

Organisational Audit Report on Hurst Water Meadow Trust, 2008

by Cynthia Napper

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This is the first organisational audit undertaken by the Trust using an independent auditor. I was asked to do the audit on the basis of seven years working for Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum, mostly supporting local environment groups, and experience of running two local environment groups myself. I have an Undergraduate Certificate in Countryside Conservation and have almost completed a BSc in Natural Sciences with the Open University.

I have found Hurst Water Meadow Trust to be the best organised group that I have ever worked with. Your office **structures** are commendable, with all minutes and newsletters chronologically filed on paper as well as on computer and backed up in a fireproof box. The office is well equipped and the hon. secretary and administrator are computer literate, producing attractive newsletters and reports at frequent intervals. The website is welcoming, with many photographs, and is easy to navigate. It is mostly up to date and clearly states the Trust's policies. The website's excellent feedback system shows that the educational material is accessed regularly, as are the site's maps and achievements pages. Trust owned machinery/materials are stored safely and easily located. Public liability and other insurances are up to date.

Turning to **processes**, trustees have verified that they are kept well informed by newsletter and by email of activities in between their meetings and are consulted on all major decisions. Attendance at trustees meetings is commendably high. Dorchester Parish Council is also satisfied with levels of communication and local people report that they are kept informed of activities on the meadow. New volunteers are actively sought, for example at Dorchester's 'newcomers fair'. Numbers of schools visiting the meadow so far are disappointing. This may be due more to the exaggerated health/safety concerns of teachers than to lack of interest in the site.

Outcomes have generally been good in the last year. The Trust's volunteer base is around 20 people, with eleven on average attending major working parties, a strong turnout for any group, and many smaller working parties as well as regular litter-picking. Local fund-raising for a new mower/trailer was also very successful. Both show high local regard for the meadow and trust in the management committee.

The meadow is well used by both locals and people from nearby villages. During my stakeholder interviews I met 44 people who use the meadow, of which 37 were local. Two of the Hurst Water Meadow Trust's central **policies** are to manage the meadow for the wide-ranging interests of its users, and to encourage greater variety in wildlife. Amongst the stakeholders that I met, satisfaction with the meadow and its facilities as an open space for recreation and for its contribution to quality of life was very high, particularly among the dog walkers and those with young families. Satisfaction with the nature conservation value of the meadow was harder to check but several people requested that the meadow be left as wild as possible, with no more seats or other facilities put in. The one request (by a fisherman) for a toilet block was rejected strongly by most others.

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A few criticized the wild flower planting and one thought the white stones at the entrance gate detracted strongly from the natural look of the meadow. No-one questioned their safety on site. Several people said they appreciated being asked for their views on the meadow.

Recommendations for change

Suggestions might be a better word as the Trust is working extremely well as it is.

To maximise local involvement I suggest that the website is given a contact email address such as office@hurst-water-meadow.co.uk accessible by the hon secretary/administrator, and that this address is given on the notice-board in the meadow, asking for comments, species sightings, volunteer offers, suggestions etc. Many people now prefer email contact to telephoning or writing.

If not already done it might be worth an occasional or regular slot in the Dorchester News on the meadow's present and potential contribution to nature conservation. Most people I met looked a little blank at this question and it would explain why the Trust is working so commendably hard to plant wild flowers.

The Trustees could meet more often, perhaps 3-4 times a year in order to make joint decisions together following discussion. Frequent newsletters and emails are very useful in saving time and keeping busy people up to date, but regular debate keeps everyone involved and interested.

As with most of the successful groups that I know, a degree of benign autocracy in running the Trust is reported. Some local people expressed concern that the Trust would fold when the hon secretary retired, leaving the meadow at risk. The issue of continuity also came up in my discussions with the hon secretary and administrator. It might be useful to agree those decisions in readiness, so that the handover, whenever it happens, is smooth.

This organisational audit of Hurst Water Meadow Trust was a pleasure to do. I have no real criticisms to make and I am sure the Trust will continue to be successful in the coming year.