

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM

9 MARCH 2016

UPDATE OF MANAGEMENT AT ST FAITH'S MEADOW

REPORT OF HEAD OF LANDSCAPE AND OPEN SPACES

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RECENT REFERENCES:

WTF175 – Management proposals for St Faith's Meadow – 7 June 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Winchester City Council has an arrangement with the Wildlife Trust regarding the management of St Faiths Meadow, Winchester. Although the land is owned by the Council, the Wildlife Trust manages the site on the Council's behalf. To facilitate this management, a Higher Level Stewardship application was successfully submitted to Natural England and the agreement commenced in March 2012.

A request was made by the Town Forum to provide an update on the work undertaken as part of the agreement, in response to a third party querying progress made on the management of land. There was a particular request to consider whether the scheme is delivering appropriate management and whether the council is receiving value for money.

Officers consider the partnership with the Trust to be highly effective in restoring this fen grassland, the scheme is delivering appropriate management and the Council is receiving excellent value for money.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Town Forum

- i) Notes the content of this report and, in particular, officers' view that the site at St Faiths Meadow is being successfully managed by the Wildlife Trust and they are providing good value for money.

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DETAIL:

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The City Council owns 2.4 hectares (5.85 acres) of land located between Garnier Road and St Cross Hospital, which is known as St Faith's Meadow. The land lies adjacent to the River Itchen and is a relict water meadow. It is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its wildlife interest and is part of the River Itchen Special Area of Conservation. The City Council has a statutory duty to manage the SSSI appropriately to encourage the flora and fauna detailed in the SSSI citation.
- 1.2 St Faith's Meadow was experiencing a gradual decline in habitat quality largely through neglect and inappropriate management over many years. A number of non-native hybrid poplars were planted on the site in 1970's, which facilitated the degradation of the habitat.
- 1.3 In 2005/06 Cabinet allocated annual funding of £5,000 for a three year programme of management for St Faith's Meadow. The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust (the Wildlife Trust) undertook various management operations on the site over this period. However, there was a need to undertake more significant management due to the years of neglect.
- 1.4 In 2008 Natural England advised they wished to see the site grazed. However, it was not possible for the Council to graze the site, due to a lack of stock and management expertise. The most suitable organisation to undertake this management effectively was the Wildlife Trust, due to their considerable expertise in this type of land management.
- 1.5 However, the Wildlife Trust were only able to graze the site if were part of a wider complex and grazing programme and if there was considerable capital investment to ensure the site was suitable for grazing.
- 1.6 The Wildlife Trust was able to secure tenure for additional land close to St Faiths, which meant that a wider grazing programme was feasible and in 2009, Cabinet approved a payment of £7,000 to the Wildlife Trust to submit an application for a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) grant to Natural England.
- 1.7 This application was successful and a 10 year agreement commenced March 2012.

1.8 To facilitate management, the agreement was between Natural England and the Wildlife Trust, who were acting with consent from the Council. The land was leased to the Wildlife Trust for a 10 year period at a peppercorn rent (as agreed in report WTF175 2012). This report also agreed to provide an annual grant of £4,000 (subject to an annual inflationary uplift derived from February CPI) towards supervision and management of the site and to facilitate delivery of the works required under the grant scheme. See 2.4 below.

2 Update of recent management undertaken as part of the HLS

2.1 There are two main elements to the HLS scheme:- capital works and annual routine management.

2.2 Capital Works

- a) A one off Capital Grant of £58,923.90 was awarded to the Wildlife Trust.
- b) Of this £55,118 (94% of the total grant) was for the clearance of the Poplar trees. This was an incredibly difficult and time consuming activity. Not only was there considerable local concern about the removal of the trees requiring two years of public consultation and engagement, but the site is wet and access extremely difficult. The grant for this work had to increase from £20,000 to c£55,000 due to the difficulties experienced when working the site and the requirement of specialist contractors. In addition to this, all timber and brash had to be removed from site, with no fires being permitted on the SSSI, so this incurred extra costs.
- c) The remaining money (c £3,800) was for a small amount of bankside tree coppicing, major tree surgery, sheep fencing, a gate, and some ditch restoration. The ditch restoration was minor and included cleaning of debris only. There was agreement between Natural England and the Wildlife Trust that there was no need for re-cutting the ditches or attempting to return the site back into a working water meadow during the lifetime of this agreement.

2.3 Annual routine maintenance

- a) The Wildlife Trust also receive an annual payment of £1,043 (from 2015 to 2022 (7 years)). This is to cover some of the cost of grazing the site, controlling invasive plant species and cleaning the ditches occasionally.
- b) A copy of the HLS agreement is attached (see appendix i).

2.4 Funding direct from Winchester City Council

- a) In addition to the funding received from Natural England, WCC pay the Wildlife Trust an annual grant of £4,000 as agreed in WTF175 2012. This money is a contribution towards the supervision and wardening of the site. Details of this funding are set out annually in a Service Level Agreement. (A copy for the agreement 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2015 is attached (appendix ii).

- 3 As the HLS stewardship scheme is entering its 4th year, and the capital works now completed, the Town Forum has requested an update of the work with a particular emphasis on whether the scheme is delivering appropriate management of the land and whether the Council is receiving value for money.
- 4 Delivering appropriate management
- 4.1 Officers regularly visit the site to monitor can advise they consider the works undertaken on the site so far to be highly appropriate in nature conservation terms and can reassure Members that all capital works in accordance with the HLS agreement have been undertaken to an excellent standard. In addition, the annual works are proceeding well and the site is now regularly grazed and managed and community engagement is continuing.
- 4.2 There has been a concern expressed about the work being delayed. Officers can advise that work on site was only able to begin once the HLS agreement had been signed, which was early 2012. It was necessary for the Wildlife Trust to then undertake a significant community engagement and consultation exercise, as many local people were concerned about the loss of the trees. This engagement exercise was extremely successful and officers from the Wildlife Trust and the City Council were able to reassure residents regarding the works and why they were necessary.
- 4.3 In addition to this there was a delay of nearly a year before the grazing could be commenced. This was due to flooding of the site during a period of adverse weather in the winter of 2013/14, which prevented large equipment gaining access to the site without causing damage to the ground.
- 4.4 Another factor contributing to the delay was the sudden exposure of an old Victorian water main running under the Lockburn Stream and footbridge from Cripstead Lane. The Wildlife Trust had to make alternative arrangements for access of heavy equipment via St Cross and was then further hampered by the flooding. Additional costs of ground reinstatement at St Cross were covered by the Wildlife Trust.
- 4.5 There has also been a concern expressed that the scheme has not proceeded at a fast enough pace. Officers can advise they consider the pace of the work to be appropriate given the constraints which hampered progress referred to above.
- 4.6 The most effective and sustainable way of restoring a site such as this, is to undertake works to remedy any significant negative impacts such as tree encroachment, as quickly as possible (whilst having a regard for legal, financial and community engagement constraints). It is then necessary to adjust the pace of change to allow the site to adapt to the new management regime. Monitoring and observations should be made regularly and each year, a review undertaken to ensure any subtle changes in future management are identified (due to factors such as weather, climate and unforeseen events). This is exactly the method adopted by the Wildlife Trust and observations show that the meadow is beginning to adapt and develop a more fitting fen habitat.

4.7 These observations have been supported by two surveys of the site. The first was undertaken in 2010 by Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC) and is a baseline survey. The second was undertaken in 2015 by the Wildlife Trust's own in-house Ecology team in 2015.

4.8 The 2015 survey concluded that "*St Faith's Meadow was previously described by HBIC as a block of largely ornamental riverine woodland, over dense and rank reed-nettle fen.*

The work to fell and restore watermeadow ditches has fully opened the area and there is structural diversity along the ditches. The recently felled and now lightly grazed area of St Faith's Meadow is now open with views to St Catherine's Hill. There is every chance that it will return to a good watermeadow species mix" (Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust: Phase 1 Habitat Survey St Cross Meadows and St Faith's Meadow January 2016).

4.9 When comparing the two surveys, there are a number of species that have shown positive changes including Pendulous Sedge, Greater Pond Sedge, Square-Stalked St John's Wort, Water Figwort and Blue Water Speedwell.

4.10 Officers consider that seeing such a positive and significant change in the land within five years is quite remarkable. In addition, whilst it has been five years between the baseline and subsequent survey, the new management regime has only been in effect for a year or so and as there is still another seven years for the agreement to run, officers anticipate that favourable changes will continue.

5 Value for money

5.1 The Town Forum has asked for officers to consider whether the Council is receiving value for money relating to the management of this site.

5.2 As detailed above, the City Council is currently paying the Wildlife Trust £4,000 annually (see 2.4 above). A summary of the key income and expenditure for the annual management of St Faiths is detailed below. This shows that the income the Wildlife Trust receives does not fully cover the cost of managing this site.

Income		Comments
WCC SLA	£4,000	Annual
HLS	£1,043	Annual
Total	£5,043	
Expenditure		Comments
Staff costs	£8,000	Based on 0.25FT devoted to St Faith's + proportion of overheads. During restoration in 2013/14 approx 0.5 of officers time spent at St Faith's
Capital, materials	£600	Annual
Total	£8,600	

- 5.3 In addition to the costs above, a payment of £7,000 to the Trust previously to facilitate entry of the site into an appropriate grant scheme, was paid. However, the Wildlife Trust itself spent £5,000 to upgrade and reinstate the path after works (see 4.4 above).
- 5.4 Therefore an expenditure of £47,000 by the City Council over a 10 year period will deliver works valued at c£155,000.
- 5.5 If the Council chose to manage the land directly (ie not through a 3rd party) the cost to the Council would be considerably higher than £4,000. In addition, it would be unlikely the Council could actually achieve appropriate management of the land irrespective of cost as it is not cost effective and is logistically challenging to graze a site such as this in isolation.
- 5.6 Another benefit for the Council has been the Trust's ability to lead on community engagement which the Council would find difficult to deliver only using its own resources.
- 5.7 Finally, in 2015 alone, the Trust held 40 volunteer work parties with over 900hrs of time spent at St Faith's and St Cross meadows. This is considered to be an excellent level of community engagement.
- 5.8 In conclusion therefore the cost to the Council of £4,000 annually is considered by the officers to be excellent value for money.

6 Summary

- 6.1 St Faiths is a wonderful, historic site, close to the heart of the city. The City Council is very privileged to own such a site. However managing a site such as this is very complex and the Council does not have the in-house resource to do this effectively.
- 6.2 The Wildlife Trust has a wealth of experience in restoring some of the Itchen Valleys most valuable sites for wildlife and people. Officers consider the partnership with the Trust to be highly effective in restoring this fen grassland, but acknowledge it will take some time to reverse decades of decline.
- 6.3 Through removing the non-native poplar trees, introducing cattle grazing, installing seating, improving the footpath and managing the water courses, officers are delighted that we are slowly seeing signs of recovery.
- 6.4 The Wildlife Trust has kindly agreed to present a brief summary of their work to the Town Forum following this report.

7 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

8 COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND PORTFOLIO PLANS (RELEVANCE TO):

- 8.1 The management of the site by the Wildlife Trust will contribute to the delivery of the following outcome within the Active Communities theme of the Community Strategy

2010 -2020, helping people to 'lead active and healthy lifestyles byexercising regularly'. Furthermore it specifically contributes to the following priority:

'provide opportunities for everyone to become more active through organised sport, walking, cycling and other recreational activities, making the most of our natural environment and countryside',

8.2 The management of the site will also contribute to the Environment, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Plan specifically 'ensuring that the quality of place we enjoy is maintained and enhanced'.

9 FINANCE

9.1 The current financial commitments are being met by the Landscape and Open Spaces revenue budget.

10 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no additional resource implications relating to this report.

11 RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

11.1 The partnership with the Wildlife Trust will ensure the Council meets its statutory obligations under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2005 and meets its responsibility as the owner of a SSSI.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None

APPENDICES:

APPENDIX ONE- Higher Level Stewardship Agreement for St Faiths Meadow

APPENDIX TWO – Service Level Agreement with the Wildlife Trust for the management of St Faiths .Meadow