A five year management plan for Hempstead Meadows Local Nature Reserve Uckfield

This management plan was written by Uckfield Town Council Countryside Ranger Neal Matheson. The management plan was devised consulting the previous management plan, members of the public, ecological consultants, and outside conservation bodies. The management plan is valid until 31 December 2027 after which a revised plan should be devised for the period 2027-2032.

Hempstead Meadows is a long and thin area of public open space owned by Uckfield Town Council that runs east from the town centre, near the High Street, between the railway to the south and houses to the north eastwards to open countryside on Uckfield's eastern fringe. This area is low lying and is part of the flood plain of the River Uck that runs through the town and before the construction of the railway it would have been open directly onto it.

Starting in the west, behind Waitrose carpark, it consists of a wet meadow, that frequently floods, known as Phillips' Field[1], which merges into permanent wet fenland. This fenland is too wet for human access, but on the north side there is a long, thin, wooded bank with a path running along the lower edge of the slope that ends at the public recreation ground known as Usbourne Field. Although this playing field cuts into the LNR from the north, it continues along the boundary of the railway track as dense, impenetrable, wet scrub that widens out after a few hundred metres to a final section. This part is accessed in the south east corner of the playing field and consists of a long, narrow, dry grassy bank with patches of scrub that runs behind the houses to the north and a seasonally wet hollow that runs parallel with the railway track and is dominated by nationally rare, wet woodland (alder *Alnus glabra*) carr). Public access from the eastern end of this section is currently difficult, especially in the winter due to muddy ground conditions. However, there is an access via Roman Way[2].

Thus, the LNR has a wide variety of habitats for its size and considering how close it is to the built environment. This is reflected in the extensive list of species found in two earlier surveys.

The conservation value of Hempstead Meadows LNR

In terms of its wider geographical setting, the reserve sits alongside the River Uck, which is a principal tributary of the River Ouse, and is part of one of the main river catchments of Sussex. The Uck flows from the lower Cretaceous sandstone High Weald generally southwards to join the Ouse in the mainly clay strata of the Low Weald before dissecting the greensand and chalk of the South Downs to flow into the Channel at Newhaven. As such the flood plain sedimentary silts of much of the reserve are held within the mildly acidic sand rock cutting of the river valley . As well as the permanently wet fen, there are numerous springs and a network of ditches feeding into the reserve including one along the western end of the northern boundary behind Olives Meadow. This ditch carrying persistent spring water is used by European eels (*Anguilla anguilla*) as a growing site prior to their return to the Sargasso Sea where they breed. Three spined sticklebacks (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*), common kingfishers (*Alcedo atthis*) and little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) also use this stream

[1] Named after the original owner.

[2] According to Magic maps this area is not designated as a Local Nature Reserve.

and the permanent water of the wet fen.

The documented history shows that there has been no known cultivation on the site since the Second World War and therefore the site has likely never been cultivated, but has certainly been used as a grazing meadow for livestock, and probably the harvesting of hay when it was part of Sunnybrook Farm previously owned by the Phillips family. Most of the site is classified as lowland wet grassland i.e. those grasslands found below 200 m above sea level and includes not only the flood plain grassland found here but also wash lands, coastal grazing marshes and poorly drained grasslands. This type of habitat is nationally scarce due to inappropriate management over the last one hundred years, including no management at all so that it reverts to scrub, or intensive drainage schemes to agriculturally improve it. Thus, where it is still found in good condition it is a precious asset to nature conservation.

Hempstead Meadows LNR is a mosaic of vegetation types that range from very wet fenland, through tussocky damp grass land to damp grassland meadow and eventually drier grass. There are also patches of brambles and thorn scrub, both perennially wet and drier, as well as willow and alder carr woodland.

The species found in the surveys of 2004 and 2009 are typical of wet grassland communities and as such sympathetic management will not only help to maintain this but will probably increase the abundance and variety of native species. This will help to meet Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) targets for this type of habitat. This will, of course include animal species of all taxa.

Due to the undisturbed damp nature of parts of the site a number of bird species have been found. Those recorded by Dr M Stenning include sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus)* gold and greenfinch (*Carduelis carduelis* and *Carduelis chloris),* garden warbler (*Sylvia borin*) mistle thrush (*Turdus viscivorus)*, tawny owl (*Strix aluco*), little egret (*Egretta garzetta*), Eurasian kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) and snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*). More recently, there have also been seen chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) black cap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) and siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) many of the small birds mentioned rely on alder as a food source in winter and spring. All are more likely to flourish if the undisturbed areas can be maintained as such, especially in the key spring nesting season. An ecological and natural capital report[3] noted few species records for the site. It is necessary that more of the constituent species are recorded with the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre at Henfield as well as on-line using 'IRECORD'.

Visitor facilities

The meadows feature two benches[4] within Phillips' field as well as interpretation boards at the Western entrance and the entrance off from Usbourne field. A notice board can also be found at the Usbourne field entrance. The notice board by the Waitrose entrance was removed due to anti-social behaviour. The interpretation boards are understated and informative. They are showing some signs of weathering now and will need to be replaced in this management cycle. Signs explaining the site's byelaws to be reinstated within this management cycle.

[3] SLNP & SDNPA Greenspaces Project. (2022). Hempstead Meadows LNR Ecological and Natural Capital Assessment Technical Report, p3.

[4] The bench is currently being repositioned

Access

Access to Hempstead meadows is via a vehicle and pedestrian gate by the Waitrose car park, via Olives Meadow, through Usbourne Field and for the sure footed, by Roman's Way. The gate at Olives Meadow was removed to allow for wheelchair access, the gate by the Waitrose car park was redesigned to the same end[5]. Vehicle access to the western end of the reserve is possible through the vehicle gate at the western entrance. The meadows are impassable to vehicles in wet weather and over the winter months.

Footpaths

The footpath from the western entrance to Usbourne field is managed and maintained by rangers from East Sussex County Council Rights of Way though vegetation control falls to Uckfield Town Council. The informal footpath on the eastern side of the reserve is maintained by Uckfield Town Council. This can be cut by brush cutter, or by DR hand tractor. Access to the reserve via Roman way is precarious in wet weather. Access could be improved by construction of a sleeper bridge. Consideration should be given to the desirability of opening up this route to more traffic as a little used area is of greater ecological benefit. The area is also prone to flooding but the works do not require consent from the Environment Agency[6].

Boundaries

The Boundary to the South of the reserve is the responsibility of Network Rail. All issues with the boundary should be addressed to that company. There are stretches of chestnut palings by the Usbourne Meadow entrance. This was considered to be temporary and growing vegetation has taken over from this fencing making the fencing now largely superfluous. The wire fence on the western boundary is intact and largely obscured by vegetation. The boundary fence along the northern boundary up to Osbourne field is a mix of wire fencing both installed by the council and by residents. Residents have been observed cutting and dumping vegetation along this property boundary, activities that require monitoring and prevention in this hard to access area. Residents often have strong views about woodland management and the removal of vegetation along property boundaries which requires individual management. In general the presumption is against vegetation or tree removal in line with UTC's tree policy. Along the strip of woodland the boundary is a mixture of close board fencing and post and rail installed by the property developers. It is my understanding that this remains the concern of the residents and that our boundary is demarcated by a length of chestnut palings. Residents appear to appreciate the privacy afforded by the dense understory and shrub layer and there are no incursions into the reserve along this length. The northern strip leading from Usbourne field to the eastern end of the reserve consists of a close board fence. Vegetation should be cut away from this fence line twice a year with additional vegetation removal considered upon request.

Trees

Trees are dealt with in the UK forestry standard woodland management plan. The high voltage power lines greatly restrict the scope of tree work that can be conducted over large parts of the reserve. The ranger must liaise with UK Power networks to facilitate utility tree works. Hazardous trees are reported to UKPWR who also conduct their own surveys. Tree preservation orders affect the area of woodland to the north of the ESCC footpath. Coppicing and tree thinning of areas may be conducted as part of normal woodland management, to improve structural diversity, light levels and so on. Health and safety tree work will also be

[5] The latch of this gate has been removed by person's unknown.

[6] Confirmed by NM August 2022

conducted though presumption must always be in favour of tree retention. Trees or large limbs which have failed are to be left in situ as valuable dead/semi dead habitat. As with all conservation woodland management the urge to “tidy up” should be resisted. The fenced enclosures set up to retain brash from being swept up in flood water are no longer adequate being rather full. They almost certainly make fine habitats in and of themselves and should be allowed to rot down naturally. Arisings from further tree work should be chipped onto the reserve. Larger diameter wood (firewood according to UKPWR) is left on site by utilities contractors; this should be removed as it presents a flooding risk. Ideally felled trees will be left intact on the floor of the woodland/reserve. Large diameter deadwood has high ecological value and such wood should resist flow of water in flooding incidents. The ranger is to liaise with Network Rail to help them manage their diseased ash trees which border the reserve.

New trees

The strips of new woodland planted as natural flood mitigation with funding from both the Woodland Trust and the Sussex Flow Initiative will require the re application of wood chip mulches in the spring and the removal of competitive vegetation and meadow ants from within the mesh tree guards at regular intervals over the growing season. Tree losses are to be removed as they occur and sites monitored for anti-social behaviour. It may be necessary to water young trees in periods of drought. At the end of this cycle of the management plan all three areas may need to be thinned by up to 10-20% of trees depending on losses. Mesh guards to be removed as necessary. Competitive bramble is to be cut with the DR hand tractor with grass surrounding the trees cut on an occasional basis in the late summer after the summer solstice. Cut grass is much more competitive for water and nutrients than grass left longer.

Vegetation

It is the Ranger’s responsibility to cut back vegetation away from footpaths and to ensure that grass foot paths are mowed with the DR hand tractor over summer months. Upkeep of mown paths will help ease the spread of ground compaction issues in open areas by ensuring an easier, clearly demarcated path to walk upon. There will be no attempt to “tidy up” areas of bramble or scrub outside of clearly defined ecological management.

Phillips’ Field

Phillips’ Field was used for many, many years as a field to hold cattle when Uckfield had a cattle market. The entire field is routinely inundated with standing water pockets of which can last many months. A drain/spring-fed stream runs along the north and west boundaries. An ecological report noted a possible decline in certain species of plant and the previous ranger had undertaken management to increase biodiversity given the species poor nature of the meadow. Hay was cut, baled and stored on site. The presence of dogs means the hay is unsaleable. The ecological report recommended re-instituting this regime. This is a standard management prescription for wildflower meadows as it removes fertility from the land which creates greater competition and biodiversity. However, this does not account for the specific history of this site, which, as a primeval floodplain will mean that the land has a very high starting fertility with up to 2 metres in depth of fertile flood-washed sediment, and the propensity for further annual flooding which will add additional fertility from river silt up to several times a year. This means that Phillips’ Field will always have high fertility and only support competitive vigorous species of plant. Consequently, this field will have a tendency towards ecological succession and will have low diversity of non-competitive meadow plants, but will require regular mowing to prevent it succeeding to woodland. However, there are

good areas of scrub and bramble that provide refuges for small mammals, birds, reptiles[7] and amphibians.

Phillips' Field will be cut in late summer after grass and plants have set their seed using the council's tractor with flail mower. This will be to prevent succession and retain the site as a grassy meadow.

A scrape on the extreme western boundary of the reserve is to be re-dug in this management cycle to create an ephemeral water feature and to increase the water holding capacity of the meadow in line with the natural flood mitigation methods of the Sussex flow initiative.

Martyn's meadow

This is small area directly to the east of Usbourne field identified as an ancient meadow. It is species rich. Without a cutting regimen the meadow is reverting to scrub. This area will come back into the cutting regimen and is to be cut late August/early September or as late as is practicable with the DR hand tractor initially. Garden escapees are to be removed as well as some naturally regenerating woody species which may be removed or coppiced. Access to the site is limited and removal of cuttings will need to be considered though will most likely be conducted with rakes and wheel barrows initially. The work will likely be conducted with sickle bar cutter on the BCS hand tractor in future years. The cutting regime could be extended along the Eastern side of the site according to results.

NNIS

The invasive Himalayan balsam *Impatiens glandulifera* is widespread on the reserve. This is to be removed across the site. Total eradication of this plant is doubtful but its presence and spread may be checked by hand pulling and repeated cutting. This plant has been located on other sites in Uckfield along the Uck to which we have no right of access. This is an ongoing activity across the summer months, ending after the plants have set seed. The plant should be removed by volunteer groups wherever it is found with attention paid to the alder carr to the East of the reserve where it is especially prolific but access is limited.

NNS

Garden escapees should be removed as a matter of course wherever found and if practicable to do so. There are a number of Norway spruce *Picea abies*[8] on the reserve which appear to be old Christmas trees planted by residents. These are trees of limited ecological value which can cast considerable shade. Removal of these trees may be controversial as there may be sentimental attachments to the trees, the trees may also provide screening and privacy to residents. If it can be demonstrated that the trees are diminishing the reserve they must be removed. If the trees are producing viable offspring (which is quite unlikely) they must be removed. Otherwise some degree of consultation with residents may be advisable if arguments and ill-feeling are to be avoided.

Antisocial behaviour

Given the site's location in the centre of the town the reserve has sometimes seen antisocial behaviour. Signs have been vandalised and there has been damage to the recently planted

[7] Adder *Vivipera berus* is recorded as present on site, Slow worms *Anguis fragilis* are regularly encountered by the current ranger.

[8] This is a species currently host to the notifiable pathogen *Ips typographus* This beetle is subject to the Plant Health (Ips typographus) (England) Order 2019 which gives the Forestry Commission power to compel control if present. Movement of the wood of *P. abies* is prohibited in East Sussex.

trees both at Phillips' field and Usbourne field. At present anti-social behaviour is sporadic and occasional. Liaison between local police and residents will be required if anti-social behaviour intensifies over summer months, as it is mostly a summer phenomenon. In recent years prolonged instances of anti-social behaviour on the reserves were effectively dealt with by local police and the problem now appears random and occasional. Requests have been made to reposition or move the benches which may act as a draw to drinkers and groups of young people which would require consideration and consent from councillors. The ranger notes that the benches are often used by young families and workers from nearby businesses for their lunch breaks but that people consuming alcohol can be encountered at any time of day. It would seem that removing the benches would be a diminishment of local services. These benches were donated by Uckfield Rotary Club.

Management prescriptions per compartment

The site is divided into four compartments to reflect the diversity of ecology on site and the differing site use.

The management plan is divided into:

Monitor: Things that need to be monitored as to their condition. Actions may or not be required

Liaise: Any outside bodies that will need to be cooperated with and to whom issues may be communicated.

Routines: Routine tasks that need to be carried out for at least the cycle of this management plan.

Future tasks: Planned future tasks to be conducted in the compartment.

Constraints: Constraints that will need to be considered concerning the management of the compartment

Opportunities: Opportunities that the unique features of the compartment offer.

We will need to need to liaise with UK Power networks, the Forestry Commission and Network Rail in all compartments, these statutory bodies will not be mentioned in individual compartment plans.

Compartment one.

An area encompassing the western most boundary and stretching up to the second of the benches.

Monitor:

The boundary fences should be monitored, as well as the gates and internal infrastructure. Frequency, type and intensity of anti-social behaviour will need to be monitored. The condition of the trees within falling distance of residential properties will need to be monitored. Fly tipping of garden waste needs to be monitored.

Liaise:

We need to liaise with the Environment agency in this compartment due to the proximity of the river.

Routines:

Paths to be kept clear of vegetation and mowed with DR hand tractor as required.

Flail mow field in August, cutting may be alternated to increase sward structural diversity.

Himalayan balsam to be removed beginning late April.

Maintain new tree plantings as discussed above.

Future tasks:

A scrape on the western edge of the reserve will be re dug offering excellent habitat for amphibians

Constraints:

Area impassable in wet weather and in winter months.

The concerns of residents can affect works being conducted, blocking of light, privacy, concerns about safety etc.

Dog fouling and litter can be marked at times despite ample provision of signage, bins and dog bags.

Anti-social behaviour limits infrastructure provision.

Opportunities:

There is less access to much of the compartment allowing a minimum intervention approach especially in relation to tree safety. A very popular site offering fantastic access to “un-manicured” nature within a town centre.

Compartment two.

The compartment runs from the electrical substation to the bridge which crosses the drain at the start of the wet fen area.

Monitor:

The condition of the willow trees over the footpath needs to be monitored and stems removed as necessary. Monitor the condition of the boundary fence and watch for garden escapees and the fly-tipping of garden waste.

Liaise:

It will be necessary to liaise with ESCC Rights of Way rangers about the condition of the footpath, and arranging access to the site.

Routines:

Himalayan balsam to be removed from late Aril.

Vegetation will need to be cut back from the footpath.

Future tasks:

If grazing is to be reintroduced the fence across the reserve will need to be reinstituted.

Constraints:

Access is difficult over much of the compartment. Underfoot conditions in wet weather can be treacherous.

Mot aggregate from ESCC footpath washes into reserve at this point.

Access is restricted by ground conditions. Transport of materials in or out is constrained to summer months.

In wetter weather desire lines are often made off the footpath and onto the reserve causing disturbance and compaction.

Opportunities :

Lack of accessibility ensures minimum interference from humans and dogs in the local ecosystem.

Compartment three.

Compartment three comprises the fen area and strip of woodland leading from the ESCC bridge to Usbourne Field.

Monitor:

The footpath conditions should be monitored. The condition of trees along the footpath and along the residential boundary should be monitored. Fly-tipping of garden waste and the condition of boundaries should also be monitored.

Liaise:

ESCC Rights of way will need to be contacted in the event of damage or worsening conditions on their footpath.

Routines:

Vegetation should be cut back off the path.

Himalayan balsam will need to be removed from late April.

Future Tasks:

In general the woodland can be minimally managed with some thinning of willow and alder to create a diverse structure and to allow light infiltration.

The Owl box to be replaced and others considered.

The reptile rocks should be cleared of vegetation. Consideration given to moving them to a more secluded site in light of results from West Park LNR reptile surveys.

Consideration should be given to placing a sign at this entrance

Constraints:

There are three separate woodland Tree preservation orders in the woodland. The United Kingdom Forestry Standard Woodland Management plan supersedes this for UTC operations but not for residents wanting to perform their own works. Tree preservation orders supercede common law rights.

Powerlines constrain tree work activity for much of the length of this compartment.

The fen is largely impassable.

Opportunities:

Much of the woodland is inaccessible resulting in an undisturbed space for flora and fauna

Wet woodland as much of this site is nationally rare. Alder carr is a vital winter habitat for many bird species.

Compartment 4:

Monitor:

Monitor unauthorised and amateurish tree work on property boundary.

Liaise:

Routines:

Clear fence line of vegetation.

Clear path vegetation.

Cut permissive footpath with DR hand tractor.

Begin removing Himalayan balsam from the end of April.

Future Plans:

Consider creating a bridge to improve access to the site from Romans' way.

Begin cutting Martyn's Meadow as described above.

Constraints:

Due to flooding the Environment agency will need to be consulted before any works can be performed.

Cannot influence management of upstream sites for flood mitigation or Himalayan balsam control.

Opportunities:

There are opportunities to improve access to the reserve.

The area in compartment four can be concentrated on in order to control Himalayan balsam as it is a source of the plant for the reserve.

Opportunities to conserve an ancient meadow habitat and increase biodiversity.

Future 2027 and beyond

Constraints:

The increasing population of Uckfield will likely put further pressure on the nature reserve.

Alder are currently under threat from plant pathogens (*Phytophthora spp.)* which may be brought onto site by utility companies. The loss of alder would be a catastrophic ecological loss to the reserve.

Mink *Neovison vison* have been spotted on the reserve; we may consider these an analogue for otter *Lutra lutra* at present but if otter move into the Uck catchment mink will be displaced.

Increased dog fouling (from an increasing population) will cause eutrophication on site.

Increased and often hydrologically ill-advised housing developments may increase rate and severity of flooding episodes.

Opportunities:

The implementation of a woodland management plan has given scope for grant applications.

Increased population may result in an increased pool of volunteers.

Further planning developments could result in section 106 and community infrastructure levy funded infrastructure projects removing pressure on the reserve.

Aspirations.

One natural process that is not occurring on the reserve is the occasional action of large ruminants. Re-implementation of large herbivore grazing to be considered.

The creation of otter holts on the Uck (at Bluebell wood) or the reserve to provide ready-made habitat for that species which is already present in the catchment.

To facilitate the recolonization of the reserve by black poplar an endangered species present on the reserve.

To link up the reserve to upper stretches of the Uck and its tributaries

To have the reserve assessed as a candidate for beaver reintroduction.

To conduct formal ecological surveys on site, as records are sporadic.

Replace interpretation boards.

Uckfield Town Council

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townclerk@uckfieldtc.gov.uk

Hempstead Meadows - Compartment 1

SCALE : 1 : 1000

DATE : 26/07/2022

MAP FILENAME : Hempstead Meadows 2nd Draft.mpd

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Legend

Compartment 1

OLIVES MEADOW

KELD AVENUE

Springs

Marula

The Meads

Coach House

Mulberry

Rother House

Eden House

Kennet House

El Sub Sta

FB

Path (um)

SP

ED and Ward Bdy

MP 46.0

SM

Sluice

Weir

River Uck

The Roller Mill

Old Mill House

1 to 6

7 to 46

Millington Court

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Hempstead Meadows - Compartment 2

SCALE : 1 : 600

DATE : 26/07/2022

MAP FILENAME : Hempstead Meadows 2nd Draft.mpd

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21

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Springs

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ED and Ward Bdy

MP 45.75

River U

Legend

Compartment 2

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Hempstead Meadows - Compartment 3

SCALE : 1 : 800

DATE : 26/07/2022

MAP FILENAME : Hempstead Meadows 2nd Draft.mpd

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MEADOW

SPRING

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Ward Bdy

Ward Bdy

Legend

Compartment 3

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Hempstead Meadows - Compartment 4

SCALE :	DATE :
1 : 800	26/07/2022

MAP FILENAME : Hempstead Meadows 2nd Draft.mpd

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4

Legend

Compartment 4

Uckfield Town Council

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Hempstead Meadows Local Nature Reserve

SCALE :	DATE :
1 : 2500	26/07/2022

MAP FILENAME : Hempstead Meadows 2nd Draft.mpd

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Legend

Hempstead Meadows