

MINUTES OF THE WELSH HARP JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
Wednesday 17 November 2021 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor , Councillor and Councillors and

Also present: Councillors and

Apologies for absence were received from: Councillors and

1. Apologies for absence and declaration of any alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor George Crane (London Borough of Brent) and Councillor John Hart (London Borough of Barnet with Councillor Helene Richman attending as a substitute member).

2. Declarations of Interests

None.

3. Deputations (if any)

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

AGREED that the minutes of the previous meeting held on Wednesday 28 July 2021 be approved as a correct record.

5. Matters arising

The following issues were raised under Matters Arising from the minutes of the previous meeting:

Min 12. Any Other Business – Welsh Harp Management Plan trash screen clearance and repairs

The Committee noted the response provided by Rebecca Pow MP (as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) regarding repair and maintenance of the two trash screens situated at the entrance to the Reservoir.

Whilst Members queried reference within the response to the screens being cleared of debris on a weekly basis, it was noted that more regular clearance was now being undertaken which was welcomed by the Committee.

6. Management Plan (Barnet)

Matthew Gunyon (Greenspaces Manager, Barnet Council) introduced the report providing an update relating to on-going site management issues affecting Welsh Harp Reservoir.

The Committee noted the updates provided in relation to the following issues:

- The continued work being undertaken with Barnet Community Safety Team, the Police and other local partners to identify and remove illegal encampments.
- The work being undertaken to address concerns relating to illegal fishing, on which further detail was due to be provided as part of the update from Brent. This had involved the installation of additional signage as well as use of ParkGuard to undertake patrols, engage with anglers to provide advice and, where required, report any incidents of illegal fishing to the Environment Agency.
- The parks patrol pilot, which ParkGuard had been commissioned to provide during summer 2021 at key hotspot locations, including Welsh Harp. Although the pilot had ended Barnet were now undertaking a review to consider the options available to provide a similar service in future, subject to funding being available.
- The ongoing work being undertaken to develop the West Hendon Playing Fields Master Plan, following the outline business case and capital funding having been approved. This work involved the formation of a Programme Board and Project Team in order to develop the design and submit a planning application, on which progress updates would continue to be provided for the Committee.

Questions and comments were then invited on the update, with the following issues raised:

- In response to a request for further clarification, confirmation was provided that the parks patrol pilot which ParkGuard had been commissioned to provide had now ended. The pilot had been operational over the summer months and was felt to have been a success with Barnet Council therefore reviewing the outcomes and considering options (subject to the necessary funding being available) to commission a similar service in the future.
- The need was identified to amend reference within future reports to the Committee from British Waterways to the Canal and River Trust and to ensure the membership list was kept updated.
- Whilst noting the concerns which had been expressed in relation to illegal fishing on the reservoir support was highlighted for fishing, although it was recognised this would need to be subject to tight control given the concerns, raised by other members of the Committee in relation to the damage being caused and behaviour of those fishing illegally, particularly towards other users of the Reservoir. The Committee recognised this would not apply to those fishing responsibly and within the rules relating to permits but felt action was required to address the nuisance and harm being caused by those who continued to fish illegally.

As no further issues were raised it was **AGREED** to note the Management Update from Barnet.

7. Management Plan (Brent)

Leslie Williams (Project Officer, Brent Council) presented a report outlining progress on the Brent Reservoir / Welsh Harp Management Plan since the last meeting of the Committee and during the 2020/21 year to date. The Management Plan was jointly managed by the three main land-holding organisations: Brent Council, the London Borough of Barnet, and the Canal & River Trust.

The Committee noted the current progress in relation to the Management Action Plan, as had been detailed within Appendix A of the report, with further updates provided in relation to the following items:

- Marshland conservation work had recommenced in late September 21 (after the bird breeding season) focussed on the southern Neasden Recreation Ground side of the reservoir. This had been on Canal and River Trust land at the marshland edge of the reservoir and Brent Council land within the Recreation Ground. The work had been conducted by volunteers of the Welsh Harp Sailing Association with consent from Natural England and had involved the reduction of shade from scrub and from coppiced trees but with less frequent species retained. Works had, however, now been temporarily suspended in view of concerns expressed by users of the Recreation Ground regarding the potential impact on biodiversity in the area with further discussions underway in order to clarify the objectives of the work being undertaken. These had been aimed at improving the balance of habitats within the area, reducing the wind shadow across the reservoir for water sports and enhancing the landscape and amenity in terms of views across the Reservoir.
- In relation to litter removal, the Committee were updated that work was ongoing around the Welsh Harp to combat littering and fly tipping, which had been aided by volunteers and the Canal and River Trust. This had included clearance of a large number of fly tipped tyres.
- In terms of illegal fishing, the Committee noted the update regarding the current restrictions, measure available, risks and actions being taken to address the concerns expressed, particularly in relation to illegal night time fishing. It was noted that as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) fishing was identified by Natural England as an activity that could potentially damage the special interest of the site and as such this was an operation requiring Natural England's consent to take place at the reservoir. In this respect fishing was taken to mean 'freshwater fishery production and/or management, including sporting fishing and angling'. Natural England had not therefore consented to fishing at the SSSI with the Canal & River Trust, as landowners, also not permitting it on the reservoir. In terms of enforcement action and powers, the Committee noted that it was the Canal & River Trust, as landowners, who had primary responsibility for the management of the reservoir with them having confirmed their support for any action taken to address the issue working with their Fisheries Team. Where fishing was taking place from Council land (not necessarily on the boundary with the water), Brent and Barnet would be able to consider other enforcement options with powers also available to the Environment Agency. Given the SSSI status of the Reservoir, members were advised this included a duty to enforce the statutory close season for coarse fishing from 15th March to 15th June inclusive. Outside of that time period the Environment Agency would check anglers present for rod licence compliance, although having no legislative power to enforce unauthorised angling by rod and line.

The Committee noted that as a result of concerns raised, the Environment Agency had visited Welsh Harp on the Spring Public Holiday at the end of May 2021 where they had encountered fishing on the reservoir, in both the geographic areas of Barnet; and Brent. Those fishing had been issued with offence tickets which would usually result in either a formal warning or in more serious cases prosecution. It was confirmed that the Environment Agency Fisheries Enforcement Officers included the Brent Reservoir in their normal routine patrols, with the most recent visit in November 21, although the challenges in preventing such activity were highlighted given the location of the reservoir and population of fish, including carp. The Committee were advised of the Environment Agency national hotline for reporting of environmental incidents, including illegal fishing - 0800 80 70 60. In terms of the powers available to each Council, whilst not possible to issue offence notices for fishing, the use of site notices had been reviewed and updated with ParkGuard having also undertaken patrols during the parks pilot in summer 21 in order to engage and where necessary report issues to the Environment Agency.

- The progress on the ongoing discussions regarding the future of the Welsh Harp Environmental Education Centre, on which the Committee would continue to be kept updated.

Questions and comments were then invited on the update, with the following issues raised:

- All those involved in the removal and clearance of the fly tipped tyres from the Reservoir were thanked for their efforts with further details sought on any investigations being undertaken to identify those responsible. In response Neil Earnshaw thanked all volunteers who had been involved in the clearance work for their assistance which had been undertaken in partnership with Brent Council and the Environment Agency. Whilst highlighting the difficulties in being able to identify the perpetrators, members were advised of the ongoing investigations being undertaken by the Environment Agency on which the Committee would be kept updated. In addition the Committee were advised that the damaged fence had now been replaced with Brent Council also having identified the area for further preventative work in order to discourage any further instances of fly –tipping.
- Support was expressed for the ongoing discussions being undertaken aimed at securing the future provision of the Welsh Harp Environmental Centre. Whilst noting that it would not be possible to provide any further updates at this stage members remained hopeful of a positive outcome given the value and support expressed for the Centre and requested that updates continued to be provided on any further developments as discussion progressed.
- Whilst noting the temporary pause in the works being undertaken to maintain and enhance biodiversity around the marshland, support was expressed for the activity and efforts of the volunteers involved. Although these works involved the removal of shrubs and some coppiced trees it was noted this had been designed to enable the marshland flora to regenerate and to maintain a diversity of trees within the marshland. Those trees being removed were mainly young willow and oak trees with other less frequent species being retained including Alder, Silver Birch, Apples, clumps of Osier and regenerating Elms and large Willows. In order to assist volunteers undertaking the works it was recommended that clear guidance and

procedures were introduced on the works to be undertaken and trees marked for removal, which the Committee agreed and felt also needed to be included within the management plan.

- In view of the concerns raised by some users of the Reservoir at the marshland and other work being undertaken around the Reservoir, members felt there was a need to ensure that the Canal and River Trust worked to ensure those groups and users not formally engaged in the activity around the Reservoir were made aware of the works in order to prevent any future difficulties, with members advised of the work already being undertaken to ensure the necessary liaison & communication mechanisms were in place. The Committee recognised the need to ensure the information provided focussed on the nature of the work being undertaken as part of a planned and consistent approach towards management of the Reservoir and surrounding habitat with an emphasis on the necessary consents having been obtained. As an example reference was made to funding received from the Peoples Postcode Lottery to support the works on the eastern side of the Reservoir, which had include the provision of temporary signage for users to explain the works being undertaken and their importance in maintaining the biodiversity and habitat in the area.

As no further issues were raised it was **AGREED** to note (subject to the actions identified above) the Management Update from Brent.

8. **Welsh Harp Vision- Verbal Report**

Neil Earnshaw (Canal and River Trust) was then invited to provide the Joint Consultative Committee with an update on the Welsh Harp "Vision" project which involved both Brent & Barnet Councils, the Trust, London Wildlife Trust, Thames 21, the Greater London Authority (GLA) and Natural England and had been established to develop an overarching vision for the Welsh Harp and review of the Management Plan. As Members had been informed at the previous meeting, it was reported that DK-CM had been appointed as the lead consultant on the project and to undertake the detailed engagement process.

In terms of the key stages in the project the initial phase had involved undertaking a baseline assessment in order to develop a strategic focus and understand the environmental and social features of the Welsh Harp. The engagement process on the baseline assessment had closed at the end of October, and work was now underway to capture the responses as part of that stakeholder engagement with over 150 responses having been received as part of this process. Key themes already identified had included the need to establish a balance between leisure and recreation, as well as ensuring that nature and biodiversity across the Reservoir area was able to thrive. Members were advised that a final version of the report and assessment was due to be made available towards the end of 2021.

Looking forward members were advised that additional funding was now in the process of being secured for various restoration and regeneration works with a focus also on using the vision and baseline assessment to support the development of wider partnership opportunities and funding bids, which would comprise of a mix of shorter and longer term targets for the Reservoir and on which an exhibition was also being planned.

Questions and comments were then invited on the update, with the following issues raised:

- Details were sought on the stakeholders approached as part of the baseline assessment engagement and consultation process and whether this had included the Welsh Harp Sailing Association (WHSA). In response Neil Earnshaw advised that whilst the engagement process had been focussed on those groups identified as being underrepresented in terms of the Welsh Harp area the consultation process had also included all organisations listed as members of the Joint Consultative Committee. This included WHSA but further checks would be undertaken and contact details updated for future reference.

With no further issues raised, the Committee thanked Neil Earnshaw for the update provided and **AGREED** that further progress updates should continue to be provided on development of the vision.

9. **Dates of Future Meetings**

The dates for future meetings of the Committee were noted, as follows:

- Thursday 10 March 2022 at 7pm (hosted by Brent) – to be held as an online meeting

10. **Any other urgent business**

10.1 Pedestrian Bridge development – Hendon waterside regeneration programme (north marsh)

Concerns were highlighted regarding the plans being developed to proceed with construction of a footbridge by Barrett Homes across the north marsh of the Welsh Harp given its status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and impact on the existing habitat in the area. Whilst it was noted that planning permission had been granted by Barnet Council in 2018 with conditional approval by Natural England, this had been subject to a number of objections raised including from the London Wildlife Trust and Canal and River Trust. Whilst the conditions imposed had included a range of measures Barrett would be required to comply with in terms of habitat provision, significant concerns remained relating to the impact on the surrounding marshland as an SSSI. Although recognising that planning permission had been granted, members were keen to explore what other options were available to express their concerns and highlight support for further consideration being given to the relocation of the bridge further north as a means of avoiding any damage to the SSSI.

As a result of the concerns expressed it was **AGREED** that Councillors Clarke and Richman (in consultation with representatives from the Welsh Harp Conservation Group) should write to Barnet's planning department in order to highlight the Joint Consultative Committee's ongoing concerns regarding the location of the bridge and asking for consideration to be given to its relocation to an alternative position further north of the marshland in order to protect and prevent damage to the SSSI in the Welsh Harp Reservoir

The meeting closed at Time Not Specified

Councillor Vincent Lo

Chair

None.

The meeting closed at Time Not Specified

COUNCILLOR R MASHARI

Chair