

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OPEN SPACES MANAGEMENT SUB-COMMITTEE AT WITHAM TOWN COUNCIL HELD 19TH JUNE 2019 AT 3.00PM IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER.

PRESENT: - **Councillors** J C Goodman (Chairman), Miss C Jay, S E Hicks, T Pleasance, S C Lager, R P Ramage

Also in attendance:

S	Brailey	-	Witham Tree Group
A	Chick	-	Witham Rotary Club
B	Fleet	-	Tree Warden
J	Palombi	-	CPRE
P	Shuttleworth	-	Local Wildlife interests
D	Smith	-	Local Wildlife interests
A	Watts	-	Wild About Witham

Staff:	Mrs	H	Andrews	-	Assistant Proper Officer
		S	Dyer	-	Operations Manager

Member of the public: D Chignall

The Chairman opened the meeting and proposed that Councillor Miss C Jay be co-opted onto this group.

It was **AGREED** that Miss C Jay be co-opted onto the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee.

The Chairman also proposed that Mr B Fleet be nominated as Vice-Chairman of the group.

It was **AGREED** that Mr B Fleet be elected to serve as Vice Chairman of the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from J Casement. Late apologies were received after the meeting from B Wilmer.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations received.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD 16TH JANUARY 2019

Minutes from the previous meeting were taken as received and agreed.

4. QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

No questions or statements were received from the member of the public present.

5. CONSIDERATIONS OF WRITTEN REPRESENTATIONS

No written representations had been received.

6. OPERATIONS MANAGER'S REPORT

A verbal report was given by the Operations Manager. He advised that this was a new post for him and changes were being made to the way work was carried out. There had been a slight drop in performance due to the recent rain and breakdowns of machinery, but the Operations Team were on track to be on target for the busy cutting season. He confirmed

that since the last meeting they had a new member of staff who was proving to be an excellent asset to the team. He confirmed that both his staff members were trainees who would soon complete their qualifications.

Praise was received from several members regarding what an excellent job the Operations Team do and how well kept the River Walk is.

A concern was raised by a member regarding the low-level fencing that has been installed on the River Walk earlier in the year by Braintree District Council to secure it from unauthorised encampments. Attention was drawn to an area by Mill Lane Meadow where there were still gaps. Members were notified that because there is a wall along this stretch of the meadow, if unauthorised access was made, it would be regarded as criminal damage and they would be immediately evicted. It was also noted that there was a similar area at Saxon Drive but it was confirmed that this was currently owned by Essex County Council so we do not have permission on this land.¹

There was discussion regarding the breakdown of equipment and the question of whether it was better to acquire new equipment or repair. The Operations Manager advised that this was currently being looked into.

7. CLERK'S REPORT

A report was received. Members were advised that the acquisition of the Blackwater Rail Trail was still ongoing. Officers had met with Councillor James Abbott earlier that week but the representative from Essex County Council had not attended so no further progress as yet.

It was noted that the QR codes should be checked, as some had changed, before incorporating them on the new entrance signs for the River Walk which are due to be produced soon.

Members were advised that Officers had met with contractors this week and were currently waiting for a quote for gates at Whetmead and also to secure some of the fencing there. They were advised that a 'V' shaped pedestrian gate was due to be made for the entrance by the A12 underpass. Concern was raised for wheelchair users and whether motorbikes could still access the area. It was noted that Whetmead does not have suitable access for wheelchair users as it is a nature reserve with natural paths. Members were also advised that the narrow gap on the suggested gate would make access for motorbikes extremely difficult.

8. CLARIFICATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Environment Committee (11/28.05.2019) had sought clarification for a suggested tree survey and a review of cycle signage. It was agreed that the cycle signage relates to signposts along the River Walk.

Members discussed the reason for the tree survey. It was agreed that the last survey was to identify the condition of the trees on the River Walk and those that were in need of maintenance. The new survey would be to identify any unusual trees or rare species that would be in need of protection. Members were advised that this would need to be referred back to the Environment Committee but that there were unlikely to be funds available for the survey. It was suggested that Writtle College could be contacted and their students carry out a survey instead which would be more cost-effective but this would have health and safety issues.

It was **RECOMMENDED** to review the cycleway signage and that a new tree survey be commissioned from ECOS.

9. GREEN FLAG DESIGNATION FOR OPEN SPACES

A report was received showing items that would need to be included in the revised River Walk Management Plan with a view to making an application to obtain Green Flag status. Members considered that there was a lot to discuss with regards to making a Green Flag application and it was suggested that a separate sub-group should be made.

It was **AGREED** to accept this report and arrange a separate meeting with members J Palombi, B Fleet, J Goodman, the Town Clerk, and Assistant Proper Officer to proceed with Green Flag.

10. CURRENT RIVER WALK MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW

Members discussed the revised River Walk Management Plan which needs to be in place from 2020 for the next decade. Members noted that the current plan includes Shelley's Meadow (Area F) which is not included on the Town Trail and shouldn't be included as we don't currently own it.

It was noted that it is important to do mowing at the correct time to protect particular wildlife species.

Members discussed whether it was practical for this Sub-Committee to discuss this item due to the amount of work involved. As the Management Plan is to be worked in conjunction with the Green Flag application it was agreed that it should be discussed in the separate sub-group as per item 9.

It was **AGREED** to arrange a separate meeting with members J Palombi, B Fleet, J Goodman, the Town Clerk and Assistant Proper Officer to proceed with the review

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

A query was made regarding our responsibility for the river and clearing various obstructions from the water. The Operations Manager advised that the team are able to clear certain rubbish such as shopping trolleys if they are able to reach them but they are not qualified and do not have the correct equipment to safely enter the water to remove obstructions. Members were advised that the Environment Agency will get involved if it impedes the flow of the river. It was noted that a delegate from the Environment Agency is always invited to attend these meetings. Members were advised that once the trainees on the Operations Team are fully qualified and up-to-date with their work, then the river problems could be assessed.

It was **AGREED** that once the Operations Team are fully trained, to bring this back as an agenda item with a view to looking at future maintenance of the river.

A query was raised regarding the current position with the period garden at the back of the Town Hall. Members were advised that this was currently being reviewed.

12. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The time and date of the next meeting was confirmed as **Wednesday 14 August 2019 at 3.00pm**.

There being no further business, the Chairman closed the meeting at 4.00pm

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Councillor J Goodman
Chairman

- 1) A licence application is due to be processed by Essex County Council for this area before installation of additional railing can commence.