

Introduction

1. As Acting Chair, Roger Brown introduced the meeting with a reminder of the support for SCF, including potential financial help, given by the Leader of the Council at the last meeting and by thanking Richard Taunton College for complimentary use of the room.
2. He welcomed Mitch Sanders, SCC Service Director, and Nick Yeats, SCC Parks and Open Spaces Manager, to explain how The Common is managed.

Presentation by SCC Officers

3. Mitch Saunders explained the Council's forthcoming organisational restructure; which would split Council functions between strategy and operations, with Parks and Open Spaces falling within the latter under (from the week following 30/10/16) a different service director, Steve Smith. He noted there was no dedicated lead / primary contact within SCC for matters relating to The Common and that Nick Yeats would continue to be the responsible officer. Councillors Rayment and Kaur are the key Cabinet members, with responsibilities including open spaces and leisure / events respectively.
4. Mitch Saunders outlined the context for management of The Common representing 132ha out of a total of 1,214 ha of open space in the city, comprising 52 parks, 115 play areas, 5,000 trees and 35 miles of hedges. Together these shared a £1.3m budget and 70 FTE staff, of which 2.5 FTE are dedicated to The Common (reduced from 14 in 1973 and 7 in 2010). These facilities contribute to the Council's objectives of making the city an attractive place for working, living and investing.
5. A further 30% cut in the city budget (another £81m on top of the £85 recent reduction) is inevitable due to less government funding and this will disproportionately affect non-statutory services, such as parks and open spaces. He hoped that the Forum can help find the best way forward in this context to achieve a sustainable balance between income-raising activities, promoting The Common and retaining its character.
6. Nick Yeats outlined SCC's operational obligations in managing The Common as:
 - a. health and safety;
 - b. recreation under the 1844 Marsh and Public Health / Open Space Acts;
 - c. conservation of biodiversity under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006;
 - d. benefit in general to the health and wellbeing of current and future residents.

7. Nick Yeats also explained that a particular issue is litter – one of the 2.5FTEs is devoted entirely to collecting litter. In summer 1 FTE is dedicated to grass cutting, leaving some scope for projects at other times of the year. He is currently working on a state-of-the-art play area to replace the paddling pool - which will be funded by nearby developer contributions (with maintenance funded from Council resources); in parts this requires consent under the Commons Act which is currently under consideration by the Planning Inspectorate; it includes a more level gravel path linking to The Hawthorns. The biggest overall challenge is the cuts in funding, making a collaborative approach with local interest groups important.

Questions

8. In response to questions Mitch Saunders and Nick Yeats stated that:
- a. Current plans for the Common comprise the detailed, primarily biodiversity-focussed, Draft Management Plan 1992, which provided the basis for the later, statutorily-required SSSI plan agreed with Natural England, and more general Green Flag Plans, the most recent being 4 years old. An updated plan, with the Forum's help, is needed although Nick Yeats considers significant change unnecessary.
 - b. For the city as a whole there are 70FTE employees to cover all grounds maintenance, trees and allotments, of which 20FTE are dedicated to parks (including the 2.5FTE on The Common).
 - c. Following the fatality from a falling tree limb last year the HSE had confirmed that SCC's procedures for checking are appropriate, with high risk trees checked every 2 years and low risk ones every 5 years.
 - d. Although 80% of The Common is now woodland, which some find impenetrable, there needs to be a balance between wildlife and accessibility.
 - e. The income from events on The Common supports the events team but there is an agreement for a proportion to be shared with SCAPPS/The Forum (as indicated by the Leader at the last meeting).
 - f. It is not certain why litter from events is not separated for re-cycling, but it is probably not economically practicable.
 - g. There is currently no enforcement capability to 'police' antisocial behaviour such as fires, encampments and unauthorised damage to trees.
9. As Meeting Chair, Roger Brown, suggested it inappropriate at this stage for discussion of a query from the floor as to the purpose of a new management plan and efforts of volunteer groups when the Action Plan for the Little Common agreed by SCC, the subject of much community funding and hard physical work by the Common Sense group over 8 years, is apparently being reversed by the current maintenance regime.

Conclusion

10. Roger Brown thanked Mitch Saunders and Nick Yeats, adding that it was clear from what they had said that further Council cutbacks will be a threat to the future of The Common. It was clear that a new, comprehensive plan was needed and the next meeting of the Forum will start to consider this. He clarified that the draft constitution will be circulated for consideration and adoption at that meeting. The website would then launch – in the meantime email and Facebook are being used.

NOTICE: Volunteer working groups

11. When constituted the Forum may organise volunteer working groups but in the meantime SCAPPS are overseeing two to continue improvements to the appearance of one of the principal entrances to the Common - all are invited:

- **Wednesday 10 November 2016 – PM 1:30 – 3:30**
- **Saturday 17 November 2016 – AM 10:30 – 12:30**

Bring suitable footwear, hats and gardening gloves - meet at the junction of Cemetery Road and Northlands Road.