

Bower Heath

MANAGEMENT PLAN 2014-2019

Briefing Document

October 2013



1 INTRODUCTION

Wheathampstead Parish Council (WPC) working in partnership with Countryside Management Service (CMS) are developing a new 5 year Management Plan for Bower Heath, Wheathampstead, starting in 2014 and running through to 2019. As the owner and manager of Bower Heath, WPC are responsible for ensuring that the site is managed as effectively as possible for the benefit of people and wildlife.

Management Plans are invaluable documents that give focus and direction to the running and improvement of open spaces. They provide a clear process to determine the activities that should take place on a site over a certain period of time in order to meet the agreed objectives.

In some cases Management Plans are written up to the point of final draft prior to consultation taking place; this not only means that consultees are faced with a significant document to read in depth for the first time, but new information can emerge through the process that should have been identified previously and then becomes difficult to integrate.

It is our intention with the Bower Heath Management plan to hold discussions early in the process to ensure that people are fully aware of what we are intending and are provided with ample opportunity to be involved in the process.

This document provides some background information on the site and previous management. It then goes on to outline some of the objectives and actions for the new Management Plan and also summarises the consultation process that forms part of the Management Plan production, specifying how and when people will be involved.

2 BACKGROUND

Bower Heath is an eight hectare (nineteen acre) piece of common land situated on a plateau to the north of the River Lea, at the north eastern edge of Wheathampstead parish. The Common comprises a mixture of broadleaved woodland with 'heathy glades' of acid grassland. Two roads run through the common, Bower Heath Lane & Common Lane, which dissect the site into three distinct areas.

The remaining open glades and old maps showing a more open heath, indicate that in the past Bower Heath was used for communal grazing, though this has long since ceased. This cessation of grazing has enabled scrub and woodland to encroach into areas of the acid grassland. Along some stretches of the Heath boundaries, remnants of hedgerow can still be seen.

The Heath is also a designated Wildlife Site of county importance. The open glades contain plants characteristic of acid grassland, such as Heath Bedstraw, Sheep's Sorrel, Harebell and Fescue grasses. The wooded areas are dominated by Oak with occasional Birch, Sycamore, Hazel and Hawthorn. On the woodland floor plants typical of woodland can be found, such as Bluebell, Dog's Mercury, Male Fern and Bramble.

There are several Rights of Way across the site; a bridleway runs along part of the southern boundary and five footpaths run into and across parts of the common. However, as registered Common, Bower heath is designated open access land allowing visitors to roam freely across the Heath for the purposes of recreation.

The relatively remote nature and small size of Bower Heath limits its value as recreational space, though a lack of clear signs & interpretation, and limited publicity & promotion may also contribute to this. However, local volunteers have been active on the site in recent years and are committed to undertaking practical tasks to conserve the wildlife and landscape of Bower Heath.

3 MANAGEMENT PLAN 2014-19

The new Bower Heath Management Plan will lead on from the positive and successful work previously carried out on the site. It will be a simple, easy to read plan for use by the parish council, members of the public and to guide the work of volunteers.

The plan will be largely map based, with annual management maps to show the actions planned for each year with the resulting change represented on the map for the following year. The document will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains effective and relevant.

The new management plan will; help make decisions and agree how Bower Heath is managed; identify works that have to be carried out for health and safety or access reasons; and enable funding and resources to be allocated for improvements.

A series of key objectives are being developed to achieve the aim of managing the site for the benefit of people and wildlife. From these key objectives, specific actions will be identified to achieve the aim.

Key objectives for the new plan

- Make Bower Heath a welcoming place for visitors
- Conserve the biodiversity and heritage value of the Heath, in particular the acid grassland, sustainably and over the long term
- Continue to involve the community in the management of Bower Heath
- Promote Bower Heath to new users & visitors through a variety of means
- Maintain Bower Heath as a clean, well maintained, safe and secure open space
- Maximize the opportunities to offset costs of management through grants and timber sales.

Outline management proposals to achieve the objectives

- Install new welcome signs and make visual & access improvements to the entrance points
- Maintain the open glades through hay cutting, and coppicing of scrub and bramble
- Thin out trees in the mature woodland areas to encourage the development of good quality trees and woodland in the long term
- Plant new trees in cleared areas to promote the development of good quality tree and woodland in the long term

- Restore old hedgerows across the site through hedgelaying, coppicing and replanting
- Establish a circular walking route around the heath with visitor interpretation
- Agree a work programme for local volunteers to assist with site management tasks
- Develop a page on the WPC website promoting Bower Heath to new visitors
- Replace old bollards, chicanes, bins and other structures and cut back overhanging vegetation from paths

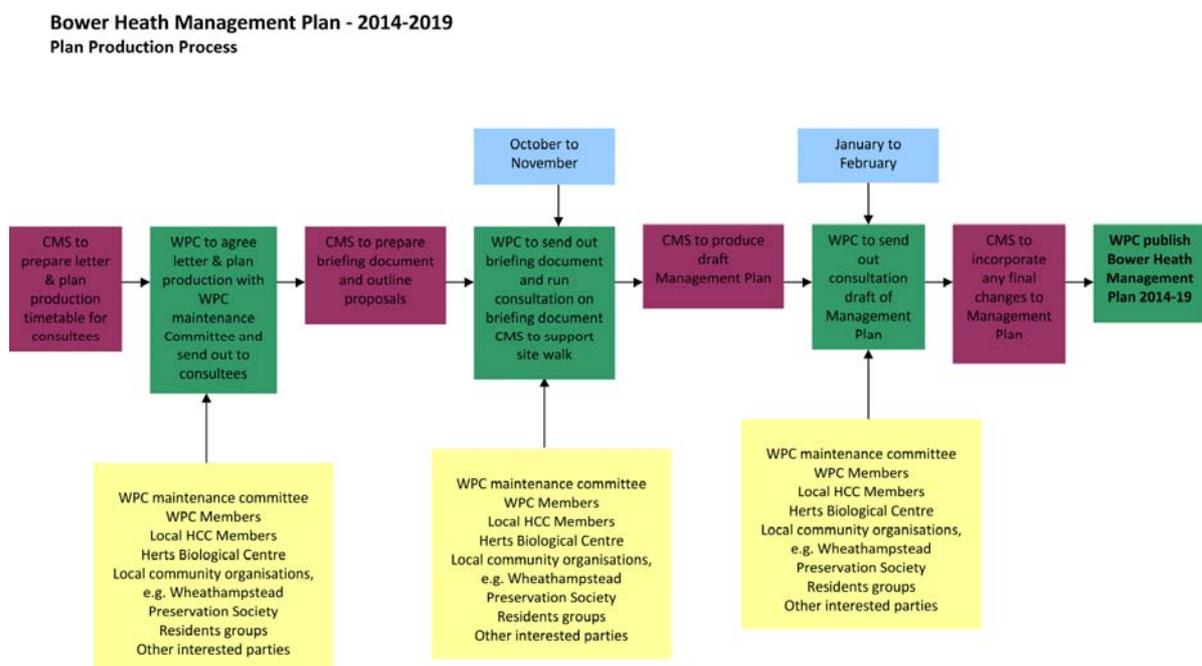
4 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Effective public engagement is at the centre of a successful Management Plan. Their particular value as documents comes from balancing the thoughts and aspirations of users and interested groups throughout the writing process.

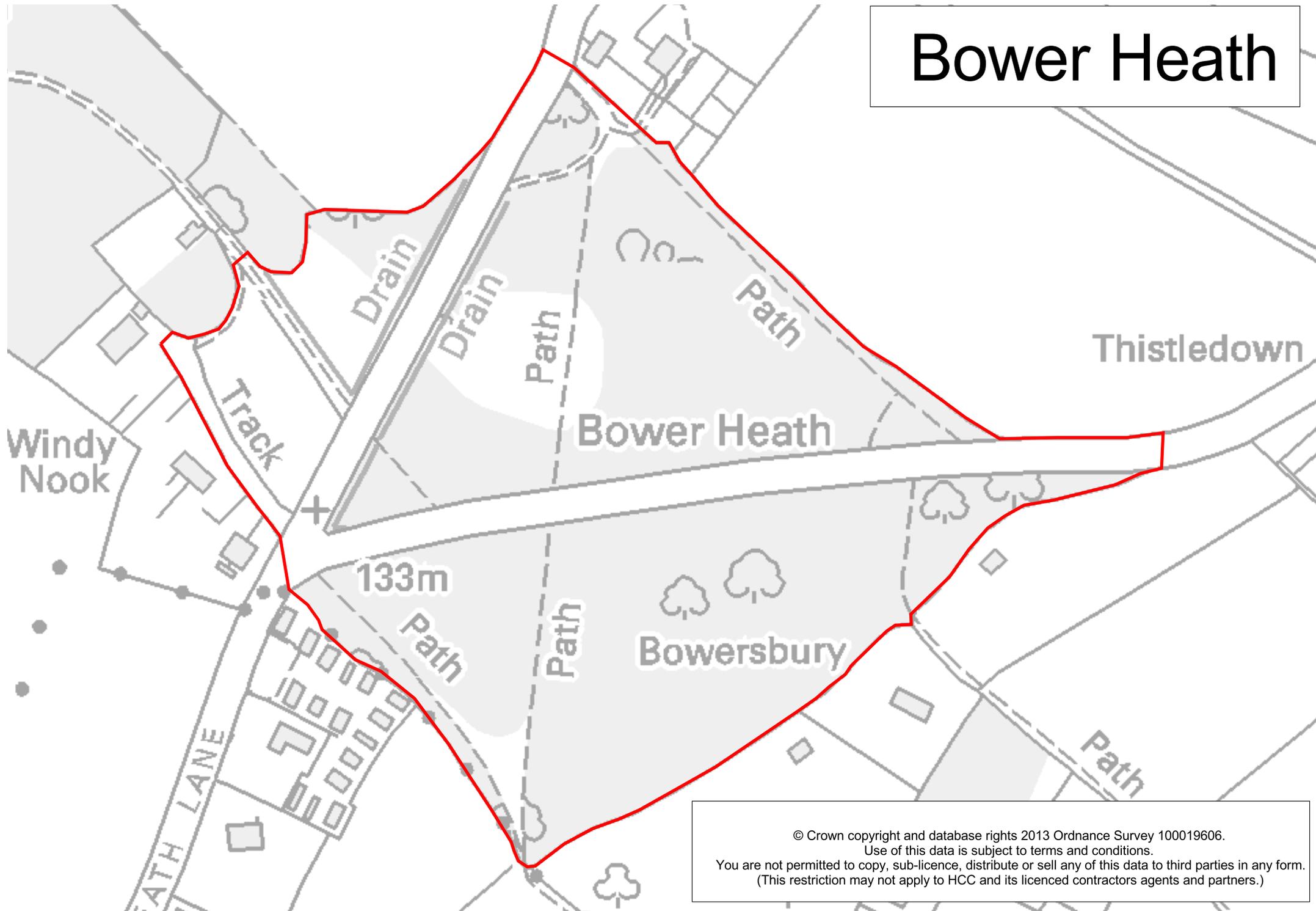
In order to enable all people and interested groups the opportunity to feed into the production of the new Management Plan, we have adopted a two-stage approach to consultation.

For the first stage, people will be invited to comment on the key objectives and outline actions that we are putting forward as part of this briefing document; it is hoped that any further objectives and/or issues will be addressed through this information gathering process. To support this stage, we will be hosting consultation sessions for any users or interested groups that may wish to discuss the proposals or a particular aspect in more detail.

For the second stage, consultees will be invited to read through and make comment on the draft Management Plan. Following this exercise, the final document will be produced and published. The following diagram shows the Management Plan production process which was issued to all interested parties at the start of this project:



Bower Heath



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