

PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Report subject	Fire Breaks
Meeting date	16 November 2022
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>There are over 2,500 hectares of open space across BCP that include a very diverse range of habitats including amenity parks, heathland, woods, meadows, river corridors, ponds and lakes, and extensive coastal areas comprising cliff, dunes and undercliff habitats.</p> <p>Some of these habitats can be susceptible to arson and wildfire and given that these spaces are managed across different teams, from Countryside and Parks in Environment to Seafront and Tourism in Destination and Culture, a joined up and holistic approach is required to address community concerns from wildfires and how we manage these spaces.</p> <p>This report was requested to consider the current policy on wildfires following a large heathland fire on Canford Heath nature reserve earlier this year, and other wildfire events across BCP. It has been noted how effective the Urban Heaths Partnership was in managing the fire at the time and in related activity in the weeks after, reassuring residents and working collaboratively across many organisations on wildlife rescues, information and education events and campaigns to ban disposable BBQ's.</p> <p>There is significant existing resource dedicated to making our green spaces and nearby land that are susceptible to wildfires, as safe as possible. This report summarises some of this resource and work to enable a discussion at scrutiny.</p>

Recommendations	<p>It is RECOMMENDED that:</p> <p>(a) Endorse the current management approach to wildfires</p> <p>(b) Endorse the current work of the Emergency planning team to support and react to events on the ground</p> <p>(c) Acknowledge the strong partnership working already in place through the Urban Heaths Partnership and Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service.</p>
Reason for recommendations	<p>Significant partnership resource and effort is already in place to ensure wildfire risk is minimised, including a wide range of public-facing activity, education and enforcement.</p> <p>Emergency planning and protocols are in place.</p> <p>Approach to risk management will be reviewed and assessed to ensure measures are up to date</p>
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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Information

Title: Fire Breaks

Background

1. BCP's Countryside team manage our heathland and other nature reserves, with the Urban Heaths Partnership (UHP), and invest a significant amount of time and

resource on an annual basis to ensure that paths, access tracks, gates and stiles are kept open and accessible in the event of emergency access being required.

2. On an annual basis our most at risk heathland sites are assessed in joint visits by DWFRS and BCP staff, as part of the UHP coordinated programmes, and site-specific interventions and management. This long-standing arrangement allows a detailed understanding of fire risk to be understood and to ensure that appropriate action is taken, based on officer knowledge and experience of previous fires, habitat management and practical options for change.
3. Over the winter season, works are prioritised that address any concerns that are identified. Works are timed to take place through the winter owing to the sensitive nature of heathland sites, managing constraints of bird nesting season and to avoid damage to reptiles and their habitats.
4. 'Fire defendable lines' are then created that provide the fire service the best possible chance of managing a wildfire. They serve as access routes for specialist vehicles, such as tractors and bowsers or off-road fire service vehicles and ensure fire officers and council staff can navigate and access large areas of the heaths quickly and safely.
5. A 'Fire Break' is a natural or man-made break in vegetation continuity such as a mown strip or grazed patch. It still has vegetation on it such as mown grass. A 'Fuel Break' is a natural or man-made break in fuel continuity such as a track, river or sandy patch where the vegetation is completely absent. A 'Fire Belt' is a natural or man-made break in fuel type such as a strip of Beech planted within a pine plantation or a strip of willow following a damp area across a heathland. All of these are 'Fire Defendable Lines'.
6. Heathland management work is either funded through Countryside Stewardship, an agri-environmental grant that supports our management of the sites, or through revenue funds if outside of this agreement.
7. Heathland Mitigation (through developer contributions) funding pays for a set level of wardening and enforcement of issues on the heaths.
8. The Bournemouth cliffs have experienced wildfires in the past, mostly from BBQs or beach huts at the foot of the cliffs. Management responsibility of these areas is split across Countryside, who have areas in active management, and with Seafront and Tourism, as well as some areas in private ownership. Goats are used in some areas to manage the scrub as it is otherwise difficult to maintain given the cliff gradient.
9. There are extensive grass meadows across the UCP estate as part of the SANG provision, as well as other sites across BCP with similar meadows. Wildfires are rare in these areas and lower risk owing to lack of combustible material. Management relies on the knowledge and expertise from the Countryside teams and using similar risk-based approaches.

10. As SANG provision increases across BCP there will be a need to include similar measures across all these sites with extensive meadows.

Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service (DWFRS)

11. DWFRS have a range of fire appliances available to respond to wildfire events. Some of these are specialist appliances such as light off-road vehicles (M1), Heavy off-road vehicles (P4) and the service has one Unimog (P9) available from Wareham. These vehicles are based at local Stations in and around the BCP area. If necessary, additional resources are requested from Hampshire and Isle of Wight FRS. DWFRS also has a National Wildfire Tactical Advisor that attends most significant wildfire events.

Urban Heaths Partnership (UHP)

12. BCP Council are one of 10 partners in UHP and as such benefit from collaborative working with the Fire service, Natural England, Dorset police and other landowners and NGO's. The Partnership's aim is to alleviate urban pressures on the Dorset heaths brought about by new residential development in the area, funded by Heathland Mitigation (Developer Contributions).
13. UHP have a range of educational and information programmes that support the Council's management of the heathlands, among them:

a) Fire Reduction Techniques

- i) **Site Specific Risk Information.** Working with Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service developed individual Site Information, including identification of fire access gates and routes and rendezvous points recorded on maps held on appliance mobile data terminals and in hard copy by local crews.
- ii) **Early warning fire text and WhatsApp groups.** Fire Control send text messages to a group of land managers of heathland sites anytime a heathland fire is called through. This information is then shared with a wider group of land managers within the partnership via WhatsApp. Information can be shared very quickly via the group which has an agreed response to support each other during fire incidents.
- iii) **Fire training.** Training in Fire behaviour, how to respond to fire incidents and how to provide best support for DWFRS during an incident is provided annually for land managers, rangers and wardens.
- iv) **Operation Heathland.** Close collaboration with Dorset Police has been key within the partnership, each year Dorset Police run an internal Order which provides Officers across the area with information on how to deal with heathland related incidents. Regular partnership meetings take place to discuss shared partnership intelligence, monitoring fire and other incidents to identify any potential

spates or trends. The meeting also looks at actions which might help alleviate risks or promote messages.

b) Firewise

- i) **Firewise UK.** Based on the international programme from The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). Firewise information suggests simple practical steps for the home and garden which can reduce the risks of wildfire damage to homes close to heathlands or forest in Dorset. The information is equally relevant to individual homeowners or communities.
- ii) **Summer engagement.** Firewise information has been shared at 11 pop up events ran on sites including Upton Country Park, Canford Heath and Stour Valley. Two events at Asda, Canford Heath and Westbourne Fire Station open day were attended, over 560 people were engaged with. After the Canford Heath fire information leaflets were delivered to 200 homes in the area in partnership with BCP and DWRFS staff.
- iii) **K9 Firewise volunteer patrols.** Volunteer dog walkers recording their walks and reporting fires and anything suspicious seen on site over 500 patrols recorded.

c) Awareness Raising Campaigns.

- i) **#Operation Heathland Campaign.** A social media campaign raising awareness of heathland habitat and asking people to share information with others to help protect them. Posts/tweets sent out regularly under this hashtag are shared by partner communication teams.
- ii) **BBQ Campaign.** Social media and on-site campaign to raise awareness that it is illegal to have a BBQ or campfire on heathlands in Dorset under a PSPO. Similar messaging is used across BCP, although PSPO's are not currently in effect. Posts/tweets have been sent out regularly and shared by partner communication teams. Banners have been put up on sites to reinforce the message. Litter Free Dorset have been targeting supermarkets to request that they stop selling disposable BBQs.

d) Proactive Education Programme.

- i) **Arson courtroom drama sessions.** The Arson Courtroom Drama (ACD) is a curriculum-based session specifically designed to reinforce the importance of heathlands due to their wildlife and biodiversity and highlight the consequences of heathland fires to the wildlife and the community. Aimed at 12 – 13 year olds, it is based in a courtroom setting with students acting the roles of Judge, Accused, Witnesses,

Defence and Jury. Delivered to target schools close to heathland sites.

- ii) **Heathland themed sessions.** Sessions illustrating the importance of heathlands due to their wildlife and biodiversity are delivered on site or in the classroom to younger students to target schools.

e) Monitoring.

- i) **Incident recording.** Fires and other incidents are recorded on Dorset Explorer to help identify any trends occurring and inform site management.
- ii) **Heathland fires attended by DWFRS.** The table shows heathland fires attended by DWFRS in the BCP area February – September 2022

Month	Fires
February	1
March	8
April	9
May	21
June	24
July	14
August	17
September	7
TOTAL	101

BCP Emergency planning

- 13. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) describes a wildfire as: “Any unplanned and uncontrolled wildland fire that, regardless of ignition source, may require suppression response or other action according to agency policy”. The UK has a predominantly managed landscape and hence the reference to ‘wildland’ within the FOA definition may prove to be misleading. A more accurate description of wildfire within the UK is: “Any uncontrolled vegetation fire which requires a decision, or action, regarding suppression.”
- 14. BCP Council Emergency Planning and Resilience Team has been working with council services and prepared a new draft BCP Council wildfire response plan for use in the event of wildfires within the council area. This is to achieve consistency between the mitigation and response to any wildfire which may occur on BCP Council land as responsibility currently lies with two different services: Environment and Destination and Culture.
- 15. New wildfire digital mapping is being produced jointly with Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service showing all suitable access points to identified risk locations. This is currently being developed by BCP Council's GIS Team. Work is

also being undertaken by Destination and Culture to produce mapping for Upton County Park and Highcliffe Castle.

16. The new mapping will include the location of suitable buildings which can be used as a rest centre in the event of a wildfire at the identified risk locations. Where a wildfire occurs at a location which is not an identified risk location, BCP Council has a list of pre-identified locations which can be used as a rest centre.
17. A multi-agency debrief was held following the Canford Heath Fire on 14th May 2022 and learning identified is being incorporated into The Dorset Local Resilience Forum (LRF) plan and/or the BCP Council Wildfire Response Plan.
18. Learning is also being sought from other LRFs regarding the numerous wildfires which occurred in other parts of the country during the summer heatwave.
19. An LRF subgroup led by BCP Council has produced a draft Poole Harbour Islands Evacuation Plan. This was led by BCP Council as any evacuees from the islands would be taken to Poole as the nearest and most appropriate evacuation point.
20. New evacuation plans are to be produced for Hengistbury Head due to the risk of people being stranded in the event of a wildfire and not being able to leave using normal routes.
21. Any recommendations identified during the emergency planning debrief and review process to highlight best practice or possible improvements will be submitted via an issues paper to Environment and Destination and Culture for consideration.

Options Appraisal

22.

a) Do nothing, maintain current service provision.

Advantages – There is a well set up, administered and funded partnership and other agency work is already in place. Significant fires do occur, but they are well prepared for and sufficient mitigation is in place.

Urban Heaths Partnership has recently been reviewed externally and no issues have been found with regards to preventing wildfires.

Statutory bodies involved in the partnership and supportive of processes in place.

Disadvantages – current resource could be insufficient.

b) Formally review current service and management of sites most at risk of wildfire.

Advantages – could identify gaps in provision

Disadvantages – lengthy and resource required

Existing partnership regularly reviews the approach to heathland management

Summary of financial implications

23. There are no specific financial impacts from this report and recommendations, current financial arrangements have been outlined as follows:
24. The Countryside team is partly funded by external funding to manage the land as part of agri-environmental schemes, known as Countryside Stewardship and Higher Level Stewardship.
25. These funds bring in approximately £235,000pa that supports our management of the sites in question, including staff, machinery, vehicles and materials costs.
26. The Urban Heaths Partnership funding is derived from Heathland Mitigation funds (Developer contributions) and is split as follows
 - BCP fund 73%, £290,701 pa
 - Dorset council fund 27%, £107,520 pa
 - Total cost (projected for 22/23): £398,221
 - Including all salaries and on costs, running costs, vehicles, severance, wildlife monitoring and bird surveys.

Summary of legal implications

27. BCP Council has a statutory duty to protect biodiversity and manage designated nature reserves, such as our 19 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), 65 Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI), 25 Local Nature Reserves, 2 Special Areas of Conservation and 1 Special Protection Area (SPA). These spaces are internationally or nationally protected for their wildlife value, protecting from wildfires is just one of many aspects to be considered in their management.
28. BCP Council is a Category 1 responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. This requires the council to
 - Assess the risk of emergencies occurring and use this to inform contingency planning.
 - Put in place emergency plans.
 - Put in place Business Continuity Management arrangements.
 - Put in place arrangements to make information available to the public about civil protection matters and maintain arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public in the event of an emergency.
 - Share information with other local responders to enhance co-ordination.
 - Co-operate with other local responders to enhance co-ordination and efficiency; and
 - Provide advice and assistance to businesses and voluntary organisations about business continuity management (Local Authorities only)

29. BCP Council assesses risks jointly in the Dorset Local Resilience Forum (LRF). The risks requiring assessment are identified in the National Security Risk Assessment published by the Cabinet Office. Wildfire is one of the risks which must be assessed. This is currently rated as a medium risk on the Dorset LRF Community Risk Register.

Summary of human resources implications

30. The Countryside team manages most spaces at risk of wildfire, with a range of different job roles in place to mitigate the impact of pressures (including fire) on heathland. Continuing this service and staffing level, at a minimum, is vital in protecting and conserving the heathlands, protecting from wildfire and other pressures; but also enhancing biodiversity.
31. The Countryside has seen numbers of frontline staff reduced as a result of changes to structures, redundancies and efficiency savings.
32. This report does not advocate for any change to staffing levels in specifically managing wildfires.

Summary of sustainability impact

33. The Countryside team specialise in careful management of our protected nature reserves and other green spaces, advocating and delivering positive benefits for nature. As such the management of our countryside estate is critical in at least maintaining our current position within the Climate and Ecological Emergency, and seeking opportunity to increase biodiversity and wildlife numbers, mitigate climate change through management of all habitat types and create new space for nature to thrive.

Summary of public health implications

34. Managing green space so that it is safe and accessible for all users is essential and at the core of service delivery. People can freely access green space sites where appropriate and there are significant benefits in doing so for mental and physical health.
35. There are significant public health risks from the smoke produced by wildfires. Vulnerable people such as the very young, very old and those with respiratory disorders may be hospitalised. There is often a spike in hospital admissions during large or multiple wildfire incidents.

Summary of equality implications

36. An EIA has not been prepared for this scrutiny report owing to the nature of the discussion requested by members. Should any further requests for change in service or policy be recommended then the EIA process will then be followed.

Summary of risk assessment

37. A risk-based approach to the management of wildfires is being managed within existing service delivery.

38. No other significant risks identified at this time.

Background papers

Appendices