

Proposed Designation of Herne Hill, Ilminster as a Local Nature Reserve

Executive Portfolio Holder: Cllr Sylvia Seal, Leisure and Culture
Strategic Director: Clare Pestell, Commercial Services & Income Generation
Lead Officer: Katy Menday, Leisure & Recreation Manager
Contact Details: katy.menday@southsomerset.gov.uk or 01935 462522

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek agreement that Ilminster Town Council is given delegated authority to declare and consult on the proposed designation of Local Nature Reserve status (LNR) for Herne Hill under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. Under this act local authorities have the power to acquire, declare and manage nature reserves, in consultation with Natural England.
2. Natural England requires the endorsement of the relevant Council committee before a formal declaration can be made. Therefore, the proposal is for the District Executive Committee to delegate the power to apply for the designation of the LNR to Ilminster Town Council.

Forward Plan

3. This report appeared on the District Executive Forward Plan with an anticipated Committee date of September 2018.

Public Interest

4. Ilminster Town Council would like to attain Local Nature Reserve status for Herne Hill. The site is owned and managed for the town by Ilminster Town Council and is easily accessible on foot from the town centre.
5. The importance of Herne Hill to the town of Ilminster and the surrounding areas cannot be understated; it provides a valuable habitat for flora and fauna; is used by local schools for education and exercise; is used by residents and visitors for rest, relaxation, exercise and informal recreation.
6. Designation as a Local Nature Reserve would help to conserve and enhance the wildlife, archaeological, landscape and amenity value of Herne Hill and increase the profile of the area for residents and visitors.
7. Designation of Herne Hill as a Local Nature Reserve should increase the interest and awareness of local residents and encourage greater "ownership" of the Hill which in turn will assist with the recruitment of a volunteers to undertake specific maintenance work and special projects on Herne Hill.

Recommendations

8. That the District Executive:
 - a. Endorses the proposal that Herne Hill becomes a Local Nature Reserve
 - b. Delegate to Ilminster Town Council under s19 of the National Parks and Access to Countryside Act 1949 the power to declare Herne Hill as land held and managed by the Town Council as a Local Nature Reserve

Background

9. A Nature Reserve is defined in Section 15 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, as:

'land managed for the purpose of providing, under suitable conditions and control, special opportunities for the study of, and research into, matters relating to the flora and fauna of Great Britain and the physical conditions in which they live, and for the study of geological and physiographical features of special interest in the area; or of preserving flora, fauna, or geological or physiographical features of special interest in the area; or for both these purposes.'

10. It is clear in the legislation that sites selected for designation as LNRs must be of special interest. It is also clear that the words 'in the area' when applied to LNRs mean the area over which the local authority has responsibility. The 1949 Act states that the local authority should feel that the site in question would be appropriately managed as a nature reserve and that it has special interest or value in their area. LNRs have important parts to play in Local Biodiversity Action Plans and, in most cases have potential for community involvement. English Nature suggests that they can be used as indicators for sustainability and that a target of one hectare of LNR per 1,000 population is realistic. Particularly where LNRs are used to serve community needs, some meaningful input must be made by the community. This should include discussion of what the community wants as well as how it can make a direct contribution to management. Careful monitoring will be needed to see whether societal or ecological/geological objectives are being met and whether adjustments to projects or management plans need making.
11. South Somerset District Council has previously agreed to Chard Reservoir, Moldrams Ground (Pen Selwood) and Eastfield (High Ham) having LNR status.
12. The designation of Herne Hill as a LNR will assist South Somerset District Council in meeting several of its aims in the Council Plan including:
- Improving culture, leisure and tourism opportunities
 - Maintaining and promoting access to greenspaces for health and well being
 - Maintaining a clean and attractive environment through high standards of environmental quality
13. Local authorities are now legally responsible for managing biodiversity in a positive way under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. Designation of Herne Hill as an LNR would therefore be of assistance in managing biodiversity for South Somerset District Council and the residents and visitors to the district.

Information about Herne Hill, Ilminster

14. The Herne Hill site covers an area of 8.25 hectares and consists of a broad range of native plant species, along with a number of introduced species. The site is predominantly woodland with some rough grassland / scrub areas.
15. The species composition of the woodland varies throughout, with the most prevalent tree and shrub species being: ash, pedunculate oak, hazel, hawthorn, elder and holly. The field layer within the woodland includes: bramble, bracken, red campion, dog's mercury, bluebell, primrose and lords-and-ladies. The ground layer within the woodland is dominated by common ivy, lesser celandine along with substantial moss, liverwort, lichen and fungi communities.
16. The area at the hill's summit is known as the Fir-Pound and is a plantation which consists of scots pine, sweet chestnut and beech.
17. Over one hundred species of flowering plants have been recorded including two Somerset notable

species. Surveys have identified forty six species of insect including two nationally rare species. The grassland area, Cleeve Close, includes a distinctive plant community with a mix of knapweed, primrose, nettles, cocksfoot, false oat and Yorkshire fog grasses. The entomological survey (1993-95) showed Cleeve's Close to be one of the richest on the Herne Hill site, including 2 nationally rare beetles.

18. The site provides a habitat for many animal species, including a large population of badgers, a substantial range of invertebrates, wild birds and bats.

Site History

19. Herne Hill has a long history having appeared in the Domesday book of 1086, however the site is not classed as an ancient woodland as it has not been continuously wooded since c.1600. However many of the trees within the woodland are veteran.
20. In 1982 a five year tree planting program was carried out, in which 5,000 young trees were planted. In the years following this, to present, a further 2,000 new trees have been planted. The initial planting program introduced new non-native species, including a large number of American Red Oak.
21. The site is now managed as an amenity woodland for members of the public to enjoy, while maintaining the areas valuable wildlife resource, which is reflected in the management objectives.

Reasons for Designation

22. The following are the principle reasons for seeking designation of Herne Hill as a Local Nature Reserve:
 1. The site is locally important for wildlife.
 2. The 'Fir-Pound' area, includes bluebells and veteran trees, an important habitat for conservation.
 3. The natural greenspace is a valuable, accessible, community resource for the town.
 4. The site has historical value for the town, having appeared in the Domesday Book of 1086
 5. Ilminster Town Council are committed to protecting and encouraging wildlife species & habitats through active conservation management.
 6. Ilminster Town Council are committed to improving educational opportunities for local schools, organised groups as well as opportunities for to the wider community.

Management Objectives for Herne Hill

23. The following, which respect the covenants in the conveyance of the land to the Council, are the management objectives for Herne Hill
 1. To ensure the sites natural vegetation continues to develop, in respect of ancient woodland character
 2. To conserve the site and enhance the local native landscape
 3. To conserve the site and enhance the local ecology, including managing habitats for species of conservation importance
 4. To assist the stabilisation of the site slopes, establishing and maintaining tree cover at vulnerable points
 5. To control pests and invasive species (insects, animals and/ or plants), preventing excessive damage
 6. Maintain reasonable safety margins for site users and neighbouring landowners
 7. To enhance access to the site visitors and educate site users on the history and ecology of Herne Hill

8. For the land to be used, accessible and for enjoyment by all

Financial Implications

24. There are no cost implications for South Somerset District Council.
25. Ilminster Town Council have an existing budget for Herne Hill and existing staffing levels will continue to be used to manage the site.
26. Designation as LNR may give the Ilminster Town Council access to funding streams that would not otherwise be available to assist with projects and other works on Herne Hill.

Equality and Diversity Implications

27. Herne Hill is managed for all members of the public.

Privacy Impact Assessment

28. No personal data will be processed as part of the LNR designation process.

Background Papers

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/create-and-manage-local-nature-reserves#how-to-declare-a-local-nature-reserve>
