

Restoring Cheltenham's Escarpment Grasslands LEI Project

First report of the RCEG Steering Group covering the period 1st April 2021 to 30th September 2021

Project Progress

Actual spend to date (please provide a brief breakdown)

- All funds are held by Charlton Kings Parish Council (CKPC) and managed by its *Scribe* accounting system using separate Cost Centres for Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common (with 11 Cost Codes) and for Ravensgate Common (with 5 Cost Codes).
- To 30th September 2021 expenditure totalled **£3,228** on 2 projects (purchase of walling stone, and setting up a webinar with the suppliers of Countryside Management System (CMSi) Management Planning services.
- As at 30th September, CKPC had approved the expenditure of a further **£25,100** on 3 projects (surface stoning parts of the Cotswold Way, 5 days Robomower, NoFence grazing collars and ancillary equipment).

Project progress to date (what have you done so far)

This is a complex project which we have divided into 12 work streams or sub-projects. Reports will be made only against those where progress has been made in the reporting period.

Drystone walling: 20 t of walling stone was the project's first capital expenditure and has been used to add thus far, approximately 10 m to the existing wall project.



Footpath improvements: We are set to complete all the footpath work on Charlton Kings Common by the end of October at a cost of £15.9 k. Many favourable comments have been received from Cotswold Way walkers on the work so far, although there has been a passing exchange of negative comments on Facebook that have simply come and gone across one weekend. The length of the refurbished section will be 363 m, with an additional 150 m of infill across parts of the ridgeline. The stone surface has bedded down well and will weather in time.

Grassland Restoration

A botanical survey of Charlton Kings Common was undertaken in July to identify priority areas for management of Gorse, and areas selected for treatment in winter 2021/2022. A works specification has been prepared and quotes sought.

The Robomower has worked for five days on Ravensgate Common, clearing dense Gorse scrub restricting landscape views from the Cotswold Way, and continuing work to remove Tor grass 'thatch' and Ash saplings on the steep slope.



Safety tree felling and removing shade

Three contractors have been taken to price up tree felling work that is now scheduled for winters 2022/23 and 2023/24.

Veteran Ash tree pollarding



Work has been held over because of possible impact of Ash Dieback. Trees in poor condition in autumn 2020, but much healthier in summer 2021. Consultation held with Ancient / Veteran Tree specialist adviser, with the view to works being done in winter 2022/23.

Overstood Larch plantation felling

Two contractor visits have been made to develop details of planned works scheduled for winters 2022/23 and 2023/24. Key locations for clearance are now agreed.

Fencing

The Summer was spent investigating the possibility of taking up the new 'Invisible Fencing' technology, with discussions with a number of English users and a visit to Gloucester City Council's nearby Robinswood Hill Country Park where the herd of Dexter cattle has successfully taken to wearing the new equipment. Having obtained National Grid's approval to switch from physical fences to this approach, 24 NoFence collars and ancillary equipment have now been obtained at a cost of £6,400. The grazing regime on the western slopes has been changed from summer to winter, and a new grazier appointed who is accustoming the cattle prior to moving them for the winter season.



Infrastructure

The Cattle Crush specification has been agreed by the new grazier and will be purchased in 2022.

Management Plan

The Steering Group has agreed to adopt the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) format, and a Webinar held with the CMS originator to explore options and to receive advice. Discussions have been held with the online supplier about our possible adoption of CMSi software. The SG agreed that there is insufficient funding to employ a contractor to produce a Plan, but rather, a joint SG/contractor approach based on identifying key features to be included in plan and developing the process of delivery.

Record keeping

The importance of keeping full records to facilitate programme management and reporting was an early decision taken, but although a clear central online repository was developed, the scale and pace of other work has prevented its enthusiastic uptake. Volunteer time record sheets are maintained by all participants.

Positive impacts of your project to date in relation to the LEI criteria (it may help to the goals listed in your original application)

- By enhanced Dry Stone walling and shrub/ coarse grass management, the project has already supported AONB Policy CE1 to ensure that views and visual amenity are conserved and enhanced, and directed visitor focus to the grassland swards rather than aerially towards the transmission line to the east of the site.
- Stoning some 500 metres of the Cotswold way has created a better and safer walking surface for visitors for which appreciation has already been expressed.
- The 'Robomower' work has created improved opportunities for biodiversity on the Ravensgate Common Key Wildlife Site (KWS). Through new survey and bringing together old records, an enthusiastic and knowledgeable wildlife surveyor has created baseline information on a range of animal and plant species on Ravensgate.
- A sustainable new cattle-grazing regime is to be introduced on the western slopes, that supports a new farming enterprise.

What are the main barriers your project has faced so far?

- Although the project was finally given Ofgem approval in April 2021, funds arrived in the CKPC bank account only at the end of August, so other than a small sum covered by match funding to purchase walling stone, no contracts could be let until September. Council approval had been previously obtained to fund other works, so at least we hit the ground running from 1st September.
- Projects and expenditure had been planned for the period of winter scrub clearance work up to March 2021, but the late arrival of funding meant that a full season of winter work was delayed and the whole work programme has had to be re-formatted.
- Covid has provided Tree Surgeons with full order books, and it has not been possible to schedule planned tree (Ash) felling in the 2021/22 work programme.
- All expenditure has to be approved by resolution of CKPC, so it has been quite a job to ensure that appropriate quotations for proposed works have been submitted in time for each Council meeting.

Have your project plans changed from your original application (if so, please provide details)?

The plans have not changed, but the timing and sequencing have, of necessity, had to be re-visited.

Is your project on track to be completed within budget and on time (if not, please give details)?

Yes.

Please explain whether any contingency element of the budget was required, and how it was spent

No contingency money has been spent up to 30th September.

Any other comments

The project has created considerable local interest and support. The joint press release was published in full by the only local media outlet 'Gloucestershire Live', and a public information leaflet prepared for the Charlton Kings 'Autumn Fayre' on 18th September created very great interest and support for the objectives of the project.

To date, with the exception of a small number of Facebook comments one weekend, all public response has been favourable.