

Appendix 4: Guidelines for the creation of Suitable Accessible Natural Green Space

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Introduction

'Suitable Accessible Natural Green Space' (SANGS) is the name given to green space that is of a quality and type suitable to be used as mitigation within the Thames Basin Heaths Planning Zone.

Its role is to provide alternative green space to divert visitors from visiting the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA). SANGS are intended to provide mitigation for the potential impact of residential development on the SPA by preventing an increase in visitor pressure on the SPA. The effectiveness of SANGS as mitigation will depend upon the location and design. These must be such that the SANGS is more attractive than the SPA to users of the kind that currently visit the SPA.

This document describes the features which have been found to draw visitors to the SPA, which should be replicated in SANGS. It provides guidelines on the

- type of site which should be identified as SANGS
- measures which can be taken to enhance sites so that they may be used as SANGS.

These guidelines relate specifically to the means to provide mitigation for housing within the Thames Basin Heaths Planning Zone. They do not address nor preclude the other functions of green space (e.g. provision of disabled access). Other functions may be provided within SANGS, as long as this does not conflict with the specific function of mitigating visitor impacts on the SPA.

SANGS may be created from:

- existing open space of SANGS quality with no existing public access or limited public access, which for the purposes of mitigation could be made fully accessible to the public.
- existing open space which is already accessible but which could be changed in character so that it is more attractive to the specific group of visitors who might otherwise visit the SPA
- land in other uses which could be converted into SANGS

The identification of SANGS should seek to avoid sites of high nature conservation value which are likely to be damaged by increased visitor numbers. Such damage may arise, for example, from increased disturbance, erosion, input of nutrients from dog faeces, and increased incidence of fires. Where sites of high nature conservation value are considered as SANGS, the impact on their nature conservation value should be assessed and considered alongside relevant policy in the development plan.

The Character of the SPA and its Visitors

The Thames Basin Heaths SPA is made up of 13 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and consist of a mixture of heathland, mire, and woodland habitats. They are essentially 'heathy' in character. The

¹ This document is currently under revision by Natural England.

topography is varied and most sites have a large component of trees and some contain streams, ponds and small lakes. Some are freely accessible to the public and most have a degree of public access, though in some areas this is restricted by army, forestry or other operations.

A recent survey showed that more than 83% of visitors to the SPA arrive by car, though access points adjacent to housing estates showed a greater proportion arriving on foot (up to 100% in one case). 70% of those who visited by car had come from within 5km of the access point onto the SPA. A very large proportion of the SPA visitors are dog walkers, many of whom visit the particular site on a regular (more or less daily) basis and spend less than an hour there, walking on average about 2.5km. Almost 50% are retired or part-time workers and the majority are women. Further detailed information on visitors can be found in the reports referenced at the end of this document.

Guidelines for the Quality of SANGS

The quality guidelines have been sub-divided into different aspects of site fabric and structure. They have been compiled from a variety of sources but principally from visitor surveys carried out at heathland sites within the Thames Basin Heaths area or within the Dorset heathlands. These are listed as references at the end of this document.

The principle criteria contained in the Guidelines have also been put into a checklist format which is contained in Appendix 1.

Accessibility

Most visitors come by car and want the site to be fairly close to home. Unless SANGS are provided for the sole use of a local population living within a 400 metre catchment around the site, then **the availability of adequate car parking at sites larger than 10 ha is essential.** The amount and nature of parking provision should reflect the anticipated use of the site by visitors and the catchment size of the SANGS. It should provide an attractive alternative to parking by the part of SPA for which it is mitigation. **Car parks should be clearly signposted and easily accessed.**

New parking provision for SANGS should be advertised as necessary to ensure that it is known of by potential visitors.

Target groups of Visitors

This should be viewed from two perspectives, the local use of a site where it is accessed on foot from the visitor's place of residence, and a wider catchment use where it is accessed by car. **Most of the visitors to the SPA come by car and therefore should be considered as a pool of users from beyond the immediate vicinity of the site.** All but the smallest SANGS should therefore target this type of visitor.

It is apparent from access surveys that a significant proportion of those people who visit the sites on foot, also visit alternative sites on foot and so this smaller but significant group look for local sites. **Where large populations are close to the SPA, the provision of SANGS should be attractive to visitors on foot.**

Networks of sites

The provision of longer routes within larger SANGS is important in determining the effectiveness of the authorities' network of SANGS as mitigation, because a large proportion of visitors to the SPA have long walks or run or bicycle rides. The design of routes within sites smaller than about 40 ha will be critical to providing routes of sufficient length and attractiveness for mitigation purposes.

Where long routes cannot be accommodated within individual SANGS it may be possible to provide them through a network of sites. However, networks are inherently likely to be less attractive to users of the type that visit the SPA, and the more fragmented they are, the less attractive they will be, though this is dependent on the land use which separates each component. For example, visitors are likely to be less put off by green areas between SANGS than by urban areas, even if they restrict access to rights of way and require dogs to be kept on leads.

Though networks of SANGS may accommodate long visitor routes and this is desirable, they should not be solely relied upon to provide long routes.

Specific guidance on individual SANGS is summarised in Appendix 2.

Paths, Roads and Tracks

The findings suggest **that SANGS should aim to supply a choice of routes of around 2.5km in length** with both shorter and longer routes of at least 5km as part of the choice, where space permits. The fact that a considerable proportion of visitors were walking up to 5km and beyond suggests **the provision of longer routes should be regarded as a standard**, either on-site or through the connection of sites along green corridors.

Paths do not have to be of any particular width, and both vehicular-sized tracks and narrow PRow type paths are acceptable to visitors.

The majority of visitors are female and safety is one of the primary concerns of site visitors. **Paths should be routed so that they are perceived as safe by the users**, with some routes being through relatively open (visible) terrain (with no trees or scrub, or well spaced mature trees, or wide rides with vegetation back from the path), especially those routes which are 1-3 km long.

The routing of tracks along hill tops and ridges where there are views is valued by the majority of visitors.

A substantial number of visitors like to have surfaced but not tarmac paths, particularly where these blend in well with the landscape. This is not necessary for all paths but **there should be some more visitor-friendly routes built into the structure of a SANGS, particularly those routes which are 1-3 km long.**

Artificial Infrastructure

Little or no artificial infrastructure is found within the SPA at present apart from the provision of some surfaced tracks and car parks. Generally an urban influence is not what people are looking for when they visit the SPA and some people undoubtedly visit the SPA because it has a naturalness about it that would be marred by such features.

However, **SANGS would be expected to have adequate car parking with good information about the site and the routes** available. Some subtle waymarking would also be expected for those visitors not acquainted with the layout of the site.

Other infrastructure would not be expected and should generally be restricted to the vicinity of car parking areas where good information and signs of welcome should be the norm, though discretely placed benches or information boards along some routes would be acceptable.

Landscape and Vegetation

SANGS do not have to contain heathland or heathy vegetation to provide an effective alternative to the SPA.

Surveys clearly show that **woodland or a semi-wooded landscape is a key feature** that people appreciate in the sites they visit, particularly those who use the SPA. This is considered to be more attractive than open landscapes or parkland with scattered trees.

A **semi-natural looking landscape with plenty of variation** was regarded as most desirable by visitors and some paths through quite enclosed woodland scored highly. There is clearly a balance to be struck between what is regarded as an exciting landscape and a safe one and so some element of choice between the two would be highly desirable. The semi-wooded and undulating nature of most of the SPA sites gives them an air of relative wildness, even when there are significant numbers of visitors on site. SANGS should aim to reproduce this quality.

Hills do not put people off visiting a site, particularly where these are associated with good views, but steep hills are not appreciated. **An undulating landscape is preferred to a flat one.**

Water features, particularly ponds and lakes, act as a focus for visitors for their visit, but are not essential.

Restrictions on usage

The majority of the people using most of the SPA sites come to walk, with or without dogs. At two or three sites there were also a significant number of cyclists and joggers. A small amount of horse riding also occurs at some sites.

The bulk of visitors to the SPA came to exercise their dogs and so it is imperative that **SANGS allow for pet owners to let dogs run freely over a significant part of the walk. Access on SANGS should be largely unrestricted, with both people and their pets being able to freely roam along the majority of routes.** This means that sites where freely roaming dogs will cause a nuisance or where they might be in danger (from traffic or such like) should not be considered for SANGS.

It may be that in some areas where dog ownership is low or where the cultural mix includes significant numbers of people sensitive to pets, then the provision of areas where dogs are unrestricted can be reduced. It should also be possible to vary restriction over time according to the specific needs of a community, providing effective mitigation is maintained. SANGS proposals which incorporate restrictions on dogs should be in the minority of SANGS and would need to be considered on a case by case basis in relation to the need for restrictions.

Assessment of site enhancement as mitigation

SANGS may be provided by the enhancement of existing sites, including those already accessible to the public that have a low level of use and could be enhanced to attract more visitors. The extent of enhancement and the number of extra visitors to be attracted would vary from site to site. Those sites which are enhanced only slightly would be expected to provide less of a mitigation effect than those enhanced greatly, in terms of the number of people they would divert away from the SPA. In order to assess the contribution of enhancement sites in relation to the hectare standards of the Delivery Plan, it is necessary to distinguish between slight and great enhancement.

Methods of enhancement for the purposes of this guidance could include enhanced access through guaranteed long-term availability of the land, creation of a car park or a network of paths.

SANGS which have not previously been open to the public count in full to the standard of providing 8ha of SANGS per 1000 people in new development in zone B. SANGS which have an appreciable but clearly low level of public use and can be substantially enhanced to greatly increase the number of visitors also count in full. The identification of these sites should arise from evidence of low current use. This could be in a variety of forms, for example:

- Experience of managing the site, which gives a clear qualitative picture that few visitors are present
- Quantitative surveys of visitor numbers
- Identified constraints on access, such as lack of gateways at convenient points and lack of parking
- Lack of easily usable routes through the site
- Evidence that the available routes through the site are little used (paths may show little wear, be narrow and encroached on by vegetation)

SANGS with no evidence of a low level of use should not count in full towards the Delivery Plan standards. Information should be collected by the local planning authority to enable assessment of the level of increased use which can be made of the SANGS. The area of the site which is counted towards the Delivery Plan standards should be proportional to the increase in use of the site. For example, a site already used to half of its expected capacity should count as half of its area towards the standards.

Staging of enhancement works

Where it is proposed to separate the enhancement works on a site into separate stages, to deliver incremental increases in visitor use, the proportion of the increase in visitor use arising from each stage should be estimated. This would enable the granting of planning permission for residential development to be staged in parallel to ensure that the amount of housing permitted does not exceed the capacity of SANGS to mitigate its effects on the SPA.

Practicality of enhancement works

The selection of sites for enhancement to be SANGS should take into account the variety of stakeholder interests in each site. Consideration should be given to whether any existing use of the site which may continue is compatible with the function of SANGS in attracting recreational use that would otherwise take place on the SPA. The enhancement should not result in moving current users off the SANGS and onto the SPA. The specific enhancement works proposed should also be considered in relation not only to their effects on the SANGS mitigation function but also in relation to their effects on other user groups.

References

CLARKE, R.T., LILEY, D., UNDERHILL-DAY, J.C., & ROSE, R.J. (2005). Visitor access patterns on the Dorset Heaths. *English Nature Research Report*.

LILEY, D., JACKSON, D., & UNDERHILL-DAY, J. C. (2006) Visitor access patterns on the Thames Basin Heaths. *English Nature Research Report*.

LILEY, D., MALLORD, J., & LOBLEY, M. (2006) The “Quality” of Green Space: features that attract people to open spaces in the Thames Basin Heaths area. *English Nature Research Report*.

Appendix 1: Site Quality Checklist – for a suite of SANGS

This guidance is designed as an Appendix to the full guidance on Suitable Accessible Natural Greenspaces (SANGS) to be used as mitigation (or avoidance) land to reduce recreational use of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA.

The wording in the list below is precise and has the following meaning:

- Requirements referred to as “must” are essential in **all** SANGS
- Those requirements referred to as “should have” should all be represented **within the suite** of SANGS, but do not all have to be represented in every site.
- All SANGS should have at least one of the “desirable” features.

Must have

- For all sites larger than 4ha there must be adequate parking for visitors, unless the site is intended for local use, i.e. within easy walking distance (400m) of the developments linked to it. The amount of car parking space should be determined by the anticipated use of the site and reflect the visitor catchment of both the SANGS and the SPA.
- It should be possible to complete a circular walk of 2.3-2.5km around the SANGS.
- Car parks must be easily and safely accessible by car and should be clearly sign posted.
- The accessibility of the site must include access points appropriate for the particular visitor use the SANGS is intended to cater for.
- The SANGS must have a safe route of access on foot from the nearest car park and/or footpath/s
- All SANGS with car parks must have a circular walk which starts and finishes at the car park.
- SANGS must be designed so that they are perceived to be safe by users; they must not have tree and scrub cover along parts of the walking routes
- Paths must be easily used and well maintained but most should remain unsurfaced to avoid the site becoming too urban in feel.
- SANGS must be perceived as semi-natural spaces with little intrusion of artificial structures, except in the immediate vicinity of car parks. Visually-sensitive way-markers and some benches are acceptable.
- All SANGS larger than 12 ha must aim to provide a variety of habitats for users to experience.
- Access within the SANGS must be largely unrestricted with plenty of space provided where it is possible for dogs to exercise freely and safely off lead.
- SANGS must be free from unpleasant intrusions (e.g. sewage treatment works smells etc).

Should have

- SANGS should be clearly sign-posted or advertised in some way.
- SANGS should have leaflets and/or websites advertising their location to potential users. It would be desirable for leaflets to be distributed to new homes in the area and be made available at entrance points and car parks.

Desirable

- It would be desirable for an owner to be able to take dogs from the car park to the SANGS safely off the lead.
- Where possible it is desirable to choose sites with a gently undulating topography for SANGS
- It is desirable for access points to have signage outlining the layout of the SANGS and the routes available to visitors.
- It is desirable that SANGS provide a naturalistic space with areas of open (non-wooded) countryside and areas of dense and scattered trees and shrubs. The provision of open water on part, but not the majority of sites is desirable.
- Where possible it is desirable to have a focal point such as a view point, monument etc within the SANGS.

Appendix 2: Site Quality Checklist – for an individual SANGS

The wording in the list below is precise and has the following meaning:

- Requirements referred to as “must” or “should have” are essential
- The SANGS should have at least one of the “desirable” features.

Must/ Should have

- For all sites larger than 4ha there must be adequate parking for visitors, unless the site is intended for local use, i.e. within easy walking distance (400m) of the developments linked to it. The amount of car parking space should be determined by the anticipated use of the site and reflect the visitor catchment of both the SANGS and the SPA.
- It should be possible to complete a circular walk of 2.3-2.5km around the SANGS.
- Car parks must be easily and safely accessible by car and should be clearly sign posted.
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- Where possible it is desirable to have a focal point such as a view point, monument etc within the SANGS.

Appendix 3: Background

The Thames Basin Heaths SPA was designated in 2005 under the Habitats Regulations 1994 to protect the populations of three internationally-threatened bird species that use the heathlands: woodlark, nightjar and Dartford warbler. One of the principle threats to these species is disturbance during their breeding period which collectively extends from February to August. Freely roaming dogs hugely exacerbate the disturbance caused by people visiting the sites.

The Thames Basin Heaths area is much urbanised with little green space available to people apart from the designated areas of heathland. The whole area is also under pressure for more housing.

The Habitats Regulations require an Appropriate Assessment to be carried out for any plan or project (including housing developments) which may affect the designated interest, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects. The result is that each new planning application within the Thames Basin Heaths Planning Zone would have to be assessed in combination with all the other extant applications. A solution to this situation (which would cause a log jam in the planning system) is the Thames Basin Heaths Delivery Plan.

The Thames Basin Heaths draft Delivery Plan (DDP) has been promoted by Natural England as part of the wider Thames Basin Heaths Area Based Delivery Project. It provides advice on how open space provision can ensure that any potential effect on the SPA is fully mitigated. The DDP has recently been scrutinised in technical sessions convened to inform the Panel of the Examination in Public on the South East Plan. It is the subject of the Assessor's Report to the Panel and addenda to his report. The DDP approach is being further developed in the light of the Assessor's conclusions and recommendations. The Assessor's Report recommended that an 'Interim strategic Delivery Plan' (ISDP) be established.

The need to provide green space for the community was incorporated into planning policy through PPG 17, originally published in 1991 and revised in 2003 (CHECK date). It requires local authorities to set green space standards locally but that these should include aspects of quantity, quality and accessibility. PPG17 illustrates the breadth of type and use of public open spaces that are encompassed by the guidelines. SANGS fit into a small proportion of these. Local authority may look at provision of SANGS in relation to other public open space provision within their area and identify potential SANGS as part of their audit of green space.