

# **Southampton Common Forum 17 January 2017**

Discussion Paper for public meeting prepared by Simon Hill

## **Developing a plan for The Common**

A new plan for the Common is needed to provide guidance both on how it will be shaped and used in the future and to specify the corresponding day-to-day maintenance regime. The existing plan Management Plan, prepared by SCC in 1992, focused almost entirely on how to manage vegetation and wildlife. There has never been a plan that deals comprehensively with how all the various interests in The Common should be managed. Such a plan is now needed.

There are many different types of users of and interests in The Common and a range of ideas on its future. The process for preparing a plan will need to be designed to allow all views to be expressed and considered and to secure broad agreement on the choices made between various options. Such a collaborative approach to plan formulation contrasts with conventional plan methodology whereby 'experts' produce a draft for comment, but then tend to defend that draft against contrary views, rendering consultation of limited value to the process and frustrating for participants. Expert contributions – for example on ecology - are needed to ensure informed debate on issues and options, but decisions between options invariably involve value judgements which are appropriately taken by the public and/or their elected representatives.

A start on a collaborative approach was made at the Forum on June 2016, when preliminary lists of issues and 'stakeholders' were identified – see the report (attached/online?). That process now needs to be continued with further consideration in detail of issues and possible options.

A particularly testing issue will be how to secure the resources needed to manage The Common under the various options for its future that might be considered. Presently SCC own and manage The Common and fund its maintenance, but the Council's resources overall have been and are likely to continue to be dramatically reduced. However that should not constrain the scope of options considered, as their appeal may attract new forms of funding. For example The Common has changed from being 80% open heath and grassland 60 years ago to being mainly wooded now. That has steadily reduced the areas usable for recreation, particularly at the north. An illustration of how that might be reversed and openness restored in the north-east to improve recreational potential and landscape quality is attached. Such a scheme might attract novel national and/or local sources of funding.

Whilst the new plan should be formulated as quickly as possible, sufficient time is needed to allow issues and options to be fully considered and for it to be soundly based and widely accepted. A possible programme, together with a suggested format, for the plan are attached below.

## **How a plan for the Common could look**

(note, this is a draft to give an idea for how a plan could be structured and the sorts of things that it could, potentially, include). It provides a framework for discussion and for future development by the Forum.

### **Overview**

1. Southampton Common covers 132 hectares and is one of the largest urban commons in the country<sup>i</sup>. Its character and uses have changed over the centuries. This management plan (MP) is designed to steer future change in an appropriately agreed way.
2. The MP revolves around the balance to be made between biodiversity, amenity/recreation uses and landscape character within the resources available for maintenance.
3. The weight given by government to biodiversity has increased significantly in the last 20 years. Councils are now required to conserve biodiversity insofar as is consistent with performing their other functions<sup>ii</sup>.
4. A growing population nearby, with an increasing proportion lacking gardens, will continue to exert to greater recreational demands<sup>iii</sup>. Parts of the surrounding residential areas are relatively poorly served with alternative public open space<sup>iv</sup>. Longstanding law requires commons to be kept open to the public with free unimpeded access<sup>v</sup>.
5. The Common until quite recently comprised predominantly open heathland; it is now predominantly woodland with only about a third being open.
6. The Council's resources have been severely reduced in the last 2-3 years and could reduce further in future. No increase is foreseeable<sup>vi</sup>. That means fewer man and machine hours available for maintenance now and in the future. Volunteers make useful contributions but cannot be a substitute for regular programmed maintenance.
7. The previous management plans for The Common comprise
  - a. The draft management plan 1992 (DMP) <sup>vii</sup>
  - b. Various Green Flag (GF) plans from 2010 onwards<sup>viii</sup>
8. All were partial. The DMP provided a detailed and much needed ecological inventory of The Common. It suggested some management interventions, mainly relating to conserving or promoting particular species/habitats. The GF plans provided a broader overview of competing pressures and included some areas for action.
9. However, neither the DMP or GF plans provided a systematic specification of how The Common and its various parts should be managed on a day-to-day

basis to achieve agreed outcomes for biodiversity, recreation, amenity and landscape character within the resources available. That is the purpose of this plan.

### ***Biodiversity***

10. In addition to the general biodiversity duty, nearly all of The Common west of The Avenue is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)<sup>ix</sup>. By law certain species/habitats must be protected and the defined land managed in a particular way. Also, some species found on The Common are protected in law in their own right<sup>x</sup>.
11. TBC - more detail about key ecology implications/requirements for management and potential conflicts with recreation/amenity/landscape character – TBC. Range of species and areas? Background material (update on DMP?) in appendix/separate paper?
12. Existing habitat is invariably a result of 'artificial' intervention that has changed the otherwise inexorable process of reversion to a particular habitat suited to the geology/soil type and climate of the area. As a result of grazing The Common for centuries up until WWII was predominantly open heathland with scattered trees and small areas of woodland amounting to no more than about 15% of its area. Grazing ceased during the 20c – most recently on The Little Common east of the Avenue - when taken over for military encampments in the 1940s. Since then natural reversion on areas not kept mown has been to predominantly deciduous woodland. That now covers about 70% of The Common, with most of the remainder maintained as mown grass.
13. Clearance or thinning of woodland or withdrawal of frequent grass cutting can lead to rejuvenation of much more diverse habitats. Regular extensive maintenance by hand to prevent establishment of sapling trees is very costly if undertaken by paid staff and is beyond the capacity of occasional volunteer groups. Apart from relatively small areas that can be maintained by (primarily volunteer) hand, the only practicable method of stemming woodland incursion is thus regular selective cutting by machine to maintain as grassland.

### ***Amenity/recreation***

14. The Common is host to a wide range of recreational activities itemised in Appendix 1. Some serve residents of the city as a whole and beyond – such as the Bank Holiday Fun Fairs, occasional 'Power in the Park' events and annual Race for Life. But The Common is also a major source of more regular informal recreation for the large surrounding urban population living in areas where there is often little public open space nearer by.
15. Being centrally located within the urban area north of the city centre The Common also provides many important off-road links in walking and cycling journeys between different parts of the City. They include Lovers' Walk, which connects East Bassett to the City centre and the two Southampton

University campuses and a direct east west link between Shirley and Portswood. The presence of these safe, shorter and comfortable links encourages walking and cycling on journeys that might otherwise be made by motorised transport.

16. All these activities depend on actual and perceived safety of users, which is affected by openness, lighting and informal supervision from other users or from overlooking properties and passers-by. They also require provision and maintenance of various associated facilities such as seats, litterbins, tarmac surfaces, signage and lighting, as well as major features such as the underpass under The Avenue and the paddling pool/children's play area. Lack of facilities might constrain desirable use of The Common – for example scarcity of seats may deter the elderly or disabled needing stopping points to rest from venturing on a walk.
17. All uses have varying implications for biodiversity, landscape character and maintenance, as summarised in Table 1. There may also be pressure for new activities in future (e.g. mini drone flying?)

### ***Landscape character***

18. The landscape character of The Common is largely determined by its habitat. After many centuries of being predominantly open heathland, it has changed very considerably in the last 50-60 years to become predominantly deciduous woodland. Two large expanses of open grassland (The Showground and The Flats) have been maintained as regularly cut grassland, which provide long vistas over the sloping ground framed by attractive woodland edges.
19. Some formal planting has taken place that has had a marked effect on the landscape. Most notable are the oaks first planted along The Avenue in the late 1700s; this has for long provided a highly distinctive approach to the city centre from the north/London. Oaks along Coronation Drive planted in the 1950s and limes trees planted (date?) along Highfield Avenue provide locally highly distinctive features. During the 1970s and 1980s there was some sporadic amenity planting of specimen trees in other locations, which in some cases bestow more of managed parkland than natural feel (TBC – others – conifers around covered reservoir, immediately to west of underpass, north of Highfield Avenue?).
20. The remnants of some historic activities, in particular the Cutted Thorn, The Carriage Drive and the Race Course are still seen in the landscape, although all or parts of all of them have become less distinct as they have become overgrown with woodland and under-storey vegetation.
21. Grazing from Medieval times depended on the separation of Southampton cattle from those of surrounding commons. That required the construction and maintenance of earth banks and ditches around its perimeter. Much of these survive, particularly on the Hill Lane and Burgess Road sides, providing an effective screen between those roads and The Common. Only on the east side did Highfield Road once form part of The Common, which was contained by the front boundary walls of adjacent properties dating from the early

1800s. This is the only part of The Common that has an open 'village green' feel associated with the adjacent residential area

22. Functional artefacts – in the form of signage, lighting, seating and litterbins - have been kept to a minimum in the last 20-30 to encourage a natural clutter-less rather than urban park appearance.
23. Other functional artefacts remaining that are prominent in the landscape include the paddling pool (Southampton Corporation's reservoir no.2 since remodelled more than once) and the Boating Lake (originally SC's reservoir no.3). The other water areas of the Ornamental (fishing) Lake and the Cemetery Lake were both artificially created for amenity/landscape purposes and – particularly in the case of the Ornamental Lake - provide attractive features in their own right that add to the overall diversity of landscape.
24. Whilst much of The Common is relatively tranquil by urban standards the character of parts is adversely affected by the noise and visual intrusion of traffic, including heavy lorries, particularly on The Avenue, but also on Highfield Lane and Road.

### ***Maintenance resources***

25. Analysis of recent, present and likely future resources and effect on potential maintenance regimes TBC.
26. Review of fee-paying/commercial activities that might contribute to resources. TBC
27. Volunteer groups: potential contribution to maintenance – how to stimulate wider involvement/interest? TBC

### **FURTHER WORK**

#### **Questions/issues**

28. A suggested list:
  - a. Which species/areas must/should be given high priority for biodiversity conservation?
  - b. What recreational or amenity activities/areas must/should have high priority?
  - c. What activities should be banned? Which potential new ones should be permitted?
  - d. Which on site fee-paying activities should be encouraged/increased to assist funding of maintenance? What off-site developments might contribute financially?

- e. In terms of landscape and perceived safety/user friendliness how wooded or open/non wooded should The Common be in future?
- f. How should shared use of paths by walkers, dogs and cycles be managed with the comfort and safety of all in mind?
- g. How can maintenance be organised more efficiently?
- h. What improvement (tarmac/gravel) to paths/cycle ways and entrances to The Common is needed/acceptable?
- i. Others?

29. These need refining/recasting to provide the best basis for public and technical debate.

### **POSSIBLE FORMAT OR THE PLAN**

30. Suggest mixture of areas/routes/entrances/features and themes for each of which issues/actions/management principles are specified. For example:

- Areas (and sub areas within them) shown on draft map (amended as per comments yet to be received);
- Routes – e.g. Carriage Drive, Coronation Drive, other individual functional routes; and
- Entrances –
- Features – boundary banks and stones, lakes, streams, springs, Cutted Thorn,
- Themes – e.g. ancient/veteran hawthorn trees (being strangled shaded out by ivy/larger tree canopy); seating (how many, what type, remembrance? etc); cycling/potential pedestrian conflict (e.g. London’s South Embankment – “cyclists welcome but only if give priority to pedestrians”)

Each could be numbered on the key map (attached) and cross-referred to a table/individual notes/sections on each.

31. That should enable issues within each and an action plan and maintenance specification to be organised in detail within a comprehensible framework?

**Table 1: Potential conflicts:  
TBC (refer to output of Forum Workshop June 2016)**

## **Appendix 1: Uses**

(note: not yet co-ordinated with output of Forum Workshop June 2016)

### **(1) Present Uses**

#### **(1.1) Recreational**

##### **Informal**

Walking  
Jogging/running Picnics/barbecues/gazebos  
Dog walking  
Sitting /lying/sunbathing  
Informally organised ball games  
Cycling (on designated paths)  
Model boating  
Art/graffiti (underpass)  
Duck/swan/bird (and rat) feeding  
Blackberry picking  
Nature appreciation

##### **Formal/organised/controlled**

Hawthorns café, wildlife education centre and garden  
Fishing (Ornamental Lake)  
Children's play equipment/paddling pool  
Funfair  
Outdoor concert/Power in the Park  
Orienteering  
Cowherds Public House  
Park Run/Race for Life etc  
Cycle events (including nude)  
Boot camps  
Historical/natural history appreciation events

#### **(1.2) Functional**

Transit routes – cycle and walking routes  
Cemetery (new burials restricted to existing family graves)  
Water supply (covered reservoir in north)

#### **(1.3) Not permitted**



To avoid damage to the natural features of The Common and unacceptable conflict between users some activities not permitted<sup>xi</sup>. These include cycling (other than on designated paths), motorcycling, tipping of any waste including vegetation, camping/habitation and fires/barbecues that damage vegetation.

## **(2) Historic Uses**

### **2.1 Recreational**

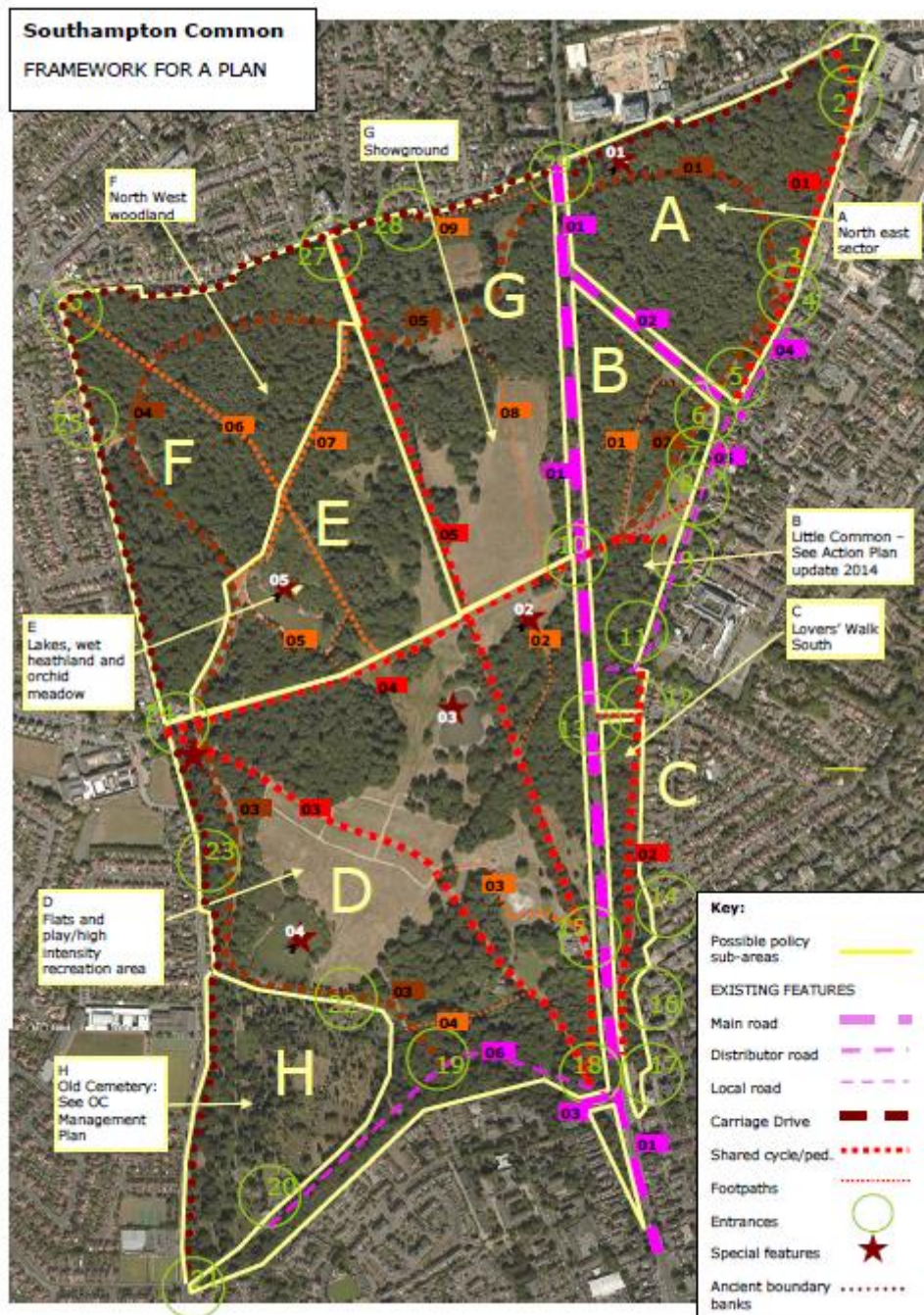
- Cricket (marked out ground on Flats)
- Golf course (on and between Flats and Showground)
- Football (marked out pitches on Showground and Flats)
- Horse racing (formal circuit: Cemetery, Flats & Showground)
- Horse riding/carriage driving (perimeter of whole Common)
- Hot air balloon show (on Showground)
- Agricultural/flower show (on Showground)
- Model aircraft flying (designated area west of Boating Lake)
- Model boating
- Zoological gardens (site of The Hawthorns)

### **2.2 Functional**

- Commoning/grazing (pound at Bellmore entrance, Cowherds)
- Hanging (site of gallows at covered reservoir)
- Civic functions/government (Cutthorn/Court Leet)
- Gravel and sand winning (various sites)
- Brick-making (Hawthorns site and elsewhere)
- Army encampments (Peninsular War, WI & II)
- Education – primary (Highfield) and nursery (Northlands) schools
- Commercial shows (Ideal Home etc on The Flats)
- Water supply (Reservoirs 1-3 + Artesian Well)

NB - Include approx dates for past activities?

# A possible framework for a plan for The Common



# Possible Action Plan for Southampton Upper Common East

(Bounded by Burgess Rd., The Avenue, Highfield Ave., Furzedown Rd. & University Highfield Campus)

- Semi-ancient wood-land: conserve
- Historic Cutthorn mound: conserve
- Historic Carriage Drive: restore openness
- selected old footpaths: restore
- new foot entrance/link
- Lovers' Walk: increase openness/restore grass verges
- Highfield Ave.: restore grass under limes
- re-open up grassland/heathland
- historic earth banks: survey/restore/conserve



Little Common Action Plan  
 2008 et.seq. /latest 2014  
 Largely implemented – restoration  
 of Carriage Drive to grass ride still  
 to be carried out (as at 01.01.17)

## **Footnotes and references:**

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<sup>i</sup> Excluding the curtilages of the Cemetery, The Hawthorns, The Cowherds and highways of The Avenue, Highfield Avenue and Highfield Road (see <http://magic.defra.gov.uk>).

<sup>ii</sup> Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 (s40 (1)): "Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity". Conserving biodiversity is defined as including promotion/improvement. The Act does not require promotion/improvement.

<sup>iii</sup> Reference to 2012 SCC Core Strategy population/housing planned increase TBC

<sup>iv</sup> Ref to POS assessment in SCC Local Plan/CS

<sup>v</sup> Commons Act 2006 (s38) and predecessor Acts of 1925 (s193-4) and earlier

<sup>vi</sup> Facts on reduction in resources TBC

<sup>vii</sup> Reference to 1992 DMP on SCC website TBC

<sup>viii</sup> Reference on SCC web to GF plans – and Biodiversity Plan for whole SCC? TBC

<sup>ix</sup> Cross ref to Natural England web site to plan and reason for designation TBC

<sup>x</sup> TBC – list – reference to their vulnerability

<sup>xi</sup> Reference to relevant byelaws and link to SCC web.