



Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve

Management Plan Stakeholder Workshop 2 Report: 14 March 2024

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Background

This was the second of two stakeholder workshops organised to support the process being undertaken by the Natural England team at Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve (Ainsdale NNR) to create a management plan for the frontal woodlands area of the site. A public survey preceded the first workshop held on 24th January 2024 to help inform the discussions. A report from that survey was also produced and summarised at the first workshop. Both workshops and the public survey were managed by independent facilitators [3KQ](#).

Introductory presentation & questions

After a round of introductions (see attendance at the end of the report) the aims and objectives of the meeting were shared and working agreements for the day were agreed.

Aims and Objectives:

The workshop will further explore with local stakeholders the future management of the sand dunes and woodland by the sea at Ainsdale NNR.

Specifically, the workshop will:

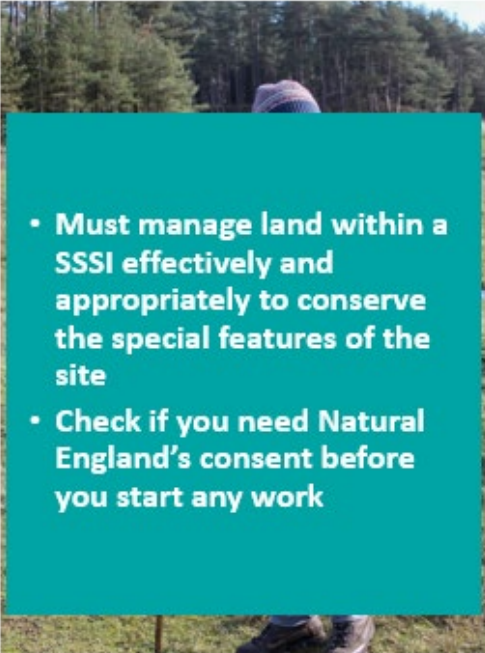
1. Update you on previous discussions and the range of management options.
2. Present a possible outline management plan for the sand dunes and woodland by the sea.
3. Hear and explore your views about this outline plan including how the plan could be improved.
4. Agree actions and next steps.

Natalie Hunt (Coastal Lead Adviser – Sefton Coast) and Dave Mercer (Ainsdale NNR Senior Reserve Manager) gave an introductory presentation to update those who had not been present at the first workshop and to inform everyone about the thinking on the emerging management plan, incorporating the feedback from that first workshop and subsequent discussions with key stakeholders. This included a recap on the role of Natural England:

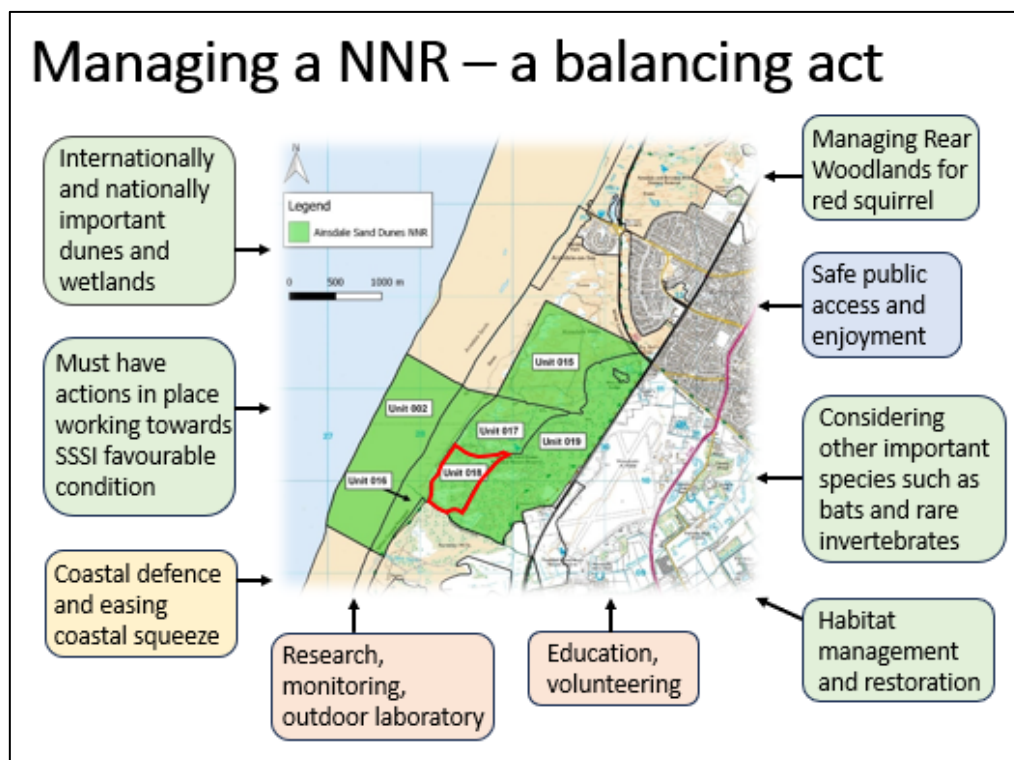
Recap - Natural England & Our Role

- Government's adviser for the natural environment in England
- Vision - 'Thriving Nature for people and planet'
- Mission - 'Building partnerships for Nature's recovery'
- Responsible for protecting Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in England
- Objective - To achieve 'favourable condition' status for all SSSIs



SSSI Owner/Occupier	SSSI Responsible Officer
 • Must manage land within a SSSI effectively and appropriately to conserve the special features of the site • Check if you need Natural England's consent before you start any work	 • Works with owner/occupiers to ensure they are managing their land properly and working towards <u>favourable</u> condition • Provides advice and responds to consent requests • Monitoring and reporting on SSSI condition

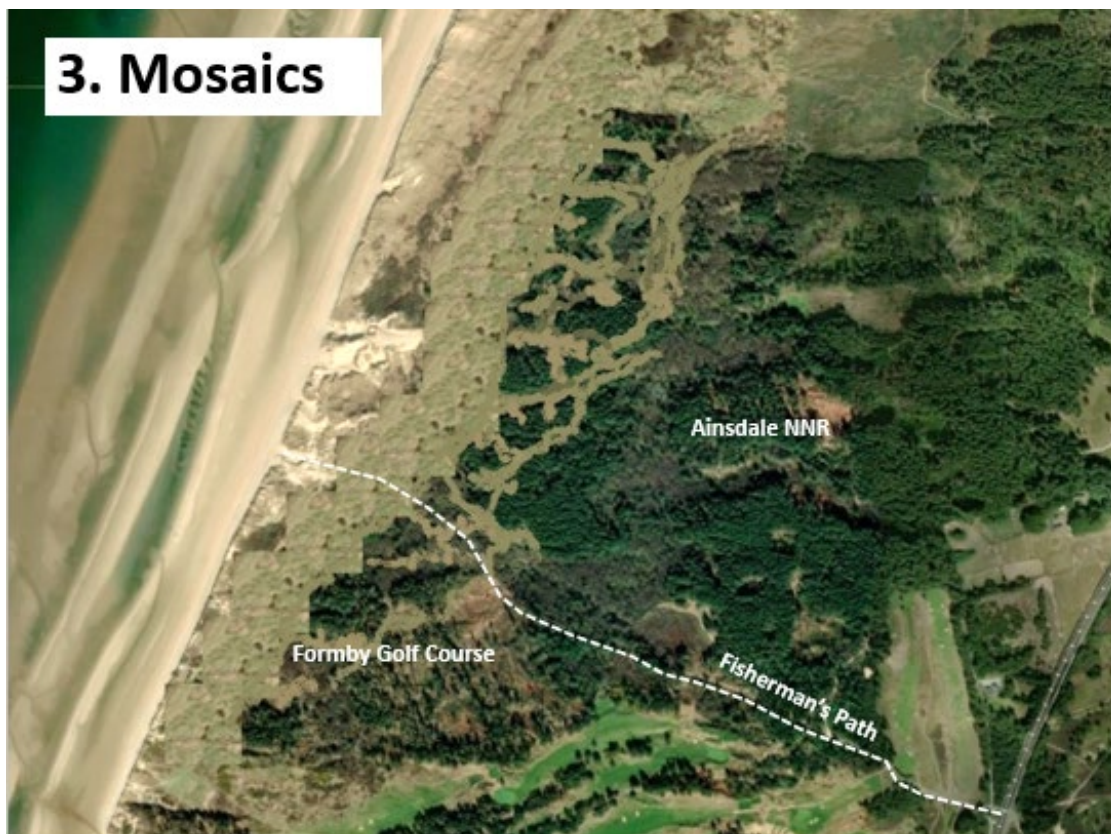
Dave explained that the focus for discussions at the workshop was the area known as the 'frontal woodlands' edged in red on the slide below. Dave then gave an overview of some of the key considerations when managing a national nature reserve.



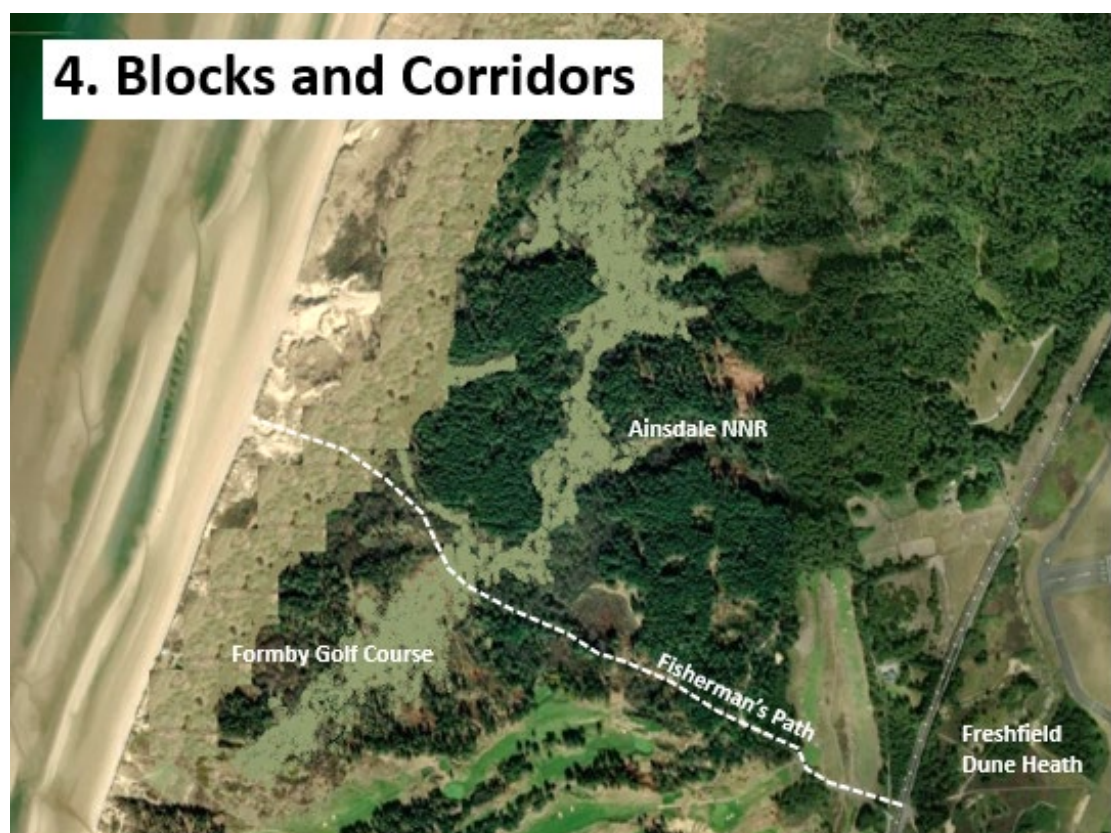
Dave went on to explain the four options that had been discussed in workshop one (detailed report available) using representations based on Google maps.



3. Mosaics



4. Blocks and Corridors



This table was shared from Workshop 1, indicating levels of support shown by stakeholders attending the workshop when thinking about the various options presented.



Dave outlined his key learning from the first workshop in January 2024

Key Takeaways from Workshop 1

Management of the frontal woodlands preferred compared to no management

Using nature-based solutions to protect our coast and improve coastal defence is important

Strong support for removal of frontal woodlands but some opposition

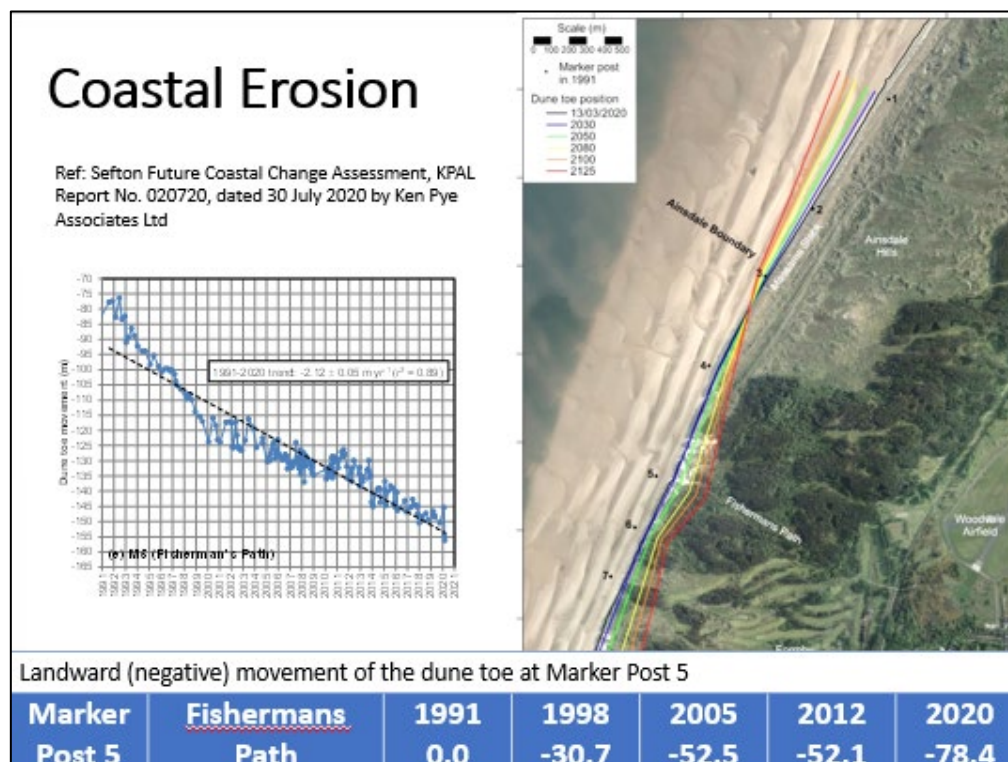
'Mosaics' were seen as the interim step over a 10-year plan for Option 2

Recognising the national and international rarity of dune and wetland habitats and their restoration is important

'Blocks and Corridors' was not a popular option

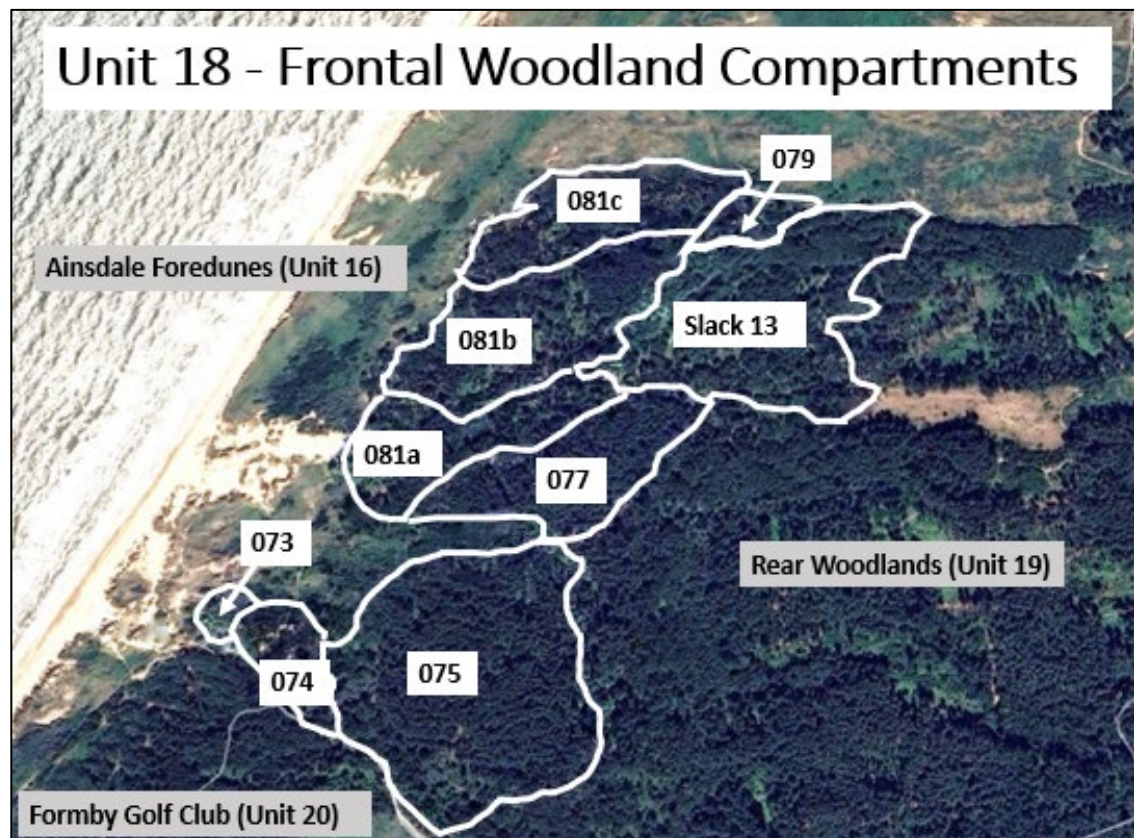
Considering key species e.g. natterjack toad, sand lizard, red squirrel and bats – is important

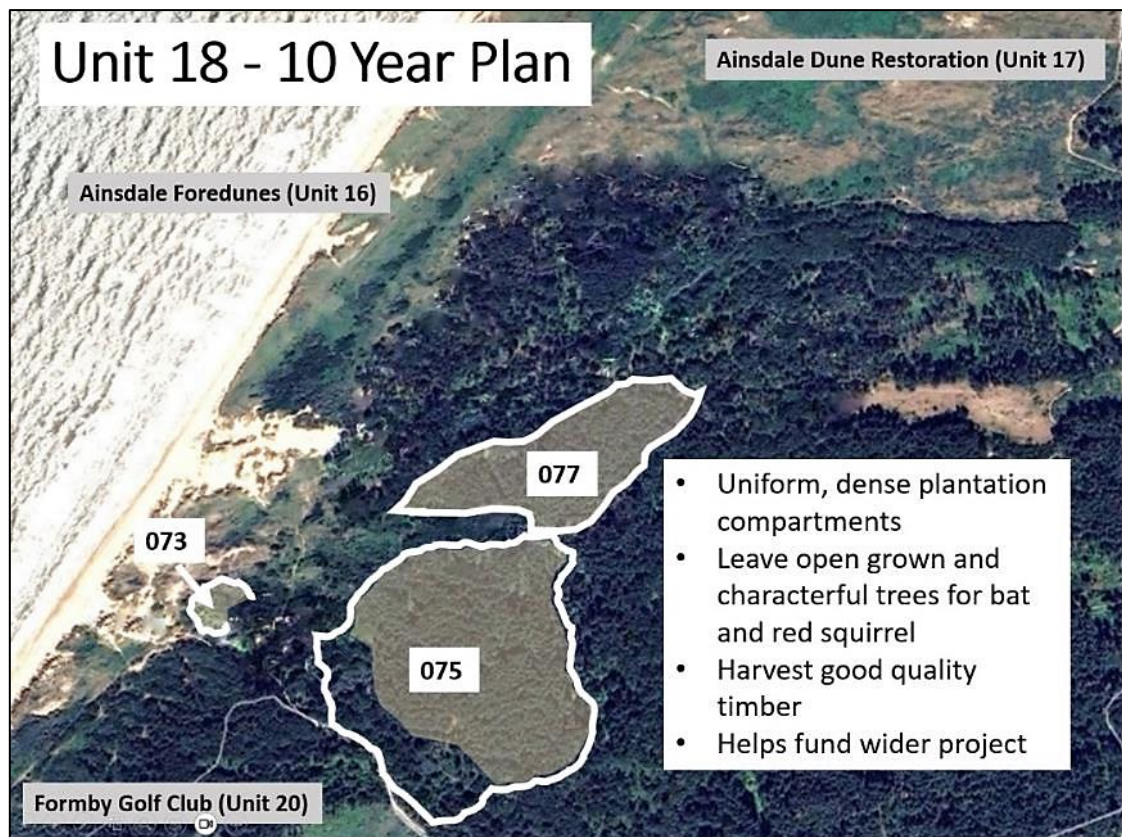
He also addressed an action from the first stakeholder workshop which was to share evidence on coastal erosion in the area.

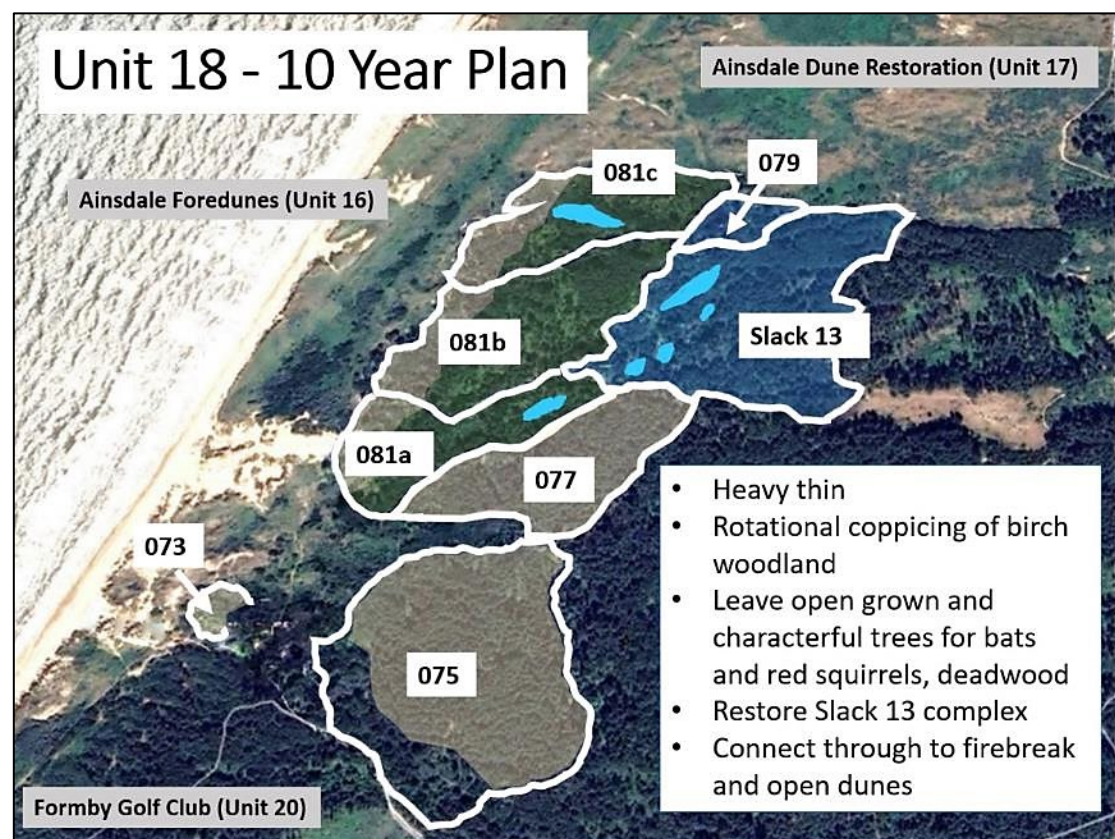
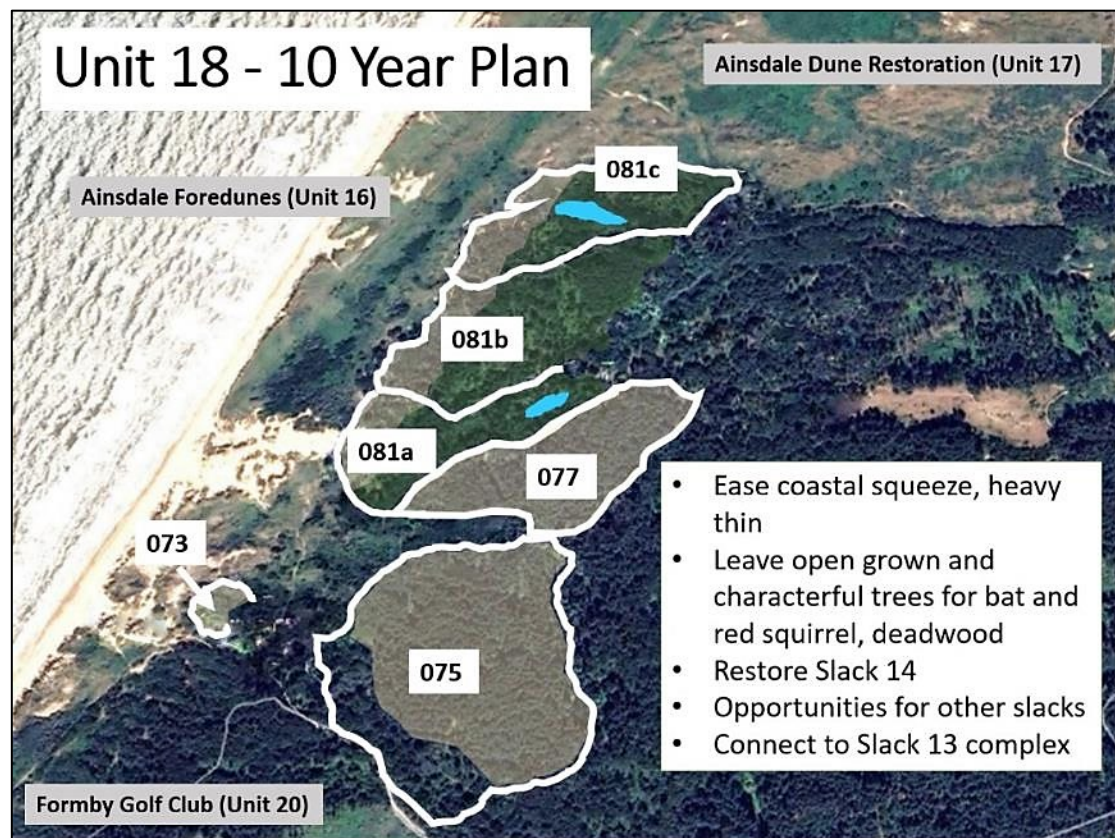


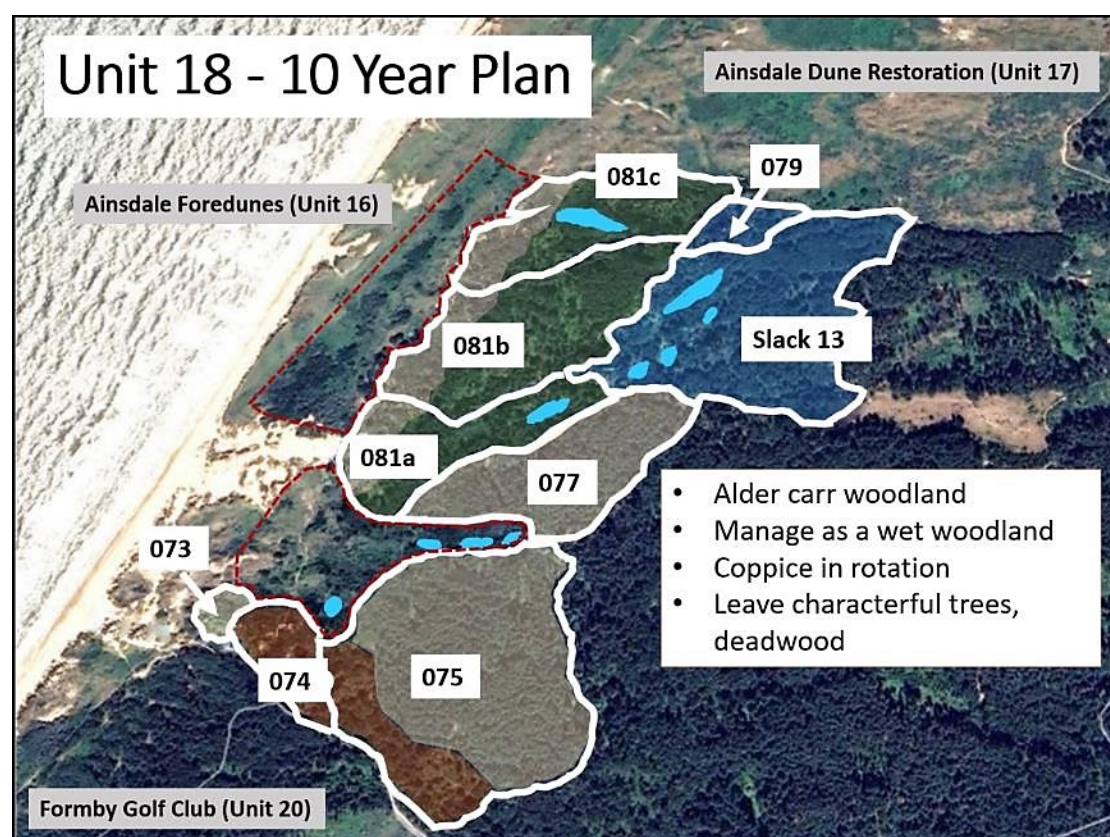
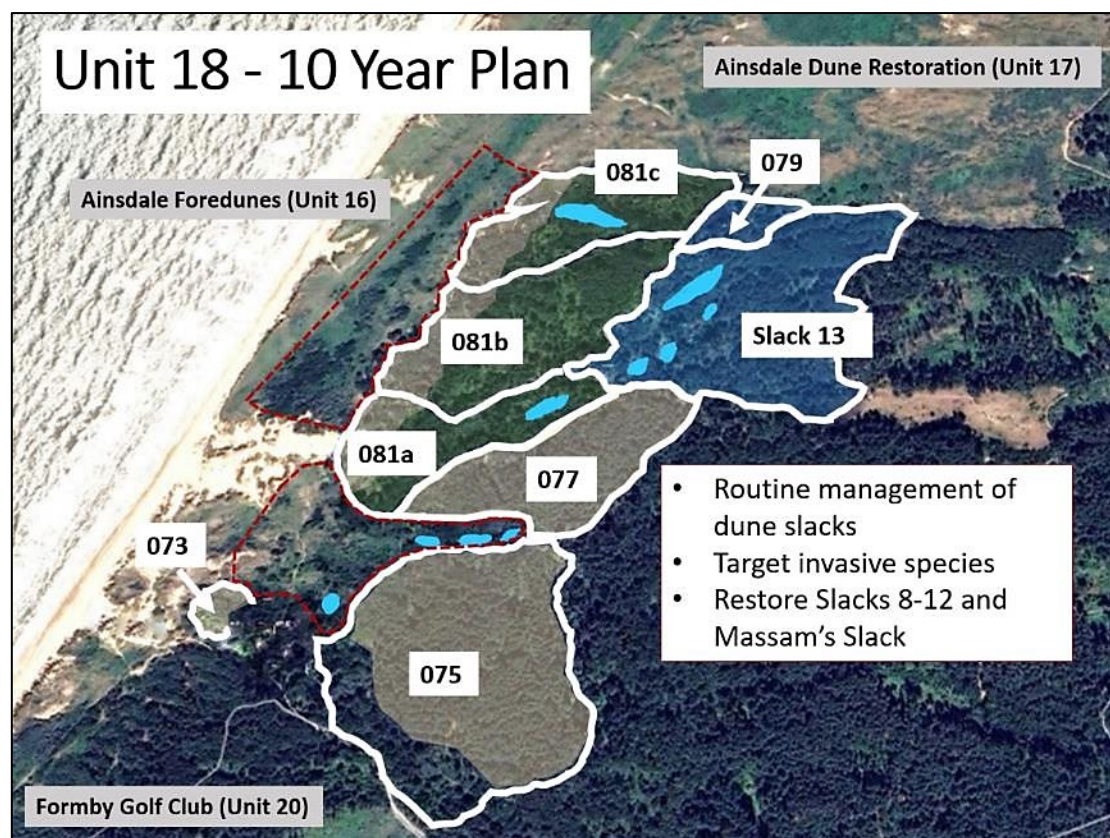
Dave then went on to outline current thinking on the development of the management plan, using photos to show what currently exists in the various compartments outlined on the map, and options for their future management.











The following areas of discussion were covered in a Q & A session that followed this presentation:

There was a query about whether a 'clear fell' would be a **more straightforward approach**. At this point it was felt that an approach consisting of starting off with some tree removal in key areas (at 'pinch points' from the point of view of the dune system, or in cases where there is timber with commercial value) would enable relevant monitoring to take place with safeguards for species such as bats and squirrels which wouldn't then experience a sudden habitat loss, whilst realising some financial resource to help with future management.

It was clarified that the **full area of the frontal woodland is around 35 hectares** out of a total of 175 hectares of pine plantation all together on the Ainsdale NNR. There are also the connecting pine plantations associated with Formby Golf Course and National Trust Formby to the immediate south of Ainsdale NNR.

A challenge was made to the idea of **harvesting timber** to obtain payment, but the group was reassured that management of those areas would be recommended anyway; the fact that there was value to be realised in the timber would simply be a helpful way to pay for future management on other parts of the reserve.

The issue of **compensatory planting** was discussed. Strictly speaking it was explained that as the habitat is a designated dune habitat there would be no requirement for compensatory planting of trees on the reserve or elsewhere. However, it was agreed that the idea could be explored in partnership with others and in a way which would look to complement other initiatives in the wider area, particularly around red squirrel expansion projects.

There was some discussion about on-going maintenance in particular **scrub management** in areas where trees are thinned or removed. It was acknowledged that some self-seeding of the trees that were thinned would take place and scrub growth would be an issue that would need to be managed to create the dune habitat desired given the special designation however, this would be very much routine management.

Following an explanation in the presentation that '**characterful**' trees would be retained in areas where thinning was taking place, there was a question about how such a tree would be defined. In response it was explained that plans will evolve according to different management areas and assessments of which trees would benefit which species as well as aesthetic value would be undertaken. It would be likely that these trees would not be those which would have commercial value.

It was confirmed that the plan includes the vision of connecting up **wetland** areas (dune slacks) within the reserve. It was discussed that the pine plantations currently impact the groundwater table by reducing the water available for dunes slacks and it was likely that tree removal would therefore benefit dune slacks.

There was discussion about **practicalities and monitoring**. Taking a gradual approach to thinning was considered to be practical from a work perspective and also to allow for monitoring and learning as things proceed. However there was a view from some stakeholders that the beneficial effects of tree removal to restore dune habitats is already acknowledged and that the pace should be quicker, given the other nearby habitats to support woodland flora and fauna.

Timelines were considered with this particular plan being confirmed as being designed over ten years, within a longer 50-year vision which is included as part of the overall NNR management plan.

A question was asked about how tree removal would affect **erosion and sediment pattern**. Tree removal will allow the establishment of marram grass which will have the effect of catching windblown sand, building dunes and therefore developing a natural coastal defence.

It was confirmed that characterful trees would be retained in **compartments 75 and 77** but that a large proportion of trees in those areas have commercial value and would therefore be harvested or thinned.

Considering the **options put forward at the first workshop** the current plan is thought to be a mixture of 'blocks and corridors' and the 'mosaic' options.

There was confirmation that **coastal protection, nature conservation and recreation needs will be balanced** within the plan. Coastal protection and nature conservation are more prominent in the plan but in terms of recreation there was acknowledgement of anti-social behaviour which tends to go on in the more densely wooded parts of the reserve, and that some thinning and tree removal would hopefully make it easier for the reserve managers to monitor behaviour, reduce the risk of fires and improve the public amenity of the site.

There was a discussion about the woodland areas of the reserve where felling took place in the 1990s. The strength of reaction at that time was acknowledged. Apparently, consultation and engagement had taken place in advance of the works but that was some years before the felling actually took place. Therefore, when the work was carried out, people had either moved on or had forgotten about the reasoning behind the works. Some stakeholders, despite their own support for the developing plan, voiced **concerns about potential public response**, noting that people can have an understandable automatic adverse reaction to trees being removed. Having had the experience of taking people on guided walks, Ainsdale NNR staff and volunteers felt that many were more understanding when the need for protecting the dune habitat was explained, alongside reassurances about the extent and management of other areas of the site and surrounding areas for species dependent on woodland such as red squirrel.

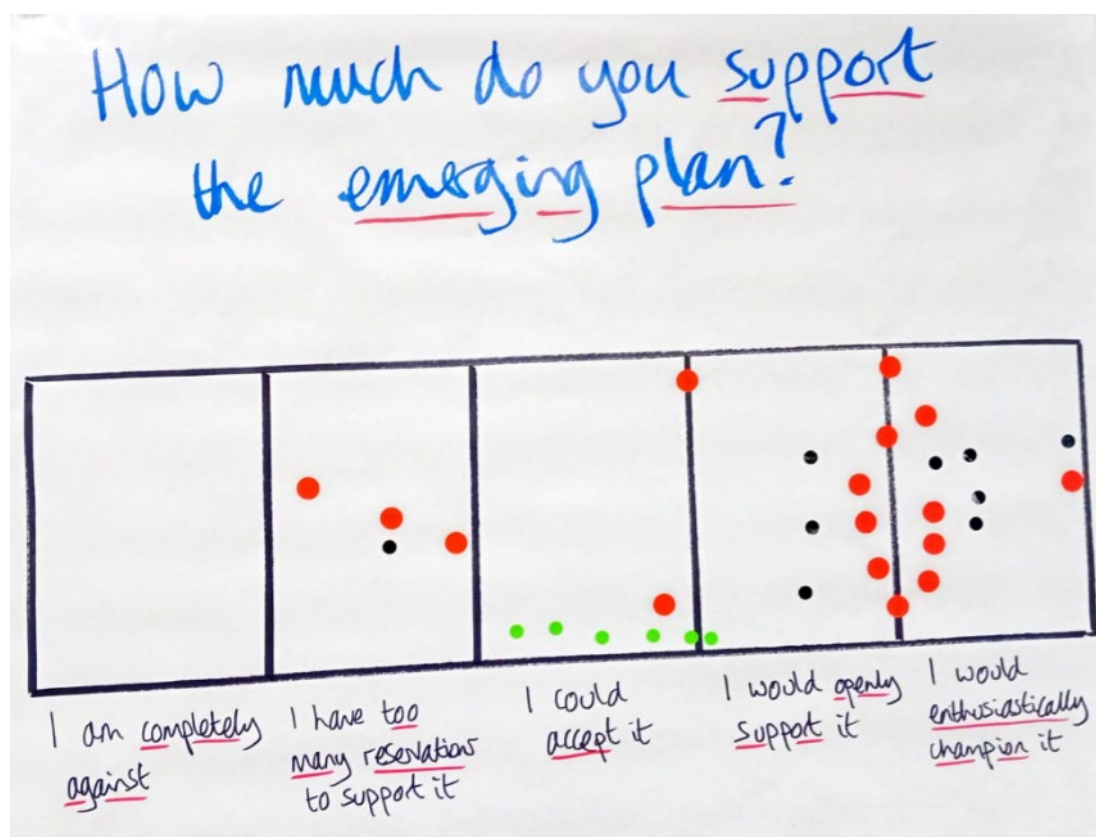
It was confirmed that there were no tree protection orders on any trees on the site, as it is primarily a pine plantation, but that both a **felling licence** from the Forestry Commission and **consent** from the SSSI Responsible Officer would be needed before any tree removal could take place.

There was a discussion about the **'no management' option** put forward at the first workshop, with a broad consensus that this would be an unhelpful continuation of the current situation where the dune habitats affected by the frontal woodlands remain in 'unfavourable' condition in a SSSI assessment. The fact that the trees were originally planted with the intention of being felled as a crop was also raised. There was reassurance that if some of the current trees were removed over the next ten years the ingress of sand landwards would not be significant because vegetation would develop on the dunes in addition to the rear woodland remaining as it is. It was also reiterated that the area being considered for management and some elements of tree removal is a small compartment, around 35 hectares compared to an overall pine plantation area of 175 hectares as mentioned above.

Finally, the **importance of monitoring** was underlined, with the opportunity to make the most of partnership-working with universities to continue to support the long-term monitoring work that is already going on.

There was a question about whether a SSSI landowner could be forced to remove trees to achieve favourable status, and if there was funding to support landowners to undertake necessary management. The response was that although there are mechanisms in place, these would be a last resort and that partnership working and agreeing a suitable management plan would be the best way forward; in addition, it was confirmed that funding sources are usually available to support this type of management.

After the question-and-answer session was concluded, everyone was asked to place dots on a scale to indicate how they felt about the emerging management plan. The resulting indication was as follows:



N.B. Green dots = Natural England staff, black dots = Natural England volunteers, red dots = external stakeholders

What do you like about this option?

There were table discussions about what the stakeholders present liked about the emerging plan. These were summarised as follows:

- Combination/consideration of different approaches, and the steadiness of approach
- Better than the current situation
- Range of options for consideration
- The fact that it is a slower pace creates the opportunity to learn more

- Existing evidence that this works
- Removal of most of the trees
- Protects the coast with focus on dunes as a designated protected feature
- Specific reference to different species, sounds like lots of different things are being taken into account
- Direction of travel
- Pragmatic – a nice balance, not just rushing which people might not like
- Opportunity for further discussion and dialogue
- From the perspective as a Formby resident – appreciate focus on coastal erosion and aim to slow it down
- Generates income
- Specific reference to the retention of wetland
- Biodiversity benefits
- It would return the landscape to a natural state
- Opportunities for monitoring before and after
- Retention of the rear woodland
- Improve the height of the water table
- More opportunities for volunteering

What concerns you about this option?

Table discussions again took place and those present were asked to consider completing the following sentence: ***If this option is implemented then please...***

Responses included the following

- Please **focus on the science rather than opinion**
- Fell trees gradually over time, monitoring for squirrels, **be careful about unintended consequences**. An additional concern was raised about the focus on balancing multiple factors potentially leading to a loss of clear focus on anything.
- Before implementation **do public consultation then action should follow swiftly after**, not a long time after like before. A clarification was made after this point referencing the fact that there is no legal requirement for public consultation over and above the felling licence application.
- Please explain how **compromises on a SSSI dunescape might affect other SSSI sites**
- **Need proper baseline data** before the works commence
- If this option is implemented **please look after the red squirrels**.
There was a discussion after this point about the fact that mature pines can't be easily replaced but on the other hand continued lack of management over the years and aging trees has led to declining food supply in the frontal woodlands for red squirrels. It was acknowledged that the people of Formby are very keen on supporting the red squirrels in the area and that everything must continue to be done to support their habitat elsewhere on the reserve e.g. in the rear woodlands and in surrounding areas. The NNR staff and Red Squirrel Officer confirmed they are working together to ensure greater habitat for red squirrel across the wider area to reduce the species' reliance on the pine plantation and build resilience into the population.
- Please **continue to education the locals with walks etc**

- **This might not go far enough**... please be brave, keep going
- Please **be more ambitious** – concern is that it is not ambitious enough
- Please **communicate clearly** so people understand why this is happening.
There was further discussion about concerns about 11th hour protests and the wish to promote understanding and avoid conflict and upset.
- **Concern it won't be sufficient enough** for dune habitat and species
- **Please keep monitoring** especially coastal erosion
- **Good that things will be taken quite gradually** and that there will be monitoring.
Monitoring must be comprehensive. It has to be properly resourced. Please don't have over reliance on volunteers.
- **Concern about timespan** for returning dunes to favourable condition and the timescale of coastal erosion, please see it in the wider context and lay out clear time spans in the coastal erosion context and time span for reaching favourable condition.
- Please think about how you can sustain it. If you are not going to clear everything, how are you going to make sure that which is left behind isn't going to take over everything. **Make sure the way forward is sustainable.**
- Please **ensure that conservation grazing** takes place
- Please **keep a good evidence record** of how clearing trees allows dunes to move, would give us up to date records to educate and bring other people on board. It would be good to use photography for this.
- Please **make sure there is compensatory tree planting elsewhere.** In general we are looking to increase woodland cover. Plant elsewhere nearby to the coast preferably in an area that is beneficial to red squirrel.
- Please **explain the extent and variety of character trees that are going to be left** (so public have an idea of what it's going to look like)
- Please **ensure that favourable condition is prioritised.**
- Please **be clear and transparent about the future** – be clear about intentions i.e. dune restoration
- Please **maintain good access for the public**, especially the coastal path.
- Request – be **really clear about terminology** e.g. if you call it dune restoration do you have justification for leaving any trees?
- Please **take and use photographs** to evidence and clarify progress
- Please **highlight the species which will benefit** – lizards, toads etc.
- Please **think about the transition of species** such as bats and red squirrel

In response to the concerns Ainsdale NNR staff made the following points

- There was a reflection that there is already **clear scientific evidence** about what would work to achieve favourable status for the area, and that the **monitoring capability** is there to check this as things progress.
- **Baseline monitoring** – there are many long term monitoring systems in place available along the Sefton coast for a variety of key species of flora and fauna. Additional baseline data could be recorded and monitored alongside this system.
- Any proposals will be discussed fully with the **Forestry Commission and Mersey Forest** and the **Sefton Council Coastal Defence Team**
- **Communication** is an area where the team felt improvements have been made e.g. increase in frequency of guided walks, increased information on Facebook. Committed to support people's understanding of what's going on at the reserve.

If this option is implemented, I could offer to....

For the final session of the meeting there was a request for offers, with a request to complete the sentence: **If this option is implemented, I could offer to....**

Responses were as follows:

- Volunteers offered 'our time, our ideas, our passion for the area'. They also offered to engage directly with people unhappy about potential tree removal to explain their own understanding.
- MEAS offered support within the context of the Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership as it applies to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for the whole region. Site level work at Ainsdale was also offered.
- Sefton Council/Green Sefton offered to continue sharing coast data and promoting the dune landscape
- Local Councillors offered to help communicate with residents to try and explain the reasons behind the potential management of the frontal woodlands and therefore minimise conflict.
- Formby Golf Club representatives offered to champion the plan to fellow members and try to encourage the same approach on their land to the south of the NNR. Also offered to share own data on coastal erosion and experience with trees next to the coastline.
- Phil Smith offered literature evidence about the habitats on the NNR
- Stan Irwin offered pre and post bat surveys and sharing of data held already
- Red Squirrel Officer offered support with squirrel surveys
- Woodland Monitoring Group offered to act as a channel of communication with the public

Finally, there was a recognition that many people in the room had even more data that could be shared including photos taken over time and other records.

Next steps

Dave Mercer concluded by offering thanks to everyone who attended the meeting and outlining next steps as follows:

- A site visit with Forestry Commission officer(s) to discuss management ideas on the ground. (April 2024)
- Outreach and education activities, media releases, quarterly newsletter and events explaining the proposed management to the local community and showcasing the wildlife of the site (April 2024 onwards).
- Engagement with Mersey Forest to discuss inclusion of the reviewed management plan in the Sefton Coast Woodlands working plan and to discuss compensatory planting or other options outside the SSSI to promote red squirrel conservation (April, May 2024)
- Review the existing management plan for the whole of the NNR including the development of new projects to deliver the management ideas discussed in the workshop(s) (May-July 2024)

- Key stakeholder consultation on the reviewed plan, comments and advice then included in the new plan and consented (Aug - Oct 2024)
- 10-year forestry management plan submitted to the Forestry Commission covering the new projects for Unit 18 to obtain a felling licence (Oct-Dec 2024)

List of attendees:

Attendee List for Stakeholder Workshop 2 - 14th March 2024

Name	Organisation
Jenny Willis	3KQ
Rhuari Bennett	3KQ
Dave Mercer	Ainsdale NNR, Natural England
Charlotte Webster	Ainsdale NNR, Natural England
Pete Gahan	Ainsdale NNR, Natural England
Robert Burns	Forestry Commission
Sian Halfpenny	Forestry Commission
Paul Swift	Formby Golf Club
Geoff Harris	Formby Golf Club
Gordon White	Green Sefton
John Dempsey	Green Sefton
Carol Richards	Harrington Ward Councillor
Thomas Smyth	Huddersfield University
Andrew Hampson	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
Melissa Wharram	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
Stan Irwin	Merseyside and West Lancashire Bat Group
Andrew Clark	Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service
Joanne Doolin	Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service
Natalie Hunt	Natural England
Amy Corthine	Natural England
Lorna Drake	Natural England
Christopher Page	Ravenmeols Ward Councillor
Sally Edmondson	Retired lecturer, long-term monitoring at Ainsdale NNR
Phil Smith	Retired lecturer/ecologist, Volunteer
Paul Wisse	Sefton Council
Katie Etheridge	Volunteer
Jo Cullen	Volunteer
Becky Doughty	Volunteer
Chris Ambrose	Volunteer
John Ferguson	Volunteer
Susan Hart	Volunteer

Dave Wheatley	Volunteer
Rob Jenkins	Volunteer
David Adams	Woodlands Monitoring Group
Mark Bennett	Woodlands Monitoring Group

Apologies were received from National Trust, North Merseyside Amphibian & Reptile Group, Loughborough University, Southampton University, Ward Councillors, Formby Ladies Golf Club, Mersey Forest, National Museum Liverpool