



Wellfield South Proposed Grazing

Phase 2 Consultation

London Borough of Sutton
Environment, Housing and Regeneration
Biodiversity Team
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Overview

Sutton Council is proposing a scheme for the introduction of conservation grazing as a site management tool for Wellfield South, a proposed Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC), in Carshalton Beeches.

Having undertaken an initial consultation with residents of Wellfield Gardens, 79% of respondents felt a grazing scheme would be acceptable in principle. Having reviewed resident's comments, the Council's Biodiversity Team have drawn up three proposals for public consultation. We aim to address the desired conservation outcomes, whilst accommodating the needs of site users.

In order to ensure the project can proceed, we need majority backing from respondents. If we are unsuccessful in achieving a majority support from respondents, the project will not proceed.

We are seeking your opinions and would appreciate if you could take a few minutes to complete a short online survey.

<http://bit.ly/conservation-grazing>

The survey will be open until **17:00 Friday 9th October 2015**

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Summary

This document sets out the proposals for the introduction of conservation grazing as a site management tool for Wellfield South.

Conservation grazing is a well documented method of improving biodiversity and is widely used by organisations such as the RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts and the National Trust as a preferred management approach.

The proposal aims to ensure long-term improvements to the chalk grassland habitat at Wellfield South. Chalk grassland is a local and regional Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat, whilst being a national Priority Habitat and of international importance. Improving the Borough's biodiversity is part of Sutton's commitment to become London's most sustainable suburb.



Herdwick sheep – Conservation grazing at Cuddington Meadows Local Nature Reserve

The introduction of conservation grazing requires the installation of an accessible enclosure. Through this consultation it is the intention to minimise the impact this may have on site users. The works will be funded by capital aspects of a legal agreement between the borough and Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme and requires implementation in 2015.

An initial local consultation was conducted with residents of Wellfield Gardens to seek views as to whether a grazing project would be supported and what issues would need addressing to minimise the impact on current users.

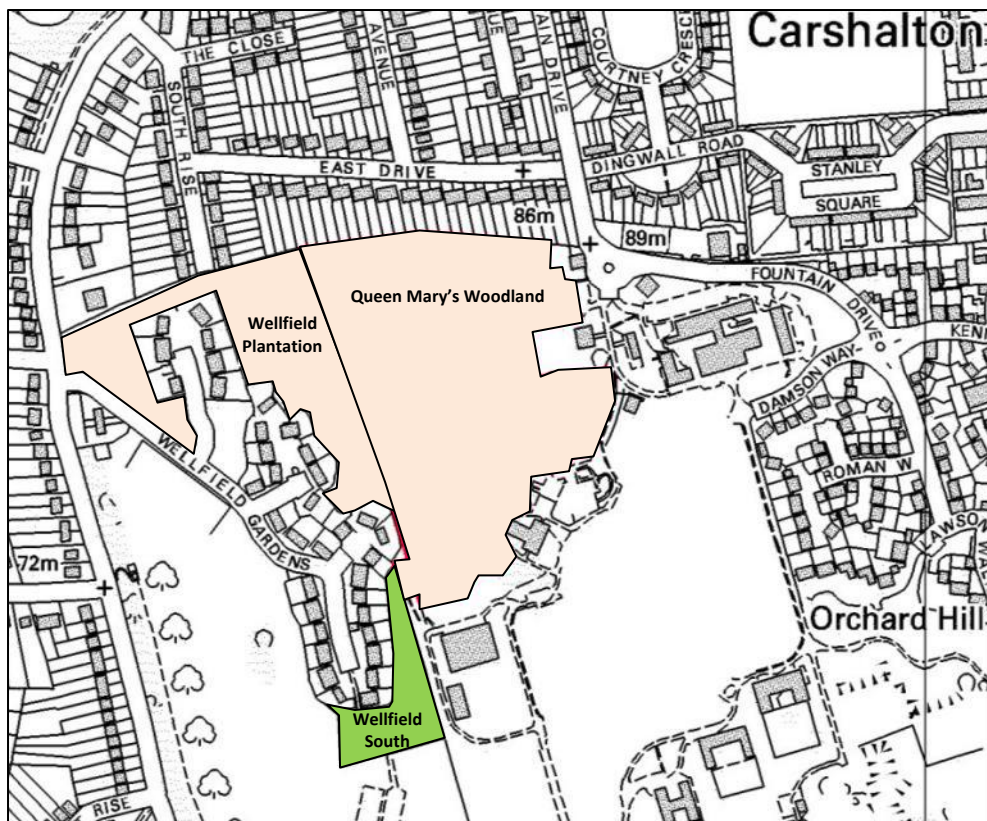
The first consultation received 14 responses (of 36 invited to respond), with 11 (79%) feeling the proposed scheme would be acceptable, 2 (14%) believing it probably

wouldn't be acceptable and 1 (7%) undecided and requiring further information. The results of the initial consultation warranted additional work on the scheme and the conducting of further consultation.

1. Background

Wellfield South is part of the wider Queen Mary's and Wellfield complex of woodland and grasslands, located at the southern end of Wellfield Gardens in Carshalton Beeches, Surrey. It is owned and managed by the London Borough of Sutton (see **Map 1**).

Despite not currently displaying a full suite of chalk grassland indicators, Wellfield South has potential to improve as a chalk grassland, with the associated plants and animals of that habitat. Chalk grassland is increasingly rare in the UK is very scarce in London. It is a local (Sutton) and regional (London) Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitat, as well as being a priority habitat both nationally and internationally. Chalk grassland habitats are so important because the nutrient-poor soils have an associated diversity of species, which have become specially adapted to exist in these conditions and many cannot survive anywhere else.



Estimates from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) suggest that only 29% of the country's best chalk grassland habitats (i.e. Special Areas of Conservation and Sites of Special Scientific Interest) are in favourable condition. It also records that as a nation, 97% of species rich grasslands have been lost since the 1930's, due to agricultural intensification, the changing of grazing management and development of the land. This worrying statistic highlights the need to take steps to conserve this priority habitat.

Map 1 – Wellfield South

The grassland at Wellfield South has the potential to become an even richer and more valuable chalk grassland site, supporting a wealth of plants, butterflies and insects, given a change in management.

1.2 What are we proposing?

In order to improve Wellfield South's biodiversity for chalk grassland plants and animals, it is proposed to introduce sheep grazing as a tool for nature conservation management on parts of the site. Sheep grazing on this site would positively improve the physical and botanical condition of the sward (the characteristics of the grassy vegetation), leading to an increase in overall species diversity.

Conservation grazing is a well documented method of improving floristic and hence faunal diversity and is widely used by organisations including the RSPB, National Trust, County Councils and Natural England as a preferred site management tool. Sutton's Biodiversity Team have been successfully grazing a number of sites, including Wellfield East and West at the bottom of Wellfield Gardens, for over a decade.

The proposals have been developed in conjunction with the Downlands Partnership, who conducts a range of countryside management activities to promote public understanding of the value of declining chalk grassland habitat. The Downlands Partnership also provides conservation grazing on a number of sites within the South London and North Surrey area, including Sutton.

1.3 What will the grazing regime involve?

The grazing regime will involve approximately 6 to 10 sheep being placed within a secured area of the Wellfield South site for about a month to 6 weeks, depending on growth rates. The arrival of the sheep is hoped to be late this year or early next year, but the exact timings will depend on the availability of the flock. The flock consists of heritage breeds of sheep including Herdwick, Beulah Speckled Face and Jacob. These sheep have been bred to survive in some harsh conditions and have proven to be particularly reliable in restoration grazing projects.

1.4 Who will look after the animals?

The Downlands Partnership's Grazing Officer is the legal guardian of the sheep and will look after the animals, with help from local volunteers. The animals will be checked every day. The Downlands Partnership have a 24 hour emergency pager that members of the public can call if there is anything wrong with the animals, and a member of staff will respond and deal with the problem. The Biodiversity Team also provides regular checks on the animals, to monitor their wellbeing and their effect on the grassland. We hope to recruit local volunteers to check the animals once or twice a day (as they already do for Wellfield East and West). If you would like to get involved with this, please contact us.

1.5 What else are we doing?

It is currently proposed that Wellfield South be included into the adjacent Queen Mary's and Wellfield Plantation Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC), as part of the current SINC Review. This would provide planning protection for the site.

We are also aiming to introduce extra chalk grassland species through use of local seed or 'green hay' from sites that are richer than Wellfield South (such as Wellfield East and West down the road). We will also continue to cut Wellfield South as a meadow to complement sheep grazing and to manage those areas that may not be affected by the sheep (depending on which option is chosen).

2. Grassland management and conservation grazing



Greater yellow rattle and hairy violet – high quality grassland species at Wellfield East

Grazing by sheep and cattle has helped shape the countryside for thousands of years. At low intensity, flora and fauna adapted to changes, becoming reliant on regular, extensive grazing. As farming methods have

become more intensive and mechanised, the way land is used and

managed has changed. In many cases, the rate or amount of this change has been such that many species have been unable to move or adapt to the new conditions.

Grazing, rather than mowing, is often the preferred method of management of species rich grasslands, as it removes vegetation gradually. This approach helps to produce a varied sward composition and creates microhabitats that can be utilised by different types of insects, butterflies, birds and small mammals. Additionally, sheep are able to transfer seeds across the site through dung, fleece and hooves. Complimenting this is the action of sheep trampling, which exposes patches of bare earth that are essential for seed establishment, as well as trampling seeds into those bare patches. All of these elements contribute to assisting with the creation and maintenance of a species rich grassland habitat.

[Natural England](#), the Government's advisor on the natural environment, has described extensive, low density livestock grazing as essential for the management of important wildlife habitats. It has proved a successful management technique for restoring and improving priority habitats, such as chalk grassland. Traditionally, grazing with sheep and / or cattle has helped keep dominant scrub and ruderal species (nettles, brambles etc.) under control that would otherwise transform the grassland into woodland, over time. If we are to restore these wildlife-rich grasslands and allow

them to thrive, establishing suitable grazing regimes will help us to realise an increase in wildlife value.

The grassland at Wellfield South is currently mown for hay in the autumn, with the cuttings being removed after drying, to reduce the level of nutrients allowed to enrich the soil. This type of management removes all the vegetation at the same time and cuts to the same height. This can make the site less suitable for wildlife and some rare plants. Whilst preventing the succession of bramble and other scrub, this method offers limited opportunity for improvement but prevents conditions deteriorating.

The Council's Biodiversity Team wants to enhance the quality of this grassland site through a number of improvement measures, most significantly, through establishing a grazing regime. It is expected that over time, this will create and maintain the right conditions to enable chalk grassland species to increase and thrive. In turn, this will increase the biodiversity value of this site and help meet conservation targets and reduce the chance of it being lost to development, for instance.

3. What will the fencing look like?

Having conducted a small initial consultation with residents of Wellfield Gardens, a number of fencing options have been drawn up. The proposals look to minimise the disruption to site users and ensure the safety of the sheep. Additional fencing is required to supplement the current fences in order to ensure the sheep's containment and provide a means of safely delivering or collecting them from site. Three options have been drawn up and your opinion is required to ensure the most suitable one is selected.



Stock netting for cattle at Roundshaw Downs Local Nature Reserve

Where additional stock fencing is required it will consist of stock netting and a jump wire hung between wooden posts at a height of approximately 1.2 metres / 4 feet high.



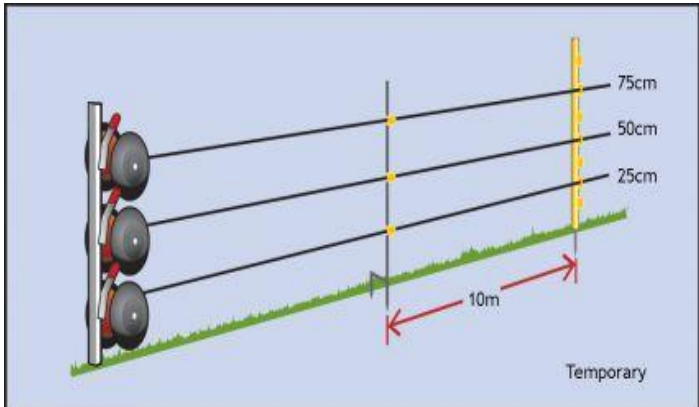
Timber pedestrian and field gate

Where the option requires the inclusion of a pedestrian gate (Option 1), these will be constructed from timber and be secured with a self-locking gate catch, or as a kissing gate. In the case of a field gate (Option 1 and 3), these would be secured by chain and padlock during the grazing period but locked open at all other times.

Where the option requires the inclusion of an electric fence (Option 2), this will be of standard agricultural design, consisting of plastic/metal posts, electric tape/wire and a battery power unit. The fence will consist of a number of lengths of electric tape / wire strung between the posts at a maximum height of approximately 0.75 metre / 2' 6"



Sheep behind electric fencing



Standard electric fencing measurements

3.2 Will the public be able to walk through Wellfield South?

Yes, access to the site will be possible at all times. Options 2 and 3 will not restrict the current level of access to the informal path leading to and from Queen Mary’s Woodland at any time of the year. Option 1 will involve accessing the site by means of at least one kissing gate located at each end of the site at all times of the year, even when the site is not grazed.

3.3 Will there be any restrictions on my use of Wellfield South?

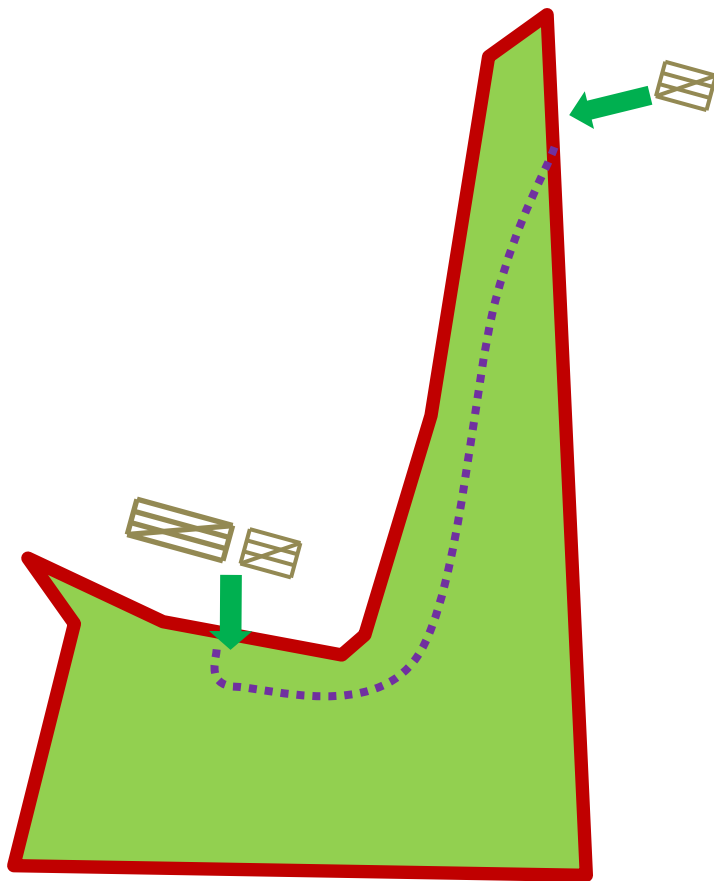
Yes, during the grazing period, dogs will need to be kept on a lead whilst on or passing through the site, to safeguard the sheep, even if not in the same paddock as the sheep (Options 2 & 3) to reduce stress levels. Dogs are the main threat to sheep grazing in urban locations. We grazed an inaccessible site in Wellfield Plantation several years ago, when a local dog got in to the paddock and attacked the sheep. 80% of the sheep died, primarily from shock and stress. Dogs, even if only ‘playing’, are a major source of stress to sheep, so we ask that people take extra care with their pets when stock are on site.

Outside the grazing period, Options 1 and 2 will allow unrestricted access to the entire site. Option 3 may restrict some access to the grazing paddock or require access through the field gate.

4. Options

Three options are presented below for your consideration. On the online form, select which of these you would prefer (Question 1), or if you do not wish to see any grazing on site, tick Option 2. If you’re still not sure, tick Option 3.

Option 1 – Permanent fully enclosed site





Pros:

- Sheep graze whole area, maximising benefit
- Robust fenceline inside existing boundary to protect sheep and neighbours
- Reduces visual impact of fencing, as runs around edge

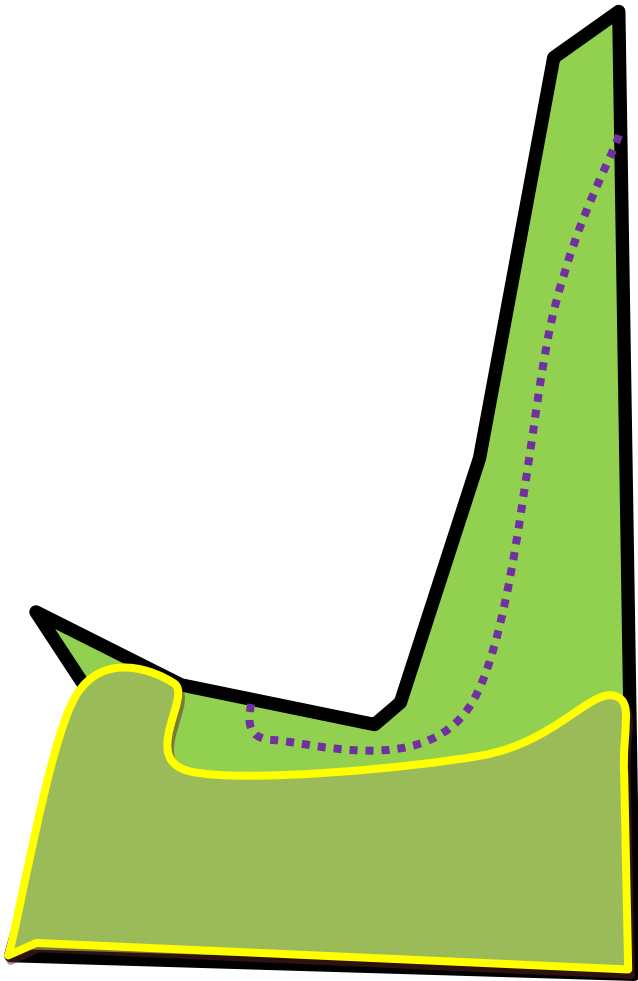
Cons:

- Impedes access through gates at each entrance
- Expensive to implement and repair
- Doesn't separate sheep off from dogs walked through the field
- Potentially creates 'trap' at narrow point, stressing sheep

KEY

-  Stock fencing / paddock
-  Footpath
-  Pedestrian kissing gate
-  Field gate for vehicle access

Option 2 – Electric fencing



Pros:

- Sheep graze main grassland but not scrub areas
- Doesn't impede visitor access at any time
- Cheap to install and maintain
- Flexible layout to focus grazing, if necessary
- Removed and installed each season, reducing visual impact and potential damage / vandalism

Cons:

- Less dog proof than standard wood and wire fencing
- Less vandal proof than wood and wire fencing
- Full site not grazed
- Dogs not under control may receive a mild electric shock from contact with the fence

KEY



Existing boundary

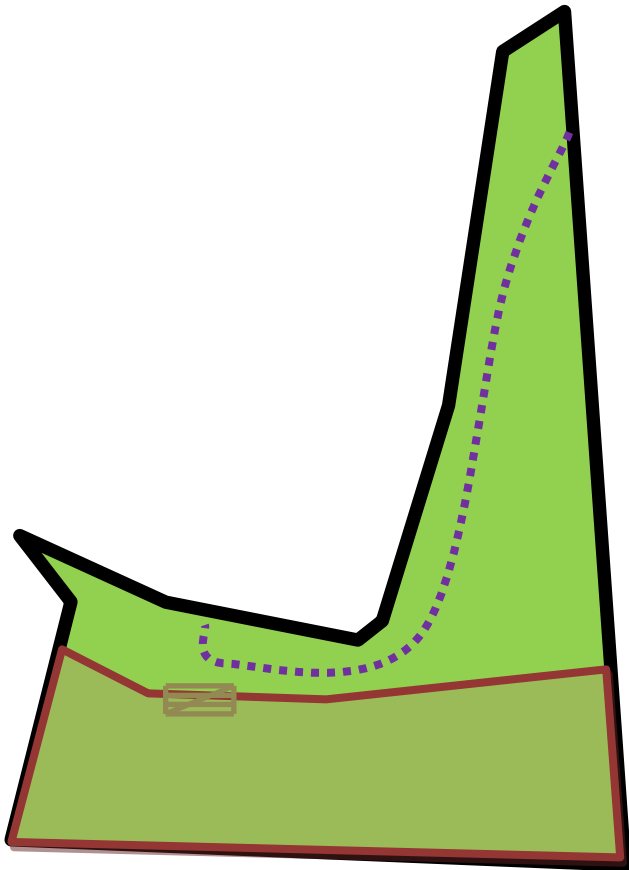


Footpath



Indicative electric fencing area for sheep grazing

Option 3 – Permanent small paddock







Pros:

- Sheep graze main grassland but not scrub areas
- Doesn't impede visitor access at any time

Cons:

- Still quite expensive to install and repair
- Potential impact on visual amenity and access
- Full site not grazed
- Permanent installation could be subject to vandalism

KEY

-  Existing boundary
-  Footpath
-  Indicative permanent fencing for sheep grazing area
-  Field gate

5. Conclusions

Conservation grazing is not a panacea for all conservation problems but often presents, in combination with other conservation management tools, the quickest and most effective means of enhancing grasslands. To restore (or create) a high quality grassland may take anything between 10 and 20 years or more, whilst acquiring a full assemblage of chalk grassland specialist plants and animals can take over 100 years. The London Borough of Sutton Biodiversity Team has been managing and enhancing some of our chalk grasslands with sheep and cattle grazing (started in 2012 at Roundshaw Downs Local Nature Reserve) for over a decade and aims to continue managing Sutton's valuable natural habitats and wildlife in the very long-term, to provide homes for animals and plants, as well as enjoyment, education and relaxation for residents.

5.2 Preferred Option

It is the opinion of the Biodiversity Team that the best compromise between retaining public access, reducing initial and ongoing costs and providing suitable conservation gains would be the adoption of **Option 2 – Electric Fencing**.

This would retain the open feel of the site, as the fencing would be installed and removed only when the sheep are on site, it would enable people to continue to access Queen Mary's Woodland without negotiating any fences at all times of the year and it would provide an area for sheep grazing where there is less scrub and therefore more of an impact on the grassland species we wish to encourage. It can be reduced or expanded in extent each year and provides increased flexibility on where grazing occurs, over permanent fencing.

The main disadvantage of this kind of fencing is that it can be subject to vandalism affecting the batteries and may provide slightly less protection from dogs than traditional wood and wire stock fencing.

If conservation grazing on this site is agreed by the majority of respondents, we will implement whichever option is most popular. If there is no majority support for sheep grazing, then we will continue trying to enhance the site through mowing.

It is vital that if you have an interest in this site, nature conservation, wildlife and our local environment, that you tell us what you think to our proposals and whether you agree, or not, with our preferred option, that of Option 2.

David Warburton CBiol MRSB FLS MCIEEM

Biodiversity Officer

15 September 2015