



Dorset Council
Habitats Regulations Assessment
Initial Scoping Report
September 2026

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1. Introduction

- 1.1.1. Dorset is exceptionally rich in wildlife, supporting rare and vulnerable habitats and species of great ecological importance.
- 1.1.2. This is reflected in the variety and coverage of ecological designations of the highest tier in the United Kingdom, which are collectively known as 'Habitats Sites'. They comprise Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Ramsar sites which are wetlands of international importance.
- 1.1.3. There is a statutory requirement to complete a Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) for a local plan under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).
- 1.1.4. The main purpose of HRA is to protect Habitats Sites from unacceptable harm by assessing whether the policy approaches and development sites within a local plan could adversely affect these areas of the highest ecological importance.
- 1.1.5. The HRA process is iterative, in that the stages of the assessment occur alongside the stages of local plan preparation. The findings of the HRA feed into the plan at each stage, informing the decisions made on policy approaches and potential development sites whilst preparing the plan.
- 1.1.6. The purpose of this document is provide an initial indication of the HRA issues which are likely to be relevant for the Dorset Council Local Plan at this early stage in the plan's preparation. This report presents the Habitats Sites which have the potential to be affected and the likely key HRA issues which will be considered further at the subsequent stages of the HRA process.

2. Habitats Sites in Dorset

- 2.1.1. The Habitats Sites in Dorset include a large proportion of the UK's remaining lowland heath, a coastline characterised by unique coastal formations and wetland habitats with marine ecosystems beyond, and grassland meadows which reflect Dorset's history of traditional farming practices. Ecologically important waterways and their hydrological catchments occupy large parts of Dorset, and ancient forests feature within the landscape.
- 2.1.2. These habitats support a wide variety of plant and animal species, for example providing crucial wintering and breeding grounds for an assemblage of

migratory birds, roosts for the greater horseshoe bat, and habitats for rare reptiles including sand lizard and smooth snake.

- 2.1.3. Dorset's neighbouring areas are also highly important for wildlife, and include the ancient woodland and heathland at the New Forest to the east and extensive wetlands at the Somerset Levels to the north of Dorset.

3. Potential HRA Impacts

- 3.1.1. To determine which Habitats Sites may be subject to impact and require further assessment during the preparation of the Dorset Council Local Plan, consideration was taken of previous assessments, evidence and studies, and the characteristics, sensitivities and proximity of the Habitats Site to the Dorset Council Local Plan area.
- 3.1.2. Some Habitats Sites in the areas surrounding the Dorset Council Local Plan area are not included in Figure 3.1 as there is no plausible impact 'pathway', which may be defined as the means by which a change in activity leads to an effect. However, further consideration of the potential for impacts upon these Habitats Sites will be considered at the HRA screening stage.

Figure 3.1: the Habitats Sites which may be affected by the Dorset Council Local Plan and the potential HRA impact pathway

Habitats Site	Land take and coastal squeeze	Potential HRA impact					
		Urban effects	Recreation	Air quality	Water quality	Water quantity	Functionally linked land
Avon Valley Ramsar							
Avon Valley SPA							
Brackets Coppice SAC							
Cerne and Sydling Downs SAC							
Chesil and the Fleet SAC							
Chesil Beach and the Fleet Ramsar							
Chesil Beach and the Fleet SPA							
Crookhill Brick Pit SAC							
Dorset Heathlands Ramsar							
Dorset Heathlands SPA							

Habitats Site	Land take and coastal squeeze	Potential HRA impact					
		Urban effects	Recreation	Air quality	Water quality	Water quantity	Functionally linked land
Dorset Heaths SAC*							
Fontmell and Melbury Downs SAC							
Holnest SAC							
Isle of Portland to Studland Cliffs SAC							
Lyme Bay and Torbay SAC							
Poole Harbour Ramsar							
Poole Harbour SPA							
Prescombe Down SAC							
River Avon SAC							
River Axe SAC							
Rooksmoor SAC							
Sidmouth to West Bay SAC							
Solent and Dorset Coast SPA							
Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar							
St Albans Head to Durlston Head SAC							
Studland to Portland SAC							
The New Forest Ramsar							
The New Forest SAC							
The New Forest SPA							
West Dorset Alder Woods SAC							

* Including Dorset Heaths (Purbeck & Wareham) and Studland Dunes SAC

3.1.3. The following section summarises the potential HRA impacts for the Dorset Council Local Plan.

3.2. Land take and coastal squeeze

3.2.1. Land take happens where development occurs directly upon the Habitats Site. This results in the direct loss of the habitats and/or species for which the site is designated.

- 3.2.2. Coastal squeeze happens when sea level rise due to climate change causes coastal habitats to move landwards towards a static man made boundary, such as a coastal settlement, road or sea defence. The boundary prevents the coastal habitat from naturally migrating in a landward direction, meaning that the coastal habitat becomes progressively squeezed between the encroaching sea and the static boundary. This ultimately results in the coastal habitat occupying an increasingly small area.
- 3.2.3. Within the Dorset Council Local Plan area, Poole Harbour is particularly susceptible to coastal squeeze. Wetland habitats fringe the landward side of Poole Harbour, and comprise tidal mudflats, seagrass beds and saltmarsh together with associated reedbed, freshwater marsh and wet grassland habitats. Sea level rise is causing these habitats to move in a landward direction, but urban development in Poole is preventing this from occurring, squeezing these coastal habitats into a progressively small area.
- 3.2.4. Both land take and coastal squeeze ultimately result in the loss of designated habitat, leading to an adverse affect upon a Habitats Site. The HRA of the Dorset Council Local Plan will examine whether future development could potentially result in habitat loss from land take or contribute to additional coastal squeeze.

3.3. Urban effects

- 3.3.1. Urban development in close proximity to Habitats Sites may introduce potential risks to habitats and species, for example through increases in light and noise pollution, predation of species by domestic pets, fire risk, and spread of invasive species.
- 3.3.2. The Habitats Sites which are close to the existing urban fringe and/or support species that are sesntive to urban effects are considered vulnerable. These include the Dorset Heathlands which are surrounded by urban development associated with the southeast Dorset conurbation and support ground nesting bird species and reptiles which are at risk of predation by domestic pets and light pollution.
- 3.3.3. The HRA of the Dorset Council Local Plan will examine whether future development could potentially contribute to unacceptable impacts from additional urban development.

3.4. Recreation

- 3.4.1. Many of the Habitats Sites within Dorset and its surrounding areas offer an attractive natural environment for sport, leisure and recreation. Where these activities occur on a Habitats Site, adverse impacts from recreational pressure may occur.
- 3.4.2. Hiking, dog walking, and cycling are popular pastimes at Habitats Sites, particularly on the Dorset coastline, heathland and grassland sites. This can lead to trampling, erosion, and disturbance to species, and dog walking and fouling may result in soil enrichment within habitats which naturally require low nutrient levels.
- 3.4.3. The coastal and marine areas also provide an environment for climbing and water sports such as kayaking and jet skiing which may disturb bird species.
- 3.4.4. Increases in local population from new residential development may contribute to a rise in recreational pressure at Habitat Sites. The HRA of the Dorset Council Local Plan will examine whether future development could potentially cause an unacceptable impact upon a Habitats Site from an increase recreational pressure.

3.5. Air quality

- 3.5.1. Air pollution may adversely affect a Habitats Site from direct toxic effects upon a species, or through the enrichment of soils from the deposition of atmospheric nutrients.
- 3.5.2. Within a typical housing development, the largest contribution to air pollution is exhaust gases from vehicles.
- 3.5.3. Other types of development may also cause air pollution, particularly development for industrial or agricultural purposes.
- 3.5.4. Dorset and its surrounding areas include Habitats Sites which are highly sensitive to changes in air quality. In particular, those habitats which are necessarily naturally low in nutrients, such as the Dorset Heathlands and meadow habitats in north Dorset, are vulnerable to changes in air quality. Associated species, such as the Marsh Fritillary *Eurodryas Aurinia*.
- 3.5.5. Development through the Dorset Council Local Plan has the potential to contribute to increases in traffic. The HRA of the Dorset Council Local Plan will use the traffic modelling results to examine whether the increase in traffic

resulting from future development could potentially cause unacceptable impacts upon a Habitats Site.

3.6. Water quality

- 3.6.1. The principal water quality threat to Habitats Sites in Dorset is from elevated concentrations of nutrients, particularly nitrogen and phosphorus.
- 3.6.2. Excess nutrients in the water body causes increased plant growth, algal blooms and an accumulation in organic matter. This leads to a decrease in oxygen availability which can result in catastrophic impacts upon habitats and species. This effect is known as eutrophication.
- 3.6.3. The principal sources of nutrients entering hydrological catchments are often treated wastewater discharge and agricultural land uses as nutrients are applied to commercial agricultural crops in inorganic fertiliser and manures.
- 3.6.4. The Dorset Council Local Plan Area includes five hydrological catchments associated with Habitats Sites which are sensitive to water pollution, which are collectively known as affected catchments. These are the freshwater catchments of the Rivers Avon and Axe, on the eastern and western boundaries of the plan area respectively, and the Somerset Levels and Moors in North Dorset, and the marine catchments of Poole Harbour and the Fleet coastal lagoon.
- 3.6.5. Other Habitats Sites in Dorset which are sensitive to inputs of nutrients and other contaminants include the wet heaths and acid mires at the Dorset Heathlands Ramsar and New Forest Ramsar, and the wet woodland habitat at the West Dorset Alder Woods SAC.
- 3.6.6. The HRA of the Dorset Council Local Plan will examine whether future development could potentially increase nutrient loading within an affected catchment.

3.7. Water quantity

- 3.7.1. New development typically requires a water supply which is linked to groundwater or surface water abstraction.
- 3.7.2. Taking large quantities of water from the natural environment through abstraction can lower water tables, decrease river flows, and change the natural seasonal water fluctuations upon which habitats function.

- 3.7.3. Where the abstraction is linked to a hydrological catchment associated with a Habitats Site, adverse impacts upon the designated habitats and species can occur.
- 3.7.4. Within Dorset, the hydrological catchment of the River Avon is particularly vulnerable to changes in water quantity, which can threaten the aquatic plants and fish species including the Atlantic Salmon *salmo salar* which relies on water flows for migration and breeding purposes.
- 3.7.5. The HRA of the Dorset Council Local Plan will examine whether future development could potentially cause unacceptable impacts from water quantity issues.

3.8. Functionally linked land

- 3.8.1. Many of the species associated with Habitats Sites in Dorset are highly mobile and may move outside the boundary of the Habitats Site for important ecological reasons, perhaps to access feeding areas, for breeding purposes, or to roost.
- 3.8.2. These areas beyond the boundary of the Habitats Site which form a key role in supporting the species are called functionally linked land.
- 3.8.3. The issues relating to functionally linked land within the Dorset Council Local Plan area include:
- Loss of foraging habitat for nightjar *caprimulgus europaeus* associated with the Dorset Heathlands SPA;
 - Loss of terrestrial habitat for great crested newt *triturus cristatus* associated with the Crookhill Brick Pit SAC;
 - Loss of hedgerows or tree lines that may provide flightlines for greater horseshoe bat *rhinolophus ferrumequinum* to move through the landscape; and
 - Loss of open, wet areas that may provide foraging or roost sites for the assemblage of wintering waterbirds associated with the Poole Harbour SPA Ramsar.
- 3.8.4. Changes to the functionally linked land may result in an adverse effect upon supporting habitat. The HRA of the Dorset Council Local Plan will examine whether future development could potentially compromise species associated with a Habitats Site by affecting land which is outside the designated area, but which plays a key role in the functioning of the species.