

Malvern Hills Trust
Land Management Committee
Manor House, Grange Road, Malvern
Thursday 7 December 2017 7.00pm

Present: Mr D Baldwin, Dr S Braim, Dr P Forster, Mr S Freeman, Mr A Golightly, Mr D Hawkins, Mrs G Rees (Chair), Ms S Rouse, Ms H Stace, Mr T Yapp.

In attendance: Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Secretary to the Board, Conservation Manager, Mr S Roberts, Mr M Gardner, Mr M Davies, 6 members of the public.

Mr Golightly, in his capacity as outgoing Vice-Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. Election of Chairman

Mr Rouse had indicated that he no longer wished to stand and therefore Mrs Rees was elected unopposed. She took the chair.

2. Election of Vice-Chairman

Dr Braim was elected unopposed.

3. Apologies for Absence

Mrs Cumming, Mr Michael, Mr Hall-Jones, Mr Rouse, Ms S Stewart.

4. Declarations of Interest

Ms Rouse declared an interest in the HLS Scheme.

5. Chairman's Communications

Mrs Rees thanked Mr Rouse for all he had done as chair of the committee. She welcomed the members of the public who were present.

6. Public Questions

There had been 4 questions received from Ian Wells on behalf of Save our Malvern Skylarks. Mrs Rees asked to take item 11 on the agenda with this item.

"We are calling on Malvern Hills Trust supported by Natural England to:

- i) Acknowledge RSPB and other expert advice on habitat needs especially grass height of 20cm plus"

The CEO replied that the Trust was aware of the needs of skylarks. The Trust's aim for the return of the skylark was set out in the adopted Land Management Plan (LMP) in objective 17. The Trust was constantly improving its knowledge by liaising with a range of experts. The habitat criteria cited by the campaign were generic advice for skylark conservation in a typical farmland setting, not applicable to the Malvern Hills. The Trust and Natural England did not therefore support the proposals as set out by the campaign group.

- ii) “Make the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme agreement due to start in January 2018 public so it is clear it has the potential to address skylark conservation alongside other species (and other land management arrangements if the new scheme does not include Castlemorton)”

The CEO replied that the Scheme would continue to support conservation on the Hills and Commons in accordance with the LMP. It would support the existing programme of low intensity conservation grazing and open habitat restoration and would benefit access, cultural heritage and a range of wildlife including skylarks. Stewardship agreements included budgets for future works and therefore could not be disclosed as they were financially confidential.

- iii) “Seek to recreate and protect skylark friendly conditions in current and historical skylark territories ie lenient winter grazing to target sward height of around 30cm and with no grazing April to mid-August inclusive. On the high hills grazing could stop at least until the target is achieved.”

The CEO replied that the Trust would continue to ensure that all its work including grazing would have as wide a group of beneficiaries as possible. The stated plan was to continue grazing on the hills to benefit the high acid grassland whilst extending restoration of the open habitats on the middle slopes. This accorded with the views of Natural England’s senior ornithologist and also their national lead on grasslands. It would provide new areas of open short grassland vegetation for potential skylark use away from the busy ridge.

- iv) “Engage in a constructive dialog that is transparent on conflicts and creative on solutions to them though it seems that what is good for skylarks will be good for much else.”

There had been 4 public consultations on the LMP over a period of a year. MHT hosted a Wildlife Advisory Panel where local experts could pass on their records and opinions twice a year and this dialog had led to setting up of the Ground Nesting Birds campaign. The Trust did not concur with the statement that what was good for skylarks would be good for much else.

Mr Wells asked whether he could see the Stewardship Agreements with the figures redacted. The CEO said as the agreement was made with Natural England, he did not feel it was for MHT to put it into the public arena. He could give a general idea of what was in it, but the Agreement was there to support the implementation of the LMP.

Mr Wells made a short statement on his activities monitoring skylarks over a number of years and why he had launched the campaign. He felt very strongly that MHT should allow the sward height to increase.

Dr Peter Holmes was also invited to speak, and said that in his view the Malvern Hills were not prime skylark habitat and the skylarks had declined in many areas. He felt efforts would be better directed towards engaging with surrounding local farmers to encourage them to put in skylark protection measures.

Committee members acknowledged that there was a difference of expert opinion. Ms Stace said that Natural England had just closed bids to its Facilitation Fund, which was targeted at groups of landowners to help them work together to improve and connect habitats and the Trust had signed up to that.

The Conservation Manager pointed out that Malvern Common was a different type of grassland to the Hills and was therefore being managed with a different objective. The CEO hoped that some of the scrub clearance in the slopes would create more open habitat for skylarks in due course.

Mrs Rees thanked Mr Wells for bringing the matter to the Committee's attention. 2 members of the public left.

7. Matters Arising from the meeting of 12 October 2017

The Conservation Manager gave an update on the topic of making charges for events. More research had been carried out and it had been concluded that it would be sensible to wait to see the outcomes in other areas (eg Richmond Park) where a charging regime had been established.

He reported that no formal offer had been received from Natural England in response to MHT's Countryside Stewardship application. It was agreed that he should write a letter of complaint as a formal response was months overdue.

8. To consider Land Management budget 2018/9

The Secretary to the Board said that she had checked the conflict of interest policy and confirmed that Ms Rouse had a personal interest in the HLS budget.

The Conservation Manager went through the part of the paper relating to the general fund budget. He pointed out that the draft showed a figure of £1,000 to add to the designated reserve for ash dieback & other tree disease, but the figure should be £3,000!

Ms Rouse left the meeting. The Conservation Manager went through the HLS section of the budget. The funding stream for the Northern and Central Hills ended in October 2017 and confirmation that Countryside Stewardship funding was available was still awaited. The grazing licences for those areas expired in November 2018 but could be funded until then from HLS scheme reserves in the event that the Trust's application for Countryside Stewardship funding was not successful. If new funding was not confirmed by April, it would be necessary to start making contingency plans to find alternative ways of delivering grazing. The CEO confirmed that the Trust was not committed to something it could not afford. On the proposal of Ms Rees, it was **RESOLVED** unanimously to approve the budget and recommend its adoption by the Board.

Ms Rouse returned to the meeting. Mr Davies left the meeting.

9. Application to surface easement Brockhill Road

The CEO went through the paper. Two residents from Brockhill Road wished to surface part of the road, including the section owned by MHT. They had made an application to the Trust, but it was clear that the course of action was not agreed by all residents. The CEO recommended that the application was deferred and the residents were asked to come back with a proposal which all residents agreed. In the past, some patches of tarmac had been put down but the CEO could find no record of this being agreed formally by MHT. The Committee **AGREED** that the application should be deferred as suggested.

10. Project progress update

The CEO went through his report. The work at St Ann's Well was finished, and there would be a formal reopening in due course.

Mr Gardner confirmed that the item "Water at Ragged Stone" would probably not now be required as mains water had been installed via Eastnor Estate.

The CEO said that a paper on car park charges would follow – the current supplier of MHT's ticket machines had merged with a much larger company and it would be necessary to see whether they would continue servicing the current machines.

11. Skylarks

Dealt with under item 6

12. Graziers' Report

Mr Gardner had attended a conference on farming post Brexit. He had understood that the Government was looking at supporting unfavourable areas, such as uplands, in order to make their management financially viable. The current farm payment system would almost certainly cease.

Two cattle had been killed in 3 weeks and another 2 hit. The deaths both occurred in daylight, and involved local people. Mrs Rees suggested there might be an attempt to educate local drivers.

13. Conservation Manager's report

The Conservation Manager gave a presentation on the felling work at Thirds Wood, which he reported should be completed under the budget. All the work by the road had been finished but here was still some thinning to be carried out in other areas. Some replanting would take place, mainly in 2018. The Trust was not permitted to replant with larch, but would aim to retain the character of the woodland.

Severn Trent had carried out a lot of work on MHT land over the last 12 months. Work on Malvern Common was coming to an end but 2 areas remained fenced off. The Conservation Manager hoped the work would finish by the end of January, but restoration work would continue after that.

The Winter Scrub work was going well. Two new Field Staff had undergone training to ensure they had the appropriate certificates to carry out their work. The work on Table Hill had revealed archaeology marking out the Kings Thirds, which was now being mapped.

Access volunteers had done a good job last winter opening up the views from the benches and cleaning the stone markers. The work would continue this year. The schedule of conservation volunteer working days covering January to June 2018 would be ready before Christmas.

Mrs Rees asked if photos of the work undertaken could be provided for the Committee from time to time. Mrs Rees asked if the volunteers could be thanked, as Board members did not get to meet them.

14. Matters for Future Consideration

There were none.

15. Urgent business

There was none.

The meeting closed at 8.45pm

ⁱ On investigation, the figure of £3,000 was correctly shown elsewhere in the budget

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