

Update from the Weir Meadow Working Group (WMWG) and Joint Projects Fund Raising Group (JPFRG)

Since the last update (13th September 2023) one additional meeting of the WMWG and JPFRG has taken place (6th November). This update covers the period from mid-September to the beginning of November (2023).

Sports Pitches

The newly sown sports grass mix in Weir Meadow has been growing well over the autumn. Temporary boundary fencing has been installed to deter people and dogs (off-lead) from walking over the meadow and causing damage to the sward. This situation will need to be maintained until at least next summer. At the meeting on the 6th November it was agreed that the notices asking people to keep dogs on lead, not to walk across the meadow and stick to the perimeter path, will be replaced with new, laminated ones.

At a separate, sub-group meeting held on the 23rd October, options for lease arrangements between the Parish Council and the cricket and football clubs were discussed. The preferred option is for the Parish Council to enter into a tenancy through a lease with the cricket club, for both sports pitches. The cricket club would then construct a new all weather wicket and also grant a discontinuous sub lease to the football club for a fee. The Parish Council would maintain control of the non-playing areas, with the entirety of the playing surfaces and non-playing areas being maintained by the cricket club. This lease option (along with the others considered) will be presented and discussed at the next IPC meeting.

Northern Fields

The tenancy agreement with Richard Parr ended on 29th September 2023 by mutual agreement. Mr Parr has now paid his rent in full for the year 2023/24 of his tenancy, and returned the keys. As the fields are no longer subject to agricultural use it was determined at the meeting on the 6th that the access signs should be replaced with new ones stating that people and dogs may now move freely about the Northern Fields.

Peter Skinner has advised that the hedge to College Lane is acceptable and does not need to be cut this winter.

Communication with the Forestry Commission (FC) regarding the submission of an application to the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) has been ongoing, but intermittent. We were advised it was probably best, from a time-saving perspective, to submit a full application.

Nick Bradley invited Sir Harry Studholme (ex head of the FC) to the meeting on the 6th November, which he kindly agreed to attend. Sir Harry advised that getting a good design is paramount and that as a community space we should be aiming for woodland aspects that are non-commercial, such as planting for autumn colour, putting in glades and paths, making the best of internal viewpoints and the vista from the village. Planting should also incorporate climate/pest resilient species, trees that are good for pollinators, specimen trees and not be entirely based upon native broadleaf species. The role of natural regeneration (allowed under EWCO) should be considered carefully as it may not be suitable for the site, although it does have biodiversity benefits.

The key message that Sir Harry provided was that we should take our time and make sure that we design a woodland/community space that meets our overall needs and vision. He strongly advised that we should apply for the EWCO planning and design grant and that we need not, and should not, rush into getting a full application in. With this, the WG decided that we should submit an application for the EWCO planning grant and, if successful, seek the help of a woodland designer to take the project forward.

Post-meeting, David Howe received a response form the Environment Bank (EB) regarding the use of Northern Fields for habitat creation and the eventual sale of Biodiversity Net Gain Units. While the site is smaller than they would normally consider, given its proximity to Exeter (and potential development sites) EB would be interested in having a look and determine whether they would be able to help. Community woodland creation on the Northern Fields would not preclude its use for generating BNG units, although it is possible that any design would need to provide for both uses. We will further investigate the opportunity with EB.

National Lottery funded items for Weir Meadow

Quotes for fencing to the eastern perimeter of Weir Meadow have been difficult to obtain. Ground conditions are now not conducive to installing any fencing without potentially damaging the new grass sward of the football pitch.

There has been limited progress on developing the interpretation board and additional quotes are needed for the benches. Given this, an extension to the time period over which the grant applies was sought from the National Lottery. This was given and we now have until the 13th August to spend the grant (or give back any monies that we don't spend). Quotes for fencing will now be sought with a view to undertaking the work in June 2024.

Japanese Knotweed

The patch of Japanese Knotweed has had two applications of Roundup and the remaining stems then felled and burnt. The plan is to repeat in April / May 2024, and again over next 4 years until, hopefully, it eventually gets the message and disappears.

Next Meeting

The next combined meeting of WMWG and JPFRG is scheduled for the 15th January 2024.

From Richard Cottle, Chair WMWG – 13th November, 2023.