

## **(1) Welcome**

The meeting was opened by Adam Wheeler (AW), Chair of the SCF Management Committee (SCF-MC) who welcomed the attendees to this important meeting at which the results of SCF's 2017 Common User survey were being released.

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## **(2) Welcome by Prof. Graham Baldwin, Vice Chancellor, Southampton Solent University.**

Southampton Solent were delighted to be hosting the meeting as a lot of their publicity featured the City's green spaces as being a particular attraction for prospective students. Southampton Solent looked forward to working with SCF and other interested parties to help promote and improve The Common. Prof. Baldwin then introduced the audience to some of the University's key strengths. The meeting was being held in the Spark building, a brand new teaching, learning and conference facility, one of several new capital projects the University was undertaking across its campuses. The University hosted some 11,500 students, out of a total registered body of some 20,000, 15% of whom were international students. The University excelled in sports, maritime and creative industries and was very keen to contribute to civic life in the City.

AW thanked Prof Baldwin for his welcome and Southampton Solent for its generous support for the Forum, having offered us free use of the conference rooms for this meeting.

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## **(3) Minutes of the previous SCF public meeting (July 2017)**

These had previously been circulated to Forum members and were available online. They were accepted as an accurate and fair record of the meeting.

Matters arising.

- (3.1) A key issue from the initial survey responses discussed at the July meeting was the need to engage with hard to reach groups and the City's ethnic communities. As a result, the SCF-MC had made extensive efforts to reach out across the City. These included 2 broadcasts on Unity 101 radio, meetings and proactive engagement with, amongst others, the Medina Mosque, Southampton Gudwara, Chinese Association of Southampton, Taunton's and King Edwards and the student unions at the University of Southampton and Southampton Solent University.
- (3.2) In July 2017 the new Common playpark was still under construction. It had now been opened to great acclaim, an excellent and exciting addition to the facilities.
- (3.3) Southampton City Council (SCC) and the SCF-MC had established a joint working group to develop a new Strategic Plan for The Common. This would be discussed further during this meeting.

(3.4) SCF had completed the digitisation of the City of Southampton Society's (CoSS) book on The Common. This was being released progressively through daily extracts on the SCF facebook page and once this had been completed, the entire book would be available. Thanks were offered to SCF Secretary and SCF volunteer Jackie Cowie for the digitisation effort and to CoSS for permission to undertake it.

(3.5) the SCF-MC then introduced themselves. We had co-opted 2 new members, Andy Lai and Tanya Bellows to complement the existing skills set. They were warmly welcomed.

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## **(4) The Common - a video**

To help publicise The Common and SCF and raise awareness and promote discussion, the SCF-MC had produced the first draft of a possible promotional video about The Common, how it is used, how it has changed over time and how good it can be with imagination and investment. ABP and Bestival had kindly supplied video footage to include and many of the other images used were taken by the SCF-MC, but others had been sourced through the internet, as had the accompanying music. This meant that we could not, at this stage place the draft video online, but we could show it privately to the meeting. It was hoped that Southampton Solent media students would now help develop the project.

The video was then shown and feedback requested.

- One viewer believed that there was too much focus on human activity and not enough on wildlife, others disagreed.
  - References to the historical Common were liked.
  - Many had not previously appreciated how much open space had been lost in recent decades.
  - The role of The Common as a commuting route did not really come through.
  - It showed deterioration in the condition of The Common well.
  - Green Flag status had not been mentioned
  - It showed the wide range of uses of The Common.
  - It demonstrated how The Common had been created and shaped by human intervention and management.
  - As a first draft, it was felt to work well.
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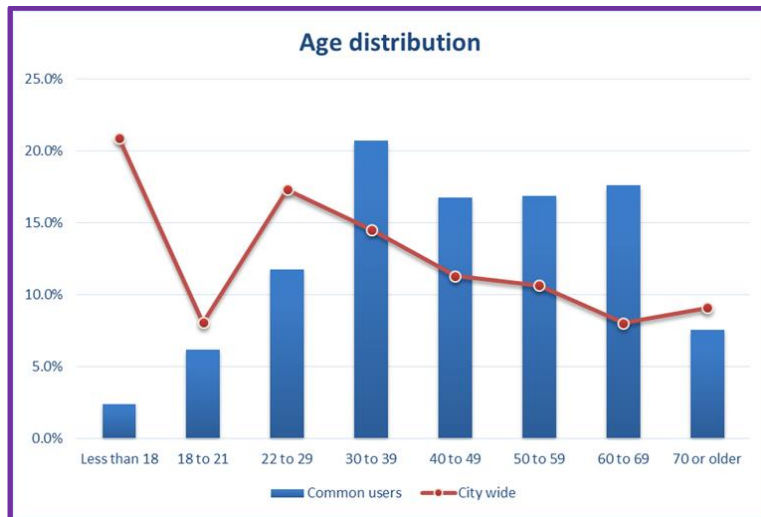
## **(5) 2017 Common User Survey**

AW then introduced the 2017 user survey, its key results and their message.

- At the time of the July public meeting, the survey had received some 1,100 responses, by its close, at the end of October, some 2,190 City residents had had their say.
- The SCF-MC were delighted with the level of response and were confident that it was representative of the City.
- Some 40 organisations across the City had helped promote the survey, including many community groups. They were all thanked for their help.
- As a result, some 900 individuals had opted into our mailing list and over 300 individuals followed SCF on facebook, demonstrating ongoing engagement with City residents.
- This was the largest ever survey of Common users and came some 40 years after the last one (conducted by CoSS).

- The SCF-MC now had a very clear and evidence-based view of what City residents thought about The Common and how they use it.

The survey had produced a very strong response from those aged 18+, which broadly matched the age distribution of the City, including a large response from the 18-21 age group, thanks to strong support from the two Universities and their student unions.

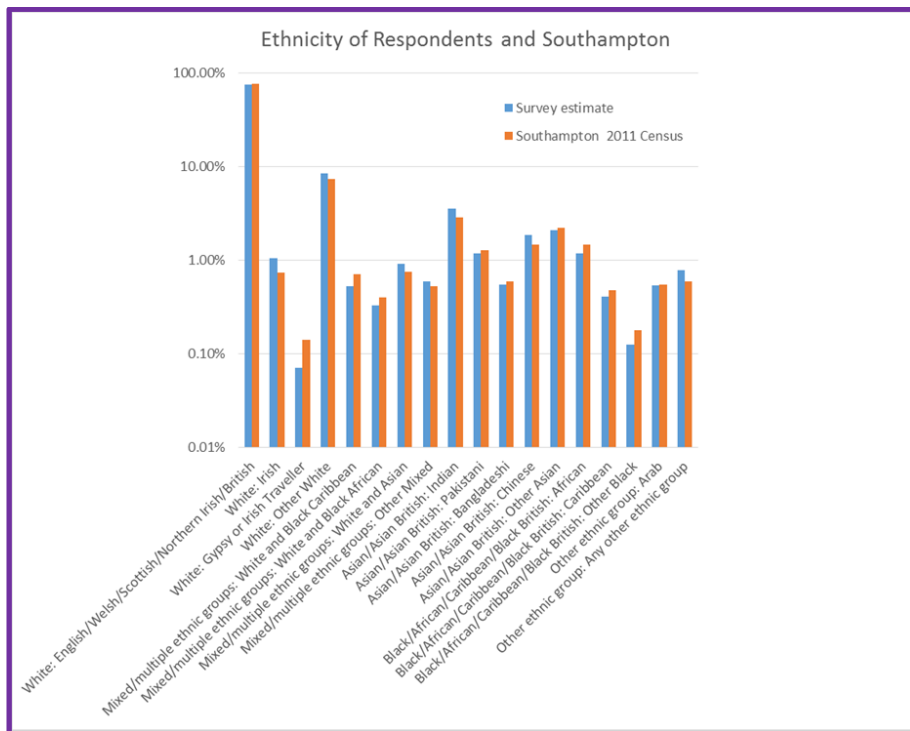


Despite the best efforts of the SCF-MC, it had proved very hard to directly engage with the under 18s, but the data suggested that their views and needs had been included in parental responses.

Only one question in the survey was compulsory; the postcode of the respondent. This enabled us to map responses to the street level to show that they came from across the City.



This also enabled SCF-MC to map responses to recent Census data to demonstrate that the responses matched the City’s demography very well. All communities in the City used and valued The Common.



As expected, responses were concentrated round The Common, but all City wards were represented, demonstrating that we had engaged widely and that The Common was used by residents across the whole City. Those living closer used The Common more regularly, with 90% of those using The Common at least monthly living within 2.2 miles of its centre (as the crow flies). This encompassed 63% of City residents. Most respondees visited at least weekly. A key message was that The Common was absolutely not the preserve of the mainly white, middle class residents who live closest to it.

Because we had asked for free text responses, rather than offering prescriptive tick boxes, the survey provided very rich, valuable and detailed data of what respondees really thought. This is why we are making the anonymised raw data available for others to examine and further analyse.

Likes



Top priorities were:

- Better child play facilities.
- More and better toilets (only The Hawthorns, when opened and one in the new playpark).
- Litter & waste management.
- Street lighting & personal safety.
- Quality of footpaths.

None of these were surprising.

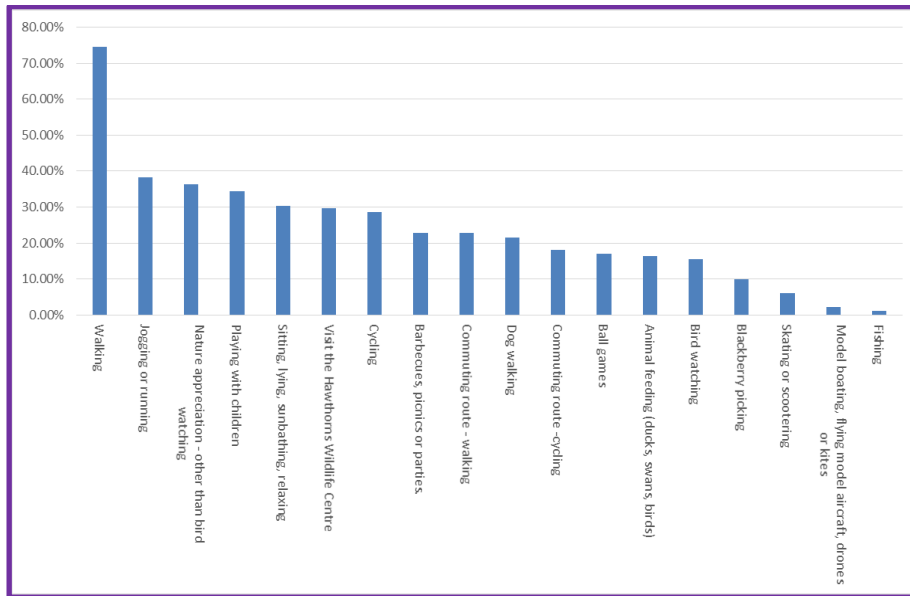
Another key message was the belief that there was insufficient maintenance and resourcing to keep The Common in a good state.

A variety of “conflicts” between different user groups were clear, between, for example:

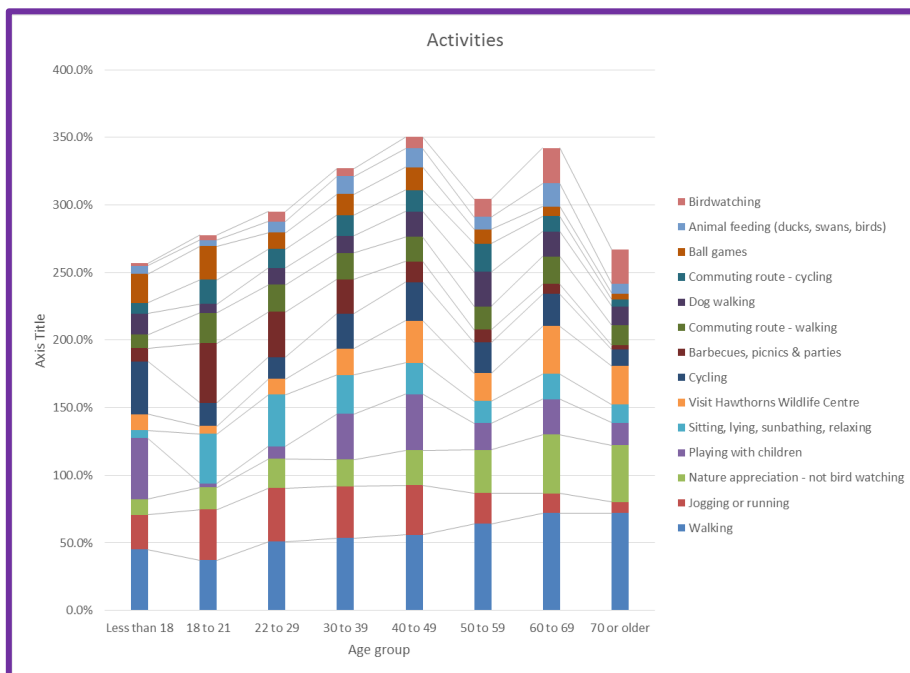
- pedestrians, cyclists and dog walkers.
- those attending and enjoying the large events and those believing that these were inappropriate, damaging or badly managed.
- those wanting improved eating and drinking facilities and those who didn't. BBQs being particularly highlighted.

It was hoped that many of these might be addressed through better management, mitigation, information and facilities.

A wide range of activities were undertaken on The Common, the most popular being walking, commuting (foot & cycle), jogging/running, playing with children and sitting/relaxing. The Common clearly makes a major contribution to green travel in the City.



Activities have also been analysed by age group; for example, jogging and running peak in the middle ages and nature appreciation in the older users.



The SCF-MC had been careful to separate factual analysis of the survey data from its interpretation. The following documents had been produced and would be made public on Thursday 14/12/2017 through the SCF www site.

- The detailed results of the survey.
- An executive summary of the results of the survey.
- The SCF-MC's view of what the survey tells us about The Common and its present and future management.
- The presentation from tonight's meeting.
- The anonymised raw data

These documents are all available from: <http://www.southamptoncommonforum.org/surveyresults.html>

The SCF-MC's view was that the Survey showed the vital importance of The Common to the City and its residents. Changes were clearly needed to restore open space and improve facilities. The Common was a large open space with a very big and diverse user base, hopefully a degree of give and take and transparent management could resolve many issues. Hopefully play facility concerns have been partly addressed by the new play park although additional play areas in other parts of The Common were clearly needed. Basic improvements to signage, lighting, information and education (both history and natural history) could greatly enhance the visitor experience. Finding the financial and logistic resources to deliver needed improvements would be a major challenge. SCC had no statutory duty to finance The Common and parks and Open Spaces were an easy target to cut in times of strained finances. Southampton was not unique in facing these challenges and it was important to look at, and learn from what others were doing elsewhere. Improvements in governance structure were needed to re-unite management with the needs of City residents.

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## **(6) Open discussion on the 2017 Common User Survey facilitated by Adam Wheeler and Cllr Satvir Kaur, Cabinet member for Leisure.**

Cllr Kaur introduced herself to the meeting.

She had a vested interest in The Common, not just from her Cabinet role but because she grew up around it and uses it regularly. Its role as green lungs for the City was fully acknowledged and she welcomed the passion that City residents felt for The Common. On behalf of SCC, she formally thanked SCF-MC and the wider Forum for producing the survey and, in particular, for:

- coming together as a representative body.
- being proactive in wanting to do something to improve The Common - the survey was hugely significant.
- being willing to work constructively with Council and being realistic about finances and resources currently available.

Moving forward, the survey results would underpin the new strategic plan now being developed by the SCF and council officers. This would then lead to detailed, individual management plans for specific aspects of The Common.

The SCC administration is passionate about The Common and its contribution to the City's culture and wellbeing. Events provided valuable revenue for the City and The Common and brought new people into the site, including City residents who hadn't previously visited it.

There were limited “quick fixes” that could be undertaken and it would not be possible to please everyone on every decision, but it was hoped that with such a large, shared space, there would be compromise for shared spaces.

A Common Plan had not been undertaken for decades so it was very important to do it and to do it right.

**Question:** how could the Forum influence the plan and how could resources be protected?

Identifying and delivering resources to improve The Common were crucial to the success of any aspirational plan. Other Councils were exploring different mechanisms to bring funding to parks and open spaces, e.g. Newcastle had just outsourced the running of its Common to a trust in partnership with the National Trust. It will be necessary to look at all of the different potential operating models and assess their advantages and disadvantages to find the best solution for The Common, which could still be to leave it under Council Control. However, this was very much a question for the future. The immediate focus of the SCF-MC was to work to deliver an aspirational Strategic Plan, not just a “status quo” one. Having decided what the City wants, then look to find the most appropriate way to resource and deliver it.

**Question:** will there be an overriding “Vision” for the plan?

Yes, a clear vision, built on testable objectives based on key strategic themes, like The Common being a welcoming place, promoting history and natural history, striking a balance between different user groups etc.. Beyond the strategic plan, there will need to be a whole series of individual detailed plans that address specific objectives and how to deliver them.

**Question:** do the big events contribute anything back to The Common to help mitigate any negative impacts. If people were aware that a % went back into Common works, there might be more acceptance?

The raw income went into central Parks and open spaces funding so it can be shared across different City spaces. However specific mitigation expenses are included for big events. This showed the need for transparency in Governance so residents could see that these fees were being appropriately used.

**Question:** It is going to be a challenge to find resources to fund operational costs, when SCC spending is being further squeezed. Could sponsorship by local businesses and other funding models be investigated?

Absolutely yes, all ideas are welcome and if anyone has specific contacts to approach, please contact us. Rather than go cap in hand at the moment, it was felt important to have an aspirational strategic plan in place as this would provide a vision to engage potential funders with.

Additional café facilities in other areas could possibly help generate footfall and finance but experience at other sites suggests that the profit margins are small. We need to learn from the experience of others (good and bad).

Possibly local funding could contribute to improving specific local areas, e.g. the NW corner.



**Question:** how will any plan be managed?

It was important that a transparent and accountable governance structure underpinned and formed a central theme of the vision and strategic plan. The survey has identified clear areas of “conflict” and so highlights the need to inform and educate user groups as to the needs and concerns of other user groups in order to try to diffuse conflict. It was everyone’s Common and a culture of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect needed to be developed and promoted - an “etiquette” for all Common users.

**Question:** were snagging works proposed for the new play area? The build quality of new tracks and paths being highlighted as being of particular concern.

Yes, there would be a review in spring to assess and improve where necessary, once things had bedded in. There were restrictions under which SCC operated due to The Common’s legal status, but these could be overcome by specific protocols. E.g. new tarmac required Common consent from central government. This shouldn’t be used as an excuse to not deliver needed improvements.

**Question:** What was the legal situation of The Cowherds?

The Cowherds were not part of the legally defined Common. The building and its grounds belonged to SCC but were let on a long term lease and the site was managed autonomously by the lessee.

**Question:** where did responsibility lie concerning value for money and quality of present and future works? It was noted that recent works to resurface the Northlands Road cycle track were conducted to a very poor standard with uneven surface which trapped water as dangerous, icy puddles. How could shoddy works be addressed? A clear quality assurance policy and investigative procedure was needed.

Forum members were encouraged to report any concerns to their local councillor, to Actionline and to parks and open Spaces management.

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## **(7) 2018 Activities**

### **Strategic Plan**

Work to develop the new Strategic Plan was ongoing and it was hoped that a public draft would be available before midyear. It would then be necessary to consult widely on the new plan. Volunteers could play a role in helping to promote and run that consultation. The detailed plans which would follow on from the Strategic plan would require a significant amount of background research and fact finding and it was anticipated that SCF volunteers could help contribute to this task.

### **Ground Works**

It was intended to establish and manage a regular volunteer groundworks programme on The Common to compliment that already in place on Little Common through the Common Sense group. It was clear from

the survey that the state of paths was a major concern for users, with many paths badly overgrown and closed in. Some initial work on the path up the western side of the Avenue in late summer 2017 had recovered up to 1m of useable tarmac! SCF-MC had recently proposed a series of volunteer works around The Common to SCC, largely based on improving access and paths and improving the area around the main Northlands Road to Hawthorns path to help address this clearly identified priority. SCC had responded with an alternative set of projects, some of which volunteers could be involved with, which were largely conservation-related. Further discussions were planned and it was hoped that different tasks would appeal to different individuals and that both might be possible.

The SCF-MC had recently submitted an application to SCC's small grants scheme for local organisations. If successful, this would supply tools and equipment which could be shared with other local groups like Common Sense and Friends of Southampton Old Cemetery (FoSOC), and volunteer and third party insurance, which was necessary if we were to undertake works without direct supervision by SCC staff, allowing flexibility of timetabling.

SCF would also be promoting and publicising volunteer opportunities with sympathetic organisations like FoSOC, local natural history societies undertaking surveys of natural flora and fauna on The Common, Friends of The Hawthorns to increase its opening times etc..

### **Advocacy for The Common**

SCF-MC had partnered with Southampton Solent University to further develop the draft promotional video so that it could be made publically available. A qualified drone pilot has volunteered to help provide drone footage of the site to incorporate into videos, and filming permissions had been arranged.

SCF would further build the Forum's social media profile & presence. In particular we hoped to build a photographic, historic and legal archive. Volunteers could help with this by sourcing and compiling information.

It was hoped that an updated visitor map / visitor app might be produced in the future. Initial contacts had been made with the Ordnance Survey to investigate this and access to archival maps and imagery.

SCF would continue to build positive relations with Common users and local businesses etc. to promote The Common and investigate sponsorship possibilities and opportunities.

At the start of 2018, SCF would be launching an online, monthly photographic competition through our facebook page. This would help build an album of photos to use for publicity purposes, recording The Common and its use across the seasons.

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## **(8) Any other Business**

All the documents relating to the survey would be placed online tomorrow. AW thanked the audience for attending on a cold, wet night and Southampton Solent University for providing the meeting venue free of charge to us. However SCF had paid for the pre-meeting refreshments and any contributions to help cover the costs of these would be gratefully received. A donation box was available in the foyer.

The meeting closed at 9:05 pm.

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Meeting Notes compiled by Dave Johnston, Secretary, SCF, [secretary@southamptoncommonforum.org](mailto:secretary@southamptoncommonforum.org)  
to whom corrections should be notified. December 2017.