

St Catherine's Hill and Town Common – towards the new management plan

An update from the Management Plan Steering Group – June 2011

Where we've got to

A steering group for the management plan of St Catherine's Hill and Town Common in Christchurch was established in 2009. This group comprises representatives from the following bodies:

Hurn Parish Council, Ward Councillors, Christchurch Borough Council, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Natural England, Friends of St Catherine's Hill, West Christchurch Residents Association, Sembcorp Bournemouth Water, and the Urban Heaths Partnership.

Assisted by facilitators the group members are working closely together with a shared aim of delivering a plan that reflects the aspirations of local people as well as securing positive measures for the wildlife, habitats and landscapes of the Hill, including woodland and heathland.

The steering group is making good progress working together to produce a management plan for the area. The area covered by the plan includes the plateau on top of the hill, the north western slopes leading down to the A338, the western slopes leading down to the residential area (e.g. to rear of Orford Close, Hillside Drive, Aston Mead) and the southern slopes leading down towards Sandy Lane and St Catherine's Hill Lane.

An important stage in the process was the commissioning and completion of an independent hydrological study. This report advises a cautious approach to management work, particularly on slopes and is helping to shape future proposals for the site.

What's happening now?

Developing proposals for site management

The steering group is meeting on a regular basis, both on and off site to develop and agree future management proposals. The site has been divided into compartments and each of these has been considered separately against a list of factors such as hydrology, archaeology, landscape importance and wildlife value.

This has been a very productive process with all steering group members taking an active involvement and ensuring that the views of those that they represent are properly considered. Members have been willing to find a middle way where there have been differing opinions and consensus has been achieved over a number of key issues.

There is general agreement over:

- The importance of ensuring that there are no adverse hydrological impacts on adjacent properties and that existing drainage systems are working
- The need to remove invasive non-native species where possible

- The need to retain and manage buffer strips adjacent to housing, A338 and gun club
- The protection of historic and archaeological features
- The need to manage trees, particularly when they are all of the same age (and will die at the same time) or in poor health
- The importance of linking existing open areas to form wildlife corridors
- The need to progress and prioritise management in a phased and gradual way
- The need to establish the cost of future maintenance and ensure its adequate funding
- The need to retain the tranquil nature of the site and amenity value

The approach of the Steering Group

All members of the steering group are aware of the different purposes that need to be met by the management plan. There is strong agreement that no one objective will be achieved at the expense of others – all the different needs for the site will be taken into account and given due consideration.

The site (and its rare and important wildlife and archaeology) is protected by a number of designations (e.g. Site of Special Scientific Interest) and the two main land managers (Christchurch Borough Council and Amphibian and Reptile Conservation) have a legal duty to manage the site in a way that benefits the special features found there. The habitats found on the site, including heathland and woodland are important for a whole community of dependent plants and animals including reptiles, mammals, butterflies and birds. All species found on site are valued and contribute to the biodiversity of the area as a whole.

Trees and woodland are an important part of the character of the site and are appreciated by people for a range of benefits. The need to have public support and understanding for any change to tree cover and woodland management in the future is recognised by the Steering Group and this will be reflected in the general scope of the management plan.

What happens next

A working draft management plan is now being prepared and once the steering group has reached agreement this will go before the Council's Community Services Committee for their consideration. Once approved, the draft plan will then be made available to everyone for comment, during a six week public consultation period.

At this main consultation stage, there will be a user-friendly system for people to comment and offer feedback on the proposals. There will also be a drop-in session at the community hall, so people can discuss issues directly with the steering group members. All the comments will again be taken into account before a final plan is then produced.

Details of these stages in preparing the management plan will be reported on the Council's website (www.dorsetforyou.com), the West Christchurch Residents Association website (www.wcresidents.co.uk) and through the local media. In addition, anyone who would like to be kept up to date with progress directly can call Christchurch Countryside Service on 01425 272479 or email countryside.service@christchurch.gov.uk to join a mailing list.