

2 APRIL 2019

**ROWHILL NATURE RESERVE AND SOUTHWOOD WOODLAND
MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW**

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Council has responsibility for Southwood Woodland and Rowhill Nature Reserve and this report addresses the need to undertake surveys and to review the management plans for these sites.

Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Approve drawdown of £26,150 to undertake surveys and update the management plan for Southwood Woodlands
2. Approve the drawdown of £34,500 to undertake surveys and update the management plan for Rowhill Nature Reserve
3. To delegate to the Head of Economy, Planning and Strategic Housing in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy authority to drawdown additional sums as necessary to:
 - complete any additional surveys or work necessary to complete the review and updating of the management plans
 - to provide appropriate training for volunteers to enable them to undertake work to improve and maintain the SANGs
 - to authorise works arising from the revised management plans

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report:

- Provides an update on Southwood Woodland and Rowhill Nature Reserve which are Suitable Areas of Natural Greenspace (SANGs) for which the Council is responsible
- Details the ecological surveys and management plans required for the review of the SANGs and seeks funding to undertake this work
- Seeks funding to provide training for volunteers within Rowhill Nature Reserve and Southwood Woodlands
- It provides an overview of the short and medium term habitat creation and management that may be required and seeks delegated authority to drawdown funding as necessary to undertake works identified from the surveys/management plans

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Southwood Woodlands SANG

2.1.1 Southwood Woodlands has been open as a SANG since 2008 when a management plan was prepared by Atkins and Blackwater Valley Countryside Project were awarded the management contract. The plan detailed the management required for the next 5 years. Surveys for badgers, bats, birds, reptiles, invertebrates and flora were proposed to be surveyed every five years with a review of the management plan in 2012 and 2017. There is no record that monitoring surveys or a management review were undertaken at 5 and 10 years although annual work reports have been provided by Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership. Without the comprehensive data provided by surveys it is difficult to establish whether the management of the Southwood Woodlands is achieving its ecological aims.

2.1.2 Blackwater Valley has continued to manage the site running monthly workgroups. Hampshire Biological Information Centre undertook a flora survey in 2017 as part of the monitoring program for Southwood Woodlands Site of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINC). These investigations found that the open heathland and wetland glades were in excellent condition and their area had increased since the 2008 survey. In regards to the wider woodland, the survey indicated that it would benefit from thinning to increase light to the ground flora and maintain floral diversity. Fauna surveys are required to assess the impact of the woodland works on the fauna that use the site with a review of the management plan and scheduled thinning works.

2.2 Rowhill Nature Reserve SANG

2.2.1 Rowhill Nature Reserve was owned by Rushmoor Borough Council before its allocation as a SANG, with Rowhill Nature Reserve Society assisting in the management of the site for the last 50 years. The site was opened as a SANG in 2012 and Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership were awarded the contract to manage the site. A 2012 management plan was prepared for the site. The management plan was due for review in 2017 but there is no record that the monitoring surveys or the review has been undertaken. However annual work reports have been provided by Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership.

2.2.2 There have been a number of concerns raised regarding the safety of the infrastructure, the working practices within the site, and the ecological management. A number of repairs to steps, boardwalks, paths and work to unsafe trees have now been undertaken on site through collaborative working between Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership, Rowhill Nature Reserve Society and Council officers

2.2.3 Rowhill Nature Reserve Society has a wealth of experience and knowledge; and manages the Surrey area of Rowhill Nature Reserve to an exceptional standard. In a recent survey to monitor Rowhill Copse SINC Hampshire Biological Information Centre stated that *this site is an*

excellent example of actively managed woodland. The long history of coppice with standards management has created a site with diverse structure and light conditions and this in turn has diversified the flora and most likely fauna too. A very high total of 42 ancient woodland indicators were noted.

2.2.4 However, the Hampshire area of the woodland requires significant works. The group accept that it is beyond their capacity to manage the site alone and have worked well with the Council to identify ecological tasks for the coming season as well as committing to undertake some of the urgent infrastructure projects. The site requires surveys to establish the fauna biodiversity on site followed by an overarching management plan and some contract work to clear the invasive species.

3. DETAILS OF THE PROPOSAL

3.1 Ecological Surveys

3.1.1 The following surveys are required to provide data to inform a review of the management plans for Southwood and Rowhill.

Southwood	Estimated Cost
Bats	£1,000,00
Badgers	£450,00
Otter and Water Vole	£450,00
Birds	£600,00
Reptiles	£900,00
Amphibians	£1,400,00
Invertebrates	£3,500,00
Fish	£1,000,00
Phase 2 botanical Survey	£1,000,00
Hydrology Survey	£5,000,00
Survey Report	£1,750,00
5 year Management Plan	£10,000,00
Total	£26,150,00

Rowhill	Estimated Cost
Baseline report	£1,500,00
Flora Survey	£500,00
Bats	£1,000,00
Dormouse	£6,000,00
Badgers	£5,000,00
Otter and Water vole	£450,00
Birds	£1,500,00
Reptiles	£900,00
Great Crested Newts	£1,400,00
Invertebrates	£3,500,00
Fish	£1,000,00
Survey Report	£1,750,00
5 year Management Plan	£10,000,00
Total	£34,500,00

3.2 Management Plan Reviews

3.2.1 Both management plans are now overdue for review. The species surveys coupled with a review of management will provide us with guidance as to where the current management has been successful and where further ecological work is required. Each management plan will cost approximately £10,000,00.

3.3 Volunteer funding

3.3.1 Volunteers undertake much of the ecological management on both sites. Within Southwood Woodland Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership supervises the work parties; however, within discussions with the site ranger it was felt that skilled work could be undertaken independently by the group with some training and confidence building. Within Rowhill Nature Reserve the society run work parties, education and social events entirely independent of Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership. To achieve the greatest benefit from our volunteers and to ensure work is being undertaken by skilled people it is important that the council promote training to upskill the volunteers. Within Rowhill, the volunteers would like to obtain tree felling, chainsaw and brush cutting licences and gain training in botanical, ecological and education courses to enrich their knowledge and enable them to provide better management and education.

3.4 Ecological Works

- 3.4.1 It is likely that thinning work will be required within Southwood woodland to increase light levels and clearance of holly, rhododendron and cherry laurel within Rowhill in the winter of 19/20. As the sites are managed using volunteer groups current resources would not provide the capacity to undertake extensive work. Therefore, further monies are likely to be requested later in 2019 to employ contractors over the winter. The contractors selected must have expertise in conservation management to ensure the works respect the sensitivities of the fauna on site.
- 3.4.2 Rowhill contains a large main badger sett likely to contain significant numbers of badgers. Due to its location adjacent to residents, property there is a need to do some work on the trees to growing on the setts. Due to the importance of the sett, the works will require a licence, which will need to be evidenced by survey work. As the work will need to be undertaken after May but before November when no vulnerable cubs are in the sett, the extended survey and costs of applying for a licence have been incorporated into the survey schedule.
- 3.4.3 The Environment Agency is very interested in working with us at Rowhill Nature Reserve to ensure the Blackwater River and associated headwater streams are naturalised with all barriers removed. This will enable rare brown trout to use the headwaters to breed. This will significantly enrich the Blackwater River Catchment. This is a long-term project, which could be achieved by a combination of volunteer help and contract work.
- 3.4.4 Finally, there are significant opportunities to increase the heathland within Rowhill. The scope of this project will be decided once the ecological value of the woodland habitat is known. There has been some commitment to funding this project to mitigate acid grassland lost within the Farnborough Airport SINC as a result of the Gulf Stream development.
- 3.4.5 In relation to Southwood further work is required to assess the ecological and volunteer requirement on this site fully as yet.

3.5 Legislative background or regulatory framework

- 3.5.1 Since 2000 there have been severe declines in ground nesting nightjar, woodlark and Dartford warbler within the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA). These declines are thought to be due to recreational pressure with birds being disturbed when nesting and feeding leading to low birth rates, chick predation and lack of condition in adult birds.
- 3.5.2 As the SPA is designated for the three species of ground nesting bird under the E.C Birds Directive and there was to be significant numbers of new housing in Hampshire, Surrey and Berkshire, it was identified that there was likely to be an in-combination impact on the bird populations.
- 3.5.3 The provision and long-term management of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) was therefore required to avoid and mitigate the in-combination recreational impact. It was hoped that provision and promotion of the SANGS would ensure that new and existing residents

used the SANGs for walking and dog walking rather than the SPA, resulting in recreational impact on the SPA being reduced. Long-term management was set at 80 years.

3.5.4 As Rushmoor Borough is entirely within the 5km impact zone, all new houses are required to mitigate impact by contributing to SANGs provision and wardening within the SPA.

3.5.5 To ensure the management of the sites is being undertaken appropriately and to ensure the SANGs continue to be biodiverse and thus provide an alternative natural greenspace to the heathland, ecological survey and review of management of the existing sites needs to be undertaken every 5 years.

3.6 Alternative Options

3.6.1 There are no alternative options to management review of the SANGs which meet the Council's obligations.

3.7 Consultation

3.7.1 The original management plans for both SANGs have been reviewed and an assessment of the ecological management on the sites undertaken. A review is required to ensure we are protecting all habitats and species within the SANGs and providing a good experience to all visitors. The updated surveys and management plans will ensure that Blackwater Valley Countryside project, the volunteers and the council are working from one document with clear goals for ecological improvement in the short, medium and long term.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Risks

4.1.1 There are no risks to the delivery of the supporting surveys or the management plans for the SANGs provided funding for the surveys, management plan and management of the SANGs for the next 5 years is secured.

4.2 Legal Implications

4.2.1 There will be no legal implications if the required surveys and management review are undertaken. There is a small risk that if ecological management deteriorates within the SANGs Natural England may decide that they no longer meet the SANG criteria

4.3 Financial and Resource Implications

4.3.1 The surveys, management plans and ecological work can be funded by developer contributions collected for these sites.

4.4 Equalities Impact Implications

4.1.1 The SANGs are open to all residents with disabled access provided to part of the site.

5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.5.1 The 5-year management review is now overdue for the both Southwood Woodland and Rowhill Copse SANG. To inform the ecological management over the next 5 years the council needs to obtain updated information as to the biodiversity value of the SANGs and the fauna species that use them.
- 5.5.2 The requirement for 5-year reviews is detailed within the management plans prepared when the sites were opened.
- 5.5.3 Good management of the sites will help to deliver the corporate objective to create a greener borough.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

List: Management Plans for Rowhill and Southwood SANGs

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