

**ASHTEAD COMMON CONSULTATIVE GROUP**  
**Thursday, 15 October 2020**

Minutes of the meeting of the Ashtead Common Consultative Group held via  
Microsoft Teams on Thursday, 15 October 2020 at 6.30 pm

**Present**

**Members:**

Graeme Doshi-Smith (Chairman)  
Benjamin Murphy (Deputy Chairman)  
Jeremy Simons  
Cllr David Hawksworth CBE

James Irvine  
Keith Lelliot  
Conor Morrow  
Councillor Chris Townsend

**Officers:**

|                   |                                 |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Sarah Anderson    | - Open Spaces Department        |
| Andy Barnard      | - Superintendent of The Commons |
| Zuza Featherstone | - Ranger (The Commons)          |
| Louise Fletcher   | - Open Spaces Department        |
| Victoria Russell  | - Ranger (The Commons)          |
| Andrew Thwaites   | - Head Ranger (The Commons)     |
| Shaun Waddell     | - Senior Ranger (The Commons)   |
| Kerry Nicholls    | - Town Clerk's Department       |
| Aqib Hussain      | - Chamberlain's Department      |
| Emily Garland     | - Remembrancer's Office         |
| Sarah Phillips    | - Remembrancer's Office         |

**1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from David Baker, Bob Eberhard, Paul Krause, Sylvia Moys, Georgina Terry and Pippa Woodall.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. MINUTES**

In considering the minutes of the previous meeting, the Head Ranger requested that Minute 8: 2019 Grazing Expansion be corrected to read: "new fencing was being installed along the *Ride* side of the Common," and that Minute 11: Review of the Annual Work Programme be corrected to read, "the upgrade of *Two Bridges* had been completed in August 2018."

**RESOLVED**, that the minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2019 be approved as a correct record, subject to the above amendments.

**4. SUPERINTENDENT'S UPDATE**

The Superintendent provided an update to the Consultative Group and the following points were made:

- The City of London Corporation's Governance Review had recommended major changes to the Corporation's committee structure which were being considered by Members and was likely to have an impact on the future governance of the management of the Common.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had placed immense pressure on the City of London Corporation's business model and it was anticipated that there would be a 12% budget cut across many service areas for the 2021/22 financial year which was likely to affect the budget for the management of Ashtead Common. In the longer term it was anticipated that the City of London Corporation would be introducing a new Target Operating Model that would have further implications for the way that services were delivered.
- In considering the planned introduction of car park charges at some City of London Corporation Commons (although not Ashtead Common), a Member highlighted that Surrey County Council recently cancelled car parking charges across its entire countryside estate following public objections. The Superintendent underlined the importance of supporting visitors to understand why car parking charges were being introduced and advised that other ways to generate income were also being identified including making greater use of Ashtead Common's registered charity status. The Chair noted that the introduction of car parking charges at some Commons would help contribute to the preservation of the wider Commons both by income generation and encouraging more visitors to use environmentally sustainable forms of transport.

**RESOLVED**, that the update be noted.

5. **ASHTEAD COMMON MANAGEMENT PLAN 2021-2031 (DRAFT)**

The Head Ranger was heard regarding the draft Ashtead Common Management Plan 2021-2031 and the following points were made:

- During August and September 2020, an online public consultation had been undertaken on the draft Ashtead Common Management Plan 2021-2031 which had 446 responses. The consultation process identified that the majority of respondents had visited the Common more frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that there had been an increase in a number of activities including walking, dog walking and cycling. In response to a question from a Member, the Head Ranger confirmed that 34% of those that had listed 'Other' as their reason for visiting had stated that they were volunteering, but that this represented only a small percentage of overall visitors.
- With regard to the draft Ashtead Common Management Plan 2021-2031 the following points were made:
  - Nearly 100% of respondents had agreed the long-term vision statement which was proposed for agreement as follows:

*“Ashtead Common: a place for countryside recreation and wildlife conservation where community involvement remains integral to maintaining an open space of national significance, a place that resists urban pressures and strives to protect an historic landscape and its features in a setting proactively managed to retain and enhance biodiversity.”*

- Over 90% of respondents had supported proposals to support biodiversity, wood pasture and ancient trees, as well as to create more firebreaks and increase the amount of bracken managed. Over 80% of respondents had supported proposals on grazing which aimed to increase the area being grazed, although this would be on a rotational basis and not every area would be visited each year with mowing also used to maintain pasture. A number of respondents had commented on the potential for “virtual” fences and a separate consultation would be undertaken should it be proposed to introduce any such system.
- Over 80% of respondents had supported the approach to paths and rides, which included a proposal to not surface any further paths but address troublesome spots using natural landscaping techniques. 13% of respondents had not supported these proposals; however, respondent comments suggested that there had been confusion around whether this included maintenance of existing paths and rides. Some visitors had requested a circular surfaced route around the Common. A Member observed that the consultation response was a strong endorsement of the proposals for paths and rides.
- Over 75% of respondents had confirmed that they felt the balance was right on Woodfield, which was used for recreation and nature conservation objectives. The site had become floristically diverse through a conservation mowing regime and was a site of skylark nesting. A Member noted that the Scout Association had previously expressed interest in holding events on the site and that any such future use would need to be managed.
- Over 90% of respondents had said that key messages about Ashtead Common were appropriate. Plans to maintain a high degree of community involvement such as through volunteer participation had also been supported by nearly 90% of respondents and a number of respondents had queried how they could volunteer. In response to a question from a Member, the Head Ranger confirmed that the proposals for volunteering did not set out any immediate changes but recognised that the way that volunteering was delivered could change during the ten-year life of the Management Plan, such as in response to changing levels of resources or to target increased diversity of volunteers or involvement of family groups. A Member suggested that

volunteers be approached for ideas to create new volunteering opportunities with existing resources. Another Member noted that the COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique opportunity to attract new volunteers due to changing working patterns.

- Over 90% of respondents had said that they would like to see the Reed Bed project progressed. This project proposed to use natural reed bed filtration to reduce the level of pollution in Rye Brook and Two Bridges and offered opportunities for partnership working and community involvement but would require up to £300k of external funding. The Head Ranger advised that the inclusion of the project in the Management Plan was the first step to making this project a priority of the City of London Corporation. A Member suggested that learning be drawn from similar schemes that had received funding and another Member underlined the need for a back-up plan to address pollution if it was not possible to progress the scheme.
- Nearly 90% of respondents had expressed their support for the Roman Villa Project, which would provide evidence of community support for any future funding application.
- 74% of respondents had confirmed their support for the introduction of a charging schedule for commercial activities that make use of Ashtead Common. 19.62% of respondents had expressed an objection to these plans; however, a number of respondents may have been unaware of existing commercial use of the site, such as for fitness classes and professional dog walking.
- In considering additional comments received, a number of respondents had raised issues around behaviour on site, including concerns around dog walkers and cyclists.
- Oak Processionary Moth continued to be managed across Ashtead Common. Numbers had not increased during 2020 which suggested that there might be some natural control in place and a new approach targeting the highest risk nests in the highest risk zones appeared to have been effective. A Member suggested that more informative signposting around the natural history of the site could be useful for visitors. Another Member stressed the importance of flagging risks around Lyme Disease to visitors to allow them to take reasonable precautions.

In response to a question from a Member, the Superintendent confirmed that the consultation process for the draft Ashtead Common Management Plan 2021-2031 would be open until January 2021 and Members were invited to provide their feedback. Members of the Consultative Group could request paper copies of the draft Ashtead Common Management Plan 2021-2031.

A Member underlined the need to engage young people with the consultation process for the draft Ashtead Common Management Plan 2021-2031, and the Head Ranger would raise this with the Youth Representative to the Consultative Group. Another Member suggested that local schools be approached to contribute.

**RESOLVED**, that the update be noted and that the amended long-term vision statement be supported.

6. **COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP APPLICATION**

The Head Ranger was heard regarding the Countryside Stewardship Scheme Grant application for Ashtead Common and the following points were made:

- The current Environmental Stewardship Scheme which funded conservation work across Ashtead Common and represented £28k funding per annum would end on 31 March 2021. Expressions of interest for the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme Grant must be submitted to Natural England by March 2021, and if accepted, applications must be submitted to Natural England by September 2021 for approval, alongside a Woodland Management Plan and ten-year Site Management Plan. Should the application for the Ashtead Common be successful, conservation work would be funded for a further ten years, starting on 1 January 2022; however, there would be a 9-month gap in funding between the end of the existing agreement and the start of the new one.

**RESOLVED**, that the update be noted.

7. **REVIEW OF THE ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME 2019-20 AND PRESENTATION OF THE 2020-21 PROGRAMME**

The Senior Ranger was heard regarding key achievements during 2019-20 and the following points were made:

- There had been a number of key achievements and updates during the 2019/20 financial year:
  - There had been a significant increase in visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic which was managed by greater levels of patrolling and engagement. This had been supported by the regular mowing of the firebreak, ride and path network to reduce fire risk and provide good quality access for the public as well as increased bracken spraying in July 2020.
  - There had been no volunteering or cattle grazing since March 2020 to allow rangers to concentrate on site safety and public engagement. The apprenticeship programme had continued and Rangers had used the period of homeworking to develop the draft Ashtead Common Management Plan 2021-2031.

- Work was also underway to take forward a range of work over the next six months:
  - The volunteering programme would resume with reduced-scale practical tasks. A Member noted that Lower Mole Countryside Management Project volunteers had just embarked on a three-year project at Rye Brook and that after a delay caused by planning processes and the COVID-19 pandemic, a wetland scheme in Kestrel Field would commence in late-October 2020.
  - Rangers would concentrate on keeping patrol levels high whilst working to improve the infrastructure across the Common, including bar-ways and noticeboards. Rangers would also attend refresher training for wood-chipper and chainsaw use. Contracts to clear veteran trees, open glades and thin out oaks would be taken forward during Autumn 2020.

**RESOLVED**, that the update be noted.

**8. QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

There were two questions

A Member noted that a small amount of local funding had been made available for the Ashted area by Surrey County Council and asked that the Head Ranger provide details of any upcoming funding opportunities.

A Member emphasised the value of encouraging more young people to visit the Common and suggested that this tie in with the volunteering programme, such as via guided walks.

**9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT**

There was no other business.

**10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Ashted Common Consultative Group would be held in February 2021 and the final meeting date would be provided to Members shortly.

**The meeting ended at 8.03 pm**

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Chairman

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