

Blindley Heath Liaison Group

MINUTES

of the meeting Blindley Heath Liaison Group meeting held on Monday 8th April at 9:30 am at
Tandridge District Council Offices

In attendance: N Hunt, R Barnes, Cllr S Farr, Cllr C Farr, V Manwill, E Jupe, C Cosgrove
Apologies: J Herd, S Endersby (Parish Clerk)
In attendance: W Dennis (Admin Assistant)

1. Introduction and apologies for absence

1.1 Introductions

Residents - Neil Hunt (Chairperson), Vanessa Manwill and Rupert Barnes

Natural England – C Cosgrove, Lead Advisor (Surrey – Thames Solent area team)

Surrey Wildlife Trust - Emily Jupe (Conservation Manager – East area), representing James Herd (Director of Reserves Management)

Tandridge District Council—Cllr Chris Farr

Godstone Parish Council – Cllr Sue Farr

1.2 Apologies

Apologies were noted and accepted from J Herd and S Endersby

2. Welcome to new members

2.1 The committee noted that the Residents' Group had lost a few members owing to relocation, and expressed hope that we would be replace these with new members imminently.

3. Minutes of previous meetings

3.1 The committee approved the minutes of the meeting held onsite (23rd August 2023) as well as the minutes of the previous BHLG meeting held on 23rd March 2023 as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. Matters arising from the above minutes

4.1 No matters arising.

5. Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) – Report for the period from March 2023 to date

5.1 EJ reported that SWT has undertaken extensive works on the SSSI in the woodland area, with a cut-and-collect completed last summer season. The black thorn has been dealt with to facilitate access to the site. She explained the chosen approaches to deal with the soft rushes, namely a 'drunken (staggered) mow' with vertical stacking, the latter of which would allow new habitats for small mammals and reptiles to be created.

5.2 Regarding the guillotine gates for dogs at kissing gates on the site, EJ commented that many were in a state of disrepair, an observation echoed by residents RB and VM who both regularly access the site for dog-walking. During the wet season, logs were also seen to be placed down near the kissing gates to facilitate access, which posed a health and safety risk. Given the overall wet condition of the site, the meeting discussed the need for a more permanent or climate-proof solution, noting however that obvious solutions alternatives (e.g. laying down of rubble or even concrete) would not comply with the specific protective requirements of the SSSI.

ACTION 4/24 – 1 – SWT to seek solution to replacing dog guillotine gates

5.3 The contributions of volunteers regularly undertaking activities such as tree-popping were acknowledged by SWT.

5.4 VM asked about the nightingale habitats on the site and whether they would be looked at. SWT agreed that some needed rejuvenation but other habitats within the scrub were still present. Providing diversity in the age structure of the habitats would be ideal to encourage the return of the nightingales.

5.5 RB raised the issue of where responsibility for the track lay, as the track that runs past his property is currently in very poor condition owing to the salvage efforts that followed a car being stuck on the track. EJ reported that she had recently witnessed a Surrey County Council (SCC) employee on site in the process of establishing the same issue, and therefore it might be worth communicating with SCC on whether the particular track was considered a SCC Public Right of Way.

ACTION 4/24 – 2 – Clerk to contact SCC to enquire about status of track, which has been noted to be in poor condition.

6. Update on Cattle-grazing

6.1 Whilst grazing was still the preferred method of keeping the grass down, due to considerations around TB (with one herd testing positive) and consequent restrictions on movement, it was anticipated that SWT

would very unlikely be able to graze their own animals on the Heath for the next 12 months. EJ explained the wider context of SWT having over 80 reserves to manage, with just a single grazing team of cattle. This did not mean that cattle-grazing was de-prioritised; they were actively seeking solutions for example breeding a flock of sheep that could be used to ease the overall grazing load on the cattle team, and therefore free the latter up to be used more widely.

6.2 The meeting also noted that, due to other considerations around the nesting season, the effective window of time for cattle-grazing would be a very brief period from September to October each year.

6.3 In the foreseeable future, SWT would therefore be managing the grass mechanically, i.e. cutting/ collecting instead, which would fulfil the agreement with NE. This had already been done over the autumn/ winter season.

7. Report from Natural England

7.1 CC confirmed that SWT's approach towards managing the area was in line with the existing agreement and working arrangements, and that she was working closely with EJ to adopt longer-term solutions and approaches, for example towards the scrubs and soft rushes, which needed to be dealt with concretely.

7.2 CC asked the group if, based on collective memory, the site was wetter than it has been previously. VM recalls there previously having been sheep in the area. SF observed that the water table certainly seems to have risen in more recent years. Particularly with the rain over this winter season, this has made the site inaccessible in many areas.

8. Survey of Reptiles on the Common

8.1 Adders have not been spotted recently, which indicates that they are in danger. EJ noted this observation and said that reptile tins could be put in easily and unobtrusively, but the wet condition of the site had also to be taken into account.

ACTION 4/24 – 4 – SWT will contact the Surrey Amphibian & Reptile Group (SARG) to explore options for maintaining the adder population and be added as a SARG site.

9. Tree Survey Updates

9.1 Trees at the site had undergone a survey as part of the Council's Parish-wide tree survey. However at this moment no work has been scheduled to deal with trees surveyed. Nonetheless, all sightings of fallen trees or any hazards should continue to be reported to the Clerk.

9.2 SF asked for an update on the fallen tree close to Pheasant Rise which was reported earlier this year. RB also separately reported a different fallen tree, for which he will provide a what3words reference if possible.

ACTION 4/24 – 5a – Clerk to provide an update on the fallen tree

ACTION 4/24 – 5b – RB to provide details of the fallen tree to be seen to

10. Any other Business

10.1 The meeting noted the recent movements of mobile homes, unauthorised tree-cutting along the track leading to Heath View, and various retrospective planning applications pertaining to development at the site. SF has reported the matter to Tandridge District Council's Enforcement Team, and will keep Natural England in the loop about developments. The Residents' Group expressed their concerns about the activity taking place on the site and unauthorised widening of the track, which impacted the tranquillity of the area as well as jeopardised their use of the track and therefore access to their properties.

10.2 CC agreed that the TDC's Enforcement Team was the appropriate party dealing with the issue, with the Parish Council simultaneously writing to the residents referencing the relevant legislation/ offence (which she has provided via email to the Clerk). This would constitute a second written warning, coming after our previous correspondence to them on the same issue last summer.

ACTION 4/24 – 6 – Clerk to write a strongly-worded letter to the residents of Heath View, cc Natural England

10.3 The Residents' Group reported that the owners of Martyn's Platt and Little Mead were seeking permission for maintaining the track leading to their respective properties.

ACTION 3/23 – 7 – Clerk to provide form on application by residents to seek permission for works as required by NE.

10.4 NH, Chairperson of the BHLG, would be standing down from his role. VM and RB were co-opted as the new chair and vice-chair respectively. SF took the opportunity to register the Council's thanks and appreciation to NH for his many contributions spanning 20 years, first as a volunteer/ member, and in later years as chairperson.

10.5 The meeting affirmed the purpose of the BHLG, particularly of the Residents' Group providing additional 'eyes and ears' to report any hazards or observations. Greater resident involvement was welcome to ensure the future of the site and preserve its nature as a SSSI. EJ provided assurance that SWT (and NE) were always accessible to members and could be contacted anytime outside of the more formal meetings scheduled.

11. Date of next Meeting – Next meeting to take place on site; and 'in house' on an annual basis.

ACTION 3/23 – 8 – Clerk to make arrangements for the meeting(s) and send reminders

----- Meeting closed -----

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Print Name: _____