



SOUTH EAST DEVON
HABITAT REGULATIONS
PARTNERSHIP

South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan

Neil Harris – Habitat Regulations Delivery Manager
July 2017

Legal comment/advice:

Should the HREC adopt the Pebblebed Heath Visitor Management Plan then this will form part of the mitigation measures required to mitigate the impact of housing growth. The legal implications that relate to the delivery of the Strategy then apply equally to this Plan. In that sense the measures outlined, where appropriate, should form part of the 5 Year Delivery Programme and Annual Business Plan. Otherwise there are no direct legal implications arising.

Finance comment/advice:

The financial implication have been factored into other reports contained within the agenda.

Public Document:	Yes Yes
Exemption:	None
Review date for release	None

Recommendation

It is proposed that the HREC adopts the Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan, noting that estimated costs have been adjusted as part of recent rebasing work (outlined in the separate report “Rebasing the SEDESMS – the strategic response”).

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: High

As an extension of the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy, if the Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan is not endorsed, there is a high risk that the delivery of the Strategy would be significantly compromised or delayed. This would put the delivery of the partner Authorities’ Local Plans at risk due to the legal duties under the Habitat Regulations.

1. Summary

1.1 This paper summarises the requirement for the Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan (VMP) as a partial replacement of (and addition to) the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy (“the Strategy”).

1.2 Implications for per dwelling developer contributions at Exeter and East Devon have been incorporated into the work to rebase the Strategy.

1.3 As outlined in the separate report “Rebasing the SEDESMS – the strategic response”, some of the recommendations in the VMP have been rationalised following consultation with Clinton Devon Estates and other partners including Natural England and RSPB. This is in the interest of ensuring ongoing delivery of an effective and efficient Strategy, based on a credible and secure financial position.

2. Background

2.1 The original Strategy recommends a number of onsite mitigation measures for the Pebblebed Heaths and also recommended further work:

“8.55 There is no existing overall visitor management plan for the Pebblebed Heaths although site managers are well aware of the issues and visitor management is addressed in the RSPB management plan.

However, any measures which relate to the whole of the Pebblebed Heaths, such as management of parking, will need to consider the issues across the whole site if a strategic approach is to be inclusive and holistic. If not, then measures taken in one part of the site such as closing casual parking areas, will impact somewhere else as visitors move to park on another part of the site... Any visitor management plan will therefore be concerned with measures to manage access, not restrict it.”

“8.56 A strategic visitor management plan will need to be led by the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust with inputs from RSPB and other owners. Information...is available from the Ecology Solutions report (2012), but additional information on the ownership and condition of car parks and parking spaces will be needed together with further information on the visitor patterns within the site.”¹

2.2 East Devon District Council commissioned Footprint Ecology to produce the Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan in February 2015, on behalf of the partner authorities. The final version was received on 18.01.17 and fulfils the components relating to the Pebblebed Heaths within the wider Strategy .

¹ South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy, June 2014, pg. 152

3. Method and key results

3.1 The report uses visitor surveys and predictions of the distribution of recreational use within the site to provide recommendations for future management.

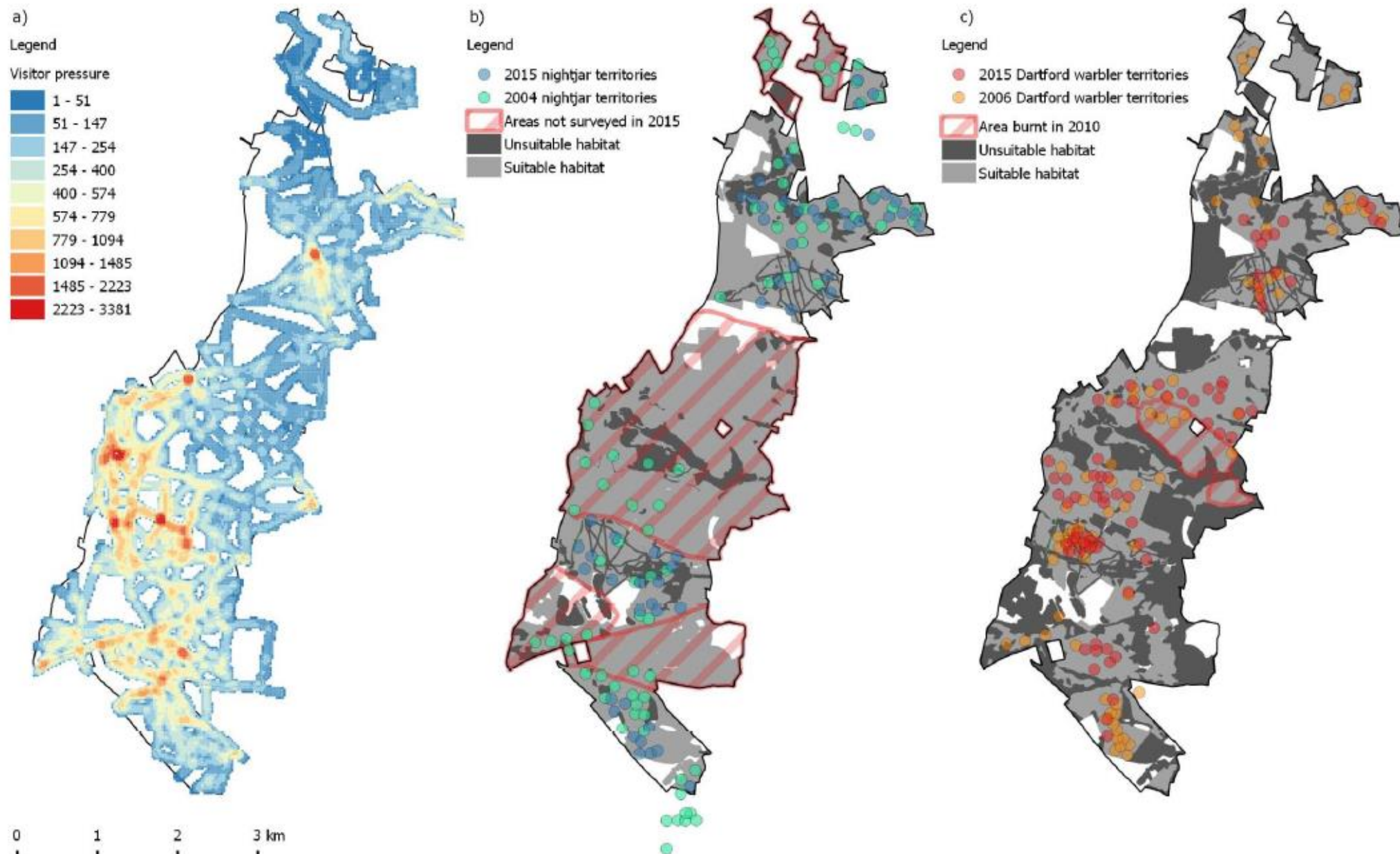
3.2 Visitor surveys involved questionnaire work at 12 locations in the spring and summer 2015. Key results of these surveys were:

- Nearly three-quarters of all interviewees were visiting to walk their dog. Other activities included walking, cycling, wildlife watching, jogging and family outings.
- Many visitors had been visiting the Pebblebeds for a long time: over half of interviewees had been visiting the location where interviewed for at least 10 years.
- Most interviewees visited at least weekly. There was some evidence that regular visitors tended to avoid the main honeypots such as the Warren car park (on the Pebblebed Heaths).
- The majority of interviewees had travelled to the interview location by car or van.
- The 'scenery/variety of views' was the most commonly given reason for the choice of site. Other common factors included 'good for dog/dog enjoys it' and the 'ability to let dog off lead'.
- Other sites visited by interviewees were often also within the Pebblebeds. The Exe Estuary (including Topsham, Lympstone, Exmouth seafront etc.) was the most commonly named destination outside the Pebblebed Heaths.
- Nearly half of all the people interviewed were not aware that there was any environmental protection or designations that applied to the Pebblebeds and few interviewees were aware of important species or habitats (for example around a third could not name a habitat or species for which the Pebblebeds are important).
- When asked about access restrictions most interviewees were aware that lighting fires and wild camping were restricted. Relatively few were aware of restrictions relating to the number of dogs walked or the need to keep dogs on leads during the breeding. For dog fouling around three quarters were aware of a requirement to pick up.
- Routes were mapped for most interviewees and showed an average distance (all activities, all locations) of just over 3km. There were significant differences between activities, with cyclists doing the longest routes and family outings and dog walking being the shortest.

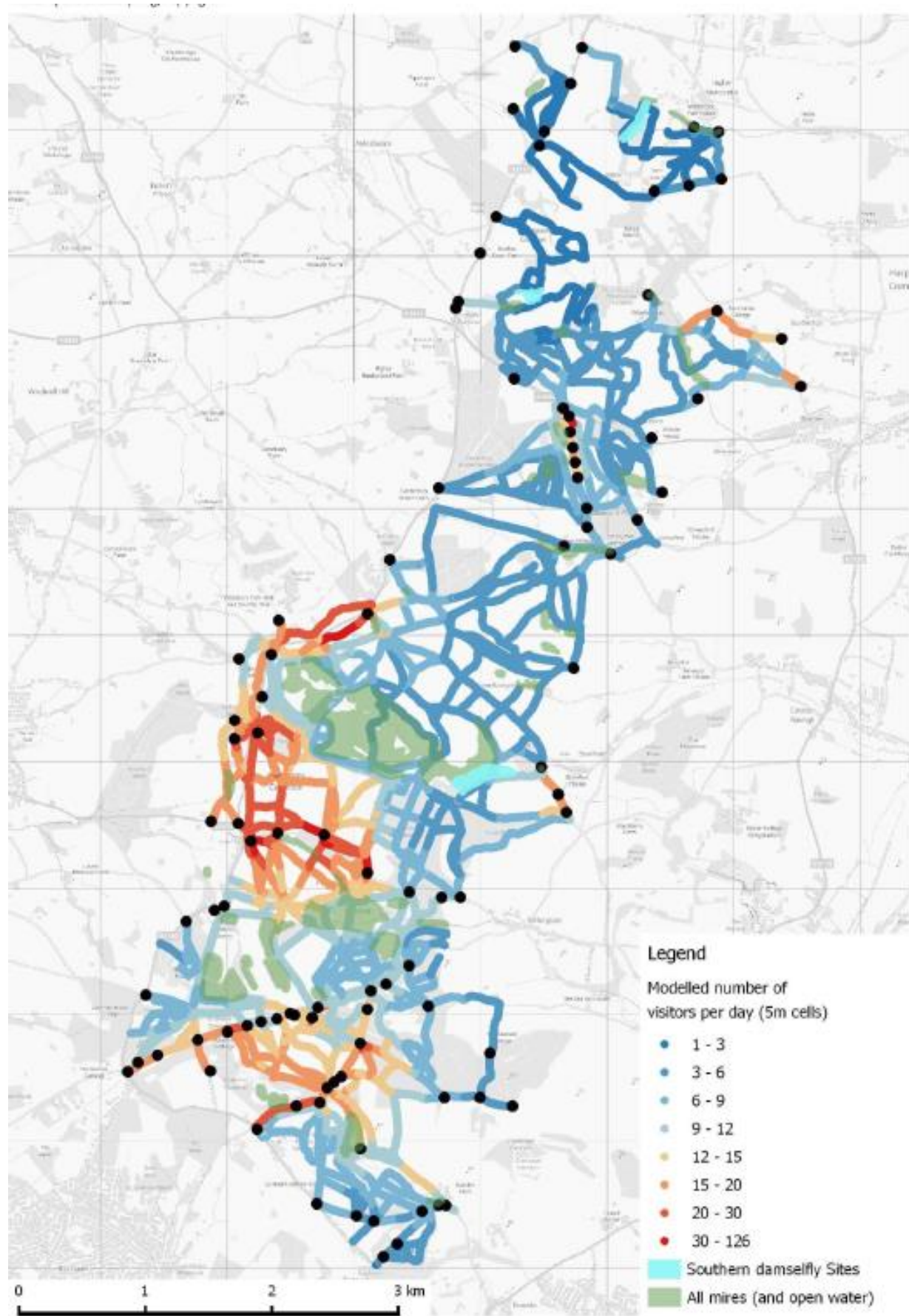
3.3 The surveys enabled an understanding of visitor use and distribution across the Pebblebed Heaths. This was coupled with information on the conservation interest features (where populations of Nightjar, Dartford Warbler and Southern damselfly are present) of the Heaths to create a visitor model which helped to inform future management recommendations.

3.4 Map 1, below, shows the distribution of visitor pressure compared to Nightjar and Dartford warbler territories. Map 2 shows visitor pressure with Southern Damselfly sites and mires (areas of wet or boggy heath) overlaid.

Map 1. (a) Distribution of visitor pressure, with (b) Nightjar and (c) Dartford warbler territories



Map 2 Visitor pressure with Southern Damselfly sites and mires (areas of wet or boggy heath) overlaid.



4. Recommendations

4.1 A range of management measures were drawn up and were subjected to a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis, according to the following criteria:

- Cost
- Ease of implementation
- Support/popularity with visitors/user groups
- Likelihood of success
- Overlap with other measures
- Effectiveness over time
- Geographic scale (i.e. if relevant to all Pebblebeds or a specific location)
- Likely opportunity (linked to existing management, on-going projects, new projects etc.)
- Views of site managers, land owners etc.

4.2 The analysis was then used to suggest priority mitigation measures to inform discussion with representatives from partner organisations and the project steering group. The discussions sought consensus as to which measures were most appropriate and would fit with existing management and with the aspirations of the relevant organisations. Following these discussions, components of the plan were identified and then developed in more detail and costed.

4.3 Recommendations for the long term management of access concentrate on influencing visitors' behaviour and ensuring the site is more robust in terms of its ability to absorb recreation pressure. The measures focus recreation rather than allowing diffuse recreation over the entire site, aiming to improve how recreation is managed rather than draw more visitors to the area.

4.4 Priority measures are shown in Appendix 1 and include:

- Provision of additional dog bins
- Codes of conduct
- Educational work with schools
- Interpretation boards
- Detailed material for internet use
- Signs directing people
- Signs regarding appropriate behaviour
- Boardwalks/path surfacing
- Changes to car parks
- Maps highlighting routes (as to avoid sensitive areas)

4.5 As with the original Strategy, monitoring is integral to the efficacy of the plan and a number of specific monitoring projects are recommended. These are:

- **Birds:** Monitoring at regular intervals (say every three years) should ensure that data on breeding areas for important species across the Pebblebed Heaths are collected and systematically mapped into a single GIS layer covering the Special Protection Area.
- **Visitor numbers:** Car-park counts are important. We suggest that car-park counts are undertaken regularly covering all the parking locations across the Pebblebeds.... the Pebblebed Heaths Trust do have counters on some main car-parks and as far as possible these should be kept running and additional counters installed as appropriate.
- **Erosion and path width:**fixed point photography and measurement of path width (bare ground) at set locations. These should be around the edges of mires (areas of wet or boggy heath) and across the mires themselves. Photographs may work from a distance but should also include close-ups showing extent of gullyng on the path. Such monitoring would help inform where (and when) path surfacing might be required.
- **Visitor interviews:** further visitor survey work would provide the opportunity to check on how well different measures are working...more detailed questions relating to whether the interviewee has encountered a warden, seen particular signs etc. should be included.....such work should be undertaken as needs dictate – potentially in response to the need to establish some of the secondary measures or once elements such as the wardening have become established.

4.6 The plan also identifies a number of secondary measures, which are the most expensive measures or ones with particular challenges to deliver. They include measures that are warranted only if other measures fail and also measures that are perhaps dependent on other opportunities (for example expensive measures that are not justified in being funded in their entirety through developer contributions).

5. Funding

5.1 The Visitor Management Plan builds on and effectively supersedes the mitigation measures listed in the Strategy for the Pebblebed Heaths (projects 37-48, Table 22, pgs. 221-2).

5.2 Notwithstanding rebasing work on the original Strategy, the increased project costs from the VMP would have required a review of developer contribution rates in zones for Exeter and East Devon. However, the two work streams are aligned and so it is logical to include the VMP in the wider review².

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Natural England comment:

We support the recommendations made.

² See separate report "Rebasing the SEDESMS – the strategic response" July 2017