

**Broads Local Plan – Recreation Impacts Study**  
Report by Planning Policy Officer

**Summary:** This report provides an update to members on the progress of evidence to support the Local Plan, namely Recreation Impacts Study - Visitor Surveys at European Protected Sites (January 2017, Footprint Ecology). This report provides updated evidence to inform the preparation of the Local Plan. Through analysis of visitor surveys it provides a strategic overview to aid the understanding of the relationship between population growth (including new housing growth and tourist growth) and the potential impacts on internationally designated wildlife sites throughout Norfolk.

**Recommendation:** That the report on the Recreation Impacts Study is published as a source of evidence to support the emerging Local Plan.

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 Norfolk contains several sites designated under European legislation (eg Natura 2000) for its nature conservation value, some very large, and is among the most important counties in England for nature conservation. These sites are of European significance for conservation value, but may also be vulnerable to change and/or development, either directly or indirectly. Recreation levels in the county continue to increase and the location of and scale of new development will continue to influence the level of visitor use. Increased recreation places increasing demands on the management of the European sites and can cause impacts to the designated interest features. As such strategic planning for residential development needs to ensure these issues are adequately addressed.
- 1.2 As part of Local Plan preparation it is necessary to demonstrate that the proposals which are made are not likely to have a significant adverse effect on designated wildlife sites. It is widely accepted that development close to designated sites can have both direct and indirect impacts including those associated with additional visitors to them<sup>1</sup>. To assess the potential impacts of increased visitors it is first necessary to understand the numbers of visitors, where they come from and the activities that visitors undertake at the sites when they arrive. Most of the sites have a legal right of access and are visited by local people and those from further afield including tourists. It is also important to understand the robustness of the sites to accommodate visitor

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<sup>1</sup> Table 1, page 11 shows the kind of impacts from recreation.

activities as some sites are more sensitive to pressures than others and many are already subject to various management/visitor strategies.

- 1.3 The study is principally concerned with establishing the number and behaviour of visitors at the designated sites as well as drawing analysis around routes and distance travelled and frequency of use.
- 1.4 This helps to make the links between new housing development and recreation use and provides evidence to inform the Local Plan including the development of appropriate monitoring and mitigation measures.
- 1.5 The Local Plan must conform to the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010, as amended, in order to ensure that plans and projects do not adversely affect any European wildlife sites. The Local Plan will be subject to a Habitats Regulations Assessment and Appropriate Assessment (HRA) This study will also provide updated base line data to inform that assessment and a potential source of mitigation measures that can inform policies should the HRA find potential significant effects that would need to be mitigated against.
- 1.6 The study was commissioned on behalf of all the Norfolk local planning authorities through Norfolk County Council / Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership, NBP and project managed through a collaborative steering group

## **2. Methodology**

- 2.1 Within Norfolk there are a range of European protected sites which encompass a range of habitats such as coast, heathland, wetlands and woodland habitats. 40 survey points across 4 broad geographical areas were selected and agreed with the consultant following targeted workshops with environmental groups and LPAs across Norfolk.<sup>2</sup> Map 3 on Page 17 shows the survey sites. A full list is contained in appendix 1 to the study.
- 2.2 Surveys were conducted at a range of times during winter and summer months of 2015/16, reflecting when nature interest and/or pressures were greatest at the survey location. Considerable variation between the numbers of individuals entering sites was recorded with the highest numbers on the Norfolk Coast at Holkham (1,928) and Horsey Gap<sup>3</sup> (1,891). In total 6,096 groups were estimated entering or leaving sites across all survey points over sixteen hours of survey. These groups consisted of 13,842 adults, 2,616 minors and 3,466 dogs. 1,341 interviews were undertaken<sup>4</sup>.
- 2.3 As part of the questionnaire, the surveyor asked the interviewee various details around where they had been (or planned to go), where they had come

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<sup>2</sup> Natural England, RSPB, National Trust, The Wash and North Norfolk Coast European Marine Site Management Scheme, Norfolk Coast Partnership, Holkham Estate, Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Broads Authority, Forestry Commission, Norfolk County Council, Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership, South Norfolk Council, Breckland Council, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council, Norwich City Council, North Norfolk District Council, Broadland District Council, Great Yarmouth Borough Council

<sup>3</sup> Recreation Impacts Study paragraph 3.3/table 4 page 20

<sup>4</sup> Table 5, page 25 shows the breakdown across the county.

from and what purpose/activity they were there for (eg, dog walking, visitor etc) If they were holidaying they were subsequently asked the type of holiday accommodation.

- 2.4 Existing and potential new housing sites (existing allocations) which represented levels of anticipated development during current plan period were supplied by all the authorities. This allowed the study to analysis the amount of existing and allocated housing in relation to the proximity (distance) from European sites.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Key Findings

- 3.1 The key findings of the study are shown on page 59, but some are listed below:
- Dog walking (41%) and walking (26%) were the most popular activities overall, but with big variations depending on the sites. Within individual areas this first and second ranking of dog walking and walking was consistent for the East Coast, Roydon & Dersingham, the Valley Fens, the Wash and the North Coast. Within the Valley Fens and Norfolk Coast dog walkers and walkers accounted for three quarters of interviewees.
  - Figure 3, page 23 shows the proportion of adults, minors and dogs at each survey point.
  - Two thirds (66%) of interviews were on short trips having travelled from home and a third (32%) of interviewees were on holiday. 52% of interviewees were visiting (Norfolk Sites) from home and resident in Norfolk. 16% had travelled from home on a short day visit and lived outside Norfolk. See Figure 5 on page 27 and figure 8 on page 32. Map 6 on page 44 shows the origin postcodes.
  - Across Norfolk the average distance between a visitor's home postcode and the survey point for those visiting from home was 24 km.
  - Some of the sites have high proportions of daily visitors and high average travel instances. This suggests that some of the sites with a strong draw over long distances still have daily visitors.
  - Across all interviewees (including holiday makers) 37% said they visited the site at least daily.
  - The most common duration on site was 1 to 2 hours (31%) followed by between 30 and 60 mins (27%).
  - Over three quarters 77% of all interviewees had arrived at the interview location by car. Most of the remaining interviewees 18% had arrived on foot.
  - Just over a third (36%) of interviewees were aware of a designation/environmental protection that applied to the site where visiting.
  - Increased housing is unlikely to have a marked effect on access at distances beyond 10km, unless the volume of housing is particularly large.
  - Turning to the routes taken by those surveyed, Map 14 on page 54 shows the routes in the Broads. Map 15 on page 55 shows the Horsey Dunes area.

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<sup>5</sup> Recreation Impact Study Map 20 Page 76

- 3.2 On average, based on the predictions of planned housing growth of 16% across Norfolk there is a predicted increase of access to European sites of 14%, (without mitigation). The report generally concludes that increased housing from allocations (as opposed to windfall) is unlikely to have a marked effect on access to European sites at distances beyond 10 km. The North Norfolk Coast is however the exception with it drawing from across Norfolk and from significant tourism.

#### **4. Implications**

- 4.1 Local planning authorities are responsible for ensuring that proposals contained in their local plans do not have an adverse effect on the integrity of European sites. Despite this being a response to European legislation the requirement is transposed into English law by the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004, and Habitats and Species Regulations 2010. As such it remains appropriate to continue to demonstrate compliance with the legislation and it remains important to have an understanding of recreation patterns including how people use the sites, why they visit and where they come from in order to start to consider the potential impacts from new housing growth.
- 4.2 Much of identified development is already included in existing plans and therefore development has already been subject to plan-level Habitats Regulations Assessment and mitigation has been established as necessary. The study however provides updated base line data and seeks to establish the links between housing growth and recreational impacts in order to inform future HRA assessments. Such information can inform policy development should the HRA find potential significant effects that would need to be mitigated against.
- 4.3 Protective measures (mitigation) identified in the study that have been implemented in other areas included:
- Buffers around sites (Development constraint zones)
  - Mobile warden teams to promote responsible access. These could be more active at particular times of the year when there are issues such as seal pupping.
  - Provision of new green space SANGs (Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace) to absorb visitor pressure. Given the draw of the sites and the distance people will travel to visit them, SANGs may not be effective. Although there may be options to create dedicated areas for dog walking linked to new development near coastal sites.
  - General awareness raising targeting user groups (such as dog walkers).
  - Provision of on-site access infrastructure such as changes to parking, path networks or way-marking.
- 4.5 The table on page 80 shows the predicted increase in those interviewed in each area if the exercise were completed again in the future after housing had been built. It shows the origin of the people in relation to the Local Planning Authority. It can be seen that the percentage increase varies at each site and

the impact from different Local Planning Authorities reflects the proximity to the area.

- 4.6 The implications and mitigation for the Broads and Coast is addressed on page 88 from paragraph 6.18 onwards. Such measures are generally linked directly to development with funding secured through section 106 agreements and/or Community Infrastructure Levy, (CIL). The study concludes that such mitigation approaches are best delivered strategically across Local Authority boundaries and working in partnership with other organisations as securing green infrastructure or long term wardening is complex and likely to be impossible to deliver piecemeal. It will also improve communication, project delivery and potentially open new funding streams.

## **5 Conclusions**

- 5.1 Recreation levels continue to increase and the location of new development will influence the level of visitor use. Most of the sites in surveyed have a legal right of public access and are popular destinations for recreation, visited by local people and those from further afield, including tourists. The key findings from this report relate to the cumulative, in-combination effects of development across all the local planning authorities in Norfolk and show a range of different use and recreational draw for the different sites. The report provides a basis for plan review and other key points for local authorities to address the issues of recreation pressure in a more strategic way. Solutions are likely to be most effective if delivered and funded in partnership. In other parts of the country strategic mitigation schemes have been established involving partnerships of local authorities delivering mitigation funded through developer contribution schemes.
- 5.2 What the report does not do is look at the individual sites capacity to absorb visitor pressure. Some sites may be able to take more visitors without any adverse effect to the integrity of the site. Some sites however may find a very small increase in visitors will detrimentally effect their functioning. It can't be assumed that growth alone will directly negatively affect these designated sites. More analysis needs to be done on the individual sites and their condition to enable a better prediction of how growth may affect them.
- 5.3 The study provides valuable information to inform the emerging local plan and in particular the HRA.
- 5.4 It is recommended that Planning Committee accept and publish the Recreation Impact Study as a source of evidence to support the emerging Local Plan for the Broads.

## **6 Financial Implications**

- 6.1 The Broads Authority has made financial contributions to this study.

Background papers:	None
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Appendices:	<a href="#">Appendix A: Recreation Impacts Study</a> (January 2017, Footprint Ecology)