

Committee(s)	Dated:
Epping Forest and Commons	20 11 2017
Subject: George Green – Proposals to vary the Care and Maintenance Agreement with the London Borough of Redbridge (SEF 36/17)	Public
Report of: Director of Open Spaces & Heritage	For Decision
Report author: Paul Thomson. Superintendent of Epping Forest	

Summary

George Green, Wanstead is a remnant village green, that was once part of Wanstead Park and now forms an important amenity space to the South of Wanstead Village and the A12. Forest Land at the Green has been managed by the Local Authority under a care and maintenance agreement since 1953 which has provided an enhanced level of grass maintenance traditionally thought to be more appropriate to public open space in urban areas.

Local community groups have made proposals for a series of wildflower meadows at George Green which will add greater ecological diversity and visual amenity to the area. Vision Redbridge would be keen to implement this project for both the environmental benefits and the potential long-term efficiencies on grounds maintenance cutting regimes. Your Committee approval is sought for a pilot project with the current grounds maintenance provider - Vision Redbridge - to examine the feasibility of such a scheme, alongside a public education initiative to explain the relaxation of grass cutting arrangements.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Approve a temporary variation of the Care and Maintenance Agreement for George Green to pilot a wildflower meadow area, subject to public consultation with the local community.

Main Report

Background

1. George Green, Wanstead is a remnant village green, that was once part of Wanstead Park and now forms an important amenity space to the South of Wanstead Village and the A12.

2. In response to public criticism of the wild character of grazed Forest Land arising from the newly urbanising suburbs around the south of Epping Forest, Local Authorities offered to take responsibility for an enhanced level of maintenance considered to be more in keeping with public open space adjacent to urban areas. The City of London Corporation agreed care and maintenance agreements with Urban district Councils which detailed the future maintenance responsibilities that Local Authorities would discharge.
3. As a consequence Forest Land at George Green has been managed under a care and maintenance agreement with the Municipal Borough of Wanstead and Woodford (now the London Borough of Redbridge) since 1953 which has provided an enhanced level of grass maintenance thought to be more appropriate to public open space in urban areas. Since the expansion in 2011 of the Local Authority Leisure Trust - Vision Redbridge Culture and Leisure (VRCL) – VRCL been responsible for the grounds maintenance of George Green.

Current Position.

4. George Green is currently managed as a heavily used public amenity open space. In an average season the grass is cut fortnightly between April and October, with cuttings being collected at the beginning and end of each cutting season.
5. The City Corporation were first approached in 2014 by the Wanstead Society with proposals for the creation of wildflower meadows at George Green. The proposals were welcomed by the City Corporation who directed the request to the London Borough of Redbridge who originally did not support the proposed request.
6. A further proposal by the Wanstead Gardening Society in 2017 was shared with Vision Redbridge who welcomed the proposal and sought the City Corporation's view on revising the Care and Maintenance Agreement.
7. The relaxation alone of the current grass cutting regime will not stimulate the development of wildflower rich meadows. A combination of turf and topsoil removal and the reseeding of the meadows will need to take place alongside the plug planting of specially grown wildflower species and the introduction of parasitic plants such as Yellow Rattle which will reduce the vigour of the more robust grass species that have come to dominant the current sward.
8. Such changes require significant initial investment before savings from the relaxation of the grass cutting regime can be achieved.
9. Many residents and visitors may mistake the development of wildflower meadows as signs of neglect by the City Corporation and its Care and Maintenance partner Vision Redbridge. Any change to the grass cutting regime will need to be the subject of public consultation and consistent public information once any initiative is underway.

10. A trial wildflower meadow project is proposed to help support public consultation around the development of wildflower meadows and the consequent change in management regime.

Options

11. There are two options available to your Committee

- a. To reject the proposals for the creation of wildflower meadows and continue with the current levels of amenity cutting. **This option is not recommended.**
- b. To vary the current care and maintenance agreement on a temporary basis while wildflower meadow creation is trialled through a pilot public consultation project at George Green. **This option is recommended.**

Proposals

12. The opportunity to respond to this local community aspiration could create a more ecologically diverse sward at George Green which should be more visually attractive during certain times of the year. It is important to work closely with Vision Redbridge on any public consultation to ensure key messages on ecological diversity; visual amenity, carbon reduction and value for money can be promoted in a coordination campaign.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

13. This proposal reflects the City Together Strategy Theme 'A World Class City which protects, promotes and enhances our environment'.

14. The development of a wildflower meadow at George Green reflects the Open Spaces Department's Strategic Aim to 'Adopt sustainable working practices, promote the variety of life and protect the Open Spaces for the enjoyment of future generations'.

Implications

15. **Financial:** There are significant investment costs needed to implement the introduction of a successful wildflower meadow to the existing species poor grassland at George Green. The longer term savings in a reduced grass maintenance regime at George Green should provide sufficient financial incentive to Vision Redbridge to fund the development of the scheme.

16. **Legal** – Section 7(3.) of the Epping Forest Act states that ('The Conservators shall at all times as far as possible preserve the natural aspect of the Forest ... and shall protect the ... turf and herbage growing on the Forest ...')

Conclusion

17. In addition to being able to respond to local community aspirations, the careful management of a new wildflower-rich sward and key public messages around the benefits of wildflower meadows, together offer the opportunity to improve the ecological, aesthetic and environmental performance of the George Green landscape. In addition these changes should also provide improved good value for money savings for local Council tax payers. The changed character of George Green should also bring the area closer to the City Corporations statutory duty for managing for the natural aspect.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Map of George Green

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