

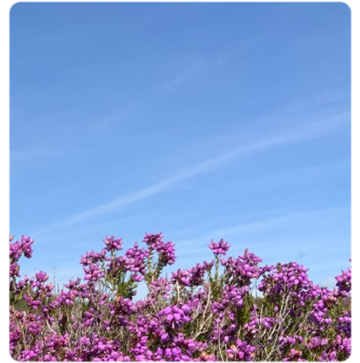


**Dorset Heathlands**

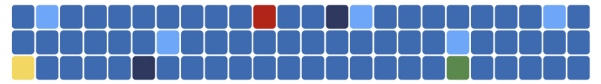
Financing heathland mitigation with developer obligations

CLIMATEFIT International best practice factsheet

Case ID: 12



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## Summary

The Dorset Heathlands in England are facing an increased risk of fires due to warmer and drier summers and increased pressure from urban development near the heathlands. The Dorset Heaths Partnership, a collaboration between local councils, other public actors, and conservation-focused charities, has implemented a novel financial mechanism to mitigate the environmental impact of urban development. This model harnesses developer obligations from new developments, turning them into funding for mitigation activities. Introduced in 2007, these obligations are calculated as part of local policy frameworks based on expected developments and cost estimates for mitigation measures. The framework obliges developers to financially contribute to the preservation and enhancement of the heathlands. Over €3,5 million was allocated for mitigation efforts between 2020 and 2025, focusing on Strategic Access, Management and Monitoring (SAMM) and Heathland Infrastructure Projects (HIPs), including the creation of Suitable Alternative Green Spaces (SANGs).

The model exemplifies a successful partnership among local councils, conservation groups, and developers, underpinned by legal mandates like the 2017 Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations, and an existing section in the Town and Country Planning Act allows local authorities to harness developer obligations and allocate them for conservation activities. This synergy ensures that development pressures do not compromise the ecological integrity of the heathlands. While developer contributions finance mitigation measures, the arrangement also highlights a paradox: development is a threat to heathlands but is essential for funding their conservation. The Dorset case offers a scalable and transferable model for harmonizing urban development with environmental stewardship, contingent upon legal, financial, and collaborative frameworks.

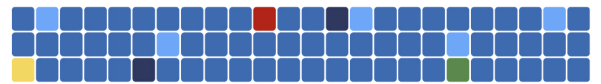
**Keywords:** Dorset heathlands, developer obligations, community infrastructure levy, mitigation, fires

**Actor interviewed:** Team Manager of the Dorset Heaths Partnership (DHP) – implementation group.

**Cover photos:** © Urban Heaths Partnership

**Further reading:** [The Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework 2020-2025. Supplementary Planning Document](#)

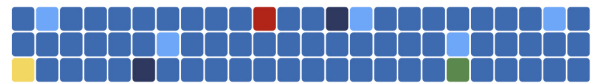
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## Best practice information card

**Table 1.** Dorset Heathlands. Information card

Location	Dorset (county), England
Population size	379,600 in Dorset county (2021)
Project area size	8500 hectares (heathlands)
Area type	Heath (heathland), a shrubland habitat found mainly on free-draining infertile, acidic soils and characterised by open, low-growing woody vegetation.
Climate challenge	Increased risk of heathland fires as a consequence of warmer and drier summers, and urban development in the vicinity of the heathlands.
Key Community System(s)	Land use and food systems
Objectives	The avoidance and mitigation of impacts of new residential development upon the Dorset Heathlands
Climate challenge solution	Development restrictions within 400 metres of heathlands, and mitigation measures for developments between 400 metres and 5 kilometres from heathlands. Mitigation measures include Strategic Access, Management and Monitoring measures (SAMMs); Suitable Alternative Green Spaces (SANGs), and heathland infrastructure projects
Key benefits	Protection and preservation of biodiversity; available green spaces for the public; increased knowledge and awareness about the heathlands; reduction of fires in the heathlands.
Implementation status	Since 2000 (start of the partnership); use of developer obligations to pay for mitigation measures since 2007.
Investment volume (€)	3.5€ million for mitigation activities in the heathlands between 2020 and 2025. This does not include heathland infrastructure projects.
Key financing barriers	No public funding for mitigation activities.
Financial model	The use of developer obligations collected based on local policy plans to pay for Dorset Heathlands mitigation measures.
Financial sources	Private investors: project developers.
Financial instruments	Land value capture: property and land tax (one time developer obligation at time of development).



## Overview and timeline

The **Dorset Heaths, or Dorset Heathlands**, are natural areas spread across the southeast of Dorset County in southwest England. They form an extensive network of open landscapes dominated by low-growing dwarf shrubs (mainly from the Heather family, Ericaceae) and include areas of acidic grassland, scrub, scattered trees, bogs, and open water. The Dorset Heathlands are recognised for their national and international importance for nature conservation. The surrounding areas of the heaths are urbanised, and since the late 1980s, the heathlands have been under increasing pressure from residential developments and a rise in visitor numbers in Southeast Dorset. Heather is highly flammable, and **heaths near urban development tend to catch fire more frequently than those in more rural locations**. Around 30% of Dorset heathlands are situated within and around urban areas, with nearly half a million people living nearby. Moreover, their use for recreation further exposes a large proportion of heathlands to fires and other negative impacts such as trampling or dog disturbance. The increased risk of fires is further exacerbated by rising temperatures due to climate change. **Warmer and drier summers suggest a potentially significant increase in the number of outdoor fires**. For a 1°C increase in future temperatures, a 17-28% increase in the number of outdoor fires in England and Wales is predicted annually, and for a 2°C increase, between 34-56% more fires are predicted to occur annually.

Aside from an increased frequency of fires, **urban development near the heaths has other effects** that pressure the areas' natural and ecological qualities. The most notable effects include the reduction and fragmentation of heath into smaller areas, hydrology disruption, enrichment and pollutants from urban run-off, roads forming barriers to species mobility, changes in breeding bird and animal distributions, and changes to vegetation.

At the same time, the Dorset Heathlands have been covered by several **international, European, and national designations** since the final quarter of the 20th century, particularly the Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the EU Birds Directive; Candidate Special Areas of Nature Conservation (SACs) under the EU Habitats Directive; Ramsar sites (an international designation) by virtue of supporting certain wetland bird habitats and species; Dorset Heaths Special Area of Conservation (Purbeck and Wareham) and Studland Dunes. The international nature conservation designations cover 96% of the Dorset heathland, and 97% is covered by the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) UK designation. Brexit has not affected the designations of these areas because the UK adopted the EU environmental regulations mentioned here. Consequently, any new development that could affect these designated areas is subject to an impact assessment, and Natural England would object to or negatively advise any new development if no mitigation measures were put in place. Due to the proximity of existing infrastructure and development near the Heathlands, establishing buffer zones through demolition and relocation programmes would have been very costly. Instead, mitigation measures are put in place for each new development.

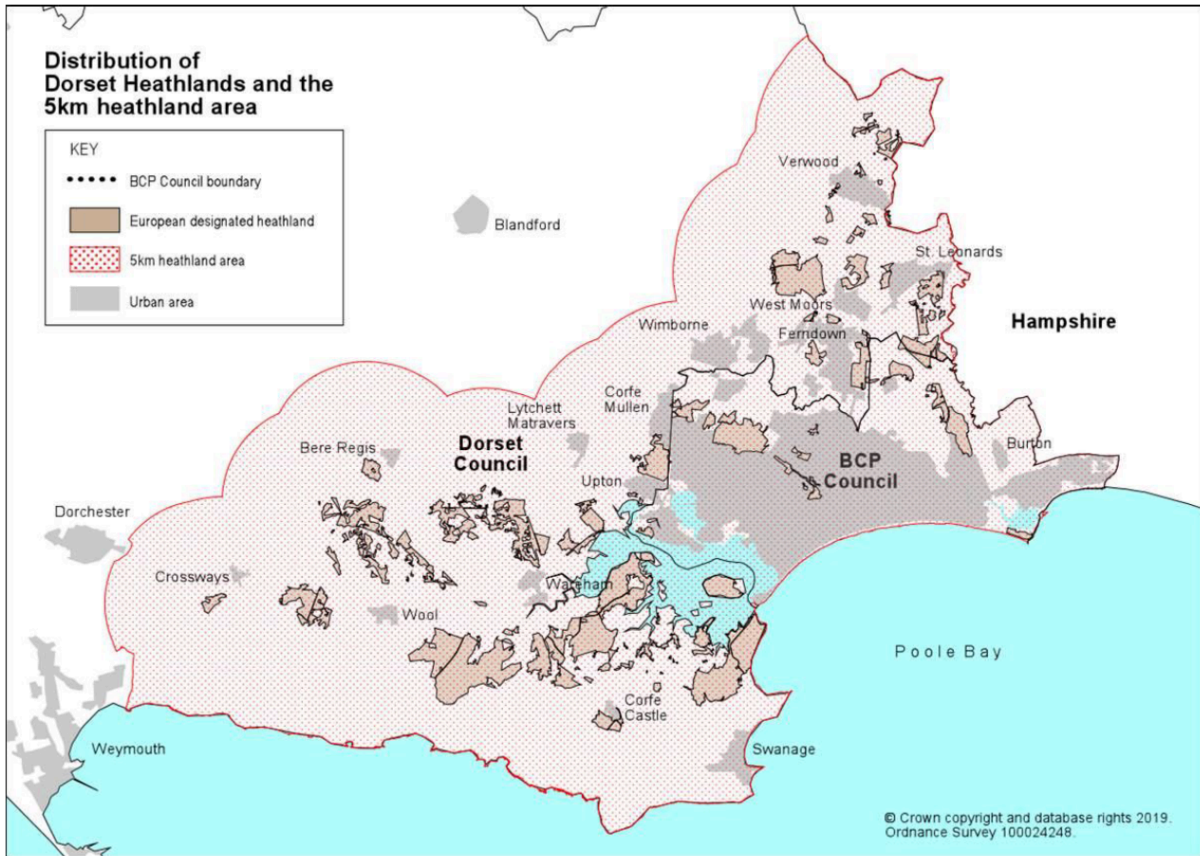
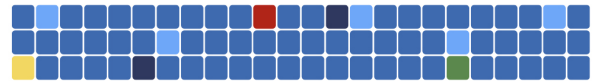
The heathlands in urbanised Dorset have a long history of protection through partnership approaches, but pressure from Natural England increased protection activities and forced the local authorities to work collaboratively and find a solution. This led to the **formation of the Dorset Heaths Partnership (DHP) in 2000**. The partnership successfully applied for €3.14 million (2024 Euro) from the European Union LIFE-Nature fund. The four-year Urban Heaths LIFE Project, launched in July 2001, addressed urban pressures through an education programme, more wardens, and new firefighting equipment. In 2004, the DHP received some national funding for its activities, but this ended in 2006.

The participating councils had to look for a new funding source and identified **developer obligations, collected based on local policy plans, as a solution to pay for Dorset Heathlands mitigation measures**. Six local authorities – which became two local authorities in 2019 after a local government review – that were part of the partnership each had their own local policy and development plans. An overall **supplementary planning document (SPD) was created that sets out the general strategy for mitigation measures**. The first SPD was introduced in 2007 and has been renewed four times (2010, 2012, 2015, 2020). The latest SPD for the period 2020-2025 was adopted on 31 March 2020. The objective of this SPD is to set out a strategy for the avoidance and mitigation of impacts of new residential development upon the Dorset Heathlands (including tourism development). The overall objective of the SPD is to establish a framework under which applications for development likely to have a significant effect on the Dorset Heathlands can be permitted (or should be refused) so that any adverse effects on the integrity of the Dorset Heathlands are avoided. The strategy deals both with larger developments, which may affect the integrity of these sites alone, and smaller developments where cumulative effects may be the critical factor. The strategy consists of two mutually dependent policy mechanisms:

- **Development restrictions** within a buffer of 400 metres around the heathlands area (measured as a straight line from the boundary of a protected heath).
- **Mitigation measures** for certain development types within a zone between 400 metres and 5 kilometres from the heathlands area.

Figure 1 shows a map of the Dorset heathlands and the 5 kilometre boundary around these areas within the two local authorities (since 2019), Dorset Council and Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole (BCP) Council.





**Figure 1.** The Dorset heathlands (dark brown) and the 5-kilometre zone (red line) around the heaths in the councils Dorset and Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole.<sup>1</sup> © Crown

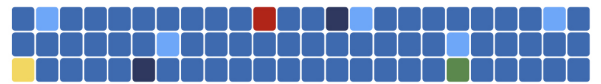
The mitigation part of the strategy is organised in two parts:

- **Strategic Access, Management and Monitoring (SAMM):** These actions target people's behaviour through awareness-raising activities, including employing wardens to manage visitor pressures on the heathland, delivering education programmes in local schools, and monitoring a sample of heathlands.
- **Heathland Infrastructure Projects (HIPs):** These physical infrastructure projects aim to increase the attractiveness of other open spaces for visitors who would otherwise visit the Dorset Heathlands. The most notable types of HIPs are Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs) or the enhancement of existing greenspaces. In the UK, "SANG is the name given to greenspace that is of a quality and type suitable for use as mitigation to offset the impact of new residential development on European protected Natura 2000 sites; Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). The purpose of SANG is to provide an alternative greenspace to attract residents of new developments away from the protected and vulnerable sites." Other types of HIPs include (i) route-ways, gateways, viewing points, seating, and way marking; (ii) improved access to non-designated sites; (iii) improved linkages between SANGs and other green infrastructure; or (iv) the creation of dog-friendly areas to provide alternative secure locations for dog owners to train and exercise their dogs.

**Table 2.** Dorset Heahtlands. Timeline with key moments

Date	Key moment
2000	Formation of the Dorset Heaths Partnership with the focus on the conservation and maintenance of heathland located close to human settlements, with a particular focus on management of access.
2001	Grant received from the European Union LIFE-Nature fund for a four-year Urban Heaths LIFE Project to address urban pressures through an education program, more wardens, and new firefighting equipment.

<sup>1</sup> Dorset Council and BCP Council (2020). *The Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework 2020-2025. Supplementary Planning Document.* Dorset Council and BCP Council. [PDF](#)



2004	End of the LIFE project. New funding came from national grants.
2006	Funding for the Dorset Heaths Partnership dried up.
2007	The first supplementary planning document (SPD) is comes in operation that sets out the general strategy for mitigation measures paid from developer obligations.
2019	Local government review merged the six participating councils in two councils: Dorset Council and Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole (BCP) Council.
2020	Adoption of the latest SPD for the period 2020-2025.

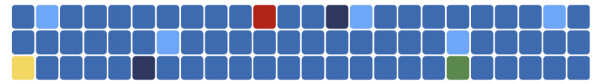
## Governance and key stakeholders

Figure 2 shows the organisational structure of the (DHP). **The DHP currently has ten members**, including two local councils, government agencies from different levels, and charitable organisations: BCP Council, Dorset Council (partnership leader), Dorset Wildlife Trust, Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service, Dorset Police, Natural England (then called English Nature), The Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Trust, Forestry England, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and the National Trust. The Urban Heaths Partnership’s organisational structure comprises three groups:

- **The DHP Steering Group** has the key role of overseeing the delivery of heathland mitigation in Dorset. The steering group is made up of senior officers (planning policy officials and countryside managers) from the partners. This group oversees the incoming developer contributions and the strategy through which these are spent.
- **The DHP Implementation Group** coordinates and oversees the delivery of the SAMMs for the mitigation required under the SPD for SAMM. The implementation group receives part of the developer contribution for the execution of the SAMM activities. This group has one team manager and fifteen permanent staff members.
- **Dorset Council and BCP Council** are the planning authorities for developments on their own territory. They deal with the HIPs, including the SANGs. The two councils hold the money that comes in for the HIPs and SANGs.

**Table 3.** Dorset Heathlands. Key stakeholders and their responsibilities or roles

Stakeholder	Type	Role and responsibilities
Dorset Council	Public (local government)	Formed in 2019 after merging multiple districts. Leader of the Dorset Heaths Partnership. Responsible for (i) drafting a local policy (development plan) that applies the SPD strategy, (ii) collecting the developer obligations on its territory, and (iii) the execution of HIPs and SANGs on its territory.
BCP Council	Public (local government)	Formed in 2019 after merging the councils Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole. Responsible for (i) drafting a local policy (development plan) that applies the SPD strategy, (ii) collecting the developer obligation on its territory, and (iii) the execution of HIPs and SANGs on its territory.
Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service	Public (government agency)	Fire services in the counties Dorset and Wiltshire
Dorset Police	Public (government agency)	Territorial police force responsible for policing the county of Dorset
Natural England	Public (non-department public body)	The government’s adviser for the natural environment in England
Forestry England	Public (government agency)	A division of the Forestry Commission, responsible for managing and promoting publicly owned forests in England.
National Trust	Private (charity))	Europe’s largest conservation charity
Dorset Wildlife Trust	Private (charity)	Dorset’s largest nature conservation charity. They work to champion wildlife and natural places on our 40 nature reserves and through our work with others.
Amphibian and reptile conservation	Private (charity)	A UK-based wildlife charity dedicated to the conservation of two important groups of animals.



RSPB - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	Private (charity)	A charitable organisation registered in England and Wales and in Scotland. It works to promote conservation and protection of birds and the wider environment.
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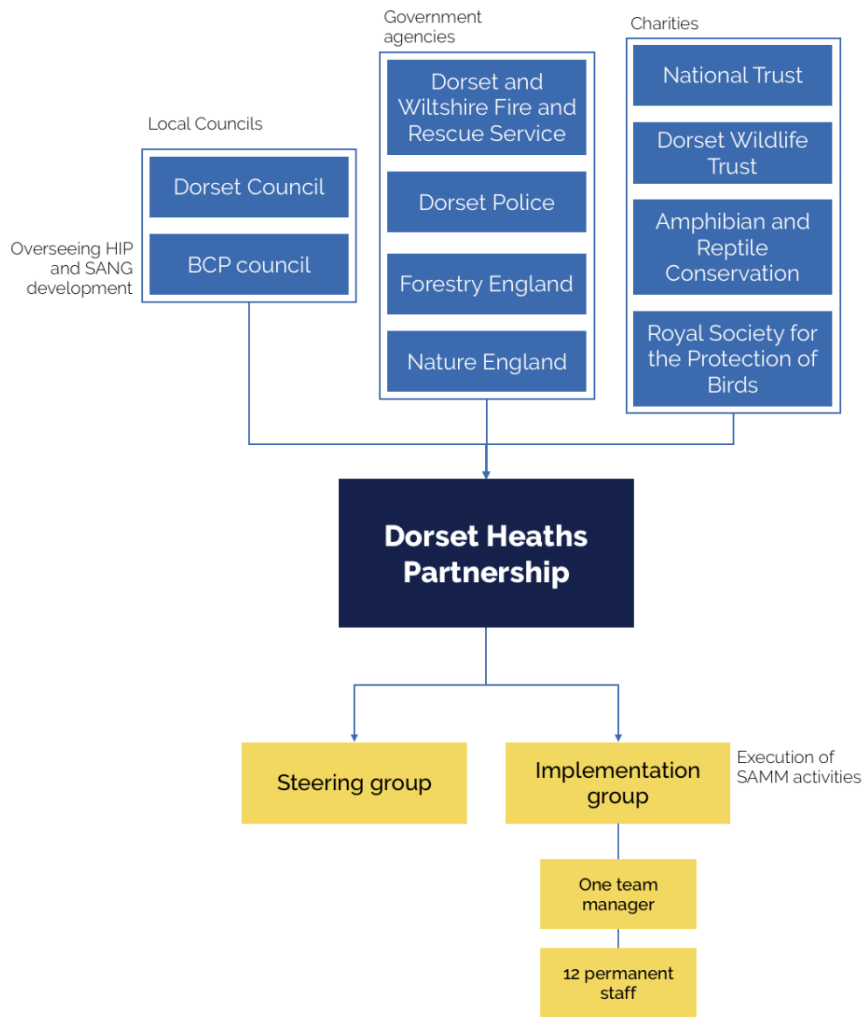


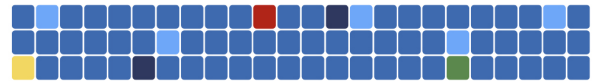
Figure 2. Organizational structure of the Dorset Heaths Partnership (source: author).

## Business model & financial model

### Business model

The Dorset Heathlands' business model is based on the key principle that new developments responsible for increased pressure on the heathlands – for example, an increased risk of fires – should bear the financial responsibility for mitigating their impacts. Conversely, the mitigation measures are required for new developments to be allowed. In other words, mitigation measures are paid for by community infrastructure levies from new developments that are causing negative impacts that require mitigation measures. **The DHP's activities mitigate against new developments, but they rely on funding from new developments that put pressure on the heathlands.**

The SAMMs and HIPs (including SANGs) create multiple **values**: wildlife protection and preservation of biodiversity; the heathlands and the newly created green spaces (SANGs) facilitate available green spaces for the public; increased knowledge and awareness about the heathlands through education; reduction of fires in the heathlands; and a general contribution to the reduction of heathlands' sensitivity to climate change. The **key beneficiaries** of these activities are the heathlands and their species, and the surrounding communities. The benefits are the assurance that the integrity of the heathlands is not further eroded or diminished by a steady increase in urban pressures due to additional development. The avoidance and mitigation measures enable the two councils to continue to grant permissions for development planned in the local plans.



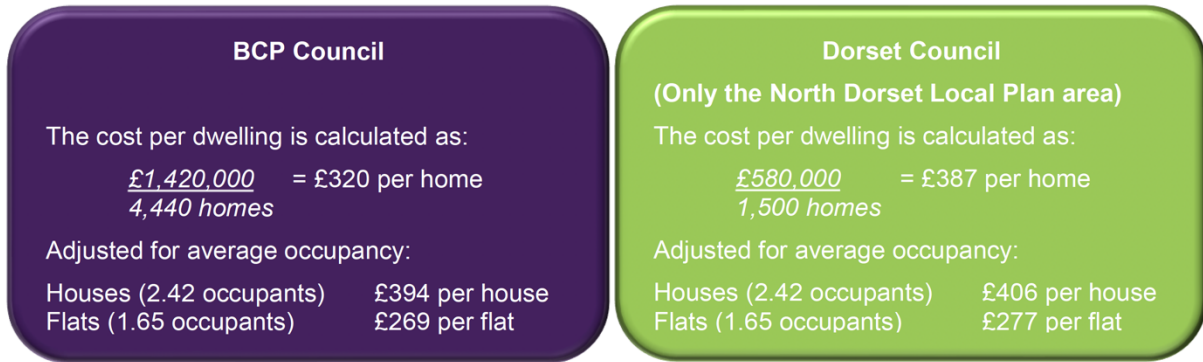
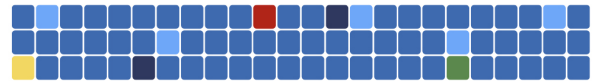
The total **cost of the SAMM measures** for the period 2020-2025 was estimated at €3.5 million (2024 Euro) in the SPD, split into €2.49 million (2024 Euro) for BCP Council and €1.01 million (2024 Euro) for Dorset Council. Cost estimates are made again with each new SPD.

### Financial model

Figure 2 shows a distinction in responsibility between the two councils and the DHP. Dorset and BCP Council are responsible for the HIPs on their own territories, including the SANGs, while the DHP's implementation group is responsible for executing the SAMM activities on the Dorset Heathlands. This also leads to a distinction in the way **developer obligations** are collected and allocated.

- **SAMM:** The cost of SAMM activities is estimated as part of the SPD, currently €3.5 million for the period 2020-2025. This cost is split between the two councils, who are then responsible for calculating the amount developers must pay during that period. The charge is calculated by dividing the total cost of providing SAMM measures by the number of planned homes within the 5km heathland area for each respective council over the period 2020-2025, as shown in Figure 3. The charges shown in Figure 3 are 2020 Pound Sterling values. A distinction is made between charges for houses and flats (apartments). The councils assess the number of planned homes in their local policy plans, in which the strategy set out in the SPD is thus applied to determine the charges. In Dorset Council, these charges are collected through the **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)**. In BCP Council, the charges are paid by **planning obligation**, although different in name, the CIL and planning obligation are the same in that they require developers to pay a charge for each newly developed unit.
- **HIP:** HIPs, specifically SANGs, are new green spaces or improvements to existing green spaces other than the Dorset Heathlands. The councils are responsible for determining how each development must contribute to the SANGs. These are not included in the financial calculations shown in Figure 3 (which are only for SAMMs). Where a settlement extension is allocated through a local plan or neighbourhood plan, the **provision of a SANG will form part of the overall infrastructure provision of that site**, particularly where settlement extensions or development on green field sites are proposed. The threshold for the number of homes that trigger the requirement to provide a SANG is 49. These are funded directly by the developer. In built-up areas, opportunities to provide HIPs alongside large developments are more constrained than in rural areas. Because of this, approaches vary according to local circumstances. Either a financial contribution is sufficient that will be used to finance strategic SANGs, or the SANG must be realised by the developer in another location. A strategic SANG is a green space in a strategic location that is sufficiently attractive to draw visitors from a wider area. Smaller developments of less than 49 units will pay a financial contribution that flows into a pot that can be used to develop strategic SANGs. This contribution is calculated by the councils and is again different from the SAMM contributions.





**Figure 3.** The calculation of the SAMMs contribution for development the BCP Council area and for Dorset Council the 5km area covered by the North Dorset Local Plan.<sup>2</sup>

Financial developer obligations must be paid before the commencement of the development of the land. In the case of large developments, the developer can arrange with the council for phased payments. Other project types besides SAMM are realised in the Dorset Heathlands, such as purchasing land to regenerate as heathland. These projects are funded through other mechanisms, for example, the National Lottery.

### Enabling conditions

Two important **resources** enabled the fast development of the first SPD in 2007 after other funding sources for heathland mitigation measures dried up in 2006. The **partnership had already existed since 2000** and had built up sufficient experience with mitigation measures during the Urban Heaths LIFE Nature Project, including evidence of which measures worked well. Secondly, the national government agency Natural England published **statutory maps** on its website that showed the 400m and 5-kilometre lines around the Dorset Heathlands. Councils can consult these maps to determine in which zone a new development is located when assessing permits and enforce developer contributions accordingly.

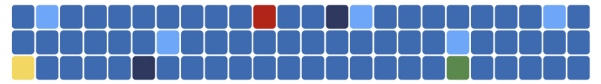
More important for the immediate adoption of the first SPD within the local council's policy plans were the **legal conditions** present at that time. The European and national environmental legislations, specifically the **2017 Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations**, forced local authorities to find a solution that allowed new developments. This regulation states that any application for development or strategic plan or policy likely to significantly affect a European site is subject to an appropriate assessment of the implications of the proposal for the site's conservation objectives. Without mitigation measures to limit any adverse effects, new developments simply could not be permitted. The choice to fund mitigation measures with developer obligations was immediately possible because of **Section 106 (S106) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990**, which allows a local planning authority to enter into a legally binding agreement or planning obligation with a landowner in association with the granting of planning permission. At that time, it was innovative to use developer obligations for measures in nature areas, but legally possible. Environmental legislation required mitigation measures to be included in local planning initiatives. In this case, the **supplementary planning document** became the legal framework all participating councils could apply in their local policy plans. The DHP was set up with a simple **memorandum of agreement** that each partner signed.

The way the SPD describes the charges for a five-year period can be considered a **de-risking mechanism** for developers. It offers developers who prepare applications for developments certainty about the amount that will be charged to them for the SAMMs. The calculation mechanism ensures transparency and accountability. The simplicity of this approach avoids unnecessary delay in the determination of planning applications.

### Outcomes

The SPD estimates the SAMM costs for five years. This estimate is the budget that the DHP implementation group should adhere to. In terms of **efficiency**, they managed to keep activities within that budget for past SPD periods. Developer obligations are annually adjusted for inflation. If issues arise and more money is needed due to changes in activities or proposals for new activities, the Steering Group decides if it can be afforded.

<sup>2</sup> Dorset Council and BCP Council (2020). *The Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework 2020-2025. Supplementary Planning Document*. Dorset Council and BCP Council. [PDF](#)



The most recent data about the **effectiveness** of the SAMM activities and HIPs is available in the 2021-2022 mitigation report. Participation in engagement activities (e.g., education) dropped somewhat in 2020 and 2021, likely due to COVID-19 restrictions. Before COVID-19, the number of students engaged in educational activities around the heathlands increased every year, and the same goes for dog members that signed up for responsible behaviour practices. Data about annual fires shows mixed results. Fires increased each year between 2007 and 2011. Fires have decreased significantly since a peak in 2010/11. Although there was a spike in 2021-2022, the numbers still show a 48% decline in fires recorded in 2021/22 compared to the 2010/11 high. There has been an average of 103 fires per year over this period, or 81 from 2015/16 to 2021/22. Looking at data about the area burnt, there is a peak in 2020/21 due to the Wareham Forest fire, which was over 180 hectares in size. This was thought to have been started by a disposable BBQ. There is evidence that the number of campfires and BBQs on-site has increased significantly. The weather also has a big influence on these numbers and is difficult to control, even with mitigation measures. 2023 was an exceptionally wet year, meaning fewer fires. Overall, the measures seem to have a positive effect. Data is building to show that HIPs/SANGs are effective and working to deflect access from the heaths. While each HIP/SANG is different in character, the data across SANGs shows they are well used, and use has been increasing over time and increasing relative to the heaths. Some SANGs are drawing high numbers of dog walkers.

Compared to the 1980s and 1990s, when the heathlands were perceived as a wasteland, the DHP's efforts have raised the value of the heathlands, including knowledge about the heathlands among the local communities.

## Lessons learned

### Successes and limitations

According to the interviewee, the overall **success factor** of this case is the **partnership approach**, mainly between different councils and other public actors. The partnership crosses the boundaries of multiple councils, allowing for a consistent approach for the entire area where heathland is concentrated. This also facilitates financial consistency, whereby councils sit around the table to collaboratively work out the calculation mechanism for developer obligations in the SPD. It is also important that every partner has an interest in the heathlands, ensuring that everybody stands behind the same objective. When the DHP was formed in 2000, it was one of the first partnerships looking at conservation that also involved the local police and fire forces. They were keen to be part of the DHP.

The interviewee stated that the main **limitation** of the DHP's approach to mitigate the effects of new developments is that conservation of the heathlands is paradoxically dependent on new developments. It is ironic that development is needed to ensure available funds for the DHP's implementation group, while mitigation measures are required because of those developments.

### Transferability conditions and potential

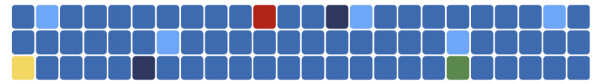
If a legal framework is in place that allows public authorities to levy developer obligations and allocate these to climate mitigation or adaptation activities, the mechanism used in this case is generally transferable to other areas. Important conditions that can speed up or upscale the use of this financial model are a legislative drive that forces local authorities to take action and collaboration between local authorities to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to conserving natural areas that surpass municipal borders.

## Related factsheets

The Dorset Heathlands case shows how impacts from residential developments can be mitigated through developer obligations that are used to pay for the maintenance of green and/or protected areas located near those developments. A similar case is Groenfonds (ID 06). The difference between both cases is that in the Dorset Heathlands, developer obligations are used directly to pay for mitigation measures, while in Groenfonds, developer obligations are first invested, after which the return on capital is used to pay farmers for delivering green services.

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