

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
HIGHWOOD MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE
HELD ON 1 FEBRUARY 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.45 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Laura Blumenthal, David Hare, Kay Gilder, Mary Holmes, Geoff Littler and Alistair Neal

Officers Present

Simon Bartlam (Countryside Service Operations Manager) and Neil Carr (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

Kay Gilder was elected as Chairman of the 2020/21 Conference.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Freda Pattison.

3. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Conference held on 8 January 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman at a later date.

5. COUNTRYSIDE SERVICE RANGERS' REPORT

Simon Bartlam, Countryside Operations Officer, gave an update on progress at Highwood since the previous Conference in January 2020.

Simon began by updating the Conference on actions set out in the Minutes, as follows:

- Bulmershe Pond Transfer – this issue was currently under consideration and it was envisaged that there would be progress in 2021.
- Cycling – additional signs had been introduced asking for considerate cycling through the site.
- Highwood web pages – the Countryside Service had been developing webpages for its sites, including Highwood.
- Dog bin – the proposed dog bin adjacent to the Cala Homes site entrance had been implemented.

Simon went on to introduce the Rangers' Report for 2020/21, highlighting the following points:

- Scraping of a section of heathland – a new compartment would be programmed for each year.
- The final £18.5k of footpath improvements had been completed in March 2020, thereby using up the access improvement budget.

- A resident had offered £800 to fund further work on the heathland – this money would be used to fund work with volunteer groups.
- Fly tipping – there had been five instances of small scale fly tipping during the year – an area of large leaved Periwinkle was removed after one instance of garden waste fly tipping.
- Cycling – there had been one incident relating to aggressive cycling on the site.
- BTCV had monitored the regeneration of areas cleared of Laurel and had reported a positive colonisation by native species.
- 89 volunteer workdays (excluding Friends workdays) had taken place including CROW (Conserve Reading on Wednesdays), Thames Valley Conservation Volunteers, BTCV and Community Services.
- Covid-19 had impacted on the number of volunteer workdays possible – Countryside Service staff had been seconded for marshalling work in order to ensure social distancing on the various sites across the Borough.
- Two Addington School pupils had spent 8 days working on the site – it was proposed to increase this provision in 2021/22.
- The potential for apprenticeships (potentially working with the Berkshire College of Agriculture) was under consideration.

Simon reported that the programme of work for the current year included:

- Coppicing in compartment 4 and Rhododendron/Laurel control in compartment 6.
- Heathland scraping as part of the regeneration project.
- Reed bed establishment on Southlake (not technically Highwood but Countryside Service staff and volunteers managed the project).
- CROW to carry out several days of conservation work on the Heathland following the financial donation to improve the area.

Simon confirmed that the Countryside Service budgets would be used to fund repairs, such as the current issues with muddy paths, and other ongoing maintenance issues. The pandemic had seen a number of new challenges for the Countryside sites, but there were no specific concerns relating to Highwood.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The Rangers' Report for 2020/21 be noted;
- 2) Simon Bartlam and the Countryside Service be thanked for their hard work and support during the year;
- 3) A site visit be arranged for the summer of 2021 to provide Members with an update on site issues;
- 4) The proposed improvement works for 2021 be supported.

6. REPORT FROM THE FRIENDS OF HIGHWOOD

Simon Bartlam reported that the Friends Group had continued to support the Countryside Service by walking the site every day, litter picking, reporting problems and directing staff to the location of jobs.

Freda Pattison had fed back that there were no specific issues from the Friends Group.

RESOLVED: That the Friends of Highwood be thanked for their ongoing commitment and support to the Countryside Service.