

Ministry of Defence

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Description

1.1 Brief History of RAF Donna Nook Air Weapons Range

Development of air to ground target facilities from 1926 onwards in support of No 1 Air Gunnery Training School at RAF North Coates. The airfield at Donna Nook became operational in 1936 as a relief landing ground for RAF North Coates. Plans were made by the Air Ministry in 1938 to develop Donna Nook as a 3 concrete runway bomber airfield but shelved due to lack of funding.

At the start of WWII RAF Donna Nook initially acted as a Decoy Site after the fall of France. (Sir) Winston Churchill visited it on 8 August 1940 during his tour of the coastal defences. Full development of the airfield took place in late 1940 as the satellite to RAF North Coates. Donna Nook had 2 grass runways of 1,500 yards, extensive buildings with 1,435 personnel. Aircraft types included Blenheim, Beaufort, and Hudson from Coastal Command. Tragedy struck on 22 January 1942 when 5 Hudsons from 407 Sqn returned from a shipping strike. One crashed on landing hitting the Air Traffic Control Tower. All bombs on board exploded resulting in 16 personnel killed and many injured. As a result, the base was non-operational for a week.

When concrete runways were installed at RAF North Coates, all aircraft (2 squadrons of Beaufighter from 16 Group Strike Command) deployed to Donna Nook. In late 1944, the airfield became No 292 German POW Camp. Circa 3,000 POWs were held, mostly Poles and Ukrainians from Polish 1st and 2nd Divisions Germany Army captured in France. Many POWs remained after 1945 as displaced persons. The Donna Nook airfield closed in 1945 and the camp in 1948. Site was destroyed in the great floods of 1953. Range targets continued. Targets re-sited to original Donna Nook in 1975 and now occupy the 1926 site – full circle!

1.2 Bombing & Gunnery

- 1) **General** - The RAF Donna Nook Air Weapons Range has been active for over 30 years and is used by the Royal Air Force, Royal Navy and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation air forces for practice bombing, rocketry and gunnery. No live munitions are used but practice weapons may contain a small spotting charge to identify impact positions. Fixed wing fast jet aircraft use the range almost exclusively but there is also some military helicopter activity. Ground firing also takes place from a fixed ground point by Royal Ordnance. They use the range for proof testing 30mm and 20mm shells. Public safety is a major consideration and access is restricted when the ranges are active by means of signs, flags and lookouts.
- 2) **Hours of Operation** - The range is open Monday – Friday (excluding holidays) for day flying between 09:00 – 16:30. Donna Nook is open for night flying on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 1st Sep to 30 Apr in each year. On these nights, the range is open to 22:00. In total, the range is open for traffic for approx 1,800 hours per year but weather and other factors reduce the range availability to around 1,600 hours per year.
- 3) **Flying Activity** - The past 3 years have shown a steady increase from 145,148 to 153,900 passes. Coupled with this is a sharp rise in percentage terms of usage by rotary wing traffic: from 2.81% Apr 2000 to Mar in 2001 to 5.17% in 2003. These figures reflect the changes in world affairs. The growing need of close support by rotary traffic has resulted in the sharp rise. The steady growth of fixed wing movements is despite world-wide commitments on all forces.

HUMBER MANAGEMENT SCHEME

- 4) **Targets & Weapons Clearance** - There are 5 targets at the Range used for differing types of attacks and weaponry. Royal Ordnance also uses the range for proof testing of 30mm and 20mm shells. These are fired from a fixed ground point. There is some disturbance within a radius of 150ft of each target. All targets are kept clear of weapon debris by Explosive Ordnance Demolition (EOD) teams. Regular replacement and servicing of targets and the marine marker buoys on the seaward boundaries of the range also occurs.
- 5) **Maintenance** - Landward areas of the range are accessed via the beach to raise/lower warning flags, maintain/replace warning notices and beacons. Replacement/repair of buoys accessed from the sea and undertaken by Marine Services.

1.3 Non-Military Activity

- 1) **Bait Digging** - Bait digging for lugworm is a traditional activity, which takes place usually during the week, but access restrictions limit incursion. The range personnel do their best to discourage it and commercial exploitation is not tolerated. (Fisheries Annex A8)
- 2) **Recreational Use** - There is little public amenity value and recreational use is restricted to bird and seal watching. Illegal access by motorbikes, quad bikes etc is infrequent and taken seriously by both MoD and English Nature.
- 3) **Wildfowling** - None takes place on MoD land.
- 4) **Samphire Gathering** - Samphire gathering is a traditional activity, which takes place in August within the range boundaries. It is confined mainly to local people cutting by hand and the small amounts taken do not endanger its continuity as a pioneer saltmarsh species and consolidator of sediments. As far as we are aware, there is no commercial exploitation of the crop and it would not be tolerated. see (Saltmarsh Management Annex F2 & Recreation & Tourism Annex G13)
- 5) **Cockling** - harvesting is controlled by others and is not within MoD's remit. (Fisheries Annex A3)
- 6) **Conservation Management** - This is undertaken by the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust (LWT) who hold a Lease from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) of the dunes and upper shore. The Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust also holds a formal Licence from MoD for the remaining area down to High Water Mark. Conservation management is undertaken by permanent and volunteer wardens in association with English Nature who liaise with the Officer Commanding, Royal Air Force Donna Nook and Defence Estates East. This long standing partnership resulted in the creation in July 2003 of the first National Nature Reserve (NNR) on MoD property.
- 7) **Seal Wardening** – Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust employs a Seal Warden to manage both the seal rookery (500 – 600 Atlantic Grey Seals) and the public (60,000 – 70,000 annually) who predominate during the pupping season between Nov and Jan each year. Number of pups during 2003 & 2004 season 792 with approximately 31,000 visitors to view. MoD contributes towards the costs of this warden.
- 8) **Light Aircraft & Microlights** - The range liaises with North Coates Airfield and the member flying clubs in order to monitor light aircraft and microlight flights through the range. Numbers of the latter have decreased recently following their move from North Coates to Sam Holt.”

HUMBER MANAGEMENT SCHEME

Further Information

Appraisal Handbook for Sustainability and the Environment.

Cultural Heritage across the Defence Estate 2002 Annual Report.

Military Byelaws entitled “Donna Nook and Theddlethorpe Air Gunnery and Bombing Range” being Statutory Rules and Orders No 451 of 1939.

The Declaration of Interest between MoD and English Nature.

The Habitats and Birds Directives and RAMSAR Convention - Memorandum of Understanding between MoD, DoE, Defra, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Welsh Assembly Government, The Scottish Executive and the Northern Ireland Office.

The MoD Conservation Magazine Sanctuary.

The Stewardship of the Defence Estate 2002.

The Wash and North Norfolk Coast EMS Management Plan.

The Wash Estuary Management Plan.

Walks of MoD Land – booklet.

www.mod.uk

www.defence-estates.mod.uk

Factors arising from the activity

Factors arising from the activity – Bearing in mind the proposal to agree and publish the Humber Management Scheme, RAF Donna Nook and its conservation partner Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust are both considering the need to prepare management plans in consultation with the Grantham office of English Nature. This to formally set out the management measures required (and those currently undertaken) to protect and conserve the environment and manage the National Nature Reserve. Consideration is also being given to the holding of conservation meetings at suitable intervals at which conservation and environmental issues may be discussed. The range reports to 1 Group RAF and Ministry of Defence Directorate Air Staff (Secretariat) and is advised by Defence Estates on environmental matters either by direct liaison or through the Defence Estates Conservation & Biodiversity office.

Effects on Bird Populations – Birds are tolerant of fixed wing aircraft and annual counts over a 20 year period show no correlation between the numbers of birds observed within the range and the level of aircraft activity. However, studies show that birds are particularly sensitive to helicopters but the level of activity is low at Donna Nook. When pairs of helicopters arrive at the range, one is always held on the ground at the Helicopter Landing Pad. During severe weather, all flying use of the range is suspended.

Factors arising from the activity

Activity	Location	Present /historic levels of activity	Existing management Responsible Organisation	Relevant Authority Bold = Lead	Possible effect on features	Significant Effects
Military Activity						
J1/ Low flying fixed wing aircraft	RAF Donna Nook Air Weapons range	15390 passes per year (15148 in 2000)	MoD	MoD	Non-physical disturbance – Noise and Visual Disturbance to passage and wintering birds and breeding rookery of Atlantic Grey Seals within flight path. Birds and seals are tolerant of fixed wing aircraft and appear to have become habituated to movement of aircraft at this location.	NO
J2/ Military Helicopters	RAF Donna Nook	Low 5.17% of all aircraft passes (2.81% during April 00-Mar 01)	MoD	MoD	Non-physical disturbance – Noise and Visual Moderate disturbance to passage and wintering birds and to seals where rotary craft are very close.	NO
J3/ Bombing and gunnery	RAF Donna Nook	Moderate	MoD	MoD	Non-physical disturbance – Noise and Visual Localised disturbance to birds. Strafing targets put out of bounds during seal pupping because of the numbers of seals at target points. No known disturbance to rookery.	NO
J4/ Weapons Clearance – (EOD)	RAF Donna Nook	High	MoD	MoD	Physical damage: Abrasion Surface damage within 150-ft radius of each of the 5 targets to unvegetated areas. Minor damage to intertidal areas. Clearance obligatory for environmental and safety reasons.	NO
J5/ Military Target Repair	RAF Donna Nook	Low	MoD	MoD	Physical damage: Abrasion Vehicles (tractor/landrover) damage to intertidal areas.	NO
J6/ Maintain /replace: warning flags/notices/ buoys	RAF Donna Nook	Daily for flags, low for remainder	MoD	MoD	Physical damage: Abrasion Abrasion to pioneer saltmarsh by vehicles from base to northern flags and to saltmarsh warning boards.	NO

Activity	Location	Present /historic levels of activity	Existing management Responsible Organisation	Relevant Authority Bold = Lead	Possible effect on features	Significant Effects
J7/ Visiting Rapier Units on Exercise	RAF Donna Nook	Low – occasional by arrangement	MoD	MoD	Physical damage: Abrasion Vehicle damage to saltmarsh	NO
Non-Military Flying						
J8/ Non-Military flying – Light aircraft (Annex G2)	North Coates Airfield		Civilian Aviation Authority - MoD	CAA MoD LA	Non-physical disturbance – Noise and Visual Max flight height for arriving and leaving aircraft is 500 ft. Minor disturbance to Little Terns at Skidbrooke Ridge within southern part of range. Minor disturbance to Little Terns just outside the Danger Area at Saltfleet if aircraft fly very low but no instances known. Minor disturbance to roosting birds during the winter.	NO

Internal Natural Factors

High tides and strong winds cause sand and shingle to migrate southwards down the coast, this alters the topography but these are long term changes. The Atlantic Grey Seals rookery is increasing in size. The increasing numbers are forcing the animals to move further towards Saltfleet.

External factors

RAF Donna Nook range is likely to remain operational for the foreseeable future with flying activity increasing slightly above current levels. Helicopter activity has risen sharply over the past two years, but is a relatively small proportion of aircraft passes.

Future Management

Rationale – RAF Donna Nook Air Weapons range is of national importance to the MoD and its military use is considered a matter of priority. The MoD is equally aware of the international importance of the Humber Estuary in ecological terms and is committed under the Declaration of Intent between the MoD and English Nature to protect wherever possible the nature conservation assets of the area. There are no site management plans but this is being addressed with English Nature’s Grantham office in order both the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust and RAF Donna Nook have either inter-linked separate plans or one overall covering all aspects. The MoD recognises the concerns of English Nature and the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust with regard to helicopter activity and abrasion of the vegetated areas of saltmarsh. The MoD will continue to consult with English Nature and relevant authorities in the event of any significant change in the operational use of the range.

MoD will continue to rely on the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust to manage the conservation interests at RAF Donna Nook through the formal arrangements already in place. This partnership brings mutual benefit to both parties and the environment as a whole.

In relation to the private flying activity from North Coates Airfield situated along the coast to the north of the range, flying control for aircraft passing over the range will remain in RAF control. This is formalised in a Letter of Agreement with North Coates Airfield and will continue, revised as necessary. The attitude between the range and North Coates coupled to the local population is very good.

Management Action

Activity	Factor	Proposed management actions	Timetable	Implementation Bold = Lead RA
Military Activity				
J1/ Low flying fixed wing aircraft	F3	Review Military activities including military aircraft usage, bombing and gunning, noise, weapons clearance and targetry	31 Dec 06.	MoD
J2/ Military Helicopters	F4	Develop a Conservation Management Plan Action – MoD (Defence Estates) in consultation with EN and LWT.		
J3/ Bombing and gunnery	F3			
J4/ Weapons Clearance – (EOD)	F3			
J5/ Military Target Repair	F3			
J6/ Maintain /replace: warning flags/notices/ buoys	F3	Monitor impact on pioneer saltmarsh Review transport routes used.	By Dec 04	MoD
J7/ Visiting Rapier Units on Exercise	F3	Monitor abrasion to saltmarsh Review areas used on exercise by Rapier units. To consider type of use and military need. To assess impact and to agree areas to be used wherever practical to minimise impact.	Dec 04	MoD

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Activity	Factor	Proposed management actions	Timetable	Implementation Bold = Lead RA
Non-Military Flying				
J8/ Non-Military flying – Light aircraft (Annex G2)	F3	<p>Continue dialogue with North Coates Airfield and flying clubs to highlight regulations, sensitive areas and explain impact they may have on EMS interest features, and encourage their membership of advisory groups.</p> <p>Research low flying activity causing disturbance. Microlights have now moved from North Coates to Sam Holt.</p> <p>Promote letter of Agreement whereby Donna Nook controls all aircraft movements over the range from North Coates airfield. Develop network with conservation site managers to record incidents and establish method for estimating height and range of aircraft for use in the field.</p>		LA