

**UPDATE ON OUGHTONHEAD COMMON LOCAL NATURE RESERVE  
GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN: INFORMATION NOTE**

THE HEAD OF LEISURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To update Members on the main aspects of the Oughtonhead Common Local Nature Reserve Greenspace Action Plan prepared by the Countryside Management Service.
- 1.2 For the ease of updating Members this Note will be divided into sub-sections.

**2. UPDATES****2.1 Project Progress**

- 2.1.1 **Last plan concentrated on the people:** Thanks to significant investment from NHDC and funding secured by the Countryside Management Service from Biffaward, the site is now well sign-posted, has good interpretation and a site information leaflet. Two walks are promoted in the leaflet, one of which – the River Walk - is suitable for all users.
- 2.1.2 **This plan to concentrate on the Wildlife:** The SSSI was de-designated in 1970 because of the deterioration of the site due to drying out of the peat marsh and lack of water flow from the springs. Whilst the solutions to these issues are beyond the scope of this plan, it does aim to enhance the habitats most affected.
- 2.1.3 The proposed fen restoration will involve scraping the surface to lower the levels of land down towards the top of the water table. This will incorporate 2 or 3 deeper, more permanent wetland features, ponds or scrapes. With consent of adjacent landowner and Natural England, material will be deposited on a nearby field. A watching brief will be required due to the archaeology. It is anticipated this work will make the area wetter for longer periods. A Boardwalk along the existing path will be installed to allow continued access. Another section of boardwalk will lead to one of the permanent ponds, where a viewing platform will be created with interpretation. The interpretation will focus on invertebrates, particularly dragonflies. It will also acknowledge the work of the former volunteer warden – Phil Lumley.
- 2.1.4 River Restoration will be split into work upstream and downstream of the mill. Upstream of the mill the river has been over-dredged, there are also issues with low flow rates caused by low rainfall and water abstraction. This has led

to the channel becoming clogged up with reed. Although this is a good habitat for some wildlife, others, like the kingfisher thrive when there is a defined channel for them to fly along. It is proposed that one section of the channel is narrowed using groynes, which will provide variations in flow. The groynes will cause sediment to accumulate both upstream and downstream of them, which then naturally narrows the channel. Some reed removal from the river channel will aid this process. Downstream of the Mill the work will be small scale, undertaken by volunteers and using a mix of techniques to create variations in flow. Materials will be sourced from the common, trees adjacent to the river along the Burford Ray or relocating material already in the river. Clear one section of tree dam to allow passage of fish, secure unstable large woody debris, re-position some large woody debris. Large woody debris is absent from many river systems due to human intervention, which stems from concerns that it looks untidy, collects debris around it and could pose a risk of flooding. Recent research has shown that it can be beneficial to river processes and wildlife. It provides shelter for fish, a range of surfaces for algae, microbes and invertebrates, which are the base of the food chain and provide food for mayflies, caddis flies and trout. It also provides a route out of the water for invertebrates with aquatic and terrestrial stage in their life. Further 'dog access points' will be created to encourage dog owners to use these and prevent bank erosion in vulnerable areas. The chalky area will be restored with re-enforced turf matting. This area will have a wide access point to the river. Horses may need to be excluded. All of the works in the rivers and ditches will require consent from the Lead Local Flood Authority.

- 2.1.5 The Northern ditch is to be re-profiled along some sections. Work to reduce the angle of the bank to 35 degrees will improve habitat for invertebrates.
- 2.1.6 Scrub management will be concentrated in the grazing areas for the period of this plan. Aerial photographs indicates that scrub is increasing here. Without grazing or intervention it would eventually cover the whole site. The longhorn cattle are helping maintain the grassland, but the scrub is still encroaching. The best way to maintain the balance between scrub and grass would be to have a mix of animals, but this would not be appropriate on Oughtonhead Common. The Common is one of Hertfordshire's most important grassland/wetland sites. The County has lost 96 per cent of wildflower meadows due to intensification, urban development or neglect. Volunteers will be employed to reduce scrub levels. This will serve to prevent further encroachment onto the grassland and create areas of younger re-growth. This in turn creates a mosaic of scrub of various ages, which increases biodiversity. It will also expose some of the rabbit populations to natural predation. The material created will be chipped by a contractor and spread on perimeter paths by volunteers. This work is carried out between September and March, outside bird nesting season.
- 2.1.7 The grazing area is to be extended to include more of the surrounding grassland. This will require an application to the Secretary of State and public consultation because of the site's status as Common Land. The existing fencing would be pushed further out into the scrubby area. The perimeter path will be retained at a width of no less than 10 m, except where the width is already less than 10metres This would allow dog walkers to continue to walk around the common without entering the grazing areas if they wish. The fence will need renewing in the next few years, whether grazing is extended or not. Replacement fencing will include stock netting around the bottom.

2.1.8 As well as the usual annual management work to paths, ditches, ponds and hedges there will be work to reduce the impact of some of the invasive species on the common. These species include water fern, Himalayan balsam, sycamore, ragwort, thistles, snowberry, mink and signal crayfish.

2.1.9 Maps are available to identify specific areas for these works.

## 2.2 **Community Involvement**

2.2.1 In addition to the involvement of the Friends of Oughtonhead Common, the development of this plan has been advertised by:

- Contacting, by email, a list of individuals who have registered an interest in the site over the past 10 years;
- Articles in the local press;
- Display at the local library;
- A specific guided walk, led by CMS to highlight the site and management plan proposals;
- On-site information on temporary notice boards for specific projects.

2.2.2 Support by CMS for the Friends group has included a range of training to enable them to work in safety with increased independence. This has included Task Planning and Leadership, First Aid and Publicity.

## 2.3 **Constraints around Wetland Work**

### 2.3.1 **Funding sources**

The major wetland (fen, ditch and river) capital works will require external funding to be realised. Sources are likely to include:

- Hertfordshire County Council's Environmental Resource Planning Group;
- A legacy from the former volunteer warden for the site;
- English Nature's Higher Level Scheme HLS;
- Growth Area Fund;
- NHDC to make a 10 per cent contribution;
- Plus another, probably the main funder – Biffaward / SITA to be approached.

### **Permissions needed**

- Environment Agency for Land Drainage Consent and Waste Transfer License;
- Landowner and English Nature consent for deposition of material;
- Secretary of State – Common Land Consent;
- Archaeology;
- Lead Local Flood Authority Consent for in channel works.

## 3. **REPORTS TO CABINET**

3.1 None to Report

#### **4. AVAILABLE INFORMATION**

- 4.1 For full plan please visit  
<http://www.hertslink.org/cms/getactive/placestovisit/oughtonhead/>

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

- 5.1 That the Hitchin Committee note the content of this Information Note.

#### **6. CONTACT OFFICERS**

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