

Working towards *Natural England* for people, places and nature

NEWS RELEASE

Monday 4 September 2006

Bringing new life to old Surrey Downs

Cattle, goats and sheep are about to start munching their way across the North Downs. In the process they will be assisting conservation officers and local people on a five year project to restore and revitalise the ancient chalk grasslands in the North Downs of Surrey and in parts of south London.

Launched at the Banstead Woods Countryside Day on Sunday 10 September, as part of Surrey's Heritage Open Days, the Old Surrey Downs Project will last for five years, involves work across 25 different sites and benefits from a £1.4 million funding package. £960,000 of that comes from the Heritage Lottery Fund and £60,000 is from English Nature, with the remainder coming from partnerships and other local sources. Some 137 hectares of downland will be grazed as part of the conservation management work. Grazed downland sites will include Pewley Downs, Sheepleas, White Downs, Happy Valley, Banstead Downs, Fames Rough and Salt Box Hill.

The principal objectives of the Old Surrey Downs Project are to:

- Restore chalk grassland habitats on 25 sites across Surrey and south London;
- Gain support from the local community in managing the habitats to secure the future of these special chalk grasslands, raising their interest by providing opportunities for personal involvement;
- Encourage more visits to these and other chalk grassland sites;
- Return grazing to its major role in maintaining chalk grassland and restore the open character of the chalk landscape by scrub clearance.

The Old Surrey Downs Project manager Alex Baxter Brown says: "With the help and support of local people, we will be working to revitalise chalk grassland through practical management, including scrub removal and the re-introduction of grazing. Chalk downland is part of the local heritage and we hope to encourage local communities to discover its past and secure its future. Community involvement is a major element in the project. We are very grateful for the substantial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. And we are pleased to be working with so many local partners and councils, including Surrey County Council, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Tandridge District Council, The London Borough of Croydon, The London Borough of Sutton and Guildford Borough Council."

Merrick Denton-Thompson OBE, *Natural England* Board member, says: "The chalk grasslands in these parts of Surrey and south London are now a scarce resource in the

Working towards *Natural England* for people, places and nature

south east. English Nature believes that securing the future of these special places requires scrub control and grazing. Many of these sites are also places where people like to walk and enjoy the countryside. One of our tasks, as *Natural England* comes into being in three weeks time, will be to see these wonderful places maintained as high quality habitats and being visited for informal recreation, contributing to a better quality of life for as wide a range of people as possible."

In addition to the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and English Nature, the Old Surrey Downs Project is supported by the Downlands Countryside Management Partnership, which brings six local authorities together, and by the Surrey and London Wildlife Trusts and the National Trust.

Nigel Davenport, chief executive of the Surrey Wildlife Trust, says: "The local Wildlife Trusts will be working hard with the Old Surrey Downs project team to ensure that we get the maximum benefit for the wildlife and species which are special to these chalk downlands, including skylarks, kidney vetch and the small blue butterfly (*Cupido minimus*). We will work alongside neighbouring land managers, including the National Trust and the local authorities. Our role is to manage the land for the benefit of all wildlife interests in a way that helps local people enjoy the area."

David Davis, chairman of Surrey County Council, says: "One of the great things about this project is the way the six local authorities are now working with the other landowners and managers. And we applaud the City of London which originally recognised the value of the North Downs through this part of Surrey. We have called the project 'Old Surrey Downs' because it covers parts of south London which used to be in the old vice-county of Surrey and are still a vital part of the valued chalk downland in this area."

Robin Eve, chairman of the Downlands Countryside Management Partnership which is managing the Old Surrey Downs Project, says: "Across the 25 sites, we are planning to bring over 220 hectares of chalk grassland into good conservation management, with about 140 hectares being grazed by livestock to favour the conservation of chalk grassland flowers and butterflies. We also intend to recreate some 35 hectares of chalk grassland from areas that have become covered with scrub and from former arable land. Our animals will play a large part in the work and are being managed by Caroline Fitzgerald who has extensive experience of conservation grazing while Chris Skinner will be working to involve the local communities in caring for their chalk downland."

"We will be looking for volunteers who can help with scrub-clearance or wild flower counting and for those who want to discover the past of these special sites and care for them in the future. This is a flagship initiative which will revitalise the historic chalk grasslands across this part of Surrey through practical management and conservation grazing, engaging with and involving local people."

ENDS

Working towards *Natural England* for people, places and nature

Media are invited to the launch event, at Banstead Woods, off Holly Lane, near Banstead, (TQ273584) on Sunday 10th September, starting at 12.30.

For more information, or to access photographs, please contact English Nature's PR adviser John Rennie on 07976 666969, or email: jrennie@dial.pipex.com, or contact Alex Baxter Brown, Old Surrey Downs Project Manager, on 01737 737700.

Issued on behalf of the Old Surrey Downs Project by John Rennie.

Notes to editors:

1. The Downlands Countryside Management Partnership will manage the Old Surrey Downs Project, working with the Heritage Lottery Fund and the local partners. The Partnership includes: Surrey County Council, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Tandridge District Council, The London Borough of Croydon, The London Borough of Sutton, The City of London, Guildford Borough Council, the Surrey and London Wildlife Trusts, The National Trust and English Nature.
2. Sites included in the project are: Pewley Downs, Sheepleas, Hackhurst, White Downs, Box Hill, Reigate and Colley Hills, Quarry Hangers, Oxted Downs, Salt Box Hill, Hutchinsons Bank, Riddlesdown, Farthing Downs, Happy Valley, Fames Rough, Stagbury Downs, Park Downs, Dene Farm, Howell Hill, Banstead Downs, Cuddington Meadow, Wellfields, Oaks Park and Roundshaw Downs. More than half the sites are designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The sites are owned by Guildford Borough Council, Surrey County Council, National Trust, Surrey Wildlife Trust, London Wildlife Trust, London Borough of Croydon, Corporation of London, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council and the London Borough of Sutton.
3. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) enables communities to celebrate, look after and learn more about our diverse heritage. From our great museums and historic buildings to local parks and beauty spots or recording and celebrating traditions, customs and history, HLF grants open up our nation's heritage for everyone to enjoy.
4. Surrey Wildlife Trust is a registered charity and the only organisation concerned solely with the conservation of all forms of wildlife in Surrey. Further information can be found on our website www.surreywildlifetrust.co.uk. The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts is a partnership of 47 Wildlife Trusts, across the UK, caring for more than 2,500 nature reserves. The partnership campaigns for the protection of wildlife and invests in the future by helping people of all ages to gain a greater appreciation and understanding of nature. The Wildlife Trusts have a membership of more than 600,000 people.
5. English Nature, the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency's Landscape, Access and Recreation division will be integrated as a single body: *Natural England* from the beginning of October 2006. *Natural England* will work for people, places and nature with responsibility for enhancing biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas; promoting access, recreation and public wellbeing, and contributing to the way natural resources are managed – so they can be enjoyed now and for future generations. English Nature is the independent Government agency that champions the conservation of wildlife and geology throughout England.