

St Catherine's Hill & Town Common Management Plan Update, April 2017

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This document only relates to the area of land on St Catherine's Hill and Town Common covered by the site management plan (areas 2 & 3 on the attached location plan). Other works have also taken place outside the plan area and on land within the boundaries of Christchurch Gun Club but these are not covered.
- 1.2 All works have been discussed and agreed in advance by the site Management Steering Group, which includes representatives of the main landowners and interest groups for the site.

2. Tree Felling

- 2.1 The total area of the management plan is 59 hectares (145 acres). At the end of the plan we are aiming to have 24 hectares of woodland (reduced from about 33 hectares), about 10 hectares of wooded heath and about 25 hectares of open heathland. Ultimately the aim of management is to provide a diverse range of habitats and maximise the benefits of the site for as wide a range of species as possible.
- 2.2 Tree felling locations on site have been guided by the agreed management plan. As some blocks within the plan require phasing (e.g. Woodland – Wooded Heath – Open Heath), these have been prioritised to get them to the wooded heath stage as a first step. Please see attached maps for locations of work carried out to date.
- 2.3 Priority has been given to the felling of Maritime/Mediterranean Pine over Scot's Pine. A proportion of the former species appears to be in natural decline on site and is in poor health with around 10 mature trees dying each year.
- 2.4 All tree felling works* have also been subject to approval by the Forestry Commission, through formal Felling Licence applications. (*excepting those on Bournemouth Water Company Land, which do not require a licence). Applications have to be made separately by each landowner.
- 2.5 Due to a range of issues (including funding complications and administrative delays) it has not been possible to apply annually as originally intended or carry out works to the intended timetable. Despite this, by phasing works, felling has taken place on part of the site each winter since 2013/14.
- 2.6 As agreed, arisings from felling works have been largely extracted from site as either timber or woodchip, as opposed to burning on site. This has limited the number of contractors available to landowners and had implications in terms of cost effectiveness, and short term logistical impacts because of on-site stockpiling of materials, vehicle movements and localised track rutting.
- 2.7 The cost of works has been almost entirely met through grant funding from Natural England under their Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) programme or equivalent agreements.
- 2.8 Vegetation recovery (e.g. germination of heather seedlings) is evident in the earliest felling blocks. This has been supplemented in some areas by spreading of heather seed and moving heather plants from adjacent open areas.

3. Grazing

- 3.1 Although cattle grazing of the site remains an aspiration within the lifetime of the plan and has been discussed at length by the Steering Group, there are no current plans to take this forward in the short term.

4. Hydrology

- 4.1 Monthly monitoring of dipwells and rainfall data from Bournemouth Airport has been ongoing since December 2012. This shows that between 2012-2014 it was a particularly wet period with both 2012 and 2014 falling within the top 5 wettest years since records began in 1953.
- 4.2 There are 10 dipwells on site, two on top of the hill are 5m deep and the remainder are 2m deep. Of these, five have to date remained dry and five hold varying amounts of water at some point during the year. Two of the five have always held water so far.
- 4.3 The Hill appears to hold groundwater a bit like a sponge and releases it gradually through springs. In low to normal rainfall periods, as the water drains away over many months the springs start to dry out. The most recent dipwell records (March 2017) are the driest on record with some ditches returning to a dry state for the first time in 4 or 5 years.
- 4.4 Not surprisingly there seems to be a strong correlation between rainfall and site dryness although the free draining nature of the site means that large volumes of continuous rain are necessary to make a noticeable difference. It is worth restating that the hydrology of the site is complex and not well understood.
- 4.5 Heavy showers and persistent rain events do still cause short term surface water issues and sand washing from site entrances due to the nature of the site being elevated from the surrounding land.
- 4.6 Works to clear or improve drainage ditches to resolve localised issues have been carried out at three main locations along the western boundaries of the site. Residents have also made contributions towards costs in one of these locations. Deliberate blocking of the new drainage in one location is an ongoing issue.

5. Fire Update

- 5.1 The devastating fires on 31 May 2015 had an immediate adverse impact on site wildlife.
- 5.2 The site vegetation is now gradually recovering in most burnt areas but we would expect it to take 10 years to return the site to a similar condition visually and longer for wildlife to fully return.
- 5.3 Works to improve fire service response and access have been planned and partially implemented. This includes removing obstructions and flammable vegetation along Dudmoor Lane to give sufficient width and height and increase opportunities for vehicle passing and turning.
- 5.4 We are currently investigating the feasibility of an additional fire hydrant at the north end of the site and improving east-west access across the site for fire vehicles.

6. Next Phase

- 6.1 Most of the planned works on site are up to date with those agreed. The Steering Group will meet again in May 2017 to discuss and agree applying for the next phase of management works.
- 6.2 General tree health and condition, in selected blocks (including the main western slopes) will be investigated by an independent tree specialist during 2017.