

## **Background Paper: Summary of the report on Chobham Common**

**(published January 2009)**

Chobham Common is one of the largest commons in south-east England. It is important as a public open space with some 250,000-300,000 visits each year by the public. It is also a wildlife site of European and National importance. It is owned by Surrey County Council and managed by the Surrey Wildlife Trust (the Trust) for the benefit of people and wildlife.

Following an appraisal of the management issues, the Trust decided to carry out a full consultation on the future of the common with the users and stakeholders and appointed a consultant, Dr John Underhill-Day of independent consultants Footprint Ecology Ltd, to advise on and facilitate this. The consultation has followed the principles set out in the document 'A Common Purpose: A guide to agreeing management on common land'.

### **The Consultation**

Consultation began in early May 2008 and continued through until July. Information on the issues relating to the management of the common consisted of a leaflet, a longer background paper for those wanting more detail, and a substantial draft management plan giving full details. A questionnaire was also prepared for circulation to individuals who visited or had an interest in the common. The management plan was made available on-line (or as a hard copy for those who requested it), and the other documents were circulated to individuals and local and national organisations through a postal drop, and handed out at meetings, open days and drop-in days, accompanied by appropriate publicity. The questionnaire elicited over two hundred responses.

The consultant subsequently produced a report on the consultations based on an analysis of the questionnaire and information and research on heathland management containing a number of recommendations which are summarised below. A full copy of his report with appendices is available on the Trust website.

### **Results from the Questionnaire**

The common is used for a wide range of recreational pursuits as well as research and education. It contains six car parks, 17km of bridleways, 13 km of agreed horse rides and 13 km of public footpaths as well as three Scheduled Ancient Monuments and the Victoria Memorial Cross.

From the questionnaire analysis, the largest user groups were walkers and dog walkers but horse riders were a significant minority interest. About 70% of visitors came at least weekly with about a third of these on foot and slightly more than half by car. Of those who came by car, almost all parked in the car parks, of which about a third parked in the Roundabout car park.

People came to enjoy the scenery and wildlife of the common; they appreciated the variety of walks and rides, the easy access both by car and on foot and its suitability for dogs. Most knew that the common is a site of European importance for wildlife. Concerns raised were mostly about the activities of dogs and the condition of paths and bridleways. There were many suggestions about improving information for visitors and a wish for a greater wardening presence.

More than half of respondents thought that wildlife management was about right, but a substantial minority thought more tree and scrub management was needed. When asked about other managements, most visitors were unconcerned by burning, grazing, mowing, turf stripping or a combination of these, but a minority had serious concerns about burning and grazing. In considering grazing, there was a greater level of concern about the use of sheep than other stock, with this being of particular concern to dog walkers. Horse riders were most concerned about ponies or a combination of stock. Overall, nearly 70% of all users were unconcerned about a combination of stock with nearly 60% or more unconcerned about particular stock types.

When asked about stock management, over 75% of all users were unconcerned about shepherding, nearly 70% about temporary fencing and over 60% about permanent fencing with or without cattle grids. Generally, some 15% of all users expressed serious concerns about permanent fencing with or without cattle grids.

There was some recognition by organisations that the common is a difficult place to manage for wildlife and people, and that as an SSSI it needs to be moving into favourable condition. The consultation was welcomed.

There were varying views on the provision of car parks, but general support for the maintenance of the bridleways and footpaths. There were suggestions for better publicity, an educational programme, more liaison with local user groups and more information for the visiting public.

From organisations, there was support for a variety of management methods including particularly tree and scrub clearance. There was both support for and scepticism about grazing. A number of organisations expressed concern or opposition to fencing, although this also had some support. It was suggested that trials of heather seeding should be instigated.

### **The current condition of the vegetation on the common**

From a vegetation survey in 2002, less than 5% of the common is pure dry heath dominated by heather or ling, but over 50% of the common is dominated by, or has a significant proportion of purple moor grass and much of the rest of the area is covered by bracken, gorse, woodland and scrub. The latest assessments from 2006-2008, which covered just under 80% of the Chobham Common SWT reserve, recorded 89% of the areas assessed as unfavourable no-change or declining. The condition of the common is still deteriorating.

The Government has set a target for achieving favourable or recovering condition on 95% of all SSSI land by 2010, has charged Natural England (NE) with meeting this, and has given them powers under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. NE is also the body responsible for supervising the main funding mechanism for conservation and countryside management. The Trust is charged to do all it can to bring Chobham Common into favourable condition and in doing so must explore all the means for achieving this. To do nothing is not an option.

### **Recommendations from the report and the Trust's response**

The research suggests that all the management options have a place in the armoury of the heathland manager, with burning, mowing and turf stripping having a greater or lesser effect in reducing nutrients (nutrients being one of the main causes of conversion of heather to grass-dominated communities) and with a suitable grazing regime to encourage heather rather than grass-dominated communities.

The report recommends the establishment of a small group to specifically consider visitor issues, using as a starting point the matters on which respondents expressed views or concerns, and considering their suggestions and ideas. It is also recommended that a short visitor implementation plan be consulted upon. This would include path and bridleway maintenance, staffing on the common; visitor management, the provision of facilities, liaison with local communities, education and interpretation, and other matters. This should be incorporated into a five-year plan with timetables for action and a ring-fenced budget for certain maintenance work including paths and bridleways. There is a range of recommendations for consulting with the public and local organisations and for launching a number of initiatives to engage with local communities.

The report also makes a series of recommendations for habitat management on the common, including consultation on, and the institution of, a long-term programme of woodland and scrub management and the inclusion of a bare ground action plan for insertion in the management plan.

The report also recommends that all the management options should be employed in the future management of the common, but with some caveats. In view of the concerns about burning, it is recommended that some winter demonstration burns be carried out and that there be further consultations. Areas suitable for burning or mowing should be mapped and smaller areas identified where turf stripping could give maximum benefit. A disposal plan for the stripped material and consultation with archaeological interests will also be necessary.

It is also recommended that grazing be re-introduced on the common. Grazing by sheep is not considered suitable as the only form of grazing on the common and is not considered to be currently practical, but should be kept under review. There are concerns about grazing by ponies although they are suitable from an ecological viewpoint, and it is suggested that there be consultations with the horse riding interests to see whether pony grazing might be introduced on the northern part of the common. Cattle are recommended as the main grazing animal on the common, with certain provisos as to the type of animal. It is suggested that, initially, low stocking rates should be used to allow familiarisation and monitoring to take place.

On the use of herbicides and seeding, it is recognised that there are considerable dangers in transferring a successful technique from the uplands onto lowland heath, which is a quite different habitat, but it is recommended that some experimental trails be set up to look at this.

A number of recommendations on monitoring both visitor use and the effects of habitat management are made, and attention is drawn to the need for careful consideration of future staffing if the report's recommendations, or most of them, are adopted.

The Trust has begun to implement some of the report's recommendations on visiting and has accepted the recommendation that a combination of management practices will be needed (a copy of the Trust's initial response to the report is attached).

### **Further advice and consultations**

The Trust has asked Dr Underhill-Day to facilitate a further round of consultations on the implementation of the management recommendations and in view of the importance of the common as a public open space, has also asked him to seek additional advice on public access. The Trust is pleased to learn that Footprint Ecology has retained the services of Kate Ashbrook, the General Secretary of the Open Spaces Society to give advice on this aspect of the future of the common.

The report has recommended that the Trust carries out further consultations generally on the options for habitat management with local communities and stakeholders. Strong views have been expressed by some over the various options for managing grazing stock, particularly fencing, and it is recommended that the Trust investigate the ways in which stock might be managed and consult widely on these.

The Trust would welcome further suggestions but at present is considering the management of grazing animals by shepherding, perimeter fencing of those boundaries not fenced (about 50% of the boundary of the common is currently fenced by adjoining owners), or perimeter fencing but with cattle grids on roads crossing the common to reduce the fencing needed.

The Trust is keen to seek the views of visitors and stakeholders and would be pleased to receive responses either by post to: Catherine Aikin-Sneath at the Surrey Wildlife Trust, School Lane, Pirbright, Woking, Surrey, GU24 0JN or e-mail: [catherine.aikin-sneath@surreywt.org.uk](mailto:catherine.aikin-sneath@surreywt.org.uk).

**The Trust is arranging drop-in days on:**

Sat 21 March 1000-1500hrs  
Sat 25 April 1000-1500hrs

Windlesham Club, Kennel Lane GU20 6AA  
Chobham Parish Pavilion, Recreation Ground

**and open days on the common on:**

Wed 25<sup>th</sup> March 1000-1600hrs  
Sat 28<sup>th</sup> March 1000-1600hrs  
Sat 4<sup>th</sup> April 0800-1200 and 1500-1900hrs

Roundabout Car Park  
Roundabout Car Park  
Staple Hill Car Park