

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
HIGHWOOD MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE
HELD ON 25 JANUARY 2016 FROM 7.30 PM TO 8.20 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Laura Blumenthal, Kay Gilder, Guy Grandison and Alison Swaddle

Friends of Highwood

Freda Pattison (Community Representative)

Officers Present

Luciane Bowker (Democratic Services Officer) and Simon Bartlam (Countryside Operations Officer, WBC Countryside Service)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

Kay Gilder was elected Chairman of the Conference for the 2015/16 municipal year.

Kay Gilder stated that five hours before the meeting was due to begin, Mary Holmes was telephoned by the Woodley Town Clerk to let her know that although she had been properly appointed as the Town Council representative for the Highwood Management Conference, an Officer from WBC had found that Mary was no longer a Town Councillor and therefore in their opinion could no longer attend the meeting. Mary Holmes had been a Member of the Highwood Management Conference for many years which is why Councillor Keith Baker had asked her to continue as one of the Woodley Town Council representatives.

It was accorded that Mary Holmes should continue to be a Member of the Conference. Members noted that her input brought a valuable contribution to the Highwood Management Conference and that she had been a Member for many years.

2. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies received.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 3 December 2014 were confirmed as correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Members asked for clarification on the S106 contribution of £48,808 for enhancements and improvements within Highwood which was mentioned in the minutes. Simon Bartlam, Countryside Operations Officer stated that Wokingham Borough Council had received approximately £48,000 from the Bulmershe Court development to be spent on "access improvements of Highwood".

Simon tabled a paper containing a list of projects that the Countryside Service felt would be appropriate and should be considered for funding:

- Enhancement of the existing three access points through the provision of suitable surfacing, gates and basic site welcome board. This would just have the site name and contact details (including website address). The access points could be

constructed to ensure access for disabled, cyclists dismount and motorcycles restricted;

- Limited surfacing of sections of the main circular path in order to address any current problem areas;
- Any works required to link the new Bulmershe Court access point to the main circular footpath (may not be required but unclear at the moment);
- Upgrading of the bridleway access from the Bulmershe pond to the Kingfisher way access point. This pond is due to be passed over to the Countryside Service in the near future and should be considered part of the Highwood site;
- Replacement of Heathland fencing to ensure heathland is protected from additional access/ desire lines establishing over the fragile habitat;
- Development of a Highwood web page on the WBC website including basic information, maps and photographs.

Simon invited Members to put forward any other ideas to use the funding for the Highwood. Members agreed with the suggestions, stressing the importance of keeping paths clear and maintaining the pond area. After discussion it was decided that Simon would find out the pricings for the projects and once the cost was known it would be possible to make a decision on how to spend the money. In response to a question, Simon stated that once it was decided what projects should be carried out; the work would be carried out this year once the weather improved. Simon informed that there were no timescales attached to this funding, so it was possible to carry it forward to the next few years.

Councillor Swaddle pointed out that the developers would want to know how the money was spent and therefore it was important to be clear and transparent, but also there should be no unnecessary delay in using the S106 contribution.

Councillor Gradison suggested that the Countryside Services liaise with Earley Town Council as he believed it may be possible to work together on some of the projects.

Members asked Simon to find out how much interest was due on the £48k, as this had been received over one year ago.

There was discussion about the boundaries near the Reading Council allotments and the access points to the Highwood. Simon believed it was very important to maintain the boundaries; however it was necessary to find out what Reading's plans were before a decision could be made on this issue. Freda Pattison from Friends of Highwood, stressed the importance of keeping open spaces for the wildlife.

Simon would contact the Members of the Highwood Management Conference with the projects' pricings as soon as possible.

5. COUNTRYSIDE SERVICE REPORT

Simon Bartlam, Countryside Operations Officer introduced his report as set out on Agenda page 9, which gave details of work carried out during the year in accordance with the management plan.

Management Tasks

- Removal of a number of fallen trees across footpaths, staff and contractors 1 day.
- Scrub removal on heathland, staff and volunteers 14 days.

- Removal of dangerous trees, staff and volunteers 3 days.

General Rangering

- General work including cutting back footpaths, strimming and removing hung-up trees.
- Removing fly tipping, garden waste.
- Litter picking.
- Boundary/ site inspection, fixing fencing and style.
- Respond to eight incidents of fires/graffiti/camping.
- Involved the police with two issues regards camping/living on site

Volunteer involvement

- The Friends group has continued to support the Countryside Service, by walking every day helping to patrol the site, litter picking, reporting of problems and directing us on site to location of jobs.
- 100 volunteer workdays (excluding Friends visits) have been carried out this year; including Pinnacle back to work programme (January only), Community Services.

Next year (this winter)

- Rhododendron / laurel control in compartments 1-4

News

- The Pinnacle Back to work project has finished.

Simon reported that the trees that had been taken down were close to footpaths and this was unsightly at the moment. It was still to be decided what would be planted in that area. There were a number of options and the maintenance of the area would be considered when deciding what plants were to be used.

Simon stated that since the Reading prison had closed the service was not receiving as much help as before; it was down to one or two community service people in the weekends.

There were seasonal regular volunteers and the Friends group who helped to maintain the woods. This weekend there had been 15 volunteers working over two days. Simon stated that it was important to keep the work varied so that the volunteers kept interested in helping out.

6. REPORT FROM FRIENDS OF HIGHWOOD

Freda Pattison, community representative from Friends of Highwood had no issues to report. Due to the weather there had only been a few people walking round the lake recently.

Simon reported that he had twice seen a black van parked by the entrance and he believed someone was sleeping there. The concern was that people sleeping in the Highwood would create 'toilet' issues; therefore sleeping in the park was to be discouraged.

It was mentioned that tents had been seen in the Highwood in the past, but it seemed that this was not happening anymore. There was a fire hazard relating to people putting up tents in the woods. Members questioned the Fire Brigade's access to the woods, Simon stated that it had been decided that if a fire broke out in the woods it would be easier to let the Fire Brigade break the lock at the entrance than to give them keys.

Councillor Gilder stated that sometimes people got lost in the woods; she felt it was important to make paths clearer.