

# ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITY SAFETY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## Agenda Item 6

Brighton & Hove City Council

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Chalk downland restoration in Wild Park Local Nature Reserve</b>		
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>21 June 2010</b>		
<b>Report of:</b>	<b>Director of Environment</b>		
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	<b>Name:</b>	<b><i>Hugo Blomfield</i></b>	<b>Tel: 29-2401</b>
	<b>E-mail:</b>	<b>hugo.blomfield@brighton-hove.gov.uk</b>	
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Hollingdean &amp; Stanmer</b>	

### FOR GENERAL RELEASE/ EXEMPTIONS

#### 1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

- 1.1 This report provides information on the restoration of chalk downland in Hollingbury Wild Park Local Nature Reserve (LNR). A letter from Councillor Simpson requesting scrutiny is attached at Appendix 4.

#### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Commission are requested to:

- 2.1 Consider the background information and consultation carried out by the council and determine if scrutiny activity is needed.

#### 3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 This report relates to the Cityparks Downland Management report which was presented to Environment CMM on 24 September 2009, Environment and Community Safety Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 6 October 2009 and Environment CMM on 5 November 2009. That report detailed grazing plans for a number of sites subject to full consultation with ward councillors and residents.

- 3.2 Sheep were successfully re-introduced to Wild Park for the first time in the winter of 2008/2009 following consultation with local people as well

as on site information and attendance of the sheep at local events (eg Moulsecoomb Family Fun Day and the Environment & Heritage Festival at Moulsecoomb Primary School). This followed publicity in the Argus (22/5/08), Guardian (21/7/08) and BBC South Today (25/7/08) which focused on volunteer shepherds or “lookerers”.

- 3.3 Cityparks Rangers trained 65 volunteer ‘lookerers’ to help check the sheep and their reintroduction was well received. Partly as a result of this renewed interest a “Friends of Wild Park” community group was re-established.
- 3.4 Although the small pockets of existing species-rich chalk grassland can be maintained by sheep grazing alone, to conserve the internationally important habitat into the long term requires the control of invasive scrub at Wild Park.

#### **4. CONSULTATION**

- 4.1 In advance of the scrub clearance works extensive consultation was carried out in the city as follows:
  - An article in Citynews in December 2009 (Appendix 1).
  - Information on the council website.
  - A leaflet for Wild Park showing the plan in detail which was displayed at the pavilion café in Wild Park and distributed locally by the Friends of Wild Park (Document In Members’ Rooms).
  - Signage on site (although some of these have been regularly removed quite soon after they are put up).
  - Monthly meetings of the Friends of Wild Park including a specific presentation and discussions of what was planned on 26 May 2009 at which ward members were present.
  - A presentation was also given to a group at New Larchwood on 9 March 2010
  - Ward members, and those in the adjacent Moulsecoomb & Bevendean ward, were also sent information prior to commencement of the work (Appendix 2).
- 4.2 The plans were assessed and approved in advance by Natural England under the Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) Regulations 2006. An on site visit was also carried out, at the advice of Natural England, by an adviser from Complete Land Management contractors and an on site visit was made by the council ecologist.
- 4.3 The project is supported by the South Downs Joint Committee (Appendix 3).

- 4.4 The council has also made efforts to publicise the benefits of chalk grassland in general with recent articles in the Guardian (28/10/09), Daily Mail (9/11/09), Times (21/11/09 and 4/1/10), BBC South Today (filmed in Wild Park), Meridian TV and BBC Countryfile (4/4/10).
- 4.5 The consultation generated little or no comment from the public until the work had largely been completed.
- 4.6 The following points address the comments which have subsequently been received:
- In Wild Park there are three main habitats: grassland, scrub and woodland. The relative value of habitats for wildlife is broadly proportional to the habitats continuity over time and its occurrence in the wider countryside. The longer the habitat has been present and the rarer it is, the more important it tends to be for nature conservation.
  - The oldest grassland has been in Wild Park for hundreds if not thousands of years which represents hundreds or thousands of generations of the plants and insects that inhabit it. In contrast most of the scrub and woodland has been there for less than a hundred years and is relatively species-poor. In the wider landscape there is very little of this ancient grassland left (most of the grassland on the downs today has been agriculturally improved with a subsequent loss of almost all of its biodiversity) while in comparison scrub and woodland is relatively common.
  - In terms of diversity, ancient grassland is Brighton and Hove's rainforest. Many of the species dependent on the ancient grassland are highly specialised, not very mobile and cannot survive elsewhere, while in contrast most of the species of the scrub and woodland are more mobile, 'opportunistic' species and widely found across the Downs. Because the loss of the grasslands has taken place over several decades it has largely gone unnoticed while the removal of the scrub generates a lot of attention as it has happened over a short time scale. So for many reasons it should be the loss of the ancient grassland that concerns us far more than the loss of the scrub.
  - The aerial photography from 1946 has been used to highlight how quickly the ancient grassland has been lost and to target clearance work where the scrub and trees are younger. The main aim is to increase the amount of grassland and to reconnect the isolated "islands" of grassland to reduce the risk of local extinctions. However rather than clear all the scrub, we are retaining some of the more diverse scrub and the most mature woodland which means the park will end up with a similar balance of grassland and scrub to what was there in 1946.
  - The scrub is being cleared to conserve the ancient grassland rather than to allow sheep to graze. The sheep are then being used to maintain the grassland and therefore cannot simply be grazed elsewhere.

- It is no longer practical or safe to graze the downland without fences as it used to be done by a shepherd and dog. Rather than one large area of downland, remote from civilisation that a shepherd can walk one large flock across, there are now lots of small pieces separated by roads and a greatly increased number of people, particularly dog walkers. However fence lines are put where they will be least intrusive in the landscape and gates are provided at any points where people are likely to want access. People are still welcome while the sheep are grazing and all that is asked is people keep their dogs on leads while they are actually in the area with the sheep.
- 4.7 A meeting was held on 10 May 2010 with Friends of Wild Park to review the project and consider future works in response to comments received. A further meeting was held on 24 May 2010.
  - 4.8 Site meetings have also been held with local wildlife experts on 11 June 2010 and with the chairman of Fiveways LAT on 17 June 2010.
  - 4.9 It is planned to consult during the summer on reducing the scale of further scrub clearance beginning with the area adjacent to Home Farm Road next winter (2010/2011) with extensive publicity in advance of the works.
  - 4.10 In addition a citywide consultation is planned for sites included in the council application for Higher Level Stewardship agricultural funding, including an article in Citynews, consultation with wildlife groups and an online consultation for residents.

## **5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:**

### Financial Implications:

- 5.1 The project is being funded in part by the council and in part by the European Union and Defra through the Single Farm Payment scheme and the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. It attracts Higher Level Stewardship funding as Chalk Grassland is one of the habitats targeted by the scheme for the above reasons.

### Legal Implications:

- 5.2 The United Kingdom was one of the 193 signatories to the Convention of Biological Diversity in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit. The Convention committed signatories to develop national strategies for the protection and sustainable use of biodiversity. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) is the UK Government's response. It describes the biological resources of the UK and provides detailed plans for conservation of these resources, at national and devolved levels. Action plans for the most threatened species and habitats have been set out to aid recovery. Lowland Calcareous Grassland (which includes chalk grassland such as at Wild Park) is one of the identified priority habitats. Under Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, the council is obliged to have regard to biodiversity in the

exercise of its functions. The Action plan objectives and targets set out are

1. Maintain the current extent of Lowland Calcareous Grassland in the UK. (Target represents no loss of BAP habitat).
2. Maintain at least the current condition of Lowland Calcareous Grassland.
3. Achieve favourable or recovering condition for 30,421ha of Lowland Calcareous Grassland by 2010.
4. Restore 399ha of Lowland Calcareous Grassland from semi-improved or neglected grassland, which no longer meets the priority habitat definition by 2010.
5. Re-establish 8,424ha of grassland of wildlife value from arable or improved grassland by 2010.
6. 6,320 ha (75%) of re-established area to be adjacent to existing Lowland Calcareous Grassland or other semi-natural habitat by 2010. (Refer to T5)
7. 4,200 ha (50%) of re-established area to contribute to resultant habitat patches of 2 ha or more of Lowland Calcareous Grassland by 2010. Where ever practicable bigger patches should be created.

The work at Wild Park will contribute to meeting targets 1, 2, 3,4, 6 and 7.

#### Equalities Implications:

- 5.3 Scrub clearance, particularly brambles and thorn scrub, improves access. The leaflet includes information on access to Wild Park.

#### Sustainability Implications:

- 5.4 To date the councils chalk grassland has not been managed sustainably as it has been declining in extent and quality for many decades. The removal of scrub and the reintroduction of grazing allows the council to manage its chalk grassland in a sustainable manner and prevent further loss of this priority habitat in keeping with the UK's commitment to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

#### Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 5.5 There is anecdotal evidence that positive active management, particularly grazing with sheep, involving volunteer shepherds or "lookers", reduces crime and disorder. Scrub clearance also improves visibility within the nature reserve. Introduction of fencing and removal of cover along the Wild Park / 39 acres boundary has also resulted in a reduction in use of the area by scrambler bikes.

#### Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 5.6

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

5.7

**SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

Appendices:

1. Wild Park goes back to its roots article, Citynews, December 2009
2. Email sent 12 February 2010
3. Statement from the South Downs Joint Committee
4. Request for Scrutiny from Councillor Simpson to Chief Executive

Documents In Members' Rooms:

1. Conserving Wild Park leaflet  
[www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/downloads/bhcc/Wild\\_Park\\_2009\(5\).pdf](http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/downloads/bhcc/Wild_Park_2009(5).pdf)

Background Documents

1. Minutes of Environment CMM on 24 September 2009
2. Minutes of Environment and Community Safety Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 6 October 2009
3. Minutes of Environment CMM on 5 November 2009

### Article in Citynews, December 2009

Wild Park goes back to its roots

The council is working with the Friends of Wild Park to improve the management of the local nature reserve.

Areas important for birds, insects and other creatures will be nurtured, while large areas of less diverse scrub will be removed to reverse the decline of the last few decades. These will be returned to grassland to provide a balance similar to that which existed in the 1940s. Areas of mature woodland will be retained.

Councillor Geoffrey Theobald said the work will build on the successful reintroduction of sheep to Wild Park last winter so it reverts to species rich grassland.

While fencing will be erected to contain the sheep, plenty of gates will be included so that all areas remain fully accessible. Dogs will still be welcome but should be kept on a short lead while in an area being grazed.

Councillor Maria Caulfield, who is a volunteer shepherd, said: "We usually only graze one section at a time, starting later this winter, so there will always be large areas where there are no sheep and dogs can be exercised off the lead under close control."

Further details [www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/countryside](http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/countryside)

**Email sent 12 February 2010**

**From:** David Larkin

**Sent:** 12 February 2010 15:24

**To:** Geoffrey Theobald

**Cc:** Pat Hawkes; Jeane Lepper; Christine Simpson; Maria Caulfield; Mo Marsh; Anne Meadows; Hugo Blomfield; Robert Walker; Gillian Marston

**Subject:** Downland Restoration in Wild Park

### **Downland Restoration in Wild Park, Feb/March 2010**

Work is due to start next week on the downland restoration project in Wild Park Local Nature Reserve to reverse the loss of valuable wildflower rich grassland.

- Some scrub will be removed to recreate grassland. The cleared area will then be fenced and grazed to prevent scrub coming back but the whole of Wild Park will still be open to the public.
- While dog owners will be asked to keep their dogs on a lead while in an area that is being grazed the majority will always be free of livestock.
- A leaflet has been published and widely distributed locally, as well as an article in City News last month and on site information will be available during the project.
- Supported by the Friends of Wild Park and ward members have been involved at all stages

### **Background**

- The council acquired the land between Ditchling Road and Lewes road in 1925 and decided to set aside the best downland for wildlife, this area was called Wild Park.
- At the time it was thought that downland was a natural habitat and the best way to manage it was to leave it to nature.
- Now we understand that the wildflower rich turf was the result of centuries of grazing without which it reverts to scrub and woodland, a process that has been happening at Wild Park over the last few decades.



**Figure 1 Comparison of Wild Park in 1946 and 2000 showing loss of grassland to scrub**

- While this scrub and woodland has some value for wildlife, it is much lower than that of the grassland it is replacing, indeed this type of grassland has been identified as a priority for conservation and has its own biodiversity action plan see [www.ukbap.org.uk/ukplans.aspx?id=12](http://www.ukbap.org.uk/ukplans.aspx?id=12)
- As of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010 Wild Park will be part of the new South Downs National Park.

Further information is available on the council web site [www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1179480](http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1179480)

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## **APPENDIX 3**

### **Statement from the South Downs Joint Committee**

#### Habitat Restoration in Wild Park

Chalk grassland is a unique habitat which supports a range of rare plants and animals. A considerable percentage of such grassland has been lost on the South Downs since the second world war, much has been ploughed up whilst other areas have suffered from neglect and lack of management resulting in the development of scrub and the shading out of many of the important plant species.

The South Downs Joint Committee has worked with landowners across the South Downs to restore important areas of chalk grassland through scrub removal and re-introduction of grazing.

Brighton and Hove City Council is an important landowner in the South Downs National Park, with many tenanted farms and also public land. The Joint Committee is a partner in the city's Downland initiative and supports the restoration of important landscapes and habitats in the area, alongside the creation of additional areas of open public access. The re-introduction of grazing at many council owned sites is also welcomed as a sustainable method of managing historic grasslands. The restoration of Wild Park is an important part of preserving the Downland landscape and heritage for future generations in the city. Wild Park along with many other City council owned sites is seen as an important gateway to the National Park. The creation of a balanced mosaic of habitats including chalk grassland, scrub and woodland will ensure that an important landscape is restored and a diverse wild life thrives whilst maintaining an important public open space for all to enjoy.

South Downs Joint Committee  
Central Area Office.

## APPENDIX 4

Dear Mr Barradell,

I am writing to request that a scrutiny review takes place on the recent scrub clearance work that is being done in the Wild Park area.

In recent weeks I and many colleagues have received expressions of concern about the work that has been going on to encourage the reintroduction of chalk grassland in Wild Park.

It is fair to say that there is a divergence of views on the scrub clearance, with some local residents and people who have a strong interest in nature conservation having expressed strong reservations about the appropriateness of the work taking place at all in a public park, and also the extent and manner of the work that has been done, with others firmly in support of the clearance work. I understand that the South Downs Joint Committee also have reservations about it.

Amongst the concerns that have been expressed are the destruction of valuable flora and wildlife habitats, the removal of mature and semi mature trees, the standard of the work with paths not corresponding with gates, the placing of a lot of barbed wire on the site, that the work has been carried out without the benefit of a management plan and proper surveys, and without adequate consultation taking place prior to the clearance work.

I feel that it would be extremely helpful to have a scrutiny review of this matter as soon as possible, as I understand that phase one of the work has been completed and that phase two will not take place until the autumn. I think that such a review would be very helpful as it would give an opportunity for all opinions in this matter to be considered and would allow for expert advice to be sought.

I am very aware that the Friends of Wild Park group have been under some pressure in all this, and I believe that a review will be also be helpful to them in resolving this matter.

I would ask that this letter be placed on the agenda for the appropriate Scrutiny Committee when I would hope to attend and speak to it.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Christine Simpson  
Hollingbury and Stanmer Ward

14 May 2010

