

St Catherine's Hill & Town Common Management Steering Group
Minutes of Meeting, Thursday 7 October 2015, 12.30
Civic Offices, Bridge Street

Present:

Cllr Margaret Phipps (CBC, DCC, HPC) – MP, David Mariner (FSCH) – DM, Nick Squirrell (NE) – NS, Helen Powell (NE) – HP, Alan Ottaway (CED) - AO, Gary Powell (ARC) – GP, Robin Harley (CED) – RH, Paul Atwell (UHP) - PA.

1. Welcome and Introduction

1.1 RH welcomed the group.

2. Apologies

2.1 Apologies were received from Cllr Sue Spittle (CBC), Amanda Collins (BW) and Chris Gordon (WCRA)

3. Minutes of the meeting on 23 April 2015

3.1 These were agreed as a true and accurate record

4. Matters arising

4.1 Fire update:

- we are not expecting a quick recovery but there has been some rapid growth in burn area of mainly grasses
- there has been lasting positive support from the public and hands on assistance initially
- the burn will allow some experimental mowing as in vegetation terms it is a blank canvas
- Improvements have been proposed for the Dudmoor Lane area – these include an additional hydrant, turning/passing areas and further vegetation clearance, all of which would be subject to funding. The access for DRFS from the A338 is being improved as part of the Spur Road highways works
- hopefully the existing pager system will be improved so that people are made more quickly aware in future
- HP mentioned that the existing mown breaks helped but there was no apparent clear strategy from a fire prevention point of view. GP said that mown strips were for ecological reasons but had a secondary fire purpose. He outlined other issues that occurred on the day, including poor radio system and delay in getting to fire
- RH mentioned that the tree felling on top of the hill to create a north-south open link has a secondary benefit as a canopy break to reduce risk of canopy fire spread. This is supported by the fire service. NS & AO suggested that this aspect of plan was accelerated to reduce fire risk, along with the removal of rhododendron as a ladder fuel. **ACTION 1:** RH to concentrate on this area in 2016/17 proposals.
- There is a need to identify sensitive areas on the site where fire is more damaging to the habitat so DRFS can prioritise. RH said that he has given DRFS a habitat map showing the very wet areas
- NS said that key risks and topographical features should be identified, particularly taking into account A338 which can act as a break. There is a need to identify important areas to protect
- Overall there was consensus that DRFS need to collaborate/ coordinate much good information which has or can be provided to them by partners to improve ways and means to respond to fire and help lessen impacts. **ACTION 2:** RH & GP to liaise with DRFS to implement.

5. Felling Works Update

- 5.1 RH outlined the planned works on Council land as discussed at the last meeting. Following a site meeting in the summer with Dick Preston, the felling licence had been drafted and was largely ready to send. RH outlined the proposed works again and circulated the table showing timber numbers and volumes. Once submitted, turnaround for permission is about 3 months, which would mean a January start date
- 5.2 RH explained that there were also outstanding works from last year which already had a licence. AO & MP suggested that these could be done sooner as there is no need to wait.
- 5.3 GP outlined the ARC component of the felling works, both around the quarry area and south of the gun club.
- 5.4 The group were happy with these works as proposed. GP said that the next step was to write an improved job spec, building on much good work in the original but taking on board lessons learned and experience gained in Phase 1, including method statement, to go out to tender. One contractor (RP Joyce) has ruled himself out of the tendering process. **ACTION 3:** RH and GP to co-ordinate this. Aim to get a few quotes
- 5.5 Likely that the same whole-tree chipper will be used as everyone tends to use the same company. Site visits with SG can be carried out once job spec is agreed and we have quotes.
- 5.6 AO pointed out that we need to stress to contractors that point of contact for public is the land managers, not the contractors themselves or Councillors

6. Commons Consultation

- 6.1 HP said that this had been raised at the Town Common Advisory Committee, with NE proposing to employ a consultant to carry out a consultation. As Town Common is registered common land, there are various hurdles that have to be jumped over to carry out works, particularly if fencing/grazing is a possible end option.
- 6.2 There is DEFRA endorsed guidance called "A Common Purpose" that can be referred to. If we want to fence for grazing which is an aspiration for the plan we need consent from the Secretary of State and have to demonstrate proper consultation, taking into account all interests.
- 6.3 MP asked why Sopley Common is included. HP explained that it is part of the overall Town Common SSSI and it makes sense to do all at once. MP said that there has already been a consultation at Sopley and for Town Common, during preparation of the management plan. Why are we having to repeat? MP noted there was also a debate amongst 'experts' over whether grazing was detrimental or beneficial in terms of nature conservation
- 6.4 HP replied that grazing is not necessarily the aim of the consultation or only focus. It is recognised that Town Common needs management and we need to determine which management is most appropriate. RH said that there are lots of factors but we need to remember that this is not a surprise for the public as the management plan consulted widely on all issues, not least grazing and it went into the plan as an aspiration for the site
- 6.5 GP pointed out that grazing can be an issue for reptiles if done incorrectly
- 6.6 NS said that Dorset Heaths should have a 'New Forest' feel. If grazing goes ahead we are talking about relatively few animals over part of the year. MP suggested that this would mean a lot of time and expense (e.g. fencing the whole site) for limited benefits. RH suggested that there may be other options, e.g. temporary fencing over part of the site. NS felt that interior fencing is not ideal aesthetically. He said that current management is not sufficient, especially in wetter areas.
- 6.7 NS said that additional items would be needed – e.g. trough, handling unit etc, which would also need consent. Any fencing must not restrict existing accesses but may help restrict undesirable activities. The issue needs further exploration.
- 6.8 PA felt that the whole issue needs deeper discussion by Steering Group before taking things forward. HP would like to involve the consultant in these discussions. NS – there is a need to discuss the principles further and set parameters. He would not like to manage in the same way as Hengistbury Head (set paddocks). There is a need to have open discussion
- 6.9 PA pointed out that the process is important and there was a need to get agreement from the group initially on how to move forward. There was a general feeling that the group didn't want to start from

scratch when so much good work has fully engaged the public and stakeholders already and created consensus.

- 6.10 NS suggested asking the consultant to give a presentation. **ACTION 4:** HP said she would get them to look at existing plan and see if we have already done part of what is needed, then call a meeting.
- 6.11 AO suggested that SWOT analysis and preparation of preferences would be helpful
- 6.12 NS said we should also look at stocking rate and carry out cost-benefit analysis, **ACTION 5:** PA and NS to look at this

7. Monitoring Update

- 7.1 RH said that dipwell monitoring had continued and that some of the burn areas would be included in the vegetation monitoring
- 7.2 Rainfall data seems to tally with dipwells although some barely change (copy attached)

8. Any other business

- 8.1 GP pointed out that he was due to have an operation on his foot on 13 November and would be off for a bit and then unable to drive

9. Date of next meeting

- 9.1 To be confirmed but possible late November/early December