

Agenda Item No: 5 **Report No:** 22/12
Report Title: Landport Bottom Management Committee Ranger Report
Report To: Landport Bottom Management Committee **Date:** 24th January 2012
Lead Councillor: Cllr Andy Smith
Ward(s) Affected: Lewes
Report By: Dan Ross, Community Ranger
Contact Officer(s)-
Name(s): Dan Ross
Post Title(s): Community Ranger
E-mail(s): Dan.ross@lewes.gov.uk
Tel No(s): 484408

Purpose of Report:

To present a summary of the Landport Bottom recreation consultation

Officers Recommendation(s):

- 1 To agree relaxation of restrictions for Horse Riding, Cycling, and other non vehicular recreation pursuits at Landport Bottom.
- 2 To reserve the option to reinstate any restriction should it be deemed necessary for health and safety or ecological issues that may arise.
- 3 To continue appropriate monitoring (for example fixed point photography) in order to review this policy after one year.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 1 Thorough consultation over one calendar year (details below) found less evidence than expected of significant ecological damage, or significant health and safety issues arising from mixed recreational use of Landport Bottom. (It should be noted that this was a particularly dry year which had an impact on this process). However there was evidence of polarised view points from different user groups, and considerable anger amongst a minority of users regarding behaviour of either horse riders, dog walkers or cyclists.

Information

2 The consultation process

The Landport Bottom Recreation Consultation was ordered by the Landport Bottom Management Committee following a public meeting on 7th December 2010. The details of the consultation process were agreed at the Landport Bottom Management Committee (LBMC) meeting on the 18th January 2011. The consultation was ordered to investigate the impact of recreation activities at Landport Bottom both in terms of physical impact such as ecological / landscape, and cultural impact on people and user groups.

2.1 Botanical Survey and ecological impact assessment

A botanical survey was commissioned by the Community Ranger in Spring 2011 by a local experienced consultant. The remit was to repeat a 2006 survey, and expand it to include an impact assessment of public use of Landport Bottom, and the progression back to chalk grassland.

One significant variable to be noted within this assessment is the exceptionally dry weather conditions of spring / summer 2011. This may have skewed the results of this survey.

Results:

- There is an expanded species list, to include flagship species such as the County Flower – Round Headed Rampion *Phyteuma orbiculare* (one specimen found). Generally, chalk grassland restoration process is proving successful, with an expanded list of Biodiversity Action Plan indicator species for example Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, Birds foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, Lady's bedstraw *Gilium verum*, Mouse-ear hawkweed *Pilosella officinarum* etc.
- The grazing regime will need altering to facilitate improved flora diversity – in particular over-grazing during early summer will need to stop.
- Scrub clearing programme in some areas is resulting in increased flora diversity.
- Horse riding, cycling and vehicular use (farm vehicles) is resulting in poaching (damage to the turf) and funnelling (squeeze effect of damage in confined areas) and erosion in several areas including gates, access tracks and high use areas.
- Horse riding was found to have less overall ecological impact than anticipated on the site, although erosion was identified that was directly attributed to horses. It is acknowledged that horse riding in particular has the potential to have greater impact on the site in the future (e.g. if wetter season, or with increased usage). The botanical survey author recommends that a restriction or demarcation of a specific route for horses and wheeled vehicles may be advantageous.

- Dog walking has considerable impact in terms of fouling in specific locations, such as near to the Tumuli entrance.
- Walking was found to have minimal impact, although littering seemed to be a by-product.
- Cycling was found to have minimal impact.
- Vehicle use was found to have an impact within the gateways, but not throughout the rest of the site.

2.2 Fixed point photography

Monthly photographs were taken throughout 2011, at fixed locations throughout all three fields at Landport Bottom.

These photographs show that the large field behind the Nevill Estate showed most recreational impact to the turf. When the ground was damp, the turf at the top of the field was poached by horses in a strip around 20m away from the fence for a width of about 10 - 15m.

In addition, there was minor poaching throughout all of the fields (mainly confined to field margins), but there was little lasting damage throughout the season.

There were no bicycle tracks observed throughout the photography, and vehicle damage was confined to small areas around gates.

The photographs illustrate clearly the impact of grazing, and show little vegetation change throughout the season. A marked contrast in the small field was observed, which was not grazed during mid / late summer, and resulted in a rich wildflower display in late summer.

2.3 Consultation with special interest groups, professional organisations and civic groups.

Letters were sent inviting comment on this consultation to a variety of stakeholders associated with Landport Bottom. A list of consultees can be found in the appendix of this report.

There was an encouraging number of respondents, the salient comments are briefly described below.

Plumpton College: concerns about site users generally not respecting stock, particularly dogs and horses.

Southdowns National Park Authority: Offered support into long-term landscape management of Landport Bottom, and supported the aims of the Higher Level Stewardship programme, whilst balancing the need for mixed recreation. They acknowledged that conflict can exist between different user groups, but did not recommend any restrictions (other than to restrict horse galloping).

East Sussex County Council: Commented that existing bridleways were inspected in 2010 and were recorded in good condition.

Cycle Lewes: praised the facility at Landport Bottom for cyclists, but commented that horse riding significantly damages downland bridleways, making them unsuitable for cycling.

Natural England: expressed concern that conditions contained within the Higher Level Stewardship agreement are upheld, in particular with regard to impact on potential habitat loss, and damage to archaeological features. They did not recommend any restrictions of access, but that habitat management and monitoring should continue to take place.

The Ramblers: recommended continued mixed recreational use without restrictions. Highlighted the importance of this site for walkers in adjacent housing estates.

Friends of Lewes: generally no problem with mixed recreational use. They highlighted the need for a car park to facilitate visitor access, and increased interpretation about the Battle of Lewes.

Nevill Residents Association: Highlighted problems of poached access points and paths leading to Landport Bottom. Suggested the need to increase access points to the site, and improve education so that different user groups can begin to respect one another.

2.4 Consultation with general public

2.4.1 SurveyMonkey on line consultation

A questionnaire was placed on the District and Town Council websites. Press releases, and on-site signage pointed to the survey address, and there were just under 250 responses to this online consultation. SurveyMonkey prevents ISP address from duplicate entries, so these are individual responses. A sample of this questionnaire can be found in the appendix.

There was a variety of responses, the key findings of which are summarised below:

Of respondents:

- 65% accessed Landport Bottom by foot, 8% by horse, 12% by bike and 12% by car.
- 33% used the site for walking without a dog, 31% for dog walking, 11% cycling, 7% horse riding, 8% family recreations.
- 40% have experienced problems when using the site, whilst 60% experienced no problems.

- 37% would like to restrict horse riding, 34% other activities (which mainly included motor bikes), 14% dog walkers, 11% cyclists, 2% family recreation and 1% walkers.
- 51% were aware of the chalk downland restoration programme.
- 66% thought Landport Bottom was well managed.
- 43% thought management could be improved.
- 25% offered their services for voluntary work to help manage the site.

A large number of complex responses were received, highlights of which are outlined below.

- Other activities on site included kite flying, running, wildlife watching, and painting.
- Problems for the vast majority of respondents encountered on site were divided roughly equally between complaints about horse riders churning up the paths, the ground and riding too fast, and dog walkers whose dogs were either out of control, or leaving dog mess. There were a couple of additional comments about motor bikes, cyclists, and litter. There also seemed to be a discrepancy between race horses who were more negatively perceived than riding school horses. A recurring theme seemed to be the problems created by horses churning up paths at access points, such as the path near to Hawkenbury Way.
- Suggestions for restricting activities were divided roughly equally between restricting horse riding, dog walkers and motor bikes. (NB motor bikes are already outlawed on site). There were also calls to restrict camping from a few respondents.
- Suggestions why restrictions were needed include erosion of ground by horses, high speed of horses dangerous, dogs causing nuisance chasing stock and horses, dog waste etc.
- Suggestions for increasing activities included more interpretation (guided walks, talks etc), kite flying, special events and festivals to celebrate access to the Downs, cycling, orienteering etc.
- Suggestions for improving management included comments on reduced grazing pressure, greater Ranger patrols, improved interpretation, prevent sheep from grazing all fields at once, control of dog waste, improve woodland management, remove dew pond fencing, better signage,

better community engagement, improved gates, potential restrictions of different user groups e.g. horse riders, dog walkers etc, no over-management (do not turn into a park),

2.4.2 In addition to the survey 40 Telephone & E-mail and written correspondence.

2.4.3 Consultation events and meetings

A number of consultation events took place including a talk to Nevill Residents Associations (Mon 5th Sept 2011), and an on-site consultation event on Sunday 11th December 2011. The latter event was an opportunity for the public to meet with the Rangers to discuss their experiences of using Landport Bottom and any issues or suggestions they had for improving management. Many of the issues already mentioned were brought up.

2.5 Conclusions

- Recreation activities at Landport Bottom are on the whole having less long-term impact than at first thought on the flora at Landport Bottom, but seasonal conditions do result in increased poaching and turf damage. This damage is particularly problematic in gateways and access tracks. A significant caveat to this was the unusually dry weather conditions throughout the year.
- Health and safety issues appear not to be significantly compromised by open access to horse riding, cycling and walking with and without dogs at Landport Bottom. However there are a number of isolated incidents that have been reported highlighting selfish or inappropriate usage.
- Different recreational groups have little respect for each other, and there is considerable misunderstanding on the needs of each user group. An education campaign to raise awareness of different user group needs should take place at Landport Bottom. A review of signage will need to take place, incorporating new messages about recreation activities on site.
- Grazing regime will need to be amended to prevent overgrazing, and better communication with the general public about the grazing regime needs to take place. (A review of management is due to take place this year due to Higher Level Stewardship conditions).
- Better community engagement, interpretation and education events need to be considered to help integrate Landport Bottom into the community.
- Better communication between Plumpton College (the graziers) and the public would benefit site users.

3 Financial Appraisal

There are no financial implications contained within this report.

4 Environmental Implications

I have completed the Environmental Implications questionnaire and this Report is exempt from the requirement because it is a progress report.

5 Risk Management Implications

I have completed a risk assessment. The changes/issues covered by this report are not significant in terms of risk. No new risks will arise whether or not the recommendations are implemented or rejected.

6 Equality Implications

This is a progress report and therefore Equality Implications Screening Report is not necessary.

7 Background Papers (Appendices)

- List of consultees
- Sample questionnaire
- Press cuttings and Newspaper ads
- On site posters and signage
- Available but not included in this report due to volume of material: SurveyMonkey full questionnaire results and analysis.