

## Warrington Local Plan Habitats Regulations Assessment – Warrington/Natural England Air Quality Meeting Minutes/Actions

03/10/22

1. It was agreed that air quality at Manchester Mosses SAC (Holcroft Moss) was the only outstanding issue. Otherwise Natural England are content with the Local Plan HRA, and that the Local Plan will not have adverse effects on the integrity of any European sites.
2. It was agreed that an update would be made to the September 2022 Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) Addendum to confirm why the woodland between the M62 and the bog habitat at Holcroft Moss (Manchester Mosses SAC) had not been discussed in any impact assessment to this point. It was agreed that the reasons for this were:
  - a. Previous advice from Natural England that the woodland constitutes 'site fabric', as documented in the Greater Manchester Combined Authority Local Plan HRA<sup>1</sup>;
  - b. A recent site visit by Natural England confirms that the woodland constitutes National Vegetation Community W6e, with a groundflora dominated by nettles and brambles, is therefore not inherently sensitive to the air quality impacts and can be considered 'site fabric' rather than a qualifying interest feature of the SAC;
  - c. Due to the prevailing direction of hydrological flow within the site nutrients entering the wood are not expected to flow into the bog.
  - d. Therefore impacts on the woodland from the M62 would not affect the integrity of the SAC.

Whilst the above points are agreed the HRA assessment record does not clearly explain this position. It was agreed that an update would be made to the September 2022 HRA Addendum to ensure the assessment is complete and includes consideration of the whole SAC. With reference to paragraph 2.1.6 of NE advice it was agreed that contributions to the wooded areas would be clearly stated and the appropriate assessment would then make reference to the above points in reaching a decision as to the risk of an adverse effect to site integrity from contributions within the wooded area.

3. It was also agreed, in line with section 2.2 of Natural England's advice letter of 27/09/22, that the updated HRA should make more explicit reference to the conservation objectives and, in doing so, the appropriate assessment might helpfully take account of the additional information sources mentioned by Natural England in paragraphs 2.4.4 to 2.4.6 to consider whether it is possible to conclude no adverse effect on the integrity of the SAC notwithstanding traffic growth due to the Warrington and Greater Manchester Local Plans. Any such assessment should be made in view of the conservation objectives and the relevant targets within the supplementary advice referred to at para 2.2.4 of Natural England's advice letter and wider Natural England guidance on appropriate assessment

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<sup>1</sup> The GMCA HRA states that '*Natural England has advised<sup>47</sup> that this tree belt can be treated as site fabric and there is no need to consider the impacts of air pollution in this area*'. Footnote reference 47 is: '*Advice provided by Natural England at a meeting with Greater Manchester CA, Ricardo Energy & Environment and others, and follow-up emails, July 2021*'

referred to in section 2.2 and table 2. This update would be made by 28<sup>th</sup> October 2022. The relevant information sources and skeleton analysis (to be expanded), would be as follows:

- a. Road transport is a smaller source of nitrogen and ammonia on Holcroft Moss than agriculture (c. 15% of deposited nitrogen<sup>2</sup> vs 40% from agriculture); agriculture is the largest single source of nitrogen at the SAC;
- b. While some traffic (particularly petrol cars) emits ammonia (as reflected in AECOM's model), and the AECOM model forecasts that ammonia emissions from traffic are likely to rise, the overall trend for nitrogen deposition at the SAC due to traffic is an improving one, due to the heavy reduction in NOx emissions from improvements in vehicle technology;
- c. This trend in traffic-related nitrogen (even allowing for its contribution to ammonia) is forecast to continue, as reflected in the AECOM model, which predicts a net improvement in nitrogen deposition of 2.6 kgN/ha/yr at the bog by 2038 notwithstanding 'in combination' traffic growth. In spite of overall improving trend the SAC will continue to exceed its critical load and predicted growth will slow the rate of predicted improvements. The 2030 baseline (in the absence of growth) predicts an improvement in nitrogen deposition of 3.14 kgN/ha/yr.
- d. Moreover, approximately 70% of nitrogen associated with traffic growth will be deposited within the woodland belt rather than on the bog and the amount that will be deposited on the bog from the GM and Warrington Local Plans is forecast to be only c. 0.3% greater than would be the case without them<sup>3</sup>.
- e. In contrast, agricultural emissions of ammonia (both from livestock and fertiliser) are not only the dominant source of nitrogen (and ammonia) but are also increasing (deteriorating) based on source apportionment and trend data for Holcroft Moss.
- f. Therefore, to achieve the SAC conservation objective to restore air quality targets to below the critical load/level, the main (though not exclusive) focus will need to be on controlling agricultural sources of nitrogen, a) because they are responsible for 40% of nitrogen and b) because unlike traffic sources they are getting worse.
- g. The government has introduced a Clean Air Strategy which sets the timelines for the introduction of regulation to reduce agricultural emissions from ammonia and legally binding commitments to reduce ammonia emissions from 2005 levels by 8% by 2020 and 16% by 2030.
- h. The increase in nitrogen deposition at the SAC due to Warrington and Greater Manchester traffic growth (0.3% of what would otherwise occur) is a small fraction of the total reduction in nitrogen deposition that would be required for the site to achieve its target (far too small to show as a difference in monitoring, for example) and even

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<sup>2</sup> Reference in the meeting was made to the category 'other transport'. However, the APIS website confirms that this category covers 'Aircraft Take-Off and Landing, Shipping (shipping up to 12 nautical miles of the coastline), Railways' rather than road transport. Source: [Modelling Emissions | Air Pollution Information System \(apis.ac.uk\)](https://apis.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Note that this 0.3% is a reflection of the amount of additional nitrogen from traffic compared to forecast 2038 deposition rates, rather than as percentage of the critical load. It is therefore a different metric from that used in the initial screening decision of whether the Warrington and Greater Manchester Plans exceed the '1% of the critical load' threshold.

allowing for growth there would still be a net reduction in traffic-related nitrogen compared to 2018 rather than a net increase, although ammonia is forecast to increase to 2038.

- i. Whilst the contribution from the Warrington and Greater Manchester plans is small, the M62 is a strategic trunk road and traffic flows are strongly influenced by non-local growth. The contributions from predicted growth overall are more significant. The contributions from overall growth (2030 Do something vs 2030 future baseline) represent 9.8% of the critical load at 90m from the carriageway.
  - j. With this in mind, it needs to be considered whether the Warrington and Greater Manchester Local Plans would undermine the achievement of the conservation objectives for the SAC bearing in mind that the habitat is already exposed to air quality impacts exceeding over 6 times the recommended level (APIS source).
4. It was discussed that, even after consulting these alternative information sources, the potential for adverse effects on integrity may nevertheless remain in the absence of mitigation, in view of the overall objective to restore the site and the relative contribution from road sources generally (i.e. additional pollutant contributions from growth beyond the Warrington and Greater Manchester plans and the wider influence of growth generally on traffic flows along the M62. This is illustrated by the difference between the 2030 'future baseline scenario' (no further growth) and the 2030 'Do something scenarios' (all predicted growth). It is not feasible to attempt to identify such growth in terms of specific 'plans and projects' but the AQ modelling does show a significant pollutant increase from wider growth generally. The Council is under a general duty to have regard to the requirements of the Habitats Directive in accordance with regulation 9(3) and predicted overall growth should be taken into account in considering the need for mitigation. As such the following alternative options to enable a conclusion of no adverse effect on the integrity of the SAC were also discussed:
- a. Natural England have agreed that the specific circumstances which apply in this case are such that a potential mitigation option might be available through the delivery of long-term ecological resilience works involving hydrological restoration measures to benefit the Holcroft Moss, commensurate with the impact on the site from traffic growth. In order to be regarded as mitigation the benefits of the hydrological improvements would need to be evident within the parts of the bog exposed to increased air pollution and the works would need to be over and above any management measures which are currently planned within Holcroft Moss. A Habitat Mitigation Plan would be put together with all parties involved in the site restoration led by Warrington Council. An appropriate mechanism would need to be put in place through proportionate contribution from developments towards these works. Warrington confirmed that such an approach could be secured through the modifications being proposed to the Plan and would be consistent with the respective Statements of Common Ground the Council has signed with site promoters. The Council would need to discuss the detail with Greater Manchester to ensure a consistent approach between the Warrington Local Plan and the GM Places for Everyone Plan. Natural England and Warrington will discuss potential options for

delivery mechanisms to provide the required certainty under the Regulations with a view to confirming the feasibility of this approach by 28<sup>th</sup> October. If feasible, all parties agreed this would be the preferred solution.

- b. If solution (a) is not confirmed feasible, the alternative mitigation solution would be the 'hard measures' identified in the September 2022 HRA Addendum, to supplement the already identified package of soft measures and provide greater certainty over efficacy. In paragraph 2.3.5 of their letter, Natural England raised several queries regarding these measures, all of which were discussed in the meeting. These can continue to be discussed if solution (a) is not confirmed feasible. The Council is confident that the queries raised by Natural England can be addressed but recognised the need to ensure Natural England were satisfied with the measures in respect of when they would be needed, their deliverability and their effectiveness.