

Pebblebed Heaths Car Park Strategy and Design Brief

Background

The East Devon Pebblebed Heaths (Pebblebed Heaths) cover some 1,400 ha and make up the largest block of lowland heath in Devon. The majority of the heaths are designated SSSI, Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Areas (SPA) due to the rarity of the habitats and the species they protect. The Pebblebed Heaths are also registered commons and as such are Open Access Land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. Most of the designated area (ca. 80%) is owned by Clinton Devon Estates and managed by the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust, which manages the site for the benefit of wildlife and to promote the public enjoyment and appreciation of the reserve. Some smaller areas are leased or owned by the RSPB, with remaining areas privately owned and managed, including by the Devon Wildlife Trust.

Under the current Local Plan over 40,000 new homes are planned in the in the East Devon, Exeter and Teignbridge districts through to 2030. This level of growth has implications for all popular recreation sites, with significant increases in visitor pressure expected. However, there are specific requirements for protecting European conservation sites within the National Planning Policy Framework, which includes designated SPAs and SACs. Within the local area this includes the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths, Dawlish Warren and the Exe Estuary. The Habitats Regulations translate European legislation set out within the Habitats and the Birds Directives and there are specific legal obligations to ensure that local development avoids deterioration of habitats and species for European sites. In south-east Devon the strategic approach to deal with issues related to access and the impacts of increased recreation from planned development are set out in the South-east Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy (Liley *et al.* 2014b), with its implementation overseen by the South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership (SEDHRP). Under the auspices of this strategy the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan (Liley *et al.* 2016) was commissioned to provide a framework for delivery of mitigation for the Pebblebed Heaths to ensure they can cope with the increased levels of recreation in the future, and to give confidence that the expected growth will not result in adverse impacts on designated features. The report makes a series of recommendations for the long-term management of access, focusing on influencing visitors' behaviour and ensuring the site is more robust in terms of its ability to absorb recreation pressure. SEDHRP developed a five-year plan based on these recommendations and since 2017 priority actions have been delivered in line with this plan.

An estimated 400,000+ visits are made to the Pebblebed Heaths annually, with the majority of visitors travelling to the site by car or van. Although there is no legal obligation to provide car parking on the heaths, there are 13 formal car parks across the site, with a further 30+ informal areas accommodating a few cars, and significant extents of verges also frequently used (Liley *et al.* 2016). Rationalising car parking was highlighted in the visitor management plan as potentially playing an important role in influencing where people choose to go and how they behave, helping to reduce negative recreational impacts. This could include the closure of some car parks and the improvement of others to make them more attractive should the evidence suggest this would be effective. The current approach anticipates targeting the improvement of a select few formal car-

parks in order to focus access, with this work complemented by adjacent trail improvements, waymarking, mapped walks and trail guides to assist with directing visitors around the site. Over time these car parks would become the main access points used by visitors with this transition supported through limiting roadside parking and allowing other car-parks to deteriorate before eventual closure. In combination these measures would reduce the risk of growth of uncontrolled diffuse access over a wider area. Improvements could include better surfacing, clear marking of bays, ease of access onto/from roads and signage. The selected car-parks should be chosen to match those most likely to minimise recreational impact on the designated features and would provide a focal point for interpretation, dog bins and wardening time ensuring greater engagement with a higher proportion of visitors. The Visitor Management Plan has provided the foundation for this work through the provision of recreational pressure heat maps. . The broad approach is to shift from widespread diffuse access (multiple locations with ample parking and limited engagement opportunities), to access which is more concentrated (less access points, a similar number of parking spaces and good engagement opportunities). The aim is to develop access infrastructure that protects the designated features from future increases in visitor pressure, which is easier to manage and which promotes more effective public engagement and education (both face to face and via interpretation signage). Improvements would provide the potential to also set the number of parking places at particular locations, giving a means of setting a limit on the number of visitors that may visit at a particular time. Changes can therefore ensure no overall net increase in the number of parking spaces at the site.

Project Brief

The development and costing of car parking plans for a site as complex as the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths requires specialist support. The SEDHRP and managers of the Pebblebed Heaths require a consultant specialising in car park strategy and design to assess the current parking across the heaths and recommend an appropriate costed strategy to manage this access. Ensuring protection of the designated features, alongside providing safe and sustainable infrastructure, which is in keeping with the character of the heaths. To ensure that the work is continually informed by the ultimate objective to avoid impacts on designated features the consultant should have ecological understanding and experience of infrastructure projects set in sensitive countryside locations. This project will be led by the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust with support from the RSPB and DWT. The contractor will draw from the principles outlined within the Visitor Management Plan and with broad consultation from site management teams develop a long-term costed strategy for parking. It is also expected that EDDC and Natural England will also be consulted regarding requirements for planning permission and consents. DCC Highways may need to be consulted regarding car park entrances and prevention of roadside parking. This strategy will ensure that future funding is spent appropriately and efficiently to deliver works specifically designed to maintain the integrity of designated features. The work will be carried out alongside other mitigation actions relating to visitor flow and behavioural change making on site delivery more efficient and ensuring the different elements complement each other on the ground. Changes to car parks have the potential to be controversial and so this report will provide evidence to justify our decisions and works that are taken forward. Our objective is to protect the site whilst improving visitor enjoyment of it.

Required output:

- Compile information on current parking offer across the heaths (visitor data available and survey of current carpark infrastructure in progress), with reference to the Visitor Management Plan
- Develop strategy for carpark offer across heaths to achieve listed objectives. Should identify the general approach to car parking, focussing of resources and where parking should be encouraged or discouraged. The strategy should include details of financial considerations such as the effectiveness of charging to cover long-term management. A clear rationale explaining the choice of recommendations should accompany the strategy.

Key objective: to limit impact of visitors on designated features (SSSI, SAC, SPA)

Supporting objectives:

- protect the aesthetic of the landscape and character of heaths
 - limit impacts on other site features e.g. SAMs
 - improve the visitor experience for new and existing visitors but without creating a 'destination'
 - prevent antisocial behaviour/camping etc
 - understand the heaths car park offer in the context of the wider landscape
 - prevent overspill parking on verges/roadside
 - direct visitors as appropriate around site, focus access (visitor flows)
 - support the increased understanding of the special qualities of the heath, education and responsible access (visitor behaviour)
 - ensure visitor safety and minimise liability
 - ensure financial viability regarding long term management
- Recommendations for design of car park offer to deliver strategy to include:
 - mapping of options for car parking offer across the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths
 - risk register
 - annotated graphics to illustrate options for individual car parks that will be retained
 - options appraisal (objectives achieved; potential drawbacks; materials used; installation value for money; expected maintenance requirements)
 - consent requirements (planning permission, Natural England consent etc)
 - indicative costing for installation of options
 - proposal of scheduling and prioritisation of works

It is recognised that detailed specifications of works are likely beyond the scope of this project and that in order to comply with CDM regulations this element will be carried out once the final strategy and design has been agreed upon. An engineer or architect is likely required to take on the role of 'principle designer' and will draw up the final detailed plan of works which quotes can then be received against. If you have the expertise to also offer this service, please make that clear in your response.



Sources of information:

Liley, D., Hoskin, R., Lake, S., Underhill-Day, J. & Cruickshanks, K. (2013). South-east Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy. Footprint Ecology. Unpublished report for East Devon District Council, Exeter City Council and Teignbridge District Council.

<http://eastdevon.gov.uk/media/369997/exe-overarching-report-9th-june-2014.pdf>

Liley, D., Panter, C., Underhill-Day, J. (2015). East Devon Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan. Unpublished report by Footprint Ecology for East Devon Council.

<http://www.footprint-ecology.co.uk/reports/Liley%20et%20al.%20-%202016%20-%20East%20Devon%20Pebblebeds%20Heaths%20Visitor%20Management%20PI.pdf>

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