

## **Cabinet**

**DATE OF MEETING: 1<sup>st</sup> September 2022**

**TITLE OF REPORT: ODIHAM COMMON MANAGEMENT PLAN 2022-2032**

**Report of: Head of Environment and Technical Services**

**Cabinet Portfolio: Strategic Direction and Partnerships**

**Key Decision: No**

**Confidentiality: Non-Exempt**

## **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

This report provides Cabinet with a proposed Management Plan for Odiham Common that, if approved will provide a strategy for its management for the next 10 years. The report also considers a strategy for the management of Ash Dieback on Odiham Common, which will be implemented until a district Tree Strategy is approved.

The report includes details of a consultation process that was undertaken with the Key Stakeholders identified in the former 2010 2020 Management Plan.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

That Cabinet:

1. Approves the draft Odiham Common Management Plan (attached at Appendix 1).
2. Approves and adopts a temporary Ash Dieback Strategy until a time where a more formal "Tree Strategy" will supplement this guidance.

## **BACKGROUND**

3. As Odiham Common is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Natural England require Hart District Council to produce a Management Plan to show it is reaching "Favourable Condition" and is meeting its legal duty as a Section 28 (g) Authority. (See section 14 for more detail).
4. A previous site management plan was developed in 2010 as a 10-year plan with the objective to restore the common to "Favourable Condition" from its current level of "Unfavourable Condition". As there was a high level of restoration required, Consultative Committee was set up with Key Stakeholders to
  1. Obtain perspective about what they value about the Common
  2. Examine the range of management options and
  3. Select the most appropriate options for delivery

The management plan ended in 2020 having achieved "Favourable Condition" but due to the Covid Pandemic, the new plan was not started until now.

5. A consultation process was carried out with key stakeholders and the draft plan was largely supported by the majority of the group. Subsequently, the plan has been subject to a petition and comments from the neighbouring residents. This has been considered with the other stakeholder responses within Appendix 2. A list of the consultees is held in Appendix 2 and section 2.9.1 of the proposed Management Plan.

6. Hart has signed an agreement with Natural England (NE) for a 10-year delivery funded plan (which forms the basis of the draft Management Plan). Any amendments to the plan that effects the agreement will need to get consent from Natural England.
7. This report was considered by Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2022. The committee unanimously agreed that Cabinet.
  1. Should not approve the draft Odiham Common Management Plan in its current form and ask it to take note of the issues and discussions raised by Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
  2. Approves and adopts a temporary Ash Dieback Strategy until a time where a more formal "Tree Strategy" will supplement this guidance.
8. The key issues discussed at Overview and Scrutiny were
  1. The cost of the Plan and balancing its requirements and resident's expectations.
  2. Making additional links, 'a contact group' between residents and Parish Councils regarding the Common.
  3. Balancing biodiversity and moderate access to this Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).
  4. The current standard of the existing pathways and whether additional work is needed to make them more accessible.
  5. The possibility of applying for additional Government funding schemes appropriate to local groups for climate change activities
9. Officers' response to the points raised at Overview and Scrutiny Committee are provided in Appendix 4.

## **MAIN ISSUES**

10. As Odiham Common is a SSSI there is a need to conserve the biodiversity of the site as a priority over its public use. However, we do hope that the proposed plan will build on the successes of the past and has struck a good compromise between biodiversity and the impacts of disturbance from recreational activities.
11. Biodiversity is a metric used to measure the variety of life in an ecosystem; the unit of biodiversity is the species. Greater biodiversity supports more resilient ecosystems, and careful management can be required to restore ecosystems to being healthy, functional, and resilient.
12. The UK is now in a biodiversity crisis with one if four species at risk in the UK we are in the 10% bottom performing countries in the world and last in the G7 group of nations. With half of our biodiversity left we are far below our "safe limit" of 90% decline and tipping into a "ecological meltdown". This plan will help build on the successes of its predecessor and provide a "haven" for biodiversity's continuing future in Hart.
13. The draft Management Plan includes a recommendation for Ash Dieback Management (see Appendix 3). Ash Dieback is a chronic fungal infection that is affecting ash populations across Europe and the UK. The pathogen attacks the internal capillary system that transports water and nutrients within the tree. This leads to loss of leaves, wilting, lesions in the bark and sometimes death.

14. The plan identifies and grades risk resulting from ash dieback. This considers the merits of retaining trees as a biodiversity resource where this risk is minimal. It is not designed to be a replacement for good woodland management.

### **ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED**

14. Alternative funding streams were considered as part of the development of this Plan. There is an alternative available (the Forestry Commissions woodland Grant Scheme) that offered more funding, but this option would have required more staffing resources and (to qualify) it recommended an elevated level of tree clearance that is unnecessary at this time to maintain the required "Favourable Condition" status and would have caused significant local disruption.

### **CORPORATE GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or The Hart Vision 2040**

15. Approval of the Management Plan will contribute to the Harts Corporate Plan priority of "A Clean, Green and Safe Environment." Specifically, by the commitment to "protect and enhance biodiversity" where this explicitly commits to the positive management of our Sites of Special Scientific Interest (Fleet Pond, Hazeley Heath and Odiham Common).

#### **Service Plan**

- Is the proposal identified in the Service Plan? No
- Is the proposal being funded from current budgets? Yes
- Have staffing resources already been identified and set aside for this proposal?

Yes

#### **Legal and Constitutional Issues**

16. As a Section 28g Authority, Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 places a duty to conserve biodiversity. It requires local authorities and government departments to "have regard to the purposes of conserving biodiversity in a manner that is consistent with the exercise of their normal function." The recent Environment Act (2021) updates the NERC duty on all public authorities to have regard, in the exercise of their functions, to the purpose of conserving and enhancing biodiversity it also requires Local Authorities to produce a biodiversity report every 5 years (which will include reporting on their 'biodiversity actions').
17. Odiham Common falls within the Odiham Common with Bagwell Green and Shaw Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981, as amended) protects the interest features of the SSSIs from development, from other damage, and from neglect by ensuring that the SSSI interests are considered properly against other factors and requires the owners/occupiers to obtain consent for any operations likely to damage the SSSI interest. Local authorities must take reasonable steps to conserve and enhance the special features of SSSIs when carrying out statutory duties and giving others permission for works
18. See section 2.6 of the Management Plan for details of all legal issues.

#### **Financial and Resource Implications**

19. The Countryside Service has successfully applied for Countryside Stewardship funding to help deliver the plan. This amounts to a one-off capital payment of £6,384 and an annual average payment of £5,800 (varied dependant on amount of works particularly to veteran trees undertaken each year). This will help supplement the delivery of the Plan over a ten-year period.
20. Odiham Common has an approved revenue budget for 2022/23 which includes salary provision for a dedicated ranger. Any additional funding required to meet the recommendations of the draft Odiham Common Management Plan will be met from the Countryside Stewardship agreement which is funded by NE.

### **Risk Management**

21. The current ranger post is vacant, whilst this is to be recruited to there is a risk that we will not be able to recruit to this post.
22. The Countryside Stewardship agreement (which has been used to inform the draft management plan) is a ten-year agreement (with review in year 5) that has been signed with NE and confirms the conservation management objectives and funding for the duration of the agreement. To draw down the funding Hart must annually provide NE with evidence of works and compliance with the agreement's objectives. Failure to meet the objectives will result in Hart losing future years funding and could require the council to repay monies received to date.
23. If the Council does not have a Management Plan and funding in place for the site longer term the council could face legal action from Natural England for failing to maintain and improve an SSSI. Natural England could force the council to undertake appropriate works on site and / or carry out works itself and bill the council for them.

### **EQUALITIES**

24. We have conducted an initial equality pre-assessment, and this does not require us to undertake a full equality impact assessment.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

25. Management objective 9 relates to HDC's sustainability goals; specifically, the baseline for the site's habitat carbon sequestration will be established and options to increase sequestration will be considered. If any resulting options result in significant amendments to the planned management of the site, a revised management plan will be produced for consideration.

### **ACTION**

26. The agreed comments of the Committee will be reported to Cabinet for its consideration.

**Contact Details:** Adam Green Countryside Manager / Email:

adam.green@hart.gov.uk

### **Appendices**

**Appendix 1 - Odiham Common Management Plan 2022-2032 (final Draft for approval)**

**Appendix 2 - Summary of feedback from consultation**

**Appendix 3 - Ash Dieback Plan for Odiham Common**

**Appendix 4 – Response to Questions raised at Overview and Scrutiny  
Committee Aug 22**

**Background Papers:** [Devon Ash Dieback Advice Note](#)