



Blacknest Fields Development Plan: for nature recovery and community greenspace

1. Purpose of this paper

This Development Plan sets out the current status and planned actions to develop Blacknest Fields for nature recovery and low-key recreation. **The Council is requested to approve this Plan.**

2. Discovery Phase (until end March 2022)

Table 1 summarises the progress made since the Council's last Blacknest Fields discussion in August.

Table 1. Discovery Phase: progress to date	
Actions completed	
1) Agree Routemap	Routemap, Aug 2021, agreed three phases of development (Discovery Phase, Alpha, and Beta) and 10 'Guiding Principles' (Appendix A1)
2) Engage parishioners: to 'reimagine' Blacknest	We used our website, flyers, social media and a July 2021 pub evening to collect very positive input from parishioners regarding Blacknest Fields. We continue to liaise with a widened Working Group, which will meet again in January 2022.
3) First events	Tree walk and Community picnics were held in Sept 2021
4) Grazing contracts renegotiated	Income has been maintained at £1,100 p.a. despite 1.7 acre reduction in grazing area in Allotment Gardens. Recreation Ground contract kept on 6 months notice, to create flexibility.
5) Improve bridleway gates, stiles, kissing gate	HCC Countryside team has approved our request to modify these bridleway fixtures (Appendix A2).
6) Identify available grants	We have identified about 40 potential grant sources that could potentially fund site investment (Appendix A4). Some grants require some matched funding, sometimes these can be in-kind support or through volunteer time on the project. We have submitted a draft Expression of Interest for SDNP's prestigious new call 'Sites for Nature Recovery' which would provide access to long-term revenue funding (e.g., from Biodiversity Offsetting, Carbon Sequestration.)
In Progress	
7) Agree Development Plan	Approval of this paper will complete this action.
8) Resurface Bridleway 41	We continue to press HCC Countryside team for a firm date for this work, which was due to be completed in July 2021.
9) Clear backlog of fencing, gate and hedge repairs	Almost no maintenance has been carried out on Blacknest's hedges, gates and fences for over 5 years. Income from Blacknest grazing (£1,100 p.a.), that would normally be used for such expenses, has accumulated in Reserves. We plan to earmark £5,500 Reserves for 'materials and labour for overdue maintenance'. We'll complete as many as possible of the tasks required (Appendix A4), free of charge (using Parish Lengthsman and our Rights of Way volunteers). We will obtain three quotes for daily rates from contractors suited to the remaining work. In April 2022 any remaining funds will be appropriately reserved for any remaining work.

10) Improve vehicular access	<p>We want to enable a 17-seater minibus to turn on-site and exit front-first. A 15m² turning area will enable this; and several cars can park here when there is no minibus. We examined 3 options for vehicular access (Appendix A3). Our preferred option is to use Blacknest Road gate access and to create a 15m² onsite turning area (costing c.£25K plus costs of tarmac part of site entrance). This requires Hampshire Highways' approval. On 29/11 we learned from SDNP and Hampshire Highways that £12,404 CIL transport funding might be available for parking, PROVIDED a desk-based pre-approval review can be carried out by a qualified transport consultant by end Feb 2022. This timetable is challenging and consultants will cost c. £10K (to be covered from Council own funds, not CIL). We're examining if other grants could cover consultancy and works. We will also re-confirm costs and technical specifications: we may perhaps improve on suggested surface (300mm 'crush', 100mm planings/fittleworth), with membrane.</p>
11) Meet obligations for Charitable Trust governance and financial management	<p>The Charity Commission advised BPC has a legal obligation to have a separate bank account for charitable trust activities (unmet until now). BPC also has no copy of its Articles of Association for the Oval Trust, and must now create these for Blacknest. We discussed our obligations for the Oval and Blacknest Field Charitable Trust with our auditor Tim Light on 29/11. Changes to the council's governance and financial management will be made from 1 April 2022. We've reserved £1,000 for potential legal fees for a new legal agreement specifying financial interactions between the entities. We will review guidance from HALC/elsewhere, to bring detailed guidance to Council ahead of April's changes. We anticipate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Separate Trustee meetings must be held to demarcate charitable trust activities from the parish council's 'corporate' business - Charities perhaps cannot recover VAT (unlike Parish Councils) - Parish council's public liability insurance can cover charity sites; - New grant opportunities (e.g. Lottery) may now become open to BPC for its charitable activities at the Oval and Blacknest Fields.
12) Continue to develop ideas for community use of the site	<p>The current thinking is that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - land near the forest edge will be the priority area for nature recovery - an area in the centre of the site will provide public greenspace - two (reduced) areas of grazing will be continued over the medium and perhaps longer term, to support ongoing maintenance - Blacknest Road area will be used for turning/parking and, longer term, a wildlife pond. <p>Appendix A6 summarises site uses actively being considered. Our expectation is that multiple uses will develop: many uses are mutually compatible, and the site's large. Two recently-suggested new ideas are now also being pursued:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For NHS workers, carers and patients to use the site for restorative purposes – a 'care garden'. This requires parking that can accommodate a minibus, and level paths. - For Blacknest Fields to form part of a potential new 3.5 mile pollinator corridor along Alice Holt Forest edge (from Bentley Station SSSI Butterfly Meadow to Bealeswood Common, Dockenfield) all of which lie on a Buglife 'B-Lines' route. - A third suggestion, made by a parishioner wishing to rent 4 acres to create a fully enclosed dog park as a private business, has been declined: the business would require considerable parking and is incompatible with 'nature recovery'.
13) Update site signage	<p>Improved on-site signage is needed, to promote awareness of the site, ensure safety, and to explicitly advise what activities can / cannot be done onsite.</p>

2. Alpha Phase (April 2022 – Mar 2023)

Table 2 sets out eight development goals for the year 2022-23.

From 1 April 2022, we plan to open a limited area of the site to the public, as community greenspace. This will fulfil the Council's obligations arising from the Recreation Ground's 'Village Green' designation. From this same date, we will have all necessary governance and financial arrangements in place, to fully meet the Council's obligations as Trustees for Blacknest Charitable Trust.

Significant further work will, however, still be required, both to improve the site physically and to develop the community's uses of the site. We intend to make funding bids so that we can press ahead with low-cost improvements to the site, and to hold at least two community events on the site. However, we will not learn until Autumn 2022 if the SDNP selects Blacknest Fields as a 'Site for Nature Recovery.' Consequently, it will not be possible to make more detailed plans for the site until 1Q 2023.

Table 2. Alpha Phase: Planned actions

Goals	Expected Targets
1) 'Open' an area of safe community greenspace to public	From 1 April 2022
2) Ecology surveys to clarify nature recovery goals, and progress	By 1 August 2022, ongoing
3) Secure first grant funding	By 1 June 2022
4) Hold at least two community events onsite	? SDNP stargazing event
5) Continue to engage with community to 're-imagine' site	Ongoing
6) Develop volunteer group to assist site management	From 1 April 2022
7) Complete 1 st phase of nature recovery action (e.g. plant hedges/trees)	By 31 Mar 2023
8) Pass Charitable Commission annual audit and fulfil all VAT and other legal and financial obligations	Interim by 31 Mar 2023

3. Beta Phase (April 2023 – Mar 2025)

By April 2023, we will know in greater detail what 'nature recovery' goals are realistic, and the level of funding available for further improvements (e.g. Wildlife Pond). We anticipate four main goals:

Table 3. Beta Phase: Planned Goals

1) Obtain further grant funding	Ongoing
2) Complete 2 nd phase of nature recovery action (e.g. pond)	By March 2025
3) Enhance community recreation area	Ongoing
4) Continue programme of community events and engagement	Ongoing

4. Maturity Phase (Apr 2025 onwards)

From April 2025, we expect site development to be complete, with stable site uses and income:

Table 4. Maturing Phase

(i) Physical development is complete.	Funding is in place for the site's ongoing maintenance.
(ii) The site has clear, stable uses.	It is a space valued by many parts of the community.
