

Green Infrastructure South West Web Portal: Delivery Case Study



The Urban Heaths Partnership

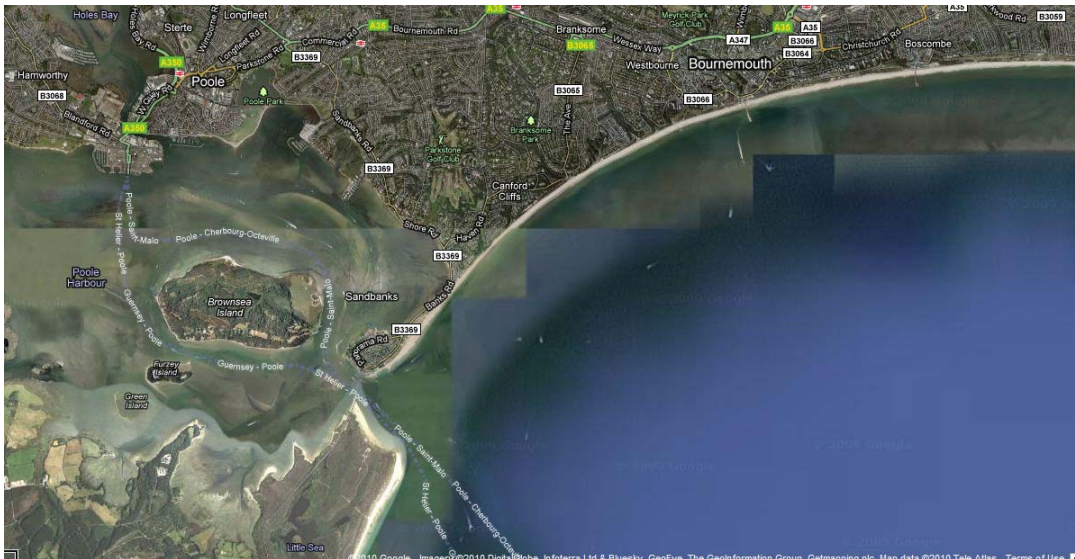
Location

Bournemouth and Poole, Dorset

Lead organisation

Dorset County Council

h.aj.tidball@dorsetcc.gov.uk



Main issues raised and highlighted:

The biggest problem faced by Dorset's heathlands is scrub encroachment. Since the first trees were cleared, heathland landscapes have been kept open through grazing, gorse and heather-cutting for fuel and careful burning of limited areas to provide fresh grazing. It was these activities that created the conditions for much of the specialist wildlife and shaped the landscape. When the agricultural use of Dorset's heathlands ended about 50 years ago it became neglected. This led to many conservation concerns due to factors including urban pressures, lack of management and fragmentation. There are also concerns over responsible heathland use.

The Poole and Dorset heathland sites fall into 20 SSSI boundary areas and many are Special Protection Areas (SPA), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and RAMSAR sites. Some sites also contain protected and unprotected ancient monuments such as bronze age tumuli and historical land boundaries, while others have features such as old military structures and quarry pits.

Main Partners

The ten founding organisations of the Urban Heaths Partnership:

Borough of Poole
Bournemouth Borough Council
Christchurch Borough Council
Dorset County Council
Dorset Fire and Rescue Service
Dorset Police
Dorset Wildlife Trust
East Dorset District Council
English Nature
The Herpetological Trust

Funding Streams

The Open Access Project funded by the Countryside Agency started in March 2005 in order to improve public awareness and understanding of open access rights and to encourage people (particularly under represented groups) to enjoy open access heathland responsibly.

Aims of Project

The Urban Heaths Partnership - involving 10 partner organisations - will enable Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch communities to protect and enjoy their urban heathland by highlighting its importance and promoting responsible use of this fragmented resource in SE Dorset.

Description of project



The Urban Heaths Partnership covers the majority of South East Dorset. Geographically, the project area extends from the Purbecks in the west to Christchurch in the east and up to Verwood in the north. Although grouped together, the heathland sites are all very different. Depending on the location within the Poole Basin the sites have varying vegetation structures and animal populations and their ecology is influenced by the local pressures each site experiences. The larger sites all have wet, humid and dry heath ecosystems within their boundaries while some of the smaller sites only contain

one or two heathland habitats.

The Bournemouth/Poole conurbation is the second largest urban area in the South West. These urban heaths provide green lungs and opportunities for informal recreation right on people's doorsteps. This recreational use can cause particular problems for the heathland management team including:

- **Arson** - Uncontrolled and deliberately set fires
- **Trampling** of rare plants and animals by human feet, horses, mountain bikes and illegal off-roading by motor vehicles
- **Erosion** of vegetation and the sandy heathland soil
- **Disturbance** of rare breeding birds such as the nightjar and woodlark
- **Enrichment** of the soil by dog faeces and dumped rubbish (including garden refuse) which encourages common grasses and other types of plants to grow there, leading to the loss of the rarer heathland plants.
- **Predation** of rare animals by domestic pets

The wildlife value of the urban heaths had been declining for many years, partly because of fragmentation and lack of management but mostly because of use and abuse by visitors and local residents. Since 2001 the Urban Heaths Partnership has worked collaboratively with land owners and managers, visitors and local communities to raise awareness of the importance of the heaths and to encourage people to enjoy them in a responsible way.

Dorset's heathlands once covered over 50,000 hectares, stretching from the Avon Valley in the east to Dorchester in the west. Changes in agricultural practice, conifer planting, scrub encroachment, urban expansion and road building have all contributed to a reduction in area to about 7,000 hectares today.

Delivery mechanism/long-term adoption of project:

The objectives will continue to be made and met through a life-long education programme, community and outreach projects and a team of additional heath wardens.

Background:

A four year project, the Urban Heaths LIFE Project, aimed at tackling these urban pressures was initiated in July 2001 co-financed by the EU LIFE-Nature Fund. The project aimed to combat urban pressures which adversely affect the conservation status of the heaths.

A five-year programme managed by English Nature (now Natural England), the Hardy's Egdon Heath Project, was started in Oct 2000, funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project aimed to restore heathland habitats through the removal of scrub and trees. It also aimed to increase understanding and enjoyment of our heathlands as areas of environmental, historical and cultural value.

Outputs/outcomes/benefits

- Because the development of heathland took place over a long period of time, nature readily adapted to this relatively gradual change. The vast range of heathland management activities resulted in a diverse landscape from bare ground to a variety of heather stands with small patches of trees. This diversity provides a rich and varied home for wildlife.
- The RSPB Dorset Heathland Project was set up in 1989 in order to offset continuing losses of lowland heathland and to reduce fragmentation through a programme of land management

advice and habitat restoration. In 2003, the Project celebrated the milestone achievement of restoring over 1,000 hectares of lowland heath.

- Over 96 per cent of Dorset's heathlands are now protected as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The importance of Dorset's heathlands is recognised in European law, with many heaths being designated as Natura 2000 sites.
- The work of the Urban Heaths Partnership has halted (and in some cases reversed) the decline in biodiversity on most of the heaths, along with encouraging local people to get involved in looking after them.
- New rights of access have been brought about through the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. New areas of Dorset's countryside are now accessible for people to visit on foot. Natural England has mapped the new areas and they include registered common land, downland and heathland.