

**Screening Opinion on the Impact of the  
Rochdale MBC Biodiversity and Development  
Supplementary Planning Document on the  
South Pennine Moors Special Area of  
Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area  
(SPA)**

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# **Screening Opinion on the Impact of the Rochdale MBC Biodiversity and Development Supplementary Planning Document on the South Pennine Moors Special Area of Conservation / Special protection Area**

## **1 Introduction**

1.1 Article 6(3) of the European Habitats Directive dealing with the conservation of European protected sites states that

‘Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans and projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site’s conservation objectives. In light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site and subject to the provisions of paragraph 4, the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only after ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned and, if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public.’

The purpose of Appropriate Assessment (AA) of land use plans is to ensure that protection of the integrity of European sites is a part of the planning process at a regional and local level. Appropriate Assessment can be seen as having a number of discrete stages -

- 1 Stage 1 - Screening
- 2 Stage 2 – Appropriate Assessment
- 3 Stage 3 – Assessment of Alternatives
- 4 Stage 4 – Assessment where no alternatives are available

This document comprises Stage 1 of the Appropriate Assessment process and contributes to the fulfillment of the Councils statutory duty as regards Article 6(3); that is, it is a Screening Opinion on whether or not the Rochdale MBC Biodiversity and Development Supplementary Planning Document (hereafter referred to as ‘the Plan’) will have an impact on the special interest of the South Pennine Moors SAC/SPA and therefore needs to undergo further Screening Opinions or a full Appropriate Assessment as the Plan develops.

1.2 The Greater Manchester Ecology Unit (GMEU), as the specialist ecological adviser to Rochdale MBC, has prepared this Screening Opinion. Natural England and the JNCC were consulted for information on the conservation objectives and favourable condition tables for the South Pennine Moors. GMEU ecologists, who are familiar with the site and its special interest, reviewed the ecological information for the site. The key vulnerabilities and sensitivities of the Moors are well understood by GMEU allowing for an informed assessment of the possible effects of the Plan, and any specific aims, objectives and policies contained in the Plan.

## **2 Brief description of the Plan**

The Plan is a consultation document with the overall objective of ‘ensuring no net loss of ecological interests or assets occurs and that opportunities to enhance such interest are incorporated within development proposals where possible’

The objectives of the SPD can be summarised as –

- To enhance the biodiversity interest of Rochdale Borough
- To ensure that development proposals support a sustainable ecological framework for Rochdale as a component of its essential green infrastructure
- To support the maintenance, restoration, expansion and good management of designated sites and priority habitats
- To safeguard protected and priority species and habitats

- To support the delivery of relevant BAP targets through development proposals
- To protect and improve wildlife corridors and stepping stones and the distribution and habitat resource for key species
- To promote public enjoyment of the natural environment close to where they live for recreation and education

### 3 Description of the South Pennine Moors SAC/SPA

This site forms part of the Southern Pennines lying between Ilkley in the north and the Peak District National Park boundary in the south. The majority of the site is within West Yorkshire but it also covers areas of Lancashire, Greater Manchester and North Yorkshire. The largest moorland blocks are Ilkley Moor, the Haworth Moors, Rishworth Moor and Moss Moor. The underlying rock is Millstone Grit which outcrops at Boulsworth Hill and on the northern boundary of Ilkley Moor. The moorlands are on a rolling dissected plateau between 300m and 450m AOD with a high point of 517m at Boulsworth Hill. The greater part of the gritstone is overlain by blanket peat with the coarse gravely mineral soils occurring only on the lower slopes. The site is the largest area of unenclosed moorland within West Yorkshire and contains the most diverse and extensive examples of upland plant communities in the county. Extensive areas of blanket bog occur on the upland plateaux and are punctuated by species rich acidic flushes and mires. There are also wet and dry heaths and acid grasslands. Three habitat types which occur on the site are rare enough within Europe to be listed on Annex 1 of the EC Habitats and Species Directive (92/43) EEC. These communities are typical of and represent the full range of upland vegetation classes found in the South Pennines. This mosaic of habitats supports a moorland breeding bird assemblage which, because of the range of species and number of breeding birds it contains, is of regional and national importance. The large numbers of breeding merlin *Falco columbarius*, golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria* and twite *Carduelis flavirostris* are of international importance.

### 4 Description of the South Pennine Moors SPA

Special Protection Areas (SPAs) are strictly protected sites classified in accordance with Article 4 of the [EC Directive on the conservation of wild birds \(79/409/EEC\)](#), also known as the Birds Directive, which came into force in April 1979. They are classified for rare and vulnerable birds, listed in Annex I to the Birds Directive, and for regularly occurring migratory species. The South Pennine Moors SPA includes the major moorland blocks of the South Pennines from Ilkley in the north to Leek and Matlock in the south. It covers extensive tracts of semi-natural moorland habitats including upland heath and blanket mire. The site is of European importance for several upland breeding bird species including birds of prey and waders.

### 5 Primary reason for designation of the SAC

#### 5.1 The site supports the following important habitats

##### 5.1.1 European Dry Heaths

The site is representative of upland dry heath at the southern end of the Pennine range, the habitat's most south-easterly upland location in the UK. Dry heath covers extensive areas, occupies the lower slopes of the moors on mineral soils or where peat is thin, and occurs in transitions to acid grassland, wet heath and **7130 blanket bogs**. The upland heath of the South Pennines is strongly dominated by heather *Calluna vulgaris*. Its main NVC types are H9 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Deschampsia flexuosa* heath and H12 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Vaccinium myrtillus* heath. More rarely H8 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Ulex gallii* heath and H10 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Erica cinerea* heath are found. On the higher, more exposed ground H18 *Vaccinium myrtillus* – *Deschampsia flexuosa* heath becomes more prominent. In the cloughs, or valleys, which extend into the heather moorlands, a greater mix of dwarf shrubs can be found together with more lichens and mosses. The moors support a rich invertebrate fauna, especially moths, and important bird assemblages.

### 5.1.2 Blanket Bogs

This site represents **blanket bog** in the South Pennines, the most south-easterly occurrence of the habitat in Europe. The bog vegetation communities are botanically poor. Hare's-tail cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum* is often overwhelmingly dominant and the usual bog-building *Sphagnum* mosses are scarce. Where the blanket peats are slightly drier, heather *Calluna vulgaris*, crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* and bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* become more prominent. The uncommon cloudberry *Rubus chamaemorus* is locally abundant in bog vegetation. Bog pools provide diversity and are often characterised by common cottongrass *E. angustifolium*. Substantial areas of the bog surface are eroding, and there are extensive areas of bare peat. In some areas erosion may be a natural process reflecting the great age (9000 years) of the South Pennine peats.

### 5.1.3 Old Sessile Oak woods

Around the fringes of the upland heath and bog of the south Pennines are blocks of **old sessile oak woods**, usually on slopes. These tend to be dryer than those further north and west, such that the bryophyte communities are less developed (although this lowered diversity may in some instances have been exaggerated by the effects of 19<sup>th</sup> century air pollution). Other components of the ground flora such as grasses, dwarf shrubs and ferns are common. Small areas of alder woodland along stream-sides add to the overall richness of the woods.

## 6 Primary reason for the designation of the SPA

The site qualifies for the designation by supporting populations of European importance of the following species listed on Annex I of the Directive:

### During the breeding season:

Golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, at least 3.3% of the breeding population in Great Britain  
Merlin *Falco columbarius*, at least 5.9% of the breeding population in Great Britain  
Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*, at least 1.4% of the breeding population in Great Britain  
Short-eared owl *Asio flammeus*, at least 2.5% of the breeding population in Great Britain

The SPA supports an internationally important assemblage of birds. During the breeding season the area regularly supports:

*Actitis hypoleucos*, *Calidris alpina schinzii*, *Carduelis flavirostris*, *Gallinago gallinago*, *Numenius arquata*, *Oenanthe oenanthe*, *Saxicola rubetra*, *Tringa tetanus*, *Turdus torquatus*, *Vanellus vanellus*

## 7 Impact of the Rochdale MBC Biodiversity and Development Supplementary Planning Document on the special interest of the South Pennine Moors SAC/SPA

I note that the overall aim of the document is to 'ensuring no net loss of ecological interests or assets occurs and that opportunities to enhance such interest are incorporated within development proposals where possible', and that specific objectives of the Plan are

- To support the maintenance, restoration, expansion and good management of designated sites and priority habitats
- To safeguard protected and priority species

The Plan refers specifically to the important status of the South Pennine Moors as a Natura 2000 site. It explicitly sets out the sets out some of the requirements of the legislation relating to European Protected Sites, in particular the need for Appropriate Assessment to be undertaken of plans that may affect the special interest of the Moors and the need to consult the Council, or the Council's specialist advisors about any development proposals that may affect the Moors. A brief description of the South Pennine Moors is provided in the document, together with a brief explanation of the special interest of the South Pennine Moors.

## 8 Conclusions

I would conclude that, since the overall aims and objectives of the Plan are compatible with maintaining and enhancing the special interest of the South Pennine Moors SAC, the Plan will not result in any detrimental effect on the special interest of the South Pennine Moors.

In fact, the overall impact of the SPD will be **positive** for the effective conservation of the South Pennine Moors SAC.

Further formal Assessment of the Plan is therefore not required.