



# Visitor use of the New Forest by residents of Dorset and implications for the Dorset Local Plan

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# 1. Introduction

## Overview

- 1.1 This report has been commissioned by Dorset Council to inform the emerging Dorset Local Plan and potential mitigation requirements with respect to the New Forest European sites.

## The New Forest European sites

- 1.2 The New Forest is a large and complex ecosystem and one of the largest remaining relatively wild areas in the South of England attracting large numbers of visitors each year. It supports an extensive and complex mosaic of habitats including wet and dry heaths and associated bogs and mires, wet and dry grasslands, ancient pasture woodlands, frequent permanent and temporary ponds and a network of streams and rivers. These habitats in turn support a diverse range of rare, range-restricted and/or legally protected species of fauna and flora.
- 1.3 In addition to its status as a National Park, the New Forest is subject to two separate European-level conservation designations due to its international importance for biodiversity. These comprise the New Forest Special Protection Area (SPA) and the New Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC). In addition, the New Forest is also a Ramsar site. The qualifying interest features are summarised in Appendix 1.
- 1.4 A wide range of recreational activities take place within the New Forest. Current visitor levels to the National Park are estimated to be over 15 million visitor days (RJS Associates Ltd., 2018) per year and access to much of the New Forest is a legal right. There is excess of 30,000ha of unenclosed land where people can walk freely.

## Visitor surveys in 2018/19

- 1.1 Between autumn 2018 and summer 2019, Footprint Ecology carried out an extensive programme of visitor surveys across the New Forest SPA/SAC/Ramsar site. The aim of these surveys was to understand the impacts of recreation associated with new housing growth and to inform necessary mitigation approaches. Full details and analysis of the results are

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set out in the original reports, which provide the context, background and data used in this report. The original work encompassed:

- A telephone survey, involving 2,000 interviews with people living within 25km of the New Forest (Liley & Panter, 2020);
- An on-site survey, involving 5,236 interviews undertaken at 60 locations within the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar, with people visiting the area for recreation. Counts were also made simultaneously of the numbers of visitors passing each survey location (Liley, Panter, et al., 2020);
- Surveys counting and recording the distribution of parked vehicles (Panter & Saunders, 2020).
- An overview of the combined visitor findings in light of housing growth around the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar (Liley, Clarke, R., et al., 2020).
- A review of the impacts of recreation on the ecological interest of the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar and implications of the findings, in terms of potential mitigation for housing growth (Lake et al., 2020).

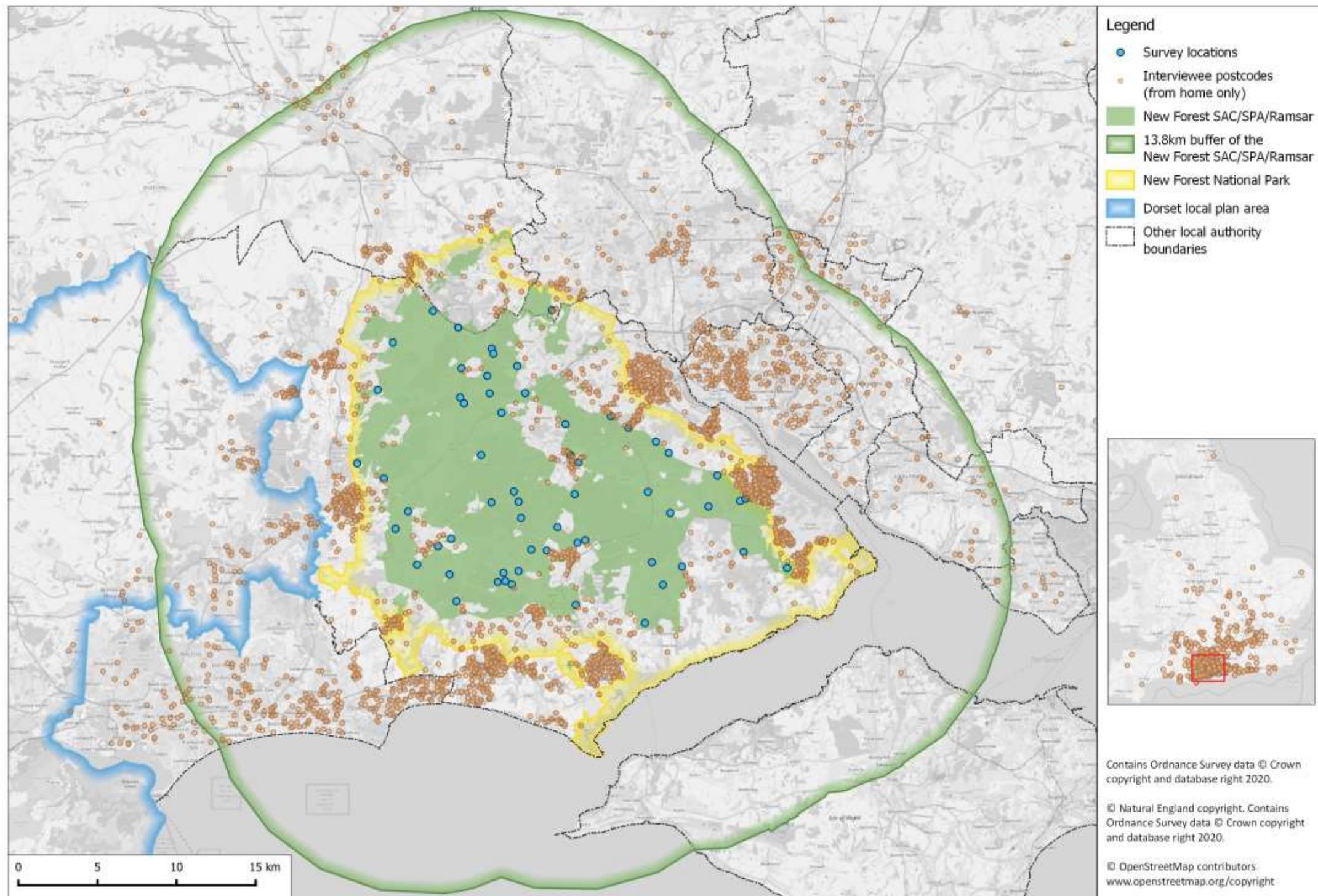
## Aims of this report

- 1.2 This short report has been produced to inform the Habitats Regulations Assessment for the Dorset Council Local Plan and to identify potential mitigation necessary to address impacts recreation pressure associated with new housing growth.

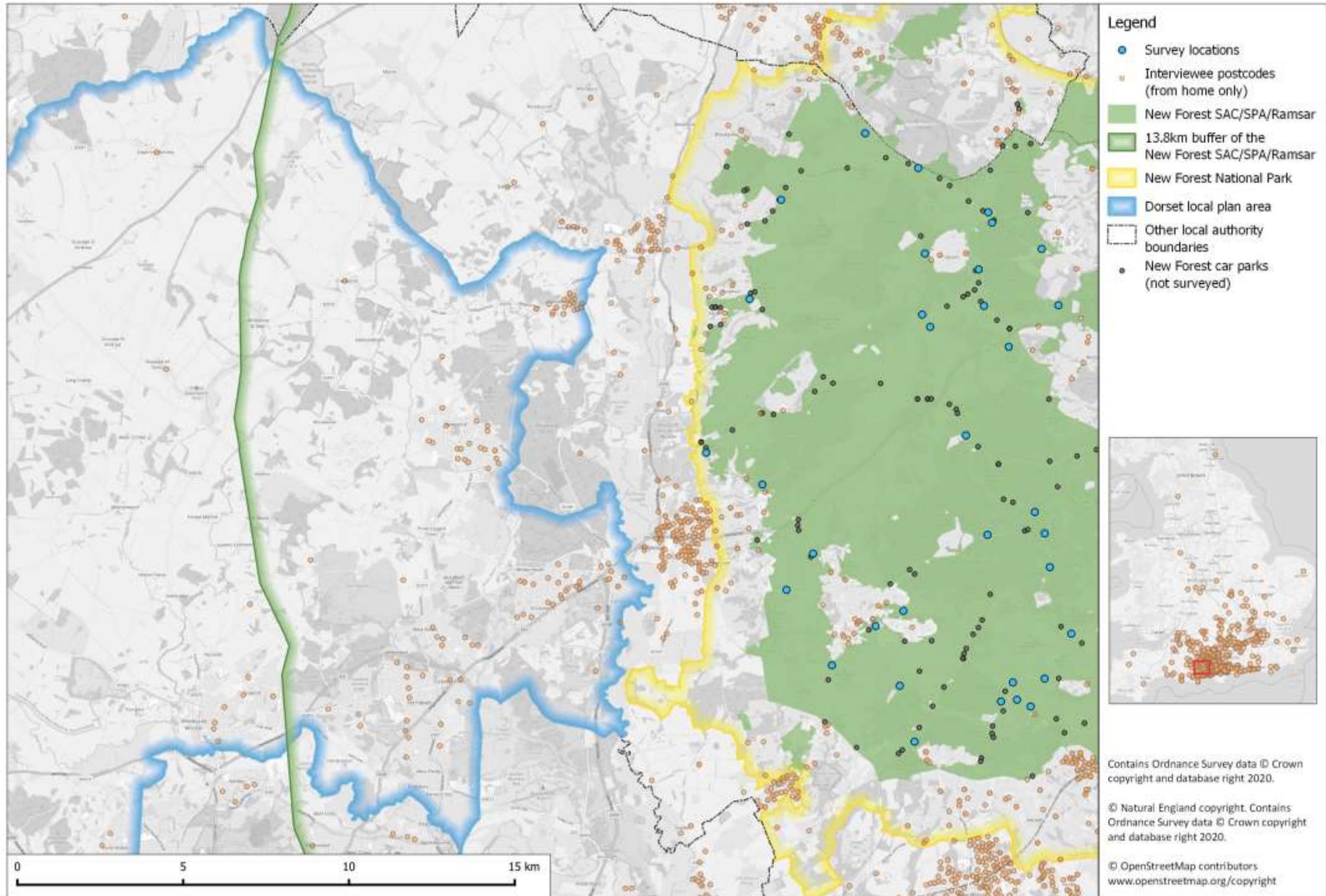
## 2. New Forest zone of influence

- 2.1 From the on-site survey in the New Forest the 75th percentile for all visitors was 21.4km and for those travelling from home it was 13.8km (Liley, Panter, et al., 2020). Based on these findings, local authorities around the New Forest have used a zone of influence of 13.8km to identify likely significant effects from recreation and the need for mitigation. This approach is supported by Natural England.
- 2.2 The 13.8km is shown with respect to the Dorset Local Plan area in Maps 1 and 2, which also show the postcodes generated in the survey work. Map 2 shows the specific area of overlap between the Dorset Local Plan area and the 13.8km buffer. Within this area, there is evidence of use from residents in Alderholt, Verwood and Ferndown. The 13.8km excludes Wimborne, falling to the east of the town.
- 2.3 It is important to note that the postcode data represent just a sample of use – drawn from interviews at a selection of access points in the New Forest. All the survey locations are shown on both maps and in Map 2 the un-surveyed car parks are included. It can be seen that there are numerous car parks that provide easy access onto the New Forest European sites along the western edge and therefore within easy reach for Dorset residents.
- 2.4 In Map 3 we show the proportion of use at each survey point by residents in Dorset. The pie charts represent individual survey locations and are scaled according to the number of interviews conducted at each location (interviews that generated a postcode that could be mapped). The blue segments show Dorset residents and, as might be expected, these are largely to the west of the Forest.

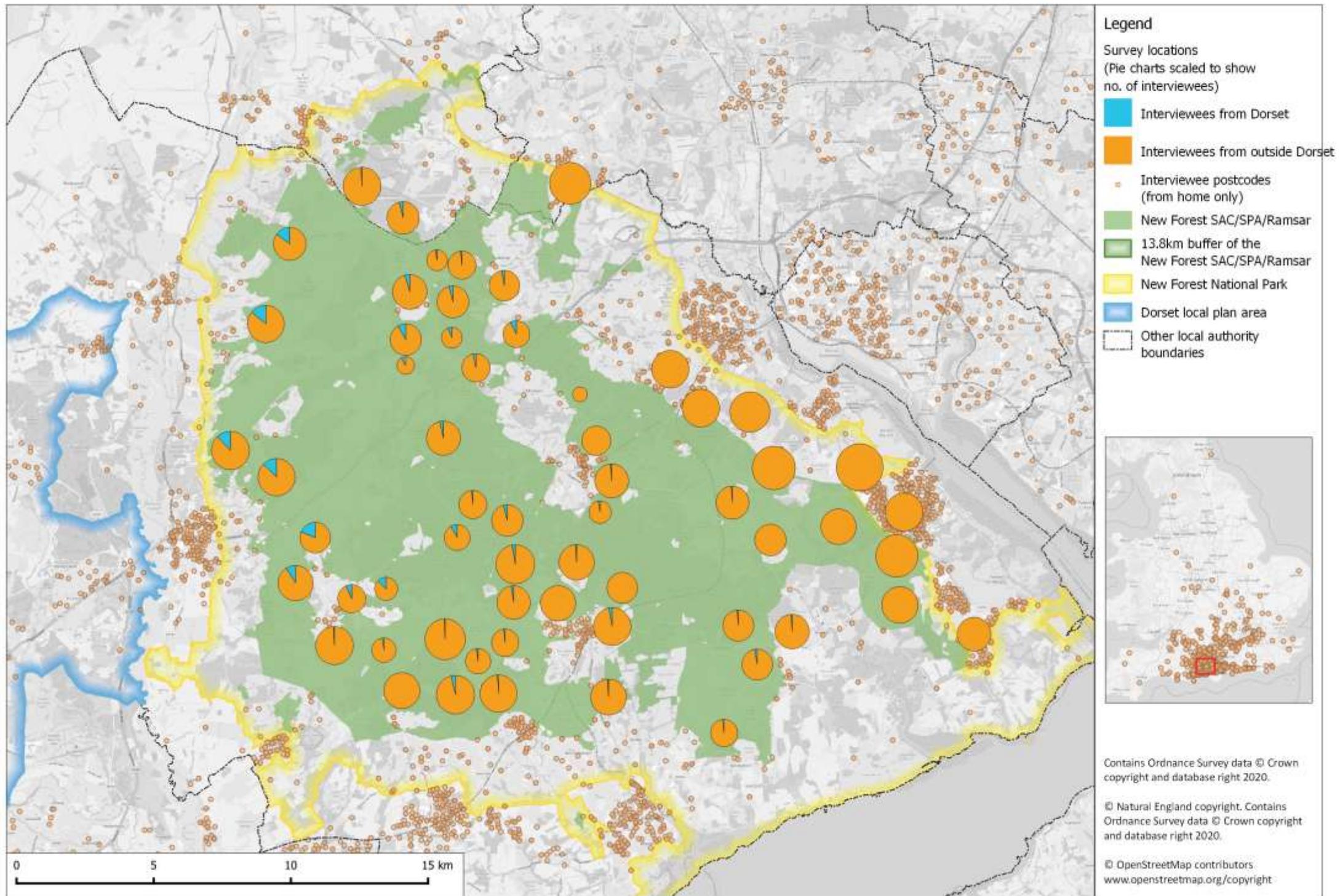
Map 1: Home postcodes of those on a short visit directly from home and the 13.8km buffer of the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar site



Map 2: Home postcodes of those on a short visit directly from home and the 13.8km buffer of the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar site: Dorset detail



Map 3: Proportion of interviewees from Dorset at each survey point



### 3. Use of the New Forest by residents in Dorset

- 3.1 In total there were 5326 interviews conducted as part of the on-site survey. Of these 4705 (88%) gave a home postcode outside Dorset, 166 (3%) gave a postcode from within Dorset and 455 (9%) either failed to give a postcode or the postcode could not be mapped. Taking just those interviewees who had travelled from home that day (i.e. excluding those on holiday etc.), there were 4434 interviewees who gave valid postcodes and 144 (3%) were from Dorset. Dorset residents therefore account for around 3% of the visits to the surveyed access points, which were selected to be representative of the Forest as a whole.
- 3.2 In Table 1 we compare the data for those 166 Dorset residents in relation to the 4705 from other local authorities and we give selected metrics from the survey (i.e. particular interview questions or data) for the two groups.
- 3.3 The New Forest surveys revealed a general pattern whereby the closer people lived to the Forest, the more likely they were to visit. The closest part of the Dorset Local Plan area is around 2.9km from the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar and therefore no Dorset residents live within the immediate vicinity of the Forest. As such the comparison highlights that Dorset residents visiting from home tend to visit less frequently than non-Dorset residents (106 visits per year on average compared to 202 visits per year), but visit for longer when they do (average visit duration for those coming from home 104 minutes compared to 85). Other differences fit with this pattern, for example – 99% of interviewees from home in Dorset had arrived by car compared to 91% from other authorities and the ‘close to home’ was a reason for 11% of interviewees from Dorset compared to 29% for those from other local authorities.
- 3.4 The data therefore indicate that visitor use of the New Forest by residents of Dorset fits with the geography and distances involved. Nonetheless, there is clear evidence that residents in Dorset use the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar, visit reasonably frequently and undertake activities – such as dog walking that pose a potential risk to the New Forest (see Lake et al., 2020 for review of relevant impacts of recreation).

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**Table 1: Selected metrics from the on-site surveys of the New Forest in 2018/19. Data shown separately for Dorset residents compared to non-Dorset residents. For those metrics with an \* the value is derived from those visiting from home only. Red values give the higher of the two values.**

Metric	Dorset residents	Non-Dorset residents
<b>Number of interviewees</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>4705</b>
<b>Number of interviewees on short visit directly from home</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>4016</b>
% main activity dog walking/exercising dogs*	51	<b>62</b>
% main activity walking*	<b>27</b>	22
% visiting daily or more than once a day*	13	<b>43</b>
Average number of visits per year*	106	<b>202</b>
Average visit duration (mins)*	<b>104</b>	85
% visiting equally all year*	71	<b>73</b>
% arrived by car*	<b>99</b>	91
% reason for visiting 'close to home'*	11	<b>29</b>
% Not aware of any habitats or species that might be impacted by recreation*	19	<b>21</b>
% for whom 75% of more of visits for given activity in New Forest*	36	<b>70</b>
% that would use a new country park if created*	38	<b>40</b>
Average group size (interviewed groups)*	<b>2.6</b>	2.4
Average number of dogs per interviewee*	0.9	<b>1.1</b>
Median distance survey point - home postcode (km)*	<b>14.17</b>	5.87
Median distance survey point - home postcode (km)	<b>15.85</b>	7.57
Median route length (m)	2756	<b>2897</b>

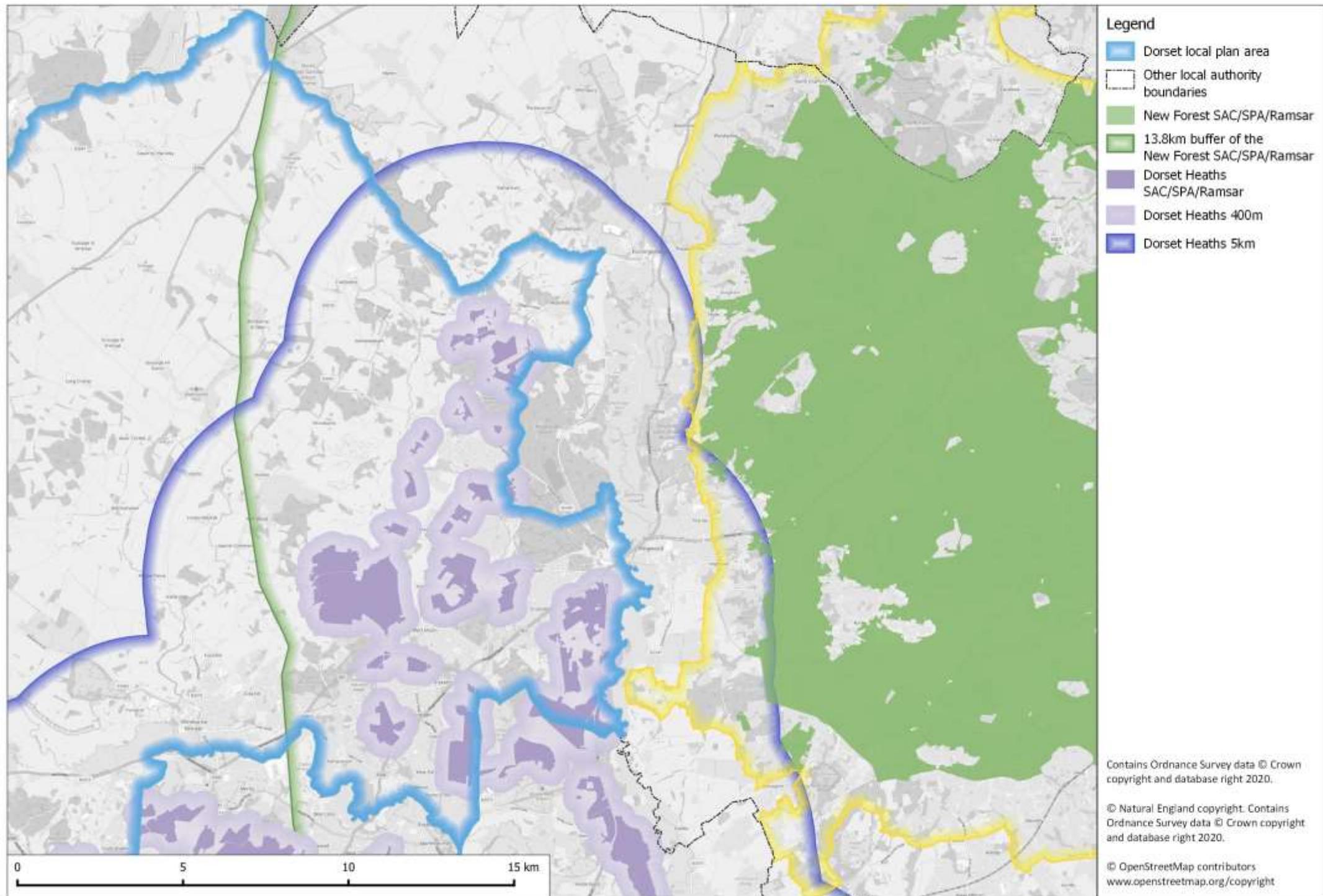
3.5 Based on these data there is no evidence to suggest that likely significant effects to the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar can be ruled out for growth in the Dorset Local Plan due to the geography or particular aspects of the visitor data. Use by residents from Dorset poses a risk in-combination with other authorities in the 13.8km buffer.

## 4. Mitigation considerations

### Overlap with the Dorset Heaths 5km zone

- 4.1 The Dorset Heaths zone of influence, as set out in the Dorset Heaths Planning Framework extends to 5km from the European site boundary and is shown in Map 4. There is clear overlap between the Dorset Heaths 5km and the New Forest 13.8km. Furthermore, the presence of the heaths (and the 400m zone around them) creates a significant area within the 13.8km buffer where new development won't come forward.
- 4.2 From Map 4 it is clear that most areas that lie within Dorset and also within 13.8km of the New Forest will potentially require mitigation for recreation impacts to both the Dorset Heaths and the New Forest and this requires careful consideration.

Map 4: 13.8km New Forest buffer and overlap with the Dorset Heaths 400m and 5km buffers



## Mitigation options

4.3 The Dorset Heaths mitigation involves provision of Strategic Access Management and Monitoring ('SAMM') and Heathland Infrastructure Projects ('HIPs') which include provision of suitable alternative natural greenspace ('SANG'). The SAMM provision addresses impacts on the heaths themselves through, for example, increased warden provision and visitor engagement. The HIPs provide alternative sites to relieve the overall pressure and visitor volume. Both approaches work together.

### *HIPs/SANG*

4.4 Clearly any HIPs around the Dorset Heaths that are provided for development within 13.8km of the New Forest could also work to deflect access from the New Forest. Any SANGs that come forward in the area around Avon Heath or Alderholt are likely to work to deflect use from both the New Forest and the Dorset Heaths. As such there is no clear need for additional HIPs or SANG delivery for development coming forward within the 13.8km buffer that is also within 5km of the Dorset Heaths (i.e. only a single HIPs/SANG payment would be required). This point is also relevant in that there is a flow of visitors in both directions and not just from Dorset to the New Forest. For example, 1.4% of interviewees in the recent Dorset Heaths visitor survey were residents of New Forest District (Panter & Caals, 2020).

4.5 The only part of the Dorset area that is beyond 5km of the Dorset Heaths and yet still within the 13.8km buffer for the New Forest is a small, very rural area north of Cranborne, toward Martin Down (see Map 4). Little or no development is likely within this area and is likely to be very small in scale. Any development that were to occur in this area could potentially contribute towards HIPs/SANG mitigation that was coming forward for the Dorset Heaths as such HIPs/SANG would still be relevant.

4.6 It is worth noting that there is evidence from the visitor survey data (Table 1) that visitors from Dorset tend to visit for a bit longer but less frequently compared to the other interviewees in the survey. As such there is perhaps an argument that the New Forest does have a particular draw and is a clear destination for the more occasional and longer recreation trips. Any HIPs/SANG provision may therefore need to be of a high standard and provide for such recreation use.

## SAMM

4.7 SAMM measures could include wardening, infrastructure (changes to car parks etc) and information provision/awareness raising. Map 3 shows the locations visited by interviewees from Dorset. The 10 survey locations that had the highest numbers of interviewees from Dorset are given in Table 2 – these are the ones towards the western edge of the New Forest and easily accessible from the road network. A total of 60 different locations were surveyed and as such the list provides an indication of those areas of the New Forest where SAMM provision would be relevant.

**Table 2: The 10 survey points (out of 60 that were surveyed) with the highest number of interviewees from Dorset**

Survey point	Number (%) interviewees from Dorset
Abbots Well	14 (14)
Rockford Common	13 (12)
Linford Bottom	13 (13)
Vereley	13 (19)
Ashley Walk	12 (15)
Smugglers Road	8 (9)
Cadmans Pool	6 (8)
Mill Lawn	5 (13)
Wilverley Inclosure	4 (4)
Fritham	4 (5)

4.8 SAMM provision will need to be coordinated with other local authorities to ensure cumulative risks to the New Forest are addressed and all authorities within the 13.8km zone have the same challenge. The relative proportion of use from Dorset is relatively small and it is likely that SAMM provision could be ‘piggy-backed’ onto mitigation delivery established by other authorities, potentially through existing bodies such as the New Forest National Park.

## Further considerations

4.9 This report is focussed on the Dorset Council area. It should be noted that the number of postcodes from the New Forest Survey that originated from the BCP Council area was much higher than that for Dorset (see Map 1) and in particular there were high levels of use from the Christchurch area. It may therefore not be necessarily appropriate to extend the approach for mitigation set out here to the BCP area.

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## References

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## Appendix 1: Qualifying features of the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar

Links in the table cross-reference to the Natural England website and the relevant page with the conservation objectives. In the qualifying features column, for SPAs NB denotes non-breeding and B breeding features. For SACs, # denotes features for which the UK has a special responsibility. For the Ramsar, the qualifying features and description are drawn from the Ramsar spreadsheet on the JNCC website<sup>1</sup>, and the link cross-references to the Ramsar site information page.

European site	Qualifying features
<a href="#">New Forest Ramsar</a>	<p>Criterion 1: Valley mires and wet heaths are found throughout the site and are of outstanding scientific interest. The mires and heaths are within catchments whose uncultivated and undeveloped state buffer the mires against adverse ecological change. This is the largest concentration of intact valley mires of their type in Britain.</p> <p>Criterion 2: The site supports a diverse assemblage of wetland plants and animals including several nationally rare species. Seven species of nationally rare plant are found on the site, as are at least 65 British Red Data Book species of invertebrate.</p> <p>Criterion 3: The mire habitats are of high ecological quality and diversity and have undisturbed transition zones. The invertebrate fauna of the site is important due to the concentration of rare and scarce wetland species. The whole site complex, with its examples of semi-natural habitats is essential to the genetic and ecological diversity of southern England.</p>
<a href="#">New Forest SPA</a>	<p>A072(B) <i>Pernis apivorus</i>: European honey-buzzard  A082(NB) <i>Circus cyaneus</i>: Hen Harrier  A099(B) <i>Falco subbuteo</i>: Eurasian Hobby  A224(B) <i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>: European Nightjar  A246(B) <i>Lullula arborea</i>: Woodlark  A302(B) <i>Sylvia undata</i>: Dartford Warbler  A314(B) <i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>: Wood Warbler</p>
<a href="#">The New Forest SAC</a>	<p>H7140 Transition mires and quaking bogs  H7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion H3110  Oligotrophic waters containing very few minerals of sandy plains (<i>Littorelletalia uniflorae</i>)  H3130 Oligotrophic to mesotrophic standing waters with vegetation of the <i>Littorelletea uniflorae</i> and/or of the <i>Isoëto-Nanojuncetea</i>  H4010 Northern Atlantic wet heaths with <i>Erica tetralix</i>  H4030 European dry heaths  H6410 Molinia meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils (<i>Molinion caeruleae</i>)</p>

<sup>1</sup> <http://archive.jncc.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=2392>

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European site	Qualifying features
	<p>H7230 Alkaline fens</p> <p>H9120 Atlantic acidophilous beech forests with <i>Ilex</i> and sometimes also <i>Taxus</i> in the shrublayer (<i>Quercion roboripetraeae</i> or <i>Ilici-Fagenion</i>)</p> <p>H9130 <i>Asperulo-Fagetum</i> beech forests</p> <p>H9190 Old acidophilous oak woods with <i>Quercus robur</i> on sandy plains</p> <p>H91D0# Bog woodland</p> <p>H91E0# Alluvial forests with <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> and <i>Fraxinus excelsior</i> (<i>Alno-Padion</i>, <i>Alnion incanae</i>, <i>Salicion albae</i>)</p> <p>S1044 <i>Coenagrion mercuriale</i>: Southern damselfly</p> <p>S1083 <i>Lucanus cervus</i>: Stag beetle</p> <p>S1166 <i>Triturus cristatus</i>: Great crested newt</p>