

**St Catherine's Hill & Town Common Management Steering Group**  
**Minutes of Meeting, Thursday 23 April, 13.00**  
**82 Hurn Road**

**Present:**

Cllr Sue Spittle (CBC) – SS, David Mariner (FSCH) – DM, Chris Gordon (WCRA) – CG, Amanda Collins (SBW) – AC, Gary Powell (ARC) – GP, Robin Harley (CBC) – RH, Paul Atwell (UHP) - PA.

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

1.1 SS welcomed the group.

**2. Apologies**

2.1 Apologies were received from Cllr Margaret Phipps (DCC/CBC/HPC), Cllr Tavis Fox (CBC)

**3. Minutes of the meeting on 21 November 2014**

3.1 These were agreed as a true and accurate record

**4. Matters arising**

4.1 It was agreed that these would be dealt with under agenda items

**5. Impact of fires on 31 March 2015**

5.1 GP outlined the likely ecological impact of the fire, with a predicted recovery period of around 20 years. Many reptiles and other animals died during the fire and will die as a result of the fire. Grass is now starting to grow back on site, along with nettles and other weeds.

5.2 There is a severe visual impact on site visitors due to the blackened ground and vegetation. One positive has been the level of support from residents. This has included help with the reptile rescue and donations to ARC. Facebook has been used to keep people updated.

5.3 Around 500 reptiles have been rescued and moved to unburnt areas. Very few smooth snakes were found but the fire was early in the season and some animals would have remained under ground. Many other fires have taken place over the same period, including two large fires on ARC reserves in Surrey. There is some suspicion that some of these may be copycat incidences. Official rescue efforts are now over.

5.4 The best thing to do re recovery is to now wait and see what comes back. The habitat will return over time, with some species recolonising quickly and others taking many years.

5.5 Many factors combined on the day to make the fire unstoppable (e.g. low humidity, wind speed, dead heather due to heather beetle damage, location of ignition point). The many fire breaks on the site helped reduce the extent of the fire but the wind was too strong for them to be wholly effective. The gorse along Dudmoor Lane was a complicating factor as it made fire vehicle movement very hard due to the risk and helped the fire jump to the eastern side of the site. Properties on Dudmoor Lane were most under threat and these were prioritised by the fire service and successfully protected on the day. Fire crews from Hampshire also attended.

5.6 Had the fire moved into the pine canopy it would have been unstoppable, with no effective methods of tackling it currently in the UK. The only option would have been to evacuate the Hillside Drive estate. Removal of ladder fuels (e.g. rhododendron understorey) helped prevent the fire climbing into the canopy.

- 5.7 Access and poor radio signals were an issue for the fire service on the day, with confusion over fire location and gate accesses due to multiple attendances and lack of visual information on fire location. Also there were six 999 calls giving varied locations. The intention is that all gates in SE Dorset will be signed and numbered.
- 5.8 All the fires appear to be definite arson, despite silly stories that they were started by land managers to get rid of trees. Multiple ignition points have been found close to the A338, including some failed attempts.
- 5.9 Signs of recovery are already evident, with a greening of some of the low intensity burn areas. This is mainly purple moor grass, moss, bracken and gorse, especially in wetter areas but some heather is starting to grow again. Birds are particularly impacted with e.g. Dartford Warblers being pushed to the fringes and staying in flocks, rather than pairs.
- 5.10 The police investigation is ongoing with a third teenager now being questioned in connection with one of the fires. On the day a 999 call was made by teenagers admitting that they had set a fire and it had got out of control. This does not appear to be linked to the main fire. Despite behaving recklessly, they did also report the incident to the police themselves. WCRA have made a proposal of an award for information. The plan is to deal with those involved through a restorative justice process but ARC have already spent many hours on this and don't have time for further involvement.
- 5.11 PA mentioned the fire setters course for people with an unhealthy interest in fires and is a successful programme. In addition UHP have an education officer going regularly into schools. As in previous years Operation Heathland is in place with Dorset Police and these recent fires are a key discussion point. After the Upton Heath fire local schools were particularly targeted. UHP hold pickled and burnt dead animals as a prop to take into schools.
- 5.12 Jess has now mapped the fire boundaries using GPS, as is standard practice for all heath fires in Dorset.

## **6. Felling works update**

- 6.1 Treetech carried out the contract for both landowners at short notice. The work was large scale to what they would normally do and this was in addition to existing works. As a result the works took a long time to complete but were finished by the 31 March deadline.
- 6.2 Feedback from the public had been generally very good, particularly given the site history. A lot of effort had gone into the preparation for the work and this appeared to have paid off. ARC were not massively happy with the work, particularly as the site was left in an untidy condition for long periods, there was a lot of vehicle movements over heather and general approach did not take appropriate care, in their view.
- 6.3 Whole tree chipping did reduce vehicle movements on and off site but it was a messy (although relatively low noise) operation, requiring large volumes of timber to be stockpiled.
- 6.4 There had been some upset over works in the gun club. There has now been a change in personnel and the new chairman is keen to build bridges. ARC had also been accused of felling trees on gun club land but this was not the case. Natural England are keen for ARC and CBC to take greater involvement in advising the club re felling but neither party was particularly keen and group members were also keen that the group is not pulled into a contentious part of the site.

## **7. Future Felling Proposals**

- 7.1 Gary outlined the ARC proposals for this coming autumn/winter period. This includes around 4-5 felling blocks around the quarry pond and areas between the gun club and Sandy Lane. The latter areas mainly relate to rhododendron removal, with a mix of pine and broadleaf thinning to the east of the gun club track. Gary circulated a map showing the areas.
- 7.2 Robin circulated a map showing the Council proposals. These include work in two blocks not completed under the existing licence, where it had been agreed to phase the felling over two seasons. There were then additional blocks, in areas adjacent to previous felling works, including further inroads into the wide ride north of the mast site.
- 7.3 Both Robin and Gary agreed that the previous specification was not tight enough and that follow up work (e.g. raking) had been required to further tidy areas and create suitable conditions for plant growth.
- 7.4 Getting a good contractor was key, with the capacity to do all the works in good time. The end result was acceptable last time but some areas were left looking messy for long periods. Chipping was a very successful operation, when the chipper wasn't broken!. Both would like to get quotes from other contractors. Gary was very keen to use Bob Joyce as he does work to a high standard and has the necessary equipment.
- 7.5 Robin informed the group that Mr Tuck from the small holding at Blackwater had sadly passed away over the winter. As the land is adjacent to the Council's holding there may be an opportunity to acquire additional land.

## **8. Monitoring**

- 8.1 The group discussed hydrological monitoring, which is ongoing and proving a useful record of varying ground water levels. One resident on St Catherine's Hill Lane had suffered water logging in February, again following a very wet period. The geology of the hill and how the area acts like a sponge, holding large volumes of water over many months and then releasing it slowly.

## **9. Any other Business**

- 9.1 None

## **10. Date of next meeting**

- 10.1 It was agreed that a meeting needed to take place on site in July with Dick Preston to discuss timber volumes. As before, Gary, Robin and Chris Gordon would attend.

*The meeting was then followed by a visit to site to view the proposed felling areas.*