

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
HIGHWOOD MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE
HELD ON 3 AUGUST 2022 FROM 6.00 PM TO 9.10 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Shirley Boyt, Laura Blumenthal, Kay Gilder, Mary Holmes, Geoff Littler and Alistair Neal

Also in attendance: Sheena Matthews

Officers Present

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

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

Kay Gilder was elected as Chair for the 2022 Conference.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Freda Pattison (Friends of Highwood).

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the held on 1 February 2021 were confirmed as correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. COUNTRYSIDE SERVICE RANGERS' REPORT

Simon Bartlam, Countryside Operations Officer provided an update on progress at Highwood since the previous meeting in 2021.

Simon began by updating Members on actions set out in the Minutes of the 2021 meeting:

- Bulmershe Pond Transfer – not transferred to WBC yet. Simon had chased Blandys Solicitors re progress. Blandys were chasing the University for an update. It appeared that there had been a delay due to an electrical cable being laid through the area. Simon agreed to keep chasing the University to ensure that action was taken to transfer the pond.
- Apprenticeships – Shirley Boyt asked about progress relating to apprenticeships. The Minutes referred to a potential arrangement with the Berkshire College of Agriculture. Simon confirmed that there had been no progress due to the impact of Covid-19. Simon agreed to review the potential for apprentices and report back to Members in due course.

Simon referred to the site visit, held at Highwood/Southlake prior to the meeting. Members felt that the site visit was positive and helped Members to understand the issues on the ground. Members requested that the site visit become part of the annual meeting process.

Simon introduced the Rangers' Report for 2021/22 and highlighted the following points:

- The Countryside Service had taken on responsibility for Southlake reservoir which was adjacent to the Highwood site. Southlake included a dam and woodland bank. Simon had regular discussions with the reservoir inspectors. The inspectors had highlighted concerns about vermin burrowing in the woodland bank and the potential risks relating to mature trees in the embankment. Other work at Southlake included the removal of silt and improvements to reed beds around the lake.
- Work at Highwood over the past year included scrub removal from the heathland areas and rhododendron removal from two areas. Work had also continued to cut back footpaths and remove incidents of fly tipping and litter. Countryside Service staff had also spent time on health and safety tree work including dead-wooding on the main footpath through the site.
- The Friends group had continued to support the Countryside Service by walking the site every day. In addition, 118 volunteer workdays (excluding Friends visits) were carried out in 2021. These included volunteers from CROW (Conserve Reading on Wednesdays), Thames Valley Conservation Volunteers, BTCV and Community Groups. A member of the public had also provided £800 to support the work of the volunteer groups. Simon confirmed that volunteer work days had been lower in 2020/21 due to the impact of Covid-19. The number of volunteer work days was expected to increase in 2022.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points (including feedback from the Friends group):

- Provision of Information Boards on the Highwood site – Simon confirmed that he was seeking funding. The cost of design, construction and installation of information boards was estimated at £4k to £5k.
- Part of the footpath (near the High Trees) had not been resurfaced for some time which was causing problems for visitors. Simon agreed to investigate.
- The gate adjacent to the new houses had lost its springer – meaning that the gate did not stay closed – increasing risks for dogs exiting the site, etc. Simon agreed to investigate.
- When were new trees planted to replace lost trees? The planting season was November to February. Simon referred to the Borough Council's new Tree Strategy and the commitment to plant 250,000 new trees in the Borough as part of the Climate Emergency Action Plan.
- Thames water site (adjacent to Southlake). Simon had chased WBC Property to see if the site had been transferred over. There was some confusion. Simon agreed to investigate further.
- Network Rail grants. Simon confirmed that the Countryside Service had not pursued this as the Highwood site was not close enough to any lines, but the Council may have applied for other sites. Simon subsequently confirmed that the Network Rail scheme did not fit in with the Council's projects or timescales, so the Council had not pursued this avenue any further.

- WBC had received some grant funding. However, this had not benefitted Highwood as the site was not near to any railway corridors.
- Bat population at Highwood. Simon agreed to carry out some research and to provide data to Members on the local bat population. Simon confirmed that the insect population appeared to have fallen this year which was not a good sign for bats and birds in the area.
- Members recalled a sign on Church Road giving directions to Highwood. Simon agreed to investigate the sign with the Highways team and discuss its potential reinstatement.
- Allotment area – Simon agreed to chase RBC re the future of the allotment area (including the ongoing dumping of rubbish) and the adjoining open space. This area could potentially link to a future wildlife corridor.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Rangers' Report on Highwood for 2021/22 be noted;
- 2) Simon Bartlam and the Countryside Service team be thanked for their hard work and support during the year;
- 3) Simon Bartlam provide follow-up information relating to the questions raised by Members during the site visit and the meeting;
- 4) the Conference move to a summer timeslot to enable a site visit to be undertaken before each meeting;
- 5) clarification be sought on the scope for including Southlake issues within the remit of the Highwood Management Conference.

6. FRIENDS OF HIGHWOOD

Simon Bartlam confirmed that Freda Pattison was unable to attend the meeting due to poor health.

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 specific location of issues.

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