

# Visitors Centre - Summer Leys Nature Reserve

## Planning Statement; October 2023



Bedfordshire  
Cambridgeshire  
Northamptonshire

### Summary

The Wildlife Trust BCN obtained planning permission NW/21/00779/FUL on October 27<sup>th</sup> 2023 for

*“Temporary planning permission for two years for one mobile room for use as a temporary visitor centre (Size 8 metre x 2.4 metre ground loading container type unit, with 7 metre x2 metre extending Pod); 2 temporary compostable toilets and car park modifications to maintain number of spaces proposes to site a temporary visitors centre at Summer Leys Nature Reserve.”*

The centre was sited in the far western corner of the car park in March 2022 and welcomes visitors as they enter the reserve in a clockwise direction. The visitor centre is primarily used to engage with visitors to educate, inform and inspire them about the wildlife of Summer Leys Nature Reserve and the wider Nene Valley as well as a base for our educational activities at the reserve. It forms a key part of our work with North Northants Council and Natural England to address the issue of recreational disturbance affection the Special Protection Area (SPA). The centre offers refreshments as a way to draw visitors in and provide some funding for educational staff. The centre has been a success since its installation and has become popular with new and regular visitors alike. Car park improvements were also implemented at the same time as the centre was installed so as not to reduce parking capacity. Having monitored visitor numbers and the impact on highway safety of the surrounding roads, our view is that there has been a negligible impact on parking in the surrounding highways. We have also seen a positive impact on reducing anti-social behaviour and dogs off leads in part due to our increased presence on site and car park charging policy, which brings us line with other similar sites in the area such a Irchester Country Park. Given the initial success of the centre we now wish to apply for full permanent planning permission for visitors centre from December 1<sup>st</sup> 2023.

Due to the fluctuations in the number of visitors through the week and across the seasons we plan to regularly open from April to the end of October (Friday-Sunday: 10am-4:30pm) as well as for scheduled events in school holidays and bank holiday Mondays, with occasional openings through the winter for specific events.

### The Wildlife Trust BCN

The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire is a registered charity (and a company limited by guarantee), whose mission is to:

- conserve local wildlife, by caring for land ourselves and with others;
- inspire others to take action for wildlife; and
- inform people, by offering advice and sharing knowledge.

We are among the largest and most effective of 46 Wildlife Trusts across Britain and we are a major contributor to the nationwide work of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. We currently manage over 100 nature reserves, covering almost 3,945 hectares, and two education centres. Our work also includes the acquisition and application of information about biodiversity. This Trust was the first to

promote the concept of Living Landscapes: large-scale conservation schemes which aim to ensure that wildlife can thrive alongside the human population across an entire landscape. Our conservation activity is increasingly focused on these Living Landscapes, including the first to be established - the Great Fen in Huntingdonshire – as well as the Ouse Valley, the Nene Valley and the North Chilterns Chalk.

### **Summer Leys Nature Reserve**

Summer Leys Local Nature Reserve<sup>1</sup> (LNR) is situated in the heart of the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area (SPA)<sup>2</sup>. The current wetland complex is a legacy of the gravel extraction that commenced on the site in 1988, transforming this previously arable area. Post-extraction restoration works were undertaken in 1992 and largely created the site that exists today. The Wildlife Trust has owned the site since 2007.

A mosaic of wetland habitat features were created, including islands, shingle spits, sinuous shallow open water margins and a large scrape, features that continue to provide suitable roosting, nesting and foraging opportunities for a range of wetland birds to this day. Areas of adjacent grassland provide an open aspect favoured by most wetland birds, with some developing species-rich swards, sustained through a careful grazing and cutting regime.

Some planted trees and scrub stands have established in marginal locations, screening the wetland from the circular path that runs around the site's perimeter, and developing its own diverse communities of flora and fauna. Numerous bird hides and viewing areas along the path afford the public excellent viewing opportunities without disturbing the sensitive wildlife.

A Reserves Officer is responsible for the management of Summer Leys under the line management of the Nene Wetlands Senior Ranger and assisted by volunteer wardens and a monthly volunteer work party. We have 2 members of our Community and Education team who are based out of the visitors centre.

### **Summer Leys Conservation designations**

**SPA** –The Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area (SPA) is internationally designated for its populations of wetland birds – both wintering and migratory – and this remains the key focus of management. The SPA area attracts over 20,000 wintering waterbirds, including important populations of golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, gadwall *Anas strepera* and wigeon *Anas Penelope* as well as occasional bittern *Botaurus stellaris*. Migratory birds can travel from far afield places such as Iceland, Scandinavia and Russia to utilise the increasingly good mosaic of habitats along the Nene Valley, of which Summer Leys is a key component. Summer Leys also sits within the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits SSSI and RAMSAR designation, which follow a similar boundary and reason for designation.

**LNR** – Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) are a statutory designation made under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 by principal local authorities. LNRs are for people and wildlife. They are places with wildlife or geological features that are of special interest locally. They offer people opportunities to study or learn about nature or simply to enjoy it. LNRs

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wildlifebcn.org/summer-leys>

<sup>2</sup> <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5495529882517504>

should be publicly accessible where visitors would not damage or disturb wildlife. Summer Leys was declared an LNR by Northamptonshire County Council but is owned and managed by the Wildlife Trust.

### **Issues; Disturbance and anti-social behaviour**

Summer Leys has become a popular and well visited Nature Reserve, attracting both local people from the surrounding towns and villages as well as birders from further away. Visitors come to enjoy the wildlife, walk, run and walk dogs. Whilst the site has been well set up for visitors to enjoy the wildlife without disturbing it, we have numerous instances of people climbing over fences to picnic, explore, fish or even try and camp, as well as dogs off leads entering the grazed compartments. Anti-social behaviour is unfortunately also common later in the evenings, mainly concentrated in the car park and bird hides. Incidents have included car breaks-ins, criminal damage to the bird hides, graffiti, and public intimidation. The Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area (UNVGP SPA) Site Improvement Plan<sup>3</sup> states that public access/disturbance is the main threat to the SPA and that this should be addressed through “managing recreational impacts through access and habitat management and advice”. North Northamptonshire’s UNVGP SPA Supplementary Planning Document<sup>4</sup> states that “Access by people and dogs can be a significant cause of disturbance in some parts of the SPA. The site is also subject to a range of recreational activities including fishing and watersports. Demand for access and recreational activities (both formal and informal) within the Nene Valley is increasing along with disturbance to the birds for which the SPA is designated”.

North Northants Council have produced a SPA SPD<sup>5</sup> to deal with increasing recreational pressure from new housing in the valley. Mitigation needs have been determined on a unit-by-unit basis at the request of Natural England. The most common requirements are screening, fencing, wardening and monitoring, which is required throughout the SPA to evaluate visitor pressure and patterns over time. For unit 3 (of which Summer Leys is part) ‘visitors diverting off paths’ is highlighted as the main issue.

### **Need for a Visitors Centre**

We wish to permanently install a visitor’s centre at Summer Leys to facilitate our Community & Education and Visitor Engagement work for this area as well as mitigating anti-social behaviour on site. This will build on the work done over the last 18 months and continues to give us an important base for our Community & Wildlife and Public Engagement staff to base themselves as well as a point of contact for our wardens and volunteers.

Visitor engagement; the visitor centre allows us to have a presence of Trust staff on site during busier periods as well as allowing us to run engagement events. Many visitors who don’t read the signage are unaware it is a Wildlife Trust Reserve, the sensitive nature of the wildlife and the (often unintentional) impacts their use of the site can have. Having engagement staff on site has given us an opportunity to educate and inform visitors which has had a positive impacts on anti-social

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<sup>3</sup> <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6732225261338624>

<sup>4</sup>

[https://www.wellingborough.gov.uk/downloads/file/6863/upper\\_nene\\_valley\\_gravel\\_pits\\_special\\_protection\\_area\\_spd](https://www.wellingborough.gov.uk/downloads/file/6863/upper_nene_valley_gravel_pits_special_protection_area_spd)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.wellingborough.gov.uk/downloads/file/7562/mitigation\\_strategy](https://www.wellingborough.gov.uk/downloads/file/7562/mitigation_strategy)

behaviour and reducing disturbance. This has a direct impact on the wildlife on site as alongside recent habitat works we have seen an improvement in overwintering bird and breeding wader numbers. The visitors centre also provides a base for our engagement activities, a hub for our volunteers and a space that visitors can ask questions and report sightings. Storage space allows reserves and visitor engagement staff to be more regularly based on site and interact with visitors influencing behaviour through positive messaging about the importance of the site. A continued increase in staff presence will ensure anti-social behaviour incidents are reduced and dealt with efficiently.

Community & Education work; the visitor centre has allowed us to successfully expand the educational work we have running at Nene Wetlands to Summer Leys. This has been based out of the visitors centre and area of the Reserve agreed with Natural England (Cmpt2) where we can run educational activities without impacting the wildlife. The Visitors centre allows us to promote activities, store materials and provide refreshments. It has been particularly useful for the Nene Valley Wildlife Watch (children's group) and Youth Ranger groups which we are relaunched.

Membership recruitment; As a charity, financing the management of the Summer Leys is reliant on membership alongside stewardship and grant funding, therefore having a continued base to engage potential members benefits the site going forwards, providing members with an opportunity to support the ongoing conservation management of the reserve they visit.

### **Assessment of alternatives**

Through the UNVGP SPA working group we have worked with North Northants Council and Natural England on various measures to reduce visitor disturbance, such as screening and improved signage. However these can't be relied on alone and wardening is seen as key activity. Due to the temporal nature of use on many sites we have concluded that engaging key site users through targeted activities and educational visits is best method. Further down the valley these can be run from Chester House, Nene Wetlands and Stanwick Lakes Visitors Centre. A Visitor centre at Summer Leys has seen a key asset for developing a community engagement project across this section of the valley. It also gives the Trust much more presence on site and is more effective than the various low key pop-up engagement we currently historically operated.

As a result of pre-applications discussions with both Natural England and North Northants Council the visitors centre was sited in the far north-western corner of the car park where it would not have any impact on the SSSI and SPA or impact on the open countryside.

### **Permits and consents**

**SPA & SSSI:** We consulted with Natural England regarding our original plans and have unconditional consent from Natural England for operating a visitors centre in the car park which sits within the SPA and SSSI boundary, given the positive impact the centre can have. The consent documentation is included as part of the application.

**Flood Risk:** We consulted the Environment Agency regarding our original plans. They confirmed that "The site of the visitor centre (NGR: SP 88589 63339) is in the floodplain and a flood risk activity permit is required for: any activity (other than an allowed activity) on a flood plain that is (i) more than 8 metres from a non-tidal main river, or (ii) more than 8 metres from any flood defence

structure or culvert on a non-tidal main river, which is likely to divert or obstruct floodwaters, to damage any river control works or to affect drainage'. However, if planning permission is in place there is no need for a permit". Given that have had planning permission in place for 2 years and not seen any increased in flooding issues we have concluded a permit is not required.

### **Planning policy**

Planning policy The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), 2021, supports applications which seek to improve and protect biodiversity. Paragraph 180 includes:

*"When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should apply the following principles:*

*d) development whose primary objective is to conserve or enhance biodiversity should be supported; while opportunities to improve biodiversity in and around developments should be integrated as part of their design, especially where this can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity or enhance public access to nature where this is appropriate."*

The primary objective of this application is to engage with visitors to educate, inform and inspire them about the wildlife of Summer Leys Nature Reserve and the wider Nene Valley as well as to provide a base for our educational activities at the reserve. This increases our ability to conserve and enhance biodiversity as stated in the NPPF.

The importance of the SPA, including Summer Leys Nature Reserve, is included within the North Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy 2011-2031. It stresses the need to protect the SPA from potentially damaging developments, as well as including a series of measures which would reduce existing (and future) pressures on the SPA, particularly as a result of recreational disturbance. Policy 4 states that:

*"A net gain in biodiversity will be sought and features of geological interest will be protected and enhanced through:*

*a) Protecting existing biodiversity and geodiversity assets by: ii. Protecting key assets for wildlife and geology, in particular the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area and Ramsar Site, from unacceptable levels of access and managing pressures for access to and disturbance of sensitive habitats."*

And

*d) Developments that are likely to have an adverse impact, either alone or in-combination, on the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area or other European Designated Sites must satisfy the requirements of the Habitats Regulations, determining site specific impacts and avoiding or mitigating against impacts where identified. Mitigation may involve providing or contributing towards a combination of the following measures:*

*i. Access and visitor management measures within the SPA*

The visitor centre at Summer Leys nature reserve provides a significant improvement in our ability to manage visitor pressure in this section of the SPA, the need for which is clearly stated in the above policy. The Policy seeks not just to prevent harmful development but also to promote measures to preserve and enhance the SPA, in line with the NPPF.

We had pre-application discussions with NNC planning officers and also discussed the application with NNC's ecologist who didn't have any objections to the proposal and we therefore see no issues with this application for a continued visitor centre. We are an active partner on NNC's SPA mitigation strategy working group and feel this proposal will continue to be of benefit to delivering the mitigation strategy by helping to positively impact visitor behaviour and providing a base for engagement activities in that section of the SPA.

### **Refreshments and toilets**

We plan to continue to offer tea, coffee and snacks from the visitors centre in order to attract more visitors over to engage with our staff and educational activities. It also means we can provide refreshments for events such as our wildlife watch and guided walks and any sales will go towards funding the new community and education officers that will be based on site. We have not seen any noticeable increase in litter since we began serving refreshments or an unmanageable number of visitors. Compostable toilets were also erected in the corner of the car park to provide facilities for visitors and those attending our events and activities.

### **Visitor Counters**

Visitor Counters were installed across the Reserve in June 2021, these will provide us with a baseline of visitor numbers and will allow us to assess and changes to visitor numbers. Car park monitoring has also been in place since early 2022 which has provided a number of visits per day.

### **Parking provision**

We previously discussed the proposal for a visitors centre with our volunteers and the local community (via Wollaston parish Council). Whilst supportive of the visitor centre they were keen that current levels of parking provision was maintained. We used the arrival of the visitors centre to refresh the car park, repainting the lines, adding 2 new disabled spaces, removing the mid-car park bunds to create replacement spaces (for those lost by creating a safe no cars zone around the visitor centre and toilets) and formalising spaces at the east end of the car park where current parking on verges can be dangerous to pedestrians and block access for Reserve vehicles. We also brought in car park charging (free for members) to help reduce anti-social behaviour in the evenings.

Since the introduction of the Visitors Centre we not seen a great increase in the number of people using the site. Although there has been an increase in wildlife enthusiasts and family groups this has been offset by a reduction in dog walkers. We also haven't seen any instances of people parking on the verges along Hardwater Road. Parking on Mary's Lane continues to occur, as it did before we installed the Centre and we have not noticed much difference in numbers of cars between before the Centre opened compared to now. People generally park in the paved/hard standing gaps and the few times it has been really busy is when there has been a rare bird on site or a sunny bank holiday.

Car park figures are shown below, based on the last 12 months the monthly average is 2466 and the daily average is 81 cars. Numbers increase in the summer compared to winter months and there are noticeable spikes around sightings of rare birds.

| Month   | Number of Cars | Month               | Number of Cars |
|---------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|
|         |                | Oct '22             | 2537           |
|         |                | Nov '22             | 2049           |
|         |                | Dec '22             | 1197           |
|         |                | Jan '23             | 1641           |
|         |                | Feb '23             | 1959           |
| Mar-22  | 3121           | Mar ' 23            | 2277           |
| Apr-22  | 3854           | Apr '23             | 3539           |
| May-22  | 3349           | May '23             | 3073           |
| Jun-22  | 6365           | Jun '23             | 2768           |
| Jul-22  | 2240           | July '23            | 2653           |
| Aug'22  | 2967           | Aug '23             | 3097           |
| Sep '22 | 5423           | Sept '23            | 2806           |
|         |                | <b>ANNUAL TOTAL</b> | <b>29596</b>   |

### Sustainability Statement

As a conservation charity, sustainability and reducing our environmental footprint are an integral part of our organisational aims. We believe in leading by example and at our Nene Wetlands Visitor Centre<sup>6</sup> (Rushden Lakes), we have worked hard to reduce and, where possible, eliminate the use of single use plastics. We also sell an expanding range of products to encourage our visitors to do the same. We also like to support small, independent and local businesses, and we stock a range of locally and sustainably produced items.

These are all practices that we have replicated at our new Summer Leys Visitor Centre. Although ideally, we would prefer to avoid the use of single use cups and plates entirely, the lack of a water supply on the site means that this isn't logistically possible. We therefore use the most environmentally friendly alternative and any single use cups, plates etc. are fully biodegradable, and made from recycled materials. We strongly encourage people to use the bins provided at the centre (that will also promote recycling), and educate them about the damage that rubbish can do to wildlife. There has been very little increase in litter around the centre and we have run regular litter picking events to reduce impacts from wider littering and which have also helped us engage with the public. In addition, we try to source our refreshments from local suppliers, thus helping to support the local economy.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.wildlifebcn.org/nene-wetlands>