

**AINSDALE AND BIRKDALE SANDHILLS LOCAL NATURE RESERVE**  
**SEFTON COAST SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST**  
**HIGHER LEVEL STEWARDSHIP GRAZING PROJECT**

**Introduction**

The Sefton Coast is one of the most important natural sites in Great Britain and its geographical position makes it particularly rich in biodiversity. The Sefton Coast is also part of the Natura 2000 European ecological network. Natura 2000 gives the highest level of protection to nature in UK law.

Most of the area is protected through legislation and local planning policies which support a series of international, national and local designations. The aim of the national and international designations is to protect in perpetuity a selection of the best sites for wildlife. Local designations are operated through the planning system and seek to protect all the important wildlife and geological sites in Sefton.

In addition to the above the North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan is also concerned with the maintenance, restoration and creation of wildlife habitats and associated species. Specific action plans have been written for some habitats and species.

Sefton Council is the major landowner on the coast. It is responsible for the management of a large proportion of the Sefton Coast SSSI and Special Area of Conservation. The SSSI is split into management units, which are assessed (Conservation Assessment) on a 6-year cycle against the SSSI criteria for which they were designated. A set of Conservation Objectives is then developed to guide landowners in respect of suitable management.

Of the units under Council ownership a number are in 'Unfavourable Recovering' condition but two are in 'Unfavourable Declining'. This latter condition description has been reported in the Leisure and Tourism Department Service Plan as a 'risk' in the last 5 years, because it was unlikely that the Council could meet its responsibility to achieve 'Recovering Condition' for the areas of SSSI in its ownership.

In order to fulfil its 'biodiversity duty' the Council identified scrub management and grazing as objectives in the Sefton Coast Nature Conservation Strategy and once adopted set out to attract funding to carry out this work. Being fully aware of its biodiversity duty the Council worked to develop a package of funding identifying Heritage Lottery as a Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership Scheme and through Natural England for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) – this is specific funding to landowners with special habitats to manage.

Funding to help owners of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's) meet targets to achieve Favourable Condition has been available in different forms over the years. In the mid 1990's and 2003 Sefton Council has been able to draw down money from Species Recovery Programme and Wildlife Enhancement Schemes to assist with habitat restoration works.

These grants were used for scrub clearance and an initial grazing project on the Ainsdale and Birkdale Sandhills Local Nature Reserve within the Sefton Coast SSSI, Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Ramsar site.

A number of Agri-environment grants, aimed at encouraging landowners to manage for wildlife, have also been available to landowners for some years, although not all were available to Local Authorities.

The HLS proposal/agreement being offered by Natural England is the extension of conservation grazing on this LNR - the fixed dunes of the Ainsdale and Birkdale sandhills, the areas cleared of scrub in the '90's, 2003 and the ongoing scrub clearance project as part of the Heritage Lottery project described in this report. The agreement offers Sefton Council an annual revenue grant of £54,878.60 for 10 years up to April 2021 and a fencing grant of £103,575.08 to use by April 2014. The cost of the fencing based on quotations is £118,000.00. Any additional cost, if required, is available from the funding available as part of the planning for the project over the last five years. It is likely, however that the fencing construction will be a mix of contractor and the in-house Biodiversity and Access Project; therefore the costs are likely to be below the grant offer.

To apply for Agri-environment grants (and forestry grants) such as HLS, land has first to be registered on the Rural Land Register. Previously Local Authorities were excluded from HLS but were able to claim Single Farm Payment (which Sefton Council, through this Department's Coast and Countryside Service, have done for part of the landholding since 2005). However, when this position changed, the Coast and Countryside Service were encouraged by its partners on the coast, through the Sefton Coast Partnership Nature Conservation Task Group, to put forward an application to Natural England for HLS for the Ainsdale and Birkdale Sandhills LNR.

Acceptance of the Agreement will change the status of the 2 declining SSSI units to 'Unfavourable Recovering' condition. The Council will be seen to be taking action to fulfil its statutory biodiversity duty.

Consultation for this scheme was undertaken as part of the process of developing a Nature Conservation Strategy for the Sefton Coast (adopted by Sefton – Cabinet January 2009) and also through the Heritage Lottery, Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership Scheme (approved – Cabinet May 2010). Later, the information on the full 19 projects in the Landscape Partnership Scheme was made available for public viewing at the Ainsdale Discovery Centre in 2010.

Both the consultations for the Nature Conservation Strategy and Landscape Partnership Scheme were extensive and vigorous, including presentations at annual coastal forums, workshops and site visits, reports to the Sefton Coast Partnership Working Groups and Board and Sefton Council.

## **Management of Ainsdale & Birkdale Hills Local Nature Reserve for Wildlife**

Ainsdale and Birkdale Sandhills cover approximately 400ha of sand dune habitat. This is made up of:

- Ainsdale Hills and Frontal Dunes.
- Birkdale Frontals and the 'Green Beach'
- Birkdale Hills, located between the Coast Road, Shore Road, Selworthy Road and the Royal Birkdale and Hillside Golf Courses
- 'Falklands Way' dunes to the east of the Coast Road, including 'Big Balls Hill'

The entire reserve is within the Sefton Coast SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest), notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Other designations include Special Area of Conservation (SAC), RAMSAR, Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and, for the foreshore only, Special Protection Area (SPA). As mentioned earlier, it is part of the Natura 2000 network of European designated sites. Thus the site is afforded the highest levels of protection in both European and National legislation.

Despite its importance for nature conservation, the whole reserve is open access for pedestrian use. There are certain restrictions which are covered by a series of byelaws including no off-road vehicles, no fires, no horses, no camping, no nude bathing, no dog fouling – which are enforced by the Local Authority through Sefton Council's Coast and Countryside Service (Coastal Rangers). It is also an offence to wilfully damage habitat or harm wildlife under other legislation such as Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, Habitats Directive (together with Birds Directive) and CROW Act.

Again, as mentioned earlier, owners of land designated as SSSI have a responsibility to ensure that the features of interest remain intact over time. The features of the Sefton Coast SSSI include:

- Intertidal mud and sand flats
- Embryonic shifting dunes
- Mobile dunes
- Dunes with Creeping Willow *Salix arenaria*
- Humid dune slacks (wet slacks)
- Fixed dunes
- Dune grasslands
- Dune heath

It is of special interest for its wader populations, plant assemblages, populations of Natterjack Toad, Sand Lizard, Great-Crested Newt and other species such as Petalwort (a lichen). The species list for the Ainsdale and Birkdale Sandhills LNR includes these priority species as well as a range of locally important BAP species.

This Local Nature Reserve is one of the most important sites for Natterjack Toad and dune slacks in the UK with over 30% of both.

Management of the LNR is undertaken with reference to the wider Sefton Coast Management Plan and underpinned by the **Sefton Coast Nature Conservation Strategy**.

For further information visit [www.merseysidebiodiversity.org.uk](http://www.merseysidebiodiversity.org.uk) and [www.seftoncoast.org.uk](http://www.seftoncoast.org.uk) .

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Why are you cutting down all the trees on the Birkdale Hills? Aren't they important for birds and Red Squirrel?**

We are planning to remove patches of non-native invasive scrub– Sea Buckthorn and Poplar Species - which have encroached into botanically rich wet slacks and are taking over the dune grassland to the detriment of the dune wildlife.

It is natural over time for wet areas typically to be taken over by willow and alder scrub, becoming drier, until the 'climax' birch and possibly oak woodland vegetation is reached. This scenario has been checked in the past by grazing pressure from rabbits, human intervention and episodes of dune rollback.

We are not trying to 'eradicate' scrub or trees from the landscape. Rather we intend to leave scattered scrub across the site and also retain stands of mixed native scrub – willow and birch predominantly - which will be managed as habitat and landscape features. Some will be allowed to develop into 'dune woodland'. Poplar and Sea Buckthorn will be controlled within this mix at lower levels. These species are not native to our coast and are particularly invasive. Sea Buckthorn is also a nitrogen fixer, taking nitrogen from the atmosphere and so encouraging soil enrichment.

Red Squirrels will pass through and take advantage of any cover or food provided in the Birkdale Hills but this is not their preferred habitat, that being the extensive pine woodlands to the south of the LNR where woodland management is in place to conserve their habitat and much effort and research is being put into ensuring they remain a feature of the Sefton Coast. (For more information visit [www.saveoursquirrels.com](http://www.saveoursquirrels.com).)

The aim of the management is to create a mosaic of habitats across the site. The Birkdale Hills are a more 'fixed' landscape which sadly no longer supports species such as Natterjack Toad which require more open sand, lower sward and shallower, less vegetated pools for breeding. It is ideal, with management, for Sand Lizard and many other animals such as Grayling Butterfly, Dragonflies, Common Toad and Newts and small mammals.

It would be a great bonus if the habitat did become suitable for 'The Birkdale Nightingale' (Natterjack Toad) again in the future.

Birds will take advantage of scrub for shelter, food and some species rely on it for nesting. Removal will impact on some species, which have moved in with the scrub, such as Blue Tit, Wood Pigeon, Carrion Crow and Magpie but on the other hand will benefit other, generally more threatened species such as Grey Partridge, Lapwing, Cuckoo, Skylark, Snipe and Meadow Pipit (all Red and Amber List Species), Carefully managing the remaining scrub will benefit Whitethroat and Reed Bunting and other species that over-winter here.

From a recreational point of view, scrub removal and management will open up more space for people to use and improve personal safety by providing unobstructed sight lines and better views.

### **We have heard you are putting cattle onto the site? You will turn it into a farm!**

In the past, high rabbit levels helped to maintain the low sward and associated species richness of the dunes. Since myxomatosis was introduced into Britain, the rabbit population is much reduced and undergoes regular 'crashes'; consequently the impacts of grazing by rabbits are much less, allowing scrub to develop at a faster rate.

Grazing by livestock complements that by rabbits but different livestock have differing impacts. Cattle, horses, goats and sheep are widely used in conservation grazing management depending on conditions and what outcome is required. Using a combination of animals is probably the most effective method to graze and browse a variety of vegetation types. However, we feel that sheep are the most sensible option for the LNR; they are relatively easy to manage, hardy (especially the Herdwick and Hebridean breeds used on the Coast) and will not unduly 'poach' or damage the delicate turf. The reserve is very popular for recreation, and the risk from sheep to people using the site is negligible.

There is evidence on the Sefton Coast that the dune grassland is losing its diversity as a few 'coarse' grass species start to dominate. These grasses are encouraged by increased nutrient levels partly as the dunes become more stable, and in part as excess nitrogen from human activity is deposited from the atmosphere. Over time they become dominant, so there are fewer grass species and even fewer herbs / flowers, reducing the species diversity and losing the special nature of the area (similar to the impacts of scrub). Conservation grazing is about using the animals as a tool to eat the courser grasses and scrub and maintain floral diversity. Unlike mowing, grazing removes biomass from the system and helps maintain lower levels of nutrients.

For more information on Conservation Grazing Management visit the Grazing Animal Project (GAP) website [www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk](http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk)

## **Why are you putting up fences? Are you trying to stop people going onto the Birkdale Hills?**

Once scrub has been cleared it needs to be managed and maintained at the lower levels. This can be achieved by a combination of mechanical cutting and spraying, selected mowing and grazing by rabbits and livestock. Conservation grazing is widely used on the Sefton Coast and other dune systems around the country to keep scrub and coarse grasses under control and encourage species diversity. Grazing also encourages variation in vegetation structure (height etc.), which benefits invertebrates in particular.

Fencing is required to keep livestock in, not to keep people out! Access points will be placed at suitable locations to allow people to enter the enclosures. Dogs would of course need to be kept on leads within the enclosures when livestock were present but there would be no other additional restrictions other than those already in place through the national legislation and LNR Byelaws.

## **How big is the area involved and how long will the sheep be kept in an area?**

The area to be grazed in total is about 99ha. Currently there is a small grazing enclosure at the south of the site on the Ainsdale Hills covering 7.2ha. Sheep have been brought down from the Cumbrian Fells to graze there over winter for over 10 years at a stocking rate of 3 to 4 sheep per hectare. Thus the new enclosures will affect an area of approximately 91ha, less than a quarter of the entire Ainsdale and Birkdale Hills LNR.

The proposal is to extend winter livestock grazing over the Ainsdale and Birkdale Hills to help maintain this open landscape in a more sustainable way. Winter grazing would take place between November and April. Summer grazing is not proposed, as this potentially would have a negative impact on the wildflowers and ground nesting birds.

## **What type of fencing will be used? How will this affect public access?**

This will be standard stock fencing as used on our existing grazing enclosure – post and wire with stock netting and 3 strands of plain wire above. No barbed wire is used on the Council's sites. Stock netting allows freedom of movement for rabbits and other wildlife.

It is proposed that not all the enclosures would be in use during any one season. This would allow flexibility for management and in practice mean that fewer sheep would be on site in any season, leaving parts of the site livestock-free. Gates would be locked open when livestock not on site as happens on our existing grazing enclosure.

We have included a number of kissing gates within the fencing specification. The exact location of these would be determined by existing paths / desire lines, to ensure that major routes within the reserve were not impeded. (There may be a need for additional stiles at less frequently used locations as well).

There will also be a number of vehicle access gates for management purposes for example for use when moving animals between enclosures either with a suitable off road vehicle or by shepherding with dogs. Permanent made vehicle tracks are not required. Access points for bringing sheep onto the site will be located where possible away from heavily used parts of the site.

### **Will we have to keep dogs on leads all the time?**

Well behaved dog owners and their dogs are always welcome on the reserve! We already expect owners to keep their animals under 'close control' and 'restrained' from disturbing other users and wildlife at all times (for some that will mean on a lead, for others not) and to observe the poop scoop laws, for the benefit of other users, especially children.

Dogs unfortunately do disturb wildlife – putting up ground nesting birds, chasing rabbits, churning up pools and trampling on toad spawn and toadlets—and we ask that owners be aware of these impacts, especially in the spring and summer breeding season, and control their dogs accordingly. Dogs **must** be kept on a lead around livestock to prevent undue stress or injury. As a guide, you know your dog best:

- Does your dog come back immediately when you call? How is it likely to react to an unusual situation?
- Is your dog in sight? If not how do you know what it is up to?
- Does your dog run up to people and bark? – this is intimidating to many people especially children, no matter how friendly you think it is – or is your dog usually aggressive towards other dogs?
- Can you always see if your dog is fouling? You can be fined for allowing your dog to foul; not seeing it do so and not having bags to clean up is no defence.
- If you have a number of dogs all off the lead at once, can you honestly say that you have them under control?

### **We love our dunes as they are, these proposals will spoil the landscape?**

The dunes are continually changing and so will not remain 'as they are'. If left unmanaged, their special qualities will be lost to future generations. The Council as landowner has a duty to ensure that this does not happen.

The introduction of grazing and associated fencing will necessarily result in changes to the landscape. However, we feel that these changes can be managed sensitively and with the help and support of site users, we can aim to make the least visual impact.

We will also take the opportunity to improve accessibility through better waymarking, information and signage, funded through the Heritage Lottery Landscape Partnership Scheme.

## **How can the Council afford this work?**

We have successfully applied for a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to undertake the scrub work over a period of 3 years as part of the Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership Scheme. The first phase of work got underway in October 2010 with the aim of clearing approximately 3ha by the end of February 2011.

The physical work has mostly been undertaken by Sefton Coast and Countryside Service's 'Biodiversity and Access Project'. As part of this programme 10 formerly unemployed people from Sefton gained suitable qualifications with help from the government's Future Jobs Fund and were employed to carry out this task alongside the Coast and Countryside Rangers. The programme also provides 'on the job' work experience for excluded young people and adults with learning disabilities as well as opportunities for a range of volunteers interested in gaining experience in countryside management.

As mentioned in detail above, funding to help owners of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's) meet targets to achieve Favourable Condition has been available in different forms over the years. In the mid 1990's and 2003 Sefton Council has been able to draw down money from Species Recovery Programme and Wildlife Enhancement Schemes to assist with habitat restoration works. The HLS grant is explained in detail above.

Specialist contractors from ARC (Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, the national organisation concerned with the protection of herptiles) are also involved and were recently on site, working to improve the habitat for Sand Lizard in particular. These rare reptiles prefer south facing grassy banks with plenty of bare sand patches to hunt, bask and lay eggs.

When the idea for this project was originally formed, the possibility of attracting an annual revenue grant was seen as important in respect of helping the Council fulfil its duties to biodiversity. Now, however, with the difficult budget process that the Council has just gone through and with most Council Services being affected by reduced funding, this offer of grant for the Local Nature Reserve is even more important.

## **Does the Council need special permission to carry out these activities?**

Sefton Council formally notified Natural England in 2009 who then made an assessment of the project under the Habitat Regulations 1994 and Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). A Consent Notice was issued by Natural England for the scrub clearance and grazing project. The HLS agreement, if signed, also constitutes a permission and consent to carry out the prescribed works. Natural England has formally offered the agreement as described above. A request for screening of the project was submitted to Natural England and this was carried out under the provisions of the EIA (Agriculture) Regulations 2006. Natural England has advised Sefton Council

that an Environmental Impact Assessment under these regulations is not required.