



Rottingdean Parish Council

Minutes of the Agenda for the Beacon Hill Nature Reserve Stewardship Group Annual General Meeting the 21st of September 2026

Present; Cllr Mike Nixon, (Chair), Cllr Phil Evans, Russ Greenwood, Bernadette Skinner, Neil Doyle, City Parks, Will Furze City Parks, Andrew Wilson, Andrew Rose, Bob Webzell, Atlanta Cook, Kay Woolner. Chris Hayes, Parish Clerk.

1. **Minutes of Annual General Meeting held on 6th of November 2025.**
The minutes were agreed.
2. **Health of the Nature Reserve.** The following points were made in discussion by the group members
 - Discarded litter and poo bags were becoming a concern. Bernadette Skinner said that she would be happy to extend the work of the Rottingdean litter picking volunteers to the reserve.
 - A formal botanical survey was proposed as the loss of expertise in the plant species meant that it was not possible to properly assess the state of the plant life present on the reserve.
 - There was also no formal monitoring of the bird species so a call out for volunteers was to be made by the Friends of Beacon Hill (FoBH).
 - The ragwort did seem under control thanks to the work of FoBH.
 - There seem to have been some loss of plants around the Beacon Hub during path clearing although Atlanta Cook said this had been for Health and Safety reasons and that plants supplied by Stanmer Park had been put in the borders. Atlanta Cook agreed to discuss future maintenance of this area with Kay Woolner.
 - Beacon Hill was designated as a Nature Reserve, but many saw it as community open space which had caused tension amongst people using the reserve. More clarity was needed to explain this important distinction and the broader plans for the preservation of the important plants and wildlife. This was hampered by that lack of a formal assessment.
 - The plan for the wooded part of the reserve was not clear and paths that used to be maintained were in poor state of repair.

- The public paths seemed to have become wider although Neil Doyle said these were informal paths formed by people walking through the reserve.
- The Parish Council summarised the feedback from residents received during a number of monthly meetings and this was shared with the Rangers
- Atlanta Cooke then provided the following key points from a research report on ground nesting birds compiled by her, Andrew Rose and Andy Wilson.
 - The national skylark population is experiencing a severe long-term decline exceeding 80% since surveys began in 1979, placing the species on the official UK Red List of High Conservation Concern.
 - Protection of grassland, especially grassland in coastal areas, is therefore of the upmost as a feeding ground for the local year-round skylark population.
 - Measures are therefore needed to support the declining national skylark population through education of local residents, visitors and dog walkers, putting up posters at the entrances, improving communications and by changing timings and location of sheep grazing to improve conditions for ground nesting at the beginning of their nesting season.

See Appendix A for the full report

Cllr Nixon then presented a frequently asked questions page that about the role of the group based on the agreement of because there had been some misunderstanding in recent social media discussions. **See Appendix B**

3. **City Parks Management Plan 2026/27.** Neil Doyle provided the following update.

- The aim of last year's plan was to tackle the scrub on the Eastern side by grazing it twice.
- The overrun of the grazing into May had caused a number of complaints that had been taken into account in forming this year's plan.
- This year the reserve would be grazed from the 1st of November until the 28th of February.
- Electric fencing would not be used because of the effort and cost of moving it around and to address complaints about the fencing from some dog owners.
- This would mean that the sheep would graze all of the reserve from November to February and a fence erected along the eastern side of the reserve to enclose it. Temporary gates would be put up during the grazing period.
- This would require dogs to be kept on leads in compliance with the law for the grazing season and also during the nesting season.

Users would also be reminded that they may face prosecution if dogs worried or harmed sheep.

- Will Furze said that the Rural Payments funding system for the reserve had changed with funds to be provided from the Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier fund that required adherence to strict management guidelines enforced by routine inspections.
- In response to a question from Bernadette Skinner Neil Doyle confirmed that the paths around the entrances to the reserve from Ovingdean were to be resurfaced.

The following points were made in discussion

- The rules for dog walkers needed to be definitive with clear communication and signage at the entrances and throughout the reserve
- The ambiguity about dogs on leads could be removed by stating the law
- Andy Wilson said that in other reserves he was aware that dog volunteer ambassadors had been appointed to explain the rules to dog owners

Cllr Evans made the following points on behalf of the Parish Council

- The 2026/7 management plan responded in a comprehensive way to current challenges in managing the hill and to the strong concerns raised by some users.
- But this was a significant change and there would be concerns about a lack of consultation and prior communication of the plan. The fact that dog owners would now need to keep their dogs on a lead when on the reserve for a period of 8 months would be controversial, so it was important that the rationale for this approach was fully understood and that it was set in the context of the aims for the reserve to maintain the wildlife and plant life.
- There were still a few weeks left before the grazing season so the Parish Council would strongly recommend a public meeting to help residents understand how the BHCC management plan would help maintain and improve the chalk grassland environment on the Hill.
- The changes proposed needed to be put into this context by sharing the City Parks' assessment of the current condition of the hill, the main challenges to be faced and how the scrub on the eastern side of the reserve will be tackled and the potential use of cut and collect for areas not fully grazed.

- A discussion at next year's AGM could examine the success of the approach and how it might be nuanced to make it more successful for the Hill and for users.
 - A more systematic approach to environmental assessment work would also be helpful for the future, perhaps in partnership with local universities, expert groups or charities. Cllr Evans was to follow this up with Kay Woolner. Will Furze also offered to speak to his City Parks colleagues about organising a rapid condition survey
4. **Friends of Beacon Hill plans for 2026/27** – See Appendix B.
 5. **Autumn/Spring Communication Plan** It was agreed that the Parish Council would provide a notice of the 2026/27 plan on their website and social media platforms with a link to the BHCC plan and supporting material
 6. **Beacon Hub** Atlanta Cook provided the following update.
 - The last 12 months had been spent assessing the state of the building and with the help of volunteers and local business a lot of renovation had taken place, for example to the eaves of the building.
 - But the building was still not fit for purpose. A loan of £3000 had been secured to enable the car park gate to be fixed and the Hub were now organising a number of autumn/winter fund raising events.
 - If sufficient funds were raised and work to repair the roof, railings and windows completed it was hoped to re-open the café in the spring.
 7. **Annual report finalisation and timing.** The Clerk said he would be coordinating the report and aiming for publication in November. He said he would write out to members for contributions shortly
 8. **Date of Next Annual Meeting.** The next meeting will be at 10.30 am on Monday the 20th of September 2027.

Parish Clerk

September 2026

**Ground Nesting Birds Subgroup Advisory Report to Beacon Hill
Stewardship Group 21/9/26**

After researching what has been done locally already, e.g. posters erected at Telscombe Tye and other East Sussex LNRs, plus national Eurasian Skylark population statistics and advice issued by Sussex Wildlife Trust and the RSPB we report the following;

The national skylark population is experiencing a severe long-term decline exceeding 80% since surveys began in 1979, placing the species on the official UK Red List of High Conservation Concern.

Main Causes of decline;

Intensive farming: Loss of permanent pastures and grasslands reduces access to soil invertebrates and insect food sources.

We note that in the last 10 years Ovingdean has experienced housing development resulting in significant horse pasture loss, an important feeding ground for the local year-round skylark population.

Development: Modern building methods and property renovations reduce the availability of roof and eaves nesting sites.

Disease: Supplementary feeding station can sometimes concentrate disease transmission if not cleaned regularly.

We conclude that protection of grassland - especially grassland in coastal areas - is of the upmost as a feeding ground for the local year-round skylark population.

Beacon Hill is Open Access Land, a Local Nature Reserve, part of the South Downs National Park.

The vast majority of UK nature reserves (including Sussex Wildlife Trust & RSPB) have strict dog restrictions, and a growing number ban them entirely (except assistance dogs). Because nature reserves are designated specifically to protect vulnerable ecosystems, wildlife, and livestock, they are not treated as typical country parks or open exercise fields.

There are clear dog restrictions on Open Access Land and around livestock in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.

We advise that the legal guardians of Beacon Hill LNR take measures to support the declining national skylark population. This could be done through education of local residents, visitors and dog walkers, and by changing timings and location of sheep grazing to improve conditions for ground nesting at the beginning of their nesting season.

Possible Measures;

Posters - All LNR entrance points to increase public awareness of Beacon Hill being a LNR, the national ground nesting bird issue of High Conservation Concern and Countryside Act dog owner guidelines.

Wording sample taken from The Wildlife Trust signage around the country.
Ground Nesting Birds – Please keep your dog on a lead – From March to July ground nesting birds are building nest, laying eggs and feeding their chicks in the long grass. Please see our draft poster design.

Press – Articles in all local press to further education local human population with support from SWT.

Sheep grazing – we would like to hold a meeting with the BHCC ranger, officer or other relevant person involved in drawing up the Beacon Hill grazing plan to discuss amendments to the timings.

Having spoken with the Conservation Policy Team at Sussex Wildlife Trust we are satisfied that they are happy to guide us further on these measures if need be. They are contactable via swtconservation@sussexwt.org.uk

Atlanta Cook - local independent environment consultant
Andy Wilson – local resident and local environment group volunteer
Andrew Rose – Friends of Beacon Hill

Beacon Hill Stewardship Group — Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Beacon Hill Nature Reserve Stewardship Group?

The Stewardship Group brings together Rottingdean Parish Council, Brighton & Hove City Council, and local volunteer support partners including FOBH, Rottingdean Heritage, Ovingdean Residents and Preservation Society and experts in flora and fauna to advise on the management, protection, and improvement of Beacon Hill Local Nature Reserve.

Who manages Beacon Hill Nature Reserve?

Brighton & Hove City Council develops and manages overall maintenance policy, prepares annual management plans, funds grass cutting, and commissions improvement works.

What is the Parish Council's role?

Rottingdean Parish Council administers the Stewardship Group, coordinates the annual Nature Report on the reserve's condition and considers joint funding proposals with BHCC.

What does the Stewardship Group do?

The group is advisory as a body and has no budget. It advises Brighton & Hove City Council on the reserve's management and condition, compiles annual surveys, explores and assesses improvement proposals, and recommends improvements.

How can ideas for improvement to the Nature Reserve be submitted?

Proposals and advice can come from members of the Stewardship Group as part of the annual planning process or, at any time directly to the BHCC City Parks or RPC Parish Clerk.

How often is the management plan reviewed?

Brighton & Hove City Council produces a management plan each year. The plan is shared and discussed by the Stewardship Group at its annual general meeting so that activities of the various support partners can be efficiently coordinated. A record of the discussion published on the Parish Council website.

Friends of Beacon Hill Plans for 2026/27.

We have been assisting Beacon Hub with making safe the area surrounding the Hub building and will complete that activity. Our winter 'scrub bashing' campaign will predominately concentrate on removing or reducing encroaching self-seeded sycamore, blackthorn, and hawthorn on the Eastern side of the hill.

Where practical we will also support any sheep grazing taking place on the hill. We will continue our spring work to prevent the spread of Hoary Cress on the hill by hand pulling. This has been very successful in recent years. During the summer we will keep the gateways and pathways free from obstruction and may selectively remove ragwort if required.