

# Cabinet

1 November 2022

## Wild Woodbury Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG)

### For Decision

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr D Walsh, Planning

**Local Councillor(s):** Cllr Wharf and Cllr Laura Beddow

**Executive Director:** J Sellgren, Executive Director of Place

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**Report Status:** Public

#### Brief Summary:

Dorset heathlands are under significant pressure from an increasing number of people living nearby. Urbanising impacts from human recreational pressures, damage caused by domestic pets and other activities, has the potential to cause ongoing adverse effects on protected habitats and species that exist within the heathland network.

The Wild Woodbury project will see the creation of a new 12.5-hectare strategic Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) in Purbeck at the former Court Farm in Bere Regis, helping to provide an alternative recreation opportunity to that provided by the nearby heathlands. This report seeks a decision for grant funding £895,034.98 to Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT) of heathland mitigation funds collected via the Community Infrastructure Levy to allow delivery of the SANG.

DWT will assume the responsibility for implementation, management, and maintenance of the greenspace, securing the facility in perpetuity which will mitigate local recreational pressures on Purbeck Heathland, as required under

the Habitat Regulations and detailed within Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework Supplementary Planning Document.

The project is a significant part of the mitigation package that has been identified in the development of supporting evidence for the emerging Purbeck Local Plan. Without this project, Dorset Council risks not being able to avoid development placing adverse impacts on the protected heathlands.

**Recommendation:** To agree:

1. To Dorset Council entering a funding agreement above £500,000 (£895,034) with Dorset Wildlife Trust to deliver 12.5 hectares of strategic Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) for heathland mitigation.
2. Authority to enter into a contract funding agreement for DWT to deliver the Wild Woodbury SANG should be delegated to the Portfolio Holder for Planning on terms to be recommended by the Executive Director of Place

**Reason for Recommendation:**

Cabinet is required to all key decisions with financial consequences of £500,000 or more. The project forms part of the Heathland Interim Mitigation Strategy for the emerging Purbeck Local Plan which is currently undergoing an examination into its soundness. Being able to demonstrate that the plan can proceed without leading to adverse effects upon protected habitats is therefore a key requirement in order to secure a sound plan and so the decision has policy implications. It is estimated that the proposed SANG would mitigate the impacts from approximately 430 new homes within Purbeck, some of which have already been built or have planning permission. The project has been considered and approved by the Heathland Mitigation Steering Group which includes representatives from Natural England.

## 1. Report

1.1. Dorset Council through the Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) provides the planning policy context for securing mitigation. The framework and the delivery of infrastructure through it enables Dorset Council and neighbouring BCP Council to continue to grant planning permission in affected areas.

1.2. This project will see the creation of a new strategic SANG in Purbeck providing 12.5ha of open access green space at Wild Woodbury in Bere Regis. The proposal forms part of the Heathland Interim Mitigation Strategy for the Purbeck Local Plan, a new short-term strategy to sit alongside

the Heathland Planning Framework (SPD) and deal with development pressures identified through the emerging Purbeck Local Plan. Delivery of the project will support decision making on planning applications for new homes in Purbeck close to Dorset Heathland habitat sites.

1.3. The emerging Purbeck Local Plan was submitted for examination in January 2019. There is a concentration of protected heathland habitat sites in this part of Dorset. As a competent authority, the Council is obliged to assess (through habitats regulation assessment) the impacts of new development on these habitat sites when preparing local plans and taking decisions on planning applications. As part of the plan making process, and to support the delivery of new homes in this area, mitigation measures may need to be delivered in-order to avoid adverse impacts on the integrity of the protected habitats (including protected heathlands).

1.4. Our habitats regulations assessments for the Purbeck Local Plan indicate that heathland infrastructure projects (potentially including SANG) are required in the Purbeck area to mitigate the impacts from small scale residential development (this includes development which has now been completed between April 2018 and March 2022, and development with planning permission which we expect to be completed up to the point when the Dorset Council Local Plan is adopted).

1.5. The interim mitigation strategy relates to the 'interim period' between the adoption of the emerging Purbeck Local Plan and the point at which it is superseded by the Dorset Council Local Plan. Subject to the length of the 'interim period' we estimate that there could be the need to mitigate the impacts from around 600 homes during this interim period. The interim mitigation strategy needs to incorporate flexibility to deliver mitigation projects in response to fluctuations in the delivery of new homes during this interim period. The Wild Woodbury SANG therefore caters for a significant proportion of the mitigation required (430 homes)

1.6. The DWT currently own Wild Woodbury and would therefore, as owners, be provided the funding to deliver the Wild Woodbury SANG.

1.7. The key objectives for Wild Woodbury SANG are:

- To deliver a bespoke SANG suitable for mitigating the local pressures from new homes on the Dorset Heathlands – namely, dog walking, trampling, littering, erosion through high footfall, disturbance to wildlife.

- To achieve broader benefits of mitigating for the wider Dorset Heathlands in the surrounding area.
- To raise awareness and educate people about local environmental issues.
- Provide a green social hub where social responsibility and health is advocated.
- To increase biodiversity, and create wildlife corridors, through changes in land management on former agricultural land.

1.8. DWT have further ambitions outside of this mitigation project to develop community provision adjacent to the SANG. This could include a visitor centre, café, toilets, and space for hire (these elements are at an early stage and there are no further details available at this time). These facilities will help to promote the SANG as a recreational opportunity and support local communities by providing a 'green' community hub.

1.9. The expected outcome of this project is that recreational impacts from new homes on the local heathland in the Purbeck area, will be mitigated. There will be an increase in publicly accessible greenspace, an awareness of social responsibility whilst out in the countryside, and greater environmental awareness.

1.10. It is expected that the SANG, once open and promoted, could mitigate for the residents from around 430 homes. Subject to monitoring, the SANG may prove more effective than anticipated particularly if DWT develop other onsite provisions as expected.

1.11. The site is easily accessible off both the A35 and A31. Most visitors are expected to come from the Purbeck area with Wareham and Crossways within approximately 10 minutes' drive and to the south Swanage and Studland around a 30-minute drive.

1.12. As part of their delivery work, DWT have held two full day consultation events followed by a month-long online survey. The community response to the project was extremely positive. DWT met around 130 members of the community face to face as part of their consultation and received over 100 online responses through the engagement period. The resulting feedback will inform the design of the space, which is proposed to include wild play opportunities, a community orchard and gathering spaces.

1.13. The emerging Purbeck Local Plan is subject to the requirements of The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (the Habitat Regulations). These regulations require the Council to assess the impact and mitigate the impacts of development on protected habitat sites, including Dorset Heathlands. If the Council is not able to deliver the mitigation projects in the interim strategy, it would not be able to conclude that adverse impacts of proposed and permitted housing on the Dorset heathland habitat sites could be avoided. This would mean that the Purbeck Local Plan could not be adopted, and decisions on planning applications around Dorset heath sites in Purbeck could not be issued as they could not be found compliant with the Habitat Regulations. The interim mitigation strategy provides an effective approach to addressing this issue subject to the securing of appropriate mitigation opportunities.

## **2. Financial Implications**

2.1. Officers seek approval to enter into a funding agreement to grant fund this project using money collected through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), a developer contribution tool Dorset Council and predecessor councils have been using as far back as 2014.

2.2. Funding specifically for the mitigation of Dorset Heathland has been ringfenced from CIL receipts. The budget for Dorset Heathlands currently stands at £1,010,427.27.

2.3. The total amount of grant funding to Dorset Wildlife Trust is £895,034.

2.4. The basis for CIL funding heathland mitigation is set out in the Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework SPD.

2.5. The proposal does not require funding outside of that secured through the Community Infrastructure Levy.

## **3. Environmental Implications**

3.1. This project aligns with Dorset Council's objectives in respect to internationally important heathland habitats. The primary objectives of the project are to ensure that adverse impacts on heathland habitat sites are avoided. The changes in land management associated with this change in the

land's use will have indirect benefits that will support mitigation of climate change. New land management will improve biodiversity as part of the change from existing management for agriculture. Allowing the land to naturally succeed will confer ecological benefits and facilitate natural carbon sequestration.

3.2. Heathland visitor surveys suggest that currently 52% of visitors are travelling by car to visit them for recreational purposes. This project encourages people to divert their current journey to a more appropriate, less harmful location. Parking spaces will be limited to 14 spaces to serve the SANG.

3.3. The SANG will be readily accessible using sustainable means of travel for local people in Bere Regis. It is within easy walk from Bere Regis village. Local bus stops at Bere Wood and Drax Arms, give visitors from the surrounding area the option of making use of more sustainable modes of travel. DWT's plans to provide a wider range of services and facilities at Wild Woodbury that, once established, will allow visitors to combine trips and increase the efficiency.

#### **4. Well-being and Health Implications**

4.1. This project helps to promote health and wellbeing of Dorset Council residents by providing new greenspace for recreation, including walking, running, mindfulness, and communal gathering.

#### **5. Other Implications**

5.1. The grant fund for this project supports Dorset Wildlife Trust's charity objectives, to deliver nature's recovery through partnership working with local people and communities, the council and local organisations.

#### **6. Risk Assessment**

6.1. **HAVING CONSIDERED:** the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

#### **7. Equalities Impact Assessment**

7.1. There remain some unclear impacts following the EqIA around age, disability, and rural isolation. It is possible that people with limited mobility

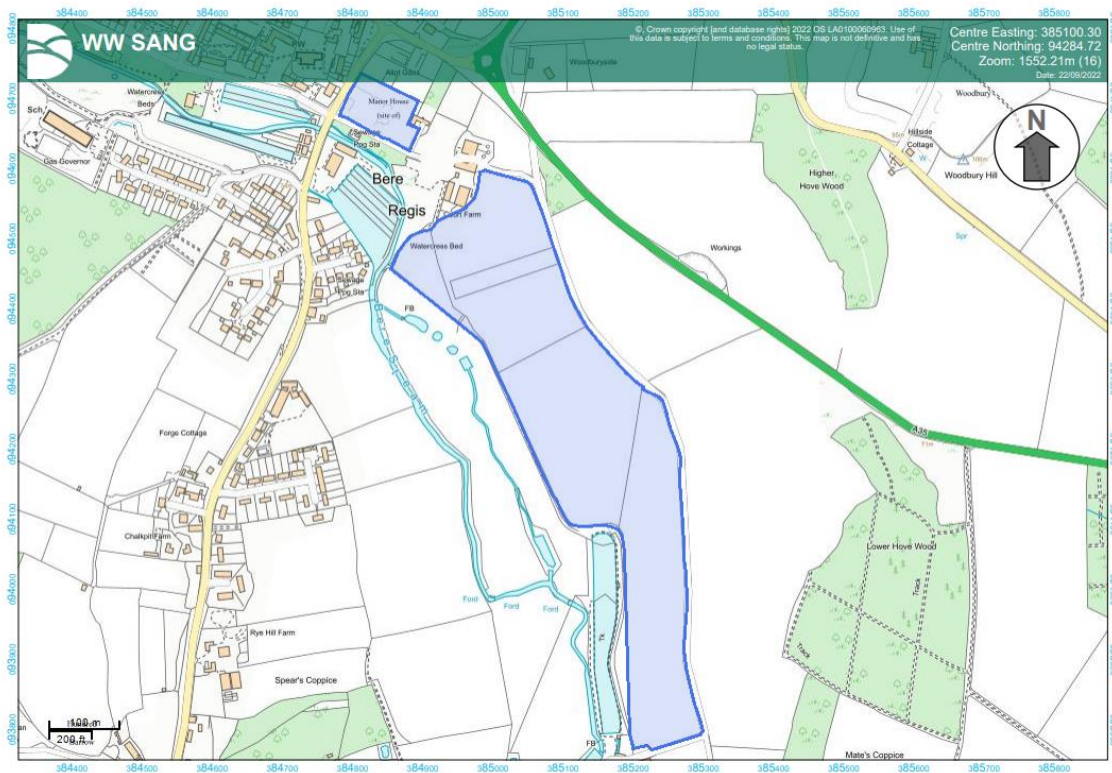
could find it difficult to access the site. However, there is an opportunity to mitigate potential impacts through detailed design of the space and this can be addressed at the later stage of the project. The facility will be free of charge and promoted as a 'green' community hub.

## 8. Agreements

8.1 NE agreement via proforma response dated 9<sup>th</sup> September and subsequent email dated 28<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

8.2 Steering group agreement was obtained during meeting dated 21<sup>st</sup> September 2022 and email 28<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

## 9. Map to show location of the proposed SANG



The land at Wild Woodbury indicated in blue above would be the area designated as a SANG; other features such as the access track and car park that facilitate the functioning of the SANG funded through the agreement, though not necessarily part of the defined area.

## 10. Appendices

None

## 11. Background Papers

- **Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework 2020-2025** - [bda03d74-cbc9-57c9-b3be-6253ba2825fb \(dorsetcouncil.gov.uk\)](https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/consultations-and-communications/consultations/2020-2025-dorset-heathlands-planning-framework)
- **Purbeck Interim Mitigation Strategy** - [FMMCD1: Interim Mitigation Strategy - Dorset Council](#)
- **Heathland Monitoring Report** - [The Partnership - Urban Heaths Partnership \(dorsetheaths.org.uk\)](https://www.dorsetheaths.org.uk/)