

**Southampton Common Forum
Inaugural AGM and Public Open
Meeting:**

Tuesday 17th January 2017,



Discussion document - a Manifesto for the Southampton Common Forum

Author. Roger Brown

Introduction

1 In February 2016 Highfield Residents Association and SCAPPs, with the encouragement and support of Southampton City Council, invited other organisations to a public meeting to discuss the idea of setting up a Forum as a sounding board and focal point for major issues affecting the Common. There was widespread support for such a body. A second meeting in June took the form of a workshop in which those present brainstormed ideas, issues and questions. The third meeting in September received a presentation from Council officers about the Council's responsibilities and how they are currently discharged. This note by the informal working group that has been arranging the meetings sets out what has been established to date and makes some suggestions about the future. It will be the main item for discussion at this meeting (and first AGM) on 17th January 2017

Positives and negatives

2 The Common is widely (and rightly) seen as the jewel in the City's parks and open spaces crown, and one of the City's greatest assets. It is a key part of the City's landscape and one of the City's greatest attractions. It fulfils a wide range of purposes, not only recreation and amenity but also biodiversity. It is used by a wide and diverse range of people, including those attending formal and informal events on the Common. It contributes significantly to the Council's outcomes in areas like sustainability and health, as well as providing some revenue for the Council that is ploughed back into Council activities.

3 However because of the budgetary pressures affecting nearly all local authorities, the resources devoted to the improvement, management and maintenance of the Common have declined in recent years, and will almost certainly decline still further. It is also clear that the Council has no strategy for the Common and that the existing management plans are out of date (and have not been updated as required by its Green Space strategy). Concerns have also been raised about how best to ensure that any plans are created and implemented in such a way as to reflect and sustain the confidence of the local community.

The way forward: a Prospectus for the Common

4 In our view, the overriding need is to develop the Common so that it imaginatively meets the needs of the citizens of Southampton for the 21st century, and not simply its preservation. We should see the Common as a place for the community that supports

citizens' education, health, wellbeing and leisure, as a source of inspiration, solace and pride. This should be supported by an operating model that protects and nurtures the Common in a way that is both financially and environmentally sustainable. This in turn requires action on three fronts:

- Build a much richer engagement with stakeholders and users
- Develop a realistic plan for the Common's future
- Work with the City Council and other parties to explore an alternative operating model for the Common.

5 In an ideal world these activities would be pursued sequentially, but time is not on our side and they should be pursued in parallel. The rest of this note sets out some initial thinking under each heading.

Richer engagement

6 We have been encouraged by the level of attendance and debate at each of the meetings to date. However it is very much established organisations and groups that have participated. Whilst this may be inevitable at this stage, we need to up the volume and quality of our engagement with stakeholders and users. In particular, we need to broaden the demographics to younger people, including students, families and ethnic communities. We need to embrace a wider range of organisations, such as Tauntons College, King Edwards School, Park Run, event organisers, local societies, clubs, businesses, etc. As well as making full use of social media there is a strong case for direct approaches to Common users at convenient times and places.

A Common Plan

7 A new plan could be built around objectives or targets for each of the main modern purposes of the Common: recreation, amenity, biodiversity and landscape character. In each case priorities and timescales would be determined for the area as a whole and specific actions identified for each sector. It will be necessary to indicate the resources required and the sources, including sources external to the City as well as revenues from commercial and semi-commercial activities. The plan should be commensurate with a realistic estimate of the resources that will be required.

A new operating model

8 The working party believes that the current operating model for the Common is unsustainable and that another solution is required, one that will (a) bring additional resources, money and expertise, from both private and public sources, to the Common's improvement and (b) more fully and constructively engage with a wider range of stakeholders and users (the establishment of the Forum is a good first step but further evolution will be required). A number of models should be explored, including the idea of a community-based trust.

Working with partners

9 In taking these ideas forward it will be essential for the Forum to work closely with the City Council, the two universities and other major local partners. In doing so, it will be

important to learn from the past and ensure that we have not only goodwill and commitment but also good communications with them and other local organisations.

Conclusion

10 As the recently published report on the State of UK Public Parks by the Heritage Lottery Fund (<https://www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks-2016>) makes clear, the Common is not unique in facing a crisis of sustainability. However unless prompt action is taken, there is a very clear risk that the Common will fall into decline and the Forum turn into an impotent referee between increasingly frustrated residents and users and a Council increasingly unable to discharge its responsibilities effectively (in spite of its best intentions).