

Malvern Hills Trust

Land Management Committee

Castlemorton Parish Hall, Church Road, Castlemorton, Malvern WR13 6BE

Thursday 7 December 2023 at 7:00 pm

Present: Mr J Michael (Chair), Mr R Bartholomew, Mr P Clayburn, Mr M Driscoll, Mrs F Robinson, Mr C Rouse, Mr J Stock, Mrs F Victory, Prof D Westbury, Mr M Wilkinson, and Mrs S Wren.

In attendance: Mr M Gardner, Conservation Manager, Secretary to the Board, incoming Secretary to the Board, Interim CEO and three Wardens (left after item 7).

The Secretary to the Board opened the meeting, advising that one nomination for Chair had been received by the deadline.

1. Election of Chair

Mr Michael was elected unopposed, proposed by Mr Bartholomew, and seconded by Mr Wilkinson.

2. Election of Vice-Chair

Mr Wilkinson was elected unopposed, proposed by Mr Bartholomew, and seconded by Mr Michael.

3. Apologies for Absence

Mrs M Alexander, Mr D Baldwin, Mr M Gardener, Mrs C Palmer, Mr M Victory, CEO and Operations Manager

4. Declarations of Interest

Mr Rouse has commoners' rights on parts of the Malvern Hills that he has exercised in the past and could do so again.

In addition, his son, Matt Rouse, was formerly a grazier on MHT land under a grazing licence. This gives Mr Rouse a potential Conflict of Interest in relation to awarding the grazing licences and supporting the licensed grazier.

5. Chairman's Communications

Mr Michael thanked committee members for supporting his election as Chair.

6. Public Comments

There were none.

7. Wardens' report

The Wardens gave a photo presentation on their day-to-day work. This was followed by a question-and-answer session, covering issues including rough sleeping on Trust land, fly tipping, educational works, and risks with cycling on Trust land. In answer to a question as to whether the wardens had received

training on dealing with difficult people, the wardens said that they would welcome training that was specific to their area of work, rather than a course aimed at office-based workers. The Interim CEO said that she could recommend a suitable trainer.

The Wardens left the meeting at 7.45.

8. Winter Works Programme

The Committee received, for information, the schedule of works planned for the winter of 2023-24. The Conservation Manager (CM) went through the paper, which listed the planned works by location. He explained that the planned scrub works would contribute towards the Trust's ongoing programme of open habitat maintenance and restoration as outlined in the Land Management Plan (LMP). The LMP listed the important features that scrub works were designed to maintain, including views and character of the landscape, but *not* tree safety. The CM confirmed that there was very little of this kind of habitat in the UK, hence its designation as a Site of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI) and confirmed that an 'open habitat' *could* have trees, bramble, and bracken. The Trust was looking to increase its woodland, but it would remove sycamores, which were not native and did not host species or ground fauna. The CM explained how habitats were cut back and advised that members of the public might be concerned by and complain about the sudden change to the landscape, but he stressed that the habitat would recover quickly. In answer to a question about to what extent the Trust did PR to anticipate and address public complaints, the CM said it depended on the scope of the work. When there was a major work and/or where the public was likely to notice, the Trust would erect notices (which were left up afterwards) and publicise the works on its social media.

The Interim CEO stated that most of the Hills were designated as SSSIs, but that this status had not been required to extend the area and add further interest features e.g. bats. Natural England was not willing to carry out a review at present.

9. Land Management Budget 2024-25

The Committee received the draft Land Management budget for 2024-25. The CM went through the paper, which he explained covered the General Fund (chiefly for maintenance, a little on special projects) and the Defra Stewardship Grant (for special projects). He confirmed that the budget was typically based on the previous year, with an allowance for inflation, because much expenditure was repeated year on year. An inflationary figure of 5% had been used, based on the retail price index. The paper listed non-standard items, plus the lines where the increase was greater or less than 5%, explaining the reasons.

Mr Rouse said that the Castlemorton Common Co-ordinating Committee had discussed tarmacking potholes in the car park in Welland, the purchase of an

incinerator, and a roll for grass seed and roadways. The CM said that these were not in the budget; presumably the Operations Manager had decided that they were not essential.

The CM explained the background to the Defra/Stewardship grants. It was noted that they all had different end dates, but the CM said this was actually helpful, because there was much work involved in setting up the grants and advertising them to graziers. The Trust aimed to underspend against the grant each year in order to generate a small surplus to be transferred to the grazing reserve. In answer to a question, the CM explained that these funds were not restricted, but that the Trust chose to place them in a Designated Fund to support on-going works in the event of break or collapse in grant funding. Defra only required assurance that the agreed management actions had been delivered. There was always a cost from General Fund to support the work.

The CM explained that there were still active commoners at Castlemorton Common and that the Trust was obliged to go into active agreement with them. A separate bank account had been set up for this agreement and would not appear in the Trust's accounts. The monies are distributed according to actions delivered with the graziers receiving around £46k for grassland management and the Trust receiving £5.5k for bracken and habitat works. The Trust also contributed towards the common through staff time.

On the proposal of Mr Bartholomew, seconded by Mr Wilkinson, it was **RESOLVED** to recommend approval of the Land Management budget for 2024-25 to the Board.

10. Operation Manager's Report

No Report was received in the absence of the Operations Manager.

11. Grazier's Report

Mr Gardner reported that six graziers (one cattle and five sheep) currently grazed Castlemorton Common, but there was a general decline in the number of both graziers and animals. There were challenges around the Common being unsecure and the hazards of traffic and dog walking. Mr Michael asked whether the Trust might need to buy its own stock, given that the number of graziers was falling. It was confirmed that there was provision for this in the new Bill, but the priority was to support local people first. Mr Bartholomew asked about the possibility of installing a cattle grid towards Welland. The Secretary to the Board advised that the Trust did not currently have the power to do this, even if Worcestershire Highways would allow it.

12. Conservation Manager's Report

The CM reported that following the tree safety survey, the Trust had gone out to tender for remedial works and awarded contracts. Each contract had been given

to a different contractor so that they could work at the same time and complete work by the end of February. The overall cost of £54k was within budget. Many of the trees were ash trees and there was a designated budget of £68k to deal with them.

13. Outdoor visits and meetings 2024

It was hoped to hold an outdoor visit in mid-March, focussing on core land management activities to include the scrub works on the Hills, diseased ash trees, tree safety work, and meeting graziers and field staff. Mr Clayburn said how valuable these outdoor visits were and encouraged the Trust to organise as many as possible. The Secretary to the Board noted that attendance on the visits had been poor in the past and encouraged Trustees to support them in future.

14. Urgent business

There was none.

15. Date of next meeting

11 April 2024

The meeting closed at 8.55 pm