

## FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON STEERING GROUP

3<sup>rd</sup> AUGUST 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

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

### INTRODUCTIONS:

**Cllr DS** welcomed everyone to the second meeting of the Steering Group and thanked those who had sent in written comments in advance of the meeting.

### NOTES OF MEETING HELD ON 29<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2021:

The notes of the meeting held on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2021 were approved. **AH** confirmed that the de-silting works to the Whitebrook, which were subject to an EA permit, would be undertaken w/c 23<sup>rd</sup> August.

### CARPARK PROPOSAL:

**AH** presented a proposal for a 14-space carpark (which would be subject to a planning application) and asked for comments, both on the principle of providing a carpark at the site and the detailed design and layout that had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

No objections were raised to the principle of providing a carpark. **MC** asked whether any further consideration had been given to the access point and road safety implications. **AH** explained that the current maintenance access point (formerly the farm access) was the optimum location achievable, considering sightlines, visibility, and the configuration of the road.

A further reduction in the recently introduced 40mph speed limit had been considered in discussion with traffic colleagues, but this was deemed not to be feasible; however, other road safety measures were being explored to increase driver awareness. **CJ** added that these measures could include a 'gateway feature' where the speed limit changes to 40mph on the northern approach to the site, additional signage, and improvements to the crossing points to make them more visible to drivers. **CJ** also advised that when the previous planning application was submitted for a 26-space carpark (subsequently withdrawn) no objection was raised by the Highways Development Control team on road safety grounds.

**LH** raised concerns regarding the detailed layout of the 4 disabled parking bays, in particular the access spaces available alongside and behind these parking bays. **AC** will review this point in discussion with **LH**, prior to the design being finalised and submitted for planning approval. **LH** also raised concerns about the design of the more northerly pedestrian access point into the site, opposite the entrance to Widbrook Common on the opposite side of the road. **AH** agreed to revisit this point to assess whether anything further can be done to improve this secondary pedestrian access point.

**CIlr MB** asked whether consideration could be given to a controlled crossing at the carpark entrance (e.g., a zebra or pelican crossing). **IR** expressed reservations about whether this would be appropriate, given the rural setting of the site. **CJ** responded that an uncontrolled crossing would normally be considered more appropriate at this type of location, and therefore the planning application wouldn't include provision of a controlled crossing.

**MC** asked whether it was envisaged that charges would be applied to the carpark; **CJ** responded that this wasn't currently proposed, as there would be a risk of drivers continuing to use the nearby roads where no charges apply.

## **ECOLOGY SURVEYS FEEDBACK:**

**JM** reported back on the second annual Breeding Bird Survey, completed in June 2021 (the full report had been circulated in advance of the meeting) and highlighted some notable species that had been recorded, including Kingfisher, Skylark, Water rail and Reed bunting. The report from Austin Foot Ecology included some useful recommendations on grassland management and mowing regimes, for example to create a varied mosaic of grass lengths, aimed at encouraging the breeding bird populations at the site.

**RA** reported that an Otter and Water vole survey undertaken in June 2021 had recorded the presence of Otters in the wet Willow Woodland at Battlemead. No Water vole presence had been recorded, which may be a result of predation by Mink which are known to be present. A further Otter and Water vole survey is scheduled for September. Consideration is being given to enhancing the Otter habitat, for example by creating log piles within the wet Willow Woodland, and the potential for Mink control is also being explored in collaboration with Ecologists from neighbouring local authorities. **RA** also reported that the wet Willow Woodland Ecological Appraisal completed in May 2021 had identified a significant amount of Badger activity within woodland.

**CIlr DS** asked whether volunteers could help with clearing invasive Himalayan balsam at the site and **JM** confirmed that this will be followed up.

In response to a question from **IR**, **RA** confirmed that the Appraisal of the wet Willow Woodland included an assessment of potential habitat improvements as well as identifying species currently present.

## **EAST FIELD PROPOSAL:**

**CJ** presented a proposal for the East Field based around the following three recommendations, which had been prepared following a review of the recently completed ecological surveys:

- (i) Creation of a fenced and screened footpath along the Causeway, open between April and early October, (to be opened from April 2022).
- (ii) Creation of additional wetland habitat in the northern part of the East Field (initial discussions had been held with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust).
- (iii) Discontinue investigations into the wet Willow Woodland footpath (in light of the findings of the recent Ecological Appraisal).

The following comments were made by members of the Steering Group:

**SG** stated that his preference would be for year-round access along the Causeway footpath, rather than seasonal closure, and asked whether the fencing/screening would mitigate disturbance to overwintering birds as well as breeding birds. **RA** confirmed that although the fencing and screening would mitigate disturbance to breeding birds, the seasonal closure is considered necessary to avoid disturbance to the large numbers of overwintering migratory birds.

**SG** also asked what the proposed width of the Causeway footpath was, and whether it was intended that the footpath would be surfaced. **AH** responded that it was not envisaged that additional surfacing would be required as the Causeway already has a reasonably firm surface, particularly over the summer months. The Causeway would need to have sufficient width to accommodate

vehicular access for hay-cutting, and the width was therefore likely to be approximately 5m between the fences/screen planting.

**Cllr GJ** expressed concern that only 29% of the site is currently available for public access, with 71% being closed to the public, particularly as the stated purpose of purchasing the site was to provide public open space for the benefit of residents, and therefore he felt strongly that the Causeway footpath should be available all year round. He had been approached by residents who felt 'locked out' of the site, and he considered it imperative that the Council should honour the original purpose of acquiring the land, and that any decisions on the recommendations presented in the reports should be signed-off by Cabinet.

**Cllr MB** stated that she believed the main priority for the site should be to protect and enhance biodiversity, and that the Council should bring forward their work with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust and the Environment Agency on these aspects before considering any further access to the East Field. **CJ** confirmed that the Council had been working with the EA since the purchase of the site and would continue to do so and would also be working in partnership with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust following the initial discussions that had recently been held.

**Cllr MB** also referred to the recent petition that had been submitted to the Council opposing access to the East Field, and **CJ** confirmed that the petition had been received and would be followed up in accordance with the petitions process. **CJ** also emphasised that providing controlled access to the Causeway footpath across the East Field was an opportunity to help raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity, and build support for nature conservation efforts more widely, and this was a key objective of the Councils Environment and Climate Strategy.

**CJ** added that there is evidence from observations on site that despite there being no formal access to the East Field at present, there are people walking this route. This represents a significant risk to the existing habitat and birds nesting in the field, and a fenced footpath with suitable screening and controlled access represents the best way to control this risk.

**MC** concurred that raising awareness of the importance of biodiversity was of critical importance and recognised the positive work that is being undertaken at Battlemead to further this objective. However, he felt that any further provision for public access to the East Field should be delayed until after environmental enhancements have been undertaken, including establishing sufficient screening along the route of the proposed footpath. In response to this point, **JM** explained that the proposed screening alongside the footpath was primarily intended to screen the adjacent wetland areas from dogs using the footpath, as nesting birds in wetland areas were known to be particularly sensitive to passing dogs, whereas they can become more habituated to the presence of people.

Summer access along the Causeway footpath, with fencing and low-level screening (such as reeds, grasses, low hedging, or willow), which could be established quite quickly, was therefore considered acceptable in terms of potential impact on breeding birds. However, overwintering migratory birds would be much more susceptible to disturbance, even with fencing/screening in place, and therefore the advice from Austin Foot Ecology was that the footpath should be closed over the winter period.

**LH** requested that accessibility issues be fully considered in relation to management of the grassed footpaths, both in the West Field and potentially along the Causeway and through the East Field, particularly during the growing season, and taking into account the needs of visitors with limited mobility. **AH** confirmed that regular cutting of the grass paths was an important aspect of managing the site, and care would be taken to ensure the footpaths are easily accessible; if necessary, localised levelling of the footpath surfaces could be undertaken, although the site is generally flat, and therefore suitable for establishing easy-access footpaths.

**LH** also referred to the importance of carefully managed access, as she felt most visitors valued and appreciated the surrounding wildlife and habitats and were supportive of measures to avoid disturbance to birds and other wildlife. Signage explaining the reasons for restricted access at certain times of the year would be very helpful, as she felt most visitors would respect such closures if the reasons were made clear.

**IR** noted that the recommendations to discontinue investigations into a new footpath through the wet Willow Woodland, and to create additional wetland habitat in the East Field both seemed to have general support, and asked that the investigations into the creation of additional wetland areas should include an assessment of the potential impacts on the overall hydrology of the site and discussion with the Environment Agency.

**CJ** confirmed that on balance it was considered that the potential adverse ecological impacts as well as the costs and complexity of creating a new footpath through the wet Willow Woodland outweighed the potential benefits that would be achieved by pursuing this option further. The Project Team will continue to work with both the Environment Agency and the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust on the proposal to create additional wetland areas in the East Field, as this is seen as the best way of enhancing the biodiversity of this part of site.

## **NEXT STEPS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING:**

**Cllr DS** thanked everyone for attending the meeting and for their contributions, and added that there were opportunities at the site to encourage more involvement of volunteers, and that the Friends Group had a key role to play in encouraging greater community engagement. The Council is very mindful of the views of the various interested groups and individuals and recognises that the site has great potential both from a biodiversity and public engagement perspective.

**Post-meeting note: a report will be submitted to the 30<sup>th</sup> September meeting of the Cabinet, based upon the recommendations set out above, and a further meeting of the Steering Group will be arranged following that meeting.**