Dear Shortfield Common team,

**Re: Shortfield Common brief walkover survey & management opportunities**

Thank you for showing me around Shortfield Common on the 2nd October (with a pre-meeting visit on the 29th September 2020) and for providing the background for the site. It is very encouraging to have such an enthusiastic and active group in charge of such a valuable site.

The following notes were made at the site visit and should provide you with some extra

information and management recommendations that can be incorporated into your work

programmes going forward.

**Conservation status and indicator plants**

The species list recorded during the site visit is appended to this report. In summary, we

recorded:

* 10 Grassland Indicators (GI)
* 15 Acid Grassland Indicators (AGI)
* 10 Axiophytes (AX)
* Two Ancient Woodland Indicators (AWI)
* One Vice County 17 Scarce (VC17S)
* One VC17 Nationally Scarce (NS)
* One England Red Listed Plant (ERL) Vulnerable (VU)
* One ERL Near Threatened (NT)

Given that only 31 were from the ‘acid grassland’ section of Shortfield Common, the small

nature of the area, the time of the brief survey, the time of year, this is a very high number and therefore confirms the nature conservation interest of the site as it is a Site of Nature

Conservation Importance (SNCI).

In addition to the plants in the above, there are a number of other species records in the Surrey Botanical Society 2014 list that were not recorded in the 2020 visit. Some are woodland species, others flower much earlier in the season and could have been missed. Furthermore, the grassland had been topped reducing the likelihood that some species could be recorded.

The following plants are likely to still be present and include Sweet Vernal-grass, Quakinggrass, Harebell, Common Knapweed, Common Sorrel, Lesser Stitchwort, Shepherd’s-cress, Hare’s-foot Clover and Squirrel-tail Fescue.

**Habitat status**

Acid grassland, woodland and other habitats together create the beautiful landscape in

Shortfield Common, steeped in history and provides place of beauty and tranquillity for the

community to enjoy. It is a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI) and provides a

corridor to the surrounding landscapes and green infrastructure by linking open spaces to

allow movement of flora and fauna.

The acid grassland present qualifies as lowland dry acid grassland Habitat of Principal

Importance (HPI). Acid grassland is a nationally scarce and seriously declining habitat. A

Natural Resource Balance Sheet for Surrey (Surrey Connects, 2015) reports that acid

grassland only overs, 0.15% of Surrey which contributes to the local distinctiveness and

importance of Shortfield Common. It is therefore a priority to positively manage, retain and

enhance the acid grassland.

**Management notes**

* Acid grassland comprises Sheep’s Sorrel, Sheep’s-bit, Ribwort Plantain, Cat’s-ear, Bird’s foot, Parsley Piert, Red Fescue, Wavy Hair-grass, Gorse, Ling, Broom, Common Bent, Mouse-ear Hawkweed. The Sheep’s-bit was in flower over the north western part of the largest segment of the common next to St Austins Cottages to the west, covering approximately 0.2ha (0.5acre) (approximately SU8412 4223, SU8412 4222, SU8408 4220, SU8406 4220 & SU8408 4225). Another area to the north in the square part of the common covering approximately 0.1ha (SU8409 4230, SU8411 4229, SU8411 4228, SU8413 4225 & SU8390 4229) is also present. See below for the BSBI UK distribution map for Sheep’s-bit, there is a western, coastal bias, therefore the Surrey population is considered all the more rare.



**Figure 1: BSBI UK distribution of Sheep’s-bit Figure 2: Sheep’s-bit**

* The grassland is topped at the end of August/beginning of September and clearly the

Sheep’s-bit is responding well to the management. Take care that the bar of the mower is set to 5cm or more, so as not to remove all of the late flowering Sheep’s-bit and other species such as the Heather and Gorse. Also rake off the clippings and compost elsewhere.

* The Ribwort Plantain is a bit of a thug in the grassland, so strim back patches twice a year in April/May and again in June/July. Monitor those patches to see if this method is controlling the encroachment. The idea is to contain the encroachment into the potential acid grassland/Sheep’s-bit grassland and not to eradicate the Ribwort Plantain completely.
* In addition to the above, scrapes are going to be a useful tool, as you have some willing volunteers. Think Rabbit, and scrape small patches, but just scarifying the top layer of vegetation to create a mostly bare patch that is approximately half a metre by 30cm into the Ribwort Plantain, but importantly away from a Sheep’s Bit. This can be done in the spring in April, but remember to take care that the areas are checked for leaves of Sheep’s bit. I would take some photographs now of the plant with the flowers and leaves present, so that you are able to show the volunteers what they are looking out for. Monitor as above.
* Could consider collecting some of the seed in October and sprinkling into the scraped areas, as an experiment.
* Another area ideal for rotationally scrapes in the southern edge of the square northern part of the common next to West End Land. This could be scraped on a three yearly rotation of 2m by 1m. This may be successful for Sheep’s-bit as well, but the main idea here is to provide bare, warm, south-facing soil for solitary bees and wasps.
* If putting in wooden posts to prevent parking, then strim around the posts once or twice a year so as not to let the vegetation grow.
* Edge areas could be cut earlier in June or July if required. But the main part of the acid grassland areas should be cut later and topped high to 5cm or more, to allow the Sheep’s Bit to flower.
* Cutting back the Gorse is fine, ideally this would be done on a rotational basis so that some areas are left to grow taller, whilst other areas are trimmed back to provide an age range and better structure for wildlife.
* Allow some of the Ling to grow and build up, other areas can be topped. Areas not to be cut should be ‘fenced off’ using some wooden stakes to demark the areas.
* Remove Rum Cherry.
* Retain the Bramble patch next to the Rum Cherry.
* Yellow-rattle has been trailed, but there is a lot of soil preparation to undertake, it does not do well in acid grassland conditions and there is not much grass for it to parasitise. Yellow-rattle may fair better on the grassland to the east of the site, under the Common Lime trees. Here, the grassland is more nutrient rich and there is a thick layer of grassy vegetation.
* Epicormic growth around the Common Lime trees, should be removed from the trees on the acid grassland sections, otherwise they are encroaching into the acid grassland by shading it out.
* Secondary broad-leaved woodland comprises Peduculate Oak, Holly, Hazel, Ash,

Sycamore. Concentrate on edge and glade management in accessible areas.

* Could trim the Holly and help thicken up into dense thickets.
* Could halo around some of the Pedunculate Oaks and other specimen tree to create a more open woodland, this area presumably was open common at some point

.

* However opening up the woodland is likely to only allow Bramble and Bracken to invade, which is good for lots of wildlife including small mammals and deer, but monitor and strim back from the path edges when necessary.
* Encourage decaying wood. When undertaking woodland work try to leave the trunks,

branches and brash in situ. Some could be stacked in piles. If you are able to chip, then a small amount can be chipped for the paths, wood chip is good for fungi, as is all the other types of decaying wood. Instead of removing a tree consider ring barking some of the trees to create decaying standing wood.

* Preferentially remove Ash and Sycamore. Ash will have die-back unfortunately and

Sycamore will take over if it is left, therefore removing some will be beneficial to the other broad-leaved trees.

* Taking before, during and after (just after, a year and five years after) will provide useful information for future management, a visual guide of what went well (or not) and illustrations for talks.
* There are a lot of non-native garden species creeping into the grassland such as Autumn Crocus, Orpine and Cyclamen. They definitely should not be encouraged,or be allowed to spread. Ideally they should be removed, stimmed down and certainly not allow in the acid grassland areas.

**Species list:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Annual Meadow-grass | Autumn Crocus |
| **Bird’s-foot (GI, AGI, AX)** | Bracken |
| Bramble | Broom |
| **Buck’s-horn Plantain (GI, AGI, AX)** | **Bulbous Buttercup (GI, AX)** |
| Bush Vetch | **Bush Vetch (AX, AWI)** |
| **Cat’s-ear (AGI)** | Chickweed |
| Cleavers | Cock’s-foot |
| Common Bent | Common Dog-violet |
| Common Lime | Common Nettle |
| **Common Stork’s-bill (GI, AGI)** | Common Vetch |
| Cow Parsley | Creeping Thistle |
| Cyclamen | Dandelion |
| **Dove’s-foot Crane’s-bill (AGI)** | Fat-hen |
| **Field Wood-rush (AGI)** | **Fine-leaved Sheep’s-fescue (AGI)** |
| Foxglove | **Germander Speedwell (AGI)** |
| Greater Plantain | **Hawkweed agg. (GI, AX)** |
| Hawthorn | **Heath-grass (GI, AGI, AX)** |
| Herb-Robert | **Holly (AX, AWI)** |
| Knotgrass | **Lesser Trefoil (AGI)** |
| **Ling (GI, AX, VC17NS, ERLNT)** | Mistletoe |
| **Mouse-ear Hawkweed (GI, AGI, AX)** | Orpine |
| Pedunculate Oak | Perennial Rye-grass |
| Pink Sorrel | **Prickly Sedge (AGI)** |
| Prickly Sow-thistle | Red Clover |
| Red Fescue | Ribwort Plantain |
| Rum Cherry | **Sheep’s Sorrel (GI, AGI)** |
| **Sheep’s-bit (GI, AGI, AX, VC17S,** | **ERLVU)** |
| Shepherd’s Cress | Slender Parsley-piert |
| **Small-leaved Crane’s-bill (AGI)** | Small-leaved Lime |
| Spotted Medick | **Wavy Hair-grass (AGI)** |
| White Clover | White Dead-nettle |
| Yarrow | Yew |
| Yorkshire-fog |  |

**Conservation status explanation**

**England Red List (ERL) for Plants**

Near Threatened - Taxa where it has been evaluated against the criteria but does not qualify

for Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable now, but is close to qualifying for or is

likely to qualify for a threatened category in the near future. This category includes species

which occur in 15 or fewer hectads but do not qualify as Critically Endangered, Endangered

or Vulnerable. Near Threatened ERL plants should be regarded as a priority for conservation

in England.

**Surrey Rare Plants**

These are species that are listed on the Surrey Rare plant Register (SyRPR draft, 2019).

VC17 Scarce have been recorded in 11-30 1km squares from 2000 onwards.

**Ancient Woodland Indicators (AWI)**

AWI are species that are strongly associated with areas of land that have been continuously

woodland for over 400 years old, or woodland land before 1600 according to the old maps.

There are ninety nine AWI species for the South-east of England.

**Axiophytes**

Axiophytes are ‘worthy plants’ that indicate good quality habitat considered important for

conservation and are taken from Surrey’s Axiophyte list and automatically include all AWI.

Although there is no qualifying number that is representative of what constitutes good quality

habitat, as this is down to survey quality, historical records, size of site and professional

judgement, as a general rule over 20 axiophytes could be considered a good guideline.

**Grassland Indicators**

Grassland Indicators are listed in the Guidance for the Selection of Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI) (Gibbs, 2008). To put this into context, to qualify as a SNCI for acid grassland the guidelines recommend 15 or more grassland indicators are to be recorded.

**Acid Grassland Indicators**

Using the provisional Acid Grassland Indicator table (Norton, 2019 Norton (2020) states that

‘for Hampshire…a total of more than 20 acid grassland indicator species for a small to medium sized site would probably indicate that it is good enough quality for designation as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation‘, this is translatable and equally valid for Surrey. This is further evidence that the quality of acid grassland habitat at Shortfield Common is high.

**Other species seen (or heard)**

Mosses are often overlooked, but the Juniper Haircap-moss was one that stood out in amongst the Heather and grassland.

Mistle Thrush – Heard and has been spreading the rather lovely Mistletoe in nearby Lime

trees.

Other birds seen or heard were Woodpigeon, Crow and Magpie.

Butterflies on the notice board: Orange tip, Small White, Large White, Green-veined White,

Peacock, Red Admiral, Small Copper, Speckled Wood, **Small Heath** (UK SPI and Butterfly

Conservation priority High), Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Small Skipper, Essex Skipper and

Gatekeeper.