

ST CATHERINE'S HILL & TOWN COMMON MANAGEMENT PLAN

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION DRAFT FEBRUARY 2012

Produced on behalf of St Catherine's Hill & Town Common Management Plan Steering Group



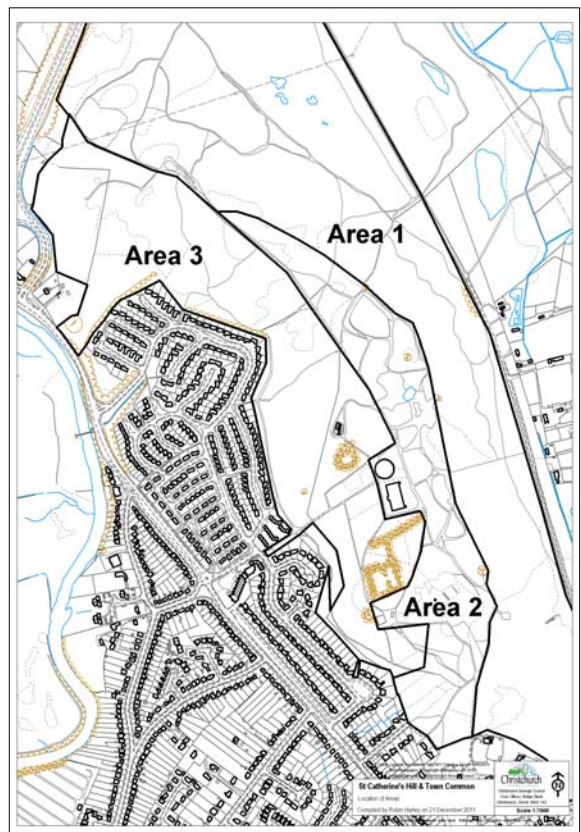
This document sets out the key proposals in the draft management plan for St Catherine's Hill & Town Common. The full draft runs to 71 pages, including much background information such as the area's history and different uses, and the environmental importance of the site. The full version also addresses the resource implications of the proposals, and it includes maps, images and rationale which help explain the detail of the proposed actions. References to relevant sections of the full Plan are given below in brackets, in bold. The complete version can be viewed as hard copy (see public consultation section at the end of this document) or downloaded from the web at the following link (this may have to be copied into a web browser search engine):

<http://www.dorsetforyou.com/christchurch/stcatherineshill/managementplan>

1. Introduction to the site (see Section 1, page 1 of full plan)

1.1 St Catherine's Hill & Town Common is located to the north-west of Christchurch. It is an important recreational resource for local residents and much of the wider community. It is also a highly valued area of land due its significant wildlife, geology and history. Covering 162 hectares (400 acres) it rises to 53m (174 ft) above sea level. The Plan covers areas of heathland, wooded heath and woodland that form part of the much wider area known as Town Common Site of Special Scientific Interest.

1.2 The area south of the A338 has been divided into three separate areas (see map). This management plan is concerned with St Catherine's Hill and the western slopes of Town Common, an area of 52 hectares (128 acres). These form Areas 2 and 3. It does not include the rest of Town Common including Area 1, and areas outside 1, including that to the east of the disused railway line.



Map to show the locations of Areas 1,2 & 3

1.3 The land under consideration is owned largely by Christchurch Borough Council, CBC (Area 3) and the Malmesbury Estate, the latter under lease by the Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Trust, ARC (Area 2). Additional small areas include water reservoirs owned by Sembcorp Bournemouth Water, SBW, Christchurch Gun Club which runs a shooting range, and a telecommunications station leased by CBC. There are commoner's rights on Area 2, and Area 3 is designated as public open space.

2. The Management Plan Steering Group (see Section 1.2, page 3 of full plan)

2.1 The St Catherine's Hill & Town Common Management Plan Steering Group has met regularly since May 2009 to formulate the draft Plan. The Steering Group is serviced by CBC and some meetings have been helped by appointed facilitators. The formation of this group was an important step in a situation of differing views about management needs for the site.

2.2 Through many meetings and site visits the group has worked hard to deliver an agreed draft plan that aims to reflect the aspirations of local people, assists the land managers (CBC and ARC) to meet their statutory responsibilities for the wildlife, habitats and landscapes of the Hill whilst giving due regard to those who use and live close to the site. Members of the Steering Group are as follows:

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust; Christchurch Borough Council; Christchurch Borough Council Ward Councillors; Dorset Urban Heaths Partnership (UHP); Friends of St Catherine's Hill (FSCH); Hurn Parish Council (HPC); Natural England (NE); Sembcorp Bournemouth Water (SBW); West Christchurch Residents Association (WCRA).

2.3 The members acknowledge each other's different interests and the draft Plan reflects the different perspectives without giving priority to one set of views above another. The Steering Group has worked well together, finding solutions to issues through compromise where there have been differences of opinions. This group will cease to function upon the satisfactory completion of the Plan, but a new site management steering group, comprising the same members will oversee the implementation and monitoring of the Plan. The Forestry Commission (FC) is not part of the Steering Group, but acts in an advisory capacity as necessary, and is committed to continue this role as needed during the implementation and monitoring of the agreed Plan.

3. Guiding principles for the management plan (see Section 1.8, page 4 of full plan)

The Steering Group agreed that the preparation and the proposed implementation of the Management Plan should be guided by the following principles:

- **Actions will be discussed not imposed**
Actions to fulfil the Management Plan will only happen after full explanation and discussion amongst people and organisations who care for, use and enjoy the area
- **Actions will be consensus-based**
As much consensus as possible will be sought for all main objectives and actions
- **Gradual change**
Change brought about by the Plan will be gradual and incremental rather than sudden and sweeping

- **Good neighbour protocol**

A 'good neighbour' approach to operations will be adopted, to minimise noise, disturbance and any other potential effects of management operations, especially those involving transportation, burning and chipping of timber
- **Responsible use**

The site, its wildlife, and its amenity, is greatly valued by many people, from near and far, for a range of reasons. Everyone, whatever their main interest, has a responsibility to respect the sensitivities of the site and the interests of other users
- **Ecological whole**

The Management Plan does not cover all parts of Town Common SSSI, but the site must be appreciated as an ecological whole, which covers areas 1, 2, and 3, and which links to neighbouring heath, woodland, wood-heath, wetland, and river valley habitats
- **Nature and people**

The Management Plan will set out the needs of people, who live nearby and use the site alongside the wildlife and habitats found there. Whilst safeguarding, restoring and caring for the wildlife species and habitats present, it must also reflect the site's vital contribution to people's wellbeing and the wider natural environment
- **A multi-purpose outlook**

Many actions proposed in the Management Plan, such as vegetation management, wildlife management, woodland management, and path management, can fulfil several purposes beyond their primary role. When actions are taken they should serve as many objectives as possible
- **Roles and resources**

Actions will be implemented according to the lead roles and available resources, which are indicated in the Management Plan (*see Section 9, page 70 of full plan*)
- **Monitoring**

On-going monitoring will gauge the effects of change and will inform future actions. Those with the identified lead roles in the Plan will have lead responsibility for the respective monitoring. The results of monitoring will be placed in the public domain.

The Management Plan context

4. Wildlife interest (*see Section 2.8, pages 7-10 of full plan*)

- 4.1 St Catherine's Hill forms part of Town Common Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which dates from 1951. It is part of the Dorset Heaths Special Area of Conservation (SAC), and the Dorset Heathlands Special Protection Area (SPA) and Dorset Heathlands Ramsar site. These are international wildlife designations concerned with protecting rare flora and fauna. They provide a legal basis for maintaining and restoring a site's wildlife habitats and species, place obligations on the owners and reflect the economic and social interests of the location. The Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 provide the UK framework for the Directive. Government authorities and public bodies, including Christchurch Borough Council, are required to have regard to the Habitats and Species Regulations.

4.2 Largely reflecting the special importance of the heathland, the SSSI was notified for the following reasons:

- Extensive areas of dry heath, with flushes on slopes giving rise to wet heath and valley mire, the latter of which can be floristically rich
- Hummocks and pools in the floodplain supporting bog-mosses and associated vegetation including the nationally scarce Brown Beaked Sedge
- Breeding populations of all six reptile species native to Britain including Smooth Snake and Sand Lizard
- Heathland birds, including Dartford Warbler, Nightjar and Hobby
- The assemblage of birds in the broadleaved and mixed woodland, including Great Spotted Woodpecker and Buzzard
- Dragonfly and damselfly species including the 'nationally scarce' Scarce Chaser, Hairy Dragonfly and Downy Emerald
- Insects including the Heath Grasshopper and the Silver-studded Blue butterfly
- Wet heath and pools which provide habitat with a variety of wintering and breeding wildfowl and waders, such as Snipe and Redshank

4.3 Land managers of SSSIs are legally bound to bring land under their control into a condition where the features for which they are designated are protected or enhanced to achieve a 'favourable' condition. The need to ensure that proportions of the heathland in the SSSI's units are helped to approach a favourable condition is one of the main components of the Management Plan.

5. Physical features and main geology (see Section 3.1, page 14 of full plan)

5.1 The prominent ridge at St Catherine's Hill peaks at 45m in the south and 49m in the north at Blackwater Hill. The south-west hillside varies in slope from almost level in the plateau top to around 40 - 45°, and there are a number of side valleys. The geology is of the Eocene/Pleistocene era. Spectacular views from the summit show the broad floodplains of the Avon and Stour and extend to the New Forest, Isle of Wight and Purbeck Hills.

5.2 The hill is capped by river terrace gravels, consisting of flintstones in a coarse sandy matrix. Sandwiched between these gravels and a bottom clay layer (Parkstone Clay) are stoneless sands (Branksome Sand). There are also thinner clayey layers in places in the Terrace Gravels and the Branksome Sands. The middle and upper strata can be observed in the faces of small gravel quarries and pits at the top and east side of the hill.

6. Hydrology and hydro-geology (see Sections 3.4 – 3.12, page 15 of full plan)

6.1 There are no rivers or streams in the area covered by the Management Plan, although there are a number of ditches at the base of the west side of the hill. These ditches intercept water from seepages, and transfer it to the surface drainage network in West Christchurch.

6.2 The Management Plan Steering Group commissioned an assessment of the 'hydro-geology' of the site (Allen, 2010). The report was mainly concerned with the hydro-geological properties of the west side of the watershed given local residents' concerns about flooding in this area. Selected households in West Christchurch with water issues were visited. The report's recommendations with regard to potential for tree removal

and heath restoration on different substrates of the site's west slopes are reproduced in the full draft of the Management Plan. The Steering Group has taken careful note of the findings of this hydro-geology report, which recommended that a precautionary approach with careful monitoring and mitigation where necessary, would minimise any negative impacts. This report has informed all of the relevant proposals in the draft Management Plan.

7. History (see Section 5, pages 31-33 of full plan)

- 7.1 There is much evidence of the site's rich history, from ancient built features that are not always easily seen, through to the very evident cultural landscape of its heathland that formed as a result of human activity of the Bronze Age several thousand years ago.
- 7.2 The ridge of St Catherine's Hill has long been a feature; a lookout, beacon site and more recently a trig point overlooking the marshy lower reaches of the Rivers Avon and Stour. Past descriptions and old maps show the inevitable changes on the hill, with an ebb and flow in the balance of trees and more open heath. The full draft Plan explains the site's main use from early history when Palaeolithic flint tools indicates the presence of early hunters and the remains of 15 tumuli or barrows, through to more recent economic activity, from which sand and gravel quarrying, mainly from the eastern side of the ridge plateau, is very evident. Twentieth Century features on the hill include the reservoirs, Wireless Transmission Station and an emergency bunker.

8. Access, amenity and recreational use (see Section 6, pages 34-40 of full plan)

- 8.1 The site is appreciated as an informal amenity by many people on a daily basis. Visitors include many nearby residents, but regular users travel from locations such as Bournemouth and Poole and people with more specialist interests come from further afield. The location is an important part of many people's quality of life and there is widespread interest in how the place is cared for.
- 8.2 People who use and visit the site can be:
- Enjoying the natural environment, tranquility, open space and views
 - Walking (much of the ridge plateau on top of the Hill is accessible for the less physically able and all terrain buggy users)
 - Dog walking (including professional dog-walking)
 - Encountering and learning about wildlife
 - Children playing or in guided groups
 - Geocaching (treasure hunting)
 - Orienteering
 - Bird watching
 - Jogging
 - Surveying and wildlife monitoring
 - Cycling
 - Horse riding
 - Gun Club members, who come to shoot in one of the quarries.

- 8.3 Feedback shows that people visiting the site like the contrasting feelings of openness and enclosure in different parts and that this variety of experience is important. Some people enjoy the site's relative tranquility; others are more intent on gentle and refreshing exercise.
- 8.4 Visitors to the site use the footpaths and several other permissive routes which are established throughout the site. Some of the permissive routes are across more fragile areas of heathland.
- 8.5 The site contains a statutory bridleway running along the north-south axis, offering varied terrain and commanding views along the ridgeline. The bridleway is used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders. The bridleway is waymarked and easy to follow for cyclists and horses.
- 8.6 Dog-walking is a highly popular activity at the site. A survey of 201 visitors at the site in October 2007 – August 2008, found that 70 per cent of visitors were walking their dog. Some of these visitors had other interests, such as enjoying nature and scenery, and gaining exercise for themselves. Site wardens from CBC, UHP, and ARC, enjoy good relationships with the dog walking community. Despite the heavy use of the site, the majority of dogs are walked in a responsible way and kept to main paths.

9. Education, events and interpretation (see Section 6.35, page 39 of full plan)

- 9.1 The site is an important learning resource for people of all ages. Several interpretation boards explain the wildlife and history of the site, and educational visits and outdoor projects are carried out by groups including Wildlife Watch, Guides, Brownies and Rainbows, Scouts, Cubs and Beavers.
- 9.2 Both CBC and ARC hold occasional guided walks and events on site. These are supplemented by a diverse programme of activities throughout the year coordinated by FSCH. This programme includes guided walks, talks, demonstrations, and active involvement of participants.

10. Influencing the site and helping care for it (see Section 6.18-6.26, pages 36-37 of full plan)

- 10.1 Events and activities on the site mainly involve FSCH and the Town Common Advisory Committee, supplemented by input from the UHP. They allow a wide range of relevant interest groups and local resident representatives to influence the site's management and to learn about the different uses and perspectives people have for the site. Opportunities for volunteering to help with practical management, monitoring and wardening activities are provided by ARC and the UHP. Christchurch Countryside Volunteers, coordinated by CBC Countryside Service, have been undertaking practical management on the Hill since 1997 and make an important contribution to the maintenance and the valued character of the site.
- 10.2 The Steering Group acknowledge that vital to the success of this Management Plan is the continuing proper involvement of local people and consideration of their views.

Main objectives of the Management Plan

The following objectives provide the framework for proposals in the plan. They have been agreed by the Steering Group and describe the desired direction of management for St Catherine's Hill and Town Common (Areas 2 and 3). The objectives are not in any particular order. All the objectives are 'ideal' positions and the practical measures deriving from them will be undertaken as far as is practical. These proposals are set in the context of a 25 year vision for the site (*see Section 1.12, page 6 of full plan*).

11. OBJECTIVE A Enhance ecological integrity, manage and protect habitats and species that are a feature of the site (*see Sections 8.2-8.40, pages 42-55 of full plan*)

11.1 After many meetings and site visits, the steering group agreed a series of maps (*see Maps 1-4, pages 48-51 in the full plan*). These illustrate the main proposed changes to the habitats found on site. The steering group first divided the site into the three main existing habitat types: woodland, wooded heath (the intermediate stage between woodland and heathland) and open heath (*see Section 8.26 in the full plan*).

11.2 Then, by looking at each compartment against a series of influencing factors (e.g. hydrology, archaeology, ecology, improving views and important trees and woodland), potential opportunities to improve habitats and overall site condition were discussed. These were then examined on site again and refined until general agreement was reached on these proposals. From these proposals, maps showing the existing and proposed extent of these habitats were produced (*see next page*).

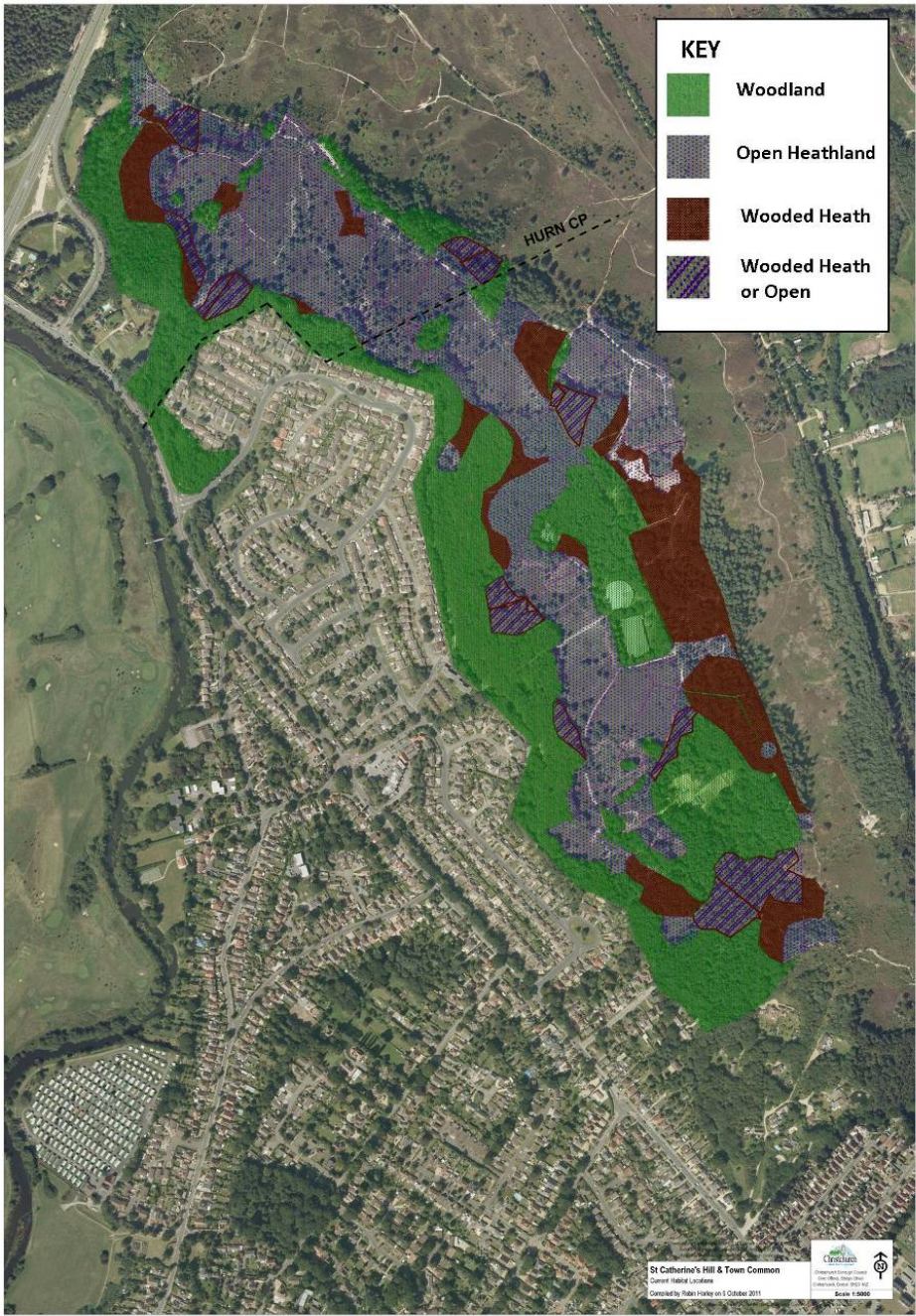
11.3 Management of these habitats, particularly where there is change from woodland to a more open landscape but also to improve the quality of areas of retained woodland in the long-term, will involve the felling of trees. Where this occurs, felling of non-native trees (e.g. Maritime Pines) and trees in poor condition will take priority. Felling has also been designed to: create wildlife corridors to connect isolated heathland, widen some footpaths to create rides, open up marshy areas to allow light into pools and open views and sightlines to enhance enjoyment of hidden landscape and topography.

11.4 Main proposed actions:

- A precautionary approach to works and monitoring to address concerns about drainage off the hill and possible flooding;
- Gradual management of the mixed habitats of woodland, wooded heath and open heathland towards the scheme shown on the maps;
- Retention of significant areas of managed woodland as a component of the overall mosaic of habitats and for its recreational and wildlife interest;
- Reintroduction of seasonal cattle grazing, within new stock-proof fencing, to help reduce unwanted scrub growth and maintain habitats;
- Provision of an additional permissive horse riding route close to the communication masts;
- Selective removal of non-native and invasive species through practical management.

St Catherine's Hill & Town Common, Summary of Draft Management Plan

Map to show existing (to left) and proposed (to right) extent of main habitats on site



12. OBJECTIVE B Safeguard and interpret the features of historic and archaeological interest (see Sections 8.41-8.51, pages 56-57 of full plan)

12.1 The history and archaeology of the site is not fully understood and there is still much to learn about the rich and fascinating past of the area. What is known is that the roots of encroaching trees and scrub on monuments may be causing irreversible damage on the hidden artefacts and the site history must be conveyed to visitors and local people as effectively as possible.

12.2 Main proposed actions:

- Removal of tree and scrub growth from all ancient monuments as advised by English Heritage;
- Seek funding and partners to continue research and provide more information.

13. OBJECTIVE C Maintain and enhance the valued sense of place – its informality and tranquillity, while ensuring informal public access allows people to enjoy and appreciate the site (see Sections 8.52-8.97, pages 58-64 of full plan)

13.1 Many people partly visit for the contact with nature, the views, the sense of openness and the sense of enclosure, the physical exercise, the social contacts, and much more. This variety of experience is part of the site's make up, and a major reason why many people value it so strongly.

13.2 Main proposed actions:

- Access and rights of way will be maintained and where possible enhanced;
- Positive solutions will be sought, to resolve the different issues that may cause difficulties with public enjoyment of the site;
- Continued attention will be paid to management of damaging activities on site e.g. fires, fly tipping and occasional poaching.

14. OBJECTIVE D Provide opportunities for education, so people can learn about the site's wildlife, history and use (see Sections 8.98-8.108, pages 64-65 of full plan)

14.1 The site provides education opportunities for young people in groups ranging from Wildlife Watch to Brownies. It also offers a learning experience for all its visitors, through contact with nature, appreciation of its history, and consideration of its various current uses and their different management needs.

14.2 Main proposed actions:

- Provide more information on site but in keeping with the informal atmosphere;
- Opportunities for continuing formal and informal education will be sought;
- Information and news will be provided through the Dorsetforyou.com website.

15. OBJECTIVE E Continue to engage community support for the site's care and management (see Sections 8.109-8.115, pages 66-67 of full plan)

15.1 The site already benefits from care and attention from volunteer groups, the Friends of St Catherine's Hill and a sense of stewardship exercised by many regular visitors. There are also a further range of practical, organisational, and administrative tasks that volunteers could help with.

15.2 Main proposed actions:

- Volunteering can help people gain new skills, new confidence, gain both physical and mental health benefits, and provide new friends and contacts. All of these benefits are apparent from the activities underway at St Catherine's Hill and Town Common;
- Greater coordination of volunteer activities would be beneficial, and means of doing this will be identified;
- The main organisations which help to manage the site will continue to promote opportunities for engaging people in volunteer roles, in both practical and organisational tasks.

16. OBJECTIVE F Have regard to the provisions of statutory obligations and to the rights and safety of people who live nearby and/or use the site (see Sections 8.116-8.131, pages 67-69 of full plan)

16.1 The statutory legislation is in place to protect the habitats and species that are of national and international importance. However there is also a need to protect the rights of people who use the site and live nearby and ensure that one is not achieved at the expense of the other.

16.2 Main proposed actions:

- Working in partnership to achieve favourable condition on site through consultation, production and implementation of this Plan, in a way that minimises impacts on neighbours and site users (In the view of Natural England, proposed management works make a significant contribution to overall targets for improving the SSSI);
- Public safety measures including assessment and removal of unsafe trees;
- Review of byelaws within Area 3, CBC land.

17. Public Consultation

17.1 The Steering Group has agreed the draft plan and objectives it contains. However, we welcome further public comment and invite views through the public consultation response form (*from 1 February to 30 March 2012*). This form and the full draft plan are available on-line at:

<http://www.dorsetforyou.com/christchurch/stcatherineshill/managementplan>

and as hard copies from Christchurch Council Civic Offices, Christchurch Information Centre, Christchurch and Highcliffe Libraries, Stanpit Marsh and Steamer Point Nature Reserves Information Centres.

The proposals are not set in stone so please help us shape the future care and management of this important, well loved and historic landscape. For more information please contact: Christchurch Borough Council Countryside Service on 01425 272479 or at countryside.service@christchurch.gov.uk.