

Marlborough Town Council



Amenities and Open Spaces Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Amenities & Open Spaces Committee
held Monday, 10 July 2023 in the Council Chamber, Marlborough Town Hall at 7pm

PRESENT	Councillor Mark Cooper Councillor Andrew Ross Councillor James Sheppard Councillor Mark Luson	Chair
ALSO		
PRESENT	Richard Spencer-Williams Nigel Weatherly Dawn Whitehall 4 members of the public	Town Clerk Grounds Manager Corporate Services Officer

PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Mrs Hannaford-Dobson asked whether she could speak at agenda item 7 - Stonebridge Meadow. **The Chair** agreed to suspend Standing Orders during the item.

102/23 APOLOGIES
Apologies for absence were received from the **Town Mayor** and **Councillors Barrett-Morton, Farrell** and **O'Brien**. **Councillor Luson** would be a few minutes late arriving.

103/23 DECLARATIONS
There were no declarations of interest or requests for dispensation.

104/23 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS
Sheep had returned to Coopers Meadow for summer grazing, and Action for the River Kennet (ARK) volunteers had installed an extension to the accessible boardwalk to the north-east of Stonebridge Meadow.

Councillor Luson joined the meeting

105/23 MINUTES
RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting held 3 April 2023 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chair

106/23

COMMITTEE VICE CHAIR

Proposed by **Councillor Cooper** and seconded by **Councillor Luson** and **RESOLVED:** that **Councillor Farrell** is elected Vice Chair of the Amenities & Open Spaces Committee for 2023-24

107/23

ACTION LOG

Members noted that all outstanding items on the action log would be covered by agenda items.

108/23

STONEBRIDGE MEADOW

Members considered the Stonebridge Meadow agreement.

In introducing the item, **The Chair** reminded Members:

- Of an open invitation for a guided walk around Stonebridge Meadow
- That the Council has a legal duty to protect biodiversity under s40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Councillor Ross asked whether a proposed bridge to join Stonebridge Meadow with the boardwalk on the other side of the river could be reconsidered, which would create a circular walk around the river. It was no longer a priority in the Management Plan, and he asked why it had been dropped.

During a suspension of Standing Orders members of the public were invited to speak:

Mrs Hannaford-Dobson thanked the Committee for its response at its last meeting to her questions raised during the Annual Town meeting. She had been encouraged to read the minutes and the proposals for a shelter for creative play, robust and simple seating and border planting (***A&OS Meeting 3 April 2023, Min. No. 325/22 Wye House Garden***). She still had questions and concerns about clearing spaces to provide river views, accessibility for the disabled and elderly, more mown areas, whether the maintenance costs of the space provided value for money to the ratepayer and suggested that five acres could be put aside for amenity space. When the land was first purchased, it was agreed that 5 acres would be set aside as amenity land and 10 acres given over to biodiversity. The Town Council serve the townspeople and they deserved more: she felt the Council was failing them. In particular she pointed out the size of the dipping pond, surrounding water and trees, reducing the amount of open land that could be used for amenity.

Her questions were:

- Would the Committee provide full access to Stonebridge Meadow and its walks for elderly and disabled people to the meadow with cleared open views of the river from the proposed seating
- Would the Committee ensure that more areas are opened up and mown and set aside for recreation, picnic etc for young families to enjoy

Stewart Dobson referred to the purchase of the land and stated it was never purchased as a wild river reserve, which seemed to have come from ARK. The original Trust states its use as to further the charitable objects of ARK and provide

amenity land – one corner of which was inaccessible so the public could not walk around in a loop. Other points were:

- He had never seen minutes other than that the Town Council agree with ARK at Stonebridge Meadow Management Committee meetings
- In hindsight, whether the land should have been divided in two
- That it was possible to walk beside the river at Axford: in Marlborough Coopers Meadow only provided two clear areas to view the river
- Sympathy for protecting biodiversity, but also considering the rights of people
- Urged Members to consider whether the plans could be adjusted so people who want to enjoy the river aren't swamped over by people who want a wild river reserve
- Whether it had been a mistake to go into partnership with ARK
- Whether ARK could buy the Town Council's share of the land and the money be used elsewhere
- There had been previous proposals to create more space for Marlborough Town Football Club which had not been progressed due to ARK objections to encroachment into the scrub area
- Questioned that the Town Council had spent public money to purchase community land, but was now defining it as a nature reserve
- That the two clear beach areas were on the other side of the river, not in the land jointly owned by the Town Council
- Two gaps had been created in the vegetation at Coopers Meadow – could this also be done at Stonebridge Meadow?

Mrs Compton made a number of points:

- Stonebridge Meadow is a water meadow. Grass paths for disabled access would become very muddy and it would need hard engineering to create disabled access. She would not want to see hard landscaping through the Meadow
- There were clear views of the river from the footbridge and beach, and hundreds of children had already accessed the river for education
- The river wasn't just for looking at; if vegetation was removed it would affect/remove wildlife
- Otters have returned and been seen with 3 pups as far into town as Kennet Place
- The quickest way to achieve a view of the river without much wildlife would be to remove the vegetation. If small spaces were cleared, it would encourage people to allow dogs into the water which would endanger the protected water voles
- The population of water voles had increased in Marlborough, in contrast to a general decrease in the rest of the country
- A lot had been achieved in the Meadow, loved by so many people including tourists
- There was space for ball games at Coopers Meadow, the Recreation Ground and Priory Gardens, and residents were lucky to have so many open spaces, including Wye House Gardens and Plume of Feathers Garden

Members responded to the points raised:

- The dilemma of offsetting access requirements against the need to protect biodiversity
- To make it fully accessible, tarmac or boardwalks would be required which would damage biodiversity
- Whether a small section could be cleared to provide a balance
- Some places were already clearer, and perhaps these could be prioritised to add more clear space
- The legal responsibility of the Town Council to protect biodiversity
- A reluctance to damage natural habitats in order to provide clear access to the river
- Whether the partnership with ARK would be damaged if the Town Council changed its approach to managing the Meadow
- If changes were made to make the river more accessible, whether there would be a section of the population who would use it for purposes other than simply enjoying river views – e.g. people playing in the water disturbing habitats, leaving litter etc
- Whether it would ever be possible to make everyone happy, given the balance required between spaces for nature and spaces for people
- Whether the original agreement, including 5 acres to be set aside for amenity land, had stipulated that this was in perpetuity, or whether it could change by mutual agreement
- That the area was a designated nature reserve
- For nature to thrive, the river as a wildlife corridor was important. That could only be achieved by not creating breaks within the corridor – it would be nice to create more access, but breaking the wildlife corridor would be an issue likely leading to a decline in water vole population, and Members would be wary of taking any action to compromise the wildlife corridor
- Whether Committee members should visit the site to assess all the points raised

The Chair reinstated Standing Orders and thanked all members of the public for their contributions:

- He assured them that Members would want to take their comments on board
- It was crucial that there should be accessible access for all members of the public
- Partnership was key in supporting ARK
- Whether the first step should be for all Members to visit the site and assess the points raised

RESOLVED: to arrange a Committee visit to Stonebridge Meadow
A member of the public left the meeting

109/23

JAPANESE KNOTWEED

Members noted the Town Clerk's update report detailing actions taken and in progress to deal with Japanese Knotweed on part of Marlborough Common boundary.

- The **Grounds Manager** answered questions to clarify location and extent of spread
- **Councillor Sheppard** stressed the importance for staff to report any issues (whether in open spaces or elsewhere) through Council

110/23 **GROUND'S MANAGER'S REPORT**

Members noted the Grounds Manager's Report, and **The Chair** thanked the team for its work: the Cemetery looked amazing. He asked that the Committee's thanks be passed back to the team. Matters arising included:

- London Road war memorial: whether the decaying posts and chains detracted from the memorial
- Whether removing the barriers would result in vehicles mounting and cutting up the bank
- Equipment inspections: clarification of the RoSPA training undertaken by all grounds staff, as well as 2-3 visits per year by the Council's insurers, Zurich, which provided reports after each visit
- Whether the condition of the chains on the swing on the Common could be confirmed in writing to clarify the ambiguous wording in the report

RESOLVED: to remove the posts and chains from around the London Road 7th Wiltshire Regiment Memorial, and monitor whether traffic incidents would require their reinstatement in the future

Three members of the public left the meeting

111/23 **FINANCE REPORT**

Members noted the Finance Report at month 2 with no questions arising.

112/23 **TREE REPORT**

Members noted the report on the Council's trees and accepted the priority order for tree works.

113/23 **TREE WARDEN**

Full Council had referred the election of a tree warden to the A&OS Committee. This role had previously been held by very knowledgeable Councillors, **Bryan Castle** and **Don Heath**. Members discussed the nature of this role and whether it required arboricultural knowledge or was more related to planning applications related to tree works. If the latter, the person holding the role would need to have time available to visit sites to assess trees prior to making recommendations to the Planning Committee. Members also asked whether training was available – it was believed that Wiltshire Council had offered something in the past. It was agreed that the role should be redefined to support the Planning Committee in considering applications for tree works and/or trees affected by planning applications, and therefore that the Planning Committee should consider nominating someone to the role.

ACTION: add to a Planning Committee agenda

114/23 WYE HOUSE GARDEN PLAY AREA

Members noted the Town Clerk's report and considered the revised plan for the play area at Wye House Gardens:

- With a relatively small budget no play equipment companies had come forward to bid for the scheme
- The project had been redefined into a series of tasks that could be carried out by a combination of in-house staff and external contractors
- There may be a requirement for a small increase to the agreed budget of £30K, allocated from CIL funds
- Feedback from Members to the emerging plans was that it was imaginative and made a good use of the space
- The sorry state of the current play area was not a good representation of the Town Council, and the work should be completed as soon as practically possible

RESOLVED: to progress the Wye House play area project as proposed, agreeing the budget be increased if necessary

ACTION: add to Finance & Policy Committee agenda to discuss potential budget increase

115/23 NEW CEMETERY

Members noted the Town Clerk's report and considered the next steps for development of the new cemetery:

- Whether to conduct a public consultation as a first step, as this was a requirement for a public works loan
- That the new cemetery was listed within the Marlborough Area Neighbourhood Plan, which should add weight to gaining permission

RESOLVED: to conduct a public consultation to assess the appetite for the new cemetery plans, including the land swap of Common land

116/23 PROJECTS

Members considered the priority projects for 2023-24:

- Whether to reinstate the creation of a bridge at Stonebridge Meadow
- That cost for the full list of projects exceeded the available budget, and would require Finance & Policy Committee consideration for the works at Tinpit

RESOLVED: that the priority projects were approved with one addition

Members discussed unsightly graffiti on walls on the southern approach to Marlborough. A joint approach had been discussed with Wiltshire Council, but there

was reluctance on its part to accept the risk. **Councillor Sheppard** agreed to raise the issue with the head of Legal Services.

ACTION: Councillor Sheppard to discuss a joint approach to cleaning graffiti with Wiltshire Council

117/23 CEMETERY REPORT

Members noted recent grants of Exclusive Rights of Burial and approved memorials and inscriptions.

118/23 ALLOTMENTS

Councillor Luson gave a verbal update:

- It was peak growing season, and allotments were in full flower
- All allotment sites were running successfully, and all annual subscriptions had been paid
- A request to the Grounds team that any spare soil and/or bark chippings would be welcomed for Stonebridge as a priority, as well as Elcot Lane

119/23 MEMORIAL BENCH REQUEST

Members considered a request for a new bench at the Cemetery, noting existing benches as well as potential suitable sites.

RESOLVED: to agree to the request if the person was happy with a location around the perimeter of the Cemetery; if not, to offer alternative sites in other parts of the town

The meeting closed at 8.09 pm

Signed:
Chair

Date: