



Mr Mike Donnelly  
Mr Julius Marstrand  
Chairman of FOLK

*Sent via email only*

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our ref:  
your ref: 5<sup>th</sup> February 2025  
date:

Dear Mike and Julius,

### **Felling of Larch Trees on Leckhampton Hill – Open Letter**

I write in response to the open letter that was published on FOLK Facebook page. At the time of writing the green spaces team hasn't formally received a copy of the letter in hard or electronic copy but is of the opinion that it should respond to Julius as the author, and Mike as the chairman of FOLK, which is the established consultative group for the hill. You may disseminate the letter to your membership, and those taking part on Facebook discussions, as you see fit along with any messaging you consider appropriate.

I was sorry to read the contents of the letter and the feelings of those on the Facebook page, so I have attempted below to outline the background and lead up to the work that took place, and the outcome of my investigations into the matter. Where I feel there is a shortcoming, I have identified this. In drafting this letter I have discussed the issues with both the Director Communities and Economic Development and the Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Public Realm.

Starting with the background, the Council was approached by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust in 2023 to take part in its "Recovering Adders on the Cotswold Escarpment" Project funded from Natural England's Species Recovery Programme. Gloucestershire is one of the few remaining strongholds for adders with the species in decline or lost in neighbouring counties. At the outset of the project informal engagement took place with FOLK. Our record of this is as follows:

- November 2023 Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust Project Officer wrote to council officers and Folk executive introducing himself and outlining the project project following confirmation of funding
- 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2024 Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust Project Officer attended FOLK Executive Committee to discuss project and wider ecological benefits on the Hill.
- Works publicised and discussed in Spring FOLK Talk newsletter

The first strand of the project started in February 2024 which included gorse management and some minor tree work in line with routine scrub management associated with the limestone grass land to create pathways for adder movement through dense vegetation. Following this Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust in conjunction with Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, surveyed the site identifying a healthy population of adders and what they considered to be an appropriate area to carry out the second strand to the project. An

important point to note is that the objective is to enhance and preserve adder habitat of existing populations to halt their decline and create a sustainable population of the species on the site. No adders are being translocated to the site from elsewhere.

Having identified the site, the Council's Community Ranger, Tree Officer and the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust project officer met on site to discuss the nature of the work required to create the desired adder habitat. Preferred methods include tree felling to open up areas of dense canopy and provide suitable places for adders to bask, paired with coppicing and scrub control. Creating cover with brash and log piles to provide areas where adders can hide from disturbance and predators and create hibernation sites. These factors were taken into account and the Council's Community Ranger and Tree Officer discussed and proposed which trees to retain and which ones to fell and use to create the dead hedge and habitat piles. This included the larch trees which in the opinion of the Council's tree officer were over mature or nearing end of life. He did not consider any of them to be diseased, but they were showing signs of reduced vitality synonymous with advancing maturity.

On the point of the project not being specifically identified in the The Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common Management Plan, this is correct, but the plan did recognise back in 2003 that the site had a healthy population of adders, and given their steady decline since then it does not seem unreasonable to partner with an organisation tasked with preserving their habitat.

This then brings us to what was communicated and presented to the FOLK Executive Board, and the publicity that was undertaken by FOLK prior to the second strand of work taking place. I have broadly outlined this below:

- On the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024, following extensive adder surveying throughout early spring and summer, the Council's Community Ranger forwarded to FOLK Executive Board proposals from Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust that outlined their plan and site selection
- On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2024, the Council's Community Ranger, Tree Officer and the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust Project Officer attended the FOLK Executive Board to explain what was proposed which included a project update outlining the area identified for tree felling that had been submitted to the Committee.
- On the 14<sup>th</sup> October the work was publicised in the Autumn 2024 FOLK talk newsletter in the "Word from Wayne" section
- On the 29<sup>th</sup> October 2024 the Council's Community Ranger reported to the Executive Board that the tree felling was to take place in January and following this, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, FOLK and Cotswold Wardens personnel would work together on creating a dead hedge. Trees to be removed included five-ten larch and two ash, with the possibility of a couple of dead trees being left standing as high pollards.
- FOLK advertised on their Facebook page just after Christmas that the work was due to commence on the 6<sup>th</sup> January with a link to the project page.

The work was carried out on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January and a mixture of FOLK and Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust volunteers returned to the site on January 21<sup>st</sup> to complete the habitat creation by constructing the dead hedge and habitat piles.

Reflecting on this, I consider the project was properly conducted using professional expertise to steer it through its development stages, and that Council and Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust officers presented adequate information to FOLK Executive board and continued to engage with FOLK through to completion of the project.

Having said that, I do feel there was a short coming in that a wider engagement, or information giving process, was not conducted that would have enabled people not involved in the existing process to understand what was about to happen, why and how. This would


have enabled a better understanding of the importance of the larch trees in terms of their amenity value to hill users, and the project could have potentially been modified to reflect this. I regret this did not happen and through this letter I would like to take the opportunity to apologise and work with you to take these lessons learnt into agreeing an approach for future projects.

I agree with the sentiment that conservation can work if conservationists work in partnership with users and the public. Moving forward I propose that my team sit down with FOLK to establish a protocol for this type of project that is outside the usual management activities of the Hill whereby we are more inclusive in the engagement that takes place working in collaboration with FOLK.

There are good examples of this, and I would like to take the opportunity to reflect on the fantastic work that has been undertaken in partnership with FOLK over recent years, and the funding that has been drawn in to improve the site. I am referring to projects such as Restoring Cheltenham's Escarpment Grassland with National Grid Funding, the reinstatement of dry-stone walling, and more recently the introduction of grazing cattle using "no fence" collar technology which could not have been achieved without large scale buy-in from site users, and volunteers. FOLK is central to the success of all these initiatives and is a valued volunteer group.

Finally, Mike I would like to acknowledge the immense efforts of yourself and the Executive Committee who work tirelessly on behalf of everyone and act as the voice of the people on the Hill. I personally value our working relationship and am committed to working with FOLK to learn from this experience.

Yours sincerely



Adam Reynolds  
Green Space and Public Realm Manager

cc.  
Cllr Izaak Tailford  
Cllr Martin Horwood  
Cllr Paul Baker  
Cllr Angie Boyes  
Cllr Iain Dobie