

FISHLAKE MEADOWS, MANAGEMENT PLAN SUMMARY

Supplementary information to be read with Fishlake Meadows Management Plan 2016- 2026

1. An introduction

- 1.1 This summary covers in broad terms what you can expect to see when you visit Fishlake Meadows Nature Reserve and summarises the principles of site management which will be undertaken for the benefit of Wildlife and People. A more detailed account of the site and proposed management can be found in the Draft Fishlake Meadows Management Plan 2016 – 2026. This management plan is written to provide historical and factual context about the site and explain in greater detail the type of management you can expect to see and where.
- 1.2 The best management plans are those which are truly treated as live documents. Ongoing annual reviews of this management plan will be undertaken to ensure the desired outcomes are being met and where they are not appropriate changes made.

2. What is Fishlake Meadows

- 2.1 Fishlake Meadows is located in the floodplain north of Romsey and comprises of a mosaic of wetland habitats including areas of open water, swamp, reed bed, wet grassland, and scrub and covers an area of approximately 60 ha (148 acres) or is approximately 27 times greater in size than the town's War Memorial Park. The area also includes the historic Romsey Barge Canal and a series of former water meadows known as Ashley Meadows.

3. Where is Fishlake Meadows

- 3.1 Fishlake Meadows is located to the north of Romsey, within the Borough of Test Valley. The area lies within the floodplain of the River Test, sitting between the main river channel and the Romsey Barge Canal (**see Map 1**). Access to Fishlake Meadows is possible on foot via footpath 10 along the canal tow path and footpath 9 which crosses the site east to west.

4. Re-connecting people with nature – an opportunity

- 4.1 The value of accessing natural green space is well documented for all people of all ages. Fishlake Meadows presents a unique opportunity to encourage the local community to access the site and take advantage of the many health and social benefits from being in the countryside. Opportunities for informal recreation (walking), environmental education working with local schools and colleges, volunteer opportunities for those people who wish to get actively involved will be available and actively encouraged and promoted.

5. Value for Wildlife

- 5.1 The site, in the past, has been managed as a water meadow system, but more recently was drained to farm arable crops. In the 1990s farming became uneconomic, because of the cost of pumping water from the land, and active management was stopped. Since active farming ceased the site has been rapidly evolving into an area of outstanding importance for wildlife.
- 5.2 Recent surveys have revealed that the site has developed a diversity of wildlife found in few other places in Hampshire. The site is of particular importance to wetland birds, for both breeding and overwintering species. But birds are only one of the groups that thrive at Fishlake, mammals such as otter and bats are regularly recorded, dragonflies are extremely well represented and the number of important plants recorded is increasing all the time.

5.3 The rapid changes that helped to form the site continues today but the unique assemblages of habitats and species that make the site so valuable are now threatened by the very lack of management which helped create it. Encroaching scrub and the increasingly rank grassland swards are beginning to take over. To retain its value for wildlife the site will require substantial management works over the next few years. The only practical and most cost-effective way to manage the grassland and other open areas will be to introduce an extensive grazing and scrub control regime.

6. Why are we here?

6.1 In 2014 outline planning permission was granted to build 64 houses on land to the east of Fishlake Meadows on the condition that the Fishlake Meadows site was secured to be positively managed as a Nature Reserve. The land will be transferred to Test Valley Borough Council on commencement of development along with a commuted sum for its ongoing management.

7. Public comments on proposals so far

7.1 During January and February 2015 for a period of 8 weeks the local community were invited to give their comments regarding the management of Fishlake Meadows as a Nature Reserve. Guided walks were hosted at the site and visuals were available providing ideas as to how the site could be improved and managed.

7.2 Broad support for what was being proposed was evident from the feedback received in January although a number of suggestions were received at either end of the spectrum. With the site's physical constraints and the transfer to the Council being conditional upon the site being managed as a nature reserve, it has proved challenging to include all ideas. Geography hydrology, landownership and practical feasibility also played a part in what could (and what could not) be included.

7.3 A summary of those ideas and commentary can be found in the documents *Response to Feedback, January/February 2015*.

8. Draft guiding management principles - Our vision for Fishlake Meadows

8.1 Fishlake Meadows offers an opportunity to experience a "wilderness in the town". Its proximity to Romsey and the surrounding urban area provides an accessible space where people can escape from the noise and pace of life for a few minutes, or where they can explore for several hours to enjoy the countryside and view wildlife at close quarters.

8.2 The vision therefore reflects both the site's importance for wildlife and its potential to enhance the lives of the people of Romsey.

"The vision for Fishlake Meadows is to create a wildlife rich gateway to the Test valley. The site will offer opportunities for visitors to witness spectacular wildlife at close quarters in an extensively managed landscape. Fishlake will offer opportunities for young and old within the local community to learn about and to become involved in the management of their natural heritage".

8.3 Fishlake should be recognised as one of the premier sites for wildlife in the County and as such, will add to the prestige of Romsey and its surrounds. To deliver the vision the plan contains a series of high Level objectives.

9. Objective 1 – To manage the site as a Nature Reserve

- 9.1 **What you can expect to see** - A number of key operations and elements will need to be undertaken from the outset to ensure that a realistic long term management regime can be implemented. A land owner has a duty of care to ensure that where reasonably practicable the public are safe in those areas where public access is currently permitted (along rights of way) and any areas where further public access is to be created or formalised. The broad management principles proposed are summarised as follows:
- 9.2 **Creation of the Management plan** – The management plan will steer the works on site for a period of 5 years with longer term aspirations over 10 years. The plan will be based on the existing and required survey data and is broken down in to key habitat types and management compartments with prescriptions developed accordingly – consistent with JNCC criteria.
- 9.3 It is anticipated that the practical implementation of the plan will be monitored by a management group through regular meetings with an annual review of progress reported publically to an open forum (details tbc). The plan will be treated as a live document which will be continually updated to ensure the prescriptions as outlined are delivering the necessary requirements.
- 9.4 **Detailed survey** – Information already exists about specific species groups at Fishlake Meadows but further survey work to cover all types of wildlife will be undertaken over the first summer of management to provide a robust baseline. Water level management will be integral to the effective management of the site so a full understanding of how the water enters and leaves the site is required along with recommendations on how seasonal variations will be managed and where appropriately controlled. A hydrological survey will be undertaken in the first year of management.
- This information will be invaluable in informing the management prescriptions and timetable for the delivery.
- 9.5 **Tree management** - Removal of any hazardous trees around the site will be prioritised following an initial tree survey. This initial work will focus on the removal of the line of mature non-native poplars running along the eastern boundary of the site and the canal and the poplar plantation to the north west of the site. These trees present a significant risk to the integrity of the canal structure and public as a consequence of branches dropping and risk of whole tree failures. This work will provide measurable benefit to the canal by reducing dense over-shading and will also have a positive visual impact across the site, and mark the commitment to proactive and positive management of the site. Further planned tree work will be considered in the management plan.
- 9.6 **Boundary treatment** – It will be important to secure the boundary of the site. This will include the enhancement of linear features including some open ditches and the installation of stock fencing to allow grazing across the site.
- 9.7 **Drainage** – Remedial work will be necessary to maintain the network of ditches to keep habitats open and steer access around the site.
- 9.8 **Appropriate grazing to achieve conservation objectives** – This will form an essential part of the long term site management of Fishlake Meadows and will involve animals moving freely around the northern dryer parts of the site. This type of grazing is classed as “extensive” (rather than ‘intensive’) meaning fewer animals on site for longer periods. In fact you may struggle to see cattle at points during the year. Grazing is an effective management tool and helps create a variety or mosaic of habitats for an abundance of wildlife. Grazing is intended to be introduced in year 1 as the primary management tool but some additional hay cutting may be required depending on the availability of stock.

- 9.9 Management of scrub** – Some initial scrub clearance will be undertaken in consultation with local special interest groups. This should focus around the wettest areas of the site, some edges of the site and where ditches are being encroached with willow and alder. Some scrub management will also be undertaken to improve sight-lines for visitors to the site.
- 10. Objective 2 - Facilitate sustainable public access and involvement by local community**
- 10.1 **Delivering public access to the site** - Access for the public to enjoy the site is essential but this will need to be balanced with the sensitive nature of the site and the need to minimise disturbance to wildlife in specific areas. There is little value in a nature reserve with no nature to observe.
- 10.2 Access into Fishlake Meadows is currently via public rights of way along the canal (footpath 10) and across the site from east to west along footpath 9. These routes are currently in a poor state of repair.
- 10.3 Access enhancement will involve improvements over time to the condition of the current rights of way. An exciting addition will be the creation of a linear route into the central area of the site. This route will be designed to, over time, blend in with the environment whilst offering a safe and accessible path to a centrally located viewing point. A second and third viewing point/platform will be located midway along canal tow path and at the southern part of the site to provide views north into the wetland. Selective tree removal will be undertaken to provide visual access into the site from Fishlake Meadows road.
- 10.4 The popularity of the creation of a circular route was evident from the public consultation. A survey of the most suitable means of delivering this utilising existing rights of way network and the installation of additional surfaced path will be undertaken.
- 10.5 **Dog walking at Fishlake Meadows** - Dog owners will have full access along the current right of ways but it is proposed that access will be restricted along the permissive path into the central area. This will help reduce disturbance in this location.
- 10.6 **Cycling and other transport to Fishlake Meadows** - Cycling is currently not permitted by law on public footpaths which lead into the site meaning access by bike cannot be encouraged. Bike racks will be provide at key entry locations to the site. These locations will be subject to consultation.
- 10.7 It is anticipated that access to the site will be predominantly by foot and this will be encouraged. An 18 space car park will be available on the east of the barge canal for visitors to the site from further afield. Further options for visitor parking will be explored as management of the site progresses.
- 10.8 **Involving the community** - Fishlake Meadows will be a valuable asset for promotion of environmental education, to encourage volunteer activity and participation by increasing access to the countryside and enhance resident's mental and physical wellbeing through physical activity and access to a unique natural asset.

10.9 Fishlake Meadows provides an excellent opportunity for the local community to become involved with their local natural environment. Opportunities will range from simply accessing the site on foot and enjoying the views of wildlife or exercise, to helping out with work parties, leading guided walks or carrying out monitoring. A programme of volunteer activity will be developed and local schools encouraged to use the site for environmental education. A friends group will be established to help with the management and monitoring of the site. An annual forum meeting to canvas views from a wide range of users groups and local community representatives will be held.

11. Objective 3 - Ensure that Fishlake Meadows does not increase flood risk to adjacent properties

11.1 Much of the wildlife found at Fishlake Meadows is closely associated with wetlands and the management of water is therefore a key issue. The Environment Agency do not consider Fishlake a particularly important factor in flood prevention terms, however it is essential that the management of water at Fishlake Meadows does not increase the risk of flooding for neighbouring properties. Although this risk is deemed low (by the EA) opportunities to improve flood attenuation will be considered.

11.2 At present the hydrology of the site is not well understood and a better understanding is required to ensure that appropriate control measures are in place to ensure that the access and wildlife interest of the site can be maintained without adding to local flood risks.

12. Objective 4 - Manage the canal to reach “favourable condition”

12.1 The Romsey Barge Canal is part of the River Test Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and is classed as in ‘unfavourable condition’. This basically means it is in poor condition and will not improve without management. The canal is also unattractive aesthetically and supports a poor diversity of wildlife. A report plan detailing measures required to restore the canal will be available at during 2016.

13. Objective 5 – Comply with legal and contractual obligations

13.1 In addition to the requirements set out within the Section 106 Agreement, the management of the site must comply with a series of other legal and administrative requirements. These range from health and safety duties, through to land drainage consent, and the Town and Country Planning, Forestry and the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

14 What happens next and key timescales?

14.1 It is expected that the site will be transferred into public ownership at some point in the late winter / early spring 2016. This transfer will include the freehold of the Fishlake Meadows site and the first instalment of the commuted sum which will fund the start of the works onsite.

14.2 Further information on this timescale will be available on the Fishlake Meadows pages of the Test Valley Borough Council Website when a more definitive timescale is known.
www.testvalley.gov.uk/fishlakemeadows

15 **How to Comment?**

Comments are welcome on the Draft Management Plan using the online comment form, by emailing fishlakemeadows@testvalley.gov.uk or in writing to

Fishlake Meadows
Community and Leisure Services
Test Valley Borough Council
Weyhill Road, Andover
Hants
SP10 3AJ

All comments will be gratefully received by Friday 5th February.

16 **How can I get involved?**

If you would like to be involved in the future management of Fishlake Meadows or be kept informed with progress please email fishlakemeadows@testvalley.gov.uk with your name and email address/address. Please note contact details will be shared with the Hampshire and Ilse of Wight Wildlife Trust who will be involved with the management of Fishlake.