

Wealden Local Plan Update – 22 February 2018

As anticipated, Wealden District Council (WDC) has now received advice from Natural England in respect of the impact of air quality on the ecology of the Ashdown Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

It can be confirmed that the advice concludes from modelling work undertaken by Wealden District Council that air quality impacts from Wealden District Council's Local Plan will have a likely significant effect on Ashdown Forest SAC alone or in combination with other plans and projects and further assessment is required under the Habitats Regulations. This further work is in the form of an Appropriate Assessment. WDC, as a 'Competent Authority' under the Habitats Regulations, is responsible for undertaking Appropriate Assessments, and Natural England is a statutory consultee.

The advice provides technical inputs into:

- A review of air quality information
- A review of ecological information
- Whether further analysis work is required
- Natural England research into impacts on heathland from air pollution taking into account the situation now shown at Ashdown Forest
- Natural England's view including evidence and reference to the Habitat Regulations/ Directive on any conclusions to be drawn, taking into account NE publications.

The advice makes suggestions on clarifications and additions to the Air Quality and Ecology Report produced by Wealden District Council's consultants. Natural England has also provided advice to help inform the undertaking of the Appropriate Assessment, and has confirmed that it considers there is sufficient information included within the reports to inform the Appropriate Assessment.

For its part the Council will be seeking clarification on some elements contained within the Natural England advice.

On the basis of the advice received WDC will be working with its specialists to update the Wealden District Council Air Quality and Ecology report including undertaking additional work. As previously highlighted the Natural England advice will form part of the evidence base feeding into the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) which WDC are currently undertaking. We are now taking forward dialogue with Natural England, who have agreed that an Appropriate Assessment is required. As such, the Habitats Regulations Assessment, which includes the Appropriate Assessment, will continue to be progressed.

It is critical we ensure that the HRA is as comprehensive and robust as possible and to this end, having reviewed the Natural England advice, we estimate this will result in the need to revise the date for consideration by Council of the updated Wealden Local Plan by two months from its current date of 25 April. We continue to focus on completing the HRA including the Appropriate Assessment as soon as possible to deliver an updated Wealden Local Plan to Council by the end of June.

In the meantime we will continue to provide regular updates on progress to all key stakeholders.

Until we complete the Appropriate Assessment and the HRA we will be unable to determine planning applications submitted to Wealden District Council which result in additional vehicle trips across the Ashdown Forest and these will continue to be held.

We will also be expecting that neighbouring authorities will continue to review any planning applications that they receive which may result in additional trips across the Ashdown Forest to determine if this is the case and, where appropriate, screen these applications and conduct an Appropriate Assessment if required.

Wealden District Council will continue to work with neighbouring councils on these issues to explore options for resolution and reserves the right to continue to lodge objections where it is felt that applications could result in increased vehicle movements. It will be for individual councils to undertake an Appropriate Assessment.

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22 February 2018