

Lessons learnt setting-up a community machinery toolkit

During the development stage of the Save Our Magnificent Meadows project, it was recognised that one of the major barriers to managing meadows was the size of the fields. The smaller grasslands were not profitable for hay-making, resulting in many being left unmanaged. This was exacerbated by the size of conventional hay-making machinery which is now too large to get through gateways and round sharp corners in lanes. However, the smaller fields were some of the remaining species-rich grasslands, and without management the diversity would decline. In response to this problem, Medway Valley Countryside Partnership (MVCP) set-up a machinery toolkit for use by local community groups. This guidance note is about their experiences of undertaking this process.

Identifying the type of machinery

The machinery is a scaled-down hay making kit which could access these smaller sites and so facilitate their management as a hay meadow. Following much research on the best machinery to carry out the work, a compact tractor, drum mower, turner, harrow, mini-baler and trailer were all purchased as part of the project. The whole toolkit costs £23,395 (including VAT) in 2014.

It was delivered in the winter of 2014 and is stored at a Kent Country Council Country Parks facility near to the offices of the MVCP. The Partnership also coordinated training for the equipment and booking system so that the machinery could be lent out to a number of local groups.

Other considerations associated with the machinery included; ongoing maintenance, emergency breakdown assistance, insurance, spare parts and associated tools. All of these had to be put in place before the kit was loaned out to end users.

The table below shows the specification and price of the machinery in 2014

| Item | Make and Model | Price (ex VAT) |
|-----------------|--|----------------|
| Compact Tractor | Land legend 40hp DONGFEN DF354/404 Model | £6,750 |
| Drum mower | Bellonmit TFL 1150 Serial number: 13-062 | £1,450 |
| Tedder | STAR Gyro Rake K45224 model: MGR2500 | £1,850 |
| Mini-baler | STAR Mini Roll Bailer Midell MRD0870 Part Supply Model: MRB0870-04 | £4,950 |





Mini-baler © Kent Wildlife Trust



Mini-baler producing a bale © Kent Wildlife Trust



Drum mower © Medway Valley Countryside Partnership



Compact tractor and mini-baler loaded onto a trailer © Kent Wildlife Trust

MVCP put in place paperwork to cover various aspects of loaning the equipment including:

- Record of information exchange;
- Hire agreement document;
- Training in operations and health and safety;
- Risk assessments; and
- Toolkit and spares.

In 2015, six community groups borrowed the machinery, while in 2016 five groups asked to borrow the toolkit. One group dropped out from year one as they had organised an alternative method of managing their meadows through a local landowner instead of using the community toolkit. This decision was made as it was felt by the group that their site was too large for them to manage using the community toolkit alone.

Some of the unanticipated problems that occurred in the first year of the toolkit included:

- The borrower's ability to tow the machinery onto site - not all community groups had drivers that were experienced towing trailers with machinery, and MVCP staff found that they were required to deliver the machinery to each site. This imposed an additional transport cost as well as time taken away from other activities.
- The borrower's ability to run and maintain the machinery - often MVCP staff were called to repair and assist with the running of the toolkit.

In year one, the time taken to facilitate the machinery at several site was deemed to be beyond the capability and scope of the project officer's work and so prompted a change of plan.

In year two, a contractor was employed to facilitate the use of the machinery on each site. The contractor took full responsibility to transport the kit to each grassland, carry out the management work, maintain the machinery and to return it to the storage facility. This left the MVCP staff just the coordination role, and was much more successful with the work being more efficiently completed on time.

As a result of purchasing the community toolkit, six sites have been managed over the last two years which would otherwise have been left unmanaged or inappropriately managed.

Future use of the toolkit

Into the future it is essential that the kit remains available for use by community groups. Even with the issues encountered in the first year, it was successful to have the ability for these smaller grasslands to be managed. The maximum number of sites that can be managed in a year seems to be six due to the amount of time taken to move the kit around, to carry out the work and the consideration of the potential short weather window in which to carry out successful haymaking. This is only possible with the extension of the hay-making season from the end of July to October

The bales were left on site in piles, sold to horse owners for a few pounds cut-down rate, or donated to local animal sanctuaries if they were of sufficient quality. The feasibility of employing a contractor has been investigated in the long term and the only way this can be ensured is for the landowners and community groups to pay for the contractor directly. This long-term management will ensure the continuation of the work that has already been carried out at the same time as increasing the benefit of the management. The estimated ongoing cost for the contractor work will be £280 per day plus fuel in 2017.



Volunteers learning how to use the machinery ©Medway Valley Countryside Partnership



Compact tractor and mini-baler in action © Kent Wildlife Trust



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