

16.06.11

Appendix 1

NATURAL
ENGLAND

Our ref:

Your ref: CEP/Hazeley Heath

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Dear Colin,

**Hazeley Heath Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Hampshire.
Part of Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA).**

**Proposed dedication of public bridleways on Hazeley Heath in the parishes of Mattingley and
Hartley Wintney – s.25 Highways Act 1980.**

Thank you for your letter dated 1 June 2011 consulting Natural England on the above proposed bridleways. Hazeley Heath is designated as a SSSI for its wet and dry lowland heath habitats, and is part of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA because it supports three rare Annex 1 birds (woodlark, Dartford warbler, and nightjar). Consequently it is a site of very high conservation value.

Natural England wishes to support initiatives that enable the public to access the countryside, however this proposal to dedicate bridleways on Hazeley Heath raises several issues.

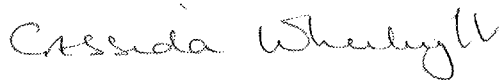
1. The site is already heavily fragment by roads and paths. Any further fragmentation should be avoided. The bridleway for the most part skirts around the edge of Hazeley Heath SSSI. However sections P-Q and F-M on the map cut across the heath. Although there is no issue with the route around the perimeter of the site, the sections noted above add to fragmentation. A route running around the perimeter via Hatts Farm and the sewage works to point M would be preferable. Also a route around the perimeter of the SSSI instead of section P - Q would avoid fragmenting this small area of heath.
2. Additional access can lead to increased disturbance of ground nesting birds, and so work against the conservation objectives for the SSSI and SPA. A reduction in the populations of the three Annex 1 birds would not be acceptable. This is particularly a problem where the bridleway crosses the open heath (see above sections). The proposed connection of this bridleway with the ones at Bramshill creates a larger pool of people who could access the heath. The Thames Basin Heaths SPA is known to be already under pressure in terms of public use. Horse riders and cyclists must not stray off the bridleway, particularly in bird breeding season, and bridleways must not widen with use, thus reducing the area of heathland habitat.
3. Drainage of bridleways raises concerns about the hydrology of the site. There must be no reduction in the area of wet heath, or in the height of the water table due to drainage.
4. Surfacing of routes should be avoided where possible. Where absolutely necessary, surfacing materials must be agreed with Natural England, only using materials that do not affect the pH of the surrounding area and fit with the natural character of the site. On no account should routes be metalled.

5. Conflict with different users of the heath. The new bridleway route uses existing paths in many areas. Walkers may find this unacceptable. Horses and bikes tend to churn up footpaths in wet weather making them impassable by walkers. If this proposal is agreed, other existing footpaths and tracks would need to be reserved for use by walkers. Both bridleways and footpaths should be clearly marked, and horse riders strongly encouraged through signage and ranger activity to keep to the bridleway keeping the footpaths suitable for walkers.
6. All operations associated with the bridleway on the SSSI (signage, surfacing, drainage, infrastructure) must be notified to Natural England and consented before they can be undertaken.

Natural England does not wish to object to the proposal as a whole, but considers a perimeter route to be more acceptable. Many of the other issues mentioned above could be resolved by informing users through signage and way-marking. Compatibility between access and conservation priorities will rely heavily on responsible use by the horse riders and cyclists using the bridleway.

Should you need any further information, do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for consulting Natural England.

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