

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Programme Committee

Monday 02 October 2023 at 14:00

Ashdown Forest Centre

**Committee Members present:** Mrs S Tidy (Chair), Mr J Squire (Vice Chair), Mrs I Manweiler, Mrs L Maudslay, Cllr R Millward, Ms E Riminton-Drury

**Co-opted Members/Advisors present:** None

**Ex-officio:** Mrs R St. Pierre

**Also present:** Mr A Walmsley (Countryside Manager), Ms E Griffith (Administration Manager)

Minutes taken by the Administration Manager

There were no members of the public present.

		Action
12/23	<p><b>Apologies</b> Cllr J Howell, Mr N Mawdsley and Cllr G Owen-Williams</p> <p>The Chair welcomed Elaine Griffith to the meeting and advised that she would be interim cover for the Administration Manager position.</p>	
13/23	<p><b>Declarations of interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature</b> Mrs I Manweiler – Landscape Recovery Project as a potential partner</p>	
14/23	<p><b>Matters arising</b> <b><u>14.01/23 Landscape Recovery Update</u></b> The Countryside Manager stated that the Landscape Recovery bid for the 2 year development phase had been submitted to DEFRA in good time, earlier than the 21 September 2023 deadline. He stated that it was an exciting opportunity to partner with local landowners and the process has gained over 30 signatories. DEFRA will be evaluating submissions over the next 8 weeks.</p> <p>a) Summary Report – It was asked if there was a summary report outlining the project to present to the Board. Countryside Manager will liaise with Mark Infield to circulate the document to Board members.</p> <p><b><u>14.02/23 Bracken Management on the Forest – Verbal update and discussion</u></b> The Countryside Manager gave a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation on bracken, its ecology and impact on the habitats of Ashdown Forest. The slides will form the basis of his upcoming talks and communication with the public to explain the complex issues and difficult decisions to be made around control and management of bracken to ensure that the identified delicate ecosystems of Ashdown Forest is protected.</p> <p>He outlined the historic traditional uses of bracken and methods of control such as cutting for livestock bedding, burning by controlled fire to allow access for grazing animals to trample it.</p> <p>He noted that whilst bracken had benefits for some species, it is invasive, spreading aggressively, its rhizomes grow to depths of over 1m, and it releases allelopathic chemicals to suppress other plants growing around it. Grazing value is limited as it contains hydrogen cyanide causing poisoning and digestive issues in animals and</p>	<p><b>CM to liaise with MI</b></p>

	<p>vitamin D deficiency as well as carcinogenic substances that has been linked to stomach cancers. Deer will not eat it.</p> <p>The Countryside Manager described a recent survey showing the bracken growth map areas on Ashdown Forest, showing 250 hectares on heathland. He outlined the methods of control available. He explained that historically large areas were mowed, but not collected throughout the summer, but this has now been pushed back so as not to risk damage to nesting birds between March and August. Chemicals were used to control bracken since before 2012. Bracken scrapes are also used but could not be used in all bracken areas and attempts at rolling had predominantly failed.</p> <p>Currently, cutting and collecting large quantities of bracken takes place in September, which is a small 4 week window, whilst the bracken is still green to weaken it and before it dies back and returns nutrients to the rhizomes. Small volunteer “pulling” groups have been used to pull it up. This is very labour intensive and requires a lot of group coordination. Manual pulling and mechanical cutting methods can take over 10 years to sufficiently suppress and weaken the plant.</p> <p>Targeted, careful spraying with chemicals, using selective herbicides that are designed to only target bracken can significantly help – requiring two applications over 2 years, which can reduce up to 98% of bracken where sprayed. However, more research on the wider impact of this on biodiversity is needed. The selective herbicide Asulox has been banned in Europe since 2012, but can be used under Emergency Authorisation, which has been granted by the different UK governments since then. The Countryside Manager noted that it was unclear if Asulox would be approved for use in England in 2024.</p> <p>The Chair and Committee members present acknowledged the significant pressures of bracken spread and challenges of controlling it.</p> <p>The Countryside Manager asked the Committee for their consideration and support for the management techniques he had outlined in his presentation. It was agreed that every effort should be made to reduce the reliance on chemical use, but it was understood that certain situations would still require chemical treatment where no other methods would be effective and there was a serious risk of detriment to the habitat otherwise. The Chair asked the Committee if there were any objections, and specifically with regard to the careful and targeted use of the herbicide Asulox. There were no objections. – the Committee were in unanimous agreement with the approaches suggested by the Countryside Manager.</p> <p>The Committee emphasised the importance of a communication plan with the public to clearly explain the problems and pressures of managing Bracken, and to raise awareness of work to identify alternative approaches, and ongoing research across the UK.</p> <p>Additional effort would also be put into building up the numbers in the volunteer “Pulling” groups to support the manual bracken pulling in 2024.</p>	
15/23	<p><b>Progress Reports</b></p> <p><b><u>15.01/23 Countryside Manager’s report, incorporating:</u></b> <b>PROG 05/23</b></p> <p>The Countryside Manager spoke to his report:</p> <p><b>Nightjar Survey</b> – Recorded 86 calling birds indicating the Forests’ population is stable.</p> <p><b>Floral Monitoring</b> – Violet Helleborine – was re-discovered on the Forest and netting was put up to protect them from deer browsing. Marsh gentians survey commenced in September indicates an improvement on last year. 2022 was poor due to the heat/drought. 2023 survey was good, with gentians seen in first survey round. Though in the Commoners grazing enclosure, many plants had been grazed by livestock by the second visit. Countryside Manager to work on protecting them outside the grazing enclosures and will investigate whether some areas could be fenced off within the grazing enclosure in 2024.</p>	

**Butterflies - Silver Studded Blue** – This year’s survey, undertaken by a Butterfly Conservation volunteer, has recorded a record high abundance. The Rangers have also established new transects and established a volunteer team to assist in surveying. The team will be looking to include areas of woodlands and other habitats for future transects.

**Dartford Warbler** - populations were down due to the cold winter and late snow.

**Glow worms** – Generally in huge decline, as they live years as larvae. Require undisturbed habitats, not cleared/mowed. Leaving verges uncut could help.

**Amenity Works - Car Parks – Repairs** – there have been repairs to the Vachery and King Standing bridleways and Blackhill car park with plans to look at St Johns as well.

**Tree Survey** – Tree Risk Management Plan is scheduled for completion in December. Focus will be on the car parks, roads and schools. In addition, splitting the Forest into risk category areas. Trees highlighted in previous survey will be prioritised this winter. Professional Tree Inspection qualifications were required for the Team to upskill their knowledge. Forestry Commission funding could provide 100% funding on applications if available. Specialist surveys are very expensive.

**Commoner Fencing and Gates** – Plans to replace the mounting blocks for horse riders. Fires – There were none in 2023. There have been no control fires since 2021. Any control burns would be during the winter, balancing risk with carbon impact.

**Volunteers and Events** – Mark Infield, Landscape Recovery Manager would be delivering a suite of community talks “Bigger, Better, More Joined Up – Reconnecting Ashdown Forest with its neighbours”, throughout November.

**Countryside Management** – Winter Works 2023 – Tenders for Scrub/Birch and Rhododendron. There are also plans to create bare ground for pioneer heather and silver studded blues.

#### **i. Grazing Report**

Cattle - NoFence collars were effective. First calf was born at the weekend. Sheep and ponies are doing well. Two new foals have settled in well. South Downs were unable to take the 14 Pippingford ponies, they will now be over-wintered on another area of Pippingford.

#### **ii. Deer Programme**

Deer – The Countryside Manager informed the committee of the current Deer Ranger’s decision to move on and took the opportunity thanking them for their contribution to the Forest. Preparations for the season were in progress – Night licences has been applied for and Impact assessments have been completed. Advertisements for the vacancy for the Deer Ranger would shortly be advertised pending approval by the Executive Committee.

#### **iii. SAMM’s report**

Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMMS) - Lead Warden completed a number of successful outreach events over the summer, including local festivals and fetes. Wealden zoning study - brief is now with Wealden District Council, who are responsible for approaching an ecologist to carry out the study. The proposed timeline is to begin the study in early 2024.

#### **15.02/23 Education programme report**

**PROG 06/23**

The Countryside Manager provided key highlights from the Education Report provided by Lisa Stevens. The Committee expressed their thanks for the considerable work undertaken over the last three months.

The Committee agreed that they would like to see the formation of a Youth Trustee Board to expand reach to older age groups than are currently reached within the existing education programme, with a remit to expand young people’s interactions

**Isabel/Liz**

	<p>with the Forest through Duke of Edinburgh Award engagement and other volunteer projects.</p> <p>The new Environmental Science GCSE qualification to be introduced in 2025 was also discussed. Secondary School staff have been invited to attend the Forest to discuss the qualification and ways that the Forest might support engagement in the curriculum.</p> <p>It was also suggested to investigate greater engagement with Special Education Needs (SEN) coordinators.</p> <p>Funding of the Education roles was discussed. – The Committee requested that the Countryside Manager support the Education Team in making a presentation to the Board.</p>	<b>CM / Education</b>
<b>16/23</b>	<p><b>Election of Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee for the following year</b></p> <p>The Countryside Manager sought nominations for the Chair and Vice Chair positions.</p> <p><b>Chair:</b> Mrs S Tidy was duly elected to the position of Chair.</p> <p><b>Vice Chair:</b> Mr J Squire was duly elected to the position of Vice Chair</p>	
<b>05/23</b>	<p><b>Any Urgent Item for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the Chairman.</b></p> <p>None.</p>	

The meeting closed at 15:45.