

APPENDIX 2 of GI Strategy Report

Chairman, Epping Forest and Commons Committee

Graeme Smith



Telephone 020 8532 1010

Date 20 April 2020

Cllr J Philip
Epping Forest District Council
High Street
Epping
CM16 4BZ

Dear Cllr Philip

Epping Forest District Local Plan and Epping Forest SAC Mitigation Strategy

Thank you for your reply of 5th February about progress with Local Plan measures to protect Epping Forest SAC. The Epping Forest & Commons Committee Members discussed the Mitigation Strategy at their meeting on 10th March and agreed that I should write to you about additional matters. The meeting took place just before we all went into 'lockdown' and this has delayed the sending of this letter somewhat.

SAC Mitigation Strategy governance

Firstly, it is very welcome news that a second meeting of the SAC Mitigation Strategy Oversight Group was held on 24th February and chaired by your Council officers. Having made the offer to provide governance for such Strategy meetings, in my letter of 28th November to all the competent authorities, it is gratifying to see this re-engagement of most parties. There is now the promise of regular meetings of this latter group, once COVID-19 issues have been overcome. I hope that this will now lead to progress with the essential avoidance and mitigation measures. I look forward to working with your Council and hearing more about the governance structure, terms of reference and timetable for this Group in due course.

However, not all parties are engaging with the same, or at least proportionate, level of commitment, and this presents a problem for achieving a comprehensive and full Mitigation Strategy. There also remains the need for coordination between London and Essex as regional entities in this endeavour. I hope that between us we can ensure proportionate, active and coordinated participation by all parties in the Group.

City of London Members' Room, PO Box 270, Guildhall,
London EC2P 2EJ
Switchboard 020 7606 3030
www.cityoflondon.gov.uk
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Zone of Influence

The proposals to be generated by the Strategy would need to enhance the protection of the habitats around any Forest visitor "hotspots" whilst providing alternative, intercepting destinations (SANGs) within the whole area encompassed by the enlarged 6.36km Zone of Influence (Zoi). This includes locations within 3km and east, west, north and south of the Forest SAC boundaries. As expressed in my previous letter of 28th November, The Conservators do not consider that the limitation of SANGs contributions from developers, as currently set out by the Local Plan, can be justified. I know this concern was also reiterated by us at the Oversight Group meeting of 24th February.

On this last point about SANGs, I am disappointed, therefore, that my 28th November letter on this matter has not yet been uploaded to the Local Plan website. Given the importance of this issue, and the forthcoming consultation on the GI and SANGs Strategies, I would hope that this will be uploaded as soon as practically possible. Any consultees can then be made aware of The Conservators' position on this matter.

Epping Forest Visitor Survey and future costs-undertakings for developing a robust Strategy

The additional data yielded by the Epping Forest Visitor Survey 2019 presented to the Oversight Group, and which your Council commissioned, are important and provide further evidence of the widespread pressures on the Forest. This new Visitor Survey also made obvious the need for, and the importance of, high quality alternative outdoor recreational destinations (SANGs) in the District, and it underscored the kind of characteristics that would be required for these additional SANGs sites to be effective. I hope that your Council will agree that the COVID restrictions on movement have made even clearer the importance and immense value of access to local greenspace.

I am pleased, therefore, to confirm that The Conservators have approved a financial contribution towards this 2019 survey and your costs in commissioning it.

Whilst welcoming this Visitor Survey, the fact that the timing and better weather of the September 2019 survey, compared with the 2017 survey, increased the Zoi indicates to me that a follow-up summer survey (May/June) would be important to consolidate the Zoi evidence. Therefore, as part of the costs-undertakings for the evidence-gathering for the Strategy, we hope that your Council would be willing to contribute financially, alongside us and other parties, to a third survey. We would like it to include an overarching analysis that would bring together all the data from the three surveys and examine the predicted "uplift" in visitor pressure from different locations in more detail. Given the COVID restrictions and impact on recreational behaviour such a survey may be delayed until 2021 and this will need to be discussed by the Oversight Group.

SAMMs development

In relation to managing visitor pressure, we provided some background to our more detailed SAMMs-focused work at the Oversight Group on 24th February. The scope of this work is limited at the moment, by time and resources, to a focus on three visitor “hotspots” within the Forest SAC. Therefore, we would welcome a dialogue with your Council and other competent authorities, including Lee Valley Park Authority, as soon as possible, about financial and other support in broadening and deepening this work to inform a more comprehensive access strategy.

We think that it is vital for this access strategy to be developed alongside your emerging Green Infrastructure Strategy (to which we provided our “high-level” response to your deadline of 2nd March), as well as the GI strategies of the London Plan and other neighbouring authorities and a reinvigorated Green Arc Project.

Your GI Strategy has yet to be consulted upon more widely and elements of it, in particular its appendices and the detailed SANGs proposals, remain to be unveiled. You had set yourselves and us a tight timeframe for a 6-week consultation after the now-postponed Council elections. This tight timetable is of concern to me and we seek reassurance about its conduct given the current restrictions.

The Conservators consider it most important that this schedule should not prevent a productive dialogue between us and other competent authorities to ensure the development of the necessary detail for, and, crucially, links between, the access, SAMMs and SANGs Strategies. I hope that the governance proposals and the future frequency of meetings of the Oversight Group will take both this proposed consultation timetable and the COVID disruption into account.

Quality of management and funding of alternative sites

As well as new sites within the Zol, the interception destinations I refer to above may include non-SAC parts of the Forest and its Buffer Lands. Throughout all the Mitigation Strategy development work, there needs to be clear evidence offered as to how the alternative destinations would be funded and managed long-term by qualified land managers. There also needs to be evidence and monitoring in place to demonstrate how these sites function to both attract and retain potential Forest visitors for the all-important repeat visits, whilst enhancing biodiversity in the District. We look forward to the discussions with you on the management of these sites across the Zol and how we may be involved in their design.

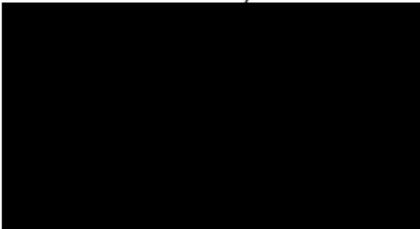
Air Quality

In relation to this aspect of the Mitigation Strategy, The Conservators reiterate their earlier request that the current SAC Position Statement (ED101, 21st October 2019) is replaced with a jointly agreed one that more fairly reflects the situation in relation to competent authority and other roles in Epping Forest SAC protection. We would be happy to work on a joint statement with you and Natural England and look forward to hearing more from you on this.

Finally, I welcome the invitation to our officers for the meeting on 29th April, which I hope may still be able to go ahead as a video conference. This would examine in further detail the critical air quality and traffic management issues of the SAC Mitigation Strategy. I hope that this work will provide the much-needed, effective and robust solutions within an amended Local Plan that will ensure the enhanced protection of the Forest and improvements in the condition of the SAC habitats.

At this extraordinary time I hope that you and your colleagues are staying safe and well.

Yours sincerely



Graeme M. Smith BSc(Hons), CISSP, CISM, CRISC, CAPM, CC
Chairman, Epping Forest and Commons Committee

cc Jamie Melvin, Natural England
Neil Fuller, Natural England
Programme Officer for the EFDC Local Plan PINS Inspector
Alison Blom-Cooper, Interim Assistant Director, Planning Policy
& Implementation