

Kingwood Common, future conservation and sustainable management; a summary report of ongoing consultation



Introduction

The Nettlebed and District Commons are a collection of eight separate commons that cover 224 hectares between the villages of Nettlebed and Peppard. The commons contain a variety of habitats, including heathland, ancient woodland and ponds.

The Nettlebed Commons Project has three aims:

- Produce a management plan for all eight commons
- Investigate introducing a scheme of grazing onto Kingwood Common
- Source appropriate funding

We are currently looking at the potential for the introduction of grazing on Kingwood Common and we need your help. A crucial part of the process is public consultation which will help shape how the project develops in the future.

Purpose of this report

This report provides a summary of the consultation we have undertaken so far. We have listed various management options which we have considered and their respective costs and at the end we have indicated our recommendations for the most appropriate form of management for the future. Your comments regarding this recommendation are invited; details are given at the end of this report.

Please be assured that any comments you have already made have been used to develop the consultation to this stage.

What is heathland and why is it important?

The mixture of heathland and woodland on Kingwood Common represents an important area for wildlife. As a result, Kingwood Common was designated as a Local Wildlife Site in 2005. Heathland is extremely rare in this area, and the glades on Kingwood Common represent a remnant of what was once a far more common habitat. It is important that the heathland is protected for the future otherwise the plants and animals that are associated with it will be lost.

The open glades on Kingwood Common contain a habitat known as lowland heathland. Heathland exists here due to the clay and sandy soils below the surface. The plants that grow in these open glades such as bell heather, ling heather and heath bedstraw are indicators that the soil is acidic.

The term heathland, is used as a description of the soil, plants and animals likely to be found in an area. It is not used as a description of landscape as heathlands can vary enormously from the vast open spaces of the Dorset heaths to small, enclosed glades such as at Kingwood Common.

Good quality heathland contains a mixture of ages, species and growth stages of different species such as heather, heath bedstraw and tormentil. A mixture of age structures provides a good habitat for invertebrates and other species.



The Nettlebed Commons project began in 2005. Since then, we have been working with a variety of organisations and individuals to develop the project.

The consultation process

Over this time we have received a great deal of support, including letters of support from the following organisations and individuals:

- Oxfordshire County Council
- South Oxfordshire District Council
- Chilterns Conservation Board
- Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum
- Oxfordshire Local Wildlife Sites Project
- Nettlebed Estate
- Rotherfield Peppard Parish Council
- Rotherfield Greys Parish Council
- Nettlebed Parish Council
- Highmoor Parish Council
- Four local users of the common

In addition we held three consultation events at Peppard War Memorial Hall held in October and November 2008. Twenty five people attended, and were able to look at information boards and talk to representatives from the project.

Your questions

Overall throughout the consultation process there has been a strong support for the project and as a result we have decided to progress by looking in more detail at future management options for Kingwood Common. During the consultation process various questions arose and we feel it is important to show how we have considered these in developing our recommendations:

Would the erection of a fence limit access to certain parts of the common?

At no time would access to any user of the common be restricted. Appropriate gates would be installed at numerous access points along any fence. The precise location of gates would be decided under consultation with users of Kingwood Common.

Why is the focus on management of the heathland glades, rather than the woodland?

The heathland requires more management to keep it in good condition. Woodland management has not been forgotten and selective felling, to encourage the growth of standard oak and beech trees, is under consideration.

How much will future management cost and who will pay for it?

This depends on the scheme of management chosen, some schemes will involve an initial high capital outlay with low ongoing maintenance costs, whilst others will involve a smaller initial capital outlay but with high ongoing maintenance costs.

Can the paths through the common be better maintained?

Every effort is currently made to try to keep the numerous paths across the common clear from overgrown vegetation. However, at present there are not enough resources available to effectively deal with this workload. If grazing animals were present on the common, they would control vegetation growth within the grazing area, leaving volunteers to attend to paths elsewhere.

Would a fence prevent the movement of deer across the common?

Fences do not prevent the movement of deer. Fallow deer can roam across a large area throughout the day looking for food, and they are used to jumping hedges and fences in order to do so. They can also jump from a standing start, and do not need a run up. Being smaller, muntjac deer tend to go under or through fences and hedges in order to move between pieces of land.

Why should I comment, when the decision to graze and build a fence has already been made?

We are following national guidance which was published in: *A Common Purpose*, (visit: www.naturalengland.org.uk) This guidance was produced in partnership with organisations such as Natural England and the Open Spaces Society. Reviewing the management of common land and investigating the possibility of grazing occurs regularly across the country, so Kingwood Common is not an isolated case. Ultimately, if stock fencing is to be erected on Kingwood Common, the decision will be made by the Planning Inspectorate (please visit: www.planning-inspectorate.gov.uk).

Management options

The aim of the project is to manage the Commons by protecting the important habitats and providing good quality access to all users. Targeted management at the heathland areas is needed otherwise they will become dominated by coarse grasses and will lose their wildlife interest. In designing the project we have considered the following options:

1. Do nothing
2. Maintain current regime of management by volunteers
3. Grazing
4. Mechanical management

1. Do nothing:

- Loss of heathland glades as they would revert to dense scrub and woodland
- Paths would become overgrown and impassable
- No volunteer input by local people

2. Maintain current regime of volunteer management:

- Sonning Common Green Gym are struggling to keep Kingwood Common in good condition.
- In addition to the group sessions, a small number of specific individuals put in numerous hours of additional work every year to try and keep the paths and glades open and this is not sustainable in the long term.

3. Mechanical management:

- Access to the common for machinery (e.g. small tractor or pedestrian mower) would need to be created.
- It is difficult to create good quality habitats with a cutting regime alone. At best a series of compartments each containing a similar age, height and growth structure will occur, rather than the desired mixture.
- Expensive and the cost of machinery and fuels will increase year on year.

4. Grazing:

- The grazing behaviour of livestock creates good quality heathland
- After a high initial cost, annual costs will be low.
- Appropriate stock can be chosen, such as Dexter or British White cattle that interact well with people and dogs.





Funding

There are various options for funding the future management of Kingwood Common. These include grant schemes provided through the Landfill Communities Fund, and the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) Scheme run by Defra. The Landfill Communities Fund grant scheme provides funding for projects that aim to protect threatened and important habitats such as heathland. The commons have received funding in the past under a Defra grant scheme and we hope that the new HLS scheme will be able to provide funding for the ongoing and targeted management of Kingwood Common.

Both of these funds are specifically targeted at improving wildlife habitats, and do not affect the possibility of other community groups receiving funding from other sources.

The Nettlebed Commons Project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Esmee Fairbairn, Peter Fleming Charitable Trust and the Nettlebed and District Commons Conservators.



Next steps

We welcome your comments regarding the recommendation of this report. Your comments will feed into developing the consultation to its final stage, when you will be asked to comment again.

This Summary Report provides information on our work so far, if you would like additional information a full report is available that provides more information about the issues discussed in this summary report. If you would like a copy, please contact Jenni Hignett.

So that an accurate record of comments can be kept, please could comments be provided in writing (either by email or letter).

The deadline for comments to this document is Thursday 30 April 2009.

Please send your comments to:

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Recommendation

This report recommends that a combination of volunteer input (from the Sonning Common Green Gym and other groups) and a scheme of grazing is used to manage Kingwood Common.

The concerns that have been raised so far focus on limitations to access that could arise from any fencing that is erected on the common. It is hoped that this report has allayed those concerns, and that every effort will be taken to minimise disruption to users of the common. A final decision on exactly how a grazing scheme would be implemented is yet to be taken.

The costs of a grazing scheme could be met through applications for grant aid from Landfill Communities Fund schemes. Annual management payments may also be available from Defra through a Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. If sufficient funding can be secured, in the long term a scheme of grazing would be the most sustainable way to manage the common.