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Our ref: HatFor Strategic Interim LPA



**Uttlesford District Council
Harlow District Council
East Herts District Council
Epping Forest
Chelmsford Council
Braintree Council**

Customer Services



BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear All

Emerging strategic approach relating to the Hatfield Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and National Nature Reserve (NNR). Interim advice pending the examination of emerging Local Plans.

Natural England is writing to your authorities to alert you to an emerging evidence base linked to the adverse effects of recreational pressure at Hatfield Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and National Nature Reserve (NNR). This evidence has also been referenced within our recent consultation responses to local authority Local Plans in preparation (and a number of specific individual development consultations), and we refer you to that advice for our representations on how to integrate this evidence in Local Plan policies. We propose that these effects are most effectively addressed via a strategic solution, now a common approach for addressing strategic issues at designated sites country wide.

The purpose of this letter is to outline Natural England's proposed approach in the interim period, which recognises the validity and relevance of new evidence at the present time to inform planning decisions, but which comes ahead of the examination and adoption of new Local Plans.

Hatfield Forest – Background and Importance

As you will be aware, Hatfield Forest is both SSSI and NNR, supporting an ancient forest mosaic of wood pasture, coppice, old grassland plains and wetlands, that collectively support grassland, woodland, wetland habitat features and notable assemblages of veteran trees, invertebrates, fungi, lichen and breeding birds. Hatfield Forest is arguably unique in a European context as the best example of a mediaeval forest with all elements surviving. (Rackham, O, 1989 and <https://www.placeservices.co.uk/projects/hatfield-forest-conservation-management-plan/>).

The site is owned and managed by the National Trust, who as long-term stewards of the Forest, have been working with Natural England towards better understanding the interactions between and impacts arising from increasing volumes of visitors and the habitats and environment which make Hatfield Forest an attractive visitor destination.

Towards this end, National Trust have commissioned research from consultants Footprint Ecology, (part funded by Natural England), which is now reporting.

Recreational Impacts and Zone of Influence

The study comprises two parts, an initial winter phase, and further summer phase. This recognises that although there are specific recreational pressures on the Forest during the winter months (a product of milder, wetter winters, and poorly draining clay soils leading to trampling damage of footpaths and woodland rides), these pressures are maintained throughout the year with adverse implications for the range of habitats for which the site is notified as SSSI / NNR. The Footprint Ecology reports describe these impacts in more detail, and also describe a range of mitigation measures available to offset these impacts, with the view that existing damage may be reversed towards favourable SSSI condition status, and to ensure that additional housing growth in the area can demonstrate sustainability consistent with the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

Currently, the National Trust is reviewing these recommendations, and is formulating a package of on-site (i.e. within the SSSI) Strategic Access Management Measures (SAMM) which new housing projects can contribute towards. Once this package of measures has been finalised and costed, it will enable a tariff based system to be worked up, towards calculating proportionate financial contributions to be secured (e.g., within s106 agreements). This is the typical approach routinely adopted by strategic solutions for protected sites nationwide.

The Footprint Ecology reports also include a visitor survey element, whereby Forest users are interviewed to better understand their activities within the Forest, and importantly where they are visiting from. The study therefore collates and reviews post code data, and has used this to generate a Zone of Influence, within which the majority (75%) of visitors can be expected to arise from. These data allow planners and stakeholders to confidently predict which new housing projects will contribute further towards recreational pressure at the Forest, and therefore where financial contributions towards the mitigation package should be requested.

The initial study for the winter period concluded that the zone of influence to capture 75% of visitors should be set at 10.4km from the boundary of the SSSI / NNR. Please note however that the additional summer survey report sets this same parameter at 14.6km, indicating that the draw of the Forest is, as might be expected, stronger in the warmer and drier seasons. The National Trust are shortly to complete and circulate the summer report, and will write to you shortly with further details. We recommend that this report should be used as part of the evidence base of emerging Local Plans, where appropriate. Maps of each of these zones are attached for reference.

Interim Consultation Arrangements

You will be aware that consultation on planning applications is directed through Natural England's Impact Risk Zone (IRZ) system, whereby defined zones are set according to development type around each designated site. These IRZs are [reviewed and updated frequently](#), and we encourage your authority to regularly refresh your GIS systems to ensure that you are aware of the most recent changes.

Please note that consistent with the changing and emerging evidence base, Natural England has submitted a change to the Impact Risk Zone for Hatfield Forest SSSI / NNR, to be set initially at 10.4km, pending publication of the fuller year-round visitor recreation survey, at which point this will be extended to 14.6km. We will write to you again when this extended zone has been uploaded.

The table below indicates which local authorities are within the respective zones of influence.

<i>Local Authority</i>	<i>10.4km zone</i>	<i>14.6km zone</i>
Uttlesford	Yes	Yes
Harlow	Yes	Yes
East Herts	Yes	Yes
Epping Forest	Yes	Yes
Chelmsford	Yes, just clipped	Yes
Braintree	No	Yes, just clipped

Interim Approach to Mitigation

Ahead of the examination and anticipated adoption of a strategic solution for the Forest, it is important that planning decisions are informed by this new evidence, albeit some schemes are coming forward ahead of the Local Plan and its strategic over-arching policies. Whilst this is not the preferred route towards informing planning decisions, we do not wish to unduly delay planning decisions if these are able to show that their own impacts can be adequately mitigated, and sustainability with respect to Hatfield Forest SSSI / NNR can be demonstrated. Our proposal at this interim stage is therefore to seek consultations on the larger housing applications, in order that bespoke mitigation packages can be negotiated and agreed with relevant stakeholders, including the National Trust.

At the time of writing, the National Trust is preparing a list of Strategic Access Management Measures (SAMMs), to enable developers to agree packages of funded measures proportionate to the size and location of their projects. Whilst this will, in time, be able to provide a means for all relevant housing projects to contribute towards these measures, at the current time these packages are being negotiated on a case-by-case basis, and consequently we propose that only the largest schemes are required to contribute in this way, which we suggest are reserved for projects of 50 or more units.

Once the SAMMs are agreed and costed, we will write to you again, as this will enable a larger proportion of affected development projects to contribute in a standardised manner. We will also then update our Impact Risk Zones to capture the majority of new housing applications to contribute in this way. At that point, Natural England would respond to planning consultations using a standardised advice letter indicating the mitigation funds required to align with the emerging policy framework.

Accessible Natural Greenspace

For the largest, strategic housing sites (we suggest 100+ units), Natural England further advises that recreational pressure impacts to Hatfield Forest SSSI / NNR are additionally mitigated via the provision of Accessible Natural Greenspace (ANG), a specific form of Green Infrastructure, to be provided within the red-line boundary of the proposed development. Such green infrastructure should be designed to absorb significant proportions of the day to day recreational needs of new residents, such as walking, dog walking, jogging / exercise, children's play facilities, and other informal recreation. It should also aim to provide a semi-natural character, with significant proportion of tree / woodland cover, and as may be appropriate, café / basic refreshment facilities.

Specifically, LPAs and developers may wish to consider two benchmark standards for ANG provision. Firstly, the TCPA have published [Guides and Principles for Garden Communities](#), and Guide 7, Principle 9, references 40% green infrastructure as a target quantum. Whilst some larger housing allocations may not technically qualify for Garden Community status, nevertheless Natural England advises that this represents a quantum and quality standard which is aspirational in this context. Secondly, the strategic solution designed for the Thames Basin Heaths SPA requires a quantum of SANG at a rate of 8ha per 1000 population. Again though, it should be noted that the Thames Basin Heaths SPA (ground

nesting birds) is classified for different interest features to Hatfield Forest SSSI / NNR, and so although it may not be directly comparable, does offer an indicative quantum comparison. In both instances, we wish to emphasise that the design quality is as important as quantity, and schemes should aim to provide a rationale which cross references GI design with mitigation requirements for the Forest.

For individual schemes, Natural England would be happy to advise developers and/or their consultants on the detail of requirements at the pre-application stage through our charged Discretionary Advice Service, further information on which is available [here](#).

Strategic Alternative Natural Greenspace

It should be noted that the combination of on-site (within SSSI) measures (SAMM) and ANG may not in themselves be sufficient to mitigate the totality of recreational pressure felt at the Forest. Natural England anticipates exploring with stakeholders as part of the medium-term the provision for land acquisition to develop larger, strategic areas of open space, better able to offer facilities and an environment more comparable to the scale of Hatfield Forest. In time therefore, developer contributions may be sought towards this aspiration.

Interim Funding Mechanism

Natural England are keen to see the delivery of the Strategic Access Management Measures. We are open for the individual Local Planning Authorities to use whatever funding mechanism they are comfortable with. As long as on a periodic basis, contributions are submitted in line with the quanta of development delivered.

Next Steps

Natural England will continue to engage proactively with your authorities towards integrating a strategic solution for Hatfield Forest SSSI / NNR within Local Plan policies. As the strategy progresses, we will write to you again with updates on progress with the SAMMs mitigation, and any changes to the Impact Risk Zones etc. Please do contact us again should you have any queries with the above. We would be grateful if you could also circulate this letter to all relevant staff within Planning Policy and Development Control departments.

Yours sincerely

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