

7.3 Allocating a budget for the development of new educational resources will enable the partnership to complement existing provision, enhance learning opportunities, and ensure consistent messaging that supports mitigation objectives across the estuary.

**Proposed spend: Review of existing education work and production of new educational materials £5,000.**

## 8. Patrol Boat – Exeter Port Authority (EPA).

8.1 At the July 2025 meeting, the Executive Committee approved expenditure of £7,500 towards a trial scheme regarding shared use of the EPA's RIB for the Wildlife Warden team. This measure will form part of the 2025-26 ABP.

**Approved spend: Shared use of the EPA RIB £7,500.**

## 9. Repair/replace/maintenance of Exe Wildlife Refuge buoys.

9.1 Ongoing upkeep and repair of the buoys marking the Exe wildlife refuges is essential to ensure they remain effective in guiding water users and protecting sensitive habitats. Improved interpretation and clearer wording on the buoys will help make their purpose more obvious to those approaching the refuge, including canoeists, paddleboarders, and walkers.

9.2 The existing buoys were installed seven years ago and, despite routine maintenance and servicing, exposure to winter storms and the harsh marine environment has resulted in wear, damage, and misalignment. Investment is now required in repairs, realignment, and replacement of buoys to maintain their effectiveness as a clear, visible, and trusted means of communicating the refuge boundaries and safeguarding wildlife.

**Proposed spend: Repair, realignment and replacement of refuge buoys £10,000.**

## **10. New/improved signage/banners for the Exe Estuary.**

10.1 Signage needs to evolve and change over time. Signs help with wayfinding and inform behaviour (e.g. dogs on leads, launching points, shoreline access etc) and to direct people.

10.2 Banners have been utilised to good effect in the past few years and are most effective when used as part of time-limited campaigns such as the Exmouth wildlife refuge Sept-Dec. These campaigns consist of a range of approaches including an increased onsite presence, targeted media interviews (radio and television), social media and signage.

**Proposed spend: New/redesigned banners for campaigns on the Exe Estuary £5,000**

## **11. Exe monitoring - vantage point counts.**

11.1 Originally part of the 3-year Exe Estuary Wildlife Refuge Monitoring Programme (2021) survey effort, vantage point counts (VPC) consist of 'snapshot' monitoring counts, whereby a wide expanse of the estuary is scanned with binoculars from pre-selected vantage points. The VCP data provides information on:

- Which activities take place within the refuges;
- How frequently they occur; and,
- How the numbers of birds in the refuges vary (e.g. when the estuary was busy, when there were events within the refuges, etc.).

11.2 The aim of these counts, (continued by the Wildlife Wardens ever since the consultant survey finished) is to provide a suitable long-term monitoring approach that can be done quickly and the data used to show patterns over multiple tide states, times of day, seasons and weather conditions.

11.3 This monitoring is easily undertaken by the ranger team as part of their work on site, as the method is both fast and effective. A review of vantage point counts as part of the proposed monitoring strategy (section 4, above) is timely, and a small budget is required to ensure printed forms and/or software availability on tablets in future.

**Proposed spend: Vantage point count resources £250**

## **12. Dawlish Warren visitor centre and gateway interpretation.**

12.1 Whilst the interpretation inside the visitor centre at Dawlish Warren remains engaging, it has been some time since investment was made and the displays are now in need of updating. The current interpretation is dated, and access is limited as the centre can only be open when staff are present.

12.2 This proposal seeks approval for expenditure to redesign the interior interpretation, create new external interpretation, and provide clear “gateway” interpretation at main access points to the reserve. Collectively, this will increase the proportion of visitors who use the visitor centre and who gain a better understanding of the site’s wildlife interest, potential conflicts, boundaries, byelaws and codes of conduct.

12.3 The project will help change perceptions of the site so that the area the reserve covers is recognised as a nature reserve, rather than simply a place for recreation or dog walking. It will also increase the number of visitors exposed to appropriate information about the Special Area of Conservation, its vulnerabilities and the behaviours needed to protect it.

12.4 A redesigned visitor centre, with information available to the public without always requiring staff, alongside robust external interpretation and clear gateway signage, will provide significant benefits. These include better visitor experiences, reduced disturbance to sensitive wildlife, and a reliable focal point for both informal and formal environmental education.

12.5 Investment in interpretation has the potential to improve the visitor offer dramatically while ensuring stronger protection for the reserve’s conservation interests. It will also support the District Council’s wider role in promoting environmental awareness and managing visitor impacts.

**Proposed spend: Visitor centre and gateway interpretation at Dawlish Warren £100,000.**

## **13. Fencing/access restrictions to protect habitat from trampling pressure at Dawlish Warren.**

10.1 Rangers continue to 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 the harsh marine environment quickly weathers materials and 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.

**Proposed spend: Fencing : £3,500**

## **14.0 More dog bins on the Pebblebed Heaths.**

14.1 Dog bins are an important form of mitigation in relation to impacts from dog fouling, which is particularly relevant to the conservation interest of the SAC. The presence of bins provides a clear indication that dog owners are expected to pick up after their pets and helps to create a sense that the site is actively managed and cared for, provided the bins are emptied regularly.

14.2 It is important that any new bins are well maintained and carefully sited, ideally at locations where they are most likely to be passed by dog walkers. At present, seven bins are located across the main car park areas on the heaths and are funded through the partnership.

14.3 The provision of additional bins at carefully considered sites, likely including RSPB and DWT land, would reinforce the message that dog fouling is unacceptable and ensure that visitors have no excuse not to dispose of waste responsibly. This measure would reduce impacts on sensitive habitats and species and contribute to improved visitor management across the SAC.

**Proposed spend: additional dog bins on the Pebblebed Heaths £4,000.**

## **15. Review of dog walking management on the Pebblebed Heaths.**

15.1 With the mitigation team and Devon Loves Dogs set to grow to meet the challenges of the new strategy, it is timely to take an objective review to ensure that the existing approach to managing dog walking is maximising its impact. While this work is valued by all partners, there is some nervousness that due to recent increased growth in use post covid, that rates of dog fouling, wildlife disturbance, and antisocial dog incidents are increasing.

15.2 With the projected increase in recreational use to come with the implementation of new local plans, partners need confidence that the correct approach and sufficient resources are in place to adequately manage dog walking pressure across the heaths.

15.3 A comprehensive, evidence-based review of current dog management strategies is required to inform future decisions, support conservation goals, and maintain positive public relationships.

15.4 The appointed consultant will:

- Review the current approach to dog management on the Pebblebed Heaths.
- Evaluate evidence of impacts, both ecological and social.
- Consider stakeholder views, historical context, and available data, particularly in respect of wider influences from SANG provision to beach bans.

- Identify best practice approaches nationally and internationally.
- Recommend feasible, evidence-based changes to policy, engagement and enforcement.
- Highlight strengths and limitations of the current approach, including reputational risks.
- Provide clear options for future management and long-term monitoring, supported by rationale

**Proposed spend: Review of dog walking management on the Pebblebed Heaths £15,000.**

## **16. Fire strategy work and review**

16.1 The summer of 2025 is the warmest summer on record for the UK and the impacts of prolonged dry conditions have led to drought in many areas. Fire is an increasing threat to the Pebblebed Heaths, particularly in the context of climate change.

16.2 Approval is sought to commission specialist consultancy support to review current management and procedures. The work would assess fire risks, emerging issues, and provide recommendations for mitigation measures, including reducing fuel load, improving fire access, and enhancing education and awareness for visitors.

16.3 This consultancy would also support and complement work already undertaken by the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust, ensuring that fire management remains effective and up to date.

**Proposed spend: Fire Strategy work for the Pebblebed Heaths £15,000**

## **17. Monitoring of habitats and species on the Pebblebed Heaths.**

17.1 The managing partners across the Pebblebed Heaths National Nature Reserve already undertake habitat and species monitoring as part of their core management duties.

17.2 Recognising the importance of ensuring good coverage across the sites and encouraging/supporting volunteers in their efforts, budget to simply help supplement existing work is recommended - e.g. mileage for volunteers.

**Proposed spend: Monitoring support £250**

18. This paper seeks approval for the 2025/26 Annual Business Plan in the context of an updated 5 year Delivery Plan.

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East Devon District Council,  
October 2025

Natural England comment:

Natural England have read the report and have no comment to make.