

Westleton Common Advisory Group

Minutes of meeting held on Wednesday 02 June 2021 in the foyer at Westleton Village Hall.

Present: Nick Shearme (in the chair), David Rous, Roy Jones, Julian Alexander, Andrew Turner, Amanda Freeman, Chris Freeman.

1 – Apologies:

Arlette Smith.

2 - Minutes of email “meeting” held on Wednesday 11th January:

Agreed to be correct

3 - Matters Arising not on this agenda.

3a – Item 8. Circulation of RSPB Guide to the Management of Lowland Heathlands:

Roy Jones brought the book to the meeting. David Rous has read it and is confident that it is a valuable reference book. However, he is not of the view that we all need to read it. It was agreed that John Bebbington would store the book, anyone wanting to refer to it can get it from him.

3b - HLS funding available:

John Bebbington confirmed that there is, currently, £4500.57 available to spend on the maintenance of the common. David Rous has the details on how the HLS funding can be spent.

4 – Membership of the Advisory Group:

4a – Other potential members:

We recently advertised for members of the Westleton community who wished to join the Common Advisory Group. Two people have expressed interest. The advisory group did not have, or express, a preference as to which should be invited to join and will leave it to Westleton Parish Council to decide who should join the group. We suggest that Westleton Parish Council asks each of them why they wish to join to help them make their decision.

5 – Emergency access onto Common:

Background. During 2020 there was a suggestion that the access to the common from the car parking area by the container on Mill Street should be widened. This would improve access for emergency vehicles such as fire appliance or ambulances. This widened access would not be permanently open but would be, normally, secured by means of drop-down posts or a drop-down bar. Access would be by means of a digital lock or a lock openable by a key kept in an adjacent keypad secured box. Access would not be widely available but would be available to the emergency services. Pedestrian, wheelchair and canine access would not be impeded.

This idea had been suggested a few years ago and dropped because of considerable public objection. At that time, it was made clear that any proposals of this type, which made significant changes to the common, other than those which formed part of regular management, would not be implemented without full public consultation and involvement.

Nick Shearme and John Bebbington met with John Last and Chris Morling from Suffolk Fire and Rescue in November 2020 to discuss these proposals. A report of this meeting is available below as Appendix 1 of these minutes. Appendix 2 is an email from John Last confirming agreement with our notes of the meeting.

It would be important to seek the advice of The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to ensure that, if Westleton Parish Council (WPC) decides to go ahead with this project, it is consistent with its obligation under the High-Level Stewardship (HLS) funding from the Rural Payments Agency (RPA). It is essential that WPC follows the regulations laid down by DEFRA/RPA. It would be helpful if someone from DEFRA could visit the site and discuss these proposals. David Rous, who has studied the terms and conditions of the RPA grant, is very doubtful if it would be proper to spend the HLS funding on this project.

Roy Jones reminded the group that Suffolk Fire and Rescue feel that, although the additional access would be very helpful, it is not essential. This needs to be taken into account when building the case for the project.

No action should be taken until we are confident it has DEFRA/RPA approval.

Natural England and the Suffolk Wildlife Trust are also advisors to the common and must be consulted.

Several emails have been received from local people expressing concern about these proposals. One email gives a balanced assessment of the pros and cons. No emails express support.

Among the concerns are;

Habitat damage – with particular reference to nightingales,

The need to do a detailed risk assessments to establish the need for this project,

The need to do a wild-life assessment because of endangered and protected species and damage to key habitat such as scrub and acid grassland,

The possible need for planning permission,

This additional emergency access may be used for other, non-urgent purposes,

Risk to visitors of unauthorised and unexpected vehicles on the common,

Environmental damage and aesthetic degradation by unauthorised vehicles,

Potential wildlife degradation and potential loss of nightingales, tawney owls, turtle doves, all of which are declining but have been seen on Westleton Common.

No strong case for this additional access has been made and no case presented to show that the existing access is not sufficient,

The previously existing road from the car park to the common is not seen as grounds for additional vehicle access,

Risk of overnight stays on common,

This proposed access does not form part of the existing management plan, which is the basis for the HLS funding,

Is this consistent with the original Heritage Lottery funding for the purchase of the common?

Existing vehicle access is adequate,

Damage to surface by unauthorised vehicles,

Present pathway is attractive to daily users, who are pedestrians,

Damage to adjacent nightingale territories,

Common is a safe vehicle free area for children to explore and play in.

Points in favour are;

Need for improved emergency access for fire appliances and ambulances,

Need to minimise risk of fire damage to neighbouring properties,

Need for emergency access if, for any reason, existing access is obstructed,

More convenient vehicle access for Bonfire and Fireworks.

In the light of the concerns raised by some people in Westleton, Julian Alexander offered further clarification. At this stage all that is proposed is that the two wooden posts that currently restrict access to the common from the carparking area are replaced by two “drop-down” posts. These will be secured to restrict access in normal circumstances but can be dropped to open this route to vehicles should it prove necessary in an emergency. This is not seen as significantly different from the current arrangement as there will be no need disturb existing habitat by widening the existing footpath.

The Advisory Group believes that, given the significant concerns expressed, both now and when this was proposed in the past, public consultation about this project is essential and that it is also important to have the support of the whole community if this is to go ahead. WPC also needs the approval and/or advice of DEFRA, RPA, Natural England, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and to establish if planning permission is needed.

This Advisory Group has also commented in the Annual Report for 2020 *“This issue has been raised in the past and has caused considerable local concern. The Common Advisory Group believes that it is important to involve the local community and take full account of any concerns raised. In our view no decisions should be made, and no action should be taken, until full public consultation has been held. We feel that all people must be able to take part in the consultation so they can hear the arguments for and against the suggestion and contribute to the debate. So, it is difficult to see how this can take place until the Covid-19 restrictions are eased and everyone, including those considered vulnerable, can take part.”*

So, there is a lot of work to do before this potentially useful, but contentious and not, perhaps, essential, project can go ahead.

The one thing which can and should go ahead is the levelling of the hump from the concrete pad leading to the main path across the common. This will give the fire services adequate access to this section of the common between the concrete pad and Black Slough.

5a – Report of meeting with Suffolk Fire and Rescue:

See Appendices 1 and 2 below.

6 – Outstanding work to be done:

Nick Shearme, David Rous and John Bebbington surveyed the common on Saturday 28th May 2021 and identified work that should be done. Their report is attached as appendix 3.

We need to work through this list.

The Owl Box referred to in the maintenance assessment was funded by a private donor. The donor has been thanked.

7 – Help from the Community Pay-Back scheme:

At this stage we do not know if the Community Payback scheme will be available to help with the work on the common and if they are what they can do and how they can do it. We suggest that the WPC clerk writes to them to enquire.

Work can only be done between the end of September and the end of March.

8 - Safety audit 2021:

Nick Shearme, David Rous and John Bebbington conducted a safety audit of the common on Saturday 28th May 2021. Their report is attached as appendix 4.

Julian Alexander advised that we should establish if the grass verge on Reckford Road between the lay-by and access gate should be cleared by Suffolk Highways or ourselves. (Perhaps another question the WPC clerk can ask.)

9 – Funding/Management Plan from April 2023:

David Rous reminded the group that the current management plan for the common ends on in April 2023. We need a new plan in order to secure any further HLS funding should it be available.

David is happy to advise on the writing of the plan, but the advice of Suffolk Wildlife Trust is also necessary. (Another letter for the WPC clerk to write.)

David believes that we need continued funding and suggests three options;

Apply for further HLS funding.

Apply for funding from some other agency.

Don't apply for any funding at all and self-fund the management of the common.

The Advisory Group agreed that the best option is to apply for further HLS funding.

10 – Publication of minutes on Westleton website:

The group agreed that in future the minutes should be available on the website.

11 – AOB:

Nick Shearme referred to the common pictures in the hall. These will be left until the Hall Committee decides it needs to put something else on the wall. There are a few additional banners which are exchanged when John Bebbington or Roy Jones thinks to do it.

There is also a set of images that can be presented as a slide show on the TV in the hall. If anyone has additional images they think worth displaying they can email them to John Bebbington who can build up a collection that can be given to the hall.

David Rous needs more first aid kits and saw blades for the working parties. Nick Shearme will sort out the first aid kits and Julian Alexander deal with the saw blades.

12 - Date of next meeting:

Wednesday 4 August 2021 or Wednesday 11 August 2021 (to be confirmed) at 7-30 pm in the village hall foyer.

Appendix 1

Westleton Common Advisory Group

Notes of Meeting held 16th November 2020.

Purpose of Meeting – to discuss access to Westleton Common for emergency vehicles and fire appliances.

Present

Westleton Common Advisory Group; Nick Shearme and John Bebbington.

Suffolk Fire and Rescue (Leiston Fire Station); John Last (Watch Commander) and Chris Morling.

Venue – Westleton Common.

The group met at the footpath entrance to the Common from the “container” car park on Mill Street and walked that footpath and the track leading to the Common from Reckford Road. We also did a brief “walkabout” of the South Common.

Summary of advice from John Last and Chris Morling.

Ideally, they would like 2 access routes to the Common. This would allow vehicles to enter and leave by different routes and reduce congestion on site. Two access points would allow flexibility if, for any reason, one of the routes was unavailable. The access routes from the “container” car park and via the Reckford Road track would both be suitable, but both require modification.

If it is not practical to provide two routes on to the Common, then one route would be acceptable. That single route could be the Reckford Road track. There is sufficient circulation and manoeuvring space on the concrete pad and adjacent clear areas to ensure that congestion is minimal.

It is important to keep the access routes clear. This is particularly important if only one access route is available.

Having two access routes used as ways “In” and “Out” would be beneficial to the residents on the affected roads as congestion would be minimised.

Work Required.

Space needed for emergency vehicles – ideal width = 3 metres, ideal height clearance = 3.1 metres.

Reckford Road Track.

Track surface seems satisfactory. Vegetation needs to be cleared to ensure 3 metres width along whole length. Overhanging tree branches need to be cleared to allow 3.1 metres height clearance.

If this is to be the only emergency route on to the Common, then this maintenance is critical and should be kept up to standard.

The gate at the bottom is not a problem. Emergency crews carry bolt cutters so can cut the padlock open. However, it would help if we supplied Leiston Fire Station with a key to the padlock or with a digital code. An emergency key could be kept in an adjacent key safe with the code given to Leiston Fire Station. But we need to remember that the first emergency appliance may not be from Leiston Fire Station so the lock may be cut open in spite of keys and/or codes being available.

Footpath from “container” car park.

Track surface seems to be satisfactory. In order to establish a 3-metre-wide track we need to;

Remove the two wooden posts. If these were replaced with lockable drop posts as used on car parks that would be satisfactory. We should supply Leiston Fire Station with a key to the locks or with a digital code. An emergency key could be kept in an adjacent key safe with the code given to Leiston Fire Station. But we need to remember that the first emergency appliance may not be from Leiston Fire Station so the lock may be cut open in spite of keys and/or codes being available. So, the locks on these drop posts should be of a type that can be opened with bolt cutters.

On the right of this track leading from the car park to the Common is a conjoined pair of wooden posts. These could be used as a marker and the vegetation cleared on this side of the track to give the 3-metre width required. On the left side of the track is

a wooden post that carries the power lines. We must avoid this post and its support cable. Clearing the vegetation on the right side of this track only is likely to do less environmental damage than clearing both sides.

“Container” car park.

Vegetation at the entrance to this car park should be kept under control.

The Common.

There is a ridge as one leaves the concrete pad to join the path on sector 14. This ridge should be levelled, and the vegetation cleared to give a 3-metre-wide gap. Otherwise access over the Common for emergency vehicles is reasonably straightforward, provided that main paths are kept sufficiently clear. The normal maintenance programme should ensure that is satisfactory.

Westleton Parish Council should keep Leiston Fire Station up to date with progress on this project. They are aware that no progress is likely to be made before early 2021 as Covid-19 restrictions inhibit discussions. Westleton Parish Council and its Common Advisory Group need to discuss this, and it is necessary to discuss these ideas with the wider Westleton community and advisory and statutory bodies.

Contact details are;

Leiston Fire Station

King Georges Avenue

Leiston

Suffolk

IP16 4JX

01728 830650

(Monday evenings are drill nights so the fire station will be open.)

Chris Morling – 07876033199

John Last – ***Number requested.***

Nick and John

Nick Shearme and John Bebbington

Appendix 2

From: John Last <John.Last@suffolk.gov.uk>

Sent: 01 December 2020 10:17

To: johnannbebbington@outlook.com

Cc: Christopher Morling

Subject: Westleton Common

Dear Mr Bebbington,

Thank you for your email, it was good to meet up with you and Nick from Westleton Common Advisory

Group. I think your notes cover everything we discussed on the day and hopefully it gives you what would be required in terms of Fire Appliance dimensions and means of access to the common.

Obviously from this communication you now have my email address for your records.

Kind regards,

John Last

John Last BEM

Watch Commander

Leiston Fire Station

Appendix 3

Westleton Common Advisory Group

Maintenance Assessment

Date of Survey – Saturday 28th May 2021

Surveyors – David Rous, Nick Shearme and John Bebbington

Scope of Survey.

All main paths on both sides of Baker's Lane and Mill Street/Mill Road were walked. Other paths including Black Slough and the footpath leading from the North Common past Nash Barn and King's Farm as far as the cultivated fields had been walked by some members of the group within the previous few days and no problems were seen.

The area leading to and surrounding the pond on the North Common and the track leading to Reckford Road and the Reckford Road layby were examined.

Findings and recommendations.

Noddle. Clear gorse on Noddle and on slope in front of seat with a view to get back to heather.

Access path from Baker's Lane car park. Clear overhanging gorse on short path on the left (facing common) leading off the main path.

Track from common to Reckford Road lay-by. Cut back sides of main track. Open access to compartment 7 from track. Cut back overgrown areas in compartment 7.

Compartments 14/8/9. Clear gorse on boundary between compartments 8 and 14. Clear gorse on paths across compartment 14 leading to the geology notice board and Black Slough.

Clear bank to right of path leading to Black Slough in compartment 9.

Entire path from Black Slough leading to concrete pad needs gorse clearing at several points.

Access to Baker's Lane car park. Clear vegetation on the edge of the road and onto the path at access nearest to The Cleaves.

North Common - path leading round edge of compartment 1. Clear birch and gorse near King's Farm end of path. Clear birch at boundary with agricultural land, and on both sides of the path. Clear new growth of oak. Install new owl box on 1 of 3 oak trees adjacent to agricultural land near gate to residential area. Clear gorse adjacent to path as it approached the track leading to The Oaks and Garden End.

We need to establish if the Community Pay-Back scheme would be available to help with this work. Failing that we would have to use contractors for much of the work and it is more than could be managed by the volunteer working parties.

*David Rous, Nick Shearme and John Bebbington
28/05/2021*

Appendix 4

Westleton Common Advisory Group

Safety Audit Report

Date of Audit – Saturday 28th May 2021

Auditors – David Rous, Nick Shearme and John Bebbington

Scope of Audit;

All main paths on both sides of Baker's Lane and Mill Street/Mill Road were walked. Other paths including Black Slough and the footpath leading from the North Common past Nash Barn and King's Farm as far as the cultivated fields had been walked by some members of the group within the previous few days and no problems were seen.

The area leading to and surrounding the pond on the North Common and the track leading to Reckford Road and the Reckford Road layby were examined. Seats, handrails and steps were checked.

Findings;

In spite of recent wet weather there is a potential fire-risk, and we recommend that the fire warning signs are left in place throughout the summer months.

A small amount of broken glass was found on the right side (towards Mill Street) of the path from the Noddle leading to Mill Street. (Round a tree in front of the black shed.)

It is apparent that people often park on the Reckford Road lay-by and walk along the edge of the road to access the common through the gate. The grass verge should be strimmed and widened so people, especially children, can walk on the edge rather than the road as sight lines can be poor. The lock and chain

on the gate from Reckford road were not secure. This was dealt with immediately.

In compartment 14 a seat set in sand adjacent to the path overlooking Reckford Road is unstable – one of the posts needs resetting.

The beehives near the pond are very difficult to see due to overgrown birch. The warning signs on the path leading to this area should remain in place but the overgrown birch should be cleared to ensure the hives are properly visible.

Handrails and steps are sound.

No other problems were found.

Recommendations;

Ensure fire risk warning signs remain in place during the summer.

Remove broken glass from path from Noddle to Mill Street. (**Removed 01/06/2021. JB**)

Strim and clear grass verge on edge of Reckford Road leading from the lay-by to the access gate.

Secure seat in compartment 14.

Clear overgrown birch obscuring beehives.

David Rous, Nick Shearme and John Bebbington
28/05/2021