

MINUTES OF THE WELSH HARP JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
Thursday 23 November 2023 at 6.00 pm

Members Present (In Remote Attendance)

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| Councillor Alan Schneiderman (Chair) | London Borough of Barnet |
| Councillor Ernest Ambe Esq | London Borough of Barnet |
| Councillor Saqib Butt | London Borough of Brent |
| Councillor Parvez Ahmed | London Borough of Brent |
| Harriet Duffield (Officer) | London Borough of Barnet |
| Leslie Williams (Officer) | London Borough of Brent |
| Adam Woods (Governance) | London Borough of Brent |
| Ben Carroll | Canal & River Trust |
| Mark Pearson | Canal & River Trust |
| Ben Watt | Cool Oak Group |
| Feargal Sharkey | Cool Oak Group |
| Lewis Elmes | Environment Agency |
| Daniella Levene | Friends of Welsh Harp |
| Leila Taheri | Friends of Welsh Harp |
| Dale Langdale | Hendon Rifle Club |
| Dianne Murphy | London Wildlife Trust |
| Phil Atkinson | Phoenix Canoe Club |
| Matt Merkies | Silkstream Friends |
| Diane Mitchell | Silver Park Jubilee Residents Association |
| Hannah Reid | Thames 21 |
| John Shepherd | Welsh Harp Sailing Association |
| Manfred Starkl | Welsh Harp Sailing Association |

Liz Hall

Leo Batten

Derrick Chung

West Hendon Allotment Society

Welsh Harp Conservation Group

West Hendon Residents
Association

1. **Apologies for Absence and Clarification of any Alternate Members**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Krupa Sheth (London Borough of Brent), Councillor Mary Mitchell (London Borough of Brent), Councillor Rishikesh Chakraborty (London Borough of Barnet), Councillor Andrea Bilbow (London Borough of Barnet), Matthew Gunyon (London Borough of Barnet), Sian Palmer-Ferry (Canal & River Trust) and Eashani Haria (Canal & River Trust).

2. **Declarations of Interests**

There were no declarations made.

3. **Deputations (If Any)**

None.

4. **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

It was **AGREED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on Thursday 27 July 2023 be approved as an accurate record.

5. **Matters Arising (If Any)**

None.

6. **Update from the Canal & River Trust**

Ben Carroll (Project Manager, Canal & River Trust) provided an update to the Committee regarding the Winter works at the Brent Reservoir, which was commencing imminently and was expected to be completed by February 2024 to avoid bird nesting season and minimise impact on the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Members were advised that the Canal & River Trust had been given permission for carry out the works by Natural England and were legally required to carry out the works in the interest of safety, with planned work including painting and repairing the bell tower, inspecting sluice's, general inspections of the Reservoir dam and necessary repair works.

In order to complete the required work, it was explained that the Reservoir would have to be fully dewatered, with the Committee noting that the required gear and equipment was currently being mobilised and water quality monitoring had begun in preparation for the dewatering. Ben Carroll also detailed that the Canal & River Trust expected their application for a Flood Risk Activities Permit to be approved in the near future, meaning that the drawdown of the Reservoir would likely commence in the week beginning 27 November 2023.

In discussing next steps, Ben Carroll informed members that the dewatering process would take approximately four to six weeks and would involve a fish health check and rescue, with native fish relocated elsewhere in the water network. In addition, silt mitigations would be replaced where necessary and, once the Reservoir had been fully dewatered, the aforementioned inspections and works

could take place which would continue over weekends and the Christmas period to progress the programme as fast as possible.

To conclude the update, Ben Carroll stated that the Reservoir was expected to be refilled by the end of February 2024 and reassured the Committee that regular dialogue was ongoing between the Canal & River Trust and Natural England. Furthermore, members were advised that the silt on the bed of the Reservoir was very dangerous and therefore the Committee was warned to not enter the Reservoir, to warn others of the dangers and to call 999 if they saw anyone going on the silt or were stuck. Lastly, the Committee noted that a virtual webinar was being held by the Canal & River Trust on 30 November which would provide a much deeper overview of the planned Winter works. Members were encouraged to register for the webinar and submit questions in advance.

Having thanked Ben Carroll for the update, the Chair invited comments and contributions from Committee members, with questions and responses summarised below:

- In response to a question relating to the silt measures, members heard that the silt measures were gabion baskets which stopped silt flowing downstream which were a temporary measure and would be removed before the reservoir was refilled. Moreover, it was explained that the gabion baskets would be arranged in a triangle shape which would form a stable base and therefore would not require stakes. However, retrospective works could be carried out in the case of unforeseen problems.
- The Committee was informed that the Canal & River Trust was reviewing invasive species as part of the Winter works and that there was a process in place to remove any identified species humanely and to not accidentally spread invasive species through the transportation of equipment.
- Regarding rubbish collections over the Winter, it was detailed that the Canal & River Trust had organised volunteer collection days around the perimeter of the Reservoir and had hired a contractor to support in the rubbish collection. However, the true scale of the rubbish would not be known until the Reservoir had been fully dewatered and members were advised that large amounts of rubbish came from upstream which was difficult to control.
- In response to a query concerning the impact of microplastics from rubbish that coated mudflats and marshes, the Committee noted that experts at the webinar on 30 November could provide detailed responses to these complex concerns.
- Given that much of the wildlife in the Welsh Harp relied on the fish in the Reservoir for survival, the Committee questioned how the Canal & River Trust would ensure that enough fish stock was returned to the Reservoir in time for the breeding season in March. In response, members were advised that there were ongoing conversations between the Canal & River Trust and Natural England regarding when and how fish would be restocked. The Committee was reassured that comments and concerns would be passed onto experts and in-depth responses would be given at the webinar on 30 November.

As no further issues were raised, the Committee **AGREED** to note the update.

7. **Management Plan (Barnet)**

Prior to the presentation of the report, the Chair informed the Committee that a separate meeting was being arranged regarding the proposed construction of the Silkstream bridge to provide further information and have a more in-depth discussion on the concerns and queries of the Committee and local residents. The Chair then handed over to Harriet Duffield (Biodiversity and Conservation Officer, Barnet Council) who introduced a report that provided an update to the committee in relation to Council activities during quarter two & three (July-November 2023) in respect of the Welsh Harp and West Hendon Playing Fields.

To begin, Harriet Duffield detailed the work completed by the Community Safety Team during quarter two and three, which included removing illegal encampments and substances and completing intelligence-led weekend patrols. Furthermore, members noted that the Community Safety Team had been briefed regarding the public safety concerns arising from the planned Winter works and therefore they were carrying out patrols along the Reservoir in tandem with the security provided by the Canal & River Trust.

The Committee also heard that the new Volunteer Handbook had been distributed through the Barnet Green Spaces Network, with the Council actioning feedback from stakeholders to inform an updated version of the document. However, it was explained that in the meantime the processes outlined in the document would ensure that volunteering work conducted on London Borough of Barnet land was safe and covered by the Council's insurance.

Members were advised that the contractors Maydencroft were undertaking survey work to inform the proposed extension of the West Hendon Allotments into their disused tenanted land. The scope of the project included ecological surveying before the production of a landscape concept plan then specification for works. It was outlined that the proposals would include new allotment space as well as conservation areas, a pond, orchard, apiary, and event space.

The Committee was informed that the Council had arranged contractors to undertake a winter deep clean of the site in January 2024; focusing on the site's paths and areas of congregation. Moreover, the Barnet Greenspaces Team were working with the Canal & River Trust to aid litter removal during the Reservoir draw down and had contacted Natural England to investigate options to mitigate bankside litter around the Silkstream trash screen. Members were also made aware that two Canal & River Trust litter picks had occurred so far, and a litter pick organised by Friends of the Welsh Harp was scheduled for the near future.

In outlining the Council's ongoing partnership work, members noted that the Council continued to work with Thames21 and the members of the Brent Catchment Partnership on catchment-wide projects such as the London Water Vole Recovery Program and were currently scoping survey locations at the Welsh Harp for American mink and water voles as part of this research, funded by the Mayor's Rewild London Fund.

Regarding the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, the Committee heard that a review would soon commence so that the Council can collect and review baseline

data which would include field surveys involving habitat mapping. It was explained that a consultation on the topic was planned for the new year and members' involvement was welcomed.

In discussing the West Hendon Playing Fields Masterplan, it was detailed that the first two formal community engagement activities took place in November 2023, with these activities aimed to actively involve the community in informing the design development for the playing fields. However, members were advised that the online engagement platform, which included a survey, an interactive map and memory map, was still accessible and would continue to be open until 17 December 2023. In addition, statutory consultation meetings had been conducted with key entities such as the Metropolitan Police, Natural England and Sport England. Ongoing consultations were in place to ensure comprehensive engagement with relevant authorities.

Members were informed that the Planning Enforcement Team were working with Natural England to resolve the issues relating to damage to the SSSI from a development on neighbouring properties. In August, a retrospective application for the construction work was refused by the London Borough of Barnet Planning Department. On the week commencing 13 November 2023, Barnet Planning Enforcement served a notice to the property owner requiring the demolition of the outbuilding and the removal of the constituent materials from the property within four months of the date of the notice. The Committee was reassured that the Council was continuing to monitor the situation to ensure the required action was taken and no further damage was done to the SSSI.

In finalising the update, Harriet Duffield outlined that the Council were working with the Canal & River Trust and Brent Council to secure external funding to deliver the Council's 'Vision'.

In thanking Harriet Duffield for the update, the Chair welcomed questions from Committee members, with contributions summarised below:

- In response to a query on the location of the illegal encampments, members were advised that further information on the whereabouts of the encampments could be provided outside of the meeting.
- Members thanked the Canal & River Trust for removing and destroying rafts from the Reservoir and highlighted that the Canal & River Trust was also removing debris on the marshes and had placed an order for new rafts to be installed once the water had been refilled for the breeding season.
- Regarding the vision for the West Hendon Playing Fields, the Committee was informed that the illustration used during the first round of engagement was used as part of a design competition and at the current stage of the project there was no concrete design proposals. It was explained that designs would be developed after the engagement period had closed.
- Members noted that concerns relating to HGV traffic near the Broadway would be passed on to colleagues in the Highways Team.

Following the consideration of the main report, Harriet Duffield provided an update regarding the proposed construction of the Silkstream bridge. It was detailed that a

feasibility study reviewing the design and construction method of the bridge had been completed, identifying that the carbon footprint of the bridge could be reduced by c60% and that it could be built using a lighter weight design. Furthermore, whilst no final decision had been taken, it was likely that the upkeep of the bridge would remain the responsibility of Barratt. The same was also true for day-day management issues, although this would need to be handled in close liaison with the Council team managing West Hendon Playing Fields. Lastly, it was outlined that a number of documents needed to be drafted as conditions of planning, which had been approved by Natural England.

In opening the floor to any questions from members, the Chair reiterated that a further meeting would be scheduled to provide a forum for a more in-depth discussion regarding the proposals for the Silkstream bridge. Questions, comments and responses are summarised below:

- The Committee emphasised that the construction of the bridge would result in a disproportionate amount of damage to the SSSI due to the proposed position of the bridge, not the weight or construction method used to build the bridge. Members highlighted that there were alternative routes available which would still serve the purpose of providing access to the sports and playing fields and would reduce the damage to the SSSI significantly.
- Members outlined the disturbance that the construction of the bridge would cause to wildlife in the area due to increased footfall, with the Committee explaining that surveys showed that birds were consistently taking flight due to high footfall.
- Although recognising and welcoming the Council's efforts to open further communication channels regarding the issue, the Committee stated that at the time in which the planning permission was granted the area had been wrongly evaluated as low-value wet woodland rather than historical wetland that had overgrown. Members explained that the area was not low-value land but rather a mosaic of habitats which supported the vitality of the SSSI which was not considered during the original planning application.
- The Committee raised safety concerns relating to the original proposal as there was not any provision for lighting in the area.
- Members highlighted that many local resident had signed a petition opposed to the construction of the bridge due to ecological and financial reasons, as residents had been informed by First Port that they would be responsible to pay for the upkeep of the bridge.
- In response to concerns that the Barnet Labour Group was renegeing on promises made regarding the bridge during their time in opposition, the Chair explained that the Council still held concerns relating to the construction of the bridge and reiterated that Barnet Labour would not have granted planning permission for the bridge if they were in power at the time of the planning application. Nevertheless, the Council was now in a position where planning permission had been awarded for the development which could not be unilaterally reversed, but options were being explored to mitigate resident concerns and the bridge's environmental impact, such as exploring alternative designs.

- In response to a query as to why the Council had not utilised their power to revoke or modify planning permission in exceptional circumstances, the Committee noted that the question could be raised at the planned engagement meeting where planning experts could provide a more detailed explanation.
- Regarding whether too much money had been spent on the proposal to construct the bridge to abandon the plans, members were advised that this would be an issue to raise with Barratt rather than the Council.

In bringing the consideration of the agenda item to a close, the Committee welcomed Feargal Sharkey (Cool Oak Group) to the meeting who spoke on their fondness of the Brent Reservoir, River Brent and SSSI and welcomed the additional meeting on the Silkstream bridge to have an open discussion to progress the issue. In concluding the agenda item, the Chair reiterated that further details relating to the Silkstream bridge would be provided at the additional meeting and details of the meeting would be distributed once they had been arranged. As no further issues were raised, the Committee **AGREED** to note the report.

8. **Management Plan (Brent)**

Leslie Williams (Project Officer, Brent Council) presented a report that outlined progress on the Brent Reservoir/Welsh Harp Management Plan since the last meeting of the Committee and during the 2023/24. Firstly, the Committee was advised that the Action Plan, attached as Appendix 1 of the report, provided notes and updates on issues and projects.

Since the previous Committee meeting, a site visit was held with officers of the Canal & River Trust to explore options to re-start work to manage the growth of scrub on the marshland of the shores alongside Neasden Recreation Ground, as shade continued to reduce the marshland vegetation on the south-western shore of the Reservoir alongside Neasden Recreation Ground. Furthermore, a new grounds maintenance contract had commenced on 1 August 2023, with Continental Landscapes Ltd, for the operational works in Brent Council's parks and open spaces. This included the Welsh Harp Open Space, Neasden Recreation Ground and Silver Jubilee Park although it did not involve work on the marshland or woodland.

The Committee was informed that the Council was considering the potential details for a Welsh Harp Post-16 Skills Resource Centre to replace the current portacabin building, which would provide young people and young adults with special educational needs with work experience and volunteering opportunities. In addition to its main proposed use, it was also explained that there was the potential for third sector and community organisations to use the building outside of curriculum time. However, confirmed details for the proposals were yet to be announced.

A reminder was provided to members that the Priestley Way trash screen should not be accessed by unauthorised personnel due to health and safety concerns that the site presented.

In handing over to Lewis Elmes (Environment Agency) to update the Committee on pollution incidents, Leslie Williams thanked members for their involvement in a range of volunteer activities such as the Healthy Walks Programme. In thanking Leslie Williams for the introduction, Lewis Elmes detailed that work relating to the sediment issues discussed in the previous Committee meeting was ongoing, with surveys identifying areas of further concern which were being rectified over the coming weeks. While the issue had seemed to be resolved as no sediment had been identified for a number of months, members heard that fresh sediment had been spotted in recent days. Once work had been completed to resolve the issue, a review of the site would be undertaken to search for any additional problems and updates would be provided to the Committee.

Lewis Elmes also informed members of ongoing issues upstream, with multiple misconnected properties identified at Edgware Brook which was resulting in fat, oil and grease blockages, in addition to 17 misconnected properties elsewhere upstream. It was explained that Thames Water was contacting impacted properties and both the Environment Agency and Thames Water were reviewing how many properties were incorrectly discharging into the water network. So far, the issue had been rectified at a few properties which included a business. However, work was still ongoing with the Environment Agency and Thames Water meeting weekly to discuss and review misconnections.

Following the conclusion of their updates, the Chair thanked Leslie Williams and Lewis Elmes and opened the discussion to Committee members, with questions and responses summarised below:

- Regarding the use of the Welsh Harp Skills Resource Centre, members expressed disappointment that the Centre would largely be used for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities as the site had benefitted generations of young people who would now not be provided similar opportunities. In outlining that exposure to nature was both physically and mentally beneficial, the Committee queried the rationale behind the decision. In response, members were signposted to the report considered at Brent Council's May Cabinet meeting on the topic, as the report provided a holistic explanation for the decision. However, the Committee was informed that there would be scope for community organisations to use the facility outside of curriculum hours, although final details were yet to be confirmed.

Having thanked Leslie Williams and Lewis Elmes for the update, and with no further queries, the Committee **AGREED** to note the update.

9. **Any Other Urgent Business**

None.

The meeting closed 7:18pm

COUNCILLOR ALAN SCHNEIDERMAN
VICE-CHAIR