

Runnymede Borough Council

Chertsey Meads Management Liaison Group

Tuesday, 28 February 2023 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillor D Cotty (Chairman),
J Alexander, V Baldwin, R Deacock, G Drake, K Drury, S Hall, J Hearne,
N Johnson, C Longman, M Nichols, C Noakes, B Phillips, M Ray,
T A Stevens and D Turner

J Harper, P Joyce and C Swatridge (non-voting advisory members)

Members of the Committee absent: Councillor M Nuti,
T Athersuch, P Bickford, J Denton, I Girvan, A Goddard, F Harmer,
G James, H Lane, D Mead and J O'Gorman.

In attendance: PCSO R Sutton.

Other Officers attending: S Barnes, H Clark, M Godfrey, B Miller and
D Williams

1 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2022 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

2 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor M Nuti, T Athersuch, Mr P Bickford, J Denton, F Harmer, I Girvan, A Goddard, and Mr J O'Gorman.

3 Membership of the Management Liaison Group

The Group approved the updated Constitution to reflect two new advisory members; these were Mr Chris Swatridge, Open Spaces and Community Development Manager and the currently vacant post of Assistant Head of Green Spaces.

Members also approved an additional section to clarify budgetary matters and the split of responsibility between Environmental Services and Community Services.

[At the close of the meeting, Mr Turner advised that Mr Mead was no longer one of the Chertsey Agricultural Show representatives and that he would advise who the new Member would be in due course.]

4 Site Security

The Group discussed site security as it related to management and maintenance of the Meads.

The condition of the Meads had been adversely affected by what both residents and Officers thought to be the activity of people tracking and poaching deer. Officers had discovered vehicular tracks, damage to sleepers and similar all of which if repaired would have to come from the operational management budget.

An informal meeting with the PCSO for Rural Crime, the Chairman, a resident from Hamm

Court and Officers took place on site to discuss possible solutions to deter future incursions.

PCSO Rich Sutton confirmed it was crucial that anyone witnessing the activity described reported it as 'crime happening now' via 999. The importance of building up an evidence base and patterns of behaviour would assist how the matter could be taken forward. It was also stressed that people witnessing these activities should not put themselves in danger by confronting individuals or groups.

There were a number of options which could address the problem, all of which would need specialist input from stakeholders such as Surrey Wildlife Trust, Surrey Botanical Society and the Council's Tree Officer. Options discussed included trenches, additional hedge planting, hedge layering, re-coppicing Hazel, more robust bollards and gates. Another option was to simply block the access points to Hamm Court Farm on the Meads side and/or on the other side when the identity of the new land owner had been established. None of these measures had been budgeted for and all would need careful research and discussion.

The legal status of the site was important. Any deterrent would need to complement the Meads Management Plan as well as have the permission of Fields In Trust as Chertsey Meads was the subject of a legally binding agreement which sought to protect the site from development.

The SANG status of the site was also relevant. Members were advised that the newly appointed Open Space and Development Manager, Mr Swatridge would be looking at how SANG funding could be used to benefit the Meads and other open spaces in the borough.

The Group understood the need for consideration of ecological issues but were equally concerned about site security and protection of residents as well as the site which had suffered in recent months owing to the Esso pipeline works.

This led to another discussion about general management and maintenance issues such as the condition of the sleepers, gaps in hedgerows and whether Esso could assist with replacing the sleepers with more robust bollards for example. The Group was advised that a sum of money had been received from Esso for environmental protection works; the list was quite specific and had been negotiated with Esso by the previous Assistant Head of Green Space. It was noted that this list of works formed a legal agreement with Esso; the Council's Legal department had been closely involved with this and what the money could be used for was subject to a number of restrictions. To vary this would be very difficult.

Officers confirmed that the 'Esso list' included some hedge laying, shaping and planting up gaps plus re-coppicing Hazel. The ideal time to do this would be over the winter months between October and February. It was acknowledged that this was not an instant 'fix' and the hedgerows would take time to mature but would ultimately be very beneficial for biodiversity.

The Group agreed that a smaller group be convened (reference 5.2 of the Group's Constitution) to take this forward with Dr Steward and interested parties.

5 **Update on Actions from the Last Meeting**

Moorings

There had been no progress with moving on the two over stay moorers from the second picnic area where they had been for some years.

Members were concerned that the condition of the Meads was suffering if raw sewerage was being emptied into The Thames, plus BBQs in the summer and potential anti-social

behaviour, all of which contravened the byelaws.

Neither vessel was registered with the Environment Agency. PCSO Sutton considered that if certain criteria were met a Community Protection Warning could be issued. However, neither occupant of the vessels were currently in evidence. Details of the vessels would be supplied to the Head of Green Spaces to follow up.

UK Power Networks (UKPN) Proposal

It was reported that this proposal had halted at the point where a risk assessment was required to lay the cables in the same trench as the Esso pipeline. It was confirmed that the matter did not rest with the Council who had done all it could to facilitate, but with Esso and UK Power Networks. Mrs Hearne said that she would make some checks with her contact and Officers would re-check with Legal.

[After the meeting it was confirmed that the draft wayleave was with UKPN and the Council awaited comments from them]

Bridge Repairs

The Group was advised that Officers were in contact with Surrey County Council to discuss repairs to the bridge; progress with which had stopped some months ago when the ownership of Hamm Court Farm had changed. It was suggested that re-instating the gate/barrier across Footpath 9 would be beneficial and or blocking off access to the smaller crossing point from the Meads side.

The accident in January which resulted in a dog losing its life was very sad and had highlighted the risks of exercising dogs around water when the water levels were high and fast flowing. Warning signs had been put up.

It was noted that the area around the informal path between the bridges was generally overgrown with hogweed and other vegetation. However, as a local Nature Reserve, the Group was advised that the Council did not want to over clear the area to encourage more biodiversity. Immediate safety concerns such as barbed wire could be prioritised subject to funding being available.

It was agreed to also approach Surrey Fire and Rescue for advice around water safety and a health and safety inspection would be advisable around suitable warning signage and vegetation clearance around the Bourne.

6 **Management and Maintenance**

The group discussed various management and maintenance issues as set out below:

Height Barrier

Officers confirmed that the process for arranging repairs had been protracted whilst colleagues resolved some insurance and procurement issues. Esso had accepted liability for damaging the barrier and were going to pay for it to be repaired. As the barrier was bespoke, owing to some integral safety features, the lead in period was 6 to 7 weeks from the point of order.

Some of the Group asked whether it was possible to have a lower gate like the one in car park 2 or an additional gate that could be locked overnight, which would effectively block access to the Meads for everyone except residents. There was some concern about access for emergency vehicles, which was acknowledged. However, some residents still wished this to be considered and thought that emergency vehicles would find a way through if necessary.

SANG Projects

Progress with various SANG funded projects was noted including the completion of works in car park 2, and re-painting picnic benches. It was reported that the existing passing places required some maintenance to make them more user friendly, such as cutting back some vegetation. Tarmacking the passing place on the approach to car park 2 was noted along with the additional bee bumps. The request for an additional passing place along the main roadway was noted. More robust signage to warn visitors that BBQs, bonfires and camping were prohibited had arrived and would be installed shortly; it was agreed on the main road to existing posts but to be mindful of maintaining the character of the Open Space.

Tree Works

Officers confirmed that funding had been secured to replace the damaged whips planted last year. Works had also been carried out near a residential property to thin the shrubbery around the first picnic area to deter anti-social behaviour.

Esso Pipeline

It was acknowledged that works had taken longer than desired and Esso would be issuing communications to residents with an updated timescale and would update the signs on site with the revised dates. They had recently re-commenced work on site. When complete, Esso would re-instate the site in consultation with the Council as landowner, in accordance with the terms of the land agreement.

Neospora

The Group was advised that Officers would be submitting a report to the Council's Environment and Sustainability Committee regarding a new policy to remove dog waste bins from parks and open spaces, including Chertsey Meads because dog waste could be put in normal bins. There was some concern that people would not bother using the bins at all so this would have to be monitored. Officers confirmed that damaged bins were not being replaced. Funding for additional bins would need to be agreed in discussions between Environmental Services and Community Services.

Any measures to limit the number of dogs people could bring onto the Meads was under consideration, particularly in light of the incident elsewhere in Surrey which had resulted in the death of a dog walker. Enforcement was also an issue.

Bat Hibernaculum.

The Group noted that the bat hibernaculum was currently unused and in a state of disrepair and that it would be an option to re-secure it in consultation with the Surrey Bat Group. A survey from 2021 had recorded six bat species on site, no roosts had been identified although it was thought they were nearby. Vegetation management would need to take account of having the least impact on bats.

Hay Cut

An option to combine the hay cut and reed bed cutting was noted. The Group was concerned that the reed bed was increasing in size and coverage because it had not been cut in accordance with the management plan. It was suggested that one side was kept long for the birds and deer and the other side cut in alternate years. Officers would liaise with Mr Phillips further, noting that the best time to cut the reed bed was in October/November. Cutting any earlier would only be possible subject to a survey by Surrey Wildlife Trust to ensure there were no ground nesting birds.

The results of the National Vegetation Classification survey carried out by Surrey Wildlife Trust in 2021 were noted. Chertsey Meads was not species poor and supported a good range of rare and unusual plant species. The site's importance in terms of encouraging wildlife had to be balanced to maintain the sympathetic meadow management regime currently in place.

Stewardship Arrangement for Chertsey Meads

Members were asked to note that the current Countryside Stewardship Arrangement for Chertsey Meads expired at the end of 2023. Renewal of the arrangement fell to Officers in the Green Spaces team in Environmental Services.

7 **Fire Breaks**

The Group discussed the merits of introducing fire breaks to the Meads in response to Climate Change and the increasing number of wildfires. Advice had been sought from Surrey Fire and Rescue Service about producing a Fire Plan for the Meads and including it in the general Management Plan subject to consultation with stakeholders.

An indicative plan of potential fire breaks was noted and Officers thanked for the preparatory research undertaken so far. It was agreed that there was a balance to be struck between making the Meads safe for everyone, especially during the summer months when the grassland was at its highest and maintaining the site in accordance with the Management Plan.

Different options were discussed including how wide breaks should or could be, where located and how maintained and funded, given there was no budget currently to introduce fire breaks. It was asked whether this type of work would be SANG funded or met from the general parks and open spaces budget. It was confirmed that SANG monies could be used to enhance the site but that it could also be classed as maintenance. Officers were currently working on a SANG strategy but any proposals would have to be properly costed.

Further thought was needed before making a decision but generally members agreed that a more frequent 'cut and collect' was desirable and that using the existing paths would be a good idea and to look at wider paths but not as wide as 5m which it was agreed would not benefit the overall look and feel of the site. There was an option to have variable widths depending on the location. Officers would share the mowing plan with Surrey Wildlife Trust and other key experts on the Group to discuss further to include obtaining further professional advice.

Recommend that –

Officers to take forward the idea of fire breaks and/or an enhanced mowing plan in consultation with key stakeholders to include detailed costed plans, and subject to sufficient funding being identified, and further professional advice being secured.

8 **Annual Work Programme**

The Group noted that the annual work programme was last updated in February 2022. A new Management Plan would need to be prepared with assistance from key stakeholders including Surrey Wildlife Trust. The Management Plan was due to expire in 2026. A lack of resources had meant that the annual work programme had not been updated but it was hoped to address this.

9 **Events**

Chertsey Show

Mr Turner advised that the 2023 Chertsey Show plans were well under way and the show was due to take place on 12 – 13 August 2023.

Members discussed the 2022 show, which despite the very hot weather had been a success.

It was confirmed that the one-way traffic arrangements could only be in force for the duration of the show itself for security reasons.

The new bin policy which was due to be considered by the Environment and Sustainability Committee would affect the show arrangements. Mr Turner agreed to discuss this separately with the Corporate Head of Environmental Services who confirmed there would be a budget to support community events.

The Chertsey Show would be discussed by the Council's Safety Advisory Group, to which Esso would also be invited.

Annual Site Visit

The Group did not set a date for an annual site visit.

Litter Pick

A Litter pick date had been set for Sunday 16 April 2023. However, staffing resources and availability of a trained first aider to attend the event meant that it could not take place as a Council led event this year. Volunteers could meet informally but this would be at their own risk and it was unlikely the Group would have the usual access to litter pickers and sacks. This would need further discussion.

10 **Any other Business**

The Group wanted to discuss the recent events at the Meads concerning a private property adjacent to Council owned land and other related incidents elsewhere. This was essentially a community safety concern but which touched on issues that might impinge on management and maintenance and the condition of the Meads.

Local residents had been alarmed by an attempt to gain entry to private properties but thanked Esso's security people for their assistance and the donation of some Heras fencing to deter further attempts. Options to address this were discussed.

The Council had acted swiftly in liaison with Esso but like the Police were limited in action they could take in what was essentially a civil matter.

Residents were grateful for the support given but remained concerned. They were urged to continue reporting incidents to the Police and remain vigilant.

Ms Harper asked the Group whether there would be support for events to mark the Great British Green Week from 10-18 June, or if they had an ideas of events that could take place to raise the profile of the Meads such as holding an open water safety event. Mrs Hearne agreed to discuss with Mr Bickford and report back. Any suggestions would be welcome.

The dates of future meetings noted as Tuesday 5 September 2023 and Tuesday 27 February 2024. To be held at the Civic Centre in Addlestone at 7.30pm.