

### **Habitats Regulations Assessment Mitigation Strategies Briefing**

A Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) refers to the several distinct stages of Assessment which must be undertaken in accordance with the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) to determine if a plan or project may affect the protected features of a habitats site before deciding whether to undertake, permit or authorise it. European Sites and European Offshore Marine Sites identified under these regulations are now referred to as 'habitats sites' in the National Planning Policy Framework.

All plans and projects (including planning applications) require consideration of whether the plan or project is likely to have significant effects on habitats sites. This consideration –referred to as the 'Habitats Regulations Assessment screening' – should take into account the potential effects both of the plan/project itself and in combination with other plans or projects. Where the potential for likely significant effects cannot be excluded, the Council must make an appropriate assessment of the implications of the plan or project for that site, in view the site's conservation objectives. The Council may agree to the plan or project only after having ruled out adverse effects on the integrity of the habitats site. Where it cannot be concluded that there will be no adverse effects on a site's integrity, there is a need to consider mitigation. Mitigation measures are protective measures forming part of a project and are intended to avoid or reduce any direct adverse effects that may be caused by a plan or project, to ensure that it does not have an adverse effect on the integrity of a habitats site(s).

#### **Rodborough Common Special Area of Conservation (SAC)**

Rodborough Common Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is a 109ha site just south of Stroud. The Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) of the Stroud District Local Plan (URS, 2014), identified that recreational pressure has the potential to impact upon the qualifying features for which the Rodborough was designated. As a result, the Council devised a Mitigation Strategy in 2015 and has been collecting monies from housing developers since that time which has funded a programme of mitigation measures delivered in partnership with Natural England, the National Trust and other stakeholders. A new visitor survey was completed in 2019 which identified visitors are on site for a relatively short time, but they visit frequently and live very locally to the site. The data would suggest an average visitor makes 180 visits to the site per year, visiting for 60 minutes and lives within 3.9 km (75% of all interviewees, across all visitor types), most of whom are dog walking. This work is now being used to inform and draft a new mitigation strategy where adverse effects arising can be mitigated. Currently we are contacting stakeholder groups in order to examine potential mitigation options. It is anticipated this work should be completed in Spring 2022 and the Mitigation Strategy will come to Environment Committee for adoption.

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Severn Estuary Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA)

The Severn Estuary is designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site for its internationally important populations of overwintering birds, and as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Ramsar site for its overwintering birds, estuarine habitats and associated species of fish. Approximately 22 km of the Severn Estuary SPA/SAC/Ramsar site (hereafter 'The Severn Estuary') shoreline falls within the jurisdiction of Stroud District Council. The Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) of the Stroud District Local Plan (URS, 2014) identified at that time that recreational pressure has the potential to impact upon the qualifying features for which the Severn Estuary was designated, in particular through disturbance to the bird species which use the Estuary for feeding and roosting during the winter. The District Council devised a Mitigation Strategy in 2017 and has been collecting monies from housing developers since that time which has funded a programme of mitigation measures delivered in partnership with Natural England, local landowners and other stakeholders. The Severn Estuary straddles many administrative areas from local to national. With this in mind Stroud District is now working in partnership with the County Council and other relevant Local Planning Authorities to develop a wider strategic partnership approach and will be commissioning visitor surveys and a mitigation strategy for the Severn Estuary shortly. The mitigation strategy should come for formal adoption at Environment Committee Spring 2023 and new governance and partnership arrangements will need to be put in place.

Cotswolds Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

The Cotswold Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is a 590ha site located between the settlements of Gloucester, Cheltenham, Cirencester and Stroud, Gloucestershire. The site is designated for the internationally important beech woodlands, and to a lesser extent for calcareous grassland communities (1.5% of SAC is dry grassland, mostly near Sheepscombe). It is also a National Nature Reserve (NNR) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Again this site straddles many administrative areas and the Council is working in partnership with relevant Councils to commission work. Visitor surveys are now available as part of the Local Plan Review Evidence Base. The Mitigation Strategy is currently being drafted and the Council is undertaking a series of meetings with the other partners to look at administrative matters and governance structures. Natural England is advising on other examples of potential governance structures such as that at Cannock Chase for example. The mitigation strategy should come for formal adoption at Environment Committee Spring 2022.

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