

Recreation Impacts Study - Visitor Surveys at European Protected Sites (Footprint Ecology - 2016)

Background

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of current and projected visitor patterns to European protected sites across Norfolk. Visitor surveys were undertaken across Norfolk. The report is novel in that it combines data from multiple local authorities to predict changes in recreation use as a result of new housing planned across Norfolk. It also provides recommendations for mitigation and monitoring.

The work was commissioned by Norfolk County Council/the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership (NBP) on behalf of all local planning authorities across Norfolk. The surveyed locations covered a range of European Protected sites, locations that are afforded strict protection within the planning system due to their importance for nature conservation. All the locations are also sites with public access and a potential risk whereby increased recreation levels could be damaging.

The work was carried out during 2015 and 2016 at 35 agreed sites. Analysis also drew on other data, for example planned residential growth (as allocated in current plans), provided by districts. The locations encompassed estuary, coast, heathland, wetland, grassland and woodland habitats. We grouped the points into seven broad geographic areas: the Brecks, the Broads, The East Coast, the North Coast, Roydon and Dersingham, the Valley Fens and the Wash. Surveys at each point involved 16 hours of survey work split evenly between weekdays and weekends and spread across daylight hours. As such fieldwork was standardised and broadly comparable.

Surveys took place at different times of year at different locations, with the timing targeted to coincide with times when wildlife interest (e.g. designated features of European Protected sites) was present and access was likely to be high. Fieldwork involved counts of people and interviews with a random sample of visitors.

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 for impacts on internationally designated wildlife sites throughout Norfolk. The Study provides updated evidence to inform the preparation of Local Plans.

It is principally concerned with:

- establishing the number and behaviour of visitors at the designated sites;
- predicting increases in access by Norfolk residents;
- drawing analysis around routes on sites, and distance travelled and frequency of use.

All of which will help to make the links between new housing development and recreation use and provide evidence to inform Local Plan preparation including the development of appropriate monitoring and mitigation measures for these designated sites.

Key Findings

1. Relating to housing change, links to allocated new housing, these include:

- A predicted 14% increase in access by Norfolk residents to the sites surveyed (in the absence of any mitigation), as a result of new housing during the current plan period.
- The individual areas the predicted increase will be:
 - around 30% in the Brecks,.
 - 14% for the Broads;
 - 11% for the East Coast;
 - 9% for North Norfolk;
 - 15% for Roydon & Dersingham;
 - 28% for the Valley Fens and
 - 6% for the Wash(note these figures relate to the surveyed access points only and to visits by Norfolk residents).
- For parts of the North Coast, the Broads, and parts of the East Coast, the links between an increase in local housing and recreation impacts are less clear as these sites attract a high number of visitors coming from a wide geographical area, both inside and outside Norfolk. There are therefore likely to be pressures from overall population growth both from within the county and further afield.

2. Relating to the visitor survey results, these include:

- Over half (52%) of interviewees were visiting from home and resident within Norfolk. Some 16% of interviewees had travelled from home on a short visit/day trip and lived outside Norfolk.
- In total 6,096 groups were estimated to be entering or leaving sites across all survey points. These groups consisted of 13,842 adults, 2,616 minors and 3,466 dogs.
- 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.
- Two thirds (66%) of interviewees were on a short trip from home and around a third (32%) of interviewees were on holiday. Holiday-makers accounted for nearly half of all visitors interviewed at the North Coast and Broads.
- 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.
- Holiday-makers were typically staying in self-catering accommodation (31%) or campsite/caravan sites (29%). In the Broads over half (59%) of the holiday makers interviewed were staying on a boat.
- The most commonly reported duration on site was 1 to 2 hours (31%), closely followed by between 30 and 60 minutes (27%). Key differences were the large proportion of interviewees visiting for more than 4 hours in the Broads (29% of interviewees) and conversely at Roydon, the large proportion visiting for less than 30 minutes (36%).

- Across all interviewees (including holiday makers), 31% of those interviewed were visiting the site for the first time. For those interviewees travelling from home on a short visit/day trip, over a quarter (27%) indicated they visited the site at least daily, reflecting high frequencies of use by local residents.
- 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.
- 'Close to home' was one of the main reasons people gave for choosing the site where interviewed that day. Scenery was particularly important for those visiting the North Coast.
- Just over a third (36%) of interviewees were aware of a designation/ environmental protection that applied to the site they were visiting.
- A total of 1,314 routes were mapped from the interviews, showing where people had walked during their visit. Median route length across all sites and all activities was 3.18km. Across all sites the typical (median) dog walk was 2.93km. Walkers covered a median distance of 3.7km while activities such as boating (median 7.64km) covered longer distances.
- In the Norfolk coast 4.91km was the average route length. Hotspots for walking routes in Norfolk Coast are Brancaster, Holkham and Wells.
- Across Norfolk the average route length fell to 3.18km.
- The three main reasons for visiting the sites in North Coast are; scenery 21.8%, close to home 18.3% and other 13.7% (long distance walking, seal and wildlife watching)

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) .

For North Norfolk there is an estimated 9% increase in access (without mitigation) but this is from a range of districts, including growth in Greater Norwich, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk. However there are variations with the most marked increase in the Brecks at 30%. This is due to a combination of high levels of growth and short distance travelled to access the sites. By contrast access to European sites over the remaining broad locations is reported as: Valley Fens 28%, Roydon and Dersingham, 15%, The Broads, 14%, East Coast 11% and the Wash, 6%.

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.

Despite the links between local housing growth and recreational impacts being less clear the results still show an increase recreational pressure as a result of development across the county. Given the draw and existing management of the sites the study concludes that should mitigation be seen as necessary, any mitigation should clearly involve a range of bodies beyond the scope of the LPA. It may be that local authorities need to facilitate and help source funding, but work alongside a wide range of other bodies.

The Report suggests there may be scope for mitigation in the form of: increased temporary wardens, improved signage and site management. In some cases better communication, awareness raising and partnership working could help to alleviate

some pressures. There is limited scope for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANGs).

Broad conclusions drawn from the Report

- Recreation levels continue to increase and the location of new development will (to a degree) influence the level of visitor use at designated sites.
- 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.
- **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.

What next?

The Report provides:

- Baseline data for the HRA process undertaken by individual districts.
- Some broad level understanding of growth levels and how they affect individual sites from a visitor number perspective, but not ecological effects.

There is however a need to appreciate the potential cumulative effects, and work together around a joint policy approach.

Without the need to overcomplicate matters there is clearly scope for an Action Plan to ensure we fully appreciate the study outcomes, and can be seen to be addressing the issues in a way proportionate to the 'pressure' caused by new housing / population.

The scope of such an Action Plan could include:

- Establish the **consistent message** that local authorities are taking from the study i.e. a joint policy approach
- Refine as far as possible the **detailed level of impact** on protected sites and give an indication of potential ability to take increased visitors
- Outline what **type of mitigation** is currently being undertaken, or what mechanisms could be used to gather funds to put to mitigation. The Report gives examples from other areas as:
 - In particular locations there *may* be scope for green infrastructure such as SANGs;
 - Better signage;

- Mobile warden teams and
- Awareness raising campaigns.
- Levies on development affecting sensitive sites
- Review **existing mechanisms** to see if these can be scaled up and broadened in scope
- Consideration of **proportionate priority projects**, either individually or strategically
- Examine the possible **outputs from the Green Infrastructure Mapping Project** where these are beneficial
- **Funding sources**, beyond the local authorities, need to be explored

In order to maximise the use of this material for plan preparation it is suggested that the Action Plan needs to be concluded in about 3 months, i.e. by October.

However this is not a simple task and it would be appropriate for the Officer Steering Group established to oversee the Study to convene and conclude the technical response / Action Plan.

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