

St Catherine's Hill & Town Common Management Steering Group Minutes

Hall on the Hill, Marlow Drive

14 August 2018

Present Gary Powell (ARC), Charlotte Smith (NE), Robin Harley (CED), Tanya Kaplan (NE), Adam Bates (NE), Sue Fotheringham (J&SCHRA), Cllr Sue Spittle (CBC - chair), Paul Atwell UHP

Welcome: SS welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made

Apologies: Melanie Gibbons, Cllr Margaret Phipps, Saska McGrath

Minutes: RH ran through the minutes - agreed as true record by those present

Matters arising: PA – Firewise now has funding but took a lot of time – starting to put together information, GP looking at draft leaflet with lots of information – about making properties more robust – reducing fire risk etc. Not just about landowners but homeowners as well. PA – someone well suited in post working 2 days/week.

GP after fire – land managers looked at gates, access issues, lots more fire breaking and easier to move around site, should now be possible to get east to west at north end of the site. RH to ask JN about hydrant [JN now chasing again].

Completed felling works: GP delayed felling works took place just north of the quarry. To right of gun club entrance to link east and west of site. Small amounts of public attention. Little bit of mess left afterwards - logs strewn around and log pile still remaining. Clearance of rhododendron to west of gun club entrance attracted more negativity. Fringe behind houses to be left as buffer. Lots of ruts etc as weather very bad during works. RSPB were the contractors, worked better than contractors in the past, site left safer.

Proposed felling work/Countryside Stewardship: Both CBC and ARC were entering their land into this grant scheme. TK - CS started 4 years ago and followed on from HLS (Higher Level Stewardship grant programme). CS is now a joint scheme between Natural England, Forestry Commission and Rural Payments Agency. The fundamental scheme is pretty good with better payments for heathland. CS is the main funding source for ARC and a good way for NE to deliver objectives. Capital works must take place within first 2 years of (usually) a 5 year programme. Parties may be able to bid for additional funding in later years. Money is guaranteed for the length of the project. There may also be unspent monies available in later years although underspend is likely to go back to the Treasury. Town Common is a regional priority. Brexit is a factor in future years. Can be large funding gaps as scheme starts on 1 January (e.g. 11 month gap for CBC).

Commons are a 10 year agreement, with a 5 year break clause. This applies to Town Common (ARC land). RH said that Christchurch moving into the new BCP council has implications that will need sorting. All SSSI land has to go into CS although Section 28 bodies (i.e. Councils) also have a statutory duty. Maintenance payments don't arrive until year 2 but capital payments come in quicker.

RH outlined works proposal focused on completing the clearance of the central ride belt within year 1 and 2 as per the management plan.

Monuments also have to be included. Talks have been carried out with Historic England on site, looking at the scar at the end of the hill and existing trees and scrub on the various monuments.

GP circulated a map showing proposed ARC works, largely in the area north of the quarry. Most of their big works are already complete. SS asked about path improvements around quarry edge. GP said annual maintenance of paths took place but tree roots are a natural hazard that they can't do much about. People have the choice to walk there, as it is not an official path. Signs to warn people were erected but they were ripped down.

RH mentioned additional potential works at north end of site, on slope to spur road, again within the management plan.

The possibility of a SANG and car park at Blackwater was discussed. It was felt that NE were unlikely to support additional access to this end of the site.

GP said that ARC had negotiated a new lease with Malmesbury Estate – all agreed for next 21-25 years. Finance aspect was main issue but about to sign. Value of wildlife on site so high that ARC are prepared to pay for lease.

Monitoring update: RH circulated rainfall data. Following some very wet winters, we are now in a sustained dry period. June was the driest month on record. Most ponds have dried out and fire risk has been very high. Dipwells were also showing record low levels.

Tree Health: RH talked through a report from an arboricultural consultant regarding tree health on the western slopes. This is a difficult situation with no straightforward solutions – trees are all even aged and will need management but a recommendation to clear fell blocks of trees was not acceptable to anyone. General feeling is that thinning is the only option. A gradual change towards broadleaves through natural regeneration (as opposed to planting) was also felt to be best approach. RH will ask Steve Maros from DCC to meet on site to give some further advice on best way forward – sensible first step would be to take out standing dead trees.

It would be possible to put wooded parts of site under an FC woodland management plan (may not be possible if site is already under CS) This would be over 40-50 years.

[SF left at this point]

AOB:

SS asked for update on rough sleeper by A338. RH had not heard there had been any changes and knew people who are keeping an eye on him

Next meeting: Suggested that this takes place in the New Year. CS paperwork should come back November time and finalised by year end, although others have been delayed until following May.

Meeting ends 12.45