

## Restoring Cheltenham's Escarpment Grasslands LEI Project

### Second report of the RCEG Steering Group: 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022

#### 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).
- All figures are given excluding VAT, as this is recovered from HMRC.
- To 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, the net expenditure by the RCEG project was £43,753.

##### ***On Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common***

- Drystone walling £4,880
- Gorse clearance £2,639
- Fencing £5,286
- Infrastructure (cattle crush and water supply) £13,228
- Footpath restoration £15,920

##### ***On Ravensgate Common***

- Mechanical cutting of grass and gorse scrub £1,800

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

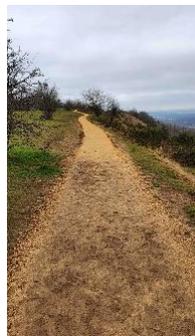
This is a complex project which we have divided into 12 work streams or sub-projects. Reports are made only against those where progress has been made in the reporting period.

##### **Drystone walling**

A further 20 tonnes of walling stone, sourced from the same quarry to maintain consistency of stone colour, was purchased in February 2022 at a cost of £2,400. An additional 15 m of walling has been completed in this reporting period.



##### **Footpath improvements**



It is pleasing to report that 1,200 m of refurbishment of the Cotswold Way National Trail was completed in the reporting period and, due to the dry weather conditions in late winter/spring, has bedded-in very well. This is more than the planned length, as partners were able to add additional match funding to help achieve this. Stoning of the 160 m section on Ravensgate Common has been put forward to 2022 and is agreed with the owner of the land over which this section of the Cotswold Way runs. Work estimated at £5,000 will be completed in Summer 2022.

## Safety tree felling and removing shade

The huge number of dead Ash in the surrounding area that urgently require felling due to Ash die-back, has congested local contractor's work schedules, and made it very difficult to place our contracts. WE have undertaken several site inspections on Leckhampton Hill to agree felling with the Borough Council's Senior Trees Officer and Borough Councillors. A small contract for £1,650 has been let, to start in early May.

On Ravensgate Common, a two-year catch-up programme of mainly Ash removal has been agreed with the grazier, and his assistance secured in removing major stems from the Common.

## Fencing - Nofence collars

The Nofence collars have worked extremely well to enable targeted grazing on Charlton Kings Common. The collars were purchased in September, and the British White and English Longhorn cattle were trained with the collars in October and used until March on the Common and additional grazing fields. The collars were removed when the cattle were moved to their summer grazing



pasture in April. This technology has been a fantastic improvement to our ability to manage the site, allowing us to target grazing areas without having to erect fencing, saving staff and volunteer time, and considerable effort. The collars have been cleaned and are ready for use again in the Autumn. The grazier of Ravensgate Common has confirmed his commitment to using the Nofence collars on 17 of his South Devon cattle that winter graze the Common from September to March. A training session is being arranged with the Charlton Kings Common grazier. 17 collars and associated equipment have been reserved from the Nofence supplier and will be ordered in the summer when arrangements are complete. Some work is required to secure the perimeter fence around the Common, and this will be contracted out in the summer.

## Infrastructure



The Bateman cattle crush, required to facilitate the management of the winter grazing herd on Charlton Kings Common, was ordered in December 2021. It was delivered to the Borough Council's Hill Farm and was used in the April TB testing of the cattle before they were taken down to their summer pasture.

The buried water pipeline to the middle 'Hopkins' field was completed in December 2021 at a cost of £2,850. It provides a water supply to an outlying field and avoids the cattle having to walk 1 km to drink.

## **Management Plan**

Most activity involved preparing documents relating to the employment of a contractor to aid the process of producing the Plan. A final version of a document seeking expressions of interest in the post was completed in late March and approved by key individuals in early April. The paper is now being circulated to potential sources of expertise.

## **Record keeping**

Financial records are maintained by both the Steering Group Treasurer and Charlton Kings Parish Council's *Scribe* financial management system. This ensures that not only is the money spent and accounted for properly according to Local Authority standards, but that the steering group is clear where works are progressing in line with the planned schedule of expenditure.

The steering group has been keeping good records of volunteering hours. These are accounted as Match Funding and valued at £12.50/hr. This element of match funding has exceeded the planned budget - £17 k against £12 k.

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

- This is a complex project that is requiring a lot of careful management by a dedicated Steering Group comprising delivery partners. This effort is worth it, as this project is starting to make a very real difference on the ground.
- The works funded by the LEI grant have supported AONB Management Plan Policy CE1.2 -To ensure that views and visual amenity are conserved and enhanced. Core National Grid funding of a major section of restoration work to the muddy section of the Cotswold Way National Trail across Charlton Kings Common has brought in additional match funding to complete the full 1,200 m length across the Common.
- The process of dry stone walling adjacent to the Cotswold Way, as well as the final result, is admired by many of the 100,000 walkers who pass through the site each year.
- Visitors have welcomed the new vistas across to Cheltenham from scrub and gorse clearance on Ravensgate Common.
- The coming year's records from the long-term (20+ years) of butterfly monitoring on Ravensgate Common, will assess the effectiveness of the 'Robomower' work that has created improved opportunities for biodiversity.
- By letting the grazing on Charlton Kings Common and bringing in the Nofence grazing technology, the project has supported the consolidation of the *Heritage Grazing* company, which is now able to provide conservation grazing cattle across the Cotswolds National Landscape.

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

- We have worked very hard to overcome the difficulties caused by the late arrival of the Year 1 tranche of grant. Of the £66 k, £44 k has been spent or committed in just 7 months.
- There was therefore insufficient opportunity to fully carry out as much winter clearance of gorse, scrub, and coarse grass thatch as we had planned. A significant programme is ready for winter 2022/23.
- Obtaining competitive quotes from the small number of local land management contractors and tree surgeons who can work in these conditions has been difficult for larger contracts over £2.5 k and has caused some delays in getting proposals to the Parish Council's monthly meetings. Covid and Ash die back seem to have provided an increase in business for them, so we hope that this effect will start to be limited as restrictions ease.

The plans have not changed, but the timing and sequencing of some planned operations have been rescheduled.

### **Please explain here about any variances to the budget, and whether any contingency has been required**

The figures in the spreadsheet show a number of variances from the original budget due to the delay in the receipt of payment, and the consequent difficulties in engaging contractors. We were, however, able to commission the footpath work so that has been brought forward from Year 2. A careful record of in-year variances has been kept, and they will be addressed in subsequent years, ensuring that we are on budget by project completion.

We hope to complete the full spend of the LEI grant by the end of the third project year. Due to the late project start caused by the delayed initial payment we may need to have an additional winter period to complete seasonal works. We will try to catch up to avoid this and will report on the likelihood of this need in subsequent reports.

No contingency money has been spent up to 31<sup>st</sup> March.

### **Any other comments ?**

Charlton Kings Parish Council has created a dedicated website page under its 'Climate and Environment' banner <https://www.charltonkingsparishcouncil.gov.uk/restoring-cheltenham-escarpment.html> Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common (FOLK) devoted their Autumn 2021 Newsletter to the project <https://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk/files/2022/03/FOLK-Newsletter-Issue-67-Autumn-2021.pdf>

Again in this period, public reaction has been very favourable, especially to the new British White and Longhorn cattle which, with their new collars, have become something of a local attraction!