

Annual Report (May 2021-May 2022) from the Weir Meadow Working Group (WMWG)

Introduction

Over the past year the WMWG has continued to meet on a regular basis via Zoom. The emphasis of the meetings has shifted from planning, through fundraising and now into looking at implementation and the development of the proposed facilities. With fundraising to purchase Weir Meadow and the Northern Fields (along with the Victorian Orchard) coming to fore, the WMWG combined with the Joint Projects Fund Raising Group (JPFRG) in late 2021 to facilitate information exchange and make best use of the time of the members of both groups. Members of the working group have given their time and expertise freely, and for this they are warmly thanked, with significant inputs in particular with regard to the fundraising and loan application process. This has enabled the Weir Meadow project to move along significantly, as reported in the following paragraphs, which provide a short summary of the activities and achievements of the WMWG over the past 12 months.

Planning application and implementation

As part of the pre-commencement planning conditions for Weir Meadow, Teignbridge District Council (TDC) required that a Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) and Water Drainage Management Plan (WDMP) be produced and submitted for approval prior to any works being undertaken on site. Both plans were produced by members of the WMWG and submitted to TDC. The plans were approved (without any further additions from TDC) on the 7th June, enabling development to proceed in accordance with the approved planning application.

Tenders were sent to a total of five contractors to provide figures for undertaking the car park, footpath and landscaping groundworks set out in the planning application. Two tenders were returned for total in the range of £100,000 plus VAT. Members of the WMWG discussed these figures in the light of estimated costs in the fund raising strategy of £35,200 plus VAT: a roughly threefold difference. The group felt that it was not desirable or achievable to add some £60k to £67k to the project, not least because discussions had resulted in a greener, more sustainable car parking solution being preferred. With this in mind, TDC were approached to discuss the acceptability of installing a greener, non-tarmac, sustainable, free draining car park surface, with a life span of around 15 years - which would be cheaper and more environmentally friendly. The response from TDC was positive and any application to change this aspect of the agreed planning consent likely to be looked upon favourably. Such a change could be made as a non-material amendment without the need for statutory consultation (as long as the change is made prior to October 2023, when the existing permission expires).

Funding the purchase of Weir Meadow

Contracts with the Church Commissioners for a three year Option Agreement to buy the Meadow and Northern Fields were exchanged in March 2021, enabling fund raising to purchase the site to begin.

Fundraising has taken a multiple pronged approach with the availability of grant funding being investigated along with promoting the project locally to get public donations and consideration of loans from public bodies.

A draft leaflet setting out the funding requirements for both Weir Meadow and the Victorian Orchard was produced in June 2021 and, with a few iterations, finalized, printed and distributed to all households in Ide Parish (and beyond) during the week of 9th September. Brochures were also produced for both Weir Meadow and the Victorian Orchard and sent, along with a covering letter, to 50 selected households with the aim of stimulating early giving.

A number of fundraising events were organized including a sponsored virtual cycle ride to Wembley, a pancake breakfast, jumble sale, cricket fun day and cricket club calendars. An open morning (with the pancake breakfast) for village residents was organized for the 9th October was well attended. This event provided the opportunity for people to ask questions about the plans for Weir Meadow (and the Victorian Orchard) and was followed by escorted visits to the two sites for residents to have a look around and discuss the plans.

Further fundraising events during the spring/summer are being planned, including an event to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, a cricket club summer fun day and a potential concert at Westown Farm. Funds from these events would go towards developing facilities at Weir Meadow and fulfilling the conditions set out in the planning consent for the site.

In total, an amazing £42,700 (to date) has been raised through donations and fundraising events for the purchase of Weir Meadow. Of this total, and with agreement of donors, £16,500 has been used for the purchase of the Victorian Orchard.

Grants available for the purchase of land were found to be non-existent and this funding avenue was considered highly unlikely to provide any results. Given the relatively large sum of money (£170,000) required for the land purchase the Parish Council looked into the process for taking a loan from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLb) with the support of the Devon Association of Local Councils (DALC). As taking out a loan would require an increase in the PC precept component of council tax (and some level of public consultation had to be demonstrated as part of the loan application process) a questionnaire was sent to parish residents in January 2022 and a public question and answer session held. The response from this consultation exercise was overwhelmingly favourable, with 85% of respondents stating support for the projects and for taking out a loan to fund purchase. It was subsequently agreed at a Parish Council meeting on the 6th March that an application to DALC would be made to borrow £152,282 for the purchase of both Weir Meadow/Northern Fields and the Orchard. The loan process appears to be running smoothly and it is expected that (if successful) that the loan could be made available to the Parish Council by June or July 2022.

Managing Northern Fields and Weir Meadow Following Purchase

Phase III of the Weir Meadow project is to start using the land for playing fields and recreation. There has been discussion at the last couple of meetings of the WMWG as to how to progress this Phase and also the best approach to managing the Northern Fields.

Concerns had been raised that the leat (Fordland Brook) that runs parallel to Station Road might be eroding both sides of the walls of the leat along the section - about 30 metres long - directly upstream from the Weir itself. A site meeting with the agent for the Church Commissioners (Strutt & Parker) on 7th October to inspect the leat and weir determined that while there has been some erosion of the north bank (at the corner where the leat turns northwards) the wall forming part of the highway is in good repair and it was agreed there is no active concern or risk needing immediate action.

One key issue of discussion was the future use of Weir Meadow by people wishing to walk their dogs. Concerns have been raised within the WMWG about potential fouling of the cricket and football grounds if dogs are allowed to roam freely and that such fouling would not be acceptable for users of these sport facilities. A way of managing the very likely desire of dog walkers to use Weir Meadow (it is already used for dog walking on a daily basis) will need to be found through the use of signage, dog-free zones, waste bins and making best use of the open space that Northern Fields and the Community Orchard will provide. Developing some form of recreational / land use management plan that covers all of these open areas together may be the best approach. There will be a rapid need for signage and dog waste bins as soon as we own the land, particularly as the site already attracts a significant number of dog walkers. Residents will need to be consulted about this issue so that the range of views can be obtained, and a solution specifically for Weir Meadow developed, incorporating the ability that we will have to utilise the Northern Fields as well.

With regard to use of the meadow for cricket, depending on funding for groundworks and re-seeding, the aim would be to install an artificial cricket wicket during winter 2022/23. The cricket club has access to equipment to maintain the wicket and there would be no need for drainage of the pitches.

The WMWG is also exploring potential grant funding for the development of football facilities and what requirements would need to be met from any grant giving bodies.

A meeting with Pete Skinner on the 16th March was undertaken to discuss and determine the best approach to managing the Northern Fields over the next couple of years. Pete suggested that the best (and most conventional) approach would be to offer the land to let for agricultural use by informal tender for a term of three years from 29th September. Given that there is no fencing and no mains water supply, it is considered that the fields would be most likely to continue to be used for arable cropping. The net 14 acres (i.e. excluding the 3 acres of steep, rough grassland / scrub) might generate a rent of approximately £1,000 per year plus. The PC might also want to stipulate that a 5-6 metre uncropped perimeter around each field be incorporated to allow villagers public access around each of the fields. Pete Skinner has kindly offered (for free) to undertake informal, localised marketing of Northern Fields by informal tender.

Looking ahead, the Forestry Commission (FC) has been approached to determine if, in the near future, the Northern Fields would be suitable / eligible for the FC administered England Woodland Creation Offer grant scheme. Initial desk-based impressions from the FC were that the site offered potential for woodland creation / planting with wildlife and amenity function with no immediately identified constraints. An application to the FC will be further considered and the views of residents sought before progressing.

A bid to the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) is also being worked up. Grants of up to £10,000 are available that can be used to fund community projects. The WMWG considers that the best use of a grant from the NLCF would be to purchase the necessary fencing materials, trees / shrubs, nestboxes and signage required in order to fulfil the requirements set out in the approved planning consent and as contained in the LEMP. An application can, however, only be made when and if the land is fully owned by the PC, which, will hopefully be very soon!

From Richard Cottle, Chair WMWG – 11th May 2022.