

**WEST WICKHAM, SPRING PARK AND COULSDON COMMONS
CONSULTATION GROUP**

Tuesday, 29 September 2020

Minutes of the meeting of the West Wickham, Spring Park and Coulsdon Commons Consultation Group held via Microsoft Teams at 6.30 pm

Present

Members:

Graeme Doshi-Smith (Chairman)	Chantal Lane
Benjamin Murphy (Deputy Chairman)	Graham Lomas
Jeremy Simons	Dr Jane McLaughlin
Cllr Nicholas Bennett JP	Cllr Neil Reddin
Cllr Margaret Bird	Avril Sleeman
Brian Hudson	

Officers:

Andy Barnard	- Superintendent of The Commons
Helen Betteridge	- Open Spaces Department
Colin Buttery	- Director of Open Spaces
Allan Cameron	- Head Ranger (The Commons)
Barry Gutteridge	- Senior Ranger (The Commons)
Hadyn Robson	- Support Services Manager (The Commons)
Kerry Nicholls	- Town Clerk's Department
James Gibson	- Chamberlain's Department

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Peter Hodges, Nicola Hunt, Sarah Lovatt, Sylvia Moys, Councillor Stephen O'Connell, Val Polydorou and Sam Wheatcroft.

2. INTRODUCTION FOR NEW MEMBERS AND FORMAL AGREEMENT TO WELCOME COUNCILLOR MARGARET BIRD (LONDON BOROUGH OF CROYDON) AS A NEW MEMBER

The Chairman led the Commons Consultation Group in welcoming Councillor Margaret Bird, London Borough of Croydon as a new Member of the West Wickham, Spring Park and Coulsdon Commons Consultation Group.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2019 were approved as a correct record.

A number of matters arising were considered:

A232 Signage

Issues around the positioning of road signage on the A232 had been raised with the London Borough of Bromley which had conducted an inspection and concluded that the existing sightlines were appropriate.

WW2 Fighter Station Heritage Network

The potential to advertise the WW2 Fighter Station Heritage Network on the City of London Corporation website had been explored. The network was still in the early stages of development and it had therefore been concluded that it would not be appropriate to signpost to the Network at this time.

Legacy Policy

Following a request by Members at the meeting of the West Wickham, Spring Park and Coulsdon Commons Consultation Group on 24 January 2019, the Superintendent confirmed that there was not currently a fully developed Legacy Policy in place for the Commons but that this was being taken forward and would be provided to Members when available.

National Nature Reserve (NNR) Status for West Wickham, Coulsdon Common, Spring Park and Happy Valley

Natural England had granted National Nature Reserve Status to Coulsdon Common, Farthing Down and Happy Valley as the newly established South London Downs National Nature Reserve. The ownership of this land was shared between the City of London Corporation, London Borough of Croydon and Wildlife Trust who worked together to protect this very special landscape.

RESOLVED, that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2019 be approved as a correct record.

5. SUPERINTENDENT'S UPDATE

The Superintendent provided an update to the Consultation 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 Commons.
- 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 represented an £85k reduction to the budget for the management of West Wickham, Spring Park and Coulsdon Commons.

RESOLVED, that the update be noted.

6. CAR PARKING INFRASTRUCTURE AND CHARGES

The Superintendent was heard regarding car parking infrastructure and charges and the following points were made:

- The issue of introducing car park charging at West Wickham, Spring Park and Coulsdon Commons had been discussed at length at the meeting of the West Wickham, Spring Park and Coulsdon Commons Consultation Group on 24 January 2019, following which a decision had been made to proceed with the proposal. Car park charging infrastructure was being installed at Farthing Downs and Riddlesdown and it was anticipated that charges would be introduced before January 2021. Season tickets would be available for frequent users and parking would remain free for Blue Badge holders.
- Three options for car park charges were being considered which comprised:
 1. Up to two hours, £1.50; All day, £3 (estimated net income: £84.7k)
 2. Up to two hours, £1.25; All day, £3 (estimated net income: £80.9k)
 3. Up to two hours, £1.00; All day, £3 (estimated net income: £77.1k)

At its meeting on 18 August 2020, Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Consultation Group had supported Option 1.

Members were advised that a comparable scheme at Polesden Lacey charged £2.00 for up to two hours and £5.00 for all day parking, although parking was free for National Trust members at that location.

- Members of the Commons Consultation discussed the introduction of car park charges and the three pricing options:
 - During the COVID-19 pandemic, usage of the Commons had increased dramatically with a high level of parking on grass verges. A Member voiced concern that the introduction of car parking charges would further encourage parking on grass verges. The Superintendent confirmed that the introduction of car parking charges would be supported by robust enforcement by Rangers with a potential partnership with District Enforcement also being considered, and that this would include grass verges. A joint project to address parking on highways and verges had been taken forward by the City of London Corporation and the London Borough of Croydon, as a result of which an urban clearway would come into effect at Farthing Downs on 25 November 2020. This change would be publicised extensively via local and social media as well as by Rangers on-site and was expected to reduce misuse of parking.
 - There had been a spate of vandalism in car parks at the Commons during Summer 2020. The Superintendent clarified that this had not been in relation to car park charges but was due to the increased usage of the Commons during the COVID-19 pandemic where

visitors had sought to use the car parks outside the advertised opening/closing times.

- Visitors would be able to pay for parking using their credit or debit card, or via their mobile phone. It was anticipated that the introduction of car park charges would increase the number of visitors who chose to walk or cycle to the Commons, with 20% more visitors to Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common now opting to walk or cycle. In response to a query from a Member of the Commons Consultation Group, the Superintendent advised that there was an expectation that visitors would observe general safety measures in visiting the Commons, such as using antibacterial handwash after purchasing a parking ticket.
- One Member voiced support for Option 1, which would help offset the anticipated budget reduction for the 2021/22 financial year. Another Member expressed a preference for Option 3, as visitors were likely to spend no more than an hour visiting the Commons and higher car parking charges might increase parking on nearby residential streets. A Member highlighted that Surrey County Council recently cancelled car parking charges across its entire countryside estate following public objections, in response to which the Superintendent underlined the importance of supporting visitors to understand why car parking charges were being introduced.

The Superintendent thanked Members of the Commons Consultation Group for the points raised which would feed into the wider consultation response.

RESOLVED, that the update be noted.

7. **MANAGEMENT PLANNING**

The Head Ranger was heard regarding management planning and the following point was made:

- Member feedback was sought on the draft Management Plan for West Wickham Common and Spring Park 2021-2031. The start date of the plan was 1 April 2021. Members were informed that the closing date for their comments on the draft plan was 31 October 2020. The draft plan would then be the subject of a wider public consultation before the Plan's submission to Natural England for final approval.
- Individual Management Plans were being developed for Coulsdon Common, Farthing Downs, Kenley Common and Riddlesdown with a start date of 1 April 2022 and would follow a separate timetable.

RESOLVED, that the update be noted.

8. **ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP**

The Head Ranger was heard regarding environmental stewardship and the following points were made:

- The current Environmental Stewardship Scheme which funded the Commons' conservation work and represented £58k per annum for West Wickham, Spring Park and Coulsdon Commons 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 new 10-year Site Management Plan. Should the application for the Commons be successful, conservation work would be funded for a further five years, starting in 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.
- A Member of the Commons Consultation Group stressed the importance of communicating to visitors how conservation work on the Commons was funded as a means of explaining car parking charges and to encourage greater community involvement in the Commons. The Superintendent suggested this message be promoted via newsletters and other communications. In light of the ongoing economic uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Deputy Chairman emphasised the need to consider how conservation work could best be funded or delivered in future and asked Members of the Commons Consultation Group to share their ideas.

RESOLVED, that the update be noted.

9. **KEY ACHIEVEMENTS 2019-2020**

The Head 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:
 - Coulsdon Common: The creation of and maintenance of wood pasture had been an area of focus with species-rich grassland increased by one hectare.
 - Farthing Downs: Approximately 5.5 hectares of chalk grassland had been created with invasive scrub on the main area significantly reduced. Ash dieback had been identified at New Hill and was being monitored and managed.
 - Kenley Common: There had been an 80% reduction of scrub in targeted areas which were now grazed with sheep and cattle. Hedgerow management had also been undertaken.
 - Riddlesdown: Two hectares of scrub had been restored to chalk grassland which was a Priority 1 habitat. Other works included the thinning of oaks and the ongoing management of ancient woodland.

- Spring Park: The introduction of a cycle of Blackthorn coppicing in recent years had had significant benefits for local wildlife, including the Brown Hairstreak butterfly population and it was planned to extend four-year blackthorn coppice rotation to other Commons.
- West Wickham Common: Holly thinning and the creation of woodland glades had benefitted the site as well as restoration of the heathland age structure.
- Front line services had continued to be delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic including core activities around livestock and health and safety inspections. The Support Services team had worked from home for much of the pandemic but were now returning to the Estate Offices. A number of new staff had been recruited to the Estate Teams over the past year although some key vacancies remained.
- Invisible fences had been introduced to manage sheep and cows across the Commons. The software monitored the location of livestock which could then be directed to defined compartments within an existing secured landscape to support targeted grazing. There was not sufficient confidence in the system as yet to use invisible fences as a standalone system, particularly as some livestock had absconded from the site during the trial period.
- Dog Waste services continued to be delivered across the Commons to a good standard. This area of service provision had a cost implication of £34k per annum and remained an area of potential cost savings in response to future budget cuts.
- 4.5km of ditching and banking works had been completed around Coulsdon Common, both increasing the security of the site and adding to the aesthetic of the area by delineating the boundary of the Common.
- The Happy Valley and Farthing Downs nature trail had been upgraded using a small grant from the City of London Corporation which included the replacement of a number of marker posts and the production of a 64-page full colour booklet to explain the history, ecology and conservation of the area. This was supported by an audio presentation that visitors could access during their walk which was voiced by a number of high-profile celebrities including Sir Tony Robinson and Benjamin Zephaniah.
- The volunteering programmes across the Commons had been suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, work was underway to review how volunteering programmes could be reintroduced safely, which would include a robust risk assessment process. In response to a question from a Member, the Head Ranger confirmed that “tree-popping” was undertaken with a piece of equipment which used the lever principle to uproot plants, offering a sustainable and ecologically sound alternative to strimming or spraying.

- Over the past year, the Commons had been awarded 6 Green Flag Awards and 3 Green Heritage awards.

RESOLVED, that the update be noted.

10. **QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE CONSULTATION COMMITTEE**

There were no questions.

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

There was no other business.

12. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the West Wickham, Spring Park and Coulsdon Commons Consultation Group would be held in March 2021 and the final meeting date would be provided to Members shortly.

The meeting closed at 8.23 pm

Chairman

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