



Buckinghamshire Council

Guidelines for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace

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1. Introduction

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace is the name given to the provision of recreational space that enables residents of new homes to avoid additional ecological disturbance to Special Areas of Conservation.

For Buckinghamshire, its role is to provide alternative green space, to divert visitors away from the sensitive areas of the Chilterns Beechwoods and Burnham Beeches Special Areas of Conservation.

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces are intended to provide recreational spaces for residents of new homes. These are provided so that residents can avoid recreation in ecologically sensitive locations such as the Chilterns Beechwoods and Burnham Beeches Special Areas of Conservation. The effectiveness of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace as mitigation will depend upon their location and design. These must be attractive enough divert trips to for example, Ashridge Commons and Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest, which is within the Chilterns Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation.

This document describes the features which have nationally been found to be effective in drawing visitors from Special Areas of Conservation to Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace. This guidance provides advice on:

- the type of site which can be identified as Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace; and
- measures which can be taken to enhance sites so that they may be used as Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace.

These guidelines relate specifically to the means to provide mitigation for significant impact arising from new recreational pressures within the Chilterns Beechwoods and Burnham Beeches Special Areas of conservation. They do not address nor preclude the other functions of green space. Other functions may be provided within Suitable

Alternative Natural Greenspace if this does not conflict with the specific function of mitigating visitor impacts on the Special Area of Conservation.

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace, subject to any planning / other permissions, may be created from:

- existing open space of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace quality with no existing public access or limited public access, which for the purposes of mitigation could be made fully accessible to the public;
- existing open space, which is already accessible, but which could be changed in character so that it is more attractive to the specific group of visitors who might otherwise visit the Special Area of Conservation; or
- land in other uses which could be converted into Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace.

The identification of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace should seek to avoid sites of high nature conservation value such as those protected under a local or national designation which are likely to be damaged by increased visitor numbers. Such damage may arise, for example, from recreational erosion, input of nutrients from dog faeces, den making or increased incidence of fires. Where sites of high nature conservation value are considered as Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace, the impact on their nature conservation value should be assessed and considered alongside relevant policy in the development plan, advice from the council's ecology team and Natural England.

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace needs to be delivered in advance of any associated housing being occupied. They must also be funded in perpetuity, taken as 80 years.

2. Quality Guidelines for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace

Accessibility

Many visitors to recreational spaces arrive by car and want those spaces to be close to home. Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces which are provided for the sole use of a local population living within a 400-metres of that space do not necessarily need to provide car parking. If the catchment is wider, then the availability of adequate car parking becomes more important and sites that are larger than 4 ha will require parking. The amount and nature of parking provision should reflect the anticipated use of the site by visitors and the catchment size of the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace. It should provide an attractive alternative to driving to and parking at the Special Area of Conservation for which it is mitigating. Car parks should be clearly signposted and easily accessed.

New parking provision for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace should be advertised as necessary to ensure that it is known of by potential visitors.

Target groups of Visitors

This should be viewed from two perspectives, the local use of a site where it is accessed on foot from the visitor's place of residence, and a wider catchment use where it is accessed by car. Most of the visitors to the Special Area of Conservation come by car and therefore should be considered as a pool of users from beyond the immediate vicinity of the site. All but the smallest Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace should therefore target this type of visitor.

Paths, Roads, and Tracks

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces should supply a choice of routes, with at least a circular route of around 2.3 - 2.5 kilometres in length. Longer routes of at least 5 kilometres, especially for sites of 10 hectares or larger should also be as part of the choice, as space permits.

Paths must be of a width and accessibility acceptable to visitors, for example, please see guidance [here](#).

Paths should be routed so that they are perceived as safe by the users, with some routes being through relatively open and viewable terrain. The routing of tracks along hill tops and ridges where there are views is also valued by many visitors.

Artificial Infrastructure

Little artificial infrastructure is found within the Special Areas of Conservation at present apart from the provision of some surfaced tracks, car parks and cafés. Generally, an urban influence is not what people are looking for when they visit the Special Area of Conservation, and some people undoubtedly visit the Special Area of Conservation because it has a naturalness about it that would be marred by such features.

However, Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace would be expected to have adequate car parking, they may also be able to have visitor facilities and information about the site and the routes available. Subtle way marking, discretely placed benches and information boards may also be suitable.

Other infrastructure would not be expected and should generally be restricted to the vicinity of car parking areas where useful information and signs of welcome should be the norm.

Landscape and Vegetation

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace need not replicate the species within the Chilterns Beechwoods and Burnham Beeches, such as beech trees to provide an effective recreational alternative to the Special Area of Conservation.

A semi-natural looking landscape with plenty of variation can be regarded as desirable by visitors. There is clearly a balance to be struck between what is regarded as an exciting landscape and an accessible one and so some element of choice between the two within the would be highly desirable.

Hills do not put off all people visiting a site, particularly where these are associated with good views, but steep hills will not be appropriate to divert all visitors from Ashridge Commons and Woods, so a balance, such an undulating landscape is preferred.

Water features, particularly ponds and lakes, act as a focus for visitors for their visit, but are not essential.

Restrictions on usage

Many visitors to the Special Area of Conservation came to exercise their dogs, and so it is imperative that Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace allows for pet owners to walk dogs under supervision off-lead over a significant part of the walk. Access to Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace should be largely unrestricted, with both people and their pets being able to roam along the majority of routes. Where there are areas of nature conservation, formally or locally designated, dogs on-leads can be stipulated.

Assessment of site enhancement as mitigation

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace may be provided by the enhancement of existing sites, including those already accessible to the public that have a low level of use and could be enhanced to attract more visitors. The extent of enhancement and the number of extra visitors to be attracted would vary from site to site. The council may require baseline visitors' surveys to a standard it sets to consider the current and future visitor capacity of proposed Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace.

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace which has not previously been open to the public count in full to the standard of providing eight hectares of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace per 1,000 people in new development.

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace which has an evidenced low level of public use and can be enhanced to increase the number of visitors may also count in full.

The evidence can include:

- the experience of managing the site, which gives a clear qualitative picture of visitor numbers;
- quantitative surveys of visitor numbers which include questions on their perception of the site, frequency of visits, postcode derivation and current use of Ashridge Commons and Woods;
- identified constraints on the sites access, such as lack of entry points, parking, navigability;
- lack of easily usable / accessible routes through the site; and

- evidence that the available routes through the site are little used (paths may show minor wear, be narrow and encroached on by vegetation).

Practicality of enhancement works

The selection of sites for enhancement to be Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace should consider the variety of stakeholder interests in each site. Consideration should be given to whether any existing use of the site which may continue is compatible with the function of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace in attracting recreational use that would otherwise take place on the Special Area of Conservation. The enhancement should not result in moving current users off the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace and onto the Special Area of Conservation. The specific enhancement works proposed should also be considered in relation not only to their effects on the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace mitigation function but also in relation to their effects on other user groups.

3. Quality Criteria for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace

Planning weight will be given to those Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces meeting all the quality criteria below.

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace			
	Criteria	Current state	Future state
Essential			
1	Parking on all sites larger than 4 hectares (unless the site is intended for use within 400 metres only).		
2	Circular walk of 2.3-2.5 kilometres.		
3	Car parks easily and safely accessible by car and clearly sign posted.		
4	Access points suitably located for the intended visitors to the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace.		
5	Safe access routes on foot from the nearest car park and/or		

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace			
	footpath.		
6	Circular walk which starts and finishes at the car park.		
7	Perceived as safe – no tree and scrub cover along the walking routes.		
8	Paths stable, well maintained and free draining but mostly unsurfaced.		
9	Perceived as semi-natural with little intrusion of artificial structures.		
10	If larger than 12 hectares then a range of habitats are present.		
11	Access largely unrestricted – plenty of space for dogs to exercise freely and safely off the lead.		
12	No unmitigated unpleasant intrusions (e.g., sewage treatment smells etc.)		
Should have			
13	Clearly sign		

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace			
	posted or advertised in some way.		
14	Leaflets or website advertising their location to potential users		
Desirable			
15	Dog owners able to take dogs from the car park to the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace safely off the lead.		
16	Gently undulating topography.		
17	Access points with signage outlining the layout of the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace and routes available to visitors.		
18	Naturalistic space with areas of open countryside and dense and scattered trees and shrubs. Provision of open water is desirable.		
19	Focal point		

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace			
	such as a viewpoint or monument within the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace.		

If it is not possible to meet all the essential criteria, for clearly evidenced reasons, those candidate Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces will be assessed on a case-by-case basis by Buckinghamshire Council in consultation with Natural England. The proposal will need to demonstrate equivalent effectiveness of mitigation being provided to ensure a robust, consistent approach continues. Any shortfall in Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace criteria should be offset by other complementary means, such as increased hectareage or higher quality features.

4. Further Initial Information Required

Please answer the following questions in a report to the council. Add anything that you consider may help the council in considering your candidate Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace.	
1	Size of the site in hectares.
2	Current designations - please identify these on a plan.
3	Current freehold / leasehold owners - please identify these on a plan.
4	Who manages the land and what are the legal arrangements?
5	Is there a management plan? If so, please provide details.
6	Is the site currently accessible to the public?
7	Does the site have unrestricted access?
8	Has there been a visitor survey of the site? If so, please attach to the report.
9	If there has been no visitor survey, please give an indication of the current visitor levels on the site.
10	Does the site have existing car parking? If so how many parking spaces? Please mark car parks and numbers of car parking spaces on a plan.

11	Are there any existing routes or paths on the site? Please identify these on a plan.
12	Are there signs to direct people to the site? Please indicate where on a plan and state what type of signage.
<p><i>Please provide any further information that will help the council to consider your candidate Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace.</i></p>	