

St Catherine's Hill & Town Common Management Steering Group
Minutes of Meeting, Friday 21st November, 14.00
Christchurch Civic Offices

Present:

Cllr Sue Spittle (CBC) – SS, David Mariner (FSCH) – DM, Chris Gordon (WCRA) – CG, Amanda Collins (SBW) – AC, Chris Dresh (ARC) – CD, Gary Powell (ARC) – GP, Nick Squirrel (NE) – NS, Colin Daborn (CBC) – CMD, Robin Harley (CBC) – RH.

1. Welcome and Introduction

1.1 RH welcomed the group.

2. Apologies

2.1 Apologies were received from Cllr Margaret Phipps (CBC/HPC), Jenni Jones (FSCH), Cllr Tavis Fox (CBC), Paul Atwell (UHP) and Jade North (UHP)

3. Minutes of the meeting on 14 January 2014

3.1 These were agreed as a true and accurate record

4. Matters arising

4.1 RH confirmed that the main outcome of the previous meeting was to defer felling due to wet conditions on the hill.

5. Year 1 felling works update

- 5.1 RH reported that felling work commenced on 10 November. The original contractor pulled out, although suggested that they may be able to start in February/March 2015. This was not acceptable, so an alternative contractor, TreeTech was arranged at short notice..
- 5.2 SS said she had received two complaints about the lack of knowledge of the work and ground being churned up by contractor's vehicles. GP confirmed that this was inevitable, but it would recover during dry weather. He also said that they had delayed felling on the final block of ARC land to help protect the track.
- 5.3 CD said he had been on site every day and been talking to members of the public about the works. Largely people were positive but there were two broad categories of people with negative views: those that had not heard of the management plan and were questioning the work, and those that were aware of the plan, but were consistently opposed to it. RH described how he had received a complaint via email and had written a thorough reply outlining the rationale of the felling work. This had led to a very positive response from the complainant, who even offered to start volunteering on the hill. CG stated he was not aware of any adverse comments about the work.
- 5.4 RH reported a relatively low level of disquiet about felling works and attributes this to the large amount of hard work carried out beforehand with WCRA, councillors, FSCH and the general public. Additionally there are interpretation posters on site to further raise awareness. SS was surprised that the large trees surrounding the reservoir had already been felled, as she had received no complaints. SS offered her congratulations to the team on their excellent handling of public relations.
- 5.5 GP warned that with the chipper on site next week there would be high noise levels, which could lead to a rise in complaints. He confirmed that the chipper had been delayed slightly due to the wet ground conditions, which meant the log stacks had to remain in place a little longer than planned.

He explained that the interim period of works is the worst time visually, when all the material is on the ground.

- 5.6 DM said he thought the hill looked pretty good and the amount of trees left seems about right. He was concerned that areas of bare ground would be left following felling, and asked about regrowth times in the felled areas. GP said the time for heather regrowth varies depending on soil type, competing vegetation (e.g. bracken) and light levels. RH said it would typically be 5 years before significant changes would be seen.

6. Interpretative plinth update

- 6.1 RH reported that the interpretative plinth was unveiled in May. It has received many positive comments and people appear to like it. It has not suffered any vandalism.

7. Monitoring update

- 7.1 RH reported on the hydrological monitoring. From 19th December 2012, water levels in the dipwells have been recorded once a month, along with the flow rate from two drainage pipes and any surface water flowing on main paths. Out of the 10 dipwells, 5 have been continually dry (including 2 on the plateau), 3 have been continually wet and 2 have been dry in the summer and wet in the winter. Water flow from the pipes had been fairly constant, regardless of rainfall levels. These records will provide pre-felling baseline data. RH presented figures highlighting how wet the previous 2 winters had been, and said he used the figures to explain to local residents why they are experiencing high levels of water in their gardens. He explained how the hill absorbs water and slowly releases it, which is why it can be wet in a dry summer if a wet winter has preceded. CG asked for clarity of the correlation between dipwell levels and water in gardens. RH explained that dipwells get wetter during wet conditions, as expected. However, spring flow tends to vary very little through the year. DM asked what is a 'normal' rainfall level. RH said the data was available from the met office website.
- 7.2 NS and SS both requested a copy of the dipwell data spreadsheet. *Action: RH*
- 7.3 SS asked about the stability of the hill. RH said the consultant hydrologist saw no risk of landslip due to the geology of the hill. He said that as an extra precaution, no felling would take place on steep slopes. The hydrologists report is available on the DorsetForYou website.
- 7.4 RH reported on the vegetation monitoring. Twenty-four quadrats of 2 metres x 2 metres square have been established in order to monitor vegetation regrowth following felling. Two controls have been set up; one in open heathland and one in woodland. Two have been located very close together to provide a comparison. The vegetation has been recorded and the next monitoring will take place in three years' time. NS suggested that percentage plant cover should also be recorded in order to monitor the amount of bare earth present. Also in two adjacent plots containing a thick layer of pine needles, one should be scraped clear in order to monitor the difference in recovery time. SS said that the research would prove invaluable in the future. She also wanted to know if funding was available. RH said that the Forestry Commission had identified it as an exemplar project, but was unaware of any potential funding.

8. Year 2 felling works timeline

- 8.1 GP stated that the Year 2 felling programme had yet to be confirmed, following a review of the current felling. The most urgent action is to apply for a felling licence for this work. RH, GP and CD need to meet first to determine the felling blocks. *Action RH.*
- 8.2 RH said there were still some outstanding blocks from the current felling licence.

9. Any other Business

- 9.1 RH presented designs for new ladder boards on Council land. The words 'St Catherine's Hill Nature Reserve' are to be routed in wood. Below this are three symbols for no fires, no cycling and no camping. AC suggested adding words below the symbols for further clarification and also adding a positive message such as 'enjoy the hill' accompanied by a viewpoint symbol. NS said it should also include a 'dogs under control' symbol and a message to respect other users. RH said he would finalise the design. *Action: RH*
- 9.2 There was a general discussion about dogs under control on the hill. Whilst there were differences of opinion, the general feeling was that although a minority of dogs were not under control, it was not a major issue. CG reported that a number of dogs enter his property each day.
- 9.3 CD reported that each block of ARC land will be re-branded' after the felling. This will include replacement of old signs and repair of fences. He confirmed that additional signage was not planned.
- 9.4 Heather beetle has been a problem this summer. RH reported that heather has regrown and flowered following an extensive attack. NS stated that the heather should recover as long as the beetle attack was not sustained over a number of years.
- 9.5 RH explained that the Countryside Service was being restructured and from the start of January a team of four Countryside Officers would be based in Moors Valley and would cover sites across Christchurch and East Dorset. Each officer would have a specialism; conservation, engagement, operations and strategic access management. In addition there would be two assistant rangers.
- 9.6 RH reported that the proposed grazing scheme has been postponed for the foreseeable future. NS suggested that it should be considered and if a plan was in place then it would be possible to make use of any funding, as and when it became available. RH highlighted the large expense of the required fencing and said it would be possible to draw on the experience of other new grazing schemes in the area.

10. Date of next meeting

- 10.1 Friday 13th February was agreed for the provisional date of the next meeting, to take place at the home of SS to enable a site visit to take place. RH to circulate the agenda. *Action: RH*