

Welsh St Donats Community Council

Meeting with members of Natural Resources Wales, Councillors and members of the community on 15th October 2020 in Heol Y March at 10am.

PRESENT: From Natural Resources Wales, Chris Rees (Operational Manager), Geraint Price and Andrew Shinton. From the Community Council, Ann Thomas, Glyn Jenkins, Nick Craddock and the Clerk. 12 members of the public.

Chris Rees opened the meeting by saying he realised the importance of having the support of the community and that his priority was to keep the community informed of current and future plans.

NRW manages 126,000 hectares of sustainable woodland and it is a case of balancing competing priorities, these include timber production (for which there is a large demand), species diversity, landscape, public access and recreation all within their annual remit.

At the moment, an important aim to is control the disease which is affecting larch and ash. The diseased trees are removed in sections, followed by replanting with broadleaf trees, such as hornbeam, oak, hazel, wild cherry, crab apple, elder and black thorn.

Previous recent replanting was hampered by hares eating the Douglas Fir saplings around the Carpark and Picnic Areas. When these areas are replanted the stems of the saplings will be protected with tubing.

NRW will be undertaking extensive replanting of the area felled earlier this year around the lake and near Owl Lodge. The replanting work will require large plant that will be moved into and out of the forest at the entrance by Owl's Lodge. It should require only one major movement in each direction. Large toppled stumps and some damaged and fallen trees will be removed. Ridges will be created across the disturbed ground to get the new saplings off to a good start. NRW officers offered to meet onsite again, before this work began, to assess whether the "desire line" paths which have been lost and which are not public rights of way could nevertheless be accommodated or restored as part of the replanting process.

Felling works will continue in early November in the Heol y March area which will inevitably cause some disruption for those in the area and will impact on the appearance of several paths through the woods. The area to be worked is a square of forest roughly from the Grange (previously Hendrewennol) to Bonvilston House. All heavy plant will be leaving the Forest via Bonvilston. This route was agreed with the Vale Council and every effort will be made to inform those using the road of these arrangements and keep movements to a minimum.

NRW will be working with the Vale Council to restore paths, highways and verges after these works are completed.

Concerns were raised by Councillor Nick Craddock at the shock of seeing an area completely felled, seemingly without any warning or reason. He suggested the public should be prepared for this by using some sort of visual image of how the landscape would appear both immediately after felling and also several years after replanting.

Those present were then taken on a short tour of an area in Heol y March (opposite Ty Draw) where work to remove diseased larch would begin soon. The broadleaf trees unaffected by the disease would be left and the larch replaced with beech.

We learned that Hensol Forest is considered a suitable habitat for the dormouse, whose possible presence has to be taken into account so they are not unduly disturbed by heavy machinery. This constraint on working during the summer season has delayed the restoration of forest paths. Dormouse protection measures also mean that further stands of diseased larch elsewhere in Hensol cannot be removed until two years have elapsed.

Chris Rees reiterated his intention to keep the community informed of the work in the Forest. He could be contacted, via the NRW website, or through the Clerk.

Members of the community asked about the restoration of footpaths following the recent felling works, especially the track running from the crossroads towards Owls Lodge and the two paths that used to allow access from the lane to the lake. NRW acknowledged that it was part of their remit to facilitate public access to woods which are primarily maintained now for amenity value rather than timber. They would therefore be restoring the drainage alongside the track to make good damage caused by the works and clearing any trees that have fallen across the path. However the paths down to the lake were only informal “desire lines” so they were not obliged to restore these. In addition they explained that it was the responsibility of the local authority rather than NRW to maintain public footpaths in a usable state. Community concerns about impassably muddy sections of the path, especially near the crossroads, should therefore be referred to the Vale of Glamorgan Council.

At the close of the meeting many residents and Councillors individually expressed their thanks to the speakers for taking the time to give the presentation, saying they found it interesting and informative.