

Malvern Hills Trust
Land Management Committee
United Reformed Church Malvern Link

Thursday 2 December 2021 7.00pm

Present: Mr C Atkins, Dr S Braim, Dr E Chowns, Mr M Davies (non-voting), Mr R Fowler, Mrs C Palmer, Dr T Parsons, Mr C Rouse.

In attendance: Conservation Manager, Secretary to the Board, Operations Manager, CEO, 3 members of the public.

Dr Braim welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. Election of Chair

Dr Braim was appointed unopposed.

2. Election of Vice-Chair

Mr Atkins was appointed unopposed.

3. Apologies for Absence

Mr D Baldwin, Ms H Stace, Mr T Yapp, Mr M Gardner.

4. Declarations of Interest

Mr Rouse - grazing rights over MHT land.

5. Chairman's Communications

- Staffing Committee meeting (postponed from 4 November) Tuesday 7 December at Colwall Village Hall
- FAR Committee meeting on Thursday 9 December at United Reformed Church Malvern Link

6. Public Comments

See schedule

7. Matters Arising from previous meetings

Mountain biking – The CEO said that there would be a further campaign on responsible Mountain Biking. There had been an incident involving a 6 year old child and a group of cyclists on a bridleway near St Ann's Well. Fortunately, the child was not seriously injured.

8. Newly secured grants for tree and hedge planting

The Conservation Manager went through the paper and gave an update on the Urban Tree Challenge Fund - following a check with the utility services maps, two of the planned trees could not be planted because of underground services. There was funding provided within the grant for 3 year's care. The urban trees would be

protected with guards – ones in locations where damage was not anticipated would have a simple guard, but in other places there would be a more robust framework. Local residents would be informed in advance of the proposals and the trees were to be located where they would not obstruct use of open spaces. He confirmed that cost of future maintenance of newly planted hedges would form part of the general fund budget. Inevitably some of the plants would die and would need to be replaced. A suggestion to plant larger groups of trees on Colwall Lands would be considered.

The work would be carried out during this financial year.

9. Update on Stewardship agreement (agenda item 10)

The Conservation Manager said that about £160,000 had been paid to the Trust by the RPA (approx. 95 % of the original sum due), and reasons for this reversal had been received. He was prepared to accept the reasons given for a deduction of £2,000pa but there remained a balance of £1,700 which was not accounted for. He would continue to chase for an explanation.

The consultant who had been engaged was useful (costs to date estimated at around £2,500), but of critical importance was pressure exerted by others on behalf of the Trust. Natural England had substantiated the Trust's position. The combination had caused the RPA to revisit their internal processes.

It had transpired that private landowners were notified of RPA inspections and received follow up reports but owners of common were not and this was a flaw in their system.

10. To set the Land Management budget for 2022/23 (agenda item 9)

The Conservation Manager went through the paper.

General fund budget

The CEO confirmed that the new foul drainage infrastructure at British Camp should be delivered in the next week.

Dr Chowns asked about the Trust's policy on sourcing equipment which was zero carbon/non-fossil fuel. There was a discussion about moving over to electric powered tools and vehicles. The CEO confirmed that the Trust always looked at these options when replacing equipment. Sustainability had to be weighed against whether the equipment could perform the task required. For example, when wardens' vans were last replaced, the range of suitable electric vehicles was insufficient but it appeared there now was a vehicle on the market with sufficient range. The CEO agreed to draft a policy statement for consideration by the Board setting out the Trust's position on moving to sustainable power sources. The CEO also actively considered "machinery rings" (Where expensive equipment was available for shared use between individuals or organisations).

Mr Fowler asked about saving fuel by cutting down the number of journeys. He asked for the spend on budget items in the current year to date, and the forecast to the year end to be assimilated into the draft budget, if possible in time for the FAR meeting.

The CEO explained that on many budget items expenditure was not linear over the year but took place during the winter months (for example contractor and tree costs)

DEFRA/Stewardship grants budget

The draft budget was out of date because of the reinstatement of the Central and Northern Hills grant funding.

The Conservation Manager clarified that a one year extension of the HLS Scheme covering Chase End Hill had been agreed (to allow time for more details of the ELM Scheme to be made public), that the rents received for the Castlemorton in-by land was for part of the year. It had been decided, going forward, to stop transferring a portion of the grant funding to general fund on account of staff time spent administering the scheme.

Mr Rouse asked whether the cost of tree work from the designated tree disease fund should be shown on this budget. He asked about the justification for the fixed asset purchases listed at the foot of the budget. The CEO explained that a trailer was required for getting equipment to site.

There was a discussion about path maintenance. The Conservation Manager explained that the budget item shown for paths and tracks was not the full extent of expenditure on path maintenance, but elements of the work were covered within the staff budget and the tools and materials budget. When doing path works, drainage was always a consideration.

Points made included:

- Whether there had been an assessment of the state of the paths and what work was needed?
- Could a separate sum be allocated for specific path works, with a report back to the committee on what it had been spent on.
- Could the path upgrades be incorporated into the Business Plan?

It was agreed to increase the budget for track and path management by an additional £3,000 and to show this as a separate item on the budget.

On the proposal of Dr Braim, seconded by Mrs Palmer, it was **RESOLVED** with one abstention to approve the draft budget with the addition of a further £3,000 for path works.

11. Project progress update

The CEO gave some updates on the report.

Community Woodland – The planned resurfacing was completed and interpretation boards were in the office awaiting installation. Provision had been made for additional materials to enable some further surfacing work to be undertaken by volunteers.

Donkey Shed – Only one tender had been returned.

British Camp Sewage system – The contractor had started work and the plant was scheduled to be delivered in the next week. If delivery was delayed work would be stopped until after Christmas because of visitor demand over that period.

Warden vehicle – the figure in the budget column was incorrect as the Board had agreed to increase funding to £24,000. The vehicle was due for delivery in the next week.

It was pointed out that there was an interpretation board on the gate at Westminster Bank that needed updating.

Dr Braim asked about the outcomes from a survey of visitor numbers and visitor pressure, which had been commissioned as part of the SWDP (South Worcestershire Development Plan) review. The report had been undertaken by Footprint Ecology. The delay was as a result of waiting for all of the funders to agree the report could be released. It would be distributed once this consent was forthcoming.

It was suggested that it would help if the CEO cross referenced the project progress report to the Land Management Plan, that the “Status” column might be changed to either “on track” or “delayed” and to rationalise the use of the word “expected” in the centre columns particularly in the context of completed projects.

12. Graziers’ report

The Conservation Manager reported on behalf of Mr Gardner. Visitor related issues had been relatively low over the autumn although there was a problem on 5 November on the Northern Hills when fireworks were set off next to a livestock enclosure. There had been one motor vehicle collision with stock at Castlemorton. The Southern Hills grazing was going well. The publicity and signs were a big help. It was anticipated that sheep would continue to graze around British Camp until March.

13. Conservation Manager’s Report

The winter works programme was progressing well. Contractors had removed about 40 trees with ash dieback from high-risk locations at a cost of around £19,000. The Trust had put up signage to let the public know why the work was being carried out and advising that the Trust was fundraising to tackle ash dieback. The wood was being made available to the public in return for donations. The Tree Safety Survey had been finished and the work put out to tender.

There was currently a great deal of activity by utility companies wishing to carry out work on Trust land

Mr Parsons expressed concern about sycamore growing on the eastern side of the Hills and the management of Park Wood.

14. Operations Managers Report

The Operations’ Manager reported on the work which had been carried out by the field staff, in accordance with the Land Management Plan. Quarry safety fencing had been erected at Earnslaw and the field staff were also involved in hedge planting, the removal of some dangerous and fallen trees and trees affected by ash dieback. A programme of ivy removal had been undertaken to facilitate the tree safety inspection. Some path maintenance had been undertaken including improving and maintaining drains.

Dealing with litter and fly tipping took 2 – 3 days per week.

He said that the enthusiasm and dedication of the Field Staff team was a pleasure to see.

The Conservation Manager and Operations Manager answered questions about grass cutting and the management of Park Wood. The management was being carried out in accordance with the Land Management Plan.

Mr Fowler said he hoped the Operations' Manager would be introducing some productivity improvements within the field staff team.

The CEO confirmed that, over the summer, probably half the field staff time was taken up with grass cutting.

15. Urgent business

There was none.

16. Date of next meeting

14 April 2022 (plus possible outdoor visits)

The meeting closed at 9.10pm

Schedule

Mr Robert Baker

I would like to comment on the huge difference in budget available to the Land Management Committee compared with that of Governance.

At the last Board meeting the Conservation Manager received some applause for his efforts in obtaining a promise of £73,000 from RPA which appeared to have been hard won over a period of time. Yet the Governance Committee, having spent £114,000 to date to no avail, are preparing to borrow up to another £423,000 from the land acquisition fund.

At the same meeting Mr Rouse told the Board that land would be coming up which presumably would be of interest to the Trust. This didn't seem to be noted by the Chair and no discussion followed.

I imagine that the land acquisition fund exists to fulfil that purpose ie to purchase land. Therefore if suitable land comes up then this fund should be available to finance it.

I hope that the Chair of this Committee will raise this at the next Board meeting if not sooner.