

Minutes of the Herne Hill Users Group
held in the Council Chamber, North Street, Ilminster
at 14:30 28th April 2023

Attendees:

Cllr Brian Hamilton, Ilminster Town Council
Jake Taylor, Countryside Manager, Ilminster Town Council
Chris Bestley, Green Ilminster
Vernon Higgins, Herne View School/Forest School

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from:
Fran White, Herne Hill User
Mary King, Herne Hill User
Margaret Masters, Herne Hill User

2. Countryside Manager's Update

- The Countryside Manager gave an overview of what has happened up at Herne Hill since the last meeting.
- The Countryside Manager then explained in preparation for the meeting he had met with Niall, from Landmark, a visitor management supplier and consultant to get an idea of a figure to be used when compiling the management plan.

3. Map and boundaries of Herne Hill

- The boundaries of the nature reserve were discussed and a map that accompanies the nature reserves declaration was circulated.
- It was explained that the map extends far beyond Cleaves Close. The actual nature reserve itself follows the tree line across the back of Britten's field and the bottom of the criss cross paths.

4. A Welcome Place – Discussion

- What makes people feel welcome when visiting a countryside site was discussed and a combination of signage, horticultural management, ease of finding your way around, quality of access and a sense of arrival played a key role.
- The elements that Green Flag judges would look at were then presented followed by photos of the main access points to the nature reserve.
- Looking at the photos it was decided that current signage was far from welcoming with large signs such as "No Cycling" attracting the eye and taking away from the welcome feel, though it was mentioned that as cycling on the site is an issue, we do need to be able to be clear about what is and isn't permitted.
- Ladder signage was discussed and how it could be installed at the five main access points that it could include 'Welcome to Herne Hill Local Nature Reserve' with visual signs indicating prohibited activities.
- It was mentioned that finding the way to Herne Hill from the footpaths behind the health centre is significantly difficult and signage directing people from the rec and West Crescent would be extremely useful to help guide those unsure towards the nature reserve.

Agenda Item 8

- To create a sense of arrival when entering the woodland, often considered the main entrance to the hill along the ridge path, a new information panel / noticeboard that could be filled with seasonal information could be used.
- It was discussed that kissing gates cause a problem for people with limited abilities and where possible we should seek to replace with something more access friendly.
- It was noted though Green Flag will not expect us to have completely accessible routes. It was noted that it is good practice to make everything we do as accessible for as many people as far as possible and clear temporary signage and information on the website could be used to help advise visitors on the most appropriate routes.
- How inaccessible the paths can be in winter, and a number of particularly difficult routes were mentioned and a walk around and path survey was suggested to help identify and prioritise and make at least one of the promoted trails accessible year-round.
- The signage directing people around the site is also missing which takes away from the welcome feel.
- It was mentioned that the Scouts rarely use the site anymore as they find the process of seeking permission too difficult in the timeframes they have and find other suitable locations for their activities.

5 Healthy, Safe and Secure – Discussion

- Regarding activities and facilities, it was mentioned we have very little in place on Herne Hill.
- It was discussed that the bench situation needs to be addressed. And it was suggested that the green trail (shortest of routes) have more frequent benches to make it more appealing to those with limited access abilities and the sites that once had a bench be replaced.
- The cost of benches was discussed, and it was thought that a rustic log bench could be installed relatively easily with the help of volunteers and using resources from the woodland. This could then be replaced when interest for a memorial bench or as budgets allow, with the pre-approved style from Open Spaces Committee. It was also thought a similar thing could be explored for the two picnic areas on the hill.
- A small-scale activity trail was discussed that could be utilised by the forest school and encourage more families to visit on the weekend. A similar concept is working well in Parc Cwm Darren in Caerphilly.
- The use of scratch posts trail is a great way to get the kids out and exploring and this could also feed into other interpretation activities which was mentioned.
- It was also thought that working with the forest school and the Scouts to identify an area that would be appropriate for their activities would be beneficial all round.
- To help provide for a variety of ages, it was mentioned that guided walks, participation surveys and wildlife spotting records could be used to engage and enhance people's visits.
- Vandalism was brought up and it was discussed that part of the Green Flag Award is personal security making people feel safe and secure walking around the site. This could be achieved with management of site lines and a staff presence which was confirmed even if it's just a quick drive around which the team are trying to implement.

Agenda Item 8

- Dog fouling and out of control dogs was discussed and at present the consensus is that neither are an issue at present and that most of the dog walkers on the hill are responsible. It was noted the importance of the hill to dog walkers and a limit of acceptable change models to monitor and take appropriate action should they begin to impact on the nature reserve.

6. Well maintained and clean - Discussion

- Apart from the occasional party held in the woods in the summer, litter isn't a massive problem.
- The number of bins seems to be adequate and are emptied twice weekly or when required.
- In regard to horticultural maintenance, it was mentioned due to the nature of the nature reserve, only the paths and picnic areas would be covered in this section, it was noted the importance of wildflower and the smells they provide which in recent years has been lost due to cutting regimes and changes to the regime were discussed and amendments could be made to help improve this area.
- In terms of arboriculture, building and equipment maintenance, it was mentioned this largely boils down to staff inspections and actions which would be highlighted within the management plan in a simple way, so people understand what goes into keeping them safe whilst in the woods.
- It was noted that we would want to touch on arboriculture later in the communication section.

7. Community Involvement – Discussion

- It was discussed that although there is some knowledge on who uses the site this is very limited, and a user survey could be really useful to get an idea of who is using Herne Hill.
- Green Ilminster said they were planning a questionnaire and that there could be potential to do something jointly rather than two surveys, though it was made clear this would have to be approved by the Open Spaces Committee and Town Council before progressing, so would depend on how urgently this information would be required.
- It was discussed how this group and our monthly volunteer group help to engage the public, but more could be done to inform. Events such as IMEX and councillor surgeries could be used to promote and make people aware of how they can get involved.

6. Date/time of next meeting

Friday 26th May 2023 14:30 at the council chamber, North Street, Ilminster.