

# ENVIRONMENT CABINET MEMBER MEETING

## Agenda Item 60(ii)

Brighton & Hove City Council

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Grazing Plan to 2011/12</b>		
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>5 November 2009</b>		
<b>Report of:</b>	<b>Director of Environment</b>		
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	<b>Name:</b>	<b>Gillian Marston</b>	<b>Tel:</b> 29-2293
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<b>Key Decision:</b>	<b>No</b>		
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	<b>East Brighton; Hangleton &amp; Knoll; Hollingdean &amp; Stanmer; Moulsecomb &amp; Bevendean, North Portslade; Patcham; Rottingdean Coastal; Withdean and Woodingdean</b>		

### FOR GENERAL RELEASE

#### 1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

1.1 On 24 September 2009 a report titled Cityparks Downland Management was presented to Environment CMM. The report was called in and the Environment and Community Safety Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered the decision made on 6 October 2009 and determined that the decision should be referred back to CMM for reconsideration due to:

- The lack of consultation with local conservation and wildlife groups
- The lack of information in the CMM report relating to cutting and composting of sites not being grazed
- Lack of analysis evident in the CMM report of the impact of the downland mowing policy on a site by site basis

1.2 This report provides information about the proposed plan to move from conservation mowing to increased grazing on certain areas of council land and includes additional information to address the matters raised by the Environment and Community Safety Overview & Scrutiny Committee

#### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

2.1 This report is for information only to inform the Cabinet Member's decision in relation to the call-in of the original decision on Downland Management taken on 24 September 2009.

#### 3. RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3.1 The downs around the city were grazed by sheep for many hundreds, probably thousands, of years. This traditional management technique was instrumental in creating and maintaining the species-rich turf. Chalk grassland supports up to 40 species of plant in one square metre and many of these are chalk specialists, which require a 'high stress' environment (very low soil fertility and regular browsing) to survive.

- 3.2 Today chalk grassland is internationally rare and local authorities are expected to prioritise its management as part of their duty to further biodiversity, set out in Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.
- 3.3 About 20 years ago Brighton Borough Council introduced grass cutting and baling on some chalk grassland sites under its control. This 'emergency management' was a reaction to the serious decline in the quality of the remaining chalk grassland, most of which had received little or no grazing for many years. However cutting is an inferior management technique to grazing.
- 3.4 Reintroducing sheep grazing on the council's chalk grassland sites was therefore always desirable and 10 years ago Brighton & Hove Council reintroduced sheep to a few key sites, working with a local grazier and in close liaison with the local community. Publicity is needed to generate support and ensure people understand the reasons for change.
- 3.5 Cityparks Rangers have trained over 65 volunteer 'lookers' (to help check on the sheep) and has a further 30 people on a waiting list for the next training course. The project has also received national and international press coverage and it is clear we are amongst the lead local authorities in this important area of work. No serious issues of concern have been encountered with the reintroduction of grazing to date and the educational and community benefits of reintroducing grazing on the urban fringe are now being recognised.

### Recommendations

- 3.6 The following proposals (which are subject to full consultation) are in addition to, or to improve, sites where grazing and/or conservation mowing currently takes place. Conservation mowing will continue until grazing is introduced.
- 3.7 Winter 2009/2010:

Site	Grazing plan (Appendix 1 Site maps)
Beacon Hill Local Nature Reserve (LNR)	Increase the limited area currently grazed with sheep to include most of the chalk grassland. Permanent perimeter fencing with accessible gates. Grazing by rotation around several compartments with temporary internal fencing.
Bevendean Down LNR	Small extension to north of existing grazed area.
Hollingbury Wild Park LNR	Triple the small area of chalk grassland first grazed with sheep last winter. Permanent perimeter fencing with accessible gates and clear a large area of scrub for grazing.

Sheepcote Valley	Triple the area grazed with sheep in 2008/2009 to include most of the chalk grassland slopes (also now in the National Park) with temporary fencing.
Waterhall	Increase sheep grazing to include all the meadow area with permanent fencing and accessible gates.
Whitehawk Hill LNR	Introduce sheep grazing to a small area for the first time with temporary fencing.

### 3.8 Winter 2010/2011:

Site	Grazing plan
Bevendean Down Local Nature Reserve (LNR)	Negotiate with existing farm tenant to increase the area currently grazed with sheep.
Hollingbury Wild Park LNR	Assess the feasibility of extensively grazing both sides of Ditchling Road from Hollingbury golf course to the A27, including "39 acres" and land along west side of Ditchling Road currently mown by Cityparks. To include open access on foot across the entire area with accessible gates located where appropriate and dog owners encouraged to keep dogs under close control. Clear a further area of scrub for grazing and permanent fencing with accessible gates.
Ladies Mile LNR	Introduce sheep grazing to a small area for the first time with temporary fencing.
Sheepcote Valley	Increase the area grazed by sheep to include most of the grassland with permanent fencing.
Whitehawk Hill LNR	Double or triple the area first grazed with sheep in 2009/2010 depending on the success of 2009/2010.

### 3.9 Winter 2011/2012:

Site	Grazing plan
Green Ridge	Introduce sheep grazing to a small area for the first time with temporary fencing.

Hollingbury Wild Park LNR	Clear a further area of scrub for grazing and permanent fencing with accessible gates.
Ladies Mile LNR	Double or triple the area first grazed with sheep in 2010/2011 depending on the success of 2010/2011.
Stanmer Park LNR	Introduce sheep grazing to “Marquee Brow” (small area of chalk downland north east of main entrance at Lower Lodges) for the first time with temporary fencing.
Whitehawk Hill LNR	Assess the feasibility of extensively grazing both sides of Manor Hill. To include open access with accessible gates located where appropriate and dog owners encouraged to keep dogs under close control.

- 3.10 Sheep grazing will continue at Benfield Hill LNR (currently managed by the South Downs Joint Committee), the sheep holding field at Stanmer and Dorothy Stringer School where sheep grazed their chalk grassland re-creation site for the first time last winter.
- 3.11 Conservation mowing will continue at the following sites until grazing can be introduced where possible: 19 acres (between Devil’s Dyke Road and Waterhall golf course), Bexhill Road open space, Braeside Avenue open space, Chattri (small area adjacent to Chattri grounds), Devil’s Dyke Road strip, Happy Valley, Hollingbury hill fort, Hollingbury Park reservoir surrounds, and Tenantry Down.
- 3.12 The following sites are not considered practical to graze and will continue to be mown: Clifftop (narrow strip from Marina to Saltdean producing little grass), Roedean Golf (small area mown for Ladies Tresses), Roedean Way (small area adjacent to car park) and Withdean woods.
- 3.13 The extensive grazing plans for Hollingbury Wild Park (2010/2011) and Whitehawk Hill (2011/2012) will require further feasibility studies. Initial meetings have been held with officers in Property Services and Sustainable Transport to agree the principle of extensive grazing.

### **Impact of reducing conservation mowing and increasing grazing**

- 3.14 It is proposed that the introduction of sheep grazing is prioritised to the Local Nature Reserves (which are Wild Park, Bevendean, Whitehawk Hill, Ladies Mile and Beacon Hill , as listed in Appendix 2). Many of the most important parts of these sites are inaccessible to mowers as they are too steep. If the current rate of progress continues, by winter 2010/11 the council will be grazing all of these high priority sites (although not the whole of them). Many of these areas are not being managed at all and in danger of losing their ecological importance. A further priority are Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs) where there is chalk grassland under direct council management.

- 3.15 During the transition period from cutting to grazing, there are sites that will not be grazed or cleared of grass cuttings for some years, although these sites are generally those which are regarded as being already of lower quality habitat. Any change to the quality of chalk grassland occurs over many years of prolonged management. Uncut grass cuttings may affect some smaller species of chalk grassland plants over a period of time, but cutting will prevent scrub invasion which can lead to the loss of chalk grassland habitats altogether. The grazing plan will be kept under review and brought forward subject to consultation and resources.
- 3.16 Conservation mowing is to be continued without the clearance of the grass cuttings on sites of lesser conservation importance (i.e. of lower importance to unimproved chalk grassland). This is unlikely to be of significant detriment to the conservation value of these sites over a period of 5 years. As such, the council will keep the grazing plan under review and further increase its coverage subject to resources, consultation and practical implications.
- 3.17 Consultation on the feasibility and the means of introducing grazing and publicity for each grazing site will include ward councillors, conservation and wildlife groups, established friends groups, site users, local residents, recruitment of "lookers" to assist with checking sheep, and up to ten access point information boards located at strategic locations and particularly focusing on where the above sites are gateways to the new South Downs National Park.
- 3.18 Implementation of these proposals would ensure sustainable management is reinstated onto the most important chalk grassland sites under council control. The declaration of the new National Park and the proposed creation of a green network as part of the Local Development Framework could create additional opportunities to extend grazing management to other areas. This wider grazing potential will be assessed at a later date.

#### **4. CONSULTATION**

- 4.1 Property Services and Sustainable Transport teams have been consulted.
- 4.2 A meeting was held with the Brighton Urban Wildlife Group and representatives of Friends of Green Ridge, Friends of Sheepcote Valley and Friends of Hollingbury and Burstead Woods in May 2009. At that meeting the Cabinet Member for Environment agreed to present a Grazing Plan to a Cabinet Member Meeting. Further consultation with conservation and wildlife groups will be undertaken to further assess the suitability of sites for grazing, the transition from mowing to grazing, and where grazing is not deemed suitable the conservation and management implications and options.

#### **5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:**

##### Financial Implications:

- 5.1 Funding for grazing has been identified from existing budgets.

- 5.2 With their support and advice an application has been submitted to Natural England for Higher Level Scheme (HLS) agricultural funding for ten years from 2010 to fund site improvements and facilitate grazing, such as scrub clearance, fences and accessible gates. Natural England has given the application full support and is currently funding full environment plans to accompany the application.

*Finance Officer Consulted: Derek Mansfield*

*Date: 21/10/09*

Legal Implications:

- 5.3 None identified at this stage.

*Lawyer Consulted: Alison Gatherer*

*Date: 21/10/09*

Equalities Implications:

- 5.4 Consultation is underway with existing conservation community groups, as well as developing new relationships with “lookerers”, particularly local dog walkers. All fences will have accessible gates, not stiles. Natural England “access to nature” project funding has recently been secured, in partnership with Sussex Wildlife Trust, to improve access to green spaces in the city by under represented groups and from areas of deprivation.

Sustainability Implications:

- 5.5 Appropriate grazing is the most sustainable method of managing most areas of chalk grassland, as well as providing open access for people to enjoy green spaces. This is an important element of the council commitment to sustainability, reducing our carbon footprint, increasing biodiversity and moving towards Urban Biosphere status.

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 5.6 Positive management in itself will deter anti social behaviour such as vehicle incursions. The recruitment of “lookerers” will develop a community of people who understand and care for the area. Scrambler and quad bikes are particular problems on “39 acres” which experience demonstrates will be deterred by grazing.

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 5.7 There is an opportunity for further linking local food production (ie. meat) with local markets (eg. restaurants, butchers, schools).

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 5.8 The project has already received national and international press coverage and it is understood the council is amongst the lead local authorities in approaching this area of work.

## **6. EVALUATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTION(S):**

### **6.1 Mowing is inferior to grazing:**

- it can cause severe disruption to grassland invertebrates and ground nesting birds;
- it cannot be used on the steeper slopes (where much of the remaining chalk grassland is found);
- it is uniform in its application and therefore prevents the establishment of swards of varying height, which are favoured by some chalk grassland species; and
- it damages chalk grassland features such as ant hills and some archaeology.

The cost comparisons of continuing to mow our chalk grassland sites vary due to soil type and from year to year due to the weather. In total in 2007 it cost £16,000 to cut, clear and compost. In 2008 it is estimated this would have increased to between £28,000 and £48,000 - depending on the weather - due to increased fuel and composting costs (as a result sites were cut but not cleared or composted).

## **7. REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 7.1 Grazing is an improvement to the quality of the council's chalk grassland management and will also cover considerably more chalk grassland than could ever be achieved by cutting. There will be an improvement in the management of sites which have never been cut and cleared but will be grazed. These are usually the most ecologically important sites which have been most under threat from species loss. Similarly, there is an improvement in the management of sites where they were being cut and cleared but are now being grazed.
- 7.2 As well as an improved method of managing chalk grassland, the increased costs of mowing and composting means the introduction of grazing is financially advantageous.

## **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

### **Appendices:**

1. Individual site grazing plans for 2009/2010
2. Site by site information

### **Documents in Members' Rooms**

None

### **Background Documents**

1. Downland Initiative Feasibility Study