

Development in the Chiltern Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation Zone of Influence

We've recently received [notification from Natural England \(PDF\)](#) about damage to the Chilterns Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation (SAC) resulting from high visitor numbers.

The SAC is an internationally recognised designation with habitats and species of significant ecological importance. Due to its status, the SAC has legal protection.

An ecology report undertaken on behalf of [Dacorum Borough Council](#), has identified that additional residential development within and around the SAC will lead to more visitors and an increase in adverse activities such as trampling, mountain biking and dog fouling.

The report reveals action is needed to help protect the SAC and mitigate any adverse impact of development.

Whilst the Beechwoods SAC is outside of Central Bedfordshire, a [Zone of Influence \(PDF\)](#) has been identified encompassing the areas that potentially impact the SAC (where visitors come from). The map shows the affected area, which includes a significant part of Central Bedfordshire.

How these restrictions could affect your planning application

This does not mean development can't take place, but that it must mitigate any adverse impacts on the SAC, and any mitigation strategy must be agreed by Natural England.

We're working with Natural England, other affected authorities and the National Trust (the site owners) to develop a strategic mitigation solution. Officers are also looking at opportunities for an interim mitigation solution in the shorter term.

The affected authorities and Natural England are holding monthly partnership and fortnightly working group meetings to discuss mitigation solutions. Footprint Ecology has been commissioned to produce a supplementary planning document (SPD) on mitigation measures (strategic access management and monitoring, or SAMM), with the expectation of having a first draft ready in early June.

We're investigating options for suitable alternative natural green space both at new developments (working with developers) and other more strategic options.

The strategic mitigation strategy will be agreed upon and put in place as soon as possible. However, until the interim solutions and ultimately the mitigation strategy are in place, additional checks on planning applications will be needed to ensure these sites remain protected. As such, there may be delays to some planning application decisions and the issuing of decision notices, whilst this work is being progressed.

We will seek to minimise the disruption as much as possible. We'll continue to receive and process all planning applications in the normal way but will need to delay issuing decisions on the affected applications until the mitigation strategy is in place. Once this is in place, we will be in a position to meet its legal obligations and issue decisions on the affected planning applications.

What happens next?

We will carry out an initial screening assessment of your application. This helps us decide if the development is likely to have a significant effect on the Chiltern Beeches Special Area of Conservation. The assessment will consider the nature, scale and location of the development and we will carry out any relevant reviews.

The new restrictions will affect applications:

- for full planning permission
- for outline planning permission
- for reserved matters
- for prior approval / permitted development rights
- that are subject to appeal
- under section 73 of The Town & Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended)
- where there is a resolution to grant planning permission but where a formal decision has not been issued (e.g. subject to the satisfactory completion of a legal agreement)

The new restrictions will also affect some discharge of condition applications that enable the development to proceed (e.g. a pre-commencement condition regarding access).