

Report Title:	Battlemead Common
Contains Confidential or Exempt Information	No - Part I
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Stimson, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Sustainability, Parks and Countryside
Meeting and Date:	Cabinet - 30 September 2021
Responsible Officer(s):	Andrew Durrant, Executive Director of Place, Chris Joyce, Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth
Wards affected:	(Bisham and Cookham, Maidenhead Riverside)

## REPORT SUMMARY

*The council purchased land at Battlemead Common in December 2018. The purpose of the purchase was to provide additional public open space. The council has since adopted an Environment and Climate Strategy which aims to protect and enhance the natural environment and to raise awareness and education in biodiversity issues across the borough.*

*This report sets out a series of recommendations for the east field, to support the objectives of the Council in relation to the site and the environment and climate strategy. This includes a fenced and screened path with seasonal access between April and October, which will support biodiversity enhancements in the rest of the east field as well as opportunities to raise awareness and education of the biodiversity protection and enhancements across the borough.*

*A petition related to the proposals was listed on the Council website which will be considered alongside the paper.*

## 1. DETAILS OF RECOMMENDATION(S)

**RECOMMENDATION:** That Cabinet notes the report and:

- i) Approves the proposals for the East Field as set out in the report.**
- ii) Approves the updated terms of reference for the Friends of Battlemead Commons and the Steering Group**

## 2. REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S) AND OPTIONS CONSIDERED

### Options

**Table 1: Options arising from this report**

Option	Comments
Provide a new fenced and screened path through the East Field.	This supports the outcomes within the climate strategy helping to

Option	Comments
<b>This is the recommended option</b>	protect and enhance our natural environment and increase awareness of biodiversity.
Do nothing and leave arrangements as currently provided in the East Field.  This is not recommended	The evidence is that despite there being no formal path, that people are accessing the East Field in an uncontrolled way. Continuing on this could have a significant detrimental impact on the habitat and wildlife in the East Field.
Provide additional fencing to prevent access to the East Field.  This is not recommended	Whilst this would protect wildlife and habitat in the East Field it would also significantly reduce the opportunity to raise awareness of the nature conservation work and go against a key objective of the Environment and Climate Strategy.
Provide an alternative path through the wet woodland  This is not recommended	The initial ecological surveys show that there are protected habitats and species within the wet woodland. The potential impact on ecology and the significant estimated costs of introducing a new path mean that any further work is not being taken forward at this time.

- 2.1 The council purchased land at Battlemead Common in December 2018 to provide additional public open space. A ‘Friends of Battlemead Common’ group was set up in June 2019 with the aim to provide guidance, advice and recommendations to the Council to ensure the effective management of Battlemead Common. The terms of reference for the Friends of Battlemead Common and its steering group are included as Appendix A for adoption.
- 2.2 A meeting of the Friends of Battlemead Steering Group was held on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2021 to consider a briefing paper by the officer project team. A copy of the briefing note is provided at Appendix B. Whilst there are a range of views within the steering group, there is a consensus on the need to move forward. The proposals represent the right balance of the council’s objectives and there is no compelling evidence not to take forward the recommended approach to the east field. A copy of the minutes of the steering group are included as Appendix C.
- 2.3 The proposals in the east field include a new fenced and screened path through the causeway on the east field connecting to the Thames riverside path, with seasonal access between April and October. Seasonal access will ensure the protection of over wintering birds from disturbance. The screened path will also mitigate the impact of people and particularly dogs during the summer months.

- 2.4 By allowing controlled access, this will allow improvement to the habitat in other parts of the east field. It will also provide opportunities for education and raise awareness of the nature conservation work within the east field and across the Battlemead Site.
- 2.5 The intention is for the path to be open by April 2022, with installation and planting during October 2021 ahead of the arrival of overwintering birds. Ongoing surveys and monitoring of the habitats and birds within the east field to ensure the screening and protection is effective and that bird species and populations continue to grow.
- 2.6 A petition was listed on the Council website related to the proposals. The petition was entitled 'reject any proposal to open public access across the designated priority habitat of the East Field at Battlemead Common'. The petition received 886 signatures.

### 3. KEY IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 The key implications are set out in table 2.

**Table 2: Key Implications**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Unmet</b>	<b>Met</b>	<b>Exceeded</b>	<b>Significantly Exceeded</b>	<b>Date of delivery</b>
Path open for the East Field	Not open by 1 <sup>st</sup> April 2022.	Open for public access by 1 <sup>st</sup> April 2022	N/A	N/A	1 <sup>st</sup> April 2022
Protection of overwintering birds	Works not complete by 30 <sup>th</sup> November 2021	Works complete by 30 <sup>th</sup> November 2021	Works complete ahead of 31 <sup>st</sup> October 2021	N/A	30 <sup>th</sup> November 2021
Protection of birds within the east field	Reduction in bird species and population within the east field	Protection of current numbers of bird species and populations within the east field.	Increase in bird species and population within the east field	N/A	Ongoing

### 4. FINANCIAL DETAILS / VALUE FOR MONEY

- 4.1 The proposals for the new path, fencing and screening through the east field will be funded from the capital budget for Battlemead Common which was approved in the Capital Programme for 2021/22. The proposals have been designed to be low maintenance and therefore ongoing costs will be limited and can be covered by the ongoing revenue budget we have for our open spaces within the borough.

- 4.2 Other proposals referenced within the meeting minutes of the steering group, such as the proposed car park are not considered in this paper and are subject to separate decision making processes.

## 5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The council does not require any third-party approvals to implement the proposals for a new path within the East Field. There have been discussions with the Environment Agency and we will continue to work closely with them as wider plans for Battlemead Common develop.

## 6. RISK MANAGEMENT

**Table 3: Impact of risk and mitigation**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Level of uncontrolled risk</b>	<b>Controls</b>	<b>Level of controlled risk</b>
Disturbance to birds within the east field.	Medium	Fenced and screened access during summer months only.  Monitoring surveys to be undertaken to understand changes in bird species and populations.	Low
Access to the remainder of the east field causing damage to habitats.	Medium	Fencing to control access to the remainder of the east field.  Educational boards explaining the habitat and nature conservation work in the remainder of the east field.	Low

## 7. POTENTIAL IMPACTS

- 7.1 Equalities. No negative impacts identified. The steering group includes representation from the disability and inclusion forum to ensure that these issues are considered at an early stage of development.
- 7.2 Climate change/sustainability. The proposals support the key objectives of the environment and climate strategy offering appropriate protection to the natural environment and an opportunity to support enhanced habitat within the east field. It also supports opportunities to raise awareness of biodiversity and nature conservation work that the Council is undertaking within the east field and at Battlemead as a whole.
- 7.3 Data Protection/GDPR. No personal data is being collected as part of this decision and no issues have been identified.

## 8. CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The proposals have been developed in consultation with the Friends of Battlemead Common Group, over a number of months. The detailed proposals have been presented to the Steering Group.

## 9. TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- 9.1 The timetable for implementation is set out in Table 4:

**Table 4: Implementation timetable**

Date	Details
30 <sup>th</sup> November 2021	Fencing and path installed, screening planted.
1 <sup>st</sup> April 2022	Public access to east field open

## 10. APPENDICES

- 10.1 This report is supported by four appendices:

- Appendix A – Friends of Battlemead Common Terms of Reference
- Appendix B – Briefing note to the Friends of Battlemead Common Steering Group
- Appendix C – Minutes of meeting of Friends of Battlemead Common Steering Group 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2021

## 11. CONSULTATION

Name of consultee	Post held	Date sent	Date returned
<i>Mandatory: Statutory Officers (or deputy)</i>			
Adele Taylor	Executive Director of Resources/S151 Officer	06/09/21	16/09/21
Emma Duncan	Deputy Director of Law and Strategy / Monitoring Officer	06/09/21	08/09/21
<i>Deputies:</i>			
Andrew Vallance	Head of Finance (Deputy S151 Officer)	06/09/21	
Elaine Browne	Head of Law (Deputy Monitoring Officer)	06/09/21	
Karen Shepherd	Head of Governance (Deputy Monitoring Officer)	06/09/21	09/09/21
<i>Other consultees:</i>			
<i>Directors (where relevant)</i>			
Duncan Sharkey	Chief Executive	06/09/21	08/09/21
Andrew Durrant	Executive Director of Place	06/09/21	06/09/21
Kevin McDaniel	Executive Director of Children's Services	06/09/21	
Hilary Hall	Executive Director of Adults, Health and Housing	06/09/21	08/09/21

Confirmation relevant Cabinet Member(s) consulted	Cabinet Member for Sustainability, Climate Change and Parks and Countryside	Yes
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## REPORT HISTORY

Decision type:	Urgency item?	To follow item?
Key decision  First entered into the Cabinet Forward Plan: August 2021	No	No

Report Author: Chris Joyce, Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth
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# **‘FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON’**

and

# **‘FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON STEERING GROUP’**

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

### **AIM**

To provide guidance, advice and recommendations to the Borough Council, to ensure the effective management of Battlemead Common, to protect and enhance the wildlife, biodiversity and landscape value of the site whilst enabling public access and enjoyment.

### **OBJECTIVES**

- To assist with the development of a ‘Management Plan’ for Battlemead Common, to be implemented by the Borough Council in conjunction with partners and volunteers.
- To review and oversee the progress and successful delivery of the ‘Management Plan’ proposals, within the available budget and agreed timeline.
- To identify potential risks and issues that could impact the effective management of the site as they arise.
- To promote open and positive communication between all parties and residents with an interest in the site, and better understanding and appreciation of the project’s objectives.
- To provide and consider guidance, advice and recommendations and make non-executive decisions.
- To assist in securing funding to deliver the objectives set out in the Management Plan.
- To monitor and assess the on-going benefits of the implementation of the Management Plan.

### **DECISION MAKING**

This Friends of Battlemead Common has been established to advise and oversee the implementation of the agreed objectives for the site. The Group will meet to discuss issues, express views and make recommendations, however the Group has no executive decision making powers on behalf of the Council. Decisions shall be made in accordance with the mechanisms in the Council’s Constitution.

### **MEMBERSHIP**

Membership of the ‘Friends of Battlemead Common’ comprises of representatives from a wide range of wildlife and amenity groups, as listed below, as well as representatives from the Environment Agency, Cookham Parish Council and Borough Council ward members and officers. Wild Maidenhead; Wild Cookham; The Cookham Society; Maidenhead Civic Society; National Trust; Maidenhead Rotary; East Berks Ramblers; Local Access Forum/Access Advisory Forum; BBOWT; Binfield Badger Group; Maidenhead Waterways; ‘Our Dogs View’; Thames Path Partnership; RBWM Climate Emergency Coalition.

The Steering Group comprises a nominated member from each of the sub-groups, a ward member from Maidenhead Riverside and a ward member from Bisham and Cookham. The Steering Group and Friends of Battlemead Common are Chaired by the Cabinet member for Climate Change, Sustainability, Parks and Countryside.

**MEETINGS**

RBWM Councillors who are not formal members of the Group may attend meetings of the 'Friends of Battlemead Common' or the 'Friends of Battlemead Common Steering Group' as observers, at the discretion of the meeting Chair. Meetings are held as required and at the request of the Chair. Agendas and minutes of meetings are published on the borough website.

# FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON

## White Brook at Battlemead Common SUB-GROUP

### TERMS OF REFERENCE

#### **AIM**

To discuss and formulate proposals and recommendations relating to the **White Brook** at Battlemead Common; these proposals and recommendations to be presented to the wider 'Friends of Battlemead Common', for further discussion and consideration, and then on to the Borough Council for implementation in conjunction with partners.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

- To assist with the development of a 'Management and Maintenance Plan' for the White Brook at Battlemead Common, to be implemented by the Borough Council in conjunction with partners and volunteers.

#### **DECISION MAKING**

This Friends of Battlemead Common, and associated sub-groups, have been established to advise and oversee the implementation of the agreed objectives for the site. The Group, and associated sub-groups, will meet to discuss issues, express views and make recommendations, however the Group has no executive decision making powers on behalf of the Council. Decisions shall be made in accordance with the mechanisms in the Council's Constitution.

#### **MEMBERSHIP**

The membership of the sub-group will include representatives of Environment Agency, Maidenhead Waterways, Cookham Parish Council, Wild Maidenhead, Wild Cookham, Maidenhead Civic Society, East Berks Ramblers.

The sub-group is made up of volunteers from organisations represented on the wider Friends group and are not 'fixed' appointments; the membership organisations will vary from time to time. It is chaired and facilitated by an officer from the Borough Council's Battlemead Project Team.

#### **MEETINGS**

RBWM Councillors may attend meetings of the sub-group as observers, at the discretion of the meeting Chair. Meetings are held as required and at the request of the Chair. Agendas and minutes of meetings are published on the borough website.

# FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON

## Biodiversity SUB-GROUP

### TERMS OF REFERENCE

#### **AIM**

To discuss and formulate proposals and recommendations relating to **biodiversity** at Battlemead Common; these proposals and recommendations to be presented to the wider 'Friends of Battlemead Common', for further discussion and consideration, and then on to the Borough Council for implementation in conjunction with partners.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

- To protect, improve, and enhance biodiversity at Battlemead Common.

#### **DECISION MAKING**

This Friends of Battlemead Common, and associated sub-groups, have been established to advise and oversee the implementation of the agreed objectives for the site. The Group, and associated sub-groups, will meet to discuss issues, express views and make recommendations, however the Group has no executive decision making powers on behalf of the Council. Decisions shall be made in accordance with the mechanisms in the Council's Constitution.

#### **MEMBERSHIP**

The membership of the sub-group will include representatives of Environment Agency, Cookham Parish Council, Wild Maidenhead, Wild Cookham, East Berks Ramblers, Binfield Badger Group, RBWM Climate Emergency Coalition.

The sub-group is made up of volunteers from organisations represented on the wider Friends group and are not 'fixed' appointments; the membership organisations will vary from time to time. It is chaired and facilitated by an officer from the Borough Council's Battlemead Project Team.

#### **MEETINGS**

RBWM Councillors may attend meetings of the sub-group as observers, at the discretion of the meeting Chair. Meetings are held as required and at the request of the Chair. Agendas and minutes of meetings are published on the borough website.

# FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON

## Accessibility SUB-GROUP

### TERMS OF REFERENCE

#### **AIM**

To discuss and formulate proposals and recommendations relating to **accessibility** at Battlemead Common; these proposals and recommendations to be presented to the wider 'Friends of Battlemead Common', for further discussion and consideration, and then on to the Borough Council for implementation in conjunction with partners.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

- To ensure and improve accessibility both to and within Battlemead Common for all legitimate users of the site

#### **DECISION MAKING**

This Friends of Battlemead Common, and associated sub-groups, have been established to advise and oversee the implementation of the agreed objectives for the site. The Group, and associated sub-groups, will meet to discuss issues, express views and make recommendations, however the Group has no executive decision making powers on behalf of the Council. Decisions shall be made in accordance with the mechanisms in the Council's Constitution.

#### **MEMBERSHIP**

The membership of the sub-group will include representatives of Cookham Society, Wild Maidenhead, East Berks Ramblers, Binfield Badger Group, Local Access Forum, 'Our Dogs View'.

The sub-group is made up of volunteers from organisations represented on the wider Friends group and are not 'fixed' appointments; the membership organisations will vary from time to time. It is chaired and facilitated by an officer from the Borough Council's Battlemead Project Team.

#### **MEETINGS**

RBWM Councillors may attend meetings of the sub-group as observers, at the discretion of the meeting Chair. Meetings are held as required and at the request of the Chair. Agendas and minutes of meetings are published on the borough website.

# FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON

## Communications and information SUB-GROUP

### TERMS OF REFERENCE

#### **AIM**

To discuss and formulate proposals and recommendations relating to **communications and information**, these proposals and recommendations to be presented to the wider 'Friends of Battlemead Common', for further discussion and consideration, and then on to the Borough Council for implementation in conjunction with partners.

#### **OBJECTIVES**

- To ensure that communication channels are in place to enable effective working of the Friends of Battlemead Common and associated sub-groups.
- To ensure effective provision of information to the public about Battlemead Common, including both on-site information and electronic/on-line information.

#### **DECISION MAKING**

This Friends of Battlemead Common, and associated sub-groups, have been established to advise and oversee the implementation of the agreed objectives for the site. The Group, and associated sub-groups, will meet to discuss issues, express views and make recommendations, however the Group has no executive decision making powers on behalf of the Council. Decisions shall be made in accordance with the mechanisms in the Council's Constitution.

#### **MEMBERSHIP**

The membership of the sub-group will include representatives of Cookham Parish Council, Wild Maidenhead, Wild Cookham, East Berks Ramblers and the Local Access Forum

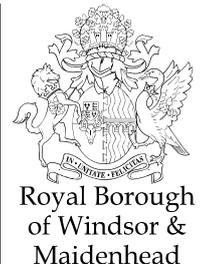
The sub-group is made up of volunteers from organisations represented on the wider Friends group and are not 'fixed' appointments; the membership organisations will vary from time to time. It is chaired and facilitated by an officer from the Borough Council's Battlemead Project Team.

#### **MEETINGS**

RBWM Councillors may attend meetings of the sub-group as observers, at the discretion of the meeting Chair. Meetings are held as required and at the request of the Chair. Agendas and minutes of meetings are published on the borough website.

<b>Subject:</b>	Proposals for the East Field at Battlemead Common
<b>Reason for briefing note:</b>	To inform the Friends of Battlemead Common Steering Group of the Project Team's recommended approach to the East Field.
<b>Responsible officer(s):</b>	Anthony Hurst, Parks and Countryside Manager
<b>Senior leader sponsor:</b>	Chris Joyce, Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth
<b>Date:</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> August 2021

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## 1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Borough Council purchased the land at Battlemead Common in December 2018 to provide additional public open space.
- 1.2 A 'Friends of Battlemead Common' group was set up in June 2019 with the aim to *"Provide guidance, advice and recommendations to the Borough Council to ensure the effective management of Battlemead Common, to protect and enhance the wildlife, biodiversity and landscape value of the site, whilst enabling public access and enjoyment"* (extract from agreed Terms of Reference).
- 1.3 A smaller Steering Group was then set up in March 2021 to help guide decision making on the site. Following the first meeting of the 'Friends of Battlemead Common Steering Group' held on 29th March 2021, the Project Team was given an action to *"draw up a detailed proposal for the East Field to include; fencing and screening of the Causeway footpath; planting and biodiversity improvements; survey/monitoring details. Also, to draw up details of surveys/habitat assessment of the Wet Woodland area, to include initial scoping of the feasibility of creating a Wet Woodland footpath, and to prepare a revised carpark plan for resubmission of a planning application"*.
- 1.4 Further surveys have since been undertaken at the site to provide additional evidence to support development of the proposals. These included an updated Breeding Bird Survey undertaken by Austin Foot Ecology between mid-April and mid-June 2021 (updating the 2020 Breeding Bird Survey) and a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal of the Wet Woodland undertaken by Austin Foot Ecology in May 2021.
- 1.5 This report sets out the recommended approach for the East Field, prepared by the Project Team. It seeks to explain the rationale for each of the recommendations and takes into account the supporting evidence contained in the ecology reports.

## 2 PROPOSALS

### **Recommendation 1 – A new fenced and screened footpath along the Causeway**

- 2.1 The proposals are shown on the attached updated Masterplan. This includes a new footpath route along the 'Causeway', fenced on both sides, which would be open to public access only during the period from 1st April to early October. Dogs will be required to be kept on a lead when using this footpath.

- 2.2 The new footpath would be open to the public from April 2022, as this will allow sufficient time for fencing and screen planting to be undertaken in autumn 2021: this planting will help to lessen the visual impact of the fencing, as well as deterring access to the wetland habitat but will be designed so as not to obscure the open views across the site.
- 2.3 The cost for these works is estimated at around £14k.

#### ***Reasons for the recommendation***

- 2.4 There is evidence from observations on site that despite there being no formal access to the East Field at present, there are people walking this route. This represents a significant risk to the existing habitat and birds nesting in the field. It is not practical to have a frequent enforcement presence and therefore without significant additional fencing and security measures, this is likely to continue. As such a fenced footpath with suitable screening and controlled access during particular times of year represents the best way to control this risk.
- 2.5 Providing a footpath route through the East Field also provides an excellent opportunity to raise awareness of the nature conservation work taking place at Battlemead. This is not just through formal education opportunities but also through regular users being able to see the habitat being created, observing the increase in birds which is more likely to build support for wider conservation and biodiversity measures than seeking to exclude access entirely, which will generate opposition and resentment.
- 2.6 This approach has been developed based on the recommendations of the most recent Breeding Bird Survey report produced by Austin Foot Ecology and is supported by the Council's internal experts.

#### **Recommendation 2 – Creation of additional wetland habitat**

- 2.7 It is proposed that the northern part of the East Field would be used to create additional wetland habitat. Initial discussions with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust have indicated that this would be feasible, and we will continue to work with them to develop the detail of the proposals.

#### ***Reasons for the recommendation***

- 2.8 This would help to increase the biodiversity value of the East Field, creating new habitat and support delivery of our Environment and Climate Strategy.

#### **Recommendation 3 – Discontinue investigations into the wet woodland walk**

- 2.9 It is recommended that a new path through the Wet Woodland area is not progressed.

#### ***Reasons for the recommendation***

- 2.10 The Preliminary Ecological Appraisal of the Wet Woodland produced by Austin Foot Ecology identifies that the wet woodland currently supports a number of badger setts. It also has the potential to support a number of protected species and species of conservation importance, including invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles, breeding birds, roosting, commuting and foraging bats, water vole, otters, foxes, deer, and hedgehogs.

2.11 The appraisal also identifies that in order to provide a footpath and boardwalk through the woodland a number of trees would need to be felled. The Council's own ecological advisers do not support the creation of a footpath along this route.

2.12 The relatively high cost of providing a footpath through the Wet Woodland (approximately £160,000) reflects the constraints associated with the woodland route:

- The route would pass through an ecologically sensitive area (including passing close to existing Badger setts, and Otter habitat), and the footpath/boardwalk would therefore need dog-proof fencing throughout.
- The woodland is very wet, particularly over the winter months (including areas of standing water). Therefore, the footpath/boardwalk would need to be fully enclosed for safety reasons, to prevent people (including young children) straying into submerged or flooded areas of the woodland.
- It is very likely that further tree safety works would be required (subject to the Arboricultural survey), which would add further to the quoted costs.
- The boardwalk would need to meet current accessibility standards.
- The EA have confirmed they would require a minimum bridge height clearance of 600mm above the bank of the brook.
- The area would be difficult to access for the construction work, which would add significantly to the cost.

### **3 NEXT STEPS**

3.1 The screen planting and fencing alongside the Causeway, and the tree planting in other areas of the site such as along the northern and eastern boundaries, (as shown on the Masterplan), will be undertaken in autumn/winter 2021, in preparation for opening of the new footpath in April 2022. Discussions with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust on the wetland creation proposals will also continue during 2021.

## FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON STEERING GROUP

3<sup>rd</sup> AUGUST 2021

### PRESENT

**Cllr Donna Stimson** (Cllr DS); Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Sustainability, Parks and Countryside (Chair)

**Chris Joyce** (CJ); Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth

**Anthony Hurst** (AH) Parks & Countryside Manager

**Jacqui Wheeler** (JW) Parks & Countryside Access Officer

**Jason Mills** (JM) Countryside Manager

**Ambika Chouhan** (AC) Landscape Officer

**Rebecca Anderson** (RA) Ecologist

**Cllr Mandy Brar** (Cllr MB), ward member for Bisham and Cookham

**Cllr Greg Jones** (Cllr GJ), ward member for Maidenhead Riverside

**Ian Rose** (IR) Maidenhead Waterways, and White Brook sub-group

**Steve Gillions** (SG) East Berks Ramblers, and Accessibility sub-group

**Mike Copland** (MC) WildCookham, and Biodiversity sub-group

**Lisa Hughes** (LH) Local Access Forum, and Information and Communications sub-group

### 1. INTRODUCTIONS:

Cllr DS welcomed everyone to the second meeting of the Steering Group and thanked those who had sent in written comments in advance of the meeting.

### 2. NOTES OF MEETING HELD ON 29<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2021:

The notes of the meeting held on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2021 were approved. AH confirmed that the de-silting works to the Whitebrook, which were subject to an EA permit, would be undertaken w/c 23<sup>rd</sup> August.

### 3. CARPARK PROPOSAL:

AH presented a proposal for a 14-space carpark (which would be subject to a planning application) and asked for comments, both on the principle of providing a carpark at the site and the detailed design and layout that had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

No objections were raised to the principle of providing a carpark. MC asked whether any further consideration had been given to the access point and road safety implications. AH explained that the current maintenance access point (formerly the farm access) was the optimum location achievable, considering sightlines, visibility, and the configuration of the road.

A further reduction in the recently introduced 40mph speed limit had been considered in discussion with traffic colleagues, but this was deemed not to be feasible; however, other road safety measures were being explored to increase driver awareness. CJ added that these measures could include a 'gateway feature' where the speed limit changes to 40mph on the northern approach to the site, additional signage, and improvements to

the crossing points to make them more visible to drivers. CJ also advised that when the previous planning application was submitted for a 26-space carpark (subsequently withdrawn) no objection was raised by the Highways Development Control team on road safety grounds.

LH raised concerns regarding the detailed layout of the 4 disabled parking bays, in particular the access spaces available alongside and behind these parking bays. AC will review this point in discussion with LH, prior to the design being finalised and submitted for planning approval. LH also raised concerns about the design of the more northerly pedestrian access point into the site, opposite the entrance to Widbrook Common on the opposite side of the road. AH agreed to revisit this point to assess whether anything further can be done to improve this secondary pedestrian access point.

Cllr MB asked whether consideration could be given to a controlled crossing at the carpark entrance (e.g. a zebra or pelican crossing). IR expressed reservations about whether this would be appropriate, given the rural setting of the site. CJ responded that an uncontrolled crossing would normally be considered more appropriate at this type of location, and therefore the planning application wouldn't include provision of a controlled crossing.

MC asked whether it was envisaged that charges would be applied to the carpark; CJ responded that this wasn't currently proposed, as there would be a risk of drivers continuing to use the nearby roads where no charges apply.

4. ECOLOGY SURVEYS FEEDBACK:

JM reported back on the second annual Breeding Bird Survey, completed in June 2021 (the full report had been circulated in advance of the meeting) and highlighted some notable species that had been recorded, including Kingfisher, Skylark, Water rail and Reed bunting. The report from Austin Foot Ecology included some useful recommendations on grassland management and mowing regimes, for example to create a varied mosaic of grass lengths, aimed at encouraging the breeding bird populations at the site.

RA reported that an Otter and Water vole survey undertaken in June 2021 had recorded the presence of Otters in the wet Willow Woodland at Battlemead. No Water vole presence had been recorded, which may be a result of predation by Mink which are known to be present. A further Otter and Water vole survey is scheduled for September. Consideration is being given to enhancing the Otter habitat, for example by creating log piles within the wet Willow Woodland, and the potential for Mink control is also being explored in collaboration with Ecologists from neighbouring local authorities. RA also reported that the wet Willow Woodland Ecological Appraisal completed in May 2021 had identified a significant amount of Badger activity within woodland.

Cllr DS asked whether volunteers could help with clearing invasive Himalayan balsam at the site and JM confirmed that this will be followed up.

In response to a question from IR, RA confirmed that the Appraisal of the Willow Woodland included an assessment of potential habitat improvements as well as identifying species currently present.

5. EAST FIELD PROPOSAL:

CJ presented a proposal for the East Field based around the following three recommendations, which had been prepared following a review of the recently completed ecological surveys:

(i) Creation of a fenced and screened footpath along the Causeway, to be open between April and early October, (opened from April 2022).

(ii) Creation of additional wetland habitat in the northern part of the East Field (initial discussions had been held with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust).

(iii) Discontinue investigations into the wet Willow Woodland footpath (in light of the findings of the recent Ecological Appraisal).

The following comments were made by members of the Steering Group:

SG stated that his preference would be for year-round access along the Causeway footpath, rather than seasonal closure, and asked whether the fencing/screening would mitigate disturbance to overwintering birds as well as breeding birds. RA confirmed that although the fencing and screening would mitigate disturbance to breeding birds, the seasonal closure is considered necessary to avoid disturbance to the large numbers of overwintering migratory birds.

SG also asked what the proposed width of the Causeway footpath was, and whether it was intended that the footpath would be surfaced. AH responded that it was not envisaged that additional surfacing would be required as the Causeway already has a reasonably firm surface, particularly over the summer months. The Causeway would need to have sufficient width to accommodate vehicular access for hay-cutting, and the width was therefore likely to be approximately 5m between the fences/screen planting.

Cllr GJ expressed concern that only 29% of the site is currently available for public access, with 71% being closed to the public, particularly as the stated purpose of purchasing the site was to provide public open space for the benefit of residents, and therefore he felt strongly that the Causeway footpath should be available all year round. He had been approached by residents who felt 'locked out' of the site, and he considered it imperative that the Council should honour the original purpose of acquiring the land, and that any decisions on the recommendations presented in the reports should be signed-off by Cabinet.

Cllr MB stated that she believed the main priority for the site should be to protect and enhance biodiversity, and that the Council should bring forward their work with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust and the Environment Agency on these aspects before considering any further access to the East Field. CJ confirmed that the Council had been working with the EA since the purchase of the site and would continue to do so and would

also be working in partnership with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust following the initial discussions that had recently been held.

Cllr MB also referred to the recent petition that had been submitted to the Council opposing access to the East Field, and CJ confirmed that the petition had been received and would be followed up in accordance with the petitions process. CJ also emphasised that providing controlled access to the Causeway footpath across the East Field was an opportunity to help raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity, and build support for nature conservation efforts more widely, and this was a key objective of the Council's Environment and Climate Strategy.

MC concurred that raising awareness of the importance of biodiversity was of critical importance and recognised the positive work that is being undertaken at Battlemead to further this objective. However, he felt that any further provision for public access to the East Field should be delayed until after environmental enhancements have been undertaken, including establishing sufficient screening along the route of the proposed footpath. In response to this point, JM explained that the proposed screening alongside the footpath was primarily intended to screen the adjacent wetland areas from dogs using the footpath, as nesting birds in wetland areas were known to be particularly sensitive to passing dogs, whereas they can become more habituated to the presence of people.

Summer access along the Causeway footpath, with fencing and low-level screening (such as reeds, grasses, low hedging, or willow), which could be established quite quickly, was therefore considered acceptable in terms of potential impact on breeding birds. However, overwintering migratory birds would be much more susceptible to disturbance, even with fencing/screening in place, and therefore the advice from Austin Foot Ecology was that the footpath should be closed over the winter period.

LH requested that accessibility issues be fully considered in relation to management of the grassed footpaths, both in the West Field and potentially along the Causeway and through the East Field, particularly during the growing season, and taking into account the needs of visitors with limited mobility. AH confirmed that regular cutting of the grass paths was an important aspect of managing the site, and care would be taken to ensure the footpaths are easily accessible; if necessary, localised levelling of the footpath surfaces could be undertaken, although the site is generally flat, and therefore suitable for establishing easy-access footpaths.

LH also referred to the importance of carefully managed access, as she felt most visitors valued and appreciated the surrounding wildlife and habitats and were supportive of measures to avoid disturbance to birds and other wildlife. Signage explaining the reasons for restricted access at certain times of the year would be very helpful, as she felt most visitors would respect such closures if the reasons were made clear.

IR noted that the recommendations to discontinue investigations into a new footpath through the wet Willow Woodland, and to create additional wetland habitat in the East Field both seemed to have general support, and asked that the investigations into the

creation of additional wetland areas should include an assessment of the potential impacts on the overall hydrology of the site and discussion with the Environment Agency.

CJ confirmed that on balance it was considered that the potential adverse ecological impacts as well as the costs and complexity of creating a new footpath through the wet Willow Woodland outweighed the potential benefits that would be achieved by pursuing this option further. The Project Team will continue to work with both the Environment Agency and the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust on the proposal to create additional wetland areas in the East Field, as this is seen as the best way of enhancing the biodiversity of this part of site.

6. NEXT STEPS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

Cllr DS thanked everyone for attending the meeting and for their contributions, and added that there were opportunities at the site to encourage more involvement of volunteers, and that the Friends Group had a key role to play in encouraging greater community engagement. The Council is very mindful of the views of the various interested groups and individuals and recognises that the site has great potential both from a biodiversity and public engagement perspective.

**Post-meeting note: a report will be submitted to the 30<sup>th</sup> September meeting of the Cabinet, based upon the recommendations set out above, and a further meeting of the Steering Group will be arranged following that meeting.**