

## **MANAGEMENT PROPOSALS – CHOBHAM COMMON**

### **Background**

A high proportion of Chobham Common is in unfavourable ecological condition due to increasing amounts of grass suppressing heather and invasion of trees and scrub. Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) commenced a consultation process in spring 2008 to meet the Government's Public Service Agreement (PSA) target that 95% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) must be in favourable condition by the end of 2010. The consultation was supported by Natural England.

After three separate stages of consultation SWT has proposed a combination of heathland management techniques for Chobham Common, which includes:

- mowing
- turf stripping and bare ground creation
- controlled winter heather burning
- grazing
- other heathland management practices like scrub and bracken control
- experimental trials of techniques used in the uplands

These techniques will be implemented on a scientific basis over a five year period. Ecological monitoring will be undertaken to record the effects of all the techniques proposed on Chobham Common, including grazing, the trial of management measures used in the uplands, and "control" areas.

A five year programme of improvements for visitors has been drawn up from public comments and is now being implemented.

### **Management Proposals Consultation**

A combination of management techniques including an extensive grazing scheme was initially developed from the consultation process, with the provision of gates for public access, across the main sections of Chobham Common. This proposed using ha-ha's, possible cattle grids and fencing with either temporary or permanent fencing. While this proposal was popular with many there was concern from parts of the community about permanent fencing and loose cattle within the Common. SWT wishes to continue to work positively with the local community in its management of Chobham Common and has listened to all responses from the consultation.

### **Grazing proposals revision**

The recently secured Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) grant scheme will provide substantial funding to rectify the current declining condition of the common as well as improve the experience of visitors to the site. This management will include scrub and tree removal, and includes an obligation to effectively reduce rank grass dominance by grazing. This will enable the Trust to work towards restoring favourable condition of this nationally and internationally important site as the heathland flora and fauna recovers.

Whilst SWT is in no doubt about the effectiveness of grazing we acknowledge these concerns and are therefore proposing an interim solution designed to achieve two aims:

- Acclimatise all users of the common (including dog walkers and horse-riders) to the presence of livestock.
- To show the results of grazing on the habitat to those who might doubt its effectiveness.

Initially, this will involve a grazing system utilizing temporary electric fenced enclosures which will begin the restoration of some of the most degraded areas on the Common. Many local organisations stated that they would prefer temporary enclosures. SWT has made this modification as it wishes to work positively with the local community, but remains committed to ensuring that most of the site is grazed over the 10 year period of the HLS. SWT has been advised by Natural England that an extensive grazing system would achieve recovering condition on Chobham Common. It is therefore proposed to undertake grazing within enclosures initially for a period of 5 years and, subject to the success of that grazing, work towards implementing a wider grazing system after that. Any further proposals would be following consultation and if brought forward subject to consent from the Planning Inspectorate. At this stage SWT does not have a fully fixed methodology as to how any future extensive system might be introduced.

Furthermore while cattle grid and quiet lane proposals appear very popular with some sections of the local community, these options will need to be carried forward through the statutory process, by SCC Highways, and it will take time before the outcome of this is known. Many consultees identified potential advantages in this option of reducing traffic speed and reducing the fragmentation to the Common caused by the roads. If these proposals were implemented many felt it would increase the recreational enjoyment of the Common. Consequently SWT will continue to pursue this option.

The proposed locations of the four temporary enclosures are shown on the attached plan. Further details are as follows:

- Permanent posts will be erected at the four enclosures with the electric fencing only on site while grazing is underway;
- Gates and squeezes for access into the enclosures will be provided on all existing paths;
- Light summer grazing would be undertaken with cattle, approximately from March – September each year;
- Water troughs would be provided where necessary;
- Docile breeds of hardy British cattle would be used which are used to grazing heathland and public open space.

In addition a movable 10ha of temporary grazing enclosures will be used on a flexible basis to suppress *Molinia*; this will be especially useful to enable grazing of vigorous *Molinia* regrowth on areas affected by wildfire. In SWT's experience grazing will suppress grasses, encourage heather germination, and reducing grasses will enable many rare plants like Marsh Gentian to recover from declines caused by the dominance of *Molinia*.

SWT will also continue to gather views on the grazing compartments and cattle from site users to assess people's responses in terms of access and their experience of the common. The Trust recognises the importance of the common for horse riding therefore none of the fixed temporary enclosures will block any horse rides.

#### Conclusion

- SWT intends to apply to the Planning Inspectorate for Common Land consent for the five temporary grazing enclosures. As referred to above, other temporary grazing enclosures up to 10 hectares can legally be grazed for a six month period in addition to the five proposed enclosures without consent, under the provisions of the Commons Act.
- The enclosures would not affect the public's legal right of access on Chobham Common.
- The application would limit the use of temporary fencing to five years.
- During this period we will review all the management techniques used during this period and then be in a position to utilise those that have been successful.
- The application would include other works raised by the community during the consultation like banks for a holding pond near the junctions of Stable Hill and Windsor Road to reduce water flow towards Chobham village and reinstatement of ditch and banks along Stable Hill and Chertsey Roads to prevent vehicular incursions onto the Common.

This interim proposal is being put forward by SWT as a compromise to build on the positive engagement which has come from the consultation and it is hoped that this will be welcomed, and the application supported, by the community.