

FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON STEERING GROUP

29th MARCH 2021

PRESENT

Cllr Donna Stimson (Cllr DS); Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Sustainability, Parks and Countryside (Chair)

Chris Joyce (CJ); Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth

Anthony Hurst (AH) Parks & Countryside Manager

Jacqui Wheeler (JW) Parks & Countryside Access Officer

Jason Mills (JM) Countryside Manager

Ambika Chouhan (AC) Landscape Officer

Rebecca Anderson (RA) Ecologist

Cllr Mandy Brar (Cllr MB), ward member for Bisham and Cookham

Cllr Greg Jones (Cllr GJ), ward member for Maidenhead Riverside

Ian Rose (IR) Maidenhead Waterways, and White Brook sub-group

Steve Gillions (SG) East Berks Ramblers, and Accessibility sub-group

Mike Copland (MC) WildCookham, and Biodiversity sub-group

APOLOGIES

Lisa Hughes (LH) Local Access Forum, and Information and Communications sub-group

INTRODUCTIONS:

Cllr DS welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the Steering Group, and explained that the purpose of the Group was to take a fresh look at the future plans for the site, focussing on the dual objectives set out below. The intention is to find consensus, and agree a way forward.

MASTERPLAN REVIEW; OBJECTIVES AND OPTIONS

Cllr DS explained that the two key objectives for the site are:

- To protect and enhance Biodiversity (i.e. species and habitats)
- To enable public access, including access to nature; appreciation of high-quality landscapes; health and well-being.

In seeking to achieve these objectives, the Steering Group was asked to consider the following options:

- Creation of a circular walk utilising the 'Causeway Path' (either on a seasonal basis, or all year-round)
- Creation of a circular walk utilising a new path/boardwalk and footbridge, to be created through the 'Wet Woodland' (either on a seasonal basis, or all year-round)
- Creation of a car park

During open discussion of these options, the following points were made:

Circular walk options

Cllr GJ considered that it is imperative that a circular walk is created, in order to enable residents and visitors to enjoy and appreciate the site. Preference would be for the 'Causeway Path' to be opened, initially on a year-round basis, whilst investigations are carried out into the potential for creating a second route through the 'Wet Woodland'. If/when this second route is opened, then the 'Causeway Path' could be used during the Summer months and the 'Wet Woodland' path during the Winter months.

SG agreed that creating a circular walk was a key objective, and that a balance needs to be struck between the two over-riding objectives of protecting/enhancing biodiversity and enabling public access and enjoyment of the site. There were important issues to consider with both potential routes; both offered a different experience for walkers, and both had different constraints in terms of potential impact on wildlife habitats. However, it is recognised that the 'Wet Woodland' route would take significantly longer to achieve, and on balance preference would be to open the 'Causeway Path' on a seasonal basis (early April to early October).

IR felt that the 'Wet Woodland' route would be the better long-term option, and noted that the proposed bridge location detailed on the latest Masterplan showed the abutments as being the required 600mm above ground level, which would be acceptable from a Maidenhead Waterways perspective.

CIlr MB stated that her preference was for the 'Wet Woodland' route, and that there was already sufficient access around the northern edge of the East Field.

MC questioned the justification for creating a circular walk within Battlemead, and felt that a circular walk could already be achieved by using Islet Road. Although it's a fine judgement, preference would be for the 'Wet Woodland' route which would be less disruptive to wildlife in the long run.

CJ asked the Steering Group to consider whether mitigation measures could be put in place to minimise disturbance if the 'Causeway Path' was opened from early April to early October, and whether the impacts of this seasonal access could be monitored.

Also, what opportunities are there to increase biodiversity within the site, alongside allowing seasonal access along the Causeway route.

The outline costs of creating the 'Causeway' route and/or the 'Wet Woodland' route also need to be considered. The following estimates had been obtained; approx. £14,000 to install dog-proof fencing along the Causeway route, compared to approx. £160,000 to establish a route through the 'Wet Woodland' (subject to EA consents).

CIlr GJ felt that if dog-proof fencing was installed along the 'Causeway' route this would provide a good level of protection to the adjacent wetland areas, and the other parts of the East Field.

SG agreed that the 'Causeway' path should be fenced, as this would prevent general wandering, and closing the path over the Winter months would minimise disturbance to over-wintering birds, and achieve a reasonable balance between protection and access.

JM advised that from an ecological perspective seasonal access along the 'Causeway', with dog-proof fencing and sensitive screening, would be acceptable, and preference would be to leave the Wet Woodland area undisturbed, other than undertaking habitat creation and woodland management works. There are opportunities to significantly improve the biodiversity of the East Field, for example through planting, and consideration could also be given to expanding the areas of wetland within the site.

JM also noted that there are many examples of seasonally accessible footpaths through nature reserves, and provided that the reasons for seasonal closures are made clear these are generally respected by visitors.

RA agreed that there is much potential to enhance the biodiversity of the site, and as a rare and high-priority habitat the Wet Woodland area in particular should be protected from public access. Further surveys and monitoring are considered essential, in order to fully understand the ecological potential of this part of the site.

AC pointed out that the East Field parts of the site have great potential as an educational resource, if managed access can be provided.

CJ suggested that the Project Team prepare a holistic proposal for the East Field, based upon seasonal access along the 'Causeway', appropriate fencing and screening, habitat management

works within the field, and monitoring of impacts on wildlife, coupled with a plan for further surveys of the 'Wet Woodland' area to identify opportunities for habitat enhancement, and further consideration of the feasibility of creating the 'Wet Woodland' path. These plans will then be shared with the Steering Group, for further review.

Car park

JW reported that the Accessibility Sub-group had considered the need for a small car park at its meeting held on 10th February. There was a strong consensus among the Sub-group that a small car park is essential if the site is to be fully accessible to all.

Preference was for a 14-space carpark, with 4 allocated disabled bays, and space for a minibus which would be useful for school visits. It was also felt that bunding around the carpark would be preferable to bollards as proposed in the earlier 26 space scheme, both in terms of protection against unauthorised incursions, and creating biodiversity/habitats.

It was noted that a planning application would be required if the carpark is to be progressed.

CIlr MB asked what measures would be put in place to manage the carpark and protect against unauthorised incursions, and it was confirmed that a new height barrier has recently been installed at the site entrance, and bunds around the carpark would be included in the proposed layout plan as a further protection measure.

CJ suggested that plans for a 14-space carpark should be drawn up, and shared with the Steering Group for further review.

FEEDBACK AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SUB-GROUPS:

The notes from the sub-group meetings held in February 2021 were circulated with the agenda, and the following key points were noted:

Accessibility sub-group: discussion re carpark as noted above.

White Brook sub-group: **IR** reported back that the EA permit had been secured for desilting works to the White Brook, which are expected to be carried out in late August.

Biodiversity sub-group: **MC** reported back on volunteer activity, including the installation of 31 nest boxes around the site and tree planting works. There were some concerns about dog-waste being left on the site, and **JW** confirmed that a dog-waste/litter bin has been ordered, for installation near the main entrance.

Communications and Information sub-group: although the Communications/Information sub-group hasn't met recently, it was noted that once there is further clarity on the plans for the site some modifications to existing site signage and/or some new signage will be required.

NEXT STEPS AND SUMMARY OF ACTIONS:

- Project team to draw up detailed proposal for the East Field: to include fencing and screening of the Causeway footpath; planting and biodiversity improvements; survey/monitoring details.
- Project team to draw up details of surveys/habitat assessment of Wet Woodland area, to include initial scoping of feasibility for creation of Wet Woodland footpath.
- Project team to prepare revised car-park plan, for resubmission of planning application

DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

To be confirmed.