

**CUCKFIELD PARISH COUNCIL**  
**Queen's Hall, High Street, Cuckfield, RH17 5EL**



**Assets, Community and Environment Committee Meeting**  
**21 November 2019**

**Item 9.g - Sussex Lund Grant, High Weald AONB**

**1. BACKGROUND**

The Sussex Lund programme is focused on the High Weald AONB (which covers parts of West Sussex, East Sussex, Kent and Surrey) but applications from nearby areas will be considered. It supports projects in the wider countryside as well as those in hamlets, villages and towns, such as churchyards, school grounds, recreation areas and roadside verges. Closing date for applications is 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2020. Grants of between £500 to £10,000 are available.

**2. OVERVIEW**

**Cuckfield Village – help for biodiversity**

This report explores some preliminary observations and ideas for improving or enhancing the village's biodiversity. The majority of ideas are not particularly costly but translating ideas into projects will require co-ordination, liaison and support from various individuals and communities, all of which takes time to arrange so some projects might not be able to be scheduled for this year.

**3. HABITATS**

**Meadows / grassland / verges / gardens**

***The Observer Field***

Clearly, a considerable amount of work and recording has been carried out for the Observer Field. It appears a ten-year plan was instigated in 2007 although the last report seems to be for 2013. Attempts at plug and bulb planting did not appear to be overly successful but yellow rattle had colonised the middle of the field.

The Observer field is a classic lowland neutral meadow but with the benefit of having been relatively undisturbed. Timing of any grazing or cutting regime is clearly key with the site currently being grazed with Black Hebridean sheep by a local farmer. These animals are often used for conservation grazing as they will tackle some of the tougher vegetation.

For now, it is probably a case of continuing to monitor the plant species and then make a judgement call when best to graze – a grazing agreement may be advisable.

***Horsefield Green***

The meadow here is just at the point of being overwhelmed by coarser plants, particularly dock and urgently needs cutting and removing although this is always weather dependent.

### ***Whiteman's Green allotments.***

There is an area at Whiteman's Green allotments where the ground is too difficult to cultivate and is currently full of rank vegetation including thistles, dock and nettles. In time, it may be possible to improve the species composition of this area but clearly a significant amount of work will be required in removing any debris e.g. carpet tiles and then at least two years of cutting and removal of clippings before an assessment could be made of its viability.

### ***Buttinghill***

There is a small area of open grassland on the upper level of the site that is shown as a wildflower meadow on the plan – unsure as to current status but can look at in the spring.

### ***Courtmead Road***

Plant Life has issued an excellent guide on the management of roadside verges. While these can be a vital refuge for bees, butterflies and bugs, our roadside flora has changed beyond all recognition in a lifetime. This is principally due to the rising fertility of roadside soils caused by increasing nitrogen levels from vehicle exhausts. Coarse grasses or single species such as cow parsley are then able to dominate.

Cutting too early, too late or not at all can all be detrimental while not collecting the clippings leaves a suppressing thatch that further increases fertility. Ideally, there should be one cut from the middle of July to the end of September. It appears that the verges in Cuckfield are mown once a year by WSCC and this was carried out on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sept this year which is ideal although WSCC are unable to collect the cuttings. Keeping roads safe for motorists and pedestrians is obviously a prime concern.

There is a significant area of verge along Courtmead Road. It would be worth taking some soil samples to assess phosphate levels, but the fact exposure to road traffic is limited might make this a viable area to improve plant biodiversity. Using glyphosate to remove initial vegetation and weeds is increasingly seen as undesirable with some research showing a detrimental impact on the micro-organisms in the soil including earthworms. It may be better to hire a scarifier and rough up the surface before sowing a wildflower seed mixture and see what develops. A scarifier can be hired for £250 a day although wildflower seed is not cheap at £1,000 per acre.

Using Courtmead might prove a useful trial before looking at the management of other verges around the village. I have contacted Geoff Goodman of the Courtmead Road Residents Association to see if he is interested.

### ***Queens Hall***

Depending on plans for the proposed acquisition of land at QH, an option could be to create a wildlife garden. A pond is always the must have feature and provides a great focal point and a magnet for wildlife. Depth of a metre is always recommended but 60cm is just as good. A butyl rubber liner would be required but if a larger pond was installed, bentonite might be better although more expensive. A bog garden could also be viable along with living willow sculptures, log piles, sweet chestnut trellis for climber plants and a vast array of nest boxes and bug hotels are all available – a trail camera (£45) would be very helpful in assessing whether hedgehogs are present and if so a box could be provided for them too.

A seating area would also be beneficial – if this was made of local materials from within the AONB, it may be possible to order several benches at the same time for use around the village as per the business plan.

A wildlife garden may be the largest and costliest project and would still require ongoing maintenance - whether it could become a community garden or a local school could take ownership would presumably depend on access arrangements.

## **Ponds**

**Horsefield Green** – an ephemeral pond that requires little management - drying out is not a problem and it receives plenty of light – possibly some of the grass may need removing if it takes over half the water surface.

**Newbury Pond** – while understood this is not owned by the council, the margins around the pond, particularly on the side of the main footpath are heavily vegetated probably benefiting the pond experiencing little disturbance. There is still a good amount of open water and plenty of incoming light while the alders are manageable at the moment although will need coppicing in a few years.

**Buttinghill** – there may already be plans in place, but to soften the edges of the pond, installation of some pre planted coir ‘sausages’ would provide useful marginal habitat although understood that remedial works are still ongoing.

## **Trees / orchard / hedge**

### ***Orchard***

A community orchard can provide numerous benefits for local residents, but can also be a huge boon to wildlife, particularly insects and pollinators and a vital food resource for visiting winter thrushes such as fieldfares and redwings.

Historically, it appears that there were 1200 apple and pear trees at Mill Hall (Whiteman’s Green) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century while a number of varieties have their origins in nearby districts including Crawley Reinette and Beauty, First & Last, Edmund Jupp, Green Custard, Coronation, Ashdown Seedling and Tinsley Quince.

Sussex Apple Trees can supply all of these varieties – half-standards cost £35 while staking, ties, vole guards, mycorrhizal fungi adds another £10 a tree.

The critical issue for any new orchard is watering while there is some maintenance work in the form of weed removal, mulching and annual pruning. Vandalism is always a threat, but tree guards do provide some psychological protection if not necessarily physical - an interpretation board showing the varieties planted would also help to add purpose and sense of security.

Potential site includes Buttinghill and Horsefield Green - an orchard at Buttinghill would be hidden from view so might be less prone to disturbance or damage. At Horsefield Green, there could be room for nine trees but using semi dwarfing rootstocks should ensure the preservation of any views. Using part of the green apron would provide an ideal south facing slope avoiding frost pockets and drainage issues. For passers-by, either walking or driving, the trees in spring blossom would be viewable.

### ***Hedges***

The hedge at Courtmead Road allotments has been ordered free from the Woodland Trust and will be delivered in March 2020 – whips include Blackthorn, Hawthorn, Hazel, Crab Apple and Rowan.

The hedge planted at the Observer field has clearly flourished and looks as though it has already been topped – It would be beneficial in the next couple of years if it was properly laid before it gets any bigger – increasing the density is much better for nesting birds while reducing the height will reduce shade and increase the openness of the meadow. It could be an ideal hedge for training purposes either through South of England hedge laying society or TCV. Rates are about £10 to £15 a metre so with 30-40m approximate cost of £500.

#### 4. SELECTED SPECIES

##### ***Swifts***

We have lost over half of our swifts in the last twenty years due in part to roof renovations reducing nesting sites availability and likely decrease in insect food. Action for Swifts <http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/> and Swift Conservation have very good websites.

Attracting swifts to boxes can be successful but often takes time. Potential sites for new boxes could include under the eaves of the roof at Queens Hall, if and when the roof undergoes repairs.

The other possibility is Holy Trinity Church. Some churches, e.g. Ditchling have built a suite of swift boxes behind the louvre doors of the bell tower. This also has the benefit of preventing other birds entering the bell tower such as pigeons and jackdaws.

I have contacted the church warden, Brian Cutler who is understandably concerned about any impact to the fabric of the church and would need to ask the church architect to inspect first. However, from April 2020, the C of E has ruled that a faculty will no longer be required for installation of swift boxes, just a List B permission.

If it was possible to install boxes at Queens Hall and the Church, a suitable article in Cuckfield Life could spread the message for anyone else who was interested in installing boxes.

One of the most common questions concerns 'mess'. Swifts are one of the cleanest birds and there is usually minimal mess with no droppings under the boxes.

Swift boxes cost around £30-40 although a call system may also be required. Ditchling also had access to a very good carpenter but cost was still under £500.

##### ***Dormice***

This species is thought to have declined by a third since 2000 – causes include loss of habitat, habitat fragmentation and decline in woodland management.

Hibernating for a large part of the year and nocturnal when they are awake, it's very rare to see one. However, boxes are readily taken up by dormice in order to build nests and breed in plus they provide a fantastic opportunity for volunteers and members of the public to actually see them.

I have met with Ken Burgess from New England wood and they would be happy to set up a new scheme and install twelve boxes. (a box costs £20)

At Buttinghill, once the site and woodland has matured further, it may be possible to put in half a dozen boxes here too although there is always the risk of vandalism with people blocking the hole or setting fire to them so regular monitoring would be required.

##### ***Honey Bees***

Bees and pollinator species have featured widely in the national press with a third of species in decline. However, there appears to be more evidence that current hives are not necessarily the best homes for bees due to lack of insulation. This in turn can lead to a weakening of the colony and greater vulnerability to the likes of varroa mite and other disease. Using a log hive enables the bees to provide much better insulation although any honey can only be obtained if and when the hive dies. Website details are <https://beekindhives.uk/> – New England Wood are currently investigating whether they would be interested with costs starting at £350 but probably sensible that if they were to go ahead, to see how they get on before considering any other sites.

### ***Bats***

It is likely that bats are well represented at New England Wood with plenty of suitable habitat. Rather than providing boxes which are likely to be unnecessary or unused, it may be more useful to find out which species are actually present. Audio Moth is a low-cost, full-spectrum acoustic logger which can identify bat species. It may be worth buying four devices, two for New England but two other units which could be used at other parish council sites to see what bat species are present.

Each device measures 58 x 48 x 15 mm and costs in the region of £40.

### ***House Sparrow***

A species that has suffered a dramatic decline in recent years with avian malaria having recently been identified as one of the possible causes. There is clearly a small colony centred around the church, cemetery and Laines Farm. It would be interesting in the spring to try and establish where the birds are breeding after which it might be possible to put some boxes up. As a gregarious species, boxes are designed to provide a 'terrace' or 'street' so that several pairs can nest in close proximity.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

More investigation and costing work is clearly required but plan would be to come up with a fully costed priority list by end of January 2020.

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Date: 21 November 2019