

**Open Spaces working group**

**Date: 4 June 2021 2021**

**Title: Rabbit Report**

**Purpose of Report**

To update members on a request to cull rabbits

**Recommendation:**

To note the report

**Background:**

1. The council was approached with an offer to cull what was perceived as being a rabbit problem in certain areas of Ilminster. This offer was referred to members at the 4 May 2021 Open Spaces meeting.
2. Members listened to a presentation from Mr Arnold on the reason for the need to cull the rabbits and his qualifications.
3. It was agreed that members would contact the office with their thoughts and feelings on the matter.

**Report:**

4. Following various responses being received it was clear that there was little support at this time for there allow any culling on Council land to take place currently.
5. This position might change in the future and as a result Jake Taylor was asked to produce a report looking at some of then issues surrounding pest control. This report has been appended.

**Mark Tredwin  
Town Clerk  
May 2021**

**Rabbits on our open spaces**

**What are our responsibilities as a landowner?**

We have a responsibility as landowner to control this rabbit Under Section 1 of the Pests Act 1954, the whole of England excluding a few areas of London and the evilly isles have been declared a rabbit clearance area.

Under Section 1 of the 1954 Act, all occupiers of land in a rabbit clearance area have a continuing obligation to kill or take any wild pop rabbits living on, or resorting to, their land, unless they can establish that it is not reasonably practicable to do so.

If it is not practicable to destroy the rabbits, we have an obligation to prevent the rabbits from causing damage elsewhere by, for example, fencing them in with rabbit-proof fencing. The obligation to control rabbits is irrespective of the use being made of the occupier’s land or that of their neighbours. Therefore, the nature reserve designation of Herne Hill is not waiver our responsibility.

**How is this enforced?**

The Secretary of State has powers, under Section 98 of the Agriculture Act 1947, to serve a notice on an occupier requiring them to take specified action against the rabbits. If an occupier fails to take the specified action, they would be liable for prosecution. In addition, the Secretary of State can also arrange for a third party to carry out the necessary control work on the occupier’s land and then recover the cost of this work from the occupier.

**Do we have a rabbit problem?**

The answer to this question is not a straightforward one and isn’t one we can answer alone. Current levels are far from an infestation however breeding rates allow populations to grow exponentially



*Figure 1: Rabbit damage on the slopes of cleaves close*

**Our land:**

At present we do not have much data on the flora on cleaves close therefore it is difficult to say how much of an affect rabbits are having at the present time; this is something we aim to improve on in coming years to monitor successfulness of management practices.

This data will also allow us to monitor the effect rabbits are having on the area, at first glance there is some evidence that they are grazing see (photo 1)

Rabbits are voracious eaters and leave clean-cut damage. the leaves and stems of plants for that have been eaten by them have cleanly cut damage; insects and other pests usually leave jagged edges on damaged plants.

Once we have a baseline of data, we as council can then employ a limits of acceptable change model setting data supported limits to which demonstrate as acceptable and when action should be taken.

**Our neighbours Land:**



*Figure 2 suspected rabbit damage field next to ours*

With agricultural land surrounding much of our open spaces its important to acknowledge the risks that rabbits pose to our neighbours

One of the main reasons why rabbits are considered agricultural pests is because they are herbivores. This means that they are in direct competition with livestock for pasture and end up consuming a lot of food that was not intended for them and similarly will eat young shoots of freshly planted crop.



*Figure 3: rabbit dropping field next to ours*

The damage will be often negligible and will not often cause significant economic damage however, its not down to us to decide how much damage is acceptable for them.

There is some noticeable damage to the field adjacent to Britten's field (figure 2) which matches that usually associated with rabbits along with droppings and further evidence of bites.

Some of the surrounding landowner's activity manage the population of rabbit through ferreting and other methods. When natural England first receive complaints regarding rabbit damage, they will encourage both parties to have a conversation regarding the issue as communication is key to long term control of the problem

In the spirit of being neighbourly it may be worth touching base with the surrounding landowners to ensure they have no present issues and to let them know they can get in touch with us should an

issue ever arise, this will also allow us to build a relationship on other matter such as hedge laying shared boundaries.

### **Rabbit control Methods**

There are several methods that can be used to control rabbit numbers and some research suggests that due to the speed rabbits breed that some methods alone will not be enough. Methods include trapping, gassing, snaring and many more. Each will have their pros and cons. These Controlling methods each will be interpreted by the community in a different way with rabbits being associated with a household pets' emotions will be running high. Before any method is undertaken a clear communication strategy should be thought out to ensure we can respond to complaints regarding the matter promptly supported by data to justify the actions.

### **Moving forward**

Although at present we cannot quantify the damage being caused on our own land at some point in the future be it 5 – 10 years down the line it is likely we will need to control numbers to protect our habitats and our neighbours' fields.

Therefore, it is important we think about how we will face this issue next time it arises.

Actions to be considered in the future :

- Neighbouring landowners be identified, and informal conversation had
- Data to be collected on ground flora with attention being made to rabbit damage
- Limits of Acceptable change are identified and worked into a pest control policy
- Research methods of control, to identify a strategy that best suits our situation and work into pest control policy
- Framework developed to help guide management decisions when issues arise in the future.

Jake Taylor  
May 2021