

Speaking note for Cabinet on 1 September 2022

I speak on behalf of the people who live on or adjacent to Odiham Common. These are people who love and cherish the common; enjoy it for quiet informal recreation; and in the commercial world would be key customers.

Potbridge lies between two noisy roads – the M3 and B3016 - and the rural lane through the hamlet leads directly to Shapley Heath. At a site visit in June 2020 the noise problem was appreciated and Hart agreed in an e-mail on 1 July 2020 that in the East compartment ‘just 2 Willow trees are to be removed in the Potbridge triangle to minimise the traffic noise effect that further felling would cause’ i.e. felling is not critical.

However, when we saw the Woodland Plan in spring 2021 it included 30% felling in Potbridge East and 10% in Potbridge West. We asked for the 2020 agreement to be honoured. In response Hart divided the East compartment into two halves with felling avoided in one and 10% in the other i.e. felling is not critical. At a Zoom meeting on 20 August 2021 Hart said there was no felling in Potbridge.

In September 2021 when we saw the Woodland plan that had been submitted we were astonished to see felling of some 40% of the trees in the East compartment ie over 1700 trees had been silently inserted and in the West compartment a 20 -25% felling: 370 trees.

When we questioned the Potbridge felling Hart said it was included because Forestry Commission insisted. We took this up. The Forestry Commission told us the land was gifted to the public to enjoy for leisure purposes; it is therefore classed as open space and is exempt from forestry regulations. They confirmed activities in the Woodland Management Plan were not legally binding; that they do not insist the work is carried out and no action would be taken if it was not carried out. They also wrote that in their negotiations with Hart over the management plan they advised the council to identify areas of ash that were suffering from ash dieback as work within these areas would increase the biodiversity and resilience of the woodland by replacing these trees with a more diverse mix of tree species. In their following e-mail of 7 December 2021 they went on to say ‘The Forestry Commission whilst reviewing the works stated that felling could be carried out within the areas other than those that were originally stated. There are areas of Ash trees within the common that are suffering from chalara and unfortunately a significant amount of those will die’ i.e. felling in Potbridge is not critical or biodiversity optimal. The truth of the matter is that the Forestry Commission did not insist felling takes place in Potbridge and were positively encouraging Hart instead to fell diseased trees in the ash dieback areas for good biodiversity reasons.

Hart officials can muster only 9 words about the felling: ‘there is no uncritical and unfunded tree felling proposed’. The Forestry Commission does not regard felling in Potbridge as critical or providing the optimal biodiversity approach. The various

proposals from Hart since July 2020 hardly suggest felling is critical or based on sound scientific evidence.

The plan lists 42 habitat operations. Only 9 are funded by the much reduced Stewardship Grant and over 40% of the grant is earmarked for simply halving on average 6.5 veteran trees per year and haymaking. As long ago as June 2021 we questioned whether the aspirations were realistic. There have been no changes as a result of our inputs and officials were not able to advise O&S that the Potbridge felling was funded. The Hart budget is mainly for a ranger who will have to cope, inter alia, with the listed 29 unfunded habitat activities; the 2000 tree Potbridge felling, ash dieback that is likely to result in the felling of 4000 diseased trees at average mortality rates, and the development of the Tree Strategy; unfunded activity in the Woodland plan; plus all the non-habitat activity such as path maintenance on the 300 acre site.

The most waterlogged paths are adjacent to areas of felling and, after felling, bracken and bramble invade. In Potbridge the wayleave is now impassable with 5 foot high bracken and bramble. The other path already has standing water: easy to anticipate the consequences of felling.

When resources are reduced or restricted it is imperative to concentrate on and prioritise the essentials. If it's not broken don't fix it. We ask you to delete the felling of the 1700 healthy Potbridge trees that during the period of this plan is not essential, critical, welcomed, or a biodiversity optimum.

We were interested to see that the Forestry Commission use Lord Charrington's Gift as the basis of their consideration of the common. The residents believe that Hart officials have betrayed Lord Charrington's wish that the public should enjoy the common for leisure purposes and as a result the balance in the plan is flawed. We would like to see biodiversity and humans embraced for the benefit of both. Frankly we do not believe all the aspirations in the plan are achievable within the available resource. The plan would benefit from more realistic aspirations with sharper objectives and performance indicators - it would not be difficult to make these improvements. We urge you to accept the unanimous O&S recommendation to decline to approve the plan in its current form.

Bill Esdaile; Peter Ingram; Stuart Royston
Representatives on the Consultative Committee

Gordon McLean
Chairman of the Potbridge residents association

