

# Protecting Ashridge

## *Sue Justice*

The Chilterns Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation is the most extensive area of native beech woodland in England, and Ashridge is part of it. Back in May last year, we published news that Dacorum Borough Council was putting a temporary halt to most planning applications in our area, pending the development of a strategy to protect Ashridge from damage by excessive visitor numbers. The strategy was published in November 2022 and more detail is on <https://www.dacorum.gov.uk/home/planning-development/planning-strategic-planning/new-single-local-plan/chilterns-beechwoods-special-area-of-conservation>.

## **A summary**

There is an 'avoidance zone' drawn 500 metres away from the boundary of Ashridge, all round. This includes all of Aldbury to just west of the church, but not Church Farm or Tring Station. The Council says 'Within the zone there is a presumption against development, ie. ensuring no increase in the number of dwellings there'.

There is a much larger 'zone of influence' drawn 12.6 km outside the avoidance zone, where rules about building new housing, additional to the usual planning ones, will apply. For developments of 10 or more houses, one condition is for a green space close to the development (with features specified in the document) to be provided as an alternative to Ashridge. Smaller developments, if they cannot provide such a green space, may contribute to the upkeep of an existing one, at £4,251 per home, paid to Dacorum Council. The only existing ones identified are Chipperfield Common and Bunkers Park (east of Hemel) – both some way from here. There are also plans to monitor and manage the effects of visitors on the Ashridge site, and for a planning levy for this on any developments that are allowed.

## **A survey**

Evidence for this policy was first collected by visitor surveys. These showed some interesting facts, quoted here from the Dacorum planning document:

'The surveys recorded an average of around 318 parked cars at Ashridge Commons and Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest. These counts indicated potentially around 4,700 people per day on average visiting Ashridge Commons and Woods SSSI during the summer. This roughly equates to 1.7 million visitors to the site each year. The visitor surveys included 951 interviews with 97% of interviewees visiting directly from home, 2% visiting whilst on holiday and 1% were staying locally with friends/family.

'The most common activity undertaken was dog walking which accounted for almost half of all interviewees. This was closely followed by walking with less frequent activities including jogging/running and cycling.

'At six of the ten locations surveyed at the site, in excess of 95% of interviewees arrived by car. Travelling by car was also high at the other locations, however higher rates of visitors by foot (20-30%) were evident at Northchurch Common, Aldbury and Norcott Hill. Visitors typically spent around 1.5 hours on site. Routes walked on site were typically around 3km. The median distance between the interview location and the home postcode for those that travelled from home that day was 5.7 km, with 75% living within 12.6 km of Ashridge. The number of cars was generally 40% more at weekends than during the week.'

We have asked the National Trust if they would write an article for us about their future involvement in the strategy, as it appears that some money raised from any development will go to them to mitigate the effects of visitor impact.