



The requirement to provide Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace

The New Forest Special Protection Area comprises the largest area of ‘unsown’ vegetation in lowland England and includes the representation on a large scale of habitats formerly common but now fragmented and rare in lowland western Europe

The habitats include lowland heath, valley and seepage step mire, or fen, ancient pasture woodland, including riparian and bog woodland and a range of acid to neutral grasslands. Nowhere else do these habitats occur in combination and on so large a scale. The site supports an exceptionally rich bird fauna including internationally important breeding populations and wintering populations of bird species associated with these habitats. The natural habitats and species present in the New Forest has led to its designation in parts as Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA) and a Ramsar site.

With substantial development close by the Forest and within easy reach of two major urban areas it is estimated by the National Park Authority that the New Forest receives over 15 million day visits a year.

The Solent coastline also provides a haven for thousands of protected birds every winter, making the area of worldwide importance to wildlife. Each winter, more than 125,000 waders and wildfowl travel thousands of miles here from their summer breeding grounds, including 10 percent of the global population of dark-bellied brent geese. Three Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for birds along the Solent coastline have been established and are recognised under UK law.

These protected areas are safeguarded by legislation, namely, the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (the Habitats Regulations) as amended. This means that mitigation must be provided for any proposed development that is likely to have any significant effects on an SPA. Local Planning Authorities must ensure necessary mitigation will be provided before planning permission is granted.

The Test Valley 2042 revised regulation 18 local plan proposes sites around Romsey totalling around 1,800 dwellings and together with sites being promoted separately for planning permission and an uplift in housing requirements set by central government a very substantial mitigation will be required through provision of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG).

Moonriver Ltd are a specialist company developing green infrastructure opportunities for offsetting the impact of development on biodiversity and providing ecological solutions. We have been researching sites for appropriate mitigation within SPA catchment areas including the Solent and New Forest SPA’s and the Thames Basin Heath SPA. Using a basis of sieve mapping and site analysis this led to the identification and agreement for the promotion of Fairbournes Farm, Braishfield as one of the primary locations for a SANG and BNG site to serve the needs of Romsey now and into the future.

Site Proposals

The Fairbournes Farm site comprises 80 hectares of dairy and arable farming which currently produces a substantial nitrate input to the Solent catchment contributing to algae bloom in the Solent. The potential change of use to a SANG site would result in a publicly accessible Country Park suitable for dog walking and general recreation use and would also eliminate the current nitrate leaching. The proposals are designed to be as naturalistic as possible although will require certain infrastructure such as the car park area, information signs and some benches and dog bins in appropriate areas. The site would contain a 2.9km formal footpath route as well as the established Public Right of Way, and offer extensive informal walking areas, including woodland.

The design guidance for SANG are set out in the Natural England document, *Guidelines for Creation of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG)-August 2021* and this defines how SANG should take on a role to provide alternative green space to divert visitors away from Special Protection Areas. In general, a larger SANG is preferred to replicate as much as possible the naturalistic environment that would attract the recreation use in the first place. It is also stipulated that little or no artificial infrastructure should be provided, restricted to the car park area and possibly a few surfaced footpaths if necessary. It may be desirable to discretely include information boards, dog bins and some resting places.

This approach has been followed with the simplistic plan for Fairbournes Farm.

Over the long term there are opportunities for the Bio-Diversity baseline to be improved and for the creation of substantial habitat areas. These habitat areas will also follow the guidelines for SANG design set out by Natural England.

The site is currently privately owned and would remain in this freehold ownership, although the management of the site would be conducted in accordance with an agreed 'Habitat Management and Maintenance Plan' (HMMP), which will be the subject of discussions with the local planning authority and included within a section 106 legal agreement. The appropriate management body for the site will be appointed and granted a long lease, equating to a perpetuity period, for the whole site and be provided with an agreed endowment sum for the cost of the long-term maintenance. A monitoring fee with Test Valley will also be agreed as a part of the legal agreement to ensure that the HMMP is adhered to.

The site will then be used to mitigate housing and development sites liable for SANG within a 5KM catchment area.

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Moonriver Ltd

Postscript

We noted at the Parish Council meeting comments on the suitability of the car park location along Kiln Lane and have agreed to review this with our highway consultant following appropriate survey work.

The list of some of the proposed sites in the local plan around Romsey are:

Land south of Ganger Farm - 340 homes

Land south of the bypass - 110 homes

Halterworth - 1,070 homes

Brentry Nursery - 245 homes

Land at Ampfield Meadows, Ampfield - 44 homes

Land at Upton Lane, Nursling - 80 homes

Land at Packridge Farm, North Baddesley - 180 homes

Fields Farm, Rownhams - 100 homes

Land adjacent to Hyde Farm, Broughton - 45 homes

Land west of Holbury Lane, Lockerley - 50 homes

Land west of Braishfield Road, Braishfield - 54 homes

Land south of Romsey Road, Wellow - 100 homes