

**Friends of West Park Meeting**  
**Thursday 21st April 2016**

Meeting started, 6.35pm.

**Apologies:** Andy Harrison, Jackie Buckingham, Nigel Potter, Heather Hebden, Pippa Smaling.

**Present:** Andrew Buckingham, Tony Cooper, Rob George, Peter Anthony, Brian McMadden, Tom Shepherd, Neil Brimer.

**Matters Arising.**

RG: spoken to Street Scene about speed of dog emptying vans, and to keep off grass. Could move bins to lower down the park so that vans don't have to go up. PA: offered to gather feedback for the ideal position of dog bins, ideally at each entrance. TC: aim is to not clutter the appearance. **[Action PA: feed back bin locations at next meeting]**

AB: not yet put leaflet on the website; will speak to TC to get a copy as couldn't find on website. **[Action AB/TC: get leaflet]**

AB: no feedback on lights from SK. PA: can use a headtorch, get night-adjusted; other routes around Darlington are available.

TC: signboard will be done as part of the arts project in a Knowledge Transfer Partnership with Newcastle University, which will also include information for the play area.

**Site Maintenance.**

Received by e-mail from Pippa Smaling in advance of meeting:

“pond works carried out at comets garth and the dipping pond. Fencing project complete, there are barriers to go into the gaps at the dipping pond. Westwood timber still to fit these. Contractor on site putting drainage in place where there have been washouts (especially Richmond close). Richmond close kissing gate has been repaired a number of times, people are unlocking the radar lock and leaving it open so the kids are swinging on it and with a tremendous amount of force snapping the bolts. The blacksmiths has re-secured the gate as a normal kissing gate so that it doesn't open all the way out. One option to solve this issue would be to replace with a chicane? Wildflower meadows are looking okay with lots of new growth coming through.”

RG: thistle growth will be more aggressive this year; might benefit from spot treatment; would the group like to volunteer to spot-treat. TS: will volunteer to do it but somebody would need to provide the kit. RG: encourage the Group to do this themselves and stop the invasive species coming in; the Group needs to procure it though. RG: discussion needs to be had about how the Group functions with reduced Council support.

RG: kissing gates along the Barnard Castle trackbed are to put off motorcycle misuse; reluctant to reduce the deterrents by replacing with chicanes, but this particular gate is a persistent problem by being left open by disabled radar-lock users at which point it doesn't deter motorcycles at all and is also subject to being broken; so worth considering chicane instead. PA: if cost of replacing gate is high then go for the chicane instead. RG: gates last about four to five weeks at the moment. Group agrees to opt for chicane. **[Action RG: replace with chicane]**

PA: what are the fences for around the bike track, wrt. dog access. RG: demarcates the bike track from the park, to discourage users who might be an insurance risk e.g. walking on the bike track. PA: might be better to actually net the area off so that irresponsible dog owners don't let their animals into the area. RG: we could still consider netting it. TC: original wire rabbit fencing worked OK. PA: some of the fencing has been stolen already. RG: same type is in other parts and has fared well.

TS: was the SUDS pond drainage done successfully? RG: better than previously. TS: reeds were dumped behind onto a chaffinch nest, which was a shame. RG: noted. PA: damage caused on the top driving up churning the grass up and dumping into the bushes. RG: noted. TS: level has dropped quickly once cleared; expected? TC: it's pumped up from the lower pond into the upper park, rather than draining from the park downwards; 9 inch pipe connecting the ponds hadn't been well maintained previously so the top pond would never be filled by the pump; needs a regular clean in the summer; Northumbrian Water didn't want a single L-shaped large pond and wanted them underground instead with a pumped system. One small land drain and three road gulleys go into the top pond, but otherwise it's just pumped up from the lower one. RG: does it need annual maintenance, get a price. **[Action RG price up annual maintenance]**

RG: do we want the cut reed material taken away? TS: no because it's good organic matter; just more sensitively left on the park. RG: could chip it. PA: similar problems in the past with contractors leaving material to the side of the path, two or three feet away. RG: shouldn't have been left like that. TS: had trouble getting the heavy plant machinery in so access is difficult; might need somebody on-site when it's happening. RG: was on-site, but have to give leeway to them.

PA: paths are dangerous when wet or frozen; dogs have had paws damaged by frozen paths. TC: material was carefully specified and landscape architect was consulted; expensive; however, have noted that it can stick to things; expected it to settle after a few years though. TC: the gravel is chosen to not behave in that way; might need referring back to Nick Leeming. RG: when frozen, can walk on the grass instead; it's a country park, informal, reasonable to take extra. **[Action RG: speak to Nick Leeming about path spec]**

## **Events.**

Received by e-mail from Pippa Smaling in advance of meeting:

“GADD are looking to hold a Bike a thon on west park on sat 30th & sun 31st Jul. St Teresa’s are looking to hold the Santa run again in Dec as they had a very good turn out last year. Spooky walk scheduled for 31st Oct at 6pm.

“West Park Academy did a litter pick on Tues 19th Apr as part of the big spring clean, the teacher said that the event went really well.

“A date for the summer event needs to be set as well as what you would like to do at the event.”

RG: Shakespeare in the park; South Park do a similar one through a link with a theatre company. TC: leave it for a year and see if the community respond by saying that they want something done for next year. AB: any volunteers? [for the purpose of the minutes: nobody has volunteered so this will be left unless anybody comes forward outside of the meeting].

## **Community Feedback.**

Received by e-mail from Pippa Smaling in advance of meeting:

1. Andy Harrison - could you pass on my appreciation of the new fencing, Comet’s Garth pond dredging and the water main corridor landscaping. Something that has confused me though is the removal of some of the dog bins, I’m not sure how or why that has happened but it now means the litter bins are full of dog bags. Pippa Smaling: The dog bin opposite the orchard has gone missing I’m working with streetscene to replace it we think vandals have taken it.
2. Heather Hebden - The landscaping on the easement through the estate - is the path going to be Tarmac? Stone used very uneven for pushchairs and toddler bikes etc. Prob not on friends radar but wondered if rob or tony could advise? Who will be maintaining it?  
Not sure if anything done yet but equipment missing in play area(sand pit). Graffiti bad in tree house again and on picnic table.  
Nothing to add to meeting apart from work on paths etc looking good last time we walked through the park  
Pippa Smaling: The missing arm for the sand digger has been passed to the play area officer. I have also discussed the graffiti on the tree house with him, going to see if we can get some volunteers to sand it, paint with wood stain (possibly dark oak colour, unless the group have a suggestion on colour?) and then put a substance called ‘easy on’ which will form a barrier so that when graffiti is put on it can be removed with ‘easy off’ graffiti wipes. We already have the ‘easy on’ so would just

need the wood stain, sand paper and volunteers. Possibly able to get volunteers as part of rethinking parks.

With reference to the water main corridor works. RG: tarmac paths are present on the outside. TC: can't hard surface due to watermains; it will be golden gravel once finished. AB: ultimately it will fall under the same terms as the Park, so the Levy will be eligible for spend on it above the level of the Council's mandatory responsibilities. TC: maintenance level will be higher than the Park because it's in front of houses. TS: had already thought that an art feature would be nice. TC: KTP (previously referenced) will include an assessment of artwork; will include a trim-trail; final spec not decided on artwork as wanted to get started first.

### **Feedback from Steering Group.**

Steering Group is working on a long-term plan for calculating ongoing costs and assigning the rest to sinking funds for future one-off projects.

RG outline of Council provision:

Level of maintenance e.g. strimming by Parks team will not longer be possible if the Council's redundancies go ahead, which seems likely. Statutory minimum will be provided; from the £84m (minus £50m on Childrens and Adults Services), a small circa £2.5m "Futures Fund" can be put back in to additional level of maintenance which will be South Park, probably Dolphin Centre.

Highly questionable for Parks & Countryside Team to be retained. Need a fallback plan for how Levy will be used for beyond the basic maintenance. A cummuted sum from Bussey & Armstrong Project Ltd lasted for 10 years; but that has now expired at which point the Levy needs to be used for that funding.

A budget plan for the Park has been produced. Roughly 1 day per week for a Ranger role; 1 day per week for Habitat (tree thinning etc); some time for Management perhaps 0.5 days.

TS: so far, Levy money has been spent on paths, pond clearance; SUDS ponds should have passed to the Council for maintenance, please seek clarification. TC: statutory minimum for containing the water but not visual aspect; Northumbrian Water only check that the discharge is suitable. RG: many other SUDS projects (Sustainable Drainage) are being brought in around Darlington, and similar discussions are going on; the outcome of that will have a bearing on whether the Levy needs to pay for it. TS: asking the question because if Levy doesn't have to be used for SUDS then the Levy money is freed up for other uses. RG: only a basic provision will be made. TC: Levy is set up to guard against Council being unable to provide the desired standard; now grown to the level where major projects are done and money is accumulating; successful >95% collection; less to spend the money on.

RG: if the Council takes the backseat that's one set of questions; if the Council takes no role at all then VAT is an issue; Steering Group might agree to work with different bodies e.g. Durham Wildlife Trust.

AB: outlining the three possibilities: 1. Constitute ourselves as a group, and organise contractors and perform day-to-day activities entirely organised by the Group; 2. Use the Council to procure services on our behalf, as now, with increased Levy funding. 3. Find another body to perform the same role that the Council does.

RG: it's entirely possible that option 2 can't happen if the Council ends up not being able to support it, because there's not enough other demand outside of West Park to fund it; not yet known. TC: option 3 management company will not reclaim VAT, and will also take a large cut in profit; as a Group we aren't in a position to employ directly though; no chance of other schemes coming to fruition in order to support the Council financially.

NB: the Council already shares some services with other local authorities; is that an option?

RG: all other authorities have taken the same approach of cutting back their departments.

NB: other parks in the area have Green Flag status so must have a similar plan; could they be looked after by a shared service team. RG: Councils are reverting to arms-length organisations e.g. Durham Wildlife Trust; Tees Rivers Trust; other charitable organisations which could work for Darlington. TS: managing those skills just amongst this Group is the problem. AB: agreed. RG: most likely that a charitable body which employs people is the most likely option. AB: option 3 as from above.

TC: the Levy has the funds to pay for all the work, if the Council was in existence to provide it, which is by design of the Levy. RG: Council provides two aspects: management and procurement of contractors, and hands-on work e.g. Habitat team; of which the former is crucial by application of knowledge.

TC: timeline is that June is when budgets are made. SR: still being assessed and scrutinised for budget, no decision made yet. TC: nothing will change until September which is when the budget takes effect; therefore impact upon the Park will not be significant until next year, with winter to plan what to do.

RG: need to be ready to implement when those options become clearer. TC: something might come out of the consultations; we aren't in a position to make a position yet; all we can do is make our preferred options known. RG: would be useful to know the Group's opinion.

AB: can we outline our preferred options then; I would suggest: providing that the Council retains the management aspect, which is key, we would prefer that; next preference would be to find another body to act wholly on our behalf; third preference (a non-option) for us to act as a Group to do that. TS: the Group isn't able to run it themselves. NB: third option is non-starter. TS: management costs could be high. TC: fifty percent.

PA: clarification: we're a Group, where does the Levy go to? [explanation of Levy funds; Steering Group] PA: what will other parks be like, don't want to pay Levy when Council will

have to maintain other parks anyway. RG: everything other than basic maintenance will go, with exception of South Park. NB: our Park designed to be more resilient to lower maintenance; appearance of all parks will be drastically worse though. PA: why can't council tax be increased by a couple of percentage. SR: a referendum would have to be taken to do so; West Park would not have been taken on without a Levy in modern times. TC: not correct because commuted sum, legally, is sufficient for adoption OR a Levy; in fact both were given; although this wouldn't be done now ten years on. NB: unique because TC decided to involve the community and built the Levy in from day one; previously had that in addition to the Council but this won't be the case in future with such close support, which is a worry; potentially people won't see the benefit if the money doesn't get spent. RG: need to future proof spending from a plan perspective. AB: not going to answer these questions now, so have to wait and see.

#### **AOB.**

AB: request that meeting starts 6pm.

PA: what area is covered, is the stream covered? TC: yes. PA: can it be looked at? TC: covers parkland and boundary, SNCI nature area, West Beck through to dipping pond. PA: does it also cover Timothy Hackworth cycle path. TC: no, has been raised before, Council Highways owns the fence and the trackbed; original intention was to take the fence down, but community feedback is to keep it, yet Council don't have funds to replace it. NB: that's where the Foundation would prevent money being spent on it. PA: the art feature on the trackbed was paid by Levy but not in the Park. TC: yes as part of improving the entrance of the park; original plan was just to take it down but nobody wants that to happen. AB: one for the next meeting.

Meeting ended. 8.20pm.

**Date of Next Meeting:** 6pm, Thursday 21st July 2016.