

Agenda Item 4

Downland Mowing; Information from the Countryside Manager

11 June 2009

1. Summary

1.1 The change from mowing to conservation grazing the council downland sites has been underway for some time, but has been hastened by a substantial increase in the cost of cutting, baling and composting since 2007. If the council continued cutting, baling and composting there would have to be a substantial reduction in the area of downland managed to stay within the same budget. Grazing results in an improvement to the quality of chalk grassland management and will also cover a considerably greater area than could ever be achieved by mowing. A Grazing Plan to will go before Environment CMM in due course.

2. Background

2.1 The Downs around Brighton and Hove were grazed by sheep for many hundreds, probably thousands of years. This traditional management technique was instrumental in creating and maintaining the species-rich turf. Chalk grassland supports up to forty different species of plant in one square meter and many of these are chalk specialists, which require a 'high stress' environment (very low soil fertility and regular browsing) to survive.

2.2 Sheep grazing began to decline towards the end of the 19th Century and this decline accelerated from the Second World War. As grazing reduced, sward height and soil fertility on many sites increased, which favoured an 'invasion' by scrub and coarse grasses at the expense of the classic downland species. During the 1950s, the decline was accelerated by a reduction in rabbit grazing (due to myxomatosis) and by artificially fertilising many of the old pastures to increase their yield. Many of the old downland pastures were also destroyed by ploughing.

2.3 Today chalk grassland is internationally rare. It is recognised in the EC Habitats Directive as a habitat of 'Community Interest' and is included in the UK List of Habitats that are of principal importance for the purpose of conserving English biodiversity. These are the habitats local authorities are expected to prioritise as part of their duty to further biodiversity, set out in Section 40 of the Natural Environment and and Rural Communities Act 2006.

3. Chalk grassland management in Brighton & Hove

3.1 About twenty years ago, Brighton Borough Council introduced grass cutting and baling on some chalk grassland sites under its control. This 'emergency management' was a reaction to the serious decline in the quality of the remaining chalk grassland, most of which had received little or no grazing for many years. However cutting is an inferior management technique to grazing for a number of reasons, including:

- It is catastrophic method which can cause severe disruption to grassland invertebrates and ground nesting birds;
- It cannot be used on the steeper slopes (where much of the remaining chalk grassland is found);
- It is uniform in its application and therefore prevents the establishment of swards of varying height, which are favoured by some chalk grassland species and
- It damages chalk grassland features such as ant hills and some archaeology.

3.2 Reintroducing sheep grazing on the council's chalk grassland sites was therefore always desirable and ten years ago, Brighton & Hove Council reintroduced sheep to a few key sites, working with a local grazier and in close liaison with the local community.

3.3 Further incentives have developed for accelerating the move towards sheep grazing. It is now possible (under the DEFRA Stewardship Scheme) to attract external funding for the reintroduction of grazing but this is not available for cutting and baling. The council has also successfully established a grazing partnership with the Sussex Wildlife Trust and the South Downs Joint Committee (which both fully support the grazing option). Extensive pre-publicity is needed to ensure that people understand the reasons for the reintroduction, which takes time.

3.4 No problems have been encountered with the reintroduction of grazing to date and the educational and community benefits of reintroducing grazing on the urban fringe are just beginning to be recognised. The Ranger service has so far trained over 50 volunteer 'lookers' (to help check on the sheep) and has a further 38 people on a waiting list for the next training course. The city's grazing project has also received national and international press coverage and it clear we are amongst the lead local authorities in this important area of work.

3.5 From last year the costs of cutting and baling have multiplied. The main reason for the increase is that grass bales are now defined by the Environment Agency as 'waste' and therefore the council has to pay to have them removed. There has also been an increase in fuel costs because DEFRA has decided that moving bales is not an agricultural operation and therefore ordinary diesel has to be used rather than the cheaper, red (agricultural) diesel.