

DUDLEY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

HALESOWEN AREA COMMITTEE – 17TH NOVEMBER 2004

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

LEASOWES COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP SCHEME

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1. To welcome and support the Leasowes Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The Leasowes is the only site in the West Midlands to be listed as Grade 1 on the English Heritage 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England', and as such ranks alongside Blenheim and Stowe. It is of international importance, being considered one of the first natural landscape gardens in England, designed by the poet William Shenstone as a *ferme ornee* (ornamental farm) in the 18th Century. Part of this landscape is the subject of a Restoration Project, largely funded with £1.3 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund.
- 2.2. Stennels Fields, which are located adjacent to the registered historic area (as shown on the attached map), support a rich community of fungi, including the Ballerina or Pink Waxcap. This species is listed in the European Red Data Book as endangered and in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan with a provisional classification of 'low risk'. It is reported to have declined across Europe and is thought to occur more often in Britain and Ireland than anywhere else in the world, but knowledge about its distribution is incomplete. Historic changes in its population are poorly understood, but potential threats to current sites include improvement of its grassland habitat through ploughing or addition of fertilisers and reduction in the levels, or cessation, of grazing or mowing, leading to growth of rank and woody vegetation.
- 2.3. Countryside Stewardship is the Government's principal scheme for conserving and improving the countryside. Land managers are paid grants to follow more traditional farming methods that enhance the landscape, encourage wildlife and protect historical features. Countryside Stewardship aims to conserve a range of traditional countryside landscapes and features by:
- sustaining the beauty and diversity of the landscape;
 - improving and extending wildlife habitats;
 - conserving archaeological sites and historic features;
 - improving opportunities for enjoying the countryside;
 - restoring neglected land or features; and
 - creating new habitats and landscapes

- 2.4. A Countryside Stewardship proposal, covering Stennels Fields and other grasslands outside of the registered historic area, was submitted to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs earlier this year. This was successful, and an agreement has been entered into from 1st October 2004 until 30th September 2014. Specifically, annual payments are available towards the management of lowland hay meadows and pastures. Also, grants are available towards specific operations, including replacement boundary fencing and field gates in the first two years, and hedgerow restoration and scrub control at specific times during the ten years.
- 2.5. Management proposals include (locations shown on the attached map):
- Restore grazing at Stennels Fields to utilize the annual grass growth, ensuring that the vegetation height is short enough (with occasional hay cutting) to benefit the fungal community, as well as plants, invertebrates and birds.
 - Introduce annual hay-cutting to fields off Kent Road and Sylvan Green, with aftermath grazing by livestock where possible, to develop the potential for wild flowers.
 - Introduce grazing and manage scrub on rotation at Crown Tip to encourage the development of species-rich grassland.
 - Restore the field hedgerow pattern, including the development of hedgerow trees and the retention of some dead wood and stacking of fallen timber as habitat for invertebrates and fungi.
- 2.6. We have an example of Countryside Stewardship elsewhere in the Borough, which was fully supported by the Central Dudley Area Committee. In 2001, the Council entered into a Countryside Stewardship scheme covering Netherton Hill (part of Saltwells Local Nature Reserve), which is being implemented by the Saltwells Warden Service. This has seen the successful reintroduction of cattle grazing on the hill, management of lowland heath, pastures and hay meadows, and the restoration and maintenance of boundary hedgerows.

3. PROPOSAL

- 3.1. That the Leasowes Countryside Stewardship Scheme be welcomed and supported.

4. FINANCE

- 4.1. There will be no financial implications for the Area Committee. Countryside Stewardship payments are based on standard rates, which are subject to review at regular intervals by the Secretary of State. Annual payments towards the management costs of land covered by the Leasowes Countryside Stewardship Agreement are currently set at about £835 in 2004/05 and 2005/06 and at about £1,010 for each year 2006/07 to 2013/14. Grant aid available towards capital works amount to about £2,800 in 2004/05, £2,855 in 2005/06, £317 in 2006/07,

£97 in 2010/11 and £117 in 2011/12. Any balance would be matched through officer time or through existing budgets of Culture and Community Services.

- 4.2. Agreement years run 1st October to 30th September and claims are made annually in arrears between 1st and 31st October in each year due.

5. LAW

- 5.1. Section 8C of the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 (as amended by the National Heritage Act 1983) enables English Heritage to compile the 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England'.
- 5.2. Section 98 of the Environment Act (1995) enabled the Secretary of State to make the Countryside Stewardship Regulations (1996), allowing agreements to be entered into and payments to be made in respect of certain land management practices.
- 5.3. Section 11 of the Countryside Act, 1968, requires that the Council in the exercise of its functions relating to land under any enactment must have regard to the desirability of conserving the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside; it extends to both urban and rural areas.
- 5.4. Section 111 of the Local Government Act, 1972, authorises the Council to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive to, or incidental to the discharge of any of its functions.

6. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

- 6.1. This report takes into account the Council's policy on Equal Opportunities.

7. RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1. That the proposal set out in paragraph 3.1 of this report be approved.

J. B. MILLAR – DIRECTOR OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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Background documents used in the preparation of this report:-

Leasowes Countryside Stewardship Agreement