

ASHTEAD COMMON CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
Tuesday, 18 February 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Ashtead Common Consultative Committee held at Committee Rooms, West Wing, Guildhall on Tuesday, 18 February 2014 at 11.30 am

Present

Alderman Gordon Haines (Chairman)
Deputy Stanley Ginsburg (Deputy Chairman)
Barbara Newman
Douglas Mobsby
Bob Eberhard (CTC Local Rights of Way)
Professor David Hawksworth (Ashtead Residents' Association)
Wyn James (Ashtead Common Volunteers)
Councillor John Northcott (Mole Valley District Council)
Councillor Chris Townsend (Surrey County Council)

Officers:

Alistair MacLellan	- Town Clerk's Department
Andy Barnard	- Superintendent, Burnham Beeches, Stoke Common & City Commons
Andrew Thwaites	- Head Ranger, City Commons
Shaun Waddell	- Senior Ranger, City Commons

In attendance:

George Gillon	- Chief Commoner
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1. APOLOGIES

The Chairman welcomed the Chief Commoner to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Joseph Byllam-Barnes, David Baker, Councillor Helen Cocker, Paul Krause and Pippa Woodall. The Town Clerk noted that David Baker was represented at the meeting by Professor David Hawksworth.

2. MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT IN RESPECT OF ITEMS ON THE AGENDA

There were no declarations.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the public minutes and summary of the meeting held on Monday 1 July 2013 be approved as a correct record, subject to the last two bullet points on item 5, page 5 being deleted.

Matters Arising

Committee Membership

The Head Ranger noted that a local youth worker had put himself forward as a candidate to be a member of the Committee. The Chairman welcomed this potential addition to the Committee's membership and expressed the hope that it would lead to greater youth involvement in Ashtead Common.

Newton Wood

The Head Ranger noted that he had contacted the new owners of Newton Wood and would be meeting with them shortly. Members suggested that the new owners be invited to Committee's July site visit to the Common.

4. ASHTEAD COMMON CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE - TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Town Clerk invited the Committee to approve their draft Terms of Reference, noting that some minor amendments had been made to them since they were last considered by the Committee in July 2013.

RESOLVED –

- That the Ashtead Common Consultative Committee Terms of Reference be approved.

5. INTRODUCTION TO STRUCTURAL CHANGES

The Chairman introduced the item on structural changes by informing the Committee that the City of London had made major changes to its management structure following the appointment of the Superintendent of Hampstead Heath as Chief Executive of Wimbledon and Putney Commons. As a result the Superintendent of City Commons Bob Warnock had moved to Hampstead Heath to take up the interim position of Superintendent of Hampstead Heath. The Chairman placed on record his thanks to Bob for his work across the City Commons and at Ashtead Common in particular, which the members endorsed.

The Chairman went on to introduce the Andy Barnard, the Superintendent of Burnham Beeches, Stoke Common and City Commons, noting that he had worked closely with Andy in Andy's previous capacity as Superintendent of Burnham Beeches. He added that Andy was a very talented conservator and manager, and that whilst the logistics involved in covering Stoke Common, Burnham Beeches and the City Commons were enormous, he was confident that City Commons staff would find they had a good leader and manager.

Wyn James noted that the Ashtead Common Volunteers wished to place on record their thanks to Bob Warnock.

The Superintendent noted that he was aware of the strong legacy that Bob Warnock had left across the City Commons. He went on to introduce himself, noting that he had been involved in the management of Open Spaces since the 1970s, beginning as a volunteer. He had moved to Burnham Beeches in 1996. He added that he was passionate about the environment, biodiversity and sustainability. On a personal level he had been married 24 years and had a 34 year old daughter, and he was a keen kayaker and cyclist. He concluded by noting that the current management arrangements were for 14 months and therefore were not necessarily permanent.

The Superintendent then went on to outline the structural changes to staffing across the City Commons, noting that the process had begun under his predecessor in 2011 and was now nearing completion. He highlighted the fact that a new position of Head Ranger had been created for West Wickham Common and Spring Park.

In response to a question from Cllr Townsend regarding how often he would be visiting each site, the Superintendent replied that he would remain based at Burnham Beeches, and aimed to spend one day per week at each of the Commons, with a

further day spent at Guildhall. He added that he planned to set aside one day per month for a dedicated site visit to each site.

In response to a question from Barbara Newman regarding staffing changes at each of the Commons, the Superintendent replied that a balance would be struck between maintaining continuity and allocating staff where they were best suited.

6. **SUMMARY REPORT OF THE VISITOR SURVEY 2012**

The Head Ranger introduced a report of the Superintendent on the Volunteer Survey 2012, noting that it had been an observational survey by volunteers walking set routes across the City Commons and recording persons and activities. In general terms 40% of users had been walkers, 30% dog walkers and 20% cyclists. He acknowledged that the methodology of the survey had made it difficult to accurately assess the use of the Commons by disabled members of the public.

The Committee went on to discuss the report, with the following comments being made:

- The Chairman noted that there was a desire to conduct further research into patterns of use upon the City Commons and therefore feedback from members of the Committee was welcomed.
- Councillor Northcott suggested that disparities in the data may have arisen from the survey being conducted upon different days of the week.
- The Senior Ranger commented that, anecdotally, Sundays were indeed busier than Saturdays upon Ashted Common and that activity tended to be concentrated on 'honey pot' areas of the Common.
- As part of a general discussion on cycling:
 - Bob Eberhard commented that it would be interesting to research how many cyclists were family groups.
 - Wyn James commented that it would be useful if cyclists could be educated to give adequate warning when approaching those on foot from behind.
 - Bob Eberhard noted that there was sometimes conflict between cyclists and loose dogs.
 - Members discussed the potential for cycling signage but felt that, given the nature of Ashted Common, that an addition to the City of London entrance sign, any further signage on the site would be inappropriate.
 - The Superintendent commented that educating different user groups was one of the functions of the site rangers.
- In response to a question from the Deputy Chairman regarding the report's conclusions regarding Ashted Common, namely that visitor numbers were lower than at comparable sites; there being few observations of children at play; and there being few observations of people with visible disabilities, the Head Ranger replied that similar issues had been discussed at the meeting of

the Coulsdon Common Consultative Committee on 12 February 2014, and that one of the priorities arising from the Visitor Survey was to establish how such issues could be addressed.

- Wyn James commented that he knew of one regular user of the Common who was disabled.
- The Senior Ranger commented that it was less common for children to use the Common by themselves as it had been, arguably, a generation ago.
- Councillor Northcott commented that the visitor numbers to Coulsdon Common – 5,000 persons – seemed low by comparison to other sites.
- In response to a query from Douglas Mobsby regarding the disparity in the way information was presented between Coulsdon Common and Farthing Downs, the Head Ranger replied that this was likely due to the summary nature of the report and that further details explaining patterns of site-use was available within the overall Visitor Survey.

7. **VOLUNTEER IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2013**

The Head Ranger introduced a report of the Superintendent on the Volunteer Improvement Plan 2013. He noted that volunteers made a huge contribution to the City Commons and that Ashted Common, in particular, would not be what it was without it. He added that rangers were keen to develop volunteer leaders and assisting external partners from doing the same. He highlighted the Volunteer Tree Warden scheme as one of the successful outcomes of the plan during 2013 and that a further plan would be developed next year.

In response to a question from Professor Hawksworth over whether volunteers were trained in understanding the ecology of sites, the Senior Ranger replied that training on ecological matters tended to take place on a task-by-task basis as part of the task briefing.

Barbara Newman welcomed the effort that rangers were putting into developing volunteer roles and the news that voluntary attendance at Ashted Common was popular.

In response to a question from Councillor Townsend regarding the continuation of the Volunteer Tree Warden Scheme continuing now that a member of staff had left, the Head Ranger confirmed that it would be continued.

In response to a question from the Chief Commoner whether any Freedoms of the City had been awarded to City Commons volunteers, the Chairman confirmed that these had taken place, and furthermore volunteers were also invited to an annual reception at Epping Forest to thank them for their contributions.

In response to the observation from Wyn James that high numbers of volunteers were coming forward at Ashted Commons, the Senior Ranger confirmed that, to maximise efficient task allocation and volunteer satisfaction, tasks were designed for a maximum group size of 20-24 persons which inevitably meant that a small waiting list was maintained of persons wishing to volunteer some time on the Common.

8. **KEY PROJECTS AND ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14**

The Head Ranger introduced a presentation on Key Projects and the Annual Work Programme during 2013/14. He summarised achievements under the City Commons management priorities as follows:

Visitor Experience

Ashtead Common had received top marks in the Green Flag inspection, and the Green Flag judges had taken the opportunity to meet with volunteers during the course of their inspection.

Consultation

New arrangements for the Ashtead Common Consultative Committee had been introduced during 2013 and a format of a Winter meeting and Summer site visit had been established.

Conservation Grazing

A Grazing Business Plan was being developed.

Tree Health

Trees had continued to be monitored for tree disease, both by rangers and Volunteer Tree Wardens.

Kenley Revival Project

The application for the first round of Heritage Lottery Funding had been successful and a project officer appointed to develop the application for the second round appointed.

In response to a question from Councillor Townsend over whether concerns over cattle safely grazing on the Common had been dealt with, the Senior Ranger replied that the cause of the cattle deaths was still unexplained and consequently we will need to think carefully before developing any plans to graze the affected area again.

The Senior Ranger then updated members on key projects for 2014/15, noting:

Veteran Tree Survey

It was year 4 of the programme and officers were developing a condition assessment to establish how effective the work conducted to date had been. Rangers were currently up to date with their halo relief programme. Overall the veteran tree programme was absorbing a significant amount of the Ashtead Common grounds maintenance budget.

Conservation Grazing

Five cattle currently overwintering with Pippa Woodall would be returned to the Common once ground conditions improved.

In response to concerns from Professor Hawksworth over whether cattle dung had a negative ecological impact upon the Common, the Senior Ranger replied that a baseline ecological survey of Phoenix Field had been undertaken to assess its impact. Moreover, rangers were not particularly concerned given they tended to undergraze areas across the Common in accordance with the Environmental Stewardship Scheme agreement – for example, the City was required to allow a six week flowering period each year uninterrupted by grazing.

Welcoming Site

Two volunteers had carried out an audit of the entrances to the Common and their findings had contributed to the development of a programme of signage improvements

and reorganisation of access points. Phase 2 of works would continue in 2014 and would include replacement of more signage.

Halo Release

As per the Veteran Tree Survey, halo release works would continue this year. Once completed, the works carried out would require ongoing grounds maintenance.

Bracken Control

This was a particular problem at Ashted Common and presented a fire risk. As of Summer 2013 bracken clearance was up to date and rangers hoped to maintain progress into 2014. The bracken was cut and collected with the piles of cuttings provided good shelter for grass snakes.

Successional Areas

Work would continue to maintain scrub/grassland mix to encourage breeding birds. Material cleared during maintenance work would be burnt on altar fires to avoid permanent damage to soils. Wood and ash arising from these works was allocated to local volunteers and allotments.

Barbara Newman left at this point of the meeting.

Roman Villa

Excavations had now been completed and it remained for Surrey Archaeological Society to publish their findings academically, as well as providing the City of London with material that could be used for education and interpretation purposes.

In response to a question from the Chairman, the Senior Ranger replied that further excavation would only be carried out if the Surrey Archaeological Society identified specific interpretative issues arising from their earlier excavations.

Amenity Areas

Contractor strimming, sign maintenance and work to maintain boundaries would continue during 2014 to ensure amenity areas remained suitable. In response to a question from the Chairman, the Senior Ranger replied that horse chestnut trees were not an issue for Ashted Common.

In response to a question from Councillor Northcott, the Head Ranger replied that a water supply to the north of the Common had not yet been established.

Bob Eberhard commented that access to the north of the Common had affected the path and caused compaction, and he expressed concern this would affect future Green Flag inspections.

In response to a question from Professor Hawksworth regarding whether wider surveys in addition to birds and butterflies were being carried out, the Senior Ranger replied that each Autumn a 'Fungi Foray' was conducted and that the Common had been given a National Vegetation Classification assessment recently. Moreover, the Woodfield area of the Common had arguably improved towards achieving SSSI-quality. He concluded by noting that a report on the newt population was also available.

Wyn James added that a beetle survey had been conducted.

Bob Eberhard expressed his thanks for the resurfacing of Bridleway 38.

Councillor Northcott thanked Bob Warnock for his work in implementing the river restoration project which had arguably contributed to prevented flooding downstream of the Common.

The Senior Ranger added that he had been approached by persons from Broadhurst expressing thanks for the flow control structure on the Common and its contribution to preventing more serious flooding following recent weather.

9. MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES AND ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15

The Chairman introduced a report of the Superintendent on Management Priorities and the Annual Work Programme 2014/15, noting that many of the issues had been discussed as part of the previous item.

10. QUESTIONS

Site of Special Scientific Interest Boundary

Professor Hawksworth noted that he had been involved in the survey of the Green Belt around Ashtead for the Ashtead Boundary Review and had noted that neither Newton Wood nor the block of woodland bounded by the Epsom/Dorking Road and Newton Wood Road/Craddocks Avenue were indicated as SSSI on the MVDC maps. He suggested the matter be raised with Natural England. The Head Ranger agreed and noted that it would be worth raising the designation of Woodfield too as part of such an approach.

Farewell to Wyn James

The Chairman noted this was the final meeting at which Wyn James would be representing the Ashtead Common Volunteers, as he had indicated his intention to stand down. He thanked Mr James for his amazing service on the Common since 1991, when the City of London had taken over as the body responsible for Ashtead Common. He added that it was apt for volunteering to have been an agenda item at the meeting that day, given that in Mr James the committee had an exemplar in voluntary service to the Common. On behalf of the Committee, he informed Mr James that his contribution to the Common was hugely appreciated, and it was hoped he would remain involved in the Common in some capacity. The Chairman suggested that Mr James' successor attend the July site visit, and emphasised the thanks of the Committee for his incredible service over so many years.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT

There was no urgent business.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chairman noted that the summer site visit would take place on the evening of either Tuesday 15 or Wednesday 16 July, and invited members to advise their preferred date in advance.

The meeting ended at 1.07 pm

Chairman

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