

## **COMMUNITY SERVICES AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**

**Monday, 13 May, 2013 at 6.00 pm in a Conference Room at the Council House**

**Panel Members Present:** Councillor V. Woodruff (Chair)  
Councillor I. Azam  
Councillor B. Douglas-Maul  
Councillor K. Hussain  
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker  
Councillor L. Rattigan

**Portfolio Holders present:** Councillor A. Harris – Leisure and Culture

**Officers in Attendance:** Jamie Morris - Executive Director (Neighbourhoods)  
Keith Stone - Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods)  
Kevin Clements – Interim Joint Head of Greenspaces  
Geoff Howe - Staffordshire Land Management Team Leader (Natural England)  
Jaclyn Lake – Staffordshire Land Management Team (Natural England)  
Paul Webster – Woodland Officer (Forestry Commission)  
Ewan Colcott – Grants Regulation Manager (Forestry Commission)  
Craig Goodall - Committee Business and Governance Manager

### **80/13 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor I. Azam and Councillor C. Creaney.

### **81/13 Substitutions**

Councillor R. Burley substituted for Councillor C. Creaney.

### **82/13 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting.

### **83/13 Minutes**

#### **Resolved**

**That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 March 2013, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.**

## 84/13 Petition regarding trees on Brownhills Common

The Panel debated a petition that was handed in at Council on 8 April 2013 which was against proposals to cut down trees on Brownhills Common (BC).

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and set out the format and order of speakers.

Mr Poxon and Mrs Jackson introduced the petition and its objectives to the Panel. The principal points of their presentations were:

- The trees on BC provided a pleasant environment for local people to enjoy. The removal of trees would spoil this 'oasis of calm'. The trees on BC should be allowed to remain.
- Other suitable sites, such as Chasewater and Cannock Chase, should be used to preserve and develop heath land.
- The local community should be allowed a greater say in the management of BC. Local people were willing to work together with the Council and its partners to develop a long term strategy for BC.
- Trees provided habitat for many natural species, including deer.
- Healthy trees should not be removed from BC.
- Local people were concerned about poor tree and shrubbery maintenance. Photographs of a poorly maintained hedge were circulated.
- Whilst conifers were not natural to England they should be left in place as they had been there for many years.
- Previous scrub clearance and hedge laying had been poor.
- Mineral extraction on the site should be prevented through the use of planning legislation.
- Mrs Jackson provided a statement to the Panel (annexed).

Councillor B. Cassidy, supported the petitioners and urged Walsall Council and Natural England to work with the local community to develop a suitable solution.

The Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods) clarified the scope of the discussion and explained that it was a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) on account of its wet and dry lowland heath, fens and standing open water habitats. The SSSI was a statutory undertaking which Natural England were responsible for preserving and protecting. Walsall Council owned BC and manages it in partnership with Natural England and the Forestry Commission. The Council has a legal obligation to manage the SSSI appropriately and in accordance with Natural England.

The Staffordshire Land Management Team Leader (Natural England) gave a presentation (annexed) that contained details on revised proposals.

The Interim Joint Head of Greenspaces (Countryside and Urban Forestry) gave a presentation (annexed).

The Portfolio Holder (Leisure and Culture) responded to the petition. He emphasised the need to listen to the concerns of residents. He supported the principal of the management plan as it was important to ensure that BC was preserved and maintained for future generations.

The Chair opened the meeting to questions from Panel Members. The following are the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- The driver for the proposals was the need to manage a SSSI, the restoration of former heath land and the protection of wildlife associated with lowland heath.
- The original proposals proposed cutting down 7.3 hectares (approximately 50%) of 15ha of trees over a period of 10 years. The revised proposals suggested thinning the trees to reduce tree cover by 12%. It was explained that further trees could be cut down but only to maintain the desired level of tree numbers. Tree removal was required to allow the heath land to be maintained and increase in area coverage.
- Trees would be removed in line with Forestry Commission standards.
- Trees cut down would be replaced through the regeneration of native broad leaf species on BC or on other land.
- Further consultation was required to agree the management plan and ensure that everyone clearly understood what work was going to take place and how.
- Conifer trees had been planted on BC as part of the development of a strategic timber reserve. The Forestry Commission now had a strategy of restoring woodland areas to their natural being. This was a long term strategy which would be achieved over decades.
- The management plan was designed to improve habitats for rare wildlife, but not impacting on existing wildlife such as deer. Lowland heath is a scarce habitat at a UK and European Level. In the UK there is approximately 16% left of the area that existed in 1800. However, the UK still holds 20% of the world's lowland heath land.
- There was strong support for the creation of a Friends Group for BC. This would allow local residents with an interest in BC to become more involved with its management in the future. It would also provide a dedicated group for that could be consulted with.

The Chair opened up the meeting to comments and questions from members of the public present. The following are the principal points:

- It was feared that the proposals to cut down trees would devastate BC. Bad experiences of previous management plans on BC and other areas was causing concern.

- It was important to create more heath land to increase connectivity across Brownhills Common itself and between heath land areas at Chasewater and Cannock Chase.
- A resident supported the management plan and the restoration of former heath land. The thinning of trees would make BC a more pleasant environment. He recalled that 18 years ago local people had requested the removal of trees.

The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions. She noted the Council's responsibility as landowner to manage the rare and important habitat in a responsible way. She suggested further consultation work take place with local communities and a further report be considered by the Panel at a future meeting. This was supported by the remaining Members of the Panel.

**Resolved:**

**That:**

1. **further robust consultation by Walsall Council, Natural England and the Forestry Commission take place with the local community regarding the new management plan for Brownhills Common;**
2. **that a Friends Group for Brownhills Common be established;**
3. **the Development and Control Section consider rescinding planning consent for mineral extraction on Brownhills Common;**  
**and;**
4. **the Panel consider the outcome of the further consultation along with the final proposed management plan for Brownhills Common at a future meeting.**

**85/13 Work Programme 2012/13 and Forward Plan**

Following a question it was noted that decision 54/12 'Walsall's Second Play Strategy' could be delayed.

**Resolved:**

**That:**

1. **the Forward Plan be noted;**  
**and;**
2. **the work programme 2012/13 be noted.**

**86/13 Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 3 June 2013.

*The meeting closed at 7.45 p.m.*

Signed.....

Date.....