

HPC Statement presented by the Chairman, Cllr Guy Reynolds regarding the fire on Holt Heath, Saturday 9th August to the meeting of the Parish Council held 20th August 2025.

The fire the parish had the misfortune to experience on Saturday 9th was dramatic and damaging in equal measure. Some 180 acres of heathland was burnt, as well as damage to property, although the latter was mercifully light considering the scale of the blaze.

We understand that emotions are running high and parishioners rightly have attended this evening to voice their concerns and opinions in the aftermath. We would ask you to listen to the following statement and respond in the light of what is said. There will be an opportunity to ask further questions at the end.

First and foremost, we would seek to remind all present that there is only one party to blame for the fire, and that is the person that started it. There are several factors that many of us believe would have mitigated the impact, but ultimately an individual made the choice to start the fire, in extremely dry and windy conditions. That is outside of our control, no matter what actions were or were not taken previously or subsequently. The fire service were very clear that the 30:30:30 conditions experience were perfect for wildfires, and very little can stop them under these circumstances.

Many of you here this evening, both parishioner and councillor, will join me in expressing considerable frustration at the lack of fire breaks cut onto the heath. They have been a feature in the past, and there is undoubtedly a powerful feeling that they have been disastrously absent this Summer. The parish council had requested only a few weeks ago that the significant levels of tall gorse on the Common was controlled, particularly in close proximity to properties adjacent to the heath. We had also asked the fire service, in the wake of the smaller fires, to add their weight to that request. In fairness to the National Trust, the local rangers were aware of the risks and had agreed to develop a cutting plan for the coming year, but there was no action taken in the short term.

There are a number of factors that are at work in this situation, but many of you may not be aware of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act. This Act gave protected legal status to heathland, amongst other environments, and this means every action taken has to be considered through this lens. Any landowner, including the National Trust, has a legal obligation to consider the impact of any work undertaken on the natural environment before any other consideration, including people and property. This means any action taken, even gorse clearance or firebreaks, has to be submitted to Natural England for approval prior to being undertaken, and Natural England are legally bound to refer to the Act before granting permission and issuing a licence. Written in 1981, there is no mention of climate change or wildfires in the Act. Whether or not you see this as idiocy or lunacy, it is the law as it stands

at the moment. Given the restrictions on funding, people and resources by the National Trust for the Commons areas, it is unsurprising that the local rangers were unable to achieve more.

Like me, many will have been dismayed to see the National Trust then spring into action on Sunday and Monday, cutting several new firebreaks and reinstating older ones. I suspect, like me, it seemed a case of too little, too late. The explanation for this action lies in the fire service declaring a major incident, which meant they had the legal right to override legislation, including the 1981 Act, to request the work was undertaken immediately to aid their efforts. As the fire service predicted, that authority ceased this Saturday, as soon as the incident had been downgraded. These are quirks of the law, but I hope it clarifies the actions taken. It was not, as some have expressed to me, because the Trust felt guilty or wanted to make themselves look less responsible. What I do hope, in view of the scale of the damage, is that in future years the Trust are able to make the case more strongly that firebreaks not only help the fire service in the event of a fire to protect lives and property, but that they actually improve the chances of survival for rare flora and fauna at the same time.

Another factor early on in the fire that has been noted was the lack of knowledge of the whereabouts of hydrants, and the lack of serviceability of hydrants when they were located. Some of this is related to out of area crews being in attendance, but the information should still have been available. The parish council will be requesting that there is an accurate map made available to both the fire service and the parish council, if it hasn't already, but also that considering the hydrants and their essential role tackling the fires, they are maintained despite their rural locations. We do know that all hydrants the fire service wished to use were made serviceable in very quick order once faulty ones had been identified, and for that we are grateful.

There has been mention of the lack of information available during the wildfire as to the nature and timing of evacuations. The parish council has previously had two meetings with members of the fire service, and the Firewise scheme in attendance, which parishioners were able to attend. We distributed appropriate literature locally to public venues, emailed out the recommendations and made all the requested situation updates we were asked to by the fire service. We have previously outlined the recommendations to have a 'grab bag' of essentials ready when we are aware of fires in the local area, and that the fire service are in charge of evacuations. We continuously offered appropriate administrative support where appropriate.

We have also recognised the usefulness of a 'Whatsapp' information group, not for debate but purely for information dissemination, not only for fires but for any other hazardous events that we can help keep parishioners up to date and well advised. I hope that will be adopted at this meeting, and I would urge parishioners to submit their mobile numbers to the Clerk if they would like to be included in the future.

The fire service have already stated that a full report will be produced in the aftermath of a declaration of this major incident, and the parish council have already requested that we discuss this report, together with the National Trust as the primary land owner, to better develop future management to mitigate the risks of wildfires. We sadly cannot control all the variables, but I think we can improve on the current situation. With that in mind, we hope to call a future additional meeting with fire service and National Trust representatives in attendance, where parishioners can engage in that process and offer insight.

Three lesser points have been raised, which I will briefly address. One is the cutting of the meadow at Broadlawn. This is dictated, again, by the restrictions placed upon the meadow on account of the flowers found there, which prevents early cuts to allow for the conclusion of the flowering and seeding season. The cut is therefore very late, often in the last week of August or later. The Holt Commoners have previously expressed frustration with this in the past, but there is no circumnavigating the legislation.

Secondly, the low hanging branches along Paradise Road and the resultant restrictions placed upon fire engines navigating the road: the road is in private ownership, and as such the parish council can only politely request that the trees are cut back. We believe the fire service are likely to do the same, but the jurisdiction to act lies with the owner. Given the proximity of the fire, one hopes we will see a speedy response.

Thirdly, the matter of storm run off had been pointed out by the fire service in view of the dramatic reduction in vegetation on the Common. The parish council will request that ditches and gulches in the vicinity are re-inspected prior to Winter weather, but any parishioner can report a blocked ditch adjacent to a road via the Dorset County Council website, and we would urge them to do so to make the Highways Department aware of any problems.

Finally, and on a much more positive note, I had already on last Monday morning requested from the Clerk a stack of headed paper and plan to write to all attending stations to thank fire crews on behalf of our parish for their extraordinary efforts in limiting the fire as much as they did. I personally had crews from Cheshire, Lancashire, Norfolk, Essex, Devon, Glamorgan, Somerset, Isle of Wight and Hampshire, as well as our own Dorset and Wiltshire fire service. All present at different times, they were unendingly helpful and friendly, as well as committed to protecting our parish. Many houses, including my own, are only unscathed because of their efforts. We should all be extremely grateful, and I will convey that gratitude to them.

In addition to that, I would like to thank all parishioners who did what they could to help others and supplied refreshments to fire crews, at times, I understand, including full roast dinners! We are very lucky to live in this little community, and I would like to finish with our minds on that thought.