



## **Chobham Common Consultation**

### **SURREY WILDLIFE TRUST RESPONSE TO THE REPORT BY DR JOHN DAY**

Chobham Common is one of the largest commons in the south-east of England. It is a very important public open space and a wildlife site of European and national importance. The common is owned by Surrey County Council and managed by the Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) for the benefit of wildlife and people.

SWT engaged Dr Day of Footprint Ecology to undertake a consultation exercise on the future management of the common as part of the process leading up to the completion of a management plan. The aim is to continue to manage the common as an attractive and enjoyable place for people to visit and to restore it to favourable condition for wildlife as required by Natural England in accordance with government targets.

Dr Day's report, which has been published on the SWT website, made a number of recommendations on the future management of the common for both people and wildlife. This note is our initial response to the main recommendations in the report. Further details will be available during the next phase of the consultation.

SWT welcomes the report as a valuable contribution in summarising Phase 1 of the consultation process and in making many significant recommendations. The Trust would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the consultation thus far. Site managers welcome the increased dialogue with visitors to the common which has been encouraged by the first consultation phase and we intend to build further on this.

#### **Visitor recommendations**

**SWT has set up a panel to consider visitor issues as recommended in the report.** The panel will review the existing management approach to significant issues raised by the questionnaire responses, such as: the provision of interpretation, management of dogs and the level of wardening presence. This group will develop a five-year visitor plan for the commons and begin the process by considering all questionnaire responses.

We acknowledge that about 40% of users consider that the maintenance of the path and bridleway network should be improved. We agree to ring-fence part of the annual site budget for the maintenance of paths, horse-rides and bridleways. This would be allocated to priority routes in agreement with horse riders, Surrey Fire and Rescue and other users. A specific survey by questionnaire for local horse riders will be carried out.

We agree to investigate alternative sources of funding to increase levels of maintenance and improvement of paths and horse rides.

**SWT will consult further about the implementation of the visitor plan at drop-in days to ensure that it remains as relevant as possible to the needs of visitors.** The visitor plan

will be then incorporated into the management plan to ensure that the agreed visitor measures are implemented.

### **Habitat recommendations**

**SWT accepts the recommendations in the report that a combination of management practices will best maintain and enhance the heathland communities at Chobham for wildlife.** The report explicitly clarifies why doing nothing is not an option. At the same time, the Trust recognises that a number of concerns have been expressed about different management methods and accepts the need for further consultation.

It is hoped that all the following techniques can be employed to reduce nutrient build-up and manage the vegetation:

- clearance of woodland and scrub
- controlled winter burning
- turf-stripping
- bare ground creation
- mowing
- grazing

If carried out sensitively, such a combination of management practices will replicate past historic management techniques that have ensured that our heaths and their associated rare species survive to this day.

In accepting the need for woodland and scrub clearance, the following caveats are relevant:

- We will actively manage The Clump as an important historic landscape feature which is central to the common and the village and Parish of Chobham;
- The Monk's Walk area would be retained and managed principally as woodland, with heathland glades;
- Scrub clearance will continue to be undertaken for wildlife conservation but with due regard to preserving the open views and archaeological features of the monument and other sites of archaeological importance on Chobham Common.

**The Trust believes that controlled burning can be an important and valuable management practice on heather-dominated areas.** However, it accepts that there are legitimate concerns and proposes to adopt the report's recommendation that some demonstration burns and further public consultation are necessary before the adoption of burning as a management practice. Turf stripping and mowing also raise some concerns and SWT will seek to address these as part of its continuing response to matters raised in the first consultation.

**SWT accepts that grazing is a vital management tool to reduce the dominance of grasses and conserve many scarce species on Chobham Common.** Furthermore, grazing compliments other management practices, making them more effective, for example controlled burning will only encourage further grass dominance unless followed up by grazing.

SWT would like to see the main parcels of the SSSI grazed but accepts that some aspects of this may be controversial. **SWT wishes to engage in further dialogue with visitors and the local community to investigate the possible options on how grazing could feasibly be re-introduced onto Chobham Common.** SWT genuinely wishes to hear views and suggestions and to work with the community on this issue.

The report makes a number of recommendations on what grazing stock could be used, for example no sheep because of dogs, mainly cattle as grazers, but possibly ponies on the northern part of the common following further consultation. The report suggests that small stock enclosures (of a maximum of 10 hectares at any one time – permitted under commons legislation) would not achieve conservation objectives and that comprehensive electric fencing on such a heavily used site would not be practical.

**We accept these recommendations but would like to consult widely on the other methods discussed in the report (and any other suggestions that come forward during consultations) including:**

- Shepherding with cattle or sheep using stockmen and protected by trained dogs;
- Additional permanent perimeter fencing with all existing access points maintained (about 50% of the common perimeter is already fenced by adjoining landowners);
- Permanent fencing as above but possibly with cattle grids on existing roads across the common to minimise the additional fencing required;
- Large temporary electric paddocks on the common over 10 hectares in area;
- A combination of techniques: perhaps involving any of the above and giving consideration to any other suggestions made to SWT by the public, like using ditch and banks.

SWT intends to compare these, and any other options put forward against criteria, such as: efficacy of achieving conservation objectives, effects on access, impact on landscape quality and cost. SWT intends to consult the public and local organisations on these issues during open days on the common and at local drop-in days, so that they can hear and respond to further views and suggestions from the community. Special efforts will be made to consult with dog walkers and horse riders as these two groups expressed the most concern about several management options.

Liaison will be carried out with the Highways Authority to investigate possible options for cattle grids and traffic calming measures on roads that cross the common to enhance visitor safety and recreational enjoyment of the site.

The Trust does not favour the introduction of grazing to Brick Hill, Valley End or Fishpool. There would be little ecological benefit from grazing these small (and mainly wooded) areas.

SWT intends to commission a research project on Chobham Common on the most cost-effective way of converting Molinia-dominated grassland habitat to more bio-diverse meadow and heathland communities. This project will consider to what extent management measures used in the uplands, which were suggested by some local organisations, can be applied to Chobham Common. This will commence as soon as possible.

We accept the importance of monitoring and reviewing visitor issues and the success or failure of management techniques, and this will form an important part of future management.

SWT hopes to finance an enhanced level of management works and increase the number of staff working at Chobham Common through an application for a Higher Level Stewardship grant from Natural England. Part of any additional revenue we secure for the common would be used to increase staffing to deliver an enhanced service for visitors, increase community engagement and to help deliver favourable condition status by 2010.

Through all these measures, SWT will aim to move towards a broad consensus on the future management of Chobham Common by working with visitors and the local community.

**The Trust will be holding open days for you to drop in  
and discuss the issues with our Consultant and Trust staff  
at the following locations, times and dates:**

Drop-in days (1000–1500hrs)

Sat Mar 21<sup>st</sup> Windlesham Club, Kennel Lane  
Sat April 25<sup>th</sup> Chobham Parish Pavilion, Chobham

Manned car park information points

Wed March 25<sup>th</sup> Roundabout car park, Chobham Common, 1000–1600hrs  
Sat March 28<sup>th</sup> Roundabout car park, Chobham Common, 1000–1600hrs  
Sat April 4<sup>th</sup>, Staple Hill car park, Chobham Common, 0800–1200 & 1500–1900hrs

The information days will be advertised on posters in the village,  
on the common and on the SWT website.

To view the report from Footprint Ecology please visit [www.surreywildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.surreywildlifetrust.org.uk)

Please address any correspondence relating to the above consultation  
by 10<sup>th</sup> May 2009, to:

Catherine Aikin-Sneath  
Surrey Wildlife Trust  
School Lane  
Pirbright  
Woking  
Surrey GU24 0JN

or

[catherine.aikin-sneath@surreywt.org.uk](mailto:catherine.aikin-sneath@surreywt.org.uk)