

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: Monday 2nd October 2023

Report Title: New Countryside Stewardship grant aid for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve 2024-2034

Report By: Cameron Morley, Head of Environment and Operations

Key Decision: Yes

Classification: Open

Purpose of Report

To outline the process for transferring to a new 10-year Countryside Stewardship grant for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve from 1st January 2024.

Recommendation(s)

- 1. Cabinet agrees to secure the future management of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve through a new 10-year Countryside Stewardship grant aid commencing in January 2024.**
- 2. Cabinet delegates authority to the Chief Legal Officer in consultation with the Lead Member for the Environment to sign the new Countryside Steward Agreement 2024-2034, on behalf of Hastings Borough Council at the time of grant offer.**
- 3. Cabinet extends thanks to all the partners and volunteers who have made and continue to make Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve an award winning example of successful sustainable management and habitat restoration.**

Reasons for Recommendations

1. The current 10-year Higher Level Stewardship Agreement at Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve terminates at the end of 2023.
2. A new 10-year Countryside Stewardship Agreement would start on 1st January 2024.
3. The 10-year Countryside Stewardship grant aid is the only funding mechanism open to the council to manage Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve.
4. There is no specific date by which we will receive the new grant for signature, other than before 1st January 2024. Waiting until we receive the grant before arranging a Cabinet decision would potentially delay the start of the grant with the consequential loss of grant income.
5. The grant income is worth between £700,000 and £1,000,000 over the life of the grant period.

Introduction

1. Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is the largest area of publicly owned and managed land in the Borough. It is a designated Local Nature Reserve which includes a nationally designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), an internationally designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC), farmland, ancient woodland, and a Country Park. It is one of the most important coastal cliff nature reserves in the UK.
2. In 2000, the Council terminated the farm tenancy agreement with the tenant farmer at the council owned Fairlight Place Farm to:
 - a. Bring together the separate but publicly owned land uses of farm, country park and SSSI into one long-term biodiversity and habitat restoration focused management strategy.
 - b. Declare the area a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act.
 - c. Underpin future management through UK/EU Countryside Stewardship grant aid.
3. Since 2000, the council has successfully implemented the above objectives. Through successive countryside stewardship agreements, the reserve has gone from over-intensive dairy farm and neglected country park, to a high-quality, award-winning nature reserve, exemplifying habitat restoration and biodiversity recovery in the face of a UK and global biodiversity crisis.
4. This report sets out the background and recommendations to adopt a third successive 10-year Countryside Stewardship management agreement for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve, starting in January 2024.
5. In addition, the report includes three appendices which aim to provide further detail and context around the management of the reserve and its habitats.
 - a) Appendix 1 Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve Management Strategy Review 2022
 - b) Appendix 2 Countryside Stewardship grant aid - Key management principles for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve 2024-2034
 - c) Appendix 3 Nationally and internationally threatened and important habitats at Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve

Countryside Stewardship grants for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve

6. The funding to manage Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve has come from UK/EU funded agricultural/land management grants. The grants are determined and set by Natural England, the Government body responsible for nature conservation and biodiversity.
7. Natural England awarded the council its first ten-year countryside stewardship grant in 2004, and a second ten-year stewardship grant in 2013. Both those grants were allocated under the EU Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. Following Brexit, the UK government has been developing successor payment schemes for farmers and land managers.

8. Natural England set management objectives for countryside stewardship grants based on the habitat priorities and biodiversity outcomes for sites. Natural England's priority for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve, is the restoration and management of nationally rare and declining habitats through conservation grazing.
9. Our current Countryside Stewardship grant ends in October 2023. It is proposed a new 10-year agreement will start on 1st of January 2024 and run until December 2034.
10. Officers have been working closely with Natural England to ensure the new 10-year Countryside Stewardship grant can start from 1st January 2024. In the unlikely event of the grant being delayed, Natural England have agreed an extension to our current grant for up to five years or until the new grant starts.
11. Natural England anticipate awarding the council its new 10-year grant before the end of this calendar year, 2023. The outcomes from the new grant will be to increase and safeguard biodiversity with public engagement and understanding of how natural ecosystems and landscapes are managed.
12. Although the council does not have the detailed final grant award, a summary of the key management principles and priorities of the new grant are included as Appendix 2.
13. It is important to note that the management priorities and principles are set by Natural England as the lead national body for nature conservation, in conjunction with the council, based on best practice management for habitat and biodiversity recovery on the reserve. A summary of key habitats at the reserve is included as Appendix 3.

Reviewing our management since 2000

14. In 2000, following the repossession of Fairlight Place Farm, the council commissioned Dolphin Ecological Surveys to prepare a management options strategy to help the council make informed decisions on future management. Officers felt it would be helpful to invite Dolphin Ecology back again to assess progress over the last twenty years and provide independent advice on the management priorities and structures required for the reserve over the next 20– 50 years. Their report helped shape the third countryside stewardship grant management priorities.
15. The Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve Management Strategy Review 2022, by Dolphin Ecological Surveys, is attached as Appendix 1.
16. The strategy:
 - a. Highlights and celebrates the council's success, innovation, and ambition in being a leading player in nature conservation management and taking a failing farm and designated sites and turning them into an award winning nature reserve.
 - b. Is particularly enthusiastic about the innovative conservation grazing techniques at the reserve and highlights the support and dedication from councillors and partners that have been crucial in achieving this success.
 - c. Highlights key priorities for the council to consider for future management and highlights opportunities and risks.

- d. Recognises that the council has explored third party management of the reserve but highlights that as a public body, the council is best placed to continue to manage the reserve through grant aid and dedicated staff and appropriate management structures.
 - e. Highlights this is a decades long project which is proving an overwhelming success and exemplar in habitat restoration and helping reverse the national trend in biodiversity loss.
17. The report concludes that Hastings Borough Council should be very proud of its successful management of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve since the original report in 2000 and outlines key management principles to continue that success.

Financial Implications

18. As the details of the new grant have not been finalised, it is not possible to provide the exact annual grant income figures. However, given the management priorities officers have been discussing with Natural England, it is estimated the management grant will be in the region of £70,000 annually. In addition, there will be a three-year capital works fund, some of which will be 100% funded. Any capital works that are not 100% funded will be matched through the revenue grant. There will be no net cost to the council.
19. The estimated income from the new grant will be between £700,000 and £1 million over the life of the agreement.
20. As there is no core council budget to manage Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve, retaining this grant aid is critical. Furthermore, as the agreements are for 10-year periods, it provides the council with long-term financial stability and assurance to manage the site.

Legal Implications

21. Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is a Local Nature Reserve, designated by the council under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1948. The reserve also includes the nationally designated Hastings Cliffs to Pett Beach Site of Special Scientific Interest [1002885 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://www.naturalengland.org.uk) and internationally designated Hastings Cliffs Special Area of Conservation, [Hastings Cliffs - Special Areas of Conservation \(jncc.gov.uk\)](https://www.jncc.gov.uk).
22. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) places a duty on public bodies to take reasonable steps, consistent with the proper exercise of their functions, to further the conservation and enhancement of Sites of Special Scientific Interest.
23. The protection and management of internationally designated sites are governed under provisions in the Habitats Regulations and section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The Environment Act 2021 further strengthened the duty for local authorities to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
24. Government awarded countryside stewardship agreements are legally binding agreements. They require the council to implement the terms of the agreement as detailed by management prescriptions and objectives set out in the grant unless derogations are agreed with Natural England. Penalties for not implementing the terms of the grant can result in repayment of all funds received over the life of the grant.
25. Previous stewardship legal agreements have been signed by the Chief Legal Officer on behalf of the authority. Should cabinet agree to a new 10-year agreement, it is

recommended the Chief Legal Officer, in consultation with the Lead Member for the Environment, sign the new agreement on behalf of the authority.

Risk Management

26. Although this is the third long term land management grant the council has received for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve, it does not come without some identifiable risks. Some of those risks are clearly set out in the Management Strategy Review by Dolphin Ecology, in Appendix 3. The key risks can be summarised as follows:
- a. The grant is subject to the council having the management resources in place to implement the grant. Natural England have the authority to withdraw or postpone the grant award if they conclude recipients are not adequately prepared to implement the grant.
 - b. Should Natural England postpone or withdraw the grant, there would be no funding to manage the reserve. This could lead to habitat decline, neglect of our statutory obligations, and reputational damage.
 - c. The council contracts an external consultant with specialist expertise in farming, land management and countryside stewardship grant administration, paid for from the stewardship grant, at no cost to the council. They provide advice and expertise on complying with and implementing the grant, land, and livestock management, and applies for the council's annual payments. The stewardship advisor liaises with senior management and Natural England to ensure the grant is being properly implemented on site.
 - d. The services of an external consultant with this range of expertise is critical to the council. However, they can withdraw their services and/or decline to sign a further contract for the period of the new grant. Without the services of a specialist countryside stewardship advisor, the council would struggle to implement and administer the grant. Any loss of the external advisor would present other partners such as Natural England and our grazier farming partner with serious concerns.
 - e. A local farmer provides the livestock required to implement the conservation grazing elements of the agreement. The new grant will require greater emphasis on habitat management by livestock grazing. Loss of the farming partner would present the council with serious difficulties in managing the reserve and fulfilling the terms of the grant.
 - f. Unscheduled inspections are undertaken throughout the grant period to ensure the terms of the grant are being implemented. There are financial penalties for not implementing the prescriptions in the agreement. The financial penalties are cumulative through the life of the grant, meaning an inspection in year 9 which finds a prescription has not been implemented but grant aided, will be subject to a 9 year pay-back. To date, the council has never been in breach of any its grants.
27. The above risks can be mitigated by the council having the required capacity and structure to implement the grant whilst continuing to cultivate good working relationships with Natural England, the stewardship advisor, volunteers, and grazier.

Options

28. There are two principal options for the council to consider:
- a. To transition to a new 10-year agreement and continue the long-term habitat and biodiversity management of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve,
 - b. Decline or postpone further grant aid funding to manage Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve.
29. It is recommended option (a) is adopted for the following reasons:
- i. There is no core council revenue budget to manage the reserve,
 - ii. There are no other known, external long-term funding opportunities for the council to manage Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve,
 - iii. The grant is part of the council's continuing long term successful management of the reserve that started in 2000.
30. It is noted that the council has previously explored options for third sector or trust management and partnerships to manage all or parts of the reserve. However, as Dolphin Ecology point out in their management strategy report, the council has been extremely successful in managing the nature reserve since 2000, and they do not identify any material benefits to outsourcing management. Retaining in-house control of the site allows faster decision making, greater flexibility to respond to changing circumstances and allows the council to retain long-term grant income.

Environmental Issues & Climate Change implications

31. The new management prescriptions will prioritise habitat restoration and transformation through greater use of conservation grazing and changing the management of the existing arable fields to wood and scrub pasture, managed by livestock. Managing the reserve with livestock reduces the need for mechanical management and promotes a sustainably managed nature reserve that positively addresses the climate and biodiversity crises.

Conclusions

32. The nature reserve is entering a new and significant era for habitat management and restoration. The major work to transition from a working dairy farm and country park to a sustainably managed nature reserve has been achieved through our previous agreements.
33. Management priorities are now about sustainable management of threatened and scarce habitats through conservation grazing with public engagement and understanding of how natural ecosystems and landscapes are managed.
34. By managing this irreplaceable coastal nature reserve, Hastings Brough Council is fulfilling its legal obligations and helping positively address the biodiversity and climate crises, and protect and manage this spectacular landscape for wildlife, visitors, and the people of Hastings and St Leonards.

Wards Affected

(All Wards);

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	N
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	N
Risk Management	Y
Environmental Issues & Climate Change	Y
Economic/Financial Implications	Y
Human Rights Act	N
Organisational Consequences	N
Local People's Views	N
Anti-Poverty	N
Legal	Y

Additional Information

- Appendix 1 Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve Management Strategy Review 2022
- Appendix 2 Countryside Stewardship grant aid - Key management principles for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve 2024-2034
- Appendix 3 Nationally and internationally threatened and important habitats at Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve

Officer to Contact

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Appendix 1

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve Management Strategy Review 2022

Appendix 2 **Countryside Stewardship grant aid - Key management principles for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve 2024-2034**

35. Following Brexit, the UK government has designed the new land management payment scheme to deliver greater benefits for biodiversity and nature. It has prioritised public funds to deliver public goods. This means prioritising grant applications that demonstrate clear and beneficial biodiversity outcomes.
36. The ten-year agreements provide land managers with financial stability over a reasonably long timeframe, allowing meaningful forward planning to implement the management prescriptions and achieve greater gains for biodiversity, helping reverse the decline in biodiversity in the UK today.
37. Countryside Stewardship management prescriptions are developed by Natural England in conjunction with the landowners/managers. For over 20 years, Hastings Borough Council has had a continued partnership with Natural England and could not have progressed its management and restoration of the reserve or been successful with our 10-year countryside stewardship agreements without their help and support.
38. Our agreements are part of a decades long management strategy to transition from an intensive dairy farm and country park to an integrated, well balanced and thriving nature reserve. Each successive agreement builds on the last to extend the management into different areas of the reserve, change our management priorities and build on the successes gained through previous agreements. In summary we have:
 - a. Extended conservation grazing into hard-to-reach habitats with native breed cattle and wild ponies.
 - b. Reduced large areas of bracken dominated landscape using traditional heavy horses and rolling techniques and livestock grazing.
 - c. Restored heathland habitats on the coastal cliffs by reducing excessive gorse cover.
 - d. Planted new hedgerows and allowed existing hedgerows to grow out to create greater biodiversity.
 - e. Sown specialist wildflower seeds to create diverse meadows and fields.
 - f. Used livestock to manage fields sustainably, creating more diverse grassland flora.
 - g. Used the innovative Nofence system of virtual fencing to track and move cattle, for which the council was awarded a special award for innovative conservation management by Green Flag.
39. The previous two agreements have retained fields of arable crops. The new agreement will remove all arable crop management and replace it with an evolving grassland, scrub, and wood pasture habitat. The new habitats will be managed by conservation grazing, reducing use of heavy machinery.
40. Overall, the aim of the new agreement will be to manage the reserve and its priority habitats through a mixture of conservation grazing, habitat management and

restoration, and biodiversity enhancement. The management principles have been fully informed by the independent Dolphin Ecology management strategy report attached as Appendix 2.

41. The partnership the council has with a local farmer is crucial to the successful implementation of our legal agreements. All livestock are provided by the farmer.
42. In addition, the management of the reserve could not be wholly implemented without the dedicated and hard work of conservation volunteers who undertake most of the scrub habitat management we would otherwise have to pay contractors to do.
43. Without the various partnerships at the reserve, the council would not have the skills or capacity to manage the reserve and implement the countryside stewardship agreements.

Transition from arable crops to wood pasture creation

44. For the last 20 years the council has sown and harvested spring sown crops as part of its agreements. Experience has shown this to be expensive and increasingly problematic to manage due to unpredictable weather patterns brought about by climate change. The drier spring and summers can mean we are in drought situations as early as April. On the other hand, wet winters can result in colder, wet conditions lasting well beyond sowing times.
45. Sowing and harvesting is very weather dependant. If the soils are too dry, the seeds don't germinate. If the weather remains wet and cold, the seeds rot. Harvest time can be equally problematic and weather dependant. Too wet for too long and the crop rots in the field, too dry and the crops don't produce a viable seed head. The arable fields can also suffer excessive weed growth. Weed species interfere with the combine harvester's ability to harvest the crop. If a crop is seriously contaminated by weed species, it may not be accepted for sale.
46. Essentially it costs the council more to sow and harvest than it gets back through grant aid and sale of the harvest.
47. The new agreement will prioritise the reversion of the arable fields to a grazed wood pasture landscape with mature hedgerows and trees with will be more in keeping with the landscape of the wider nature reserve.

Managing livestock at the reserve.

48. For the last seven years the council has owned its own cattle for conservation grazing. Whilst this has been extremely successful in introducing the concept of conservation grazing to manage habitats, it has proved difficult in terms of managing public expectations around how cattle should be managed on the reserve. Livestock management is not a core function of the council. The council has relied on our farming partner to manage the welfare and movements of the council's cattle. With the advent of the new agreement there is an opportunity to rethink how the livestock are owned and managed at the reserve.
49. From the start, and over the life of the new agreement, all livestock at the reserve will be owned and managed by our farming partner who will rotate the cattle around the

fields, manage their welfare and ensure our agreement is complied with. The council will no longer own cattle. This is a more efficient management option for the council.

50. It is anticipated native Sussex breed cattle will be the main conservation grazing livestock breed at the reserve. These cattle are suited to the challenging terrain at the reserve and the climate of the southeast.
51. The number of cattle at the reserve will fluctuate and be dependant on the food resource and the areas to be managed. As the arable fields transition to grazed pasture, there will be a need for more cattle to manage those new habitats.

The Nofence virtual fencing system

52. Nofence is the world's first virtual fencing system for grazing animals. The technology consists of a solar-powered GPS collar and a virtual boundary. The collar communicates with a phone app and web portal.
53. The system allows animals to access different pastures and targets grazing at different habitats. It saves time and money by not having to build and maintain physical fences. Animal movements are tracked in real-time and notifications on animal movements are sent to the phone.
54. This system of virtual fencing is used widely across the UK and Europe on both traditional farms and on nature reserves. It is used by The National Trust, the City of London at major sites such as Epping Forest and closer to home it is used at Seven Sisters Country Park and other sites in the South Downs National Park. In addition, virtual fencing has had significant positive coverage on the BBC's Countryfile.
55. At Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve the council have been using the Nofence system since 2020, particularly at Warren Glen, where its use has transformed our ability to manage the habitats in the glen.
56. Cattle will be grazing throughout the reserve at different times of the year, depending on the management priorities for these areas. They will, in the main, be grazing within farm fields such as the ex-arable fields and the fields towards Ecclesbourne meadow. The Nofence system will continue to be used to allow the council to target grazing in different areas for maximum biodiversity outcomes.
57. Since 2013 there has been the intention that a small number of cattle will graze the Firehills for a limited period from the Autumn through to Spring, dependant on weather and ground conditions to manage the nationally scarce and declining clifftop heathland habitat.

Grazing the Firehills

58. The Firehills represents a clifftop lowland heathland habitat, unique to this part of the UK. The habitat is one of the rarest in the UK.
59. As a public body, the council has a duty to conserve biodiversity and an obligation to conserve and enhance the Site of Special Scientific Interest of which the Firehills is part. The council therefore has a special obligation to ensure the habitats and biodiversity of the area is managed appropriately.

60. Prior to the 2013 Higher Level Stewardship agreement, the Firehills was covered in old and even age planted gorse. The heathland habitat was declining and in danger of being lost. In the 2013 stewardship agreement, Natural England required the council put in place management prescriptions to restore the heathland habitat by removing areas of invasive scrub and to manage the area with cattle.
61. It was recognised this was likely to be one of the most contentious areas of management at the reserve. The council discussed the proposals directly with Fairlight Parish Council, the Friends of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve, and a representative of the local disability forum. The council put up a series of posters and signs to inform visitors and users what was happening and why.
62. The gorse blocks were removed, and in 2018 a system of underground fencing installed in various areas of the Firehills. The underground fencing system was a precursor to the Nofence system. It uses a buried underground cable to delineate the grazed area. It is not as sophisticated or versatile as the Nofence system, but it was the only system available at the time. The only alternative was to install new stock proof fencing, which, it was concluded, would adversely alter the landscape character of the area, and was not considered appropriate.
63. However, repeated vandalism to the underground cable meant that grazing was continually delayed. The cable was deliberately pulled up and sections cut out. After a series of repairs and continued vandalism, the system had to be abandoned.
64. As a result of the delays in bringing cattle onto the site to manage the area, the council has had to employ contractors to cut the regrowing gorse and remove the cuttings annually. This has not only been expensive but is not achieving the habitat results required to restore the heathland habitat. Repeated mechanical cutting without grazing is resulting in a dominance of low growing even-age gorse. This provides no ecology and biodiversity benefits and is not an appropriate management for the threatened heathland habitats.
65. Natural England continue to advise that grazing by small numbers of cattle in the autumn/winter/spring period is the most sustainable management for this type of habitat. Whilst the Firehills is a very public area, other nature reserves such as Epping Forest and Seven Sisters Country Park successfully use cattle and the Nofence system on areas which are regularly used by the public without incident or concern.
66. Officers are aware some members of the public are opposed to grazing the Firehills as a management tool to restore the heathland habitats and protect and enhance biodiversity. A key component of the new stewardship grant will be to raise public awareness about biodiversity management. The council will therefore ensure it has disseminated widely information about the positive impacts of grazing on habitats before cattle are put on the Firehills.
67. There is no sustainable alternative to grazing with cattle to restore the threatened heathland habitats of the Firehills area of the reserve whilst also discharging our legal obligations to conserve biodiversity.

Exmoor ponies

68. The wild Exmore ponies will remain at the reserve. Ponies browse differently from cattle and are an added benefit to the management of the reserve and its biodiversity.
69. The ponies are currently owned by the council. However, officers are looking at ways to engage a specific third party with their own herd of Exmoor ponies which can be used on the reserve. Having the ponies owned by a third party ensures they are managed by experts in Exmoor pony welfare and management. Officers will continue to explore this option whist the existing ponies remain at the reserve and are continually welfare checked by our grazier.

Rights of way and footpaths

70. There will be no changes to public footpaths or Definitive Public Rights of Way in the new agreement. Public access is not allowed inside defined fields unless there is a legal or permissive footpath within it. The fields where the public are excluded are identified in the byelaws for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve. There will be no change to access permissions in the new agreement.

Appendix 3 **Nationally and internationally threatened and important habitats at Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve**

71. In 2019, a State of Nature report by the UK State of Nature Partnership presented an overview of how UK wildlife is faring, looking back over 50 years of monitoring. It found the UK to be one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world where 41% of all UK species surveyed have declined, with 15% of species in the UK threatened with extinction.
72. Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is the largest area of publicly managed land in the borough and home to many rare, threatened, and important habitats and species. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Area of Conservation and Local Nature Reserve.
73. All the habitats of the reserve require appropriate management to ensure they retain their biodiversity and ecological importance within an irreplaceable coastal ecosystem. Some of the most important habitats and their management priorities are listed below.

Lowland Heathland

74. Lowland Heathland is a habitat type found in the lowlands of the UK. It occurs on acidic, impoverished, dry sandy or wet peaty soils, and is characterised by the presence of a range of dwarf-shrubs including various types of heather and gorse.
75. The coastal cliff top lowland heathland habitat at Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is unique in the southeast. The habitat is home to numerous highly specialised plants and animals. It is particularly important for reptiles, such as adders and lizards. Many rare and threatened invertebrates and plants are found on lowland heathland habitats and nowhere else. Several scarce birds such as Dartford warbler use lowland heathland as their primary habitat.
76. Lowland heathland is classed as a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. It is a rare and threatened habitat, with the UK supporting about 20% of the lowland heath in Europe. In England it is estimated that only one sixth of the heathland present in 1800 remains – and it still faces major pressures.
77. The most significant area of coastal cliff top heathland at the reserve occurs at the Firehills. The management priorities for this habitat are to form a complex habitat mosaic with heather, dwarf and mature scrub and acid grassland.
78. The management prescription for this habitat in our previous and new countryside stewardship agreement is grazing with cattle. Grazing with small numbers of cattle at appropriate times of the year retains a varied habitat structure that allows the rare and threatened species associated with the habitat to thrive.
79. The main pressures associated with the decline of this habitat are neglect, inappropriate mechanical management, and disturbance to wildlife from dogs off leads.

Ancient Woodland

80. Ancient woods are areas of woodland that have persisted since 1600 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. They are the richest and most complex terrestrial habitat in the UK, and home to more threatened species than any other habitat type, yet only 2.5% of the UK land is covered in ancient woodland. They are the oldest and least disturbed woodlands in the Southeast, supporting communities of plants and rare invertebrates, found nowhere else in Europe.
81. The unique gill stream ancient woodland habitat type of deeply incised wooded ravines with humid and relatively stable micro-climates are characteristic of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, AONB, and Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve.
82. The coastal nature of the ancient gill woodlands in the reserve makes them wholly unique and invaluable in a UK and international biodiversity context. There are three ancient gill woodlands in the Reserve, Ecclesbourne Glen, Fairlight Glen and Warren Glen.
83. There are no specific management interventions required for the ancient woodland in the reserve.

Vegetated Sea Cliffs and clifftop habitats

84. Vegetated sea cliffs are steep slopes fringing hard or soft coasts, created by past or present marine erosion, and supporting a wide diversity of vegetation types with variable maritime influence.
85. The cliffs at the reserve and other parts of Hastings and St Leonards are 'soft' cliffs that have a sloping or slumped profile, often with a distinct undercliff or vegetated toe. Soft cliffs may be subject to mudslides or landslips, which create complex habitats of pioneer and mature vegetation.
86. The cliffs at Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve are an area of actively eroding soft cliff where the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, AONB, is exposed at the sea. Wooded ancient gill valleys, maritime scrub, and coastal heathland are characteristic of vegetated sea cliff and clifftop habitats.
87. Clifftop grassland occurs the length of the coastal reserve. The grassland is characteristically short on well drained soils and is a unique habitat type in the southeast. Several very rare invertebrate species are found on the clifftop grassland habitats of the reserve.
88. Clifftop grassland occurs the length of the coastal reserve. The main threats to the habitat are from cliff erosion and successional scrub encroachment. Where appropriate, the management priority is livestock grazing.

Hedgerows and scrub

89. Scrub and mature hedgerows are found throughout the reserve and connect all other habitats. Scrub is characterised by gorse, blackthorn and bramble, and the hedges are mainly hawthorn and blackthorn with a range of native hedgerow species.

90. Scrub and hedgerows are some of the most diverse and important habitats in the UK. The habitat can be rich in flowering plants, providing nectar, food, shelter and nesting sites for a range of birds, insects, and small mammals. It is the lifeline habitat that connects all other habitats throughout the reserve and makes the nature reserve function as an interconnected and well-functioning ecosystem.
91. Over the years new hedgerows have been planted which provide new field boundaries and habitats for wildlife. The aim of the new stewardship agreement will be to replace the existing arable fields with a mixed grassland and wood pasture habitat characterised by emerging and mature scrub. This new wood pasture habitat will be managed by livestock.
- 92. Open and running water**
93. There are two small ponds at the reserve, one with full public access, the other sheltered with no public access. Water bodies are invaluable for wildlife, where specialist aquatic plants and animals can thrive.
94. The streams that run through the wooded gills are spring fed and are essential for the rare plants and invertebrates that survive within the shaded gill stream habitats. The streams in the glens are essential for some very rare species that have their UK stronghold here and are rarely found anywhere else in the country.
95. One of the main threats to small ponds is from invasive, non-native plants which can quickly proliferate to the detriment of native plants and animals. Ponds require monitoring and intervention to clear non-native plants.