

**COMMENTS ON THE WILDLIFE TRUST'S  
DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN  
FOR  
MIDSUMMER COMMON 2009 – 2014**

One of FoMC's objectives is to help foster good management practices in order to protect the Midsummer Common environment. The author recognises a steady decline in this management and suggest ways in which this can be corrected. But the author goes further in proposing various 'habitat enhancement works' that would improve the appearance and condition of the Common. This is good news.

However, for many years the Council has given insufficient commitment and resources to the management of Midsummer Common. The Council is unlikely to change its ways without carefully costed plans. It seems that the author was neither set limits within which to plan nor asked to cost the various proposals. Without these, the plan could end up going nowhere. But let us hope for the best.

**1. Management Objective 1: To enhance the species richness of the grassland to achieve a more natural floodplain grassland habitat**

1.1 The author describes the Common's grassland as species-poor, semi-improved riverside pasture. Work needs to be done to improve the species diversity. We welcome this statement.

1.2 The author asserts that the introduction of the red polls to graze the Common has led to an improvement in the grassland species composition. The cattle are popular but it is difficult to believe that they have brought such benefit given there were so few and for such a short period of time. They are taken off for events. This year, for example, the cattle have been missing from the first week in June when they were moved elsewhere to accommodate the first Fair's arrival. It is questionable whether *the current grazing regime ... is suitable for the site*. Reliance on a grazing strategy as a means of bringing benefits would be neither robust nor within the control of the Council. The Common will only be grazed if someone wishes to exercise their grazing rights and the track record in recent years has not been good.

1.3 Mowing is an alternative to grazing. There is no mowing regime in place at the moment and the grass gets very long. FoMC engaged Dr Ian Richards (an experienced agronomist) to examine the condition of the Common in early 2007. He reported his findings at a public meeting attended by Council officials. He noted that long grass had been cut and left to rot - this had encouraged the infestation of chick-weed. He

acknowledged that the cost of cutting and carting the grass would be prohibitively expensive and that some 20 plus grazing cattle would be needed to keep the grass to a proper length. He indicated that with only 8 to 10 cattle grazing the Common, the Council should aim at 4 mowings a year if the cuttings are left behind. Even then, it would take some years to get the Common back into a decent state.

1.4 The proposed plan to create two areas of meadow is positive and exciting. It is important in species selection to acknowledge that the Common is nutrient rich and that it will take years of cutting and carting or heavy grazing to run this down. The plan requires that these areas *be fenced off* to allow the plants to grow, that *the existing weed species (nettles and thistles) be reduced* either through hand pulling, weed wiping or the use of herbicide spray, and that the meadow is *closely grazed or regularly mown* to maintain an average sward height of 2-5cm. It is proposed that a *hay cut be taken* on the eastern site but if grazing and mowing take place there will be no hay and this seems a rather fanciful idea. Nevertheless, the concept is exciting but the resource implications will be significant and need spelling out. The author calls for help from FoMC which believes it can deliver the necessary volunteers to carry out some of the work.

## **2. Management Objective 2: To maintain and enhance the overall habitat diversity of the common**

2.1 The author notes that the habitat diversity on Midsummer Common is very limited. There is a distinct lack of scrub or hedgerows for birds to utilise for feeding and nesting - the two existing areas do not fulfil their potential for wildlife.

2.2 It is stated that *the strip of scrub habitat adjacent to the Fort St George public house must be managed in a way to encourage species diversity*. Its location in a heavily trafficked part of the Common and near a popular meeting place will challenge the work but should make the outcome more rewarding.

2.3 It is noted that the *banks adjacent to the Pound* are currently dominated by nettles, brambles and thistles and these must be controlled by *regular cutting and topping*. It is proposed that *the banks be prepared for scrub planting*. This sounds good but the ongoing resource implications are significant and need specifying.

## **3. Management Objective 3: To maintain the trees so as to contribute to the character of the common and its value for biodiversity**

3.1 The author notes that tree planting on the common is restricted but enriches the overall visual appearance. The trees around the perimeter play an important role in creating a natural feel to the Common. The mature trees along the riverside are an important ecological feature as they provide roosting sites for bats and are home to a plethora of invertebrates.

3.2 A call is made for the *current tree planting scheme* to be retained. This scheme needs elaboration. The weeds within the tree guards need to be *controlled through hand pulling and careful strimming*. That this is not already done reflects on present management practices. The new trees need watering *at least once a fortnight throughout the spring and summer* and monitoring for *signs of stress or dehydration*. It is for the Council to make this happen. It is thought that the choice of tree species along the southern boundary *seems illogical*. The Council recently decided to plant only poplars here claiming that willows were not compatible with its Conservation Area status.

3.3 The Council has only a limited budget for tree planting and the public recently gave it a low priority. Mention should be made (paragraphs 4-7 in 1.2) of the recent tree plantings which were funded directly by local people. A few years back, the plane trees planted on Butt Green were bought by private funds. This year a more varied planting was funded by a FoMC collection - see <http://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/>.

3.4 The plan envisages a significant tree replanting programme - as did the Council's 2001 Conservation Plan for Midsummer Common. Many trees are aged, diseased or damaged. The presence of the chestnut leaf miner moth will likely cause the removal of chestnut trees in the near future. The two elms adjacent to Maids Causeway are believed to have Dutch Elm disease. The willows along the river have not been pollarded properly. It is pointed out that the trees are at greatest risk of damage from uncontrolled vehicles driving and parking close by and causing ground compaction around the roots. All this reflects Council neglect and reluctance to commit resources.

3.5 This desirable objective will only be achieved if there is radical rethink by the Council. In the author's own words

*"The management of the trees on Midsummer Common requires careful planning and specialist knowledge of the site and the trees already present. It is clear that the level of detail needed demands an arboricultural strategy for Midsummer Common. This must be produced by Cambridge City Council in consultation with other stakeholders".*

The 2001 Conservation Plan for Midsummer Common covered similar ground and one is bound to ask why the Council failed to implement its recommendations. Will this new plan fare any better?

#### **4. Management Objective 4: To enhance the Pound through the creation of a community orchard**

4.1 This is an exciting project. Interestingly, there were once orchards in what are now residential areas around Midsummer Common. So it would be restoring something typical of the area. But much more work is necessary in planning and resourcing the project practicalities.

**5. Management Objective 5: To maintain and improve the site infrastructure**

5.1 This all makes good sense. The language is tantalising. *The footpaths must be checked throughout the year for accessibility. Where paths require repairs, this will be done promptly. The gates and railings will be kept in good condition.* None of this is current Council policy. For example, the upgraded footpath between Auckland and Parsonage roads will not be asphalted. It is worth mentioning (paragraph 7 in 2.1.3) that the Council is soon to replace some of the gateways to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. This needs to be done carefully in order to maintain the overall design. There is also a need to improve litter collection on the Common. More bins and more frequent clearing in summer would help. Some of the dog refuse bins might be better located.

**6. Management Objective 6: To enhance the visitor experience**

6.1 The author says that it is important to promote the enhancements to the Common and any changes in management. One cannot disagree but there needs to be **real** enhancements and **real** changes before a visit *to the common is made more enjoyable*. Timing and method is important. FoMC is opposed to notice boards which add clutter to the environment and can contain outdated information. But it does have its own website that it keeps up to date - see <http://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/>.

**7. Management Objective 7: To put in place administrative arrangements to ensure the co-ordinated implementation of this management plan**

7.1 One of FoMC's objectives is to help *foster good management practices in order to protect the environment and address the principles of sustainable development*. As with any campaign group it looks for shortcomings in existing administrative arrangements within the City Council. In commissioning the Wildlife Trust to devise a Management Plan for Midsummer Common, the Council presumably accepts that all is not well with its current administrative arrangements. We would agree!

7.2 As with all bureaucracies, responsibilities get fragmented and delegated. Leadership becomes diffuse. In the case of Midsummer Common for example, grass mowing, litter collection, tree maintenance, event planning, vehicle control, footpath maintenance, cattle grazing are all carried out by different officials in different departments. This makes it very difficult to have coordinated management. Unless this shortcoming is rectified, any management plan will go nowhere.

7.3 The author suggests the establishment of a *Midsummer Common Management Group* (with representatives from the key stakeholder groups and Cambridge City Council departments) which will meet at least once a year to monitor the effectiveness of

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the management work and plan for the forthcoming year. This is NOT good enough. The Group is a good idea but it should be chaired by a top official, meet monthly, assign responsibilities and resources, set performance targets, and monitor achievements. Without such formality and rigour, the appearance and condition of Midsummer Common will continue to decline.