



**Therfield Heath SSSI Mitigation Strategy**  
**October 2022 (Draft)**

## Contents

<i>Therfield Heath SSSI Mitigation Strategy</i> .....	1
<i>Draft – October 2022</i> .....	1
1 <i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	3
1.1 <i>Overview</i> .....	3
1.2 <i>Background, purpose and status of this document</i> .....	4
1.3 <i>Legislative context</i> .....	5
1.4 <i>National planning policy context</i> .....	6
1.5 <i>The Local Planning context</i> .....	6
1.6 <i>Developer contributions, planning obligations and S106</i> .....	8
2 <i>THERFIELD HEATH SSSI</i> .....	9
2.1 <i>The SSSI designation</i> .....	9
2.2 <i>SSSI Zone of Influence</i> .....	10
2.3 <i>Other designations and activities</i> .....	14
3 <i>THE ZONE OF INFLUENCE</i> .....	22
3.1 <i>Introduction</i> .....	22
3.2 <i>Green Infrastructure Provision in the ZOI</i> .....	22
3.3 <i>Future development in the ZOI</i> .....	26
3.4 <i>Other plans and strategies in the ZOI</i> .....	30
4 <i>KEY PRESSURES ON THE HEATH</i> .....	33
5 <i>MITIGATION MEASURES</i> .....	35
5.1 <i>Introduction</i> .....	35
5.2 <i>Education and management measures within the Heath</i> .....	36
5.3 <i>On-site planning mitigation measures for new development</i> .....	40
5.4 <i>Planning policy measures</i> .....	47
5.5 <i>Off-site avoidance and mitigation measures</i> .....	49
6 <i>ACTION PLAN, FUNDING &amp; DELIVERY</i> .....	54
6.1 <i>Action Plan</i> .....	54
6.2 <i>Funding</i> .....	54
7 <i>REVIEW AND UPDATE</i> .....	61

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Overview

- 1.1.1 Therfield Heath is a protected Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) lying to the west of Royston in Hertfordshire in the parish of Therfield. As well as being a protected site, it is an important recreational facility for residents of the town and surrounding area and a registered Common. The site additionally contains a number of historic burial mounds (or barrows) which are protected as Scheduled Monuments (SMs). SMs are nationally recognised heritage assets.



- 1.1.2 Under the District Council's new Local Plan, more than 1,800 new homes are anticipated to be built in and around Royston over the twenty-year period from 2011 to 2031. It is inevitable that further development will take place in surrounding areas that lie within The Heath's catchment, including in neighbouring South Cambridgeshire in the future.
- 1.1.3 The Conservators of Therfield Heath and Greens, Natural England, North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) and other key stakeholders have long recognised the recreational pressures that people have on the SSSI<sup>1</sup>. These pressures have increased since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.
- 1.1.4 Since the introduction of the Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, the Conservators have reported a significant and continuing impact on The Heath as a result of

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<sup>1</sup> *Therfield Heath Visitor Access Study, Footprint Ecology 2019*

increasing numbers of people using The Heath for recreational purposes, particularly during the periods of lockdown and restricted travel.

- 1.1.5 This strategy sets out measures that will be used to manage the impact upon Therfield Heath SSSI as a result of the planned growth in the Local Plan. It is important to note that the extent of the Therfield Heath SSSI and the extent of the Common Land which is generally referred to as Therfield Heath do not directly correspond to one another. This relationship is explained further in Section 2 of this document.

## **1.2 Background, purpose and status of this document**

- 1.2.1 This document has been produced by NHDC to support their new Local Plan with the input of key stakeholders and interest groups. The requirement for a strategy was agreed by NHDC with Natural England as part of the Local Plan Examination<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.2.2 This document will be a material consideration in the determination of relevant planning applications. It provides additional information to support consideration of issues including, but not necessarily limited to:
- The design and layout of development schemes that come forward in the area covered by this strategy;
  - The requirements of policies in the Plan relating to open spaces, biodiversity and other relevant green infrastructure;
  - The contributions that developers might be asked to make towards measures to manage the impact of their scheme upon the SSSI including potential measures within and beyond the Heath;
  - Specific projects that any such contributions might be put towards.
- 1.2.3 This strategy is referenced in the Council's (forthcoming) Developer Contributions SPD as a document which should be referred to in securing the above. The SPD, in turn, supports Policy SP7 of the new Local Plan. This requires developers to provide, finance and / or contribute towards mitigation measures which are fairly and reasonably related to their proposed schemes.
- 1.2.4 This strategy is not a detailed management strategy for Therfield Heath itself. Although elements of this strategy relate to this subject, the management of much of Therfield Heath remains the responsibility of the Conservators of Therfield Heath and Greens with Natural England acting in an advisory role. The Conservators and / or Natural England will continue to produce such strategies and management measures as they consider necessary to protect the notified features of the SSSI and / or manage Therfield Heath generally.
- 1.2.5 Section 2 sets out the relationship between the SSSI and other designations in the area. Section 7 of this document sets out how this strategy will be reviewed and updated in the future to reflect any such measures identified in other documents.

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<sup>2</sup> [Statement of Common Ground between NHDC and Natural England, November 2017](#)

- 1.2.6 Other authorities within The Heath's Zones of Influence, as identified within this strategy, may wish to pursue some of the principles and / or projects identified in this document – either by adopting it for their own purposes or translating its findings and recommendations into any relevant strategies being produced for or within their area. It is beyond the scope of this strategy to specifically require this, however, there may be opportunities to explore this further in the future.

### **1.3 Legislative context**

- 1.3.1 The designations affecting Therfield Heath SSSI have their roots in a range of legislation.
- 1.3.2 SSSIs are sites designated at a national level for their biological, geological and / or physiographic interest. The legal framework for SSSIs is provided by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). The decision to notify a SSSI is made by Natural England as the relevant nature conservation body.
- 1.3.3 The Conservators of Therfield Heath and Greens were set up by an Act of Parliament in 1896 and are the owners and managers of the Common Land at Therfield Heath which substantially overlaps with the SSSI designation (see Section 2). In addition to being the owners and occupiers of the Heath, the Conservators are also defined as a Section 28G body with duties under the Countryside and Wildlife Act, 1981<sup>3</sup>.
- 1.3.4 The provisions in the Environment Act 2021 will help to restore natural habitats and increase biodiversity and will require new developments to improve or create habitats for nature.
- 1.3.5 Local Nature Reserves are a statutory designation made under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The regime for Scheduled Monuments is set out in the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.
- 1.3.6 Local Plans are prepared under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended). Local authorities have a statutory duty to set out policies for development in a Local Plan. Regulations set out detailed requirements as to their preparation and examination. Plans are examined to determine whether they have been prepared in accordance with legal and procedural requirements and whether they are 'sound'. In order to be sound, a Plan must be positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy. In preparing Plans, authorities must also prepare environmental assessments which set out the likely effects of their proposed policies.
- 1.3.7 Planning law requires that applications for development are determined in accordance with the adopted Local Plans unless material considerations indicate otherwise<sup>4</sup>. Case law establishes that the factors which might be a material consideration are wide-ranging.

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<sup>3</sup> [Section 28G - Countryside and Wildlife Act, 1981](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Section 38\(6\) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004](#)

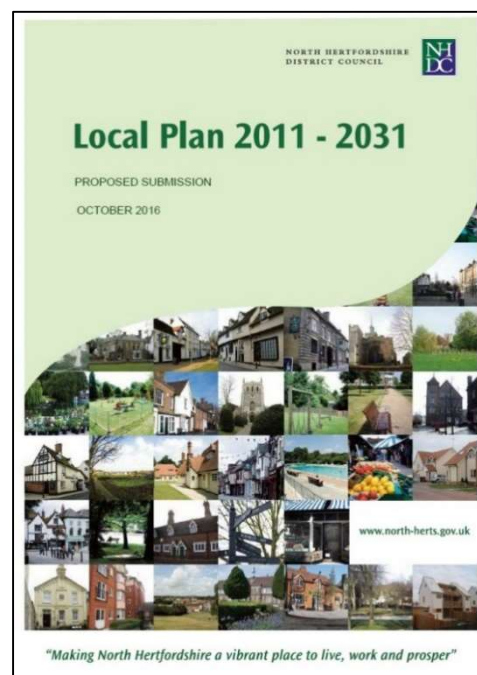
## 1.4 National planning policy context

- 1.4.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) says that planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment. This should be achieved by, among other matters, affording protection to sites of biodiversity value in a manner commensurate with their status<sup>5</sup>.
- 1.4.2 Development adversely affecting a SSSI (either individually or cumulatively) should not normally be permitted unless the benefits clearly outweigh the likely impacts<sup>6</sup>. National policy also sets out guidelines for consideration of schemes which might adversely impact upon designated heritage assets, including Scheduled Monuments<sup>7</sup>.
- 1.4.3 Balanced against this is a general expectation that local authorities should plan to meet their development needs and any needs which cannot be met in neighbouring areas unless there are strong reasons for restricting development or adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits<sup>8</sup>.

## 1.5 The Local Planning context

### North Hertfordshire

- 1.5.1 The Local Plan for an area forms part of the statutory Development Plan. The proposed new NHDC Local Plan was submitted to the Secretary of State in June 2017 for Examination in Public. It covers the period from 2011 to 2031.
- 1.5.2 Following the examination process, the Plan contains four proposed housing allocations in Royston. These are expected to deliver approximately 500 new homes. Together with existing permissions and completions since 2011, 1,900 new homes are expected in and around the town over the Plan period.
- 1.5.3 Initial hearing sessions were held between November 2017 and March 2018. During this period, NHDC agreed with Natural England that a mitigation strategy for Therfield Heath SSSI would be produced.



<sup>5</sup> Paragraph 174 of the NPPF

<sup>6</sup> Paragraph 180 of the NPPF

<sup>7</sup> Paragraphs 189 to 208 (inclusive) of the NPPF

<sup>8</sup> Paragraph 11 of the NPPF

- 1.5.4 This would address the recreational impacts arising from the proposed allocations and developments within Royston and the surrounding areas within NHDC (both alone and in-combination). The strategy was to be developed in consultation with Natural England and agreed prior to the adoption of the Local Plan<sup>9</sup>.
- 1.5.5 Proposed Main Modifications (the changes required to the Plan arising from the examination) were consulted upon in 2019. Further hearing sessions were held between November 2020 and February 2021. Further Proposed Main Modifications were issued for consultation in May 2021.
- 1.5.6 The Council received the Inspector's report on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2022. Receipt of the report marks the end of the Local Plan Examination. The Council will consider whether to adopt the new Local Plan at a meeting of Full Council on 8 November 2022. Following any decision to adopt, the new Local Plan will be the starting point for considering planning applications for new development.

### **South Cambridgeshire**

- 1.5.7 Royston is located at the north-east of the District. Its outer limits are broadly demarcated by the A505 bypass around the north of the town, which also marks the administrative boundary between the counties of Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire. South Cambridgeshire is the district local planning authority for the land to the north of the A505. As set out in subsequent sections of this strategy, the identified Zone of Influence for the Therfield Heath SSSI extends across the administrative boundaries.
- 1.5.8 South Cambridgeshire's Plan was adopted in September 2018 and covers the period to 2031. It includes sites for new development and sets out what types of development will be permitted in the villages and the south-west of the District closest to Therfield Heath.
- 1.5.9 There was no specific requirement arising from the examination of the South Cambridgeshire's Plan to expressly mitigate the likely impacts of its strategy on Therfield Heath SSSI. The Plan does, however, contain generic policies allowing potential impacts to be considered as individual sites are brought forward for development in the future.
- 1.5.10 South Cambridgeshire have commenced work on a joint plan review with Cambridge City Council; the [Emerging Greater Cambridge Local Plan](#). Consultation took place in November and December 2021 on the First Proposals for the Plan. Following consideration of the issues raised, a full draft local plan will be prepared for public consultation.
- 1.5.11 Further information on future development in both authorities is contained in Section 3.3.

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<sup>9</sup> [Examination Document ED52: Statement of Common Ground between NHDC and Natural England, November 2017](#)

## **1.6 Developer contributions, planning obligations and S106**

- 1.6.1 Under the present planning system, contributions from developers to mitigate the impact of development in the area are normally secured through planning obligation agreements under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.
- 1.6.2 Agreements may be used to ensure that the impacts arising as a result of a new development can be addressed. They are also a valuable way of ensuring that a development complies with planning policies contained in the Local Plan and any Neighbourhood Plans. Planning obligations may be set out in an agreement between the Council and the developer (and any other relevant parties) or in a unilateral undertaking offered by the developer.
- 1.6.3 The terms 'developer contributions', 'planning obligations' and 'Section 106' (s106) are used interchangeably but generally refer to the same things.
- 1.6.4 There may be instances where the impacts of development that lie within other local authority areas may affect the Therfield Heath SSSI. This includes, but is not necessarily limited to, South Cambridgeshire District. It will be for Natural England, as the statutory consultee, to determine the likely severity of the impacts and the extent to which mitigation measures may be required. Natural England may request obligations from the developer accordingly. In these cases, the NHDC may expect a clause enabling money to be transferred for spending in the District if necessary and justified.

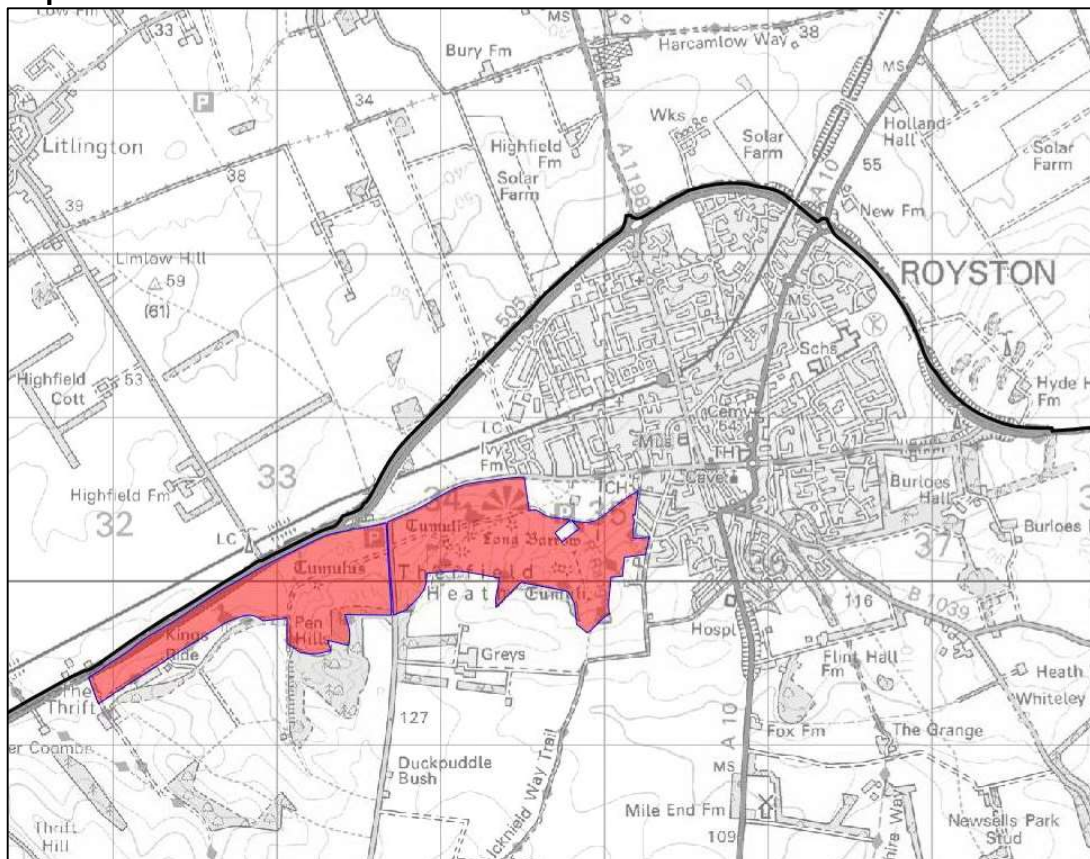


## 2 THERFIELD HEATH SSSI

### 2.1 The SSSI designation

- 2.1.1 Therfield Heath SSSI lies to the west of Royston in the county of Hertfordshire in the parish of Therfield. It covers an area of more than 140 hectares (350 acres), extending almost 3.5km from the urban edge of Royston on its eastern boundary and running along the A505 dual carriageway to the west. At its widest, the SSSI measures over 750m from north to south.
- 2.1.2 The SSSI is an undulating site which, in broad terms, rises quite steeply to the south. There is a vertical gain of approximately 50m between the lowest and highest points of the designated site. It lies on the north side of a ridge known as the East Anglian Heights. This ridge is a continuation of the escarpment which forms the Chiltern Hills further to the west.
- 2.1.3 The location and extent of the SSSI in the context of the town of Royston are shown on the map below.

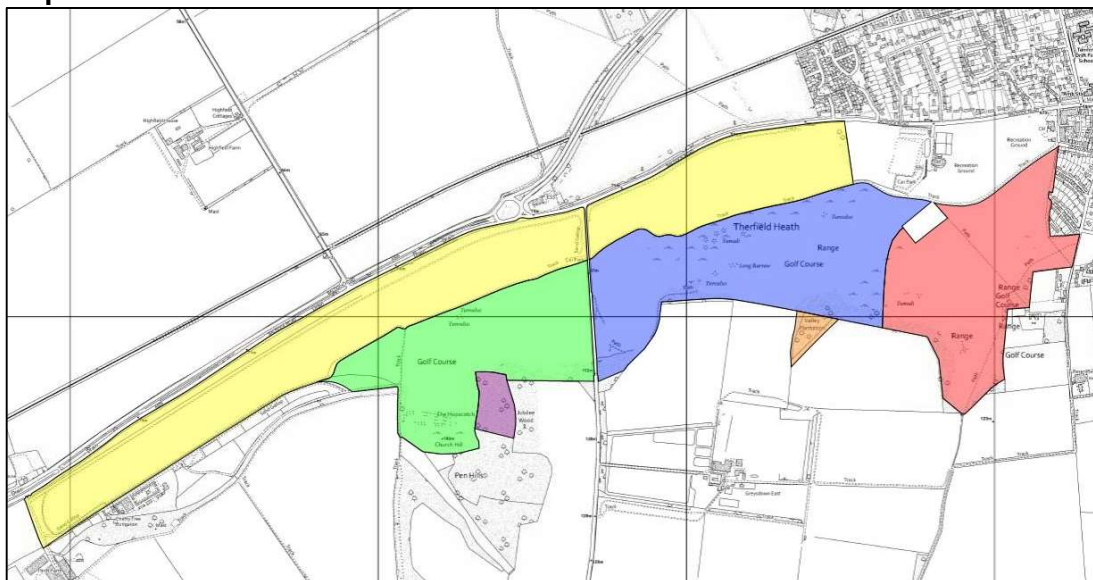
**Map 1: Location of Therfield Heath SSSI**



- 2.1.4 The site was first notified as a SSSI in 1953 under the National Parks and Countryside Act 1949. It was re-notified under the existing legal framework in 1984.

- 2.1.5 The SSSI Citation, which is reproduced in full at Appendix A, identifies that Therfield Heath is a very good example of East Anglian chalk grassland. The site contains some of the richest chalk grassland in England and is of high conservation value. The designated features of the SSSI are: lowland calcareous grassland, lowland mixed deciduous woodland, a vascular plant assemblage, an invertebrate assemblage and the Chalkhill blue butterfly. These species are identified as reasons for notifying Therfield Heath as a SSSI.
- 2.1.6 The SSSI also supports a wide range of other species. This includes ground-nesting skylarks and an array of finches, warblers, birds of prey and other species. However, these are not specifically identified in the SSSI citation as features underpinning the designation.
- 2.1.7 Therfield Heath SSSI is divided into six units. SSSI units are divisions of SSSIs used to record management details. Four of these units (001 to 004) contain calcareous grassland. These correspond to that part of the SSSI which is also Common Land (see Section 2.4 below). The remaining two units (005 and 006) contain areas of woodland. The six units are shown in the map below.

**Map 2: Therfield Heath SSSI units**



## 2.2 SSSI Zone of Influence

- 2.2.1 The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 requires local planning authorities to consult Natural England on “Development in or likely to affect a Site of Special Scientific Interest” (Schedule 4, w). Natural England’s SSSI Impact Risk Zones are a GIS dataset designed to be used during the planning application validation process to help local planning authorities decide when to consult Natural England on developments likely to affect a SSSI. The dataset and user guidance can be accessed from the [data.gov.uk](https://data.gov.uk) website.
- 2.2.2 The IRZs are established on a case-by-case basis using intelligence relating to the relevant SSSI. Historically, the IRZ for the Therfield Heath SSSI had been drawn

relatively tightly around the designation. These have been expanded in recent years and, in early 2019, the requirement to consult Natural England on schemes of 25 or more homes was extended to approximately 3km from the SSSI boundary<sup>10</sup>.

2.2.3 In order to better understand visitor pressure on Therfield Heath SSSI, Natural England commissioned a detailed visitor survey in 2019. This survey provided evidence taken from direct and automated counts, face-to-face interviews and an online questionnaire.

2.2.4 The key findings of the [Therfield Heath Visitor Access Study](#) included:

- 70% of interviewees gave dog walking as their main activity;
- the median route length for visitors was 2.47km in the summer, 2.11km in winter and 1.59km in winter;
- other activities included walking, playing golf, jogging, power walking, family outings and meeting up with friends;
- dog walkers and golfers were the groups of visitors least likely to use the café or sports facilities;
- interviewees tended to visit the site frequently and many of these visits were short (an hour or less);
- relatively few other sites were mentioned as alternative destinations to The Heath; and
- suggested improvements mostly related to parking in the main car park, dog mess on site, the need for dog waste bins, signage on site, conflicts between users and the need for better surfaced paths.

2.2.5 The study concluded that, as a very approximate estimate, there are 215,000 person visits to the Therfield Heath per year, excluding visitors using the sports facilities and the café only. The median distance for interviewees was 1.9km and 75% of interviewees lived within 5.8km.<sup>11</sup> These areas are referred to in this report as Zones of Influence (ZOI).

2.2.6 The visitor survey identified that the Heath is a well-used and a popular site for recreation and that very little of the use relates to the nature conservation of the site with only a small proportion of visitors (10%) visiting the site because of the butterflies and the flora, albeit that half of respondents were aware of the SSSI designation. Paragraph 1.10 from the visitor study notes that: *“The whole of the common is subject to the Commons Regulation Provisional Order Act 1888 which gives the right to access on foot as well as for the purposes of other forms of recreation, including the playing of cricket and other games.”* With this in mind, it is not surprising that 90% of visits to the Heath are for the purposes under this enactment, rather than to view and study the designated SSSI. The survey concluded that the issues for nature conservation on the site relate to the volume of

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<sup>10</sup> As shown on the MAGIC mapping tool (<https://magic.defra.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx>), accessed June 2022

<sup>11</sup> The Footprint Ecology report identifies the median and 75% percentile distances as 1.9km and 5.8km respectively. These have been rounded up to the nearest kilometre for simplicity for the purposes of this strategy.

footfall on The Heath and the longer-term challenges delivering the management necessary for the nature conservation.

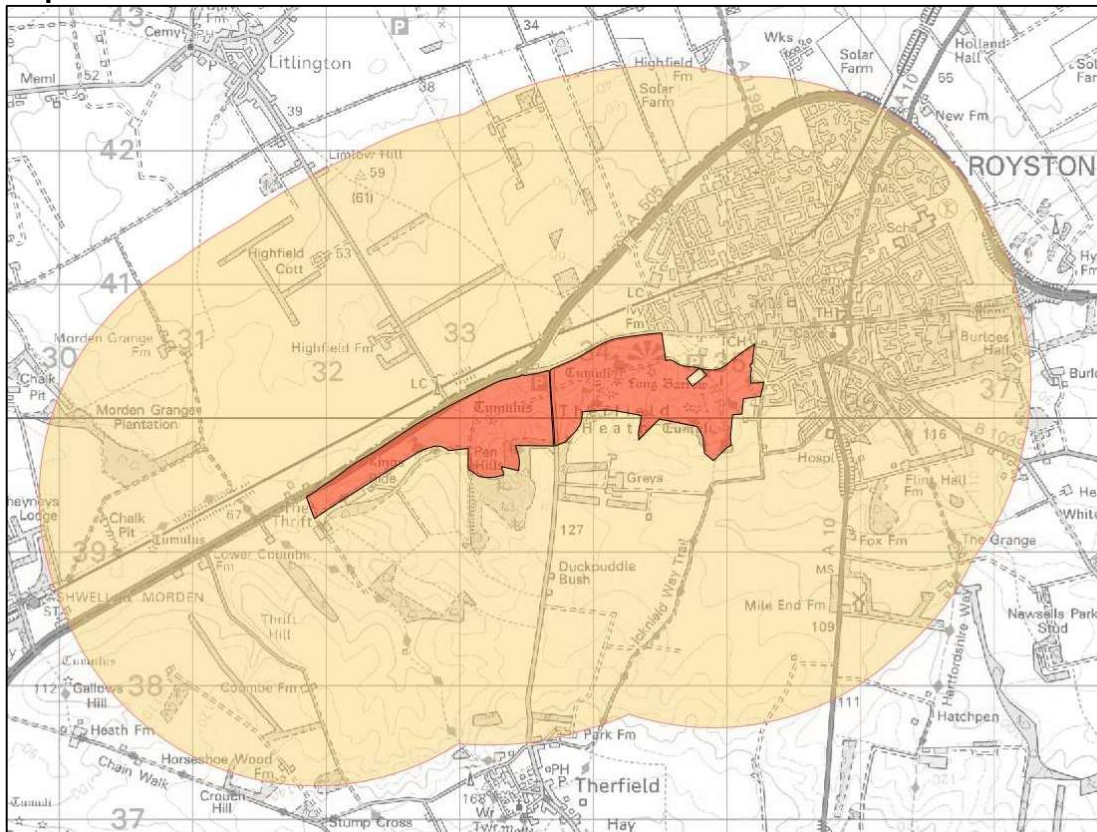
2.2.7 The study also considered a range of implications for recreational management in the context of the survey's findings which might be relevant to this strategy. In particular, the survey found that;

- much of the recreational use was local and that the creation of a visitor centre has the potential to result in drawing more visitors from a wider area but that such a centre would not necessarily be used by local residents;
- conversely, a visitor centre could help to raise awareness of the conservation interest of the site which could ensure that visitors recognise its value;
- the presence of a warden or ranger could be a positive way to engage with visitors;
- the site could be more robust if the recreational use could be shifted from being widespread and dispersed to being more concentrated along set routes;
- if there were parking improvements in key locations, people could be encouraged to use particular routes and the visitor facilities; and
- the provision of green space elsewhere in Royston could help to resolve the pressures on The Heath, for example with dedicated dog walking routes.

2.2.8 The inner 2km ZOI from which half of trips to The Heath are drawn is detailed in the map below. This encompasses the entirety of Royston as well as surrounding land in both North Hertfordshire and South Cambridgeshire. This surrounding land is largely rural with only scattered farms and buildings. There are no other settlements within this inner zone.

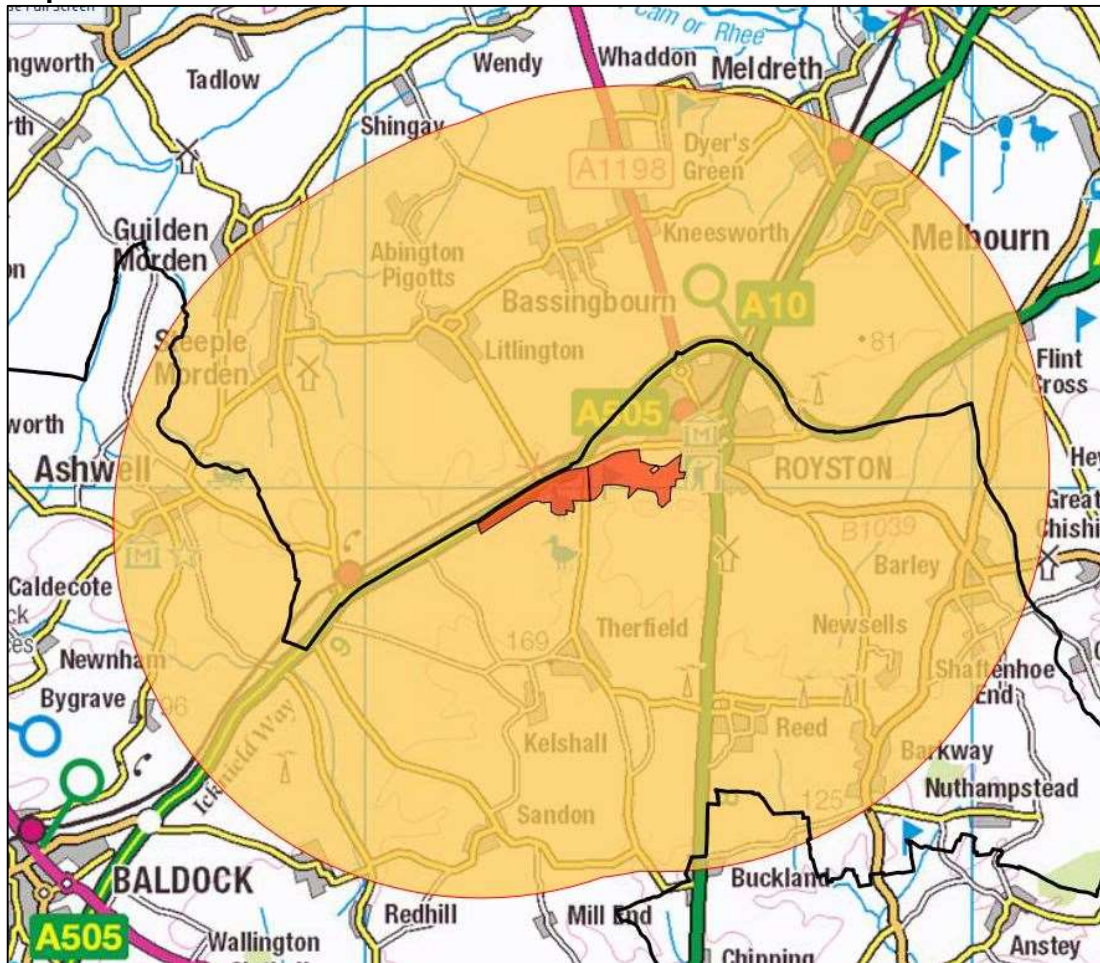


**Map 3: 2km inner Zone of Influence around Therfield Heath SSSI**



- 2.2.9 There are approximately 7,500 homes within this inner ZOI. Based upon the results of the Footprint Ecology visitor survey, this gives a very approximate estimate that, on average, each individual home in this area generates around 14 visits to The Heath per year.
- 2.2.10 The wider 6km buffer from which three-quarters of trips to The Heath are drawn, is detailed in the map below. As well as the whole of Royston this incorporates, in whole or in part, many surrounding villages in both North Hertfordshire and South Cambridgeshire. This includes (but is not limited to): Ashwell, Barley, Barkway, Bassingbourn, Litlington, Melbourn, the Mordens, Reed, Sandon and Therfield. This extends beyond the current limits of Natural England's Impact Risk Zones.
- 2.2.11 It is estimated that there are around 6,800 additional homes in this wider ZOI beyond the 2km inner zone. Based upon the results of the Footprint Ecology visitor survey, this gives a very approximate estimate that, on average, each individual home in this area generates around eight visits to The Heath per year.
- 2.2.12 The approaches set out in this Strategy (or other documents which reference this Strategy) should be applied within the 5.8km Zone of Influence insofar as it lies within North Hertfordshire.

**Map 4: 6km wider Zone of Influence around Therfield Heath SSSI**



- 2.2.13 The Conservators' view is that both the catchment radii and the overall volumes of visitor numbers calculated by the Footprint Ecology report may represent conservative estimates of The Heath's reach and popularity. The report acknowledges that it does not account for the extra 'draw' of special events. The Conservators have further concerns around the detailed nature of some of the survey timings and techniques which they consider may have underestimated traffic and usage. It is also acknowledged anecdotally that there has been a rise in the number of visitors to The Heath since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.
- 2.2.14 Given the Conservator's view of the visitor survey, it may be appropriate in the future to consider applying some of the principles beyond the 6km Zone of Influence, particularly for strategic-scale development schemes which will generate a larger number of new residents or employees. The most appropriate approach to be taken will be determined on a case-by-case basis.
- 2.2.15 The approach to be taken in other authority areas will be for those Districts to determine in consultation with Natural England as required.

## **2.3 Other designations and activities**

- 2.3.1 There are a number of other designations and activities affecting the Therfield Heath SSSI.



## Common Land

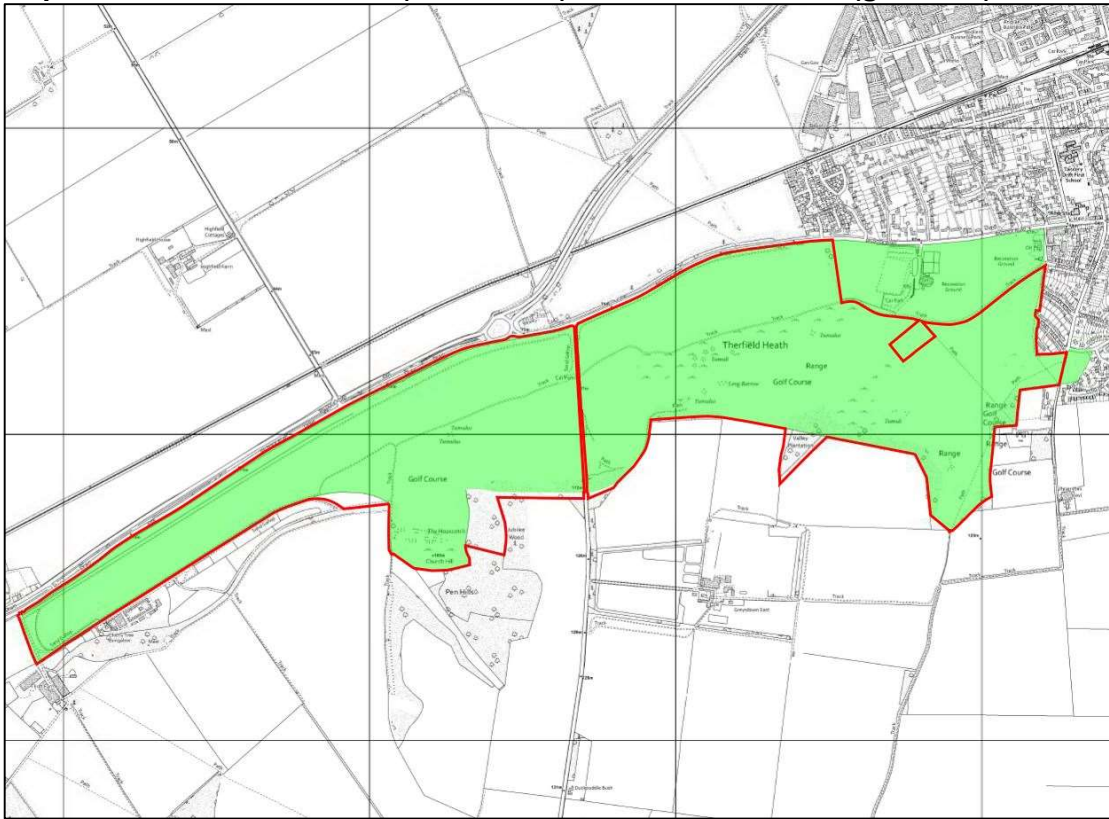


*The extent of the Common Land includes the sports facilities at the north-east of Therfield Heath as well as large areas of the SSSI designation*

- 2.3.2 As set out in Section 1, the extent of the SSSI does not correspond exactly to the extent of the Common Land which is also referred to as Therfield Heath. The Common Land is owned by the Therfield Regulation Trust and managed by the Conservators of Therfield Heath and Greens.
- 2.3.3 The relationship between the two is shown in the map below. The key differences between the designations are:
- An area of additional Common Land outside of the SSSI boundary at the north-east of the site, broadly corresponding to the areas covered by the Golf clubhouse, Royston Rugby Club, the Heath Sports Centre and associated sports pitches and facilities, Heath Café and the associated car parks;
  - A further, small area of Common Land to the east of the SSSI and Briary Lane and south of Sun Hill; and
  - Areas of the SSSI outside of the Common Land, broadly corresponding to the two areas of woodland in Units 005 and 006 discussed above.
- 2.3.4 The area which is both Common Land and within the Therfield SSSI broadly corresponds to SSSI Units 001 to 004 as shown in Section 2.2 above. The Common Land is open access land under Section 15(2) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. It is important to note that this document is a mitigation strategy for the SSSI rather than for The Heath (as defined by the Common Land designation). However, there is significant overlap between the two.
- 2.3.5 The Conservators are the statutory managers of The Heath under a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Act of Parliament (see Section 1). Although this strategy identifies some broad measures for future consideration it is recognised that responsibility for day-to-day management

of The Heath and decisions about management regimes (or similar) within it remain the responsibility of the Conservators. The Conservators liaise with Natural England, as the responsible body for the statutory SSSI designation, in undertaking their management responsibilities.

**Map 5: Therfield Heath SSSI (red outline) and Common Land (green fill)**



### **Other biodiversity designations**

- 2.3.6 The area covered by the SSSI is also designated as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR). The LNR designation was declared in 1973. There are some minor differences between the geographical extent of the two designations. These are mainly around the edges of the sites and the differences are generally marginal. The principal difference is that the LNR designation also covers the rectangular rugby pitch which can be seen excluded from the SSSI designation in Map 5 above towards the east of the site.
- 2.3.7 The LNR Citation states Church Hill on Therfield Heath is renowned for its colony of rare pasque flowers which bloom in early spring. Full details are given on the [Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust website](#).
- 2.3.8 There are a number of designated Local Wildlife Sites in the area immediately surrounding the SSSI. The largest of these is Jubilee Wood to the south of Fox Covert Wood (SSSI Unit 005).
- 2.3.9 Fox Covert Wood itself is managed as a wildlife site by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Site Trust but this does not bestow any additional status upon the land over and above the existing SSSI and LNR designations.



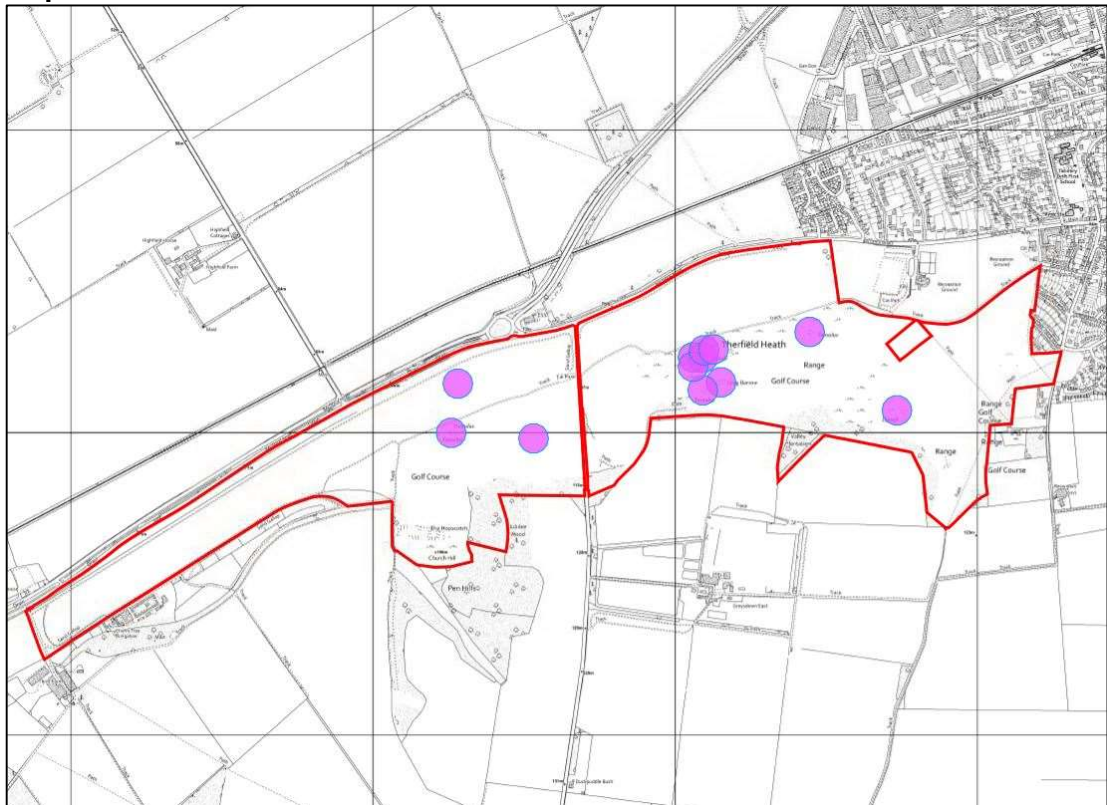
## Heritage



*The scheduled barrows are a distinctive feature on the Heath's skyline*

- 2.3.10 There are a number of ancient burial barrows and other features within Therfield Heath SSSI which are protected as [Scheduled Monuments](#). The location of these is shown on Map 5 below. Round barrow cemeteries date to the Bronze Age. The round barrow cemetery on Therfield Heath is the largest known example of its type in Hertfordshire.

**Map 6: Scheduled Monuments within Therfield Heath SSSI**



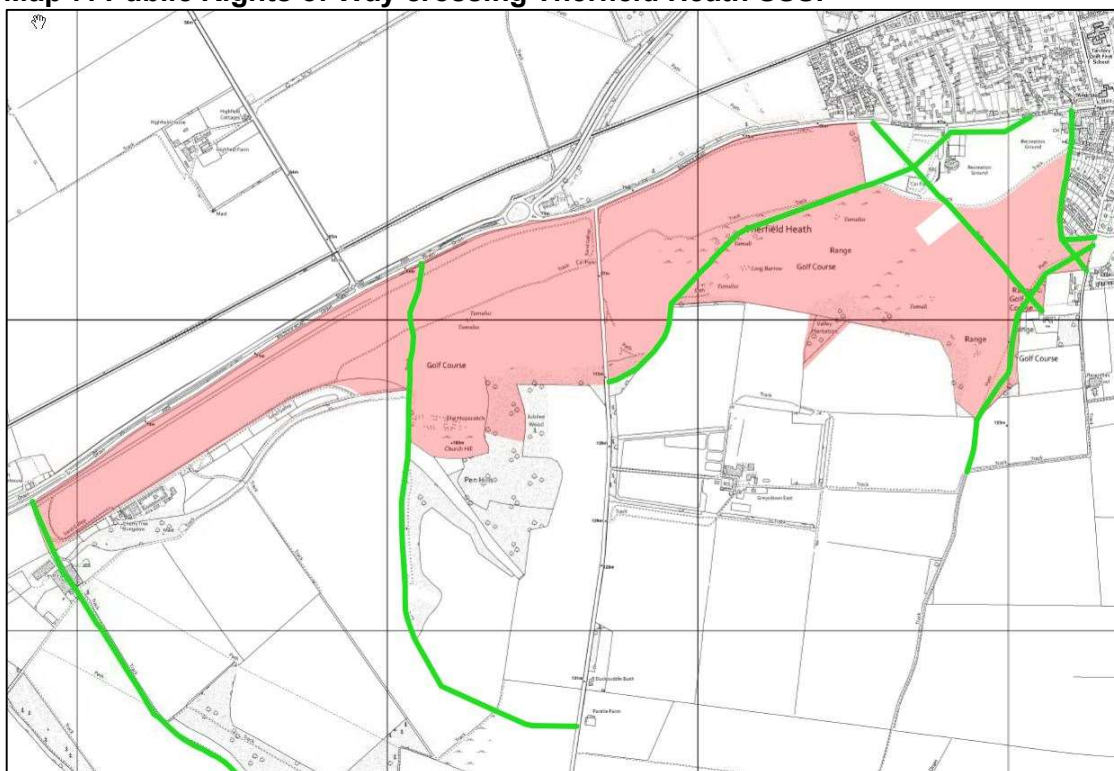
## Public Rights of Way

- 2.3.11 There are seven paths within the Therfield Heath SSSI which are recognised as Public Rights of Way. They provide routes within and / or across The Heath. A

number of these link to destinations outside of the Heath either directly or by connecting to the wider Rights of Way network. The table and map below show and summarise these routes.

Footpath	Description	Length
Therfield 002 (T002)	From A505 opposite Thrift Farmhouse, south-east across western edge of SSSI, continuing beyond to Therfield village.	2.6km
Therfield 005 (T005)	From A505 approximately 300m west of roundabout, south across SSSI continuing south and then east to unclassified road to Therfield.	1.9km
Therfield 006 (T006)	From Baldock Road, approximately 50m west of Downloads, generally west and south-west across recreation ground to unclassified road to Therfield.	1.7km
Therfield 007 (T007)	From Baldock Road, approximately 50m west of Ivy Lane, south-east across the recreation ground and SSSI.	0.8km
Therfield 009 (T009)	From Baldock Road, opposite Copperfields, generally south across the recreation ground and then south-east to Briary Lane approximately 120m south of Sun Hill	0.5km
Therfield 010 (T010)	Short spur from Briary Lane, approximately 10m south of Sun Hill west across the SSSI to join Footpath Therfield 009 at the rear of properties on Stake Piece Road.	0.1km
Therfield 011 (T011)	From Briary Lane, approximately 40m south of Sun Hill, generally south-west and south across the SSSI continuing beyond southern extents to join Bridleway Royston 013.	0.9km

**Map 7: Public Rights of Way crossing Therfield Heath SSSI**



*Note: Only those PROWs lying partially or wholly within the SSSI are shown on this map*

### **Long distance paths and other routes**

2.3.12 Two long-distance walking paths cross Therfield Heath SSSI. The Icknield Way Path broadly follows the ancient route of the same name (though in this area the historic Icknield Way itself is now the alignment of the A505 from Baldock). The Icknield Way Path is a 110-mile route connecting the end of the Ridgeway National Trail in the Chilterns to the start of the Peddars Way National Trail in Norfolk. It enters Therfield Heath at its south-east corner following Rights of Way through the eastern part of the SSSI to Baldock Road

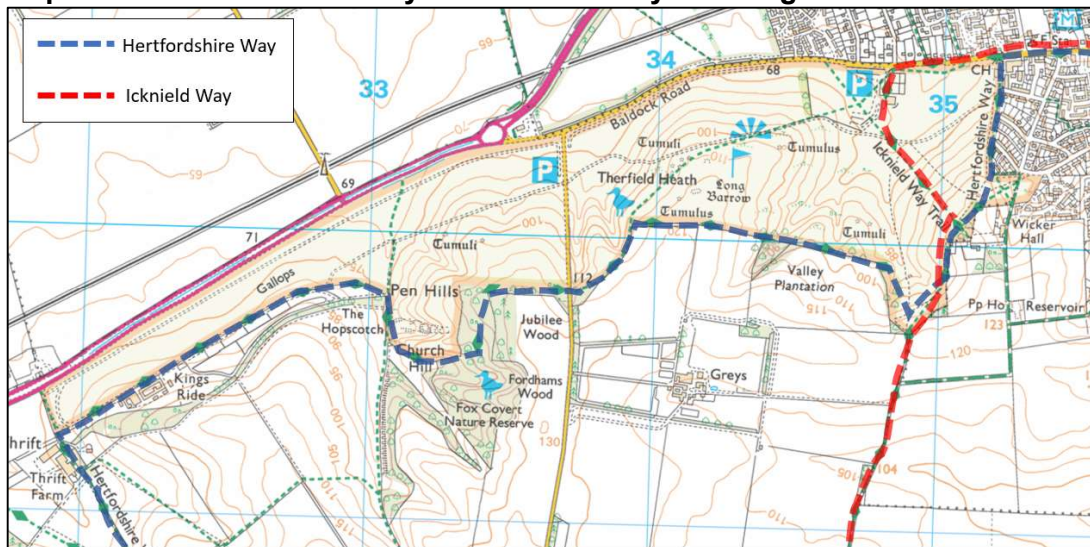


2.3.13 The Hertfordshire Way is a route of more than 160 miles around the perimeter of the County. It enters the Heath along the route of footpath Therfield 002 and traces the southern perimeter of the site, most of which is not a formally recognised Right of Way. It rejoins the footpath network at the south-east corner of Therfield Heath –



where the route also intersects with the Icknield Way – and follows defined footpaths along the eastern boundary before exiting towards Royston town centre.

**Map 7: The Hertfordshire Way and Icknield Way crossing Therfield Heath SSSI**



2.3.14 In addition to the Public Rights of Way detailed above, there are a number of informal paths across the Heath. Some of these paths are more defined than others and some are managed with a surface. These paths can be linked to the open access status of the Common Land where 'desire lines' are created by preferred walking routes over the years. The eastern end of Therfield Heath in particular contains many informal paths and 'desire lines' as shown on the aerial photo below. This reflects the proximity of this part of the Heath to the built-up area of Royston and its ease of access.



*Source: Google Maps*

- 2.3.15 There are three car parking areas that provide free public access to The Heath; at Briary Lane, adjoining the Rugby Club / Heath Café complex and south of Baldock Road, west of the unclassified road which bisects the site. All of these are within the Common Land but only the latter falls within the SSSI.
- 2.3.16 The Conservators seek to regulate behaviour on The Heath through the use of byelaws. These generally seek to prevent anti-social activity (including dog fouling) and the removal of plants or soil.
- 2.3.17 Royston Golf Club provides an 18-hole golf course on a largely 'out and back' route across the upper levels of The Heath (Units 002 and 003 as described in Section 2.1 above). A grass gallops associated with the adjoining Kings Ride stables covers the perimeter of the lower, relatively flatter ground at the west of the SSSI (Unit 004).
- 2.3.18 Other sporting activities at The Heath lie within the common land but outside of the SSSI designation.



*The golf course extends across a large area of the SSSI designation*

### 3 THE ZONE OF INFLUENCE

#### 3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 As set out in Section 2.2 above, this strategy identifies a 2km inner Zone of Influence and 6km wider Zone of Influence around the SSSI based upon the findings of the Footprint Ecology visitor survey conducted for Natural England. This section sets out further information on other forms of recreational provision within the ZOI, along with details of planned and potential future development and other relevant strategies.

#### 3.2 Green Infrastructure Provision in the ZOI

##### Open Space provision

- 3.2.1 The Council has recently undertaken an audit of open space in the District's main settlements. In terms of formal open space provision within the ZOI, residents in Royston have access to about 148 hectares of open space around the town, including Therfield Heath. As illustrated in the table below, if Therfield Heath is excluded the amount of natural and semi-natural green space reduces significantly.

Type of Open Space	Including Therfield Heath (Ha)	Excluding Therfield Heath (Ha)
Parks and Gardens	2.2	2.2
Cemeteries and Churchyards	1.3	1.3
Allotments	1.75	1.75
Outdoor sports facilities	5.71	5.71*
Children's play areas	0.8	0.8
Amenity green space	8.16	8.16
Natural and semi-natural green space	125.55	14.33
Green corridors	2.32	2.32
Total	147.79	36.57

\* Sports facilities on Therfield Heath are not included in this figure as they are not publicly available, i.e they not free to use without joining the club

- 3.2.32 The Open Space Profile for Royston also provides an overview of open space provision in comparison with the Fields in Trust quantity standards. The profile concludes that there are some types of open space where there is a deficit when compared to the FiT standards, including parks and gardens, allotments, outdoor

sports facilities, provision for children and teenagers and amenity green space. The one typology where there is not a deficit in provision is natural and semi-natural green space. The full details are included in Appendix B.

3.2.33 In addition to green space, there are more formal opportunities for recreation in Royston. The Playing Pitch Strategy undertaken in 2015 considered the level of formal playing pitch provision across the district. The Study looked at all main pitch playing sports, football, rugby union, hockey, tennis, athletics, bowls and bmx and skate parks as well as golf. The Strategy concluded that there was no overall deficiency in playing pitch provision in the Royston area.

3.2.34 In addition to formal green spaces, access to natural green spaces has been recognised as an important contributory factor to the quality of the environment and to quality of life. English Nature<sup>12</sup> recommended that local authorities should consider the provision of natural areas to ensure that local communities have access to an appropriate mix of green spaces which provide for a range of recreational needs (Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards Model – AnGST). The recommended provision was for at least 2ha of accessible natural greenspace per 1000 population in a system of tiers:

- No person should live more than 300m from their nearest area of natural greenspace;
- There should be at least one accessible 20ha site within 2km from home;
- There should be one accessible 100ha site within 5km;
- There should be one accessible 500ha site within 10km.

3.2.35 Therfield Heath is 140ha in size and the 5km AnGST catchment area includes the whole of Royston and extends to Reed in the south and to Bassingbourn to the north. As previously noted, some parts of The Heath are used for formal recreation uses which reduces the amount of natural green space available to the community. However, even when taking this into account, the catchment of the Heath (in terms of the AnGST standards) still covers the whole of Royston, as illustrated in Map 4.

3.2.36 Further afield, there are recreational opportunities at Wimpole Hall Estate which is run by the National Trust and open to paying members of the public. The parkland is a Grade I Registered Park and Garden.

3.2.37 In 2020, Public Health England published a report “Improving access to greenspace: A new review for 2020” which recognises the importance of access to green spaces and the role they play in supporting health and wellbeing. The study acknowledges the importance of green and natural open spaces to people following the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>12</sup> Providing Accessible Natural Greenspace in Towns and Cities, English Nature 2003

### **Other green infrastructure**

- 3.2.38 The North Hertfordshire Green Infrastructure Plan, 2009<sup>13</sup> identified Therfield Heath as an important open space within the District. One of the projects identified in the 2009 Action Plan was for grassland restoration to the west and south of Therfield Heath. The Plan also identified the proposed green infrastructure within Royston but these are limited to initiatives within the town rather than creating or improving links to the surrounding countryside.
- 3.2.39 The County Council prepared the [Hertfordshire Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan](#) in 2011. The Green Infrastructure Plan (GIP) identified work which would be needed to deliver green infrastructure in the future, including two projects in North Hertfordshire: Chalk Arc and “Reconnect”. The projects identified in the Green Infrastructure Plan focus on the restoration, enhancement and conservation of elements of green infrastructure and the restoration and reconnection of the rights of way. An updated County-wide GIP is currently being prepared.
- 3.2.40 As part of the new Local Plan for Greater Cambridgeshire, biodiversity and green spaces have been identified as one of the key themes that the new local plan will need to address to ensure environmental sustainability in the future. The evidence studies have evaluated existing green infrastructure assets and the key issues which might arise from development. As the spatial strategy for development evolves, it will become clearer whether proposed development in Cambridgeshire will have implications for increased recreational use of Therfield Heath.

### **Public Rights of Way**

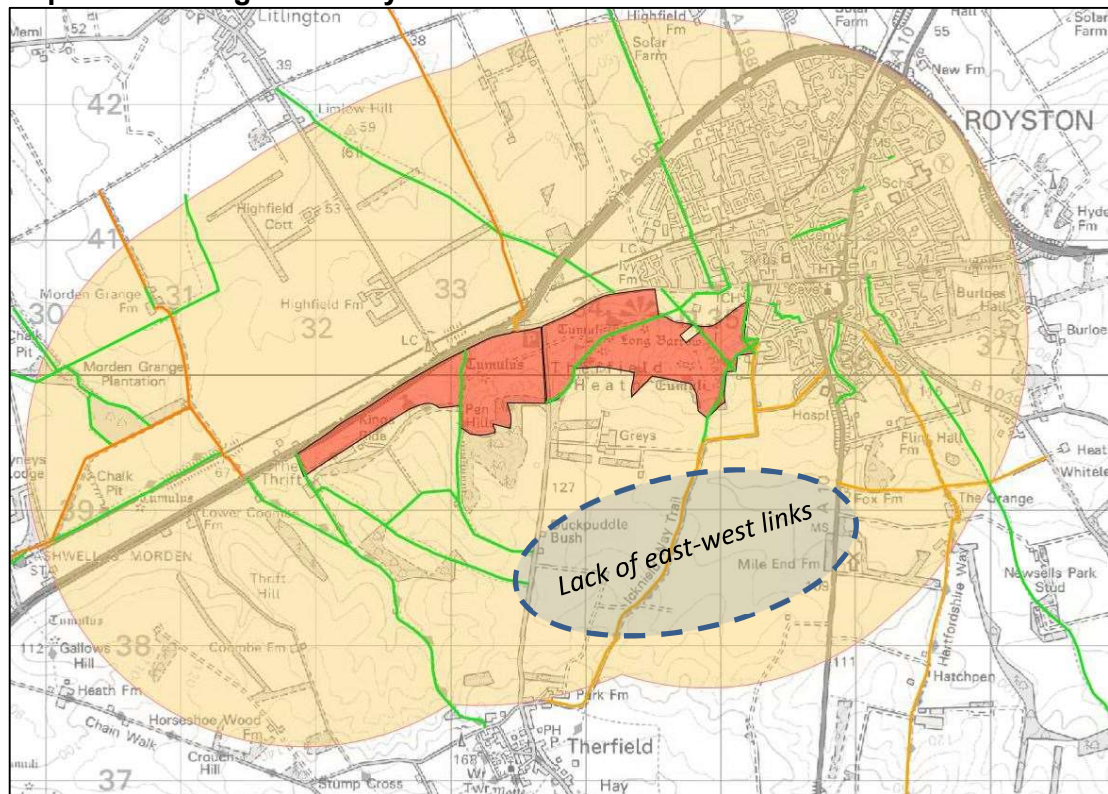
- 3.2.41 There is an extensive network of Public Rights of Way (PRoW) within the ZOI. Within Hertfordshire this includes elements of long-distance routes including the Hertfordshire Way and The Hertfordshire Chain Walk, a series of interconnecting walking loops stretching from the boundary with north London to Ashwell station. There is a similar network of routes within adjoining Cambridgeshire.
- 3.2.42 The PRoW network within the inner ZOI is detailed on the map below. It can be seen that there are a number of routes within this area. However, it is notable that many traverse the area in broadly north to south directions. There are areas where provision is more deficient. There is a lack of east-west connectivity, particularly to the west of the A10 and north of the A505 (although there is an extensive east-west byway just beyond the northern limits of the 2km zone as detailed below). These gaps in provision limit opportunities for circular walking or recreational routes.
- 3.2.43 The A505 itself is also a notable barrier to north-south movements. To the west of the A10 junction this is a 70mph dual carriageway and a number of rights of way cross this road at grade between Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire. These are denoted by the red “x” marks on the map below.

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<sup>13</sup> North Hertfordshire District Green Infrastructure Plan, 2009 [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)



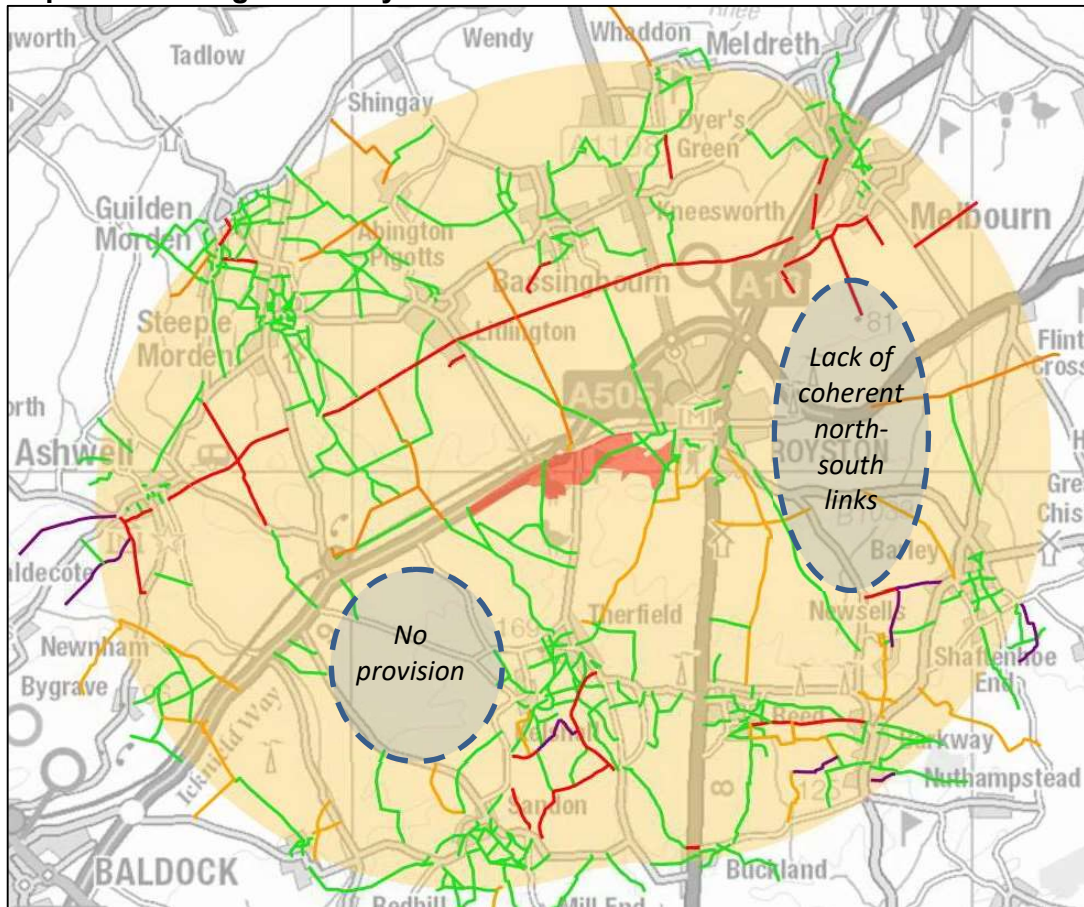
**Map 8: Public Rights of Way within 2km inner Zone of Influence**



*Note: Footpaths shown green, bridleways shown orange. Only those PROWs lying partially or wholly within the inner ZOI are shown on this map*

- 3.2.44 Provision within the wider ZOI is shown in the map below. Similarly to the inner ZOI, it is possible to identify areas with lower levels of provision. There is no interconnected provision from north to south from Melbourn around (or into / through) the eastern edges of Royston towards Barley, Barkway and Reed. There is a general absence of Right of Way routes to the west of Kelshall and south of the A505.
- 3.2.45 In addition to the PROW network there are also some permissive footpaths in the ZOI where landowners allow recreational use to take place which could be used to extend provision in the future. This is explored further in Section 5.

**Map 9: Public Rights of Way within wider 6km Zone of Influence**



*Note: Footpaths shown green, bridleways shown orange, byways shown red or purple (restricted). Only PROWs lying partially or wholly within the wider ZOI are shown*

### **Other leisure provision**

3.2.46 Cycling has become an increasingly popular leisure activity. However, Royston and its surrounds are not connected to the National Cycle Network. In the Royston area, there is only one cycle route promoted by the Countryside Management Service, a circular route incorporating Royston and the surrounding villages of Therfield, Reed, Barkway and Barley. There are no current leisure routes promoted to the north of Royston by Cambridgeshire County Council.

3.2.47 Part of Therfield Heath is used by Royston Golf Club and within 10km, there are a further 4 golf clubs, all to the north or east of Royston. The Playing Pitch Strategy concluded that the level of supply was sufficient to meet the demand from residents.

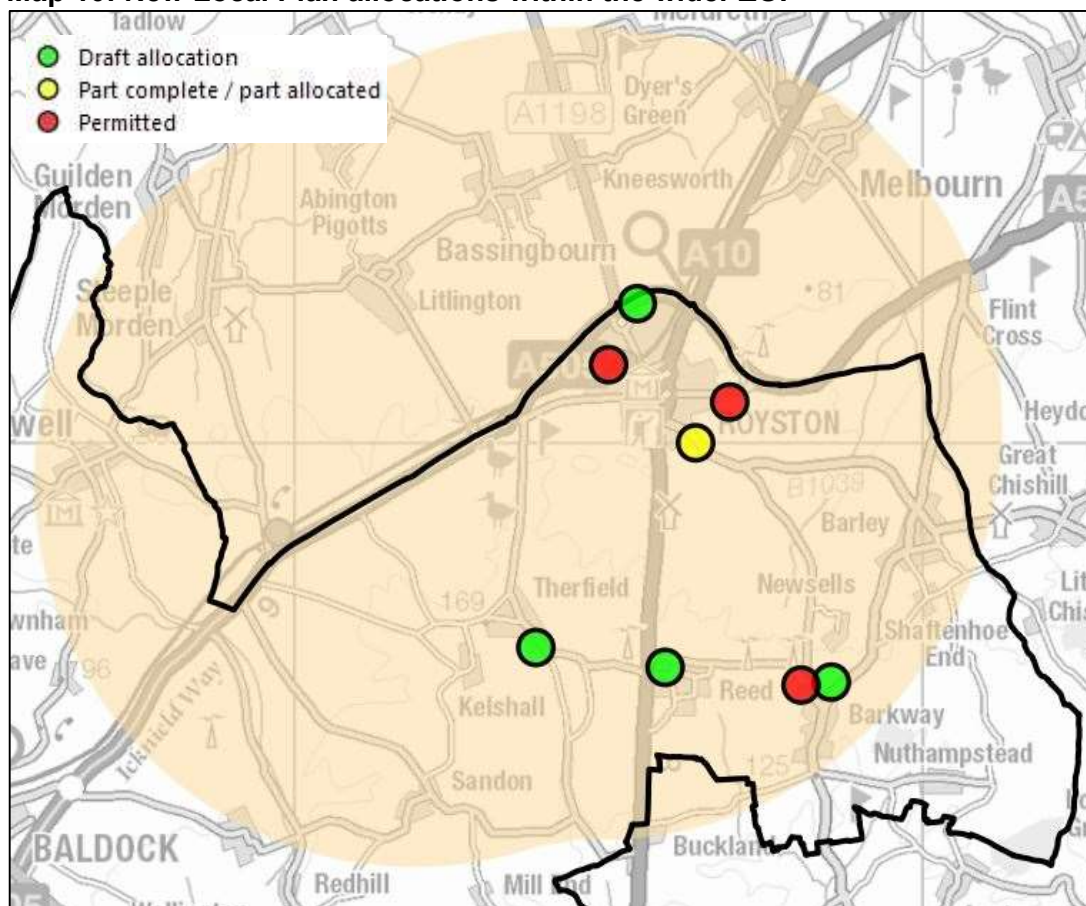
## **3.3 Future development in the ZOI**

### **North Hertfordshire**

3.3.1 North Hertfordshire's current District Plan was adopted in 1996. A revised Local Plan for the period 2011-2031 was submitted for examination in June 2017. The District Council hopes to be in a position to adopt the new plan in 2022.

- 3.3.2 The new Plan sets out a proposed strategy that would provide almost 13,000 new homes across the whole District over the twenty-year plan period, along with associated employment growth.
- 3.3.3 Map 10 and the table below illustrate the location and status of the sites that are allocated for development in the new Local Plan within the identified Zone of Influence.

**Map 10: New Local Plan allocations within the wider ZOI**



Address	Local Plan Policy	Dwelling estimate	Status
Land off Windmill Close, Barkway	BK2	20	Draft allocation with planning permission granted, <a href="#">20/02779/FP</a>
Land between Cambridge Road and Royston Road, Barkway	BK3	140	Draft allocation with planning application under consideration, <a href="#">18/01502/OP</a>
Land at Blacksmiths Lane, Reed	RD1	22	Draft allocation with no permission or application



Land north of Lindsay Close, Royston	RY4	100	Draft allocation with no permission or application
Anglian Business Park, Orchard Road, Royston	RY7	60	Draft allocation with planning permission granted, <a href="#">19/01172/HYA</a>
Land south of Newmarket Road, Royston	RY10	300 (325)	Draft allocation with planning permission granted, <a href="#">17/00110/1</a> and <a href="#">20/01138/RM</a>
Land at Barkway Road	RY11	18	Draft allocation with application received <sup>14</sup> , <a href="#">21/02957/FP</a>

3.3.4 Outside the wider ZOI, the Local Plan allocates a strategic housing site for approximately 2,800 homes to the north of Baldock. This is approximately 10km from the SSSI. However, due to its size it could result in some impacts upon the Heath and it may be appropriate to consider applying some of the principles in this Strategy to any future scheme.

3.3.5 A number of further developments in Royston and the surrounding area have been completed since the start of the plan period in 2011. Others benefit from planning permission and are under construction. These include Redrow's Hedera Gardens scheme on land north of the Baldock road and Meridian Gate being built by Linden Homes to the east of town.

3.3.6 Several of these sites were included in the proposed new Local Plan at the time of the original agreement with Natural England. However, as development has now started (or been completed), these sites no longer form part of the Local Plan. Details of relevant sites are given in the table below.

Address	Former Local Plan Reference	No. of homes	Status of site
Land west of Claybush Road, Ashwell	AS1	33	Development completed
Land off Cambridge Road, Barkway	BK1	12	Development completed
Land west of Ivy Farm, Baldock Road	RY1	279	Under construction – partially complete
Land north of Newmarket	RY2	330	Under construction – partially complete

<sup>14</sup> Part of site has previously received permission and been built

Address	Former Local Plan Reference	No. of homes	Status of site
Agricultural Supplier, Garden Walk	RY5	19	Development completed
Land at Lumen Road	RY8	15	Development completed

3.3.7 As these sites have come forward in advance of the new Local Plan being adopted, the likely effect of these developments on Therfield Heath SSSI was considered on a case-by-case basis as necessary.

3.3.8 Relevant Section 106 contributions totalling up to £479,000 were secured from the two largest sites. These are set out in the table below. These contributions will be used to support the delivery of measures identified in this strategy where this would be consistent with the terms of the relevant agreement.

Address	Reasons for S106 contributions	Contributions secured (£)
Land west of Ivy Farm, Baldock Road	Contributions towards visitor facilities including the provision of public toilets and changing rooms near or around Therfield Heath	£100,000
	Contributions for Heath Management, including the provision of a Site Warden or other management measures agreed with Natural England.	£279,000
Land south of Newmarket Road	Contributions for habitat mitigation measures on Therfield Heath.	£100,000

3.3.9 It is likely that further proposals that do not (or did not) form part of the Local Plan will come forward for residential development within the Zone of Influence. This is known as windfall development. The location and scale of any windfall development is, by its nature, currently unknown.

3.3.10 Any windfall applications will be determined as they are made. The principles in this mitigation strategy will be applied to any relevant schemes within North Hertfordshire.

### **South Cambridgeshire**

3.3.11 Future developments to the north of Royston in South Cambridgeshire will be determined through the Greater Cambridge Local Plan and by South Cambridgeshire District Council in the consideration of any relevant planning applications. Work on the plan is at an early stage and the proposed spatial strategy for future development in Cambridgeshire has not yet been identified. It is anticipated that further consultation will take place later in 2022.

## **Future Local Plan reviews**

- 3.3.12 NHDC's emerging Local Plan is expected to include a commitment to an early review by the end of 2023 to determine whether its policies need to be updated either in whole or in part.
- 3.3.13 In general terms (and without prejudice to future considerations), it is recognised that the pattern of development is generally more dispersed in the north-east of the District. Land here is beyond the limits of the Metropolitan Green Belt surrounding London and much of the Home Counties. This might suggest that land within the ZOI may be a less constrained option when compared within other parts of the District.
- 3.3.14 Any further review of existing towns and villages and other locations for further development opportunities, will take place through reviews of the respective Local Plans. These reviews will be bound by relevant legislation and national policy guidance applicable at the time and supported by the necessary evidence.
- 3.3.15 Longer-term schemes or proposals for development lie outside the remit of this first version of the strategy. However, there will be a need to monitor emerging proposals on an ongoing basis. The impact of any relevant proposals upon the Therfield Heath SSSI will need to be given appropriate consideration. Further information on the approach to review and update of this strategy is set out in Section 7.

## **3.4 Other plans and strategies in the ZOI**

### **Rights of Way**

- 3.4.1 The County Council have prepared a Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan<sup>15</sup> for a ten-year period up to 2027/28 which provides recommendations for the future management and investment for the rights of way network. The Improvement Plan is also accompanied by a list of potential projects for each District. For North Hertfordshire there are a number of suggestions for improvement which have been identified and ranked in the Royston area which could help to provide more attractive routes for recreation in the future. The highest scoring suggestions in the Royston area include:
- Verge improvements to avoid walking in Barkway Road (PRoW ref. 12/31);
  - Safer crossing of the A505 between Bassingbourn and Royston (PRoW ref: 12/34); and
  - Improvements to the dangerous crossing at McDonalds roundabout, Royston (PRoW ref. 11/103).
- 3.4.2 There are a number of other lower priority projects included in the list which could contribute to improving the public rights of way for recreational purposes in the longer term:
- Signposting the links with the Cambridgeshire rights of way network in Ashwell and Royston (PRoW ref: 12/01);

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<sup>15</sup> [Rights of way Improvement Plan 2017/18 – 2027/28, Hertfordshire County Council](#)

- The identification of the area between Reed, Newsells, Barkway, Barley and Royston to make some circular connections (PRoW ref: 12/10);
- Verge improvements between Royston and Buntingford (PRoW ref: 12/05);
- upgrading of Royston FP2 to a bridleway as it is used for cycling (PRoW ref: 11/106;
- circular walk to include South Cambridgeshire (PRoW ref: 12/35;
- add pathway at Hawthorn Way (PRoW ref 12/36; and
- add footpath in Royston to address a dead end (ProW ref 12/15).

## **Transport**

- 3.4.3 The District Council and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) are currently collaborating to produce an LCWIP, (Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan) as recommended by the Department for Transport (DfT), to demonstrate a commitment to promote active travel and be in an optimal position to bid for future funding opportunities for cycling and walking schemes periodically announced by Government.
- 3.4.4 Consultation on the LCWIP is due to take place in the autumn of 2022 and it is anticipated that the LCWIP will be adopted in early 2023. The LCWIP will initially focus on the five largest settlements in the District including Royston, and will identify and prioritise the main the cycling and walking routes that will have the greatest impact on encouraging local residents and visitors to take up and continue to use active travel modes for local journeys, particularly on the arterial routes into the town centres. In the longer term the LCWIP will need to address rural and recreational routes.
- 3.4.5 In addition, the District and HCC are assisting Royston Town Council in its application to become a Sustainable Travel Town. The Sustainable Travel Town Programme is an HCC initiative that features in the County Council's current Local Transport Plan. It invites towns across the county to submit applications to identify for delivery a package of schemes that promote sustainable travel modes, for local and inter-urban journeys instead of private vehicles.
- 3.4.6 The Royston Sustainable Travel Town Outline Plan is the first step in developing a programme of schemes which will help enable modal shift to more sustainable modes of travel in Royston.

## **Open space, ecology and green infrastructure**

- 3.4.7 The District Council is updating its open space, ecology and green infrastructure evidence base. This will form part of and inform a suite of documents to support implementation of the new Local Plan and, in time, the proposed early review of the Plan.
- 3.4.8 In addition to the open space review identified above, the 2018 Playing Pitch Strategy and Action Plan will be updated in 2022 prior to a full review, currently anticipated to be completed in 2023/4. This will provide the opportunity to review sports provision on the Heath, in the Royston area and across the wider district and

reflect changes since the last strategy that have affected access to formal sports provision such as the reorganisation of schools provision within the town.

- 3.4.9 A wilding audit of key Council assets has been completed. This will inform a broader review as part of an ecological network plan to inform the most appropriate approaches to biodiversity and identify opportunity areas for new and enhanced habitats. This will be linked to the Environment Act 2021 which sets a mandatory requirement for new development to deliver a 10% net gain in biodiversity.
- 3.4.10 In this area, provision could include chalk grassland which has been identified by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust<sup>16</sup> as a priority habitat for creation and restoration.
- 3.4.11 The above work will all inform an update to the 2009 Green Infrastructure Strategy to provide a holistic overview of the approach to green and blue infrastructure provision across the District and key networks and connections.

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<sup>16</sup> Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust: Hertfordshire's Ecological Networks, 2014



## 4 KEY PRESSURES ON THE HEATH

- 4.1.1 The six units and their condition are shown and summarised in the map and table below. The full SSSI condition report is reproduced in Appendix C. Natural England's views on management and operations likely to damage the special interest are reproduced in Appendix D.

Unit no.	Main Habitat	Condition
001	Calcareous grassland	Unfavourable – recovering
002	Calcareous grassland	Unfavourable – recovering
003	Calcareous grassland	Unfavourable – recovering
004	Calcareous grassland	Unfavourable – recovering
005	Broadleaved, mixed and yew woodland	Favourable
006	Broadleaved, mixed and yew woodland	Unfavourable - recovering

- 4.1.2 The condition survey recognises that five of the six units within the SSSI are in an unfavourable – recovering condition. The exception is the area of woodland at Fox Covert (Unit 005). The condition survey also identifies a number of activities that results in adverse impacts upon the (condition of) the interest features underpinning the SSSI designation.
- 4.1.3 Within Unit 001, the presence of a large rabbit population, along with un-grazed areas and invasive scrub are identified.
- 4.1.4 Much of Unit 002 is occupied by the golf course. The manicured fairways and the transition of these to the rough – where greater variety of grassland species can be found – are key issues. Unit 003 similarly forms part of the golf course with the same issues as identified for Unit 002 above. Within this unit, Church Hill is recognised as the most abundant area of the SSSI but is under threat from invasive scrub. There is also a recognised need to manage land outside of the SSSI boundary to the south to control the transition of scrub species into the SSSI.
- 4.1.5 The presence of the gallops within Unit 004, along with the less varied topography, means there is a less favourable structure for invertebrates. However, changes to the management regime through an agri-environment scheme have proven beneficial.
- 4.1.6 As outlined in the previous sections, the 2019 Visitor Study highlighted the number of visitors and the range of activities that they engaged in whilst on The Heath and noted that very few visits related to the site's nature conservation interest. The Conservators have also observed that since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, visitor numbers to The Heath have increased significantly, although it is not clear whether these patterns will continue or stabilise in the future.
- 4.1.7 In summary a number of pressures on, and issues relating to, Therfield Heath have been identified. Positively and proactively addressing these could have a positive

beneficial impact upon the condition of the SSSI. In summary, these pressures and issues include:

- Additional development in and around Royston, resulting in increased use of the Heath for informal recreation activities, including dog walking, jogging and occasional recreation;
- The detrimental impact on the soil nutrient balance of the chalk grassland arising from dog littering;
- The low prevalence of visitors identifying the ecology of the Heath as a key attractor and only half of visitors being aware of its nature conservation importance, potentially indicating low value being placed upon this;
- Inconsistency between the extent of the Zones of the Influence identified by the Footprint Ecology visitor survey and the Impact Risk Zones identified by Natural England that inform the approach to consultation on planning applications;
- The conflict between the status of The Heath as common land where people are allowed to roam whilst at the same time a significant part of The Heath being designated as a SSSI;
- The relative ease of access for car-users with three, free car parks including a large parking area adjoining the cafe;
- The use of the Heath for formal recreation by a number of successful sports clubs, including rugby, cricket and golf which (i) impact upon the ecological value of the Heath where activities take place within or adjoining the defined boundaries of the SSSI and (ii) drive further recreational demand as friends and families of participants make use of the wider setting of the sports facilities;
- The previous absence of any formal strategy to co-ordinate mitigation measures or wider projects that might help alleviate recreational pressures;
- The relative lack of other natural and semi-natural open spaces, and open space more generally, for informal recreation in Royston;
- Gaps in the Public Rights of Way network limiting the potential for alternate circular walks or access points to the wider countryside, particularly around the east of Royston and across the barrier created by the A505; and
- The absence of safe, longer distance cycle routes and connections.

## 5 MITIGATION MEASURES

### 5.1 Introduction

- 5.1.1 The previous sections of this report have considered a range of key issues relevant to Therfield Heath SSSI. This includes the features of interest that have led to its designation, patterns of usage of the Heath and the presence of other forms of recreational provision both within the Heath and its wider zones of influence which inform how individuals choose to spend their leisure time in the area.
- 5.1.2 This section considers how to draw the findings of these sections together into a package of potential mitigation measures to be taken forward by the District Council, the Conservators, Natural England and other relevant parties.
- 5.1.3 It is recognised that Therfield Heath SSSI is a unique asset to the District in terms of its features, status and location. In addition to its ecological and biodiversity value it provides a substantial area of natural recreational space within a varied and interesting landscape, immediately adjoining one of the largest towns in North Hertfordshire.
- 5.1.4 As Common Land, the Heath will continue to be a major draw for residents of Royston and the surrounding area. It is not realistic to anticipate that an open space of this nature can be easily replicated elsewhere in order to draw a substantive proportion of existing and potential future users away.
- 5.1.5 More than 2,000 new homes are expected to be built over the period 2011-2031 within that part of the wider Zone of Influence that lies in North Hertfordshire. As described in Section 3.3, a number of significant sites already benefit from planning permission or development has already been completed with contributions secured. As these homes become occupied, residents will start to use the recreational spaces around the town, including the Heath. The amount of planned development that remains to be permitted and brought forward is relatively small.
- 5.1.6 Even if usage of the SSSI could be managed in such a way that the 'per household' visitor rates identified in Section 4 reduce, the planned increase in housing within the area means that, without intervention, absolute visitor numbers to the Heath over time would likely continue to rise due to the increased population.
- 5.1.7 It is therefore essential to manage future impacts in such a way that the Local Plan, and any currently unknown windfall development that is granted permission, can be implemented in a way which does not have an unacceptable adverse effect on the SSSI as required by national policy<sup>17</sup>.
- 5.1.8 This mitigation strategy takes a combined approach of measures to mitigate the effects of the proposed developments on the SSSI. A number of themes have been identified which the proposed measures fall into:
- Education and management projects on The Heath;

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<sup>17</sup> Paragraph 180 of the NPPF

- Planning requirements on development sites within the ZOI;
- Policy and strategy measures to inform longer-term considerations; and
- Wider measures which will provide alternative recreation opportunities.

5.1.9 Detailed measures are discussed in turn under these headings below. These have been informed by stakeholder engagement including:

- Ongoing dialogue with The Conservators and Natural England in preparation of the study; and
- An initial workshop with a range of individuals and groups with an interest in the future of the Heath held at Royston Golf Club in July 2019 when work on the mitigation strategy was launched.

5.1.10 The overall objective is to identify a package of potential measures and ensure that as the planned increase in the area's housing and population is delivered, the recreational pressures and levels of disturbance upon the SSSI's notified features of interest do not result in further degradation of the site's condition. The SSSI citation states that almost all of The Heath is classified as "unfavourable – recovering".

5.1.11 The measures identified in this strategy will enable the Council to request appropriate and proportionate contributions from development schemes within the Zones of Influence and, where clearly justified, beyond<sup>18</sup>. It also provides a means to influence the preparation of other relevant plans and strategies and to seek additional sources of funding where the benefits of the scheme coincide with other aims and ambitions (such as the provision of measures to support sustainable modes of transport).

5.1.12 A detailed action plan, containing the measures set out in this part of the Strategy, is set out in Section 6. This identifies the lead agencies for the individual measures and, as applicable in each case, target dates, potential costs and monitoring arrangements.

## **5.2 Education and management measures within the Heath**

5.2.1 'Soft' management and education measures have a significant role to play in raising awareness of the Heath's ecological importance and guiding responsible use of the SSSI. These will be complemented by appropriately-scaled visitor and education facilities and physical on-site management works as outlined in paragraph 2.2.7.

### **Wardens**

5.2.2 The provision of wardening on the Heath has been identified as a key measure by Natural England, the Conservators and workshop participants. Wardens are a feature of mitigation programmes in other areas of the country such as the [Thames Basin Heaths](#) and the protected [coastal environments of Suffolk](#). In these and other examples, wardens form a small mobile team who spend most of their time on site talking to visitors, influencing behaviour and helping to increase peoples'

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<sup>18</sup> As required by national guidance and regulations that govern how contributions can be collected.

understanding of local wildlife. Wardens can also assist with the delivery of site-specific projects and monitoring.

- 5.2.3 This version of the strategy identifies a requirement for at least two wardens. Wardens will be responsible for promoting positive visitor behaviours and, as such, will need excellent interpersonal skills as well as being knowledgeable on the key features and species of the SSSI as well as nature conservation more broadly.
- 5.2.4 The **lead warden** would be the main contact point for the implementation of the Strategy insofar as it relates to on-site measures. They would be responsible for developing further detailed management plans for the Heath with Natural England and executing habitat management measures. In consultation with Natural England, the Conservators and North Hertfordshire District Council they would guide the expenditure of developer contributions that have been collected for on-site mitigation and management. They would co-ordinate publicity, education and outreach measures and manage other warden staff and direct volunteer work.
- 5.2.5 An **assistant warden** would report to the lead warden and support them in delivering their duties. The assistant warden post would likely be part-time to begin with and could potentially be staffed on an internship or apprenticeship basis. This would potentially provide opportunities for students or local residents with an interest in ecology, conservation and the Heath.
- 5.2.6 These formal, paid positions should be supplemented by volunteers and / or the 'Friends of...' group who could assist on an ad-hoc basis during periods of peak demand (such as the kite festival) or when particular works need to be undertaken.
- 5.2.7 Consideration should be given to branding or clothing to ensure wardens are recognisable to users of the Heath. Small-scale, portable equipment (such as boards or similar that can be put up when the warden is at a particular location) would help give a presence and assist the wardens by ensuring users understand who they are.
- 5.2.8 The Conservators have already appointed a lead warden on a part-time basis to begin managing use of the Heath and implementing the aims of this Strategy as it has been developed. The post has, to date, been funded from the S106 contributions received from the development of Ivy Farm and identified in Section 3.

#### **Visitor education facility**

- 5.2.9 Notwithstanding the current café and golf clubhouse, there is currently no physical location on site where wardens can shelter, store equipment or welcome individuals or groups – such as local school children – to the Heath.
- 5.2.10 An appropriate balance needs to be struck between facilitating the above and providing a 'destination' visitor facility with a significant physical footprint that enhances the draw of the Heath and compromises the aims of the Strategy.
- 5.2.11 Many wildlife sites make use of a (semi-)portable cabin or similar. This can provide an appropriate scale of facility and a location from which information can be provided

(when the cabin is both staffed and unstaffed). This Strategy supports the provision of a modest visitor facility that is commensurate with the broader management aims for the Heath.

- 5.2.12 This will require further investigation to determine the most appropriate facility and location(s) within the Heath where it might be located.



*Example of a small scale and semi-portable visitor facility (Source: Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire)*

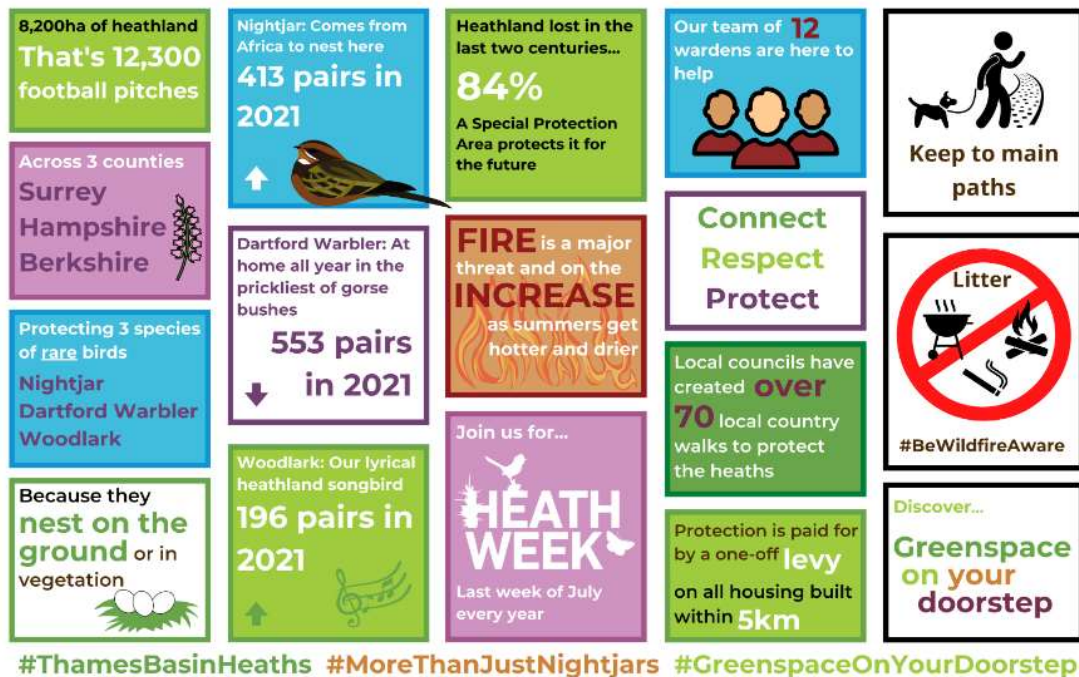
### **Education and publicity material**

- 5.2.13 Ad-hoc, on-site interactions with users of the Heath will be a significant part of the wardens' roles and key to educating both frequent and occasional visitors on how they can enjoy the SSSI in a responsible manner.
- 5.2.14 However, this should be supplemented and supported by structured information and communications. The identity and work of the wardens, and key information about the Heath and its ecological value should be promoted through a well-maintained web presence and social media. Some mitigation projects develop branding, logos and leaflets which provide good examples of messages and public communication.
- 5.2.15 The Conservators and the Friends of Therfield Heath each maintain their own, separate web presence. Statutory information on the SSSI is maintained by Natural England. North Herts Council and Royston Town Council have their own websites. Information on long distance routes which cross the Heath or the wider ZOIs such as the Hertfordshire Way, Icknield Way Path and Icknield Way Tail is hosted elsewhere. A review should be carried out of relevant sites to determine whether information can be consolidated and / or to ensure that routes and opportunities which might divert recreational demand are consistently promoted across relevant platforms.



## THAMES BASIN HEATHS SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA

Protecting birds protects heaths!  
Protecting heaths protects birds!



*Example of online infographic material (Source: Thames Basin Heaths Partnership)*

5.2.16 Other measures which could be valuable in educating visitors and / or mitigating impact could include:

- Educational leaflets and information boards for residents explaining the importance of the Heath's natural and human history and setting out how the Heath can be used responsibly;
- Information being made available about alternative recreational footpath routes around Royston (including through the review suggested above); and
- Information on the location of alternative green spaces in the area.

5.2.17 The wardens should also develop a programme of community outreach with schools and local interest groups. This could incorporate visits to the Heath (making use of the proposed visitor facility) as well as off-site engagement at key meetings and events.

### Site management

5.2.18 Natural England and the Conservators have been working towards preparing a five year management strategy for The Heath which will help direct seasonal management activity. The SSSI management plan(s) will focus on describing how the grassland and notifiable features of the SSSI will be beneficially managed.

5.2.19 An **access management plan** should be developed to describe how human activity will be directed and controlled to alleviate recreational pressure and allow restoration of the habitat condition of the SSSI.

5.2.20 A key issue for the site is the loss of grazing.

- 5.2.21 Conservation grazing can play an important role in the management of grassland habitat. The use of animals for grazing – unlike manual cutting and management – naturally creates vegetation at different heights, and small areas of bare ground. This allows for different species of grass and wildflowers to grow, flower and set seed each year. This provides pollen and nectar for invertebrates and increases invertebrate food available for birds.
- 5.2.22 The Heath has historically been grazed, most recently by sheep, The Conservators have a grazier for the western part of the site and it was most recently grazed in 2021. An appropriate replacement grazing regime should be established for the longer term.
- 5.2.23 The Conservators have also expressed a desire to reconcile the statutory grazing rights on the Heath with the optimum grazing season for conservation purposes. These are currently ‘out of sync’ which technically limits the period for which the Heath can lawfully be beneficially grazed Further legal work will be required to review the grazing rights and regimes.
- 5.2.24 A number of matters which should be further considered in the access management plan have been highlighted by stakeholders in response to both the Footprint Ecology visitor survey and the development of this strategy. These measures might include (but are not necessarily limited to):
- Review of existing signage and interpretation and provision of new signage and interpretation as required; a number of stakeholders consider existing signage to be dated, complicated or confusing;
  - A review of (marked) routes as a possible solution to increased recreation pressure and to manage conflict and wear by less wandering across golf course;
  - Using renewed signage as a means of empowering people to take action against irresponsible users;
  - Consider identification of areas on the Heath (or times of the year) where ‘free roaming’ on an ‘on lead’ policy might be appropriate for dogs and dog owners / walkers;
  - A review of car parking provision; and
  - Further surveying of visitors to supplement the findings of the 2019 study, take account of post-Covid changes in usage and lifestyles, assess the effect of mitigation and management measures and inform future iterations of this strategy.

### **5.3 On-site planning mitigation measures for new development**

- 5.3.1 As set out in Section 1, the new NHDC Local Plan will provide the statutory policy ‘hooks’ allowing for mitigation measures to be secured from new developments. The following policies in the emerging Plan are of particular relevance:
- Policy SP7 provides general powers for the Council to secure mitigation measures from new development. This can take the form of physical or financial contributions;



- Policy SP9 requires developments of 100 or more homes to be masterplanned setting out, among other matters, the approach to green infrastructure;
- Policy SP12 reflects national guidance and states that designated biodiversity sites will be protected, enhanced and managed in accordance with their status;
- Policy D1 sets out detailed requirements for new development to achieve high quality and inclusive design;
- Policy NE1 requires new development to contain suitable mitigation measures to satisfactorily address adverse impacts on the strategic green infrastructure network;
- Policy NE4 sets out detailed requirements for development proposals affecting designated biodiversity and geological sites; while
- Policy NE6 establishes the requirements for provision of new and improved open space as a result of new development.

5.3.2 In 2021, the Council agreed to adopt the nationally recognised Fields in Trust standards to assess open space provision in new developments across the District. These standards are shown in the table below. The detailed approach to calculating the population of new developments and the consequential open space requirements is set out in the Council's Developer Contributions SPD.

Type	Standard (per 1,000 people)
Playing pitches	1.2 hectares
Other outdoor sports	0.4 hectares
Equipped / designated play	0.25 hectares
MUGAs / skateboard etc	0.3 hectares
Parks and Gardens	0.8 hectares
Amenity Green Space	0.6 hectares
Natural and semi-natural	1.8 hectares
Allotments	0.3 hectares

5.3.3 The Council has recently reviewed the open space provision in Royston. This audit shows that there are 147.79ha of open space in Royston, which includes Therfield Heath. However, when those totals of open space are compared to the Fields in Trust standards in the table above, a number of deficiencies can be seen, as illustrated in the table below:

5.3.4 Using these figures it is possible to demonstrate that there are areas of deficiency in Royston.

5.3.5 This highlights that within the Zones of Influence (and the Inner Zone in particular) the Fields in Trust standards will normally be viewed as absolute minimums with a general expectation they will be exceeded. The Council's policies and guidance make clear that it may be necessary to provide further open space and habitat in addition to standards-based recreational provision within developments. This might be to meet other requirements such as biodiversity net gain, sustainable drainage and good design. This approach also allows the Council to seek additional provision

in order to reduce impacts upon the SSSI. In doing so, it is recognised that many open spaces will perform multifunctional roles that meet several objectives simultaneously. A case study of a residential development is provided on the following pages.

Case study:	Land north of Baldock Road, Royston
Number of homes:	279
Application references:	16/00378/1 (outline permission, granted February 2019) 19/00386/RM (reserved matters, granted October 2019)

Royston is one of the main towns in North Hertfordshire. As the only town beyond the Green Belt, it has been the focus of (applications for) larger developments in recent years. An outline planning application was received following identification of the site in an early-stage consultation on the new Local Plan.

The site lies directly opposite Therfield Heath SSSI on its northern boundary extending from the previous western limit of the town towards the bypass. The initial consultation on the planning application led to objections from Natural England.

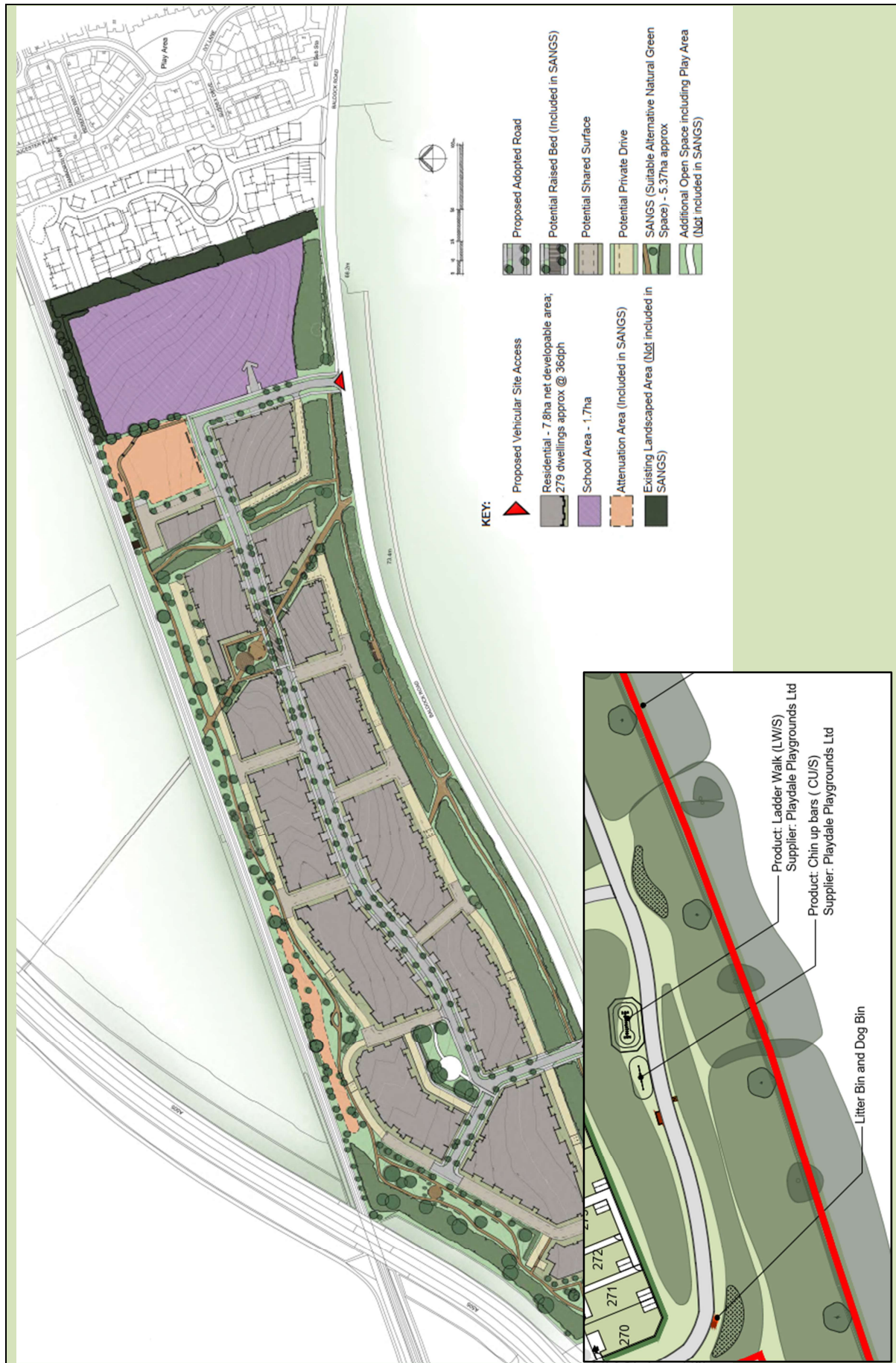
In order to address concerns raised it was necessary to carry out further assessment, including detailed survey work within the SSSI to determine the likely levels of impact that would arise from the scheme.

Following extensive negotiation and amendment to the scheme, the applicant agreed to incorporate a significant amount of green infrastructure at 8 hectares per 1,000 population (based on an assumed occupancy of 2.4 people per dwelling).

The open spaces are interconnected and will provide a series of circular routes for dog walking, running and cycling with children. This includes a perimeter walk of approximately one mile in length as well as shorter loops designed to intersect / overlap with the Public Right of Way that crosses the site. The routes are designed to encourage short distance recreation which can be undertaken on site to mitigate some of the pressures on the Heath from new residents. These can be seen on the plans reproduced on the following page. The scheme also made contributions of more than £300,000 towards management measures and facilities upon the Heath.

Outline planning permission was granted in February 2019 with the provision of on-site open space and off-site financial contributions secured through a site-specific legal agreement (Section 106).

The subsequent reserved matters application included further detail on the proposed landscaping and open space including the detailed positioning of litter and dog bins and 'trim trail'-style fitness activities to provide points of interest and interaction on the circular route. The scheme is now under construction. The first homes were completed in 2021 with 85 of the 279 homes complete as at April 2022.



- 5.3.6 Natural England advise that, where larger sites that support meaningful levels of on-site open space provision come forward for development, the recreational pressures arising from that development can be mitigated with the provision of appropriate levels of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG).
- 5.3.7 This is a particular form of green infrastructure provided within or close to a development that responds to recognised pressures on nearby designated sites. For development within the catchment of Therfield Heath SSSI, any SANG green infrastructure should be designed to absorb significant proportions of the day-to-day recreational needs of the new residents, including dog walking, jogging, children's play facilities and other informal recreation.
- 5.3.8 In some areas, SANG can be provided as a strategic off-site solution. Natural England advise that strategic SANGs to mitigate cumulative recreational impacts should normally be at least 30 hectares (ha) in size to reach an optimal size and in order to provide a route length of at least 2km within their boundary that might act as a sufficiently attractive alternative for recreational use.
- 5.3.9 Strategic SANG provision is not being pursued in this first iteration of the Mitigation Strategy as there is no evidence base, policy basis or allocated site(s) for this purpose in the new Local Plan<sup>19</sup>. However, this is a matter that the Council will explore as a potential approach in the longer-term.
- 5.3.10 The focus is therefore on securing enhanced levels of on-site provision and exploring opportunities to improve the green infrastructure networks from those sites which have been allocated in the Local Plan.
- 5.3.11 There is no nationally-set, or universally applied, SANG standard. However, a number of solutions have now been reached to mitigate recreational impacts on internationally and nationally designated sites which require provision of SANG at 8 ha per 1,000 population. This demonstrates that meaningful and substantive uplifts upon prevailing standards can and will be sought in order to meet national and local policy requirements.
- 5.3.12 Applicants and decision-makers should have regard to the 8-hectare SANG standard in developing and assessing proposals for development.
- 5.3.13 Application of the *Fields in Trust* standards across all typologies results in a standards-based requirement of 5.7 ha of open space per 1,000 population. SANG would normally be considered as natural and semi-natural greenspace, for the Fields in Trust requirement is 1.8 ha per 1,000 population. However, requirements for Parks and Gardens, amenity greenspace and even some equipped play could reasonably contribute to SANG requirements if (partially) managed in a naturalistic way and / or

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<sup>19</sup> Government guidance is clear that supporting documents to Local Plans cannot introduce new policies to the Development Plan and should not add unnecessarily to financial burdens on new development; viability should be tested primarily at the plan-making stage.

are (partially) 'traded' for further natural and semi-natural provision having regard to provision in the local area.

- 5.3.14 The remaining open space typologies relate to organised sports and other forms of provision and it will not normally be appropriate to count these towards SANG provision.
- 5.3.15 Based on anticipated future schemes, on-site provision will not be sufficient to demand an extensive heath-like open space environment within new developments. However, it should be possible to secure sizeable open spaces providing enhanced opportunities for some recreation needs that might otherwise resort to the Heath to be met within, or in very close proximity to, future development sites.
- 5.3.16 Open space provision should normally be made within the 'red line' of the planning application boundary. However, there may be instances where additional land closely adjoining the site, either in the ownership of the applicant or third parties, may be suitable for additional provision. Where this is the case, access rights to that land should be demonstrated and secured as part of the application.
- 5.3.17 Within the 2km inner ZOI within North Hertfordshire (see Section 2.2), schemes that are required to make meaningful on-site open space provision should seek all opportunities to accommodate the 8-hectare SANG standard in full. In practical terms, this requirement is most likely to apply to larger development within or adjoining the town of Royston where access to open space other than the Heath is more restricted. A case study is provided on the following pages.
- 5.3.18 The 6km wider ZOI within North Hertfordshire is characterised by small and medium-sized villages in a rural setting, often with good access to the wider countryside through the public rights of way network. The analysis of the visitor survey also suggests a substantively lower incidence of visits to Therfield Heath SSSI from this area compared with the inner ZOI<sup>20</sup>.
- 5.3.19 No specific requirement or benchmark is set for the provision of SANGs in this wider area. The level of on-site open space deemed appropriate will depend on a variety of factors including (but not necessarily limited to) the proximity of individual sites to the Heath, the characteristics of the individual site, the nature of the open spaces proposed and the ability to plug into existing green infrastructure and rights of way networks that provide access to the wider countryside.
- 5.3.20 In determining the distribution of publicly accessible open spaces within relevant schemes, it should be ensured that they are of high quality and will be attractive to future residents. To maximise their potential for recreational use, spaces should be laid out and incorporated within the development in a manner which encourages their functional use in line with national guidance and policy on good design. Disconnected, incidental spaces which fail to do this should generally be viewed as

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<sup>20</sup> The analysis in Section 2.2 suggests the number of visits per household could be 75% higher in the inner Zone of Influence than in the wider ZOI reflecting the day-to-day draw of the Heath for recreation..



an inappropriate approach to open space provision generally and within the ZOIs especially

5.3.21 In particular, applicants should aim to provide (as applicable to the size of the site):

- Coherent recreational and or dog-walking routes within the site; and / or
- Access to and / or sensitive incorporation of any Public Rights of Way, permissive routes or existing open spaces within or adjoining the site, particularly where these provide access to the wider countryside or might direct recreational activity away from the SSSI.

5.3.22 The approach taken should be set out in Masterplan documentation, Design & Access and / or Planning Statements and shown in site layout, parameter plans and / or landscape masterplans as applicable to the scale of the application. Schemes should provide a rationale which cross references their green infrastructure design with the mitigation requirements for the Therfield Heath SSSI. In line with any site-specific responses received from Natural England, applicants may be asked to produce further information relating to anticipated SSSI impacts and mitigation measures.

5.3.23 In order to deliver these policy requirements, it will be necessary for Natural England to review and update the Impact Risk Zones (IRZ) for the Therfield Heath SSSI for consistency with the approach set out above. As set out in Section 2.2, the current IRZ for residential developments extend approximately 3km from the Heath.

## **5.4 Planning policy measures**

5.4.1 In addition to the new Local Plan, NHDC has committed to producing a suite of supporting documents to help implement its requirements. These are known as Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs). SPDs are formal planning documents which add further details to policies in a Local Plan. They can be used to provide further guidance on particular issues, but they cannot introduce new policies.

5.4.2 The Council has committed to producing four new SPDs in support of the new Local Plan:

- The Developer Contributions SPD will set out detailed guidance on the types of facilities and projects new developments will be expected to provide within their sites, or contribute to within the wider area;
- The Design SPD will provide further advice on how schemes should look and be laid out. This will include guidance on the provision of amenity and open spaces within development sites and will respond to the emerging revisions to NPPF on design requirements;
- A Sustainability SPD which will consider issues such as energy efficiency, climate change adaptation, parking provision and how more sustainable modes of transport, will be integrated into new developments; and

- A Biodiversity SPD to secure net gain on new sites and in anticipation of 10% biodiversity net gain becoming a mandatory requirement through the Environment Bill.
- 5.4.3 All of these documents will be relevant to the implementation of this strategy. NHDC will ensure that, as they are produced, each SPD contains appropriate references to this strategy and the mitigation measures, priorities and projects that have been identified. This will ensure that development schemes within the zones of influence are suitably designed and / or make appropriate contributions towards funding of mitigation measures within the Therfield Heath SSSI or wider area.
- 5.4.4 This strategy itself will be a material consideration in the determination of relevant planning applications within NHDC where it is appropriate.
- 5.4.5 As set out in Section 3, the Council will also be undertaking a programme of work to prepare and update an evidence base for these documents and for the review of the Local Plan. The district wide studies will include:
- An audit of publicly accessible open space;
  - An update to the Sports and Playing Pitch Strategy;
  - Underpinning requirements for biodiversity net gain and nature recovery;
  - Opportunities for ecological gains on spaces owned by the Council and other landowners; and
  - These studies will be drawn together in a revised Green Infrastructure Strategy for the District.
- 5.4.6 These studies will be undertaken at a District level to ensure that the Council takes a strategic view of the roles, functions and pressures for green spaces and green infrastructure when taken as a whole. However, they will provide an opportunity to understand key pressures at a local level within Royston and the ZOIs as well as reflecting changes since the relevant studies were last undertaken.
- 5.4.7 In the area covered by this mitigation strategy it is already known, for example, that reorganisation of schools within Royston has reduced access to and availability of pitches for formal sports provision, increasing demand use of those facilities in and around the Heath. The most appropriate long-term arrangements for sports provision (and green infrastructure more generally) in and around the town will be a key issue for consideration in the next review of the District Council's Local Plan.
- 5.4.8 Progressing these studies is a key element of the strategy as it will provide a clear evidence base to justify any future strategic interventions in the area for the long-term benefit of the Heath.
- 5.4.9 The role, function and condition of Therfield Heath SSSI will continue to be an important consideration in any future Local Plan or other strategy prepared by any of the authorities within the ZOI. The use of, and reference to, this strategy in adjoining authorities, notably South Cambridgeshire, and the upper-tier county authorities of Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire, should be encouraged whilst recognising that Natural England have not presently placed the same obligations or agreements upon

those authorities to produce a mitigation strategy through the plan-making, or any other, process.

## **5.5 Off-site avoidance and mitigation measures**

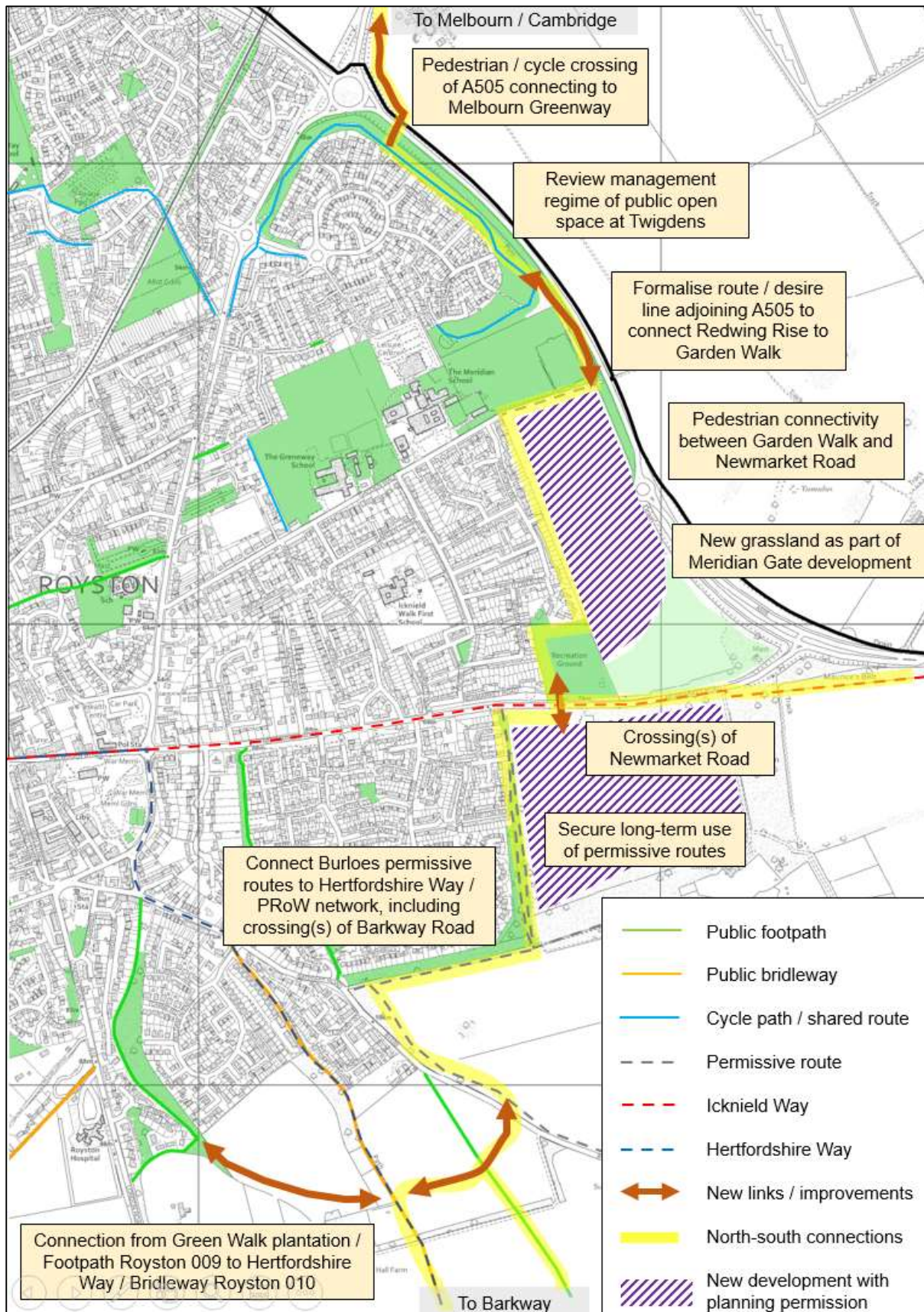
- 5.5.1 In addition to the measures identified above, pressures on the Heath might be further mitigated through the provision of alternative open space, leisure and recreational facilities elsewhere in the Zones of Influence and through the improvement of existing facilities to make them attractive places and routes for residents to use.
- 5.5.2 The analysis in the previous sections identifies a number of issues that serve to reinforce the current role of Therfield Heath as the key destination for outdoor leisure and recreation in the area. This includes the absence of alternate natural and semi-natural greenspaces providing a comparable environment to the Heath (on a smaller scale) as well as gaps in or barriers to the provision of attractive leisure routes for walking or cycling. This is for both day-to-day, incidental and / or circular routes in or close to Royston as well as access to the wider countryside in Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire.
- 5.5.3 This strategy identifies a number of potential projects to help resolve these deficiencies. These should be pursued with relevant landowners and stakeholders. The projects are presented in broad areas below with a focus on Royston and its immediate surrounds as the key source of recreational pressure on the Heath.

### **Royston East**

- 5.5.4 The analysis in Section 3 identified a lack coherent north-south links in the rights of way network to the east of Royston as well as a general underprovision of alternate natural and semi-natural open space. A number of potential links, improvements and connections have been identified that would provide a more integrated green infrastructure network, enhanced north-south connectivity and improved (perceptions of) recreational opportunities in this area of the town. These are shown in the plan on the following page and described below.

#### **North of Newmarket Road**

- 5.5.5 To the north of Newmarket Road and within the ongoing Meridian Gate development a significant area of open space is to be retained / provided as chalk grassland on the high ground overlooking the town. This will incorporate existing, informal pathways to and around this area including those on the northern side of Newmarket Road and connections and connecting from the site through to the Newmans Recreation Ground.
- 5.5.6 There is no formal connection to the existing footpath network to the north of the site, but there is a well worn desire line alongside the A505 highway verge to join up with the open space to the south of Redwing Rise. Retaining and enhancing this connectivity would provide greater accessibility to and between the existing



Off-site mitigation projects in the east of Royston

residential areas supplementing existing routes such as the pedestrian and cycle link to the west of the schools linking Garden Walk and Cherry Drive.

- 5.5.7 Redwing Rise is surrounded by a significant area of public open space maintained by the District Council. Historically this has been largely maintained as an extensive area of mown grass amenity space. The Council is investigating the potential to alter the management regime to support natural / semi-natural habitat and provide a local-scale alternative open space. This would effectively be a retrospective SANG for this 1990s development.
- 5.5.8 There is an existing pedestrian / cycle network around the perimeter of this development which, in association with the measures above, would allow for continuous connections from Newmarket Road to the junction of the A505/A10.

#### South of Newmarket Road

- 5.5.9 To the south of Newmarket Road, outline permission has been granted for up to 325 dwellings. As part of the development a pedestrian crossing will be provided to the north of the site providing a link to the nearby Newmans Recreation Ground and the routes described above.
- 5.5.10 The Icknield Way runs east to west along Newmarket Road before deviating from the road along the route's historic alignment into Cambridgeshire. The possibility of providing a further crossing point close to the Meridian line and the Burloes estate access road to facilitate use of this route will be explored.
- 5.5.11 To the south and east of the site there is a network of unofficial footpaths on the Burloes Estate. These initially run south from Newmarket Road through a woodland strip to the east of the Valley Rise residential area before opening out into a perimeter route around the field to the north-east of Barkway Road which has permissive status. Through this strategy, the Council has held initial discussions with the landowner to secure the long-term use of these routes extending the options available to residents for recreational uses and allowing them to be publicised as alternatives.



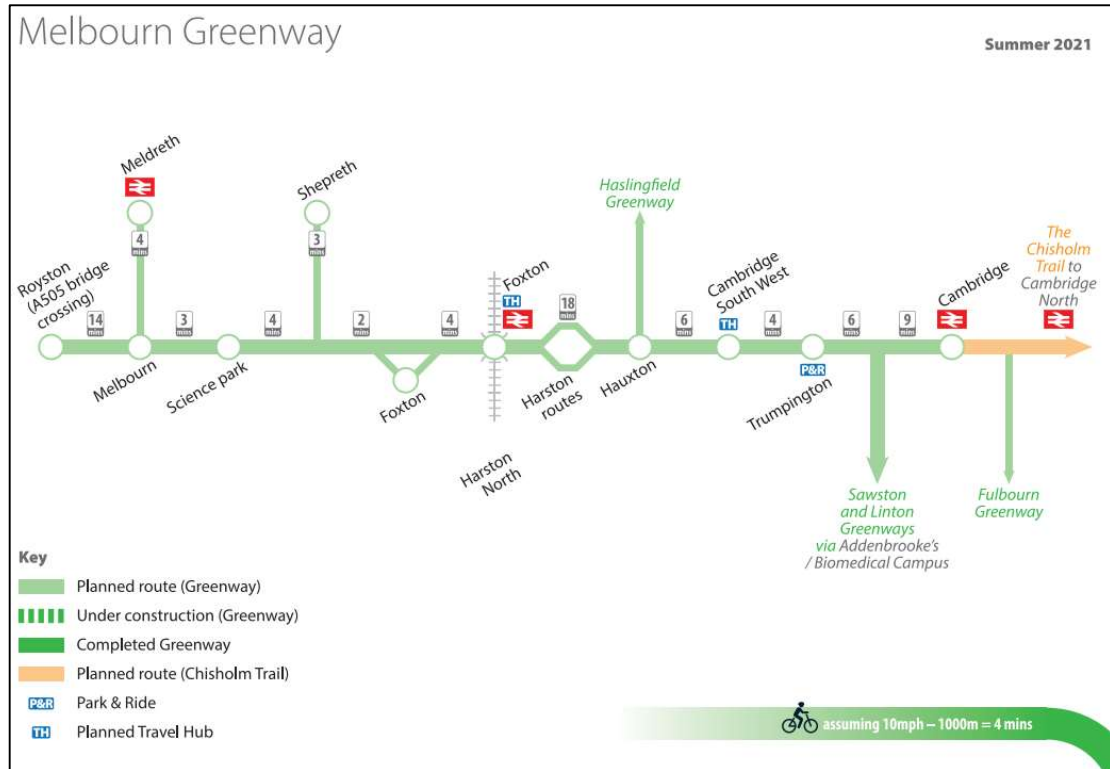


*Desire lines and routes heading south from Aintree Road. Source: Google Streetview*

- 5.5.12 To the west of Barkway Road, a bridleway (which also forms part of the Hertfordshire Way) and footpath run broadly north-west to south-east linking from the residential areas and providing access into the wider countryside towards Royston. To the east of this a further footpath, known locally as the plantation walk runs from close to the town centre south before awkwardly dog-legging west to the A10. However, there is an absence of east-west connectivity and new links should be investigated and provided connecting the permissive route around Burloes to these rights of way. This will provide a range of connections and opportunities for circular walks of different lengths around the urban fringe of the town connecting back into residential areas.

### **Royston North**

- 5.5.13 The A505 is a significant barrier to onward movement to and from Cambridgeshire. It is largely a national speed limited dual carriageway with a number of footpaths crossing the A505 at grade.
- 5.5.14 To the north east of Royston there are proposals for the development of the Melbourn Greenway, a link for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders to travel from Melbourn to Cambridge. The project is being led by the Greater Cambridge Partnership in consultation with Hertfordshire County Council and the process of detailed design has started. The draft route starts in Royston and will include an improved path and bridge over the A505.



Melbourn Greenway schematic. Source: Greater Cambridge Partnership

- 5.5.15 The project is listed as a priority in the latest consultation on the North Herts LCWIP.
- 5.5.16 Further to the west, public rights of way 44, 17 and 2 extend into Cambridgeshire to the north across the A505. All of these rights of way cross the A505 at grade which does not make them attractive routes for leisure purposes. The 2017 Public Rights of Way Plan identifies that safer crossings are needed for these paths.
- 5.5.17 In the longer term, there are opportunities to improve these public rights of way and the links to the paths in Cambridgeshire to encourage greater use as leisure routes.
- 5.5.18 The [Royston Sustainable Travel Town Outline Plan](#) includes proposals a proposal for a Royston Greenway to meet the objectives of making Royston a town that is healthy, efficient to get around and helps to bring a shift away from the car to more active travel by improving the linkages of walking and cycling routes.

## **6 ACTION PLAN, FUNDING & DELIVERY**

### **6.1 Action Plan**

- 6.1.1 The Strategy has identified a number of projects which could help to address the recreational impacts on the SSSI arising from new development in Royston. The tables on the following pages sets out a series of actions plan for this strategy collating the measures and initiatives identified in the previous sections.
- 6.1.2 Alongside these actions, there are a number of wider range of measures outlined which in the longer term might help to provide wider recreational opportunities in the Royston area and help to reduce the pressures on The Heath. Many of these actions are not costed as they are initiatives taken from other plans and strategies which do not include detailed project costs. These would have to be established as projects are brought forward.

### **6.2 Funding**

#### **Developer contributions to on-site mitigation measures**

- 6.2.1 To date, developer contributions have been secured for on site measures from two development schemes in Royston: land west of Ivy Farm, Baldock Road and land south of Newmarket Road. These contributions have been secured for habitat mitigation measures, site management measures and visitor facilities, as outlined in paragraph 3.3.8.
- 6.2.2 The most significant measure for addressing recreational pressures on The Heath has been the appointment of a warden by the Conservators. To date, this has been funded by Section 106 contributions and the action plan includes the funding of this appointment for the lifetime of the Local Plan, up to 2031. The Council acknowledges that Natural England would normally expect a post like this to be funded in perpetuity, which could be between 80 and 120 years. However, given the scale of proposed development that remains to be built out, funding for the post for that length of time this is not achievable through this strategy.
- 6.2.3 To date, £379,000 has been secured from S106 contributions which is sufficient to fund the warden and their essential equipment for the period up to 2031, based on current costs, but not beyond. Taking these costs into consideration, this does leave approximately £35k from the secured contributions for further mitigation measures to alleviate recreational pressures on the Heath in addition to any further contributions secured on a case by case basis from any further development.

#### **Developer contributions to off-site mitigation measures**

- 6.2.4 In addition to on-site measures, contributions will be sought towards the wider suite of off-site mitigation measures which are detailed in the table of actions, wherever it is considered appropriate to do so.

- 6.2.5 NHC has resolved to continue using individual s106 legal agreements to secure mitigation measures from relevant sites at the present time. Contributions should always be proportionate and directed towards named projects.
- 6.2.6 The results of the visitor survey discussed in Section 2 suggest that there is a notably higher incidence of visits to Therfield Heath from homes within the inner Zone of Influence. Within the outer Zone, the average visit rates are lower but still make a notable contribution to overall use. In order to comply with national planning guidelines, any contributions sought must be proportionate to the likely impacts upon the SSSI of any given scheme.
- 6.2.7 The case study outlined in Section 5.3, land to the north of Baldock Road, within Royston (within the inner ZOI) secured contributions in excess of £1,000 per home towards management measures or the provision of additional facilities on Therfield Heath. These figures were negotiated with the agreement of Natural England and provide a useful benchmark to the scale of sums which might be sought where it would be proportionate and consistent with the relevant regulations to do so. It is equally recognised that these contributions were secured prior to the completion of a comprehensive strategy.
- 6.2.8 A number of measures in the wider area would likely still be required or encouraged in the absence of the Heath and / or this strategy given the emphasis of the wider planning system on good design, securing health and wellbeing and encouraging active travel through walking and cycling and contributions may be secured within requests for (e.g.) sustainable transport measures.
- 6.2.9 The Council has to prepare an annual infrastructure funding statement which sets out how developer contributions have been spent. This will be a key measure in monitoring the implementation of the measures in this strategy.
- 6.2.10 Many of the actions included in the tables below are not costed as they are measures which have been included in other strategies. These measures have not been costed in those strategies and therefore are projects to be considered in the longer term rather than immediate spending projects.

The following tables set out the measures discussed in the Mitigation Strategy:

Theme : On Site Education and Management							
Action	Description	Annual cost	One off costs	Total costs	Timescale	Organisation	Notes
Warden	Appointment of a lead warden to work on The Heath	£30,500		£305,000	2021 – 2031	THC NHC	Cost for one warden (part-time) based on an annual salary of £20,000 plus NI contributions (£2,500) and overheads (£8,000) giving a total of £30,500 per year.  10 year period used here as some S106 monies have been used for these costs
Warden Intern	Appointment of an intern warden to work on The Heath	£24,150		£193,200	2023 – 2031	THC NHC	Costs estimated from THC job description - July 2022  Assumption that the post would be filled for each year up to 2031
Warden equipment	Annual equipment purchases, e.g mobile phone contract, PPE and stationery	£4,640		£37,120	2023 - 2031	THC	Costs for equipment based on those provided by THC and split between annual and one-off costs
	One off small scale equipment purchases, e.g laptop, printer, laminator, uniform		£1,550	£1,550	2023 - 2031	THC	

Theme : On Site Education and Management							
Action	Description	Annual cost	One off costs	Total costs	Timescale	Organisation	Notes
Therfield Heath Management Plan	THC to develop a management plan for Therfield Heath in consultation with Natural England to assist in the continued management of the SSSI.		£1,000		2022	NE THC	Estimated cost – included to allow for a review of the Management Strategy in the period up to 2031 following agreement of a Management Strategy in 2022.
Therfield Heath Management Plan	Investigative review and update to regularize the grazing regimes for the Heath					THC NE	Included in the Mitigation Strategy as grazing can help to improve the condition of the SSSI.



Theme : Off Site Education and Management				
Action	Description	Timescale	Organisation	Notes
Review of websites and social media	Review of relevant sites and social media accounts to identify opportunities for consistent messaging and branding and provision of (e.g.) designed and branded material	Ongoing	THC RTC HCC NHC	
Promotion of alternate recreational routes	Investigate opportunities to work with Royston Town Council, landowners and local interest groups to provide appropriate publicity of alternate routes.	Ongoing	THC NHC Royston Town Council HCC Landowners Local interest groups	Production and distribution of leaflets for general public, local residents, new homeowner packs etc.

Theme : On Site Visitor Facilities							
Action	Description	Annual cost	One off costs	Total costs	Timescale	Organisation	Notes
Visitor education facility	Installation of a visitor education facility on The Heath to act as a starting point for visitors and provide a visible point of contact for the warden.	~£5,000	~£50,000		2023 – 2025	NE THC	The scope of this project has not been determined and therefore this is an estimate for a one off cost for the provision of a visitor facility and any on-going running costs.

Theme : Off Site Measures				
Action	Description	Timescale	Organisation	Notes
Off site open spaces	Deliver and secure long-term management regime for new chalk grassland and open space north of Newmarket Road	Ongoing	NHC	
	Review management regime of public open space around Redwing Rise and implement changes to deliver natural / semi-natural habitat		NHC	
	Investigate and secure opportunities for the creation of additional chalk grassland around Therfield Heath to increase the resilience of the SSSI and improve local biodiversity.		NHC HMWT THC NE Greater Cambridge Partnership	
East Royston connectivity	Investigate opportunities for new public rights of way, permissive routes and / or cyclepaths with landowners to provide connective routes from Meridian Gate to Ridgeways and Redwing Rise.	Ongoing	NHC HCC Developer Landowners	
	Provision of new pedestrian crossings on Newmarket Road.			
	Work with the landowner to formalise and recognise the routes between Newmarket Road and Barkway Road by investigating the designation of a permissive route through the tree belt to the south of Newmarket Road and maintain the existing route to the east of Barkway Road.			
	Deliver enhanced pedestrian crossing facilities across the B1039, Barkway Road.			
	Provision of new east-west permissive route or Right of Way linking B1039 Barkway Road to Footpath Royston 16 / Bridleway Royston 10 (Hertfordshire Way) and Footpath Royston 009 (plantation walk)			
Royston Greenway	Continue to pursue opportunities to progress the Royston Greenway	Ongoing	NHC NE THC HCC – PRoW RTC	
North Royston Connectivity	Work in conjunction with the Greater Cambridgeshire Partnership to ensure that the preliminary design work for the Cambridgeshire Greenways route from Royston to Cambridge includes consideration of a walking and cycling route over the A505.	2022 - 2023	Greater Cambridge Partnership HCC & NHC	

	Investigate opportunities for new and improved PRow and cyclepaths to improve the pedestrian links across the A505 to the north of Royston into Cambridgeshire, in particular for PRow 2 and 17.	Ongoing	NHC HCC Greater Cambridge Partnership Landowners Network Rail RTC	
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Theme : Planning Policy				
Action	Description	Timescale	Organisation	Notes
Supplementary Planning Documents	Prepare a number of SPDs that incorporate and reinforce key expectations to help in the implementation of planning permissions and to secure appropriate mitigation measures for Therfield Heath through the planning system: In particular:		NHDC NE THC	The production of SPDs in support of the Local Plan and new evidence studies for the Local Plan Review will be met from within existing Council revenue and staffing budgets and as such they have not been costed separately.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developer Contributions – this will include details of contributions expected from development schemes in respect of formal and informal open spaces</li> </ul>	2022	Developers Landowners	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustainability – this SPD will include consideration of health and wellbeing issues in as far as measures can be addressed through the planning system</li> </ul>	2023 / 2024	Community Groups Individuals	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biodiversity – the SPD will secure net gain on new sites, supported by an ecology network plan.</li> </ul>	2023 / 2024		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design – the SPD will respond to the emerging revisions in the NPPF on design requirements for new development.</li> </ul>	2023 / 2024		
Evidence Studies for North Hertfordshire	Playing pitches and Open Space Audit – will establish the amount of open space in the district and demand for recreation spaces	2022 / 2023	NHC	
	Complete baseline open space audit	2023 / 2024	NHC	
	Commission and complete updated Sports and Playing Pitch Strategy	2022 / 2023	NHC	
	Commission and complete wilding audit and BNG capacity study for Council owned assets	2023 / 2024	NHC	
	Commission and complete second phase wilding audit / BNG capacity work with other key public and private landowners	2023 / 2024	NHC	
	Commission and complete district-wide Green Infrastructure Study	2023 / 2024	NHC	

Greater Cambridge Local Plan	Continue to monitor progress on the Greater Cambridge Local Plan and where appropriate make representations which will ensure that a green infrastructure network is provided in association with any proposed development in South Cambridgeshire which is within the ZOI.	2023 / 2025	NHC NE Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service	Timescales are dependent on decisions made by Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council.
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## **7 REVIEW AND UPDATE**

- 7.1.1 The Strategy will be implemented alongside the Local Plan and through development management decisions and will be in place for the lifetime of the Local Plan 2011 – 2031. This Strategy is not static and will require periodic review and updates to reflect changing circumstances, updates are made to other relevant plans and strategies and initial projects are funded and implemented.
- 7.1.2 As the development schemes are progressed, there will be greater clarity about the contributions which have been secured from development schemes and the projects which have been started or completed. Similarly, other relevant plans and strategies identified in this document may be progressed or updated themselves providing greater certainty in terms of projects and / or funding. Together these will inform progress towards achieving the measures recommended in this report.
- 7.1.3 As set out in Section 5, the Conservators and Natural England are preparing an updated Management Plan for the SSSI. This will include the detailed on-site management measures which may build upon some of the broad ideas identified in this strategy but lie beyond the scope of this document to prescribe in further detail.
- 7.1.4 Completion and adoption of this Management Plan will provide the trigger for a first review of this SSSI Mitigation Strategy (either in whole or in part). The update will translate (as appropriate) some of the detailed on-Heath management measures it identifies into this document.
- 7.1.5 In turn, this will allow those measures to be taken into account by planning decision-makers when schemes for new development are brought forward within the Zone of Influence (or beyond where considered appropriate).
- 7.1.6 This Strategy will be adapted and updated as new information, new projects or measures are identified which are relevant to the long-term mitigation of recreational impacts on the SSSI. Beyond the first update, the District Council will, as a minimum, consider the need to review and update this Strategy in conjunction with a review of the Local Plan.
- 7.1.7 The Council has a commitment to start a review of the local plan in 2023 and as part of that, there are a number of studies which will also be updated. These studies will help to establish a base line of open space and recreation provision across the District and which in turn will assist in further understanding and addressing the recreation pressures on Therfield Heath SSSI.