



Witham

town council

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MINUTES

Meeting of: **Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee**

Date: **4th June 2024**

Present: Councillors B Fleet (Chairman)

Co-optees S. Black (Witham and Countryside Society)
 J. Palombi (CPRE)
 P. Shuttleworth (Local Wildlife Interests)
 J. Goodman (Local Interests)

Officers H. Andrews (Deputy Town Clerk)
 S. Dyer (Operations Manager)
 S. Puckey (Open Spaces Administrative Assistant)

Darren Tansley from Essex Wildlife Trust was present as an invited guest.

1. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Cllr Hewitt, Cllr Barlow, Cllr Heath and J Casement. Cllr Ramage was absent.

2. **APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN**

It was **AGREED** that Cllr Barry Fleet be appointed Chairman.

3. **APPOINTMENT OF VICE- CHAIRMAN**

It was **AGREED** that John Goodman be appointed Vice-Chairman.

4. **INTERESTS**

No interests were declared.

5. **MINUTES**

The minutes were **AGREED** and subsequently signed by the Chairman.

6. **QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC**

There were no questions.

7. **CONSIDERATION OF WRITTEN REPRESENTATIONS**

No written representations were received.

8. **CLERK'S REPORT**

The Clerk's report was received by Members. Members were further informed that there was a delay on the A12 widening scheme due to an appeal but the recently installed nature trail would not be affected by the works. Members were further advised that the re-routing of the gas line is not expected to impact Whetmead.

The Deputy Town Clerk assured Members that despite being unsuccessful in a recent grant application, the floating island suggestion for the duck pond would not be forgotten and is on the Potential Open Spaces Improvement Document for Section 106 spending although it has not yet received a formal resolution from the Council to go ahead with this project.

Members **AGREED** to receive the report.

9. **OPERATION MANAGER'S REPORT**

The Operations Manager provided a verbal update.

It is grass cutting season but due to the prolonged rainfall and new mower, the team are having to catch up with their schedule of work. There has been some light hedge cutting, as required, and some trees on the River Walk between Maldon Road and Newland Street have had their crowns raised. A fence has been erected around the recently created bee haven, 2 new benches have been installed close to Luard Way and Armond Road, the sleeper bench close to Ebenezer Close has been replaced while the Witham in Bloom bench has been relocated to the corner of Armond Road and Guithavon Valley. In addition, the War Memorial artwork at the water station has been painted in anti-graffiti varnish, a part of the knee-rail fencing on Chipping Hill has been replaced following a car accident and the beacon has been installed ready for the D-Day event.

At James Cooke Wood, the team have been conducting regular maintenance, at Whetmead etching boards have been installed and paths maintained while at the allotments there has been the usual plot clearing and upkeep.

At the Closed Churchyard, the management plan has been followed with particular attention to strimming the war graves in readiness for the D-day anniversary.

Summer planting at Witham station is expected to begin next week.

The Operations Manager advised Members that the reeds in the backchannel would be cleared in the near future and that the area around the memorial Elm tree at James Cooke Wood would also be cleared. Members were also informed that the recently repaired river bank at Whetmead would be inspected as there have been reports of vandalism.

Members **AGREED** to receive the report.

10. MANAGEING DEBRIS IN RIVERS

Darren Tansley from Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT) advised Members that it is beneficial to the ecology of the river to have natural debris as it supports the invertebrate species that need a connection with water and air, like Damselflies and Dragonflies. In addition, woody debris in rivers is essential for small fish who use this environment to avoid predators, keep cool in summer, even more important with rising river temperatures caused by climate change, and feed on the insects there. Fish live in trees! is a slogan used by EWT.

While Mr Tansley acknowledged that negative perceptions are prevalent with regards to natural river debris, he reassured members that there was no impact on flooding. In reality the river turbulence hollows out the river bed below the area so that capacity is restored within a few months and even before that, the impact is negligible as the debris is permeable. The water levels are the same either side of the debris and there is no evidence that the debris causes the river to back up. There is a perception gap between potential and actual risks, which is a tricky concept to convey to the public. The only issue that can occur is that tree debris can trap litter which can be aesthetically unpleasant.

Mr Tansley informed members that the white frothy scum that sometimes collects around river debris is likely to be caused by road run-off or plumbing misconnections that enter the river

Members **AGREED** to receive the report.

11. WATER QUALITY OF WITHAM'S RIVERS

It was noted that the nitrates and phosphates remain high. Members were advised that much of this is likely to be caused by fertilisers which are washed off when it rains. Many farmers are trying to judge when to apply nitrogen to their soil to reduce this impact. Members were further informed that Regenerative Farming would help but it is in its infancy in the UK. This would eventually reduce the need for fertilisers but the change is complex and expensive and cannot happen overnight.

Members **AGREED** to receive the report.

12. BLACKWATER RESTORATION PLAN

Members hoped that a representative would be able to attend the second workshop in the autumn.

Members **AGREED** to receive the report.

13. HABITAT HERO

A new idea was put forward to champion a species for a year e.g. The Swift whereby the lifecycle, challenges, habitat can be conveyed over 12 months.

It was also suggested that the Habitat Hero concept could tie in with restarting Witham Open Gardens, promoting unpaved front gardens and that schools could potentially be invited to be part of any Habitat Hero activities.

Members **AGREED** to receive the report.

14. DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR JAMES COOKE WOOD

Members would like to see a record maintained of all documented species in the wood as a benchmark. It was recognised that this would be a big undertaking and that maybe a section of the wood could be monitored. It was **AGREED** to take this forward.

Members were informed that there were no current plans for a direct footpath to James Cooke Wood.

Members **AGREED** to receive the report.

15. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee would be held on Tuesday 3rd September 2024 at the later time of 2pm.

Meeting concluded at 2.59pm.

SP/06.6.24

Signed by Chairman.....