

Hazeley Heath Consultative Group 09/05/2017

Victoria Hall, Hartley Wintney

Present: Mike Coates (RSPB, chair), Phil Maund (Hart DC, Secretary), Julian Bishop (Commoners), Therese Abbott (Easement holders), John Collman (naturalist), Lindsay Mackay (Small land owners), Sarah Daly (HW Parish)

Apologies: David Sexton (Mattingley Parish), Leigh Wallace (Hart DC)

1. Minutes from previous meeting

Minutes were considered and approved.

2. Matters arising

Hart Ponds - PM: Hart have dug test holes in four of the proposed pond locations (based on suggestions from dragonfly surveyors), to see what the underlying substrate was and whether they held water. Three of the holes had clay substrate and naturally filled with water, retaining it over the following week, suggesting suitability for a pond. As such, Hart will apply to the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) for three new ponds.

RSPB ponds - MC: The proposed pond north of the police college track would not hold water so needs a rethink. There is a potential former pond near the northern boundary which may be suitable. There is also a ditch which would benefit from restoration, however it was created without PINS consent and it is unclear whether restoring it would invoke this issue.

PM: Dredging existing ponds or ditches do not require PINS consent, however it's right to confirm whether this is an issue due to the ditch being illegal in the first place.

MC: Will await a response from Footprint Ecology.

ACTION: MC

[12/05/17 - Footprint Ecology confirmed that maintenance of existing ponds and ditches does not require consent, but the definition of each feature is a grey area. They suggest that consent is applied for in the PINS application for each feature.]

DogFence visit - PM: Hart, the RSPB and LM met with DogFence [invisible fencing contractor] on-site on the 27th of February. They walked the proposed route of the invisible fencing and the contractor identified no significant issues with the chosen route. The invisible fence will exclude LM's land, following the route of the land ownership division.

Historic photos - MC: RSPB have some historic army photos from their time on the Heath, which are stored on a memory stick. Most of them do not give an indication of exact location. They can be shared/printed if requested.

Letter from Mattingley Parish - PM: Hart and RSPB are awaiting a signed letter of consent for the PINS application from Mattingley Parish Council. They had an email but Footprint Ecology do not believe this will stand up in court, if needed.

ACTION: LW/MC

Meeting with grazier - PM: Hart had a meeting with the potential grazier and she has had to reduce the size of her herd due to loss of grazing land. However, she is still planning to be involved with the Hazeley Heath grazing project if it is approved, so no issues are foreseeable at present.

Natural England surveys - Action is outstanding for Matt Taylor (Natural England) to find out when the field units are due at Hazeley.

ACTION: MT

RSPB surveys - MC: The RSPB reserves ecology team are due around June this year.

Bramshill crossing - PM: There is no development in the issue of the ford crossing to Bramshill Plantation. It is hoped that members of the public may commission the work under the terms of an Environmental Enhancement grant from Hart.

JB: The Toll Rides Off-road Trust receive income from managing the forest so maybe they could be persuaded to take on responsibility for the work and/or the maintenance of it. PM will chase this up with LW.

ACTION: LW/PM

3. Planned summer works

PM: Hart summer works are as follows:

- Bracken pulling in sensitive areas, such as the recently-cleared concrete winch ramp area. Spraying will be considered in problematic areas where it is growing more aggressively.
- Himalayan balsam removal near the River Hart.
- Ragwort removal along the main rides.
- Weeding the scrapes of bramble and other pioneer species.
- Later summer – heather cutting and dispersal, potentially including the small area of heath in the southeast of the landfill.
- Notice board replacement (August deadline).

MC: RSPB summer works are as follows:

- Bracken pulling, revisiting last year's areas, with some chemical treatment if necessary.
- Himalayan balsam removal near Plough Lane.
- Ragwort removal along the easement near Wedgewood.

- Japanese knotweed treatment near Purdie's/Wedgewood.
- Path clearance.
- Weeding the scrapes north of the police college track.

TA: What about birch regeneration?

MC: Volunteers will tackle some areas with tree poppers in the winter. Tree poppers are a new invention that are effective for small scrub removal.

JB: Are the deer having an effect?

MC: They are still out there having an effect to an extent.

JC: The Wildlife Trust have found that Himalayan balsam management can only be successful if it is managed from upstream, as seed dispersal carries downstream to other sites and areas.

PM: With different land-owners owning different sections of watercourses, it can be very difficult to find a collaborative approach and this is not currently enforced. Either way, it is important that we as land managers do our bit to prevent further dispersal downstream, as frustrating as the overall issue may be. Hence, the population of balsam on the river Hart will continue to be managed on a local basis. PM will investigate what the Environment Agency's stance on this is.

ACTION: PM

4. Fencing application to PINS

FE have sent a draft of the application to Hart and the RSPB to check and complete.

JC: Is it all one application?

MC: It is easier and cheaper to complete as one application, with Hart and RSPB together.

PM: Hart and RSPB are due to meet to decide on structures, as it would be good to have uniformity across the site.

ACTION: LW/MC/PM

JC: Is a management plan part of this?

MC: The RSPB format draft will be run by Hart. The reserves ecology team will be involved in this process. This will be viewable by the Consultative Group when it is ready.

PM/MC: Hart and RSPB are completing a schedule of planned management for areas that would not be grazed, as part of the PINS application. This includes mechanical management of open areas and safety checks in closed habitats like woodland.

5. Naming of site features

[The following refers to a map from JC showing suggestions for names of features on Hazeley Heath, for which all present expressed gratitude and compliments.]

JC: Names have been provided for certain areas (e.g. valleys) and features (individual things, like trees).

MC/PM: Hart and RSPB agree that main topographic features and some individual features are well worth being named, scrapes in particular. They expressed caution with naming temporary features (or areas thereafter), such as trees. The map provided looks good. There could be a few alterations based on existing colloquial names amongst dragonfly and botany surveyors.

JC will revisit based on the comments from today.

ACTION: JC

6. Summer surveys

a. Invertebrates

MC/PM: Surveys include transects for butterflies, bees and dragon/damselflies.

PM: Would like to investigate other invertebrate groups, such as spiders. Will chase up with LW on past data sources.

ACTION: PM/LW

MC: Will forward details to Hart of a student who may be interested in conducting spider surveys.

ACTION: MC

b. Birds

JC: Will continue bird surveys. There is no evidence of woodlark in the Hart side but around 4 pairs in the RSPB side. There is a Dartford warbler pair in the Hart side but they are difficult to find in the RSPB side. Stonechat populations look very good. Tree pipits are still present but there are fewer everywhere [nationally?]. Not enough evidence on nightjars yet. Evidence of very successful linnet populations.

MC: The drought may be having an impact.

c. Reptiles

MC/PM: There are reptile tins out on both sides of the Heath, which are checked regularly.

PM: We have a good adder population on-site and it's important to protect this. Would like to look in to identifying important features such as hibernacula sites, which would need protecting during future management.

LM: There is a local walker and herpetologist who may be interested in conducting surveys. Will pass on details.

ACTION: LM

MC: Will talk to the RSPB volunteer surveyor about this.

ACTION: MC

d. Mammals

JC: Is there evidence of dormice on-site?

MC: The RSPB side was surveyed when they took it on and there was no evidence. It may be better in areas of the Hart side. MC will forward details to Hart.

ACTION: MC

e. Vegetation

JC: Is there a follow-up on the bog asphodel scrapes?

PM: Visited the scrapes this morning. Lots of dicotyledon saplings appearing, however much too early to identify. Will contact the botanist who was involved in the project regarding its follow-up.

ACTION: PM

7. Any other business

a. Fixed point photography

JC: Fewer points, including some new ones, across less frequent intervals would be sufficient.

MC: Every other year would be fine. Would be worth having a meeting to decide on points to be used.

ACTION: MC/JC/PM

b. Squirrel and rabbit populations

TA: Are there any plans to reduce squirrel and rabbit populations on-site?

MC: Rabbits and deer are the only grazing animals west of the B3011, so there is some incidental benefit to them being present. As for squirrels, the RSPB have a very stringently-regulated policy on lethal control and there are no plans to instigate this at present.

PM: From conversations with other landowners who have tried to eradicate these invasive mammals, the speed and success with which they recolonise upon removal is incredible. Hence, it is very difficult (if not futile) to effectively control these species on-site. There has been recent speculation about a nationwide project to sterilise grey squirrels, but whether this materialises is uncertain. Aside from the costs, rabbits can have some ecological benefits such as nest-habitat provision and creating diversity in sward structure.

c. Leigh's new role

PM: LW is now Senior Ranger for Visitor Services. She is now predominantly in charge of marketing, access, amenity, interpretation and the design of new sites within the Council. As such, she will be less involved with habitat management works but will continue to advise in this Consultative Group at least until the grazing commences, provided the application to PINS is approved. Queries, suggestions, etc. regarding management of the Hart side of Hazeley Heath should go to PM, who will continue to liaise with LW as and when required.

All present offered congratulations to LW for her promotion.

8. Date of next meeting

It was agreed by all present that the next meeting should be 22nd of August 2017 from 10am onwards. SD will check availability and book the room.

ACTION: SD