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## 1 Introduction.

In late summer 2009, the managers and part owners of Royal, Elstead and Bagmoor Commons the Surrey Wildlife Trust, decided to restart public consultations (suspended in 2003) on the future management of the Commons. The Trust decided to engage Footprint Ecology to offer help and guidance, but further action was put on hold pending a decision as to whether Natural England would wish to include the adjoining and much larger Thursley and Ockley Commons in the scheme. Early in 2010 a decision was made to include all five commons within a single consultation, and work started on the first consultation to be completed by late summer 2010. The public consultation was based upon the principles set out in 'A Common Purpose, a guide to agreeing management on common land' (Short et al., 2005).

These commons, which collectively extend to some 510 ha (and are hereafter referred to as 'the Commons') have full right of public access under the Countryside and Rights or Way (CRoW) Act 2000 or, for Thursley and Elstead rights of access under Section 193 of the 1925 Law of Property Act. There are, in addition a number of footpaths and bridleways. The commons are within the Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for their wet and dry heath habitats and are also part of the Thursley, Hanley and Frensham Commons (Wealden Heaths Phase 1) Special Protection Area (SPA) due to the presence of important populations of nightjar, woodlark and Dartford warbler.

## 2 The Consultation

### Information and literature produced as part of the consultation

As a first step, the consultants produced an options appraisal report. This included:

- The historical context to heathland commons and their wildlife, together with a summary of the relevant legislation affecting commons and their management.
- A description of the current threats to heathland including succession to woodland, inputs of atmospheric nitrogen, disturbance, wild fires and other visitor effects.
- A brief history and summary of the status of the commons, including background to their previous management for people and wildlife, and their archaeological interest.
- A description of the main heathland habitats including wet and dry heath, scrub and woodland, mires and bare ground and their value for wildlife.
- An assessment of potential management actions together with their pros and cons, including tree and scrub removal, gorse and bracken management, use of herbicides, mowing, controlled burning, turf stripping and grazing. A more detailed description of the scientific background and research into these management actions was included in an Appendix 1.

It was recognised that many individuals would have neither the time nor the interest to read the full appraisal document; therefore a background summary and a short leaflet were also produced. A list of stakeholder organisations was produced which is reproduced below to whom letters would be sent.

Amphibian & Reptile Conservation
Ancient Tree Forum / Woodland Trust
County Recorder Bees & Wasps
British Dragonfly Society
British Horse Society
Butterfly Society - Local Recorder
County Recorder Butterflies
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Elstead Parish Chair
Elstead Parish Magazine
Elstead Riding Club
Farnham Riders Club
Frensham Riders Club
Herpetological Conservation Trust
Local Ethno-Botanist
Local Botanist/ hydrologist
Local MP
Merrist Wood College
Natural England Project Manager – Thames & Wealden Heaths
Natural England Team Leader
Open Spaces Society
Peper Harow Cricket Club
Plantlife International
Ramblers Association*
RSPB Farnham Heath
RSPB - SE Regional Office
RSPB
RSPB Guildford Local Group
Shackleford Parish Council
Surrey Bird Club
South West Surrey Walkers
Surrey Amphibian & Reptile Group (SARG)
Surrey Bat Group
Surrey County Bird recorder
Surrey Botanical Society
Surrey Butterfly Conservation
Surrey County Council
Surrey County Ecologist
Surrey Fire & Rescue Service
Surrey Hills Conservation Volunteers
Surrey Hills Partnership
Surrey Moth Group
Surrey Rights of Way
Surrey Wildlife Trust members locally
Thursley Cricket Club

Thursley Footpath Warden
Thursley Parish Council
Thursley Parish Magazine
Thursley Village Hall
Tilford and Rushmoor Riding Club
Waverley BC-Local Councillors
Witley Parish Council
Woodland Trust

## 2.1 Methods

The basis of the consultation was that no decisions on future management had been made and that consultation with the public would be open, inclusive, wide ranging and transparent. It was however made clear that as part of an internationally designated site, owners and managers of the commons had a duty to manage for the qualifying interests and to do nothing was not an option. The habitat management options given in the accompanying literature were those normally used on lowland heathland.

The consultation on the options included the following elements:

- The full appraisal report was put on the Trust website to download and was available as a hard copy on request
- A shorter background paper was produced based on the appraisal report<sup>1</sup>
- A leaflet on the habitat options was produced which included details of consultation events and the website
- A questionnaire was produced and made widely available both at specific events and attached to correspondence to local householders. Altogether 106 questionnaires were returned.
- The background paper and leaflet were put on the Trust website
- Letters or e-mails were sent out to all local and national organisations listed above together with some additional local consultees (97 in all) with copies of the background paper and leaflet (containing details of consultation events) and copies of the questionnaire to individuals
- A similar letter was hand delivered to 156 properties close to the edge of the Commons, and to all Surrey Wildlife Trust members living in postcode area GU8. In each case the background paper and leaflet were attached together with the questionnaire to householders
- Posters were produced giving full details of open and drop-in days and put up in all the Commons car parks, on notice boards, shops, village car parks, village hall noticeboards and other locations. Altogether 40 posters were affixed.
- Details of events were also available on the Trust website
- Press releases were issued to 14 local papers and two local radio stations on the consultations on May 25<sup>th</sup> and July 5<sup>th</sup> and details of consultation events appeared in the Surrey Advertiser and as a news item on the BBC radio and website, and an interview was recorded with the local Eagle radio station.
- A short article was inserted in the St Michael and All Angles Thursley Parish Magazine, Shackleford Parish Magazine, Elstead Village News, Elstead Village Newsletter, Witley and Milford Parish Council Newsletter and Surrey Life magazine
- Seven bespoke display panels were produced and made available at open days and drop-in days
- There were four open days, held in the main car park entrances to the Commons, attended by Trust and Natural England staff during July and August 2010 and four drop-in days in village halls in each of the four Parishes around the area during June, July and August 2010. There were 70 attendees at the open days and 56 at the drop-in days.
- Two demonstration grazing days were held, one in May and the other in June, close to the two main access routes, with cattle in enclosures and Trust and Natural England staff in attendance. These were widely advertised locally, and 46 people visited.
- Altogether 172 people attended the consultation events

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of the background paper, leaflet, questionnaire and poster are attached to this report as Appendix 1.1.

## **2.2 Responses from drop-ins and open days**

Attendees were asked to give their name and postcode and given the opportunity to write comments.

### ***2.2.1 General comments***

A large number of people were complementary about the current management regime with 27 specifically commenting that they like it/keep it as it is/happy with it. Twelve were complementary about the consultation and though it helpful and informative with an impressive display, but two thought there had not been enough publicity of events and another two were disappointed that MOD did not have a representative there. One commented that the decisions on future management of the Commons were best left to the managers . One respondent thought there were too many visitors at weekends and another that there were not too many people.

### ***2.2.2 Grazing and containment***

There were 48 favourable comments on grazing; most people mentioned cattle but two were in favour of sheep one in favour of ponies. One mentioned using a traditional breed and one extensive grazing. There were few comments on fencing and grids, probably as no proposals had been put forward. Two would not like to see fences and three others were in favour of grazing within enclosures.

### ***2.2.3 Other management***

Again there were few comments. Two respondents would prefer grazing to the use of machinery for turf stripping, and another wanted to see grazing supplemented by mowing, burning and turf stripping. Three people thought more bracken control was needed (one suggested pigs), and two mentioned ragwort as a problem (In Parish Field and alongside some paths) with one other concerned at young pine regeneration. Another respondent would like to see large firebreaks.

### ***2.2.4 Dogs and horses***

A few comments concerned dogs with two mentioning problems with dog waste and the need for better signage asking owners to pick up after their pets, three asking for dogs to be kept under control/on leads, (with specific mention of areas near car parks, picnic areas and roads) with one concerned about ground nesting birds and another suggesting a zone to be specified as a dog walking area. One respondent thought that the safety of horse riders should be prime concern.

### ***2.2.5 Car parks, tracks, paths and bridleways***

One respondent thought the Moat Car Park a good facility for horseboxes. One thought some of the paths were difficult, another mentioned churning of paths by horses, with two more asking for more wood chip surfacing to paths and another for more board walking.

### ***2.2.6 Other Facilities***

One respondent thought the amount of signage should be restricted, another wanted more guided walks and a third suggested the encouragement of volunteers to help manage the commons.

Altogether of the 172 people who gave their details, 122 left some comment on the attendance sheet and 50 made no comment.

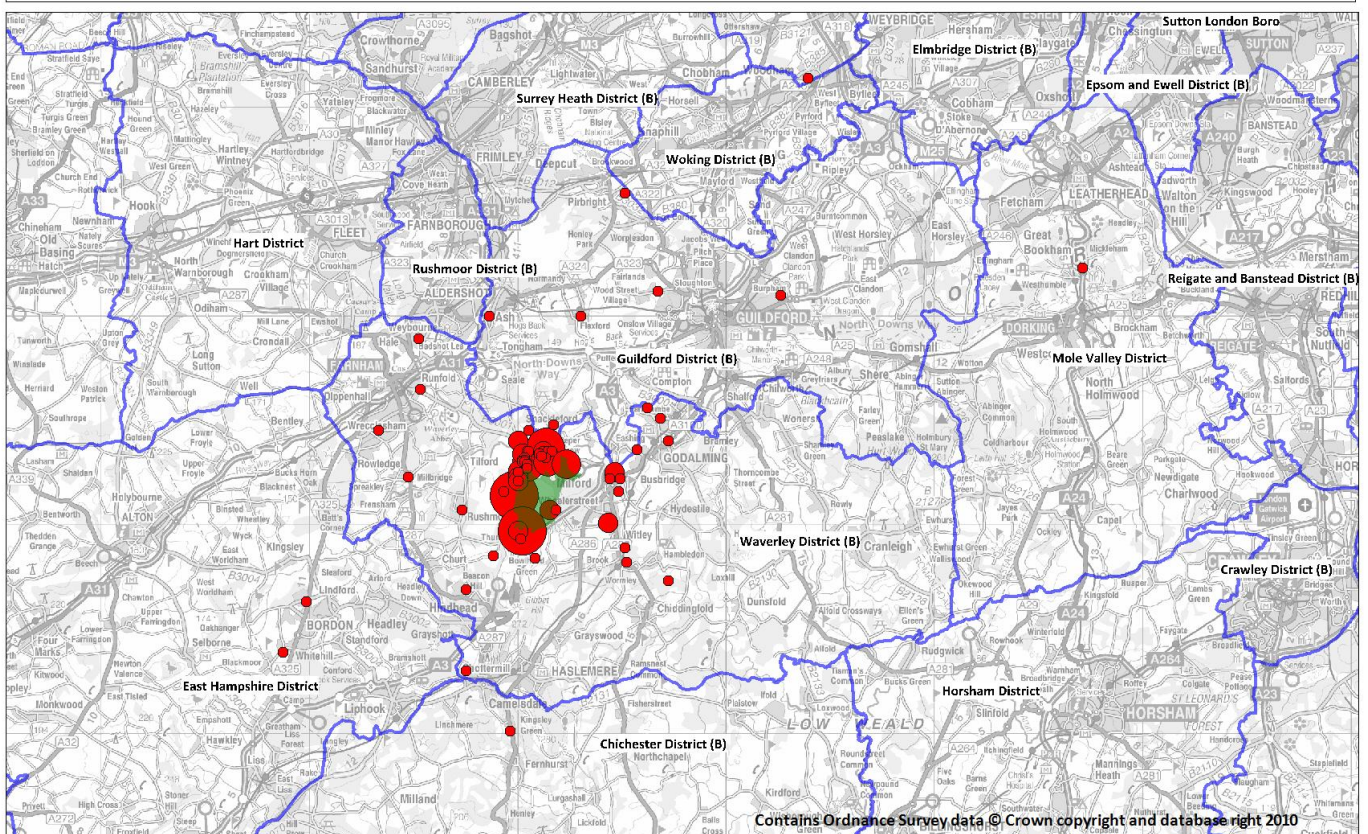
### 3 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were circulated at events, included with letters to individuals and letter drops. Altogether 106 questionnaires were returned. Questionnaires were not sent to members of the Wildlife Trust or local organisations as the intention was to obtain the views of local residents living close to the Commons and those visiting the Commons.

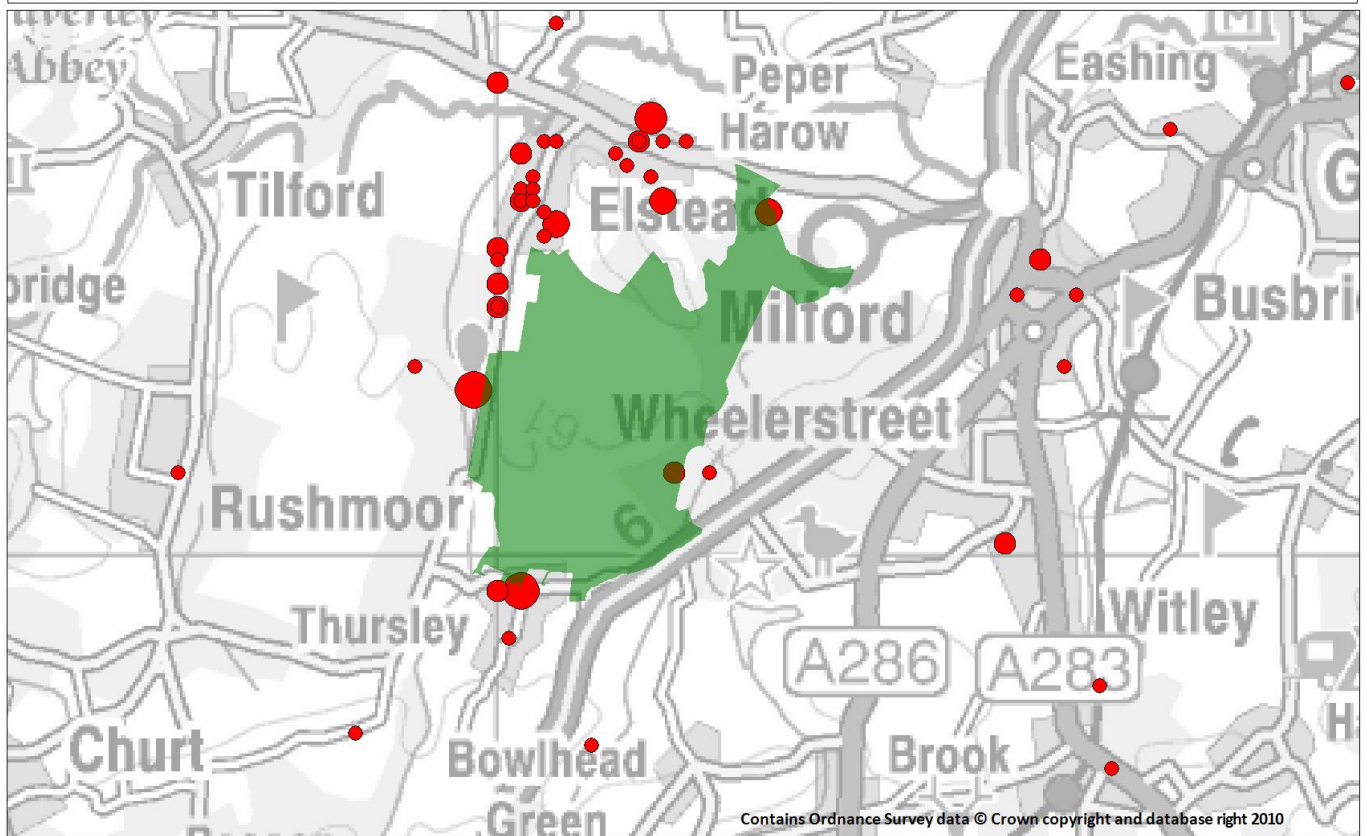
#### 3.1 Visitor profile

Visitors were asked to give their post code, and 96 respondents filled hits in, most of these came from GU8, from within the triangle enclosed by Milford, Rushmoor and Tilford. However there were visitors from a scattering of locations further out, including, Dorking, Woking, and Bordon (Maps 1 and 2). (The overwhelming majority of those who came to the drop-ins were from GU8 [64%] or GU 7 [12%]. These postcodes include the villages of Thursley, Witley, Milford, Elstead and Shackleford and the town of Godalming. These have not been analysed separately as they will include many of those who also submitted completed questionnaires).

**Graduated Map 1: Home postcodes of respondents that submitted a consultation questionnaire for Thursley Common. Largest symbol represents 5 respondents per postcode.**



**Graduated Map 2: Home postcodes of respondents that submitted a consultation questionnaire for Thursley Common - Localised. Largest symbol represents 5 responses per postcode**



### 3.2 Membership of wildlife conservation or amenity organisations

A total of 50 respondents answered this question and had membership of one or more of the following organisations:

Surrey Wildlife Trust	28	RSPB	18
Sussex & Hants Wildlife Trust	1	Surrey Bird Club	1
Dorset Wildlife Trust	1	British Trust for Ornithology	2
Hampshire Wildlife Trust	1	British Ornithologists Union	1
National Trust	11	Hampshire Ornithological Society	1
North East Hants conservation group	1	Plantlife	2
Owl & Hawk Trust	1	Surrey Botanical Society	2
World Wildlife Fund	3	Botanical Society of the British Isles	1
Woodland Trust	3	Butterfly Conservation	1
Trees for Life	1	Buglife	1
Moor Trees	1	Norfolk Naturalists	1
Royal Horticultural Society	1	Campaign to Protect Rural England	1
British Horse Society	1	Countryside Alliance	1
Fungus Recording Group	1	Ramblers Association	1
Zoological Society of London	1		
British Association for Shooting and Conservation	2		

From a total of 92 memberships, 83 (90%) belonged to a wildlife conservation or related organisation. The remainder were made up of amenity organisations or other societies and clubs. Of the 30 organisations, societies or clubs listed, 25 (83%) are involved in wildlife conservation as a primary aim.

### 3.3 Reasons for visiting and patterns of use

#### Reasons for visiting the common

Many respondents identified more than one reason (from a list of 9 suggestions) for visiting the Commons (figure 1).

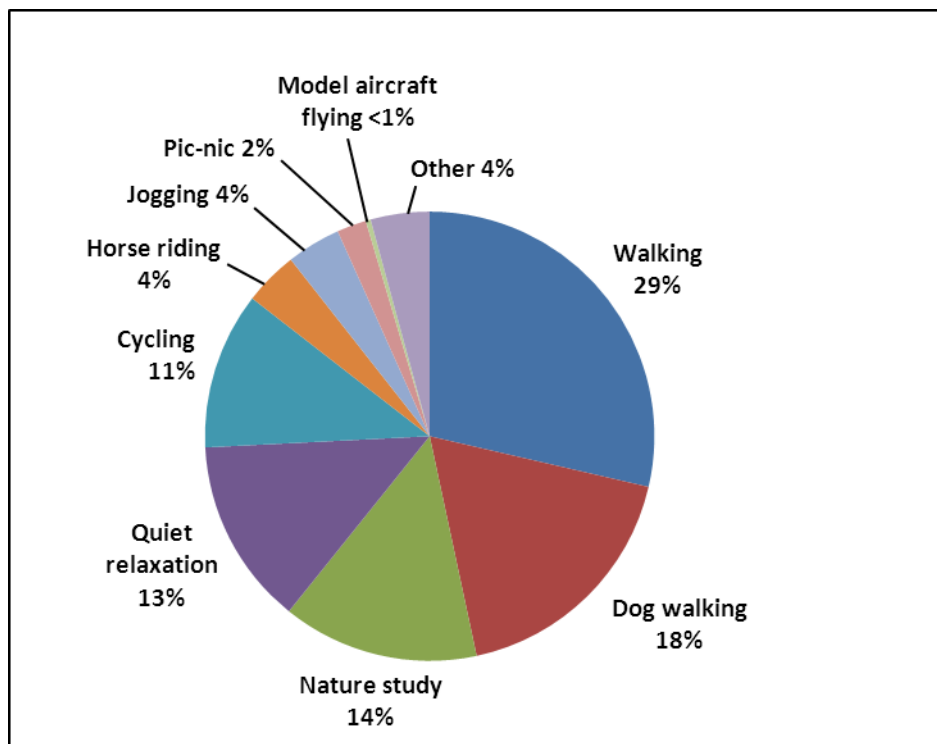


Figure 1 Reasons for visiting Thursley Common (percentage shown for each category).

The most popular reasons given for visiting the commons were:

- Walking (29%) and dog walking (18%) which together made up nearly half of all responses
- The next most popular were nature study (14%), quiet relaxation (13%) and cycling (11%)
- A number of other activities were listed including horse riding, jogging, picnicking and flying model aircraft

Although this is a snapshot of the reasons people visited, many gave multiple answers totalling 283 responses. This suggests that considerable numbers of people visit the Common for a variety of reasons. Some additional reasons why respondents visited the commons can be found in [Appendix 1 X](#).

## Frequency of visits

**Table 1 Frequency of visits to the Commons**

Frequency	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less often
Number	48	22	22	10
Percentage	47	22	22	10

Of the 102 respondents who answered this question, almost half (47%) visited the commons daily while 10% visited less than once a month.

## Travel methods

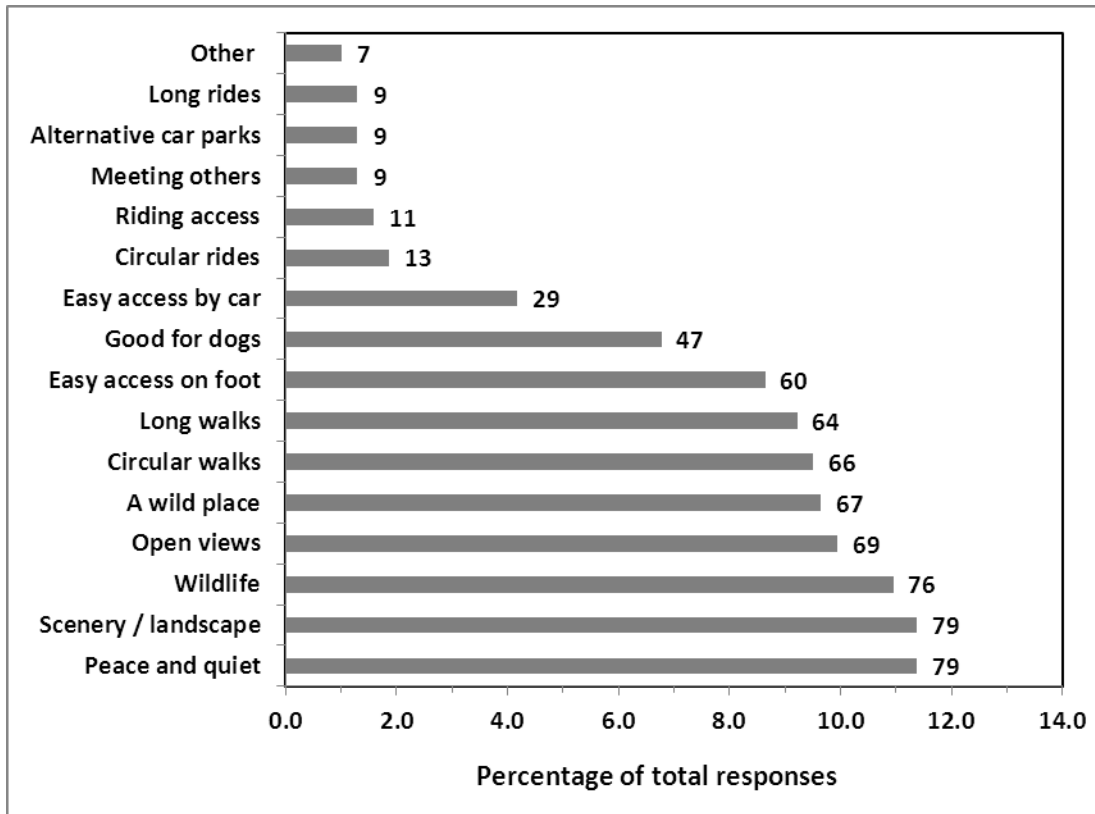
**Table 2 Methods of arrival at the Commons**

Method	On foot	Car/van	Bicycle	Horse	Public transport	Other
Number	63	59	22	8	2	1
Percentage	41	38	14	5	1	1

From a total of 155 respondents, 41% arrived on foot while 38% arrived by car/van. A smaller number arrived by bicycle (14%), horseback (5%) or other means.

## 3.4 Amenities offered by the commons

From a panel of 15 options, respondents chose one or more amenities they thought the commons provided (figure 2). This question also asked respondents to list additional amenities (Appendix 1 X).



**Figure 2 Reasons for visiting the Commons (with number of responses shown for each amenity).**

The total number of responses was 694 indicating that most respondents viewed the common as providing several valuable amenities. Peace & quiet, scenery & landscape and wildlife together accounted for approximately a third (34%) of all responses while the ease of on-foot access and suitability for walking, with or without a dog, accounted for another third (34%). The common was also appreciated for its open views and provision of a 'wild place' (20% combined). Fewer people saw the common as having ease of access for horses and suitability for riding (<5%) or as a place to meet others (<2%).

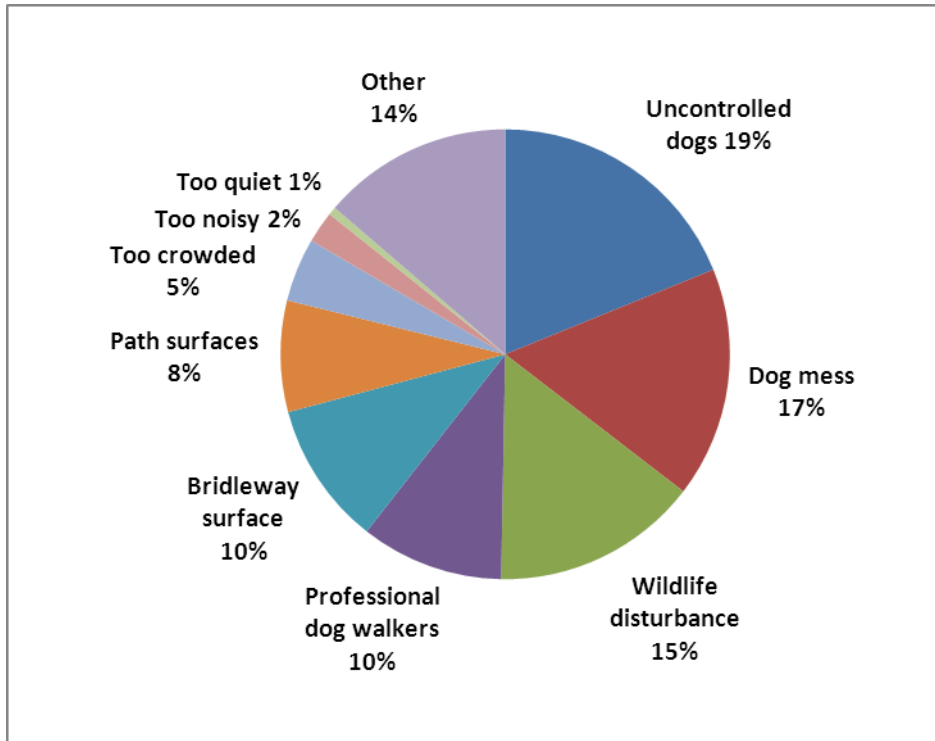
### *3.5 Other open spaces visited*

This question asked respondents if they frequented other local open spaces for walking and/or riding. A total of 88 respondents listed 33 locations, most visiting multiple sites generating a total of 198 responses (site listings). The most popular 7 sites visited accounted for 75% of responses and were as follows (number of respondents in parenthesis): Hankley Common (50), Frensham Ponds (28), Puttenham Common (27), Witley Ponds (11), Hindhead Common & Devil's Punch Bowl (13), Crooksbury Common (10) and Rodborough Common (10). The remaining 25% of responses consisted of 25 sites, each visited by less than 5 respondents and most only by 1-2 respondents.

### *3.6 Respondents views on condition and management of the commons*

#### **Concerns during visits to the commons**

This question offered respondents to voice their concerns (figure 3) from a panel of 11 options and also provided space for additional comments (Appendix 1 X).



**Figure 3 Respondent concerns while visiting the Commons (percentages shown).**

From a total of 175 responses (ticks) the emergent trends were as follows:

- 46% of concerns were related to activities of dogs
- 18% of concerns were with regard to bridleway or path surfaces
- 15% of concerns were with regard to wildlife disturbance

There were no concerns ticked regarding the meeting of horses (for walkers) or of meeting walkers/joggers/cyclists (for horse riders).

### *3.7 Views on current management of the common for visitors*

Asked about current management of the commons for visitors (total 102 responses):

- 73% (74 responses) thought management was 'about right'.
- 24% (24 responses) thought management 'needs changing'.
- 4% (4 responses) had no view.

Respondents were also asked about changes they would like to see. These are listed in Appendix 1 X.

### *3.8 Views on current management of the common for wildlife and tree and scrub control*

Of the 100 respondents (number in parenthesis) who gave a view on management for wildlife:

- 68% (68) thought it was 'about right'.
- 16% (16) thought it 'needs changing'.

- 16% (16) had no view.

Of the 93 respondents (number in parenthesis) who gave a view on tree and scrub control:

- 53% (49) thought it was 'about right'.
- 19% (18) thought it 'needs changing'.
- 27% (25) had no view.

Respondents also suggested changes they would like to see regarding management for wildlife. These are listed in Appendix 1 X.

### *3.9 Views on information, wardening provision, and facilities*

Of the 96 respondents (number in parenthesis) who gave a view on the level of information provision for visitors:

- 59% (57) thought it was 'about right'.
- 37% (38) thought it was 'not enough'.
- 1% (1) thought it was 'too much'.

Respondents also suggested changes they would like to see regarding provision of information (Appendix 1 X).

Of the 95 respondents (number in parenthesis) who gave a view on the level of wardening presence on the commons:

- 66% (63) thought it was 'about right'.
- 34% (32) thought it was 'not enough'.
- 0% (0) thought it was 'too much'.

#### **Views on dog bin provision and location**

Of the 102 respondents (number in parenthesis) who gave a view on whether dog bins should be provided on the commons:

- 58% (59) responded with 'yes'.
- 32% (33) responded with 'no'.
- 10% (10) had no view.

Of the 59 respondents (number in parenthesis) who gave a 'yes' view to the provision of dog bins on the commons, when asked about location for the bin(s):

- 8.5% (5) preferred the bin(s) to be located at Moat car park only.
- 88% (52) preferred the bin(s) to be located at all car parks.
- 3% (2) preferred other locations.

### *3.10 Respondents views on future management options*

Views about main management options (burning, grazing, mowing, turf stripping)

Respondents were asked for their views (Table 3) and comments (Appendix 1 X) on each of the main management options being considered for the future.

**Table 3 Views of respondents towards management options.**

Management option:	Percentage of responses (number in parenthesis)			Total number
	Like to see	Not like to see	Don't know	
Controlled winter burning	56 (47)	26 (22)	18 (15)	84
Summer grazing	92 (81)	6 (5)	3 (2)	88
Mowing	58 (49)	21 (18)	21 (18)	85
Vegetation/turf stripping	38 (30)	32 (26)	30 (24)	80

- Of the 4 management options 92% of respondents were keen to see summer grazing.
- Just over half of respondents would like to see controlled winter burning or mowing (56% and 58% respectively).
- Less than half (38%) of respondents were keen on vegetation/turf stripping as a management option.
- Options that respondents would not like to see were vegetation/turf stripping 32%, winter burning 26%, mowing 21% and grazing 3%
- The level of uncertainty (don't know) was highest with respect to vegetation/turf stripping (30%) then mowing (21%) and burning (18%) and lowest with respect to summer grazing (3%).

### Views on types of stock

Respondents were asked for their views (table 4) and comments (Appendix 1 X) on stock types if grazing were to be considered for the commons.

**Table 4 Views of respondents on grazing stock options.**

Stock type:	Percentage of responses (number in parenthesis)			Total number
	Like to see	Not like to see	Don't know	
Sheep	55 (40)	34 (25)	11 (8)	73
Cattle	86 (66)	9 (7)	5 (4)	77
Ponies	63 (47)	19 (14)	19 (14)	75
Combination of above	74 (56)	15 (11)	12 (9)	76

- Respondents viewed cattle (86%) and then a combination of stock types (74%) as favourable grazing stock options. This was followed by ponies (63%) and sheep (55%) as less favoured options.
- Conversely, about a third of respondents (34%) were not keen to see sheep grazing on the common while only 9% were not keen on cattle as an option.
- The level of uncertainty (don't know) was highest regarding ponies (19%) and lowest regarding cattle (5%).

### Views on types of grazing stock control

Respondents were asked for their views (table 5) and comments (Appendix 1 X) on each of the stock containment options being considered for the common.

**Table 5 Views of respondents on grazing stock containment.**

Stock containment:	Percentage of responses (Nos. in parenthesis)			Total number
	Like to see	Not like to see	Don't know	
Shepherding (sheep)	45 (33)	34 (25)	22 (16)	74
Large temporary enclosures	50 (40)	28 (22)	23 (18)	80
Perimeter fencing with access points	38 (29)	34 (26)	29 (22)	77
Small compartments	65 (37)	25 (14)	11 (6)	57
Other fencing	46 (31)	37 (25)	19 (13)	69

- The most favourable view on stock containment chosen by respondents was small compartments across the commons (65%).
- The remaining named options all received similar levels of responses ranging from 38% for perimeter fencing with access points which was the least favoured option, to 45% for shepherding.
- Just less than half (46%) of respondents viewed 'other fencing' as a viable option.
- Just over a third of respondents (34%) would not like to see shepherding or perimeter fencing while small compartments were the option which the lowest number of respondents did not like (25%).
- The level of uncertainty (don't know) was highest regarding perimeter fencing (29%) and lowest regarding small compartment (11%).

## **4 Individual comments in Questionnaire**

### **Introduction**

This Appendix 1 contains a summary of comments received from respondents who filled out a questionnaire and supplied comments in the appropriate boxes. The paragraph numbers (e.g. A A1) refer to the questions in the questionnaire shown in Appendix 1 X.

### **4.1 Reasons for visiting and patterns of use**

#### **Reasons for visiting the common (Question A A1)**

Reasons for visiting the commons (total of 14 comments), in addition to those suggested in the questionnaire and displayed in figure 1, fall into 4 categories (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Wildlife; birdwatching, botanical recording (4).
- Photography, painting, sketching (2).
- Statutory inspections; local authority countryside manager visit, biodiversity action plan related visit, parish council rights of way check, fly tipping check (4).
- Voluntary work groups (2).

#### **Amenities offered by the common (Question B B1)**

There were, in addition to the 15 suggested amenities offered on the questionnaire, several comments regarding amenities. These fell into 4 categories (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Wildlife interest; flora & fauna, birds, invertebrates (3)
- Historical interest (2)
- Geological interest (1)
- Access for mobility scooter (1)

## *4.2 Respondents views on condition and management of the common*

### **Concerns during visits to the common (Question B B2)**

There were a wide range of concerns (total of 24 comments) expressed in addition to the panel of 11 offered on the questionnaire. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Litter, lack of bins (2)
- Use of motorcycles, quad-bikes on the common (2)
- Poor signposting (2)
- Uncontrolled dogs (5)
- Inconsiderate cyclists (2)
- Bridleway & path surfaces; flooded, waterlogged, too muddy (3)
- Lack of trees (1)
- Overcrowding at weekends (1)
- Too many horses (1)

Most of the comments reiterated or expanded upon concerns already listed in the suggested panel (uncontrolled dogs, bridleway/path surfaces, disturbance to wildlife, too crowded) and usually referred to the source of the concern, for example, “dogs running loose during breeding season” or “horses destroying footpaths”. Other concerns related to management for visitors (poor signposting, bins, inappropriate hard surfacing of path) or habitat management (loss of too many trees). There were several concerns regarding inconsiderate cycling on the common.

### **Suggested changes to current management of the common for visitors (Question B B4)**

There were a wide range of suggestions (total of 30 comments) regarding the management of the common for visitors. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Improved information and management to control disturbance to wildlife, particularly uncontrolled dogs but also people and horses (9).
- Management to improve path condition (4).
- More information on management activities (3).
- Better scrub management, particularly bracken and birch (2).
- More tree cover and less heathland (3).
- Addition of litter bins to car park, cleaner car park (2).
- Greater access (more paths, greater access for mobility scooters) (3).
- Management for Rights of Way (1).
- Provision for cyclists (1).
- More sign posts (1).
- More wardening (1).

The greatest number of suggestions regarded improvements to both information and management in order to control disturbance to wildlife. The second highest number of specific comments related to improvement in path condition, while there were also a number of suggestions to changes in habitat management albeit with opposing views (reduction of scrub to improve heathland / increased tree cover and less heathland). The remaining suggestions concerned improvements for visitors and mainly related to increased access (more paths, access for scooters, Rights of Way).

#### **Suggested changes to the management of the common for wildlife (Question B B5)**

There were a wide range of suggestions (total of 19 comments) regarding the management of the common for wildlife. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Management to improve diversity of species, taxa and habitats (4).
- Disturbance control, particularly uncontrolled dogs (2).
- Restricted access to sensitive areas or during breeding season (3).
- Limited access for horses and cyclists (1).
- Scrub control and/or grazing (3).
- Deer management, more deer (2).
- Expansion/improvement to ponds and water areas for nesting birds (1).
- Other (3).

Most of the suggested comments were in favour of improving management for wildlife but few suggested specific changes. A high number concerned the closely linked issues of disturbance and access and were in favour of limiting access spatially or temporally in order to protect sensitive areas or during the breeding season. Suggestions were also in favour of protecting or increasing biodiversity, on managing for scrub encroachment and on managing deer.

#### **Comments on provision of information (Question B B10)**

There were a high number and wide range of suggestions (total of 38 comments) regarding the provision of information for visitors. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- More information/education on wildlife and site importance (10).
- Better maps; showing paths, Rights of Way, path condition, take-away maps (7).
- More information on routes/trails (4).
- Information/notices regarding dogs; disturbance, dog mess, Country-Code, law (4).
- More information/education on habitat management activities (4).
- Warnings; grazing animals, horses (2).
- Contact number for problems (1).
- Other information.

The largest number of respondents asked for more educative information regarding the specific wildlife of the site and of the site (habitat) importance in conservation terms. An improvement on informative maps was also suggested by multiple respondents along with more information on routes and trails. Also suggested was information regarding habitat management activities, notices for dog walkers and warnings with respect to grazing animals or horses.

### *4.3 Respondents views on future management options*

#### **Suggested changes to the main management options (Question B B7)**

There were a various comments (total of 18 comments) regarding changes to future management options. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Supportive for appropriate management (4).
- Concerns over burning; destruction, smoke (2).
- Concerns on grazing; containment, number of cattle (2).
- Other concerns; herbicides, scrub encroachment, large machinery, scale of works.

In this section, comments reflected both support for and various concerns of respondents to changes in management options.

### **Suggested changes to management options regarding stock type (Question B B8)**

There were a various comments (total of 19 comments) regarding considerations for types of stock being considered. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Supportive for appropriate management (4).
- Concerns regarding dogs and livestock (4).
- Concerns on fencing (3).
- Other; access restriction, livestock aggression.

Again, comments reflected both support for and various concerns of respondents regarding types of stock being considered.

### **Suggested changes to management options regarding grazing stock control (Question B B9)**

There were various comments (total of 21 comments) regarding stock containment. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Supportive for appropriate management (4).
- Concerns on landscape quality (5).
- Concerns on access (2).
- Other concerns, preferences for fencing options.

There were a variety of concerns with respect to grazing stock containment and the effect fences would have on both the landscape 'feel' and on the level of access for users of the site.

## **5 Responses by letter from Organisations and individuals.**

Responses were received from five organisations and eight individuals. While some of these letters could be reproduced in full, others have been phrased in a way that suggests that the writers were not expecting them to be published. The main points of each communication have therefore been summarised here.

### ***5.1 English heritage***

EH were supportive of measures to enhance sustainable management and increase public awareness of the distinctive cultural landscape of the commons. There are a pair of Bowl Barrows on Thursley Common that are designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, together with a number of other features including indications of significant Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age activities as well as post-Mediaeval ironworking. EH would need to be consulted on any management affecting the SAM and would find burning

and turf stripping unacceptable in this case. EH broadly support proposals for long term long term management programmes for the commons and look forward to further engagement as these develop

### ***5.2 Amphibian and Reptile Conservation*** (Formerly Froglife and the Herpetological Conservation Trust)

Are broadly supportive of the management and goals, but with some concerns on techniques in relation to scale, timing etc. Has provided information on aspects of reptile conservation and both ARC and the Surrey Amphibian and Reptile Group would like to help and advise on management and monitoring (including advance monitoring) to achieve the right balance.

### ***5.3 Ancient Tree Forum***

The Ancient Tree Forum (ATF) were pleased that the consultation had raised the issue of veteran trees associated with heathland, and believe that Royal Common in particular is an excellent example of a heathland common with parkland spaced trees, groves and pollards. ATF suggests that Royal Common could be managed by grazing, cutting of trees and heather, pigs in autumn and other historic activities to give visitors an insight into the past cultural history of commons. The UK is a major custodian of Europe's ancient and veteran trees so we have a special responsibility for conserving these.

### ***5.4 Environment Agency***

EA fully supports habitat restoration projects such as this. They can advise on aspects of watercourse and wetland management and any consents and licences that may be needed. Care will need to be taken in connection with any activities such as tree felling or turf cutting that could lead to soil erosion and deposition in watercourses, and EA can offer advice to minimise the risk of this. They can also advise if felled material is to be moved off site as waste. EA can also give advice on hydrological effects of felling, use of herbicides and activities that could affect main rivers. If cattle use streams and ditches for drinking and excessive poaching should be avoided. Currently the Forked Pond is classified as good, and the local Bagmoor Stream is known to support important fish populations such as brown trout and brook lamprey and Royal brook could also support these species. Account should be taken of this in the management proposals for the site. It will be important to choose the right breed of cattle to conserve fragile wetlands under a grazing scheme.

### ***5.5 Surrey Fire and Rescue Service***

Offering to assist and ask if SFRS could become involved. Correspondent is producing a wild fire strategy for the service which includes Thursley Common.

### ***5.6 Responses from individuals***

#### **Individual letter/e-mail 1**

Correspondent lives adjoining the commons and uses them for walking and dog walking. Increased use of the commons in the future will increase soil erosion, already happening in places due to horse traffic. Protecting and increasing the heathland may well be the right course of action but the wetlands also have great importance.

#### **Individual letter/e-mail 2**

Correspondent uses the commons for walking, cycling and horse riding throughout year.

Commons have become increasingly boggy in winter over last 15 years, not helped by tree cutting. Some paths now almost impassable in winter. Great to have cattle grazing on common but would wish them to be kept penned away from bridleways to avoid accidents.

### **Individual letter/e-mail 3**

Correspondent an amateur entomologist and lead partner in Biodiversity Action Plan programme for two rare heathland flies that are specialist parasites of solitary wasps.

Conservation of rare flies will be assured by management of the Thursley Common National Nature Reserve for wildlife, but concern if site is managed for people, pets and leisure uses that it will gradually deteriorate. There are some 180 specialist solitary wasps and bees that require bare sandy ground for nest sites (burrows) and their shadow flies and other parasites including the heath tiger beetle. Nest sites are destroyed by covering paths, tracks and bridleways in any kind of surfacing material including wood chips on open sandy paths. Respondent enclosed a map showing footpaths, tracks and bridleways of most value to this community. Certain lengths of track should be barred from use by horse riders, cyclists and motor cycles.

Over grazing and trampling can be harmful to invertebrate populations and if grazing is introduced, should be accompanied by control areas and monitoring. Correspondent suggests that a number of areas be excluded from grazing over the next ten years to monitor effects on invertebrates. Believes that the potential damage to invertebrate populations should rule out sheep grazing altogether and if grazing is introduced would prefer grazing by cattle and horses at low density and asks for a careful consideration of stocking densities. Correspondent has no problem with controlled burning on 10-15 year rotation to a design that conserves habitat for invertebrate predators and their caterpillar prey species.

Correspondent is much in favour of turf stripping as it creates new bare ground, valuable to invertebrates, and goes on to give guidance on the places where this can be done and the techniques to use to achieve maximum benefit for invertebrates. Mowing should not take place simultaneously each side of paths or tracks. Erosion gulleys and sandy cliffs are valuable invertebrate features and should not be in-filled or repaired. Correspondent draws attention to value of broad leaved trees and scrub on and around heathland for invertebrates. Log piles also valuable habitat for invertebrates and reptiles. Branches and other dead wood should be left wherever possible and brash should not be chipped on site. Ragwort is a valuable source of nectar and pollen for a range of invertebrates and should be left if possible (e.g. Parish field and grazing animals excluded).

### **Individual letter/e-mail 4**

Correspondents believe Surrey Wildlife Trust are, or have access to, experts on managing the commons and should manage them in the best way possible for wildlife consistent with available budgets.

### **Individual letter/e-mail 5**

Adjoining land owner. Correspondent has concerns that cattle could foul water and trample banks of stream. Damage to banks should be monitored and coppicing reintroduced to protect banks. Believes area should be left as wild as possible and not filled with benches, signs and other clutter. Suggests more fire beaters are made available.

### **Individual letter/e-mail 6**

Nearby property owner who walks Commons every day.

Believes money spent on consultants could be better spent on management of commons. Correspondent is concerned that bracken silver birch and gorse are not being controlled after last major fire on Thursley Common, and that available funds for management are insufficient. Concerns that domestic farm breeds of cattle will be introduced to areas that already suffer from public access, dogs and vermin. Grazing has been tried before to no avail. Believes commons are under-funded and under-staffed and that consultation exercise diverts funds away from where they would best be allocated.

### **Individual letter/e-mail 7**

Parish Councillor.

Use of existing tarmac road from Royal common to Thursley Road is hugely popular as a safe place for children to ride their cycles. Correspondent would be interested to see surface of bridleway between Elstead and Rodborough Common upgraded.

There was an additional response specifically labelled `Private response` which presumably the correspondent did not wish to be included in any report that might become public. It has not therefore been summarised here.

## **6 Summary of responses**

Overall the range of comment was not unexpected on a large, public open space such as the Commons. From the drop-ins and open days and other individual responses there were a lot of complementary comments about the Commons and the way they are currently managed, with a substantial proportion of responses generally liking the Commons and happy to see a continuation of management.

### **6.1 Responses on reasons for visiting and patterns of use**

Nearly half the visits made to the Commons were for walking, with or without a dog, while a smaller number ( $\pm 14\%$ ) came either for the wildlife or for quiet relaxation. About a tenth of respondents came to cycle. Almost half the respondents came daily and around 70% came at least once a week. About an equal proportion of respondents (approximately 40%) arrived on foot and by car respectively while 14% arrived by bicycle and 5% by horse.

Respondents appreciated the intrinsic value of the commons in terms of their scenery, wildlife and open aspect with peace and quiet and 'wild' character high on the list of values offered by the site. The length, circular nature and suitability for dog walking were also appreciated in conjunction with the ease of access on foot and by car. Most respondents (9 out of 10) were members of a wildlife organisation with membership of Surrey Wildlife Trust and the RSPB accounting for half of all memberships.

Many of the respondents frequented alternative sites including a number of similar (heathland), open aspect areas including Hankley Common, Frensham Common and Puttenham Common which together accounted for about half of alternative site visits.

### **6.2 Responses on visitor management**

A high proportion of respondents (46%) were concerned (questionnaires-Qs) about dogs not being under appropriate control and of dog mess, issues that were echoed in the comments from drop-ins and open days, where control of dogs was seen as most important near car parks, picnic areas and roads. Disturbance to wildlife was also an issue and three commented that access should be restricted to sensitive areas during the bird breeding season. For others the condition of paths and bridleways was a concern (Qs-18%) and this was also raised in a number of comments and in two letters, with two mentions of horse riders causing damage. One correspondent raised the issues of improved surfacing to certain routes and two other approved of woodchip surfacing, while another made a strong case for the importance of open sandy paths, tracks and bridleways for scarce, rare and specialist invertebrates and reptiles and for a ban on surfacing or wood chips on certain specified routes.

Three quarters of respondents thought that visitor management was about right. However, a majority (Qs-59%) thought dog bins should be provided with most (Qs-88%) agreeing that they should be placed in the car parks, and a few also mentioned a need for litter bins and cleaner car parks. A majority also thought that the level of information provided to visitors (Qs-59%) and the level of wardening (Qs-66%) was about right.

There were mixed views on whether there should be more or fewer signs with some concern that improved information was needed to control disturbance to wildlife, particularly by dogs but also by people and horses and reference to the Country Code.. A number of respondents wanted more information/education on wildlife, site importance and management. Others asked for maps showing rights of way, routes and trails with more information on these. One respondent asked for more board walks, one for better provision for cyclists, three for better access for disabled and there was a request for more guided walks and more encouragement to volunteers. One comment asked for wide firebreaks, wildfires and their aftermath was mentioned by others and the Surrey Fire and Rescue service were keen to help and advise.

### **6.3 Responses on habitat management**

Greater than two thirds of visitors (Qs-68%) thought that current management for wildlife was about right including approximately half who thought that tree and scrub management was at the right level although one correspondent felt that not enough control of developing scrub was being carried out after the last major fire and three wanted more trees and less heathland and three other called for less scrub. The Ancient Tree Forum was strongly supportive of bringing back traditional management on Royal Common with an element of wood pasture grazing. Bracken and birch control was mentioned as necessary in a number of comments and two comments thought ragwort was a problem with one correspondent arguing for its value for invertebrates. There was also support for turf stripping to benefit invertebrates, a caveat on this technique in some areas for archaeological reasons and one comment in favour. Hydrological issues were raised by the Environment Agency and one other correspondent and English Heritage were supportive but were cautious about some management techniques and potential damage to archaeology. Amphibian and Reptile Conservation and their local representatives asked to be consulted further on specific issues but were otherwise supportive of management goals. Two respondents called for better management to encourage more deer.

With respect to the main future management options being considered for Thursley common most visitors (Qs-92%) chose summer grazing as the option they would like to see. Grazing by cattle was also supported by nearly fifty drop-in and open day comments, with none commenting that they did not want grazing animals. Lower numbers supported mowing (Qs-58%) and winter burning (Qs-56%). Summer grazing also had the least level of objection (Qs-6%). The majority (Qs-86%) also selected cattle as their preferred stock type with ponies second (Qs-63%). The highest objection (Qs-34%) was to sheep as a stock option.

In terms of stock containment, about two thirds from Qs selected small compartments as their most favoured option and three of the open day and drop-in day visitors also wanted to see compartment grazing with two against any fencing. Perimeter fencing and shepherding were not favoured by approximately a third of visitors on Qs. Small compartments also received the least amount of objection (Qs-25%).

### **6.4 Other comments**

Wildlife figured highly among additional Qs comments regarding reasons for visiting and amenities offered by the commons. Comments about visitors' major concerns mirrored the multiple choice responses with uncontrolled dogs and dog waste the major issue followed by concerns about the state of paths. These concerns were broadly mirrored by the comments.

Comments responding to future management were less clear and largely consisted of concerns about each of the suggested management options. Concerns regarding dogs and livestock figured highly as did concerns about the impact of fencing on landscape character and access. One correspondent thought the management of the commons was under-resourced. However, there was also much support for future management changes with “Whatever experts recommend” a typical response.

## 7 Options and recommendations

### *Introduction*

The Commons are an area of extensive common land and a cultural landscape with a range of archaeological, historic, and cultural connections, and is one of the larger fragments of heathland in South-eastern England.

They are a public open space with full and permanent rights of access under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 for those on foot and public rights of way for cyclists and horse-riders, with full access for the latter on Thursley Common. The Commons are a valued local resource for walkers, dog walkers, riders and others and the response to this consultation underlines the interest that local individuals, organisations and communities take in its welfare and future. It is important therefore that the Commons are maintained as an attractive destination for people to visit and enjoy.

The whole area of the commons are designated as an SPA and an SAC under European legislation (with part of Thursley common also designated as a RAMSAR site for its valley mires), and as an SSSI under UK legislation as being of national importance for its wildlife. It is also within the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act (as amended by the CRoW Act) the SSSI must be managed to restore and maintain the designated interest features in favourable condition. The majority of the area is now in unfavourable recovering condition, with recovery due to considerable management inputs in recent years. Without further and continued appropriate management the wildlife interest, the Commons will not continue to improve. Management is necessary to safeguard the future of the European site and for the Trust, the Ministry of Defence/Defence Estates and Natural England, as managers and owners to do nothing, is therefore not an option.

Parts of the commons are used by MOD for training purposes and these will continue to take precedence over other activities which must not be allowed to interfere with this important use.

The recommendations that follow are applicable to all the commons within this report and managers may need to liaise closely, particularly on management activities in relation to public use and perceptions.

Elstead, Bagmoor and Royal commons are currently managed under a Higher Level Stewardship agreement with agreed targets for achieving favourable condition. In order to manage the Commons to achieve favourable condition targets, a range of management measures are desirable. As the organisation charged with administering the Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme, Natural England is also able to help fund the capital and running costs of management of sites like the Commons for the benefit of a range of interests including wildlife, landscape, access and recreation.

The habitat management options have been fully described in the options appraisal and therefore only the main elements will be summarised here. However, there were a number of issues raised by consultees and these will be mentioned under each heading and noted where relevant in the recommendations. The recommendations are included under each section and listed at the end for convenience. A brief summary of comments is given in a box at the beginning of each habitat sub-section and at the beginning of the visitor section.

In most cases a five year management plan is suggested for each option as this is the normal interval for plan reviews. For the Trust it may be more appropriate to consider a seven year plan in this instance as this is the unexpired length of the HLS agreement.

## 7.1 Habitat management

Some 70% of respondents thought the management for wildlife on the commons was about right, with over 90% in favour of summer grazing and over half in favour of winter burning and mowing. A minority (38%) supported vegetation/turf stripping with almost as many against this (32%). Only 6% were not in favour of summer grazing.

In order to provide maximum variety and structure for the benefit of flora and fauna and to achieve and maintain favourable condition, a variety of management techniques are essential. Burning and mowing are single event managements to break up homogenous vegetation structures and remove nutrients. Grazing is a continuous management which complements other management activities, maintains a mosaic of vegetation structures and bare ground, and encourages heather whilst controlling grass. Turf stripping is a valuable tool, for invertebrate and reptile conservation but is clearly not strongly supported by visitors to the common, possibly because they are not aware how small-scale this techniques is likely to be. It will also need to be agreed with the archaeologists and to be well thought out, especially with regard to spoil disposal.

### Recommendation

The Commons should continue to be managed using all the main heathland management techniques including mowing, controlled burning, grazing and turf stripping

### 7.1.1 *Scrub and Tree clearance*

Views on whether more or fewer trees should be removed from the commons were equally divided among the few respondent who commented. About half the respondents thought the current management for trees and scrub was about right

Heathlands are a largely man-made landscape, so that in the absence of continuing use and management, much of the open, heather dominated heathland returns to woodland and scrub. To prevent this and maintain the heath in favourable condition, a programme of clearance is required, with trees being removed and stump treated to prevent re-growth. At the same time it is recognised that some trees should be left on the heaths to provide song posts for birds, refuges for bats and other wildlife and feeding opportunities for invertebrates and birds, and that some woodland should remain, particularly on the better soils and along streambanks.

### Recommendation

An assessment has already been made of the current extent of encroaching trees and scrub, and a work plan is in place for clearance of identified areas and necessary management of retained woodlands and veteran trees. This should continue to be implemented.

### 7.1.2 *Scraping and turf cutting*

This was mentioned by only two respondents who were in favour, but was the least favoured option in the questionnaire with nearly a third of respondents not in favour.

Turf stripping involves removing the top 10 cms or so of the ground to remove nutrients and encourage regeneration of heather from the seed bank. It can be used to restore areas of heath and also creates valuable bare ground habitat for invertebrates and reptiles. It is suggested that the response from the questionnaire to this issue is, first of all, a matter of providing better information on the scale of work and the benefits for wildlife, followed by one or two demonstration sites, to gauge public opinion. An

archaeological survey will be needed on any proposed site before work commences, and any initial demonstration site should take into account the views of an experienced invertebrate specialist.

### **Recommendation**

Carry out further educational work with users of the common on the benefits of bare ground to specialist wildlife on heathlands. This could take the form of occasional display material in car parks, a leaflet and perhaps an open day on the common in the summer to look at wildlife, including invertebrates. Following discussion with English heritage and the County Archaeologist and an invertebrate specialist, identify suitable areas for turfing and carry out two turf stripping plots with suitable signs to identify what they are and why they have been created. Continue educational work on this issue and/or prepare a five year plan for plot creation and if the educational programme is judged to have been successful, implement plan.

### **7.1.3 Burning**

A majority were in favour of controlled winter burning but about a quarter were not in favour, with concerns over destruction of habitat and smoke.

It is possible that attitudes to fire have been influenced by the huge wild fires that have occurred on the commons in recent years, when the aftermath of burnt ground with the remains of charred scrub and trees remain an eyesore for two or three years afterwards. Most controlled burning takes place on dry heath, with the intention of breaking up even aged heather areas and re-starting the heather growth cycle for the benefit of the associated wildlife. Burning (or swaling) can remove some of the accumulated nutrients from the heath, but will encourage grasses, especially if carried out too often. However, controlled burning on wet ground can damage sensitive plant communities and on seasonal damp ground will encourage *Molinia*<sup>2</sup> dominance unless followed by grazing. Burning usually takes place in February or March (and cannot legally take place outside March-Nov without consent) and covers small areas within fire breaks that have been mown beforehand.

Not all areas can be burnt (areas close to housing, roads, car parks, power lines and similar) and it is normally unwise to burn into bracken areas (as this encourages bracken dominance), on steep slopes (which can initiate erosion) or on areas dominated by *Molinia caerulea* (purple moor grass) without subsequent grazing. Some areas of older heather would also normally be left out of any programme of controlled burning and identified as non-intervention areas. Burning into edges of wet heath could benefit silver-studded blues and other invertebrates. Any burning programme is weather dependant and a wet spring can severely curtail planned burning programmes. Climate change with wetter winters may contribute to these uncertainties.

### **Recommendation**

Carry out a heather condition survey to identify are and locations of pioneer, building, mature and degenerate heather. Determine whether additional buns are necessary to restart heather cycles, (given that large wild burnt areas currently provide a preponderance of pioneer and early building heather stands in some areas). If it is desirable to start new cycles of heather growth ion areas of the commons undamaged by wild fires, identify areas suitable for burning and prepare a five year programme of controlled burning for the Commons based on a rotation of 10-15 years. Before any burning takes place attach posters at all entrances to the commons giving notice of the proposals and explaining the reasons for carrying out controlled burning. The surrey Fire and Rescue will also need to be notified beforehand.

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<sup>2</sup> *Molinia caerulea*-Purple moor grass

### 7.1.4 Mowing

Nearly 60% of respondents were in favour of mowing with about a fifth not in favour. Concerns seem to centre on the use of large machinery and the potential scale of operations.

Mowing can be used to control bracken, maintain areas of acid grassland and remove nutrients provided the cut material is taken off, but on heathland, where heather and its associated ericaceous plants are dwarf shrubs, cutting, if carried out too frequently, will encourage grasses except on the driest and most nutrient poor areas. Mowing is not practically possible on broken or steep ground, and machinery has to be carefully chosen to avoid soil compaction. Mowing is best used as a restoration technique to remove tall vegetation and thick litter prior to grazing.

#### **Recommendation**

Prepare a five year work programme of areas proposed for mowing.

### 3.1.6 Bracken spraying and the use of chemicals

Of the few respondents who mentioned bracken, all thought that it should be reduced in area. No concerns were expressed about the use of herbicides and one correspondent approved of its use for bracken control. No respondents mentioned concerns over the spread of purple moor grass around the mires and on the wetter areas of Royal and Bagmoor commons where some has been cut annually by MOD/DE contractors.

Bracken is an invasive species which can compete with heather especially on the slightly better soils often associated with clearance of woodland. Dense bracken casts a heavy shade, contributes to a thick litter layer and inhibits the establishment or growth of other plants. It is usually controlled by spraying, cutting or rolling, repeated at intervals of several years to contain, rather than to eliminate it. It has a number of associated invertebrates and is often part of the vegetation complex used by nesting nightjars, so that where it is not invading dwarf shrub vegetation, some bracken stands are desirable within the complex of heathland associated habitats.

Purple moor grass encroachment is usually due to historical changes in management and atmospheric nutrient inputs. In a number of wet heath and mire communities, purple moor grass can become dominant. Herbicides can, in the short term be effective in controlling purple moor grass, and sowing heather seeds can be effective in establishing heather but results can be vary variable from site to site depending on site and treatment conditions, and to be effective in the long term, grazing would need to be used as a follow up to prevent purple moor grass re-establishment. However, this treatment has only been used in the uplands and the effects on lowland heathland and mires have not been researched.

#### **Recommendation**

Assess the extent of bracken on the Commons and put in place a five year control programme. Where possible bracken should be cut or bruised instead of sprayed, especially in areas heavily used by the public. However it is recognised that cutting or bruising could be difficult in some circumstances and the option of spraying should be kept. Bracken management needs to be repeated at intervals as control rather than elimination is the usual result of treatment. Control of purple moor grass through the use of chemicals is not recommended until full experimental trials have established this as a generally acceptable management mechanism on lowland heathland.

### *7.1.5 Gorse management*

Gorse was not a concern of most respondents who probably considered the management of gorse as part of the existing scrub management programme

European gorse is a particularly characteristic shrub on lowland heaths and provides a home for heathland invertebrates and food, shelter, particularly during hard winter weather, and nesting sites for birds such as Dartford warbler and stonechat. European gorse can spread to form large thickets which are of limited value to birds and impenetrable to visitors. The usual management is to cut gorse on a rotation of about 15 years to provide a variety of form and structure for wildlife and to remove or break up excessive areas of this shrub. The control of roadside gorse often improves views (although in this situation it can also act to effectively hide fences) and reduces the probability of traffic deaths of nesting warblers. In some places, the control of roadside scrub is the responsibility of the highway authority.

### **Recommendation**

Continue the management of European gorse based on an ideal objective of retaining areas of gorse in each stage of recovery within each potential Dartford warbler territory. An assessment of the gorse and Dartford warbler distribution on the Commons would inform a ten year work plan.

### **7.1.6 Grazing**

There was considerable support for grazing with 92% of questionnaires supporting summer grazing. There were some concerns if livestock densities were too high resulting in unacceptable levels of trampling which could damage invertebrate and reptile habitat.

Grazing is a traditional management practice on lowland heaths, and, often accompanied by burning, is probably the main management that has kept many heaths open over the years. Grazing has been adopted as a sustainable and ecologically enhancing form of management by heathland managers across the heathlands of north-west Europe, with the re-introduction of traditional management practices and original breeds. Grazing and trampling on lowland heaths can maintain the balance between heather communities and prevent domination by grasses, can contribute to the reduction of nutrient levels and the establishment and maintenance of species and structural diversity, and create niches which contribute to the richness of the wildlife communities.

Grazing does not remove significant amounts of nutrients from the heath (although substantial amounts can be transferred off the heath onto surrounding woodland, particularly by cattle) but helps to maintain lower nutrient levels. Both under and over-grazing can cause problems, but on many heathlands, particularly where the deciduous purple moor grass is a problem, low intensity grazing from spring to autumn is the normal practice. The effect of grazing on tree and shrub encroachment on heathland can be variable depending on the type and density of stock, but generally grazing animals delay encroachment rather than stop it and periodic clearance will still be necessary.

### **Recommendation**

Extend the grazing (currently restricted to 10% or 10ha of each registration unit under the Commons act 2006) to cover as much of the Commons as is practical.

### **7.1.7 Type of grazing stock**

Some 86% of respondents were in favour of grazing by cattle. Over 60% also favoured pony grazing, and 55% favoured sheep. About three-quarters of respondent favoured a combination of animals. About a third of respondent were not in favour of sheep, with the main concern being dogs, and also some concern over aggression by livestock.

Sheep are close and selective grazers, creating and maintaining a very short sward. They can damage heather by grazing especially in autumn and by pulling up young plants on areas recovering from management treatments where most regeneration is from seed, and on wetter ground their trampling can lead to soil compaction due to their habit of following each other and creating narrow tracks. On dry heath they may do less damage than heavier stock. On wet heath, sheep grazing of *Molinia* can be ineffectual unless accompanied by cutting or burning. Free range sheep are particularly vulnerable to attacks by dogs and where they have been used on public open spaces there have been many such incidents.

Ponies tend to graze grassland on heaths, will generally move further into wet vegetation to graze than cattle and will graze tall and rough vegetation including dead leaves and stems. They are therefore ideal for grazing on *Molinia* which produces much dead material and grows in wetter areas. Ponies can become aggressive if fed by visitors and free range ponies, especially stallions, can pose problems for horse riders.

Cattle grazing has many similarities with grazing by ponies, as they will graze mostly grasses and will forage in tall and tussocky vegetation. They can damage heather by trampling but tend to use dry heath mainly as a route to water or forage areas or to lie up. Trampling on wet ground creates niches for other plants and invertebrates. Cows with young calves can be protective particularly when approached by dogs but older cows from traditional breeds are very docile and are widely used for grazing open access heathland.

### **Recommendation**

The use of sheep for grazing the commons is not practical with loose dogs. Grazing on the Commons should be primarily by cattle during the spring and summer with ponies grazing all the year round to be implemented if possible as an additional benefit. Stocking rates could start at about 1 Livestock Unit<sup>3</sup> per 15-20ha (about 30-40-LSUs on the whole area of the Commons) and varied in the light of experience. This target would be met, for example, by grazing 35-50 cattle for eight months as well as 8 ponies all year. No bulls or cows with young calves should be put on the commons, and any problem animals removed immediately. A traditional docile breed should be used.

There will clearly be a number of major considerations and preparations to be made if this recommendation is implemented. These will include:

- Sourcing sufficient stock
- Carrying out a risk assessment for stock introduction
- Consultation with interest groups, particularly horse riders
- Acclimatisation of stock to visitors and vice versa
- Seasonality of grazing
- Stock management and movement
- Stock checking and welfare
- Wintering and calving areas

### **7.1.8 Management of Grazing**

The overwhelming majority of respondents wanted to see grazing on the common. Most respondents were in favour of small compartments with 50% supporting large temporary enclosures, 28% opposed and 23% uncommitted. Some 38% were in favour of perimeter fencing with 34% not in favour and 29% uncommitted. Some (45%) favoured shepherding with 34% not in favour. Some comments were in favour of grazing but against fencing. Concerns were expressed about fences and access restrictions and landscape issues.

The options for grazing management set out in the options appraisal were tethering (which was rejected as being impractical, ineffective and unacceptable on stock welfare grounds), shepherding (which is currently only practical with sheep) and either temporary or permanent fencing as enclosures on the Commons, or as fences around the perimeter.

#### *Shepherding*

Very little information is available on shepherding schemes for types of stock other than sheep, and there are no examples in the UK of shepherded cattle on open heathlands. Cattle are not as amenable as sheep to control by dogs and there would be obvious dangers with a large herd or herds and busy roads. Shepherding is not an option for ponies.

#### *Temporary electric fences*

There is a restriction on fenced enclosures under the Commons Act 2006 to 10 ha or 10% of any common registration unit whichever is less. On the main areas of the Commons, this restriction would mean only

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<sup>3</sup> One cow = 1LSU, one pony =0.9 LSU, one sheep + 0.15 LSU

limited areas could be grazed for up to six months in any one year. Small grazing enclosures can target grazing on particular areas, but stock confined in them can be more vulnerable to dogs and fire, and labour resources to manage them and move around fences and water can be high. Enclosures on the Commons could also restrict troop movements during training. Temporary electric fencing around the perimeter of the Common would generate very large labour resources in regular checking and would be vulnerable to breakage, damage and vandalism.

#### Permanent fencing

Any fencing scheme would have to preserve all existing access points with appropriate gates and suitable access for cyclists, horse riders and disabled visitors. Detailed specifications for access gates for horse riders would need to be agreed with their representatives. Vehicular access points would need gates or, if required to be kept open, cattle grids with appropriate by-pass arrangements for horses. In areas of high visibility, fences are best hidden in dips or behind banks or concealed by existing gorse thickets.

Within the general framework for fencing and grazing there are a variety of permutations. A feasibility study should be undertaken to determine how much fencing would be needed to complete the perimeter fencing of the whole commons area. Fencing options would be:

- Perimeter fencing to enclose the whole commons area as a single grazing unit
- As above but with a dividing fence across the narrow neck between Royal/Bagmoor and Ockley Commons, to allow either differential grazing or grazing only on one side or the other, allowing those who might be nervous of grazing animals to have available an ungrazed area at any one time.
- A perimeter fence around part of the common and large temporary or permanent enclosures elsewhere
- Large temporary or permanent enclosures only

A substantial proportion of the Common perimeter is already fenced on adjoining land so perimeter fencing would complete this around the remaining boundaries. Permanent perimeter fencing would be the least unsightly option of least inconvenience to visitors who would have to pass one gate going in and one going out. Costs would be high and it would be necessary to install suitable gates on all access points. A perimeter fence would allow maximum freedom to grazing stock to follow natural patterns of extensive grazing, but would mean that no part of the common would be potentially free of stock all the time. The MOD/DE have made it clear that on areas of land they control and use for troop movements their preference would be for perimeter fencing.

The second option would have the same characteristics as the first, save that a fence across the narrowest part of the commons would give an option to confine stock either one side or the other in the interests of grazing management or for the benefit of visitors.

The third option would allow extensive grazing on part of the common with enclosure grazing elsewhere. Such enclosures would need to be large and would require moving at least twice each summer if most of the area of the commons was to be grazed. Each enclosure would need access gates, and rails at each side for the safety of horses. A number of such enclosures would be required if the majority of the common were to be grazed and these could be more unsightly and intrusive than perimeter fencing. Such enclosures could give more targeted grazing in wetter areas, but could pose dangers for stock in the event a wildfire. Whether the fences making up the enclosures were permanent or temporary, they would need to be consented in fixed positions on the commons. The fourth option would be similar to the third but with more enclosures and no perimeter fencing.

#### **Recommendation**

It is the view of the authors of this report that despite the responses to the questionnaire and for the reasons given above that permanent perimeter fencing would be the best option for the management of

grazing on the commons, with or without a dividing fence between the main two areas of common (Bagmoor and Royal and Elstead, Ockley and Thursley). Although permanent perimeter fencing attracted the lowest percentage in favour, it also had the greatest percentage of uncommitted respondents. However, to reflect the concerns expressed by respondents it is suggested that a further consultation offers three options for stock containment, permanent perimeter fencing and large enclosures or a mixture of the two, to reflect the preference of MOD/DE for perimeter fencing on the land they control. Whichever option is chosen as the favoured way forward, a further consultation with users and stakeholders in the common will be necessary before a final decision is made.

### *7.1.9 Habitat and species monitoring*

It will be important to monitor the effects of habitat management in future years. A selection of methods might be used depending on resources and what is already being done, but could include:

- Fixed point photography
- Plant quadrat monitoring across managed habitats with controls sited in unmanaged enclosures
- Carrying out baseline surveys and monitoring of soil nutrient levels
- Breeding bird surveys, reptile and invertebrate survey and monitoring

Some monitoring could be carried out as projects by local students.

#### **Recommendation**

Set up a habitat and species monitoring strategy to assess the effects of habitat management.

## **7.2 Visitor Management**

### Introduction

Current management already meets many visitor aspirations, as evidenced by the considerable number of respondents who were complementary about the existing management and liked the Commons and wanted to keep them as they are now. There was appreciation expressed by a number of respondents for the opportunity to comment on the future of the Commons. The main concerns were related to dogs (including the need for dog bins) and the state of the paths and bridleways. There was little evidence of direct problems between horse riders and pedestrians although there were some concerns about horse damage to surfaces. There were some concerns about inconsiderate cyclists and use of motorbikes. There is some demand for more information for visitors to the common, particularly in relation to route marking and maps, and a call for signs encouraging dog walker to keep their dogs under control and pick up after them. Generally speaking, however, there were remarkable few issues raised by only a limited number of respondents on visitor issues.

### *7.2.1 Information on users of the Commons*

The visitor questionnaire undertaken as part of this consultation is the main source of information on visitors to the commons and will act as a baseline for further future surveys.

It is known that large numbers of people can cause, among other things, disturbance to wildlife, direct damage to sites from soil erosion and compaction and associated effects from depositing litter, eutrophication from dogs and introduction of alien species. At present these effects on the Commons are low, and seem to be mainly concentrated around the car parks in areas most heavily used by visitors. However, these effects are also likely to increase as more people visit the Commons.

#### **Recommendation**

In order to numbers and impacts of visiting to the common a further visitor survey should be carried out every five years. Install automatic counters in the main car parks for long term monitoring of numbers of people visiting the Commons. A path condition survey should be carried out and a path maintenance plan drawn up, taking full account of the needs of invertebrates as detailed in the letter from the entomologist.

### **7.2.2 Community liaison**

Although there are no immediate and substantial pressures for change, the need to consider issues such as path improvements and dog bins have been raised. At some point, if changes affecting the public use of the site are proposed, it will be desirable to obtain the support of the local community and their representatives. This will most easily be obtained if continuing dialogue has informed the local community who already understand the problems and the need to find solutions. It is recognised that a significant level of contact exists between site staff and local people. However, staff change, or their responsibilities for other aspects of site management can take precedence. It would therefore be prudent to consider future plans in this respect.

#### **Recommendation**

Staff of the relevant organisations should take steps to keep in touch with the local community by continuing to put up seasonal ranger notes and posters to inform about latest news and management as well as instituting a series of events such as guided walks, talks and volunteer tasks. In particular, efforts should be made to establish and foster contacts with local organisations and minority users of the Commons including cyclists and horse-riders, and to consult relevant representatives over path, bridleway and track maintenance plans on an annual basis.

### **7.3 Work programmes**

The management of the Commons and the recommendations given above will be facilitated by the preparation of work programmes and a summery description of what is proposed each year as a feature in a spring newsletter. A summary work programme will also assist in demonstrating to visitors and others the expertise, time and resources needed to manage the Commons whilst underpinning any future proposals for additional or new management techniques or other proposals

#### **Recommendation**

Produce a publically accessible annual work summary for the commons.

## **8 Further consultations**

It is important that the Trust, NE and MOD/DE seek the widest possible consensus on the future management of the Commons. If the recommendations above are adopted, then further consultations with local communities and stakeholders will be needed. In particular, if grazing is to be included among the range of management techniques which are used then stock management or containment will be required, and will require a further consultation.

A further consultation on preferred options, once these have taken shape should be sought. On completion of this consultation, final adoption of options in the light of further responses by consultees will be required. This report has recommended that sheep are not a practical option and that cattle and ponies should be the preferred grazers, and that the preferred option should be for perimeter fencing, possibly with a dividing fence.

#### **Recommendation**

Undertake a consultation with all previous consultees on a preferred option for grazing and fencing based on maps of any proposals. Use this public consultation to launch a longer term visitor implementation plan including the strengthening of links with the local community. Apart from any specific proposals for future management, the consultation process should result in due course in a publicly available, summary version of a habitat and visitor management plan and annual work programmes.





# Appendix 1

## Summary of comments from individuals

### Introduction

This Appendix 1 contains a summary of comments received from respondents who filled out a questionnaire and supplied comments in the appropriate boxes. The paragraph numbers (e.g. A A1) refer to the questions in the questionnaire shown in Appendix 1 X.

### Reasons for visiting and patterns of use

#### A A1 Reasons for visiting the common

Reasons for visiting the commons (total of 14 comments), in addition to those suggested in the questionnaire and displayed in figure 1, fall into 4 categories (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Wildlife; birdwatching, botanical recording (4).
- Photography, painting, sketching (2).
- Statutory inspections; local authority countryside manager visit, biodiversity action plan related visit, parish council rights of way check, fly tipping check (4).
- Voluntary work groups (2).

#### B B1 Amenities offered by the common

There were, in addition to the 15 suggested amenities offered on the questionnaire, several comments regarding amenities. These fell into 4 categories (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Wildlife interest; flora & fauna, birds, invertebrates (3)
- Historical interest (2)
- Geological interest (1)
- Access for mobility scooter (1)

### Respondents views on condition and management of the common

#### B B2 Concerns during visits to the common

There were a wide range of concerns (total of 24 comments) expressed in addition to the panel of 11 offered on the questionnaire. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Litter, lack of bins (2)
- Use of motorcycles, quad-bikes on the common (2)
- Poor signposting (2)
- Uncontrolled dogs (5)
- Inconsiderate cyclists (2)
- Bridleway & path surfaces; flooded, waterlogged, too muddy (3)
- Lack of trees (1)
- Overcrowding at weekends (1)
- Too many horses (1)

Most of the comments reiterated or expanded upon concerns already listed in the suggested panel (uncontrolled dogs, bridleway/path surfaces, disturbance to wildlife, too crowded) and usually

referred to the source of the concern, for example, “dogs running loose during breeding season” or “horses destroying footpaths”. Other concerns related to management for visitors (poor signposting, bins, inappropriate hard surfacing of path) or habitat management (loss of too many trees). There were several concerns regarding inconsiderate cycling on the common.

#### **B B4 Suggested changes to current management of the common for visitors**

There were a wide range of suggestions (total of 30 comments) regarding the management of the common for visitors. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Improved information and management to control disturbance to wildlife, particularly uncontrolled dogs but also people and horses (9).
- Management to improve path condition (4).
- More information on management activities (3).
- Better scrub management, particularly bracken and birch (2).
- More tree cover and less heathland (3).
- Addition of litter bins to car park, cleaner car park (2).
- Greater access (more paths, greater access for mobility scooters) (3).
- Management for Rights of Way (1).
- Provision for cyclists (1).
- More sign posts (1).
- More wardening (1).

The greatest number of suggestions regarded improvements to both information and management in order to control disturbance to wildlife. The second highest number of specific comments related to improvement in path condition, while there were also a number of suggestions to changes in habitat management albeit with opposing views (reduction of scrub to improve heathland / increased tree cover and less heathland). The remaining suggestions concerned improvements for visitors and mainly related to increased access (more paths, access for scooters, Rights of Way).

#### **B B5 Suggested changes to the management of the common for wildlife**

There were a wide range of suggestions (total of 19 comments) regarding the management of the common for wildlife. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Management to improve diversity of species, taxa and habitats (4).
- Disturbance control, particularly uncontrolled dogs (2).
- Restricted access to sensitive areas or during breeding season (3).
- Limited access for horses and cyclists (1).
- Scrub control and/or grazing (3).
- Deer management, more deer (2).
- Expansion/improvement to ponds and water areas for nesting birds (1).
- Other (3).

Most of the suggested comments were in favour of improving management for wildlife but few suggested specific changes. A high number concerned the closely linked issues of disturbance and access and were in favour of limiting access spatially or temporally in order to protect sensitive areas or during the breeding season. Suggestions were also in favour of protecting or increasing biodiversity, on managing for scrub encroachment and on managing deer.

#### **B B10 Comments on provision of information**

There were a high number and wide range of suggestions (total of 38 comments) regarding the provision of information for visitors. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- More information/education on wildlife and site importance (10).
- Better maps; showing paths, Rights of Way, path condition, take-away maps (7).
- More information on routes/trails (4).
- Information/notices regarding dogs; disturbance, dog mess, Country-Code, law (4).
- More information/education on habitat management activities (4).
- Warnings; grazing animals, horses (2).
- Contact number for problems (1).
- Other information.

The largest number of respondents asked for more educative information regarding the specific wildlife of the site and of the site (habitat) importance in conservation terms. An improvement on informative maps was also suggested by multiple respondents along with more information on routes and trails. Also suggested was information regarding habitat management activities, notices for dog walkers and warnings with respect to grazing animals or horses.

## **Respondents views on future management options**

### **B B7 Suggested changes to the main management options**

There were a various comments (total of 18 comments) regarding changes to future management options. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Supportive for appropriate management (4).
- Concerns over burning; destruction, smoke (2).
- Concerns on grazing; containment, number of cattle (2).
- Other concerns; herbicides, scrub encroachment, large machinery, scale of works.

In this section, comments reflected both support for and various concerns of respondents to changes in management options.

### **B B8 Suggested changes to management options regarding stock type**

There were a various comments (total of 19 comments) regarding considerations for types of stock being considered. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Supportive for appropriate management (4).
- Concerns regarding dogs and livestock (4).
- Concerns on fencing (3).
- Other; access restriction, livestock aggression.

Again, comments reflected both support for and various concerns of respondents regarding types of stock being considered.

### **B B9 Suggested changes to management options regarding grazing stock control**

There were various comments (total of 21 comments) regarding stock containment. These are categorised as follows (number of comments in parenthesis):

- Supportive for appropriate management (4).
- Concerns on landscape quality (5).

- Concerns on access (2).
- Other concerns, preferences for fencing options.

There were a variety of concerns with respect to grazing stock containment and the effect fences would have on both the landscape 'feel' and on the level of access for users of the site.