

Changes to Grazing on Beacon Hill Nature Reserve 2026/2027

- FAQs

Q- Why has the timing of the grazing changed?

A – The grazing times have changed for a number of reasons. The main one is in response to public opinion. For the 2025/2026 season we extended the grazing onto some parts of the reserve into late spring/early summer to help deal with the scrub (Bramble and Hawthorn) encroachment.

This was done with the best of intentions; we sought for and received guidance from various conservation organisations and sheep grazing can be beneficial for creating and maintaining skylark habitats even into the spring and summer months.

However, some people were concerned that they thought the sheep were damaging skylark nests.

We have therefore taken the decision to move the grazing into the winter months.

Bird nesting 'season' in the UK begins on the 1st March, Skylarks generally don't start nesting until April, but to avoid any ambiguity or confusion we have decided that all sheep will be off site by 28th February.

Grazing at this time of year should hopefully 'inconvenience' the least amount of people, as fewer people tend to walk across the reserve in the winter months.

Q-Why is Beacon Hill no longer grazed in separate compartments?

A- In the past we have used electric fencing, which can be useful because it can be taken away after grazing has ended.

However, when setting up these fences we get lots of complaints about dogs receiving electric shocks, and some people think that just having these types of fences on site, makes Beacon Hill a less welcoming place.

The setting up and taking down of these fences does take up a lot of time of both staff and volunteers, time that could be freed up to do some actual conservation work or physical improvements to the reserve.

The options of running either a long fence running north to south and separating the hill into two compartments or having three or four compartments with fences running east to west, have been considered but were dismissed, as this would break up the landscape and the feeling of a large open space.

Electric fence will no longer be used at Beacon Hill this is both a response to public opinion and a longer term operational decision for managing the reserve more efficiently

Q- Will you have to set up a new fence

A - Beacon Hill is already fenced on 3 sides; we will erect another fence down the eastern side. We will put temporary gates across all the rights of way and the larger 'desire' lines through the woods, whilst the sheep are on site. The fence will be set back roughly 2 to 3 meters from the path, and we will allow the area directly in front of the fence to 'scrub over', meaning the new fence should be mostly hidden from sight within a couple of years. The gates will be taken away when the sheep are not on site.

We have tried grazing with electric grazing. Lots of people do not like the electric fencing. If we no longer use electric fencing, installing this fence along the eastern edge is the most practical solution to enable us to continue grazing in order to preserve the precious chalk grassland habitat, whilst maintaining the open downland nature of Beacon Hill. The boundary of Beacon Hill Nature Reserve is about 2.5km. The new fence will be about 800m long and mostly hidden from sight.

Q- Can I still walk my dog when the sheep are on site?

A- Yes, even when we used electric fence it was still allowed to walk through the enclosures. It may just take a bit of getting used to, walking your dog in amongst a more free-roaming flock of sheep.

Beacon Hill is Open Access land.

By law in England and Wales, you must keep your dog on a short, fixed lead of no more than 2 metres on open access land between 1 March and 31 July (to protect ground-nesting birds) and at all times near livestock (GOV.UK).

Even when we did use electric fencing, visitors should have had dogs on leads whilst the sheep were on site.

If any dog is caught chasing or worrying the sheep, attacking the sheep or damaging a bird's nest, the owner may be liable for prosecution.

Q- Why is this happening now?

A- Every year we receive complaints about the grazing, electric fence, and about dogs receiving electric shocks. A lot of the conservation work at Beacon Hill is done by volunteers. The 2025/2026 season we had 'protests' about the timing of the grazing and the electric fencing, whether this was the intention or not, we had the unacceptable situation of volunteers feeling intimidated with some no longer willing to help at Beacon Hill. However, we also understand the passion.

Grazing the reserve in this more holistic fashion has always a long term management aim, but it was the depth of feeling from local wildlife lovers, dog walkers and members of the local community about the timing of the grazing and the electric fencing, that have pushed these issues to the fore and as a result these small changes are being made.



**Brighton & Hove
City Council**