

## **MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE 20 NOVEMBER 2015**

### **THE FUTURE OF THE CASTLEMORTON COMMONS**

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#### **Background**

1. This project is derived from the following policies in the Malvern Hills AONB Management Plan 2014-19:
  - a) LP2 – Restore distinctive landscapes that have been significantly degraded.
  - b) LP3 – Identify and promote opportunities for positive landscape change to landowner.
  - c) BP2 – Restore the condition of degraded habitats in line with local and national biodiversity priorities.
  - d) HP1 – Conserve and enhance the historic and cultural environment of the AONB in accordance with key documents.
  
2. The common land within the parishes of Castlemorton and Birtsmorton form a very distinctive landscape. Much of the land is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The landscape has been created by hundreds of years of grazing by livestock belonging to individuals with common rights. Though individuals have the right to graze, they don't own these commons. Malvern Hills Conservators own Castlemorton Common, and Birtsmorton Court owns Coombegreen Common in Birtsmorton. Livestock can range freely between these two commons, and they are both one common land unit.
  
3. One common land unit, two commons, two owners, one problem; and that is the decline in grazing. With its partnership approach to landscape management, the AONB Unit has been involved in trying to find solutions to this common problem. The diagnosis is the lack of grazing and the symptom is the scrubbing up of the landscape which changes its savannah look, impedes public access and degrades the SSSI.
  
4. The AONB Unit has previously helped to provide infrastructure to manage the commons on the hills through the Malvern's Heritage Project, funded partly by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Almost 10 years ago now, this project installed cattlegrids and electric gates to on the hillside commons from British Camp to Chase End Hill. It also paved the way for the current Higher Level Stewardship programme for the hillside and Castlemorton Commons. Originally the project envisaged the installation of cattlegrids on Castlemorton Commons; this dropped out of the project for financial and political reasons.
  
5. But the problem still remains and has increased by degree; there are now even fewer graziers and livestock, barring Malvern Hills Conservators who have taken up some of the unused rights and now graze through an agent. Those who currently graze, and those who don't but might, both say that containing the livestock within the common is the single most important discouragement they face.

6. The Malvern Hills AONB Unit is now under contract to the Malvern Hills Conservators to produce a report (working with Footprint Ecology) on the future of the Castlemorton Commons. Because of the link through to Coombegreen Common, the Unit has also commissioned the development of a management plan specifically for that common. The job of the Unit, in its partnership role, will be to ensure that these two plans mesh together. Both reports should be complete by the end of January 2016. Then, following consideration by those with jurisdiction over the land, it is hoped that implementation will commence later in 2016.

7. In order to implement any recommendations from these plans, it will mean creating a further partnership - in particular with Worcestershire County Council's Highways, should cattlegrids across the highways, or invisible fencing, be a solution to containing livestock. At the time of writing, catching the attention of Highways and their consultant designers CH2M, is proving difficult.

8. The new Countryside Stewardship Scheme, as a provider of income and capital for works on the commons, may feature as a recommendation of the reports.

### **Legal, Financial and HR Implications**

9. Any Worcestershire County Council involvement in a future management project on the Castlemorton Commons is expected to be on a costed basis.

### **Recommendation**

10. **The Committee is recommended to:**
- a) **Note the partnership approach to landscape management across multiple ownerships;**
  - b) **Consider writing a letter of support for the principles of the project, to the Malvern Hills Conservators; and**
  - c) **Give its support to the continued attempts to engage with Worcestershire County Council's Highways department and their design consultants.**

### **Contact Points**

#### County Council Contact Points

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#### Specific Contact Points for this report

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