

Waverley Borough Council

SUMMARY OF THE THAMES BASIN HEATHS SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA DRAFT AVOIDANCE STRATEGY

MAY 2009

Introduction

Waverley Borough Council has produced an updated plan designed to continue to protect rare birds in heathland while allowing new housing to be built.

Until 20 July the council will be seeking views on the proposals drafted to safeguard the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) and the rare birds which nest on or close to the ground within it. The proposals are contained in what is called the Avoidance Strategy May 2009. The biggest threat to the woodlarks, Dartford warblers and nightjars that inhabit the heathland of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA comes from walkers and people using the area to exercise dogs.

The Thames Basin Heaths SPA includes areas of Hart, Rushmoor, Bracknell Forest, Surrey Heath, Guildford, Woking and Elmbridge. Waverley is mainly affected by a five kilometre radius that emanates from the section of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA that straddles the borders of Hart and Rushmoor. The five kilometre radius affects any new homes being built within the Farnham area.

A requirement has been placed on developers looking to build homes within a five kilometre radius of the Thames Basin heaths SPA. The important requirement involves contributions from developers towards parks and other green spaces, known technically as Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG), as an alternative to people using the SPA. A summary of the draft Avoidance Strategy is set out below.

The purpose of the Avoidance Strategy

The purpose of the Avoidance Strategy is to give guidance to housebuilders, when making a planning application in the Farnham area. It sets out measures that need to be taken to avoid having an adverse impact on the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA), because of the pressure of additional population living in new housing. The measures set out in the draft Avoidance Strategy would involve contributing towards "Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace" (SANG) and contributing towards the access management and monitoring of the SPA itself.

The Thames Basin Heaths Draft Delivery Plan

The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) was designated in March 2005 and is a European designation to protect woodlark, nightjar and Dartford warbler. To show how the area should be protected from an increase in visitors, arising from additional housing, English Nature (now Natural England) produced a draft Delivery Plan in May 2006. It was used by the Council to produce the Interim Miniplan in 2007. From the Delivery Plan the concept of two zones was developed, relating to the different distances people walk and travel by car to visit the SPA. The zones are 0-400m (Zone A) and 400m-5km (Zone B).

The Thames Basin Heaths Delivery Framework

The Thames Basin Heaths Delivery Framework has overtaken the Delivery Plan and has been produced by the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board, on behalf of the member local authorities and other stakeholders. It gives guidance to Local Authorities on how to implement avoidance measures in a consistent way. It is a non-statutory document in the context of the South East Plan, which includes a policy NRM6 on the Thames Basin Heaths SPA.

Options for developers to meet Avoidance Strategy requirements.

Developers can provide SANG themselves; buy into new SANG identified by the Council; or buy into the upgrading of an existing SANG.

Farnham Park as SANG

Of the 130 ha of Farnham Park, there are 85 ha of semi-natural grassland, woodland and scrub, which was confirmed by Natural England as being of SANG quality. Of this 21.25 ha could be allocated as SANG, based on Natural England taking a precautionary approach on the assumption that the Park was at 75% capacity, and in advance of a visitor survey being undertaken. This was further reduced to 10.9 ha because of limited parking. The visitor survey, carried out in May/June 2007 showed the Park was used at about 50% capacity.

Enhancements have been carried out in the Park since the Miniplan was published in 2007. Car parks have been improved, a site based full time ranger has been employed, a Park office and visitor interpretation area has been provided.

The initial assessment of SANG capacity at Farnham Park has now been exhausted as a result of planning permissions being granted for housing in Farnham since the adoption of the original Miniplan in 2007. One option is to increase the SANG capacity up to 21.25 ha.

Identification of new SANG

An alternative to increasing the capacity of the SANG at Farnham Park would be the identification of new SANGs. Alternative sites being investigated are Farnham Quarry; land to the east of Farnham Park; Riverside and the land to the south of the A31 Bypass; the water meadows to the north of the A31 Bypass and south of West Street; Bourne Woods and Alice Holt; and a site in the Blackwater Valley.

Financial tariffs

Under the provisions of the Interim Miniplan, developers with permission to build houses in Zone B (400m-5km from the SPA) have been paying a tariff to provide the SANG required to avoid a significant impact on the SPA. It is proposed that this will continue with the addition of a further tariff to pay for the work that Natural England is proposing in respect of access management and monitoring of the SPA.

Monitoring

As well as the monitoring work of Natural England, the Council will continue to monitor housing and site improvements and will undertake a monitoring programme as advised by consultants.