

## Responses to Parks, Open Spaces and Playing Fields – Council Motion

*Referred to as the Protected Sites Report*

### Recommendations and Reasons

- Removal of the retained right for road access on Old Down and other public open spaces.
  - There is no evidence that Old Down would be the only and necessary access point for Manydown. There are other places where Manydown could be accessed.
  - Retained rights were established many years ago and Old Down has changed immeasurably since. Its management for biodiversity and people by community volunteers over 7 years has given in the region of 12, 000 – 14,000 hours (evidence available) for free, and delivered demonstrable success and benefits to people and wildlife.
  - Old Down is unique in or around the town, it adds diversity to the range of spaces available to residents, it provides opportunities for parents and children to learn more about nature, it attracts community groups and it helps wildlife in ways in that this Borough should support much more.
  - Old Down is a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC).
  - Old Down has 2 national priority habitats. Chalk downland whose flora has been considerably enriched, and ancient woodland. With both of these habitats 98% has been destroyed nationally.
  - Old Down has several species of “Principal Importance” including this year for example 4 butterfly species. We have other BAP species as well. With over 300 species listed as seriously in decline this Borough should be doing more to encourage species not taking steps that will do more damage.
  - Council in a report many months ago objected to Local Nature Reserve status for Old Down on the basis of retained access rights even though the favourable evidence we have for designation is supported by Natural England.
  - Prior to requesting LNR status a request for Fields in Trust status (*granting protection in perpetuity*) was blocked by Council despite support from the awarding organisation.
  - It was Council Officers that encouraged this group to work on Old Down rather than Bggarwood in 2007. While we do not suggest the Officers concerned knew that there were retained access rights it does demonstrate that this policy has little to recommend it to communities and to volunteers.
  - A better policy than retained rights might have been to have built road infrastructure such as this at the outset. Perhaps if the Council had done this at the time it would have been realised that it should have built less houses at Gabriel Park so that the community was not deprived of its open space later.
  - A road across Old Down at a time when population levels are due to expand and visitors from across the Borough are increasingly attracted will mean that either underground or overground access will have to be provided or people will risk their lives crossing the road. In addition it may lead to re-opening of Kempshott Lane.
  - The Council Plan for 2013 – 2017 includes the words “Protect, restore, reconnect and expand biodiversity and the rural nature of our borough through better management of our woodlands, parks and open spaces.....
  
- Reject the Hierarchy in Section 8.

- The Hierarchy appears to be an invention of the Property Department, or perhaps a Council view which defines importance in terms of the financial investment by Council in a site rather than the intrinsic value to communities. It demonstrates how remote from the community Council has become. It would seem much of our community land is not there for us but to be convertible into cash to fund more spending, and especially if the land is natural and relatively unspoilt it is deemed to be of little value.
- Reappraise in Detail Sections 5, 6 and the Disposal Policy
  - Recognise that some reassuring statements in the report came from Officers, not residents and, lacked evidence, only partly addressed concerns or simply reassured. For example, Paras 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 6.1 all. The evidence of what has happened over; South View, Old Common, Old Down, Saunders Field, Daniel Park and no doubt others does not accord with the sentiments expressed here. The suggestion that the War Memorial Park could be developed, especially when partly bought by public subscription does not inspire confidence. Residents have many needs including a network of different, secured, open space facilities and local but connected natural green spaces for wildlife that can be enjoyed and their needs should be paramount. We keep building houses and offices and industrialising the landscape but Councillors do not appear to give much thought to the consequences of overcrowding, over population and over development.
- Council should be aiming to optimise open space value for community benefit.
  - 9.2.1 Financial return is given greater significance than social benefit. The criteria used to determine what is in the “greater interests of the community” is presumably political but if the Council does not care or facilitate care for a site it owns then it is easier for a site to become viewed as disposable contributing to a general attrition of open space rather than a determination to make it work. At the same time it is accepted that there must be exceptions
- It is unclear if some of the land under discussion has been acquired to be open space or for development or whether it was acquired as open space and the Council somewhere subsequently changes its mind. Can we have greater clarity, transparency and wider discussion before decisions? Land is ever more precious as urban sprawl increases.
- Let Council regard all sites as equally “protected” and adopt an approach where we keep as much open space as we can for urban communities. Full Council to make criteria based genuinely difficult decisions on open space, without whipping and weighted in favour of community views which may be local or Borough wide. Any changes only if accompanied by acceptable compensation. Unfortunately there seems to be a presumption in Council, demonstrated in the report that if space does not have “facilities” then it has little or no value. This is not true.
- Set a timetable to transfer community open spaces to a Community Land Trust together with an endowment for their management.

**Paul Beevers**

**Chair**

**Old Down and Beggarwood Wildlife Group**