

For noting with Item 1 – Chair's Opening Remarks

Birchwood Town Council

Report on a Visit to The Walled Garden and Locking Stumps Common

A visit was made to both The Walled Garden at Oakwood Gate and Locking Stumps Common in the company of Elis Smits, the lead for the Local nature Recovery Strategy for Cheshire and Warrington. The visit was made by Cllr Ellis and Deputy Clerk Hannah Thomas, with a view to starting to assess the options for both sites, the amount of work required to bring them back to an acceptable standard and the potential future level of on-going maintenance.

The visit was made to assess the potential future involvement of Birchwood town council in resolving the lack of maintenance of the two locations in question over the last 20 years.

It is recognised that both of these areas are in need of substantial intervention to make them a true public asset that also encourages diversity and increased wildlife in the area. As well as visiting the two locations in question a number of other local problems were discussed including the proliferation of Himalayan balsam beside the Birchwood Brook footpath and the sowing of wildflowers alongside roads in Birchwood.

The Himalayan balsam requires extensive balsam bashing at the right time of year and would best be done by groups of volunteers. Balsam spreads extremely effectively as one seed pod can contain as many as 50,000 seeds. Birchwood Town Council could perhaps organise some volunteer days to carry this out. The approach needed would be the following (taken from UK references)

Survey in May – identify patches early.

Organise pulling sessions June–July – ideal for volunteers.

Avoid disturbance after July – prevent seed dispersal.

Repeat annually for 2–3 years – essential for eradication.

Replant or encourage native species to outcompete balsam. This could include meadowsweet, purple loosestrife and great willowherb.

With regard to roadside wildflower planting, the typical wildflowers that have been used locally in Birchwood tend to suffer badly when there is limited rain. While we were out visiting Locking Stumps Common, we were able to see this with the flowers planted at the entrance. All were very leggy and provided almost no ground cover allowing the ground to dry out severely and crack. They also need to be planted every year and in different locations to prevent depletion of key nutrients in the soil. It was recommended that we look at planting NATIVE wildflower seeds. The only disadvantage is that everything needs to be cut back to ground level at the end of the season and the cuttings removed to prevent soil enrichment which does not favour seed growth for this type of seed. ES will send us recommendations for suitable seeds to use.

While walking to the walled garden, we had a look at the ponds there. These are in poor condition and it was recommended that the trees need to be cut back to allow more light and to prevent leaves from falling into the water in high numbers. ES believes that there should be funding available to do this kind of work. The ponds may need to be clay-lined and may require treatment with lime to reduce acidity. It was recommended that we speak to Jim Turton at WBC and Jonathan Parry about the Sustainable Drainage Fund. There are also grants from the National Lottery to set up rain

gardens which we could investigate. These can be helpful in prevention of flooding. There would need to be liaison with Woodland Trust as they own some of the adjacent land.

The visit to the Walled Garden at Oakwood Gate showed it to be in an increasingly perilous state. The whole area is very badly overgrown now and the walkways are in poor condition with loose chicken wire in places which Cllr Ellis caught his foot in at one point. The very heavy tree canopy has led to the ground being very dark and probably very acidic due to the number of fallen leaves. This has led to extensive growth of ivy, nettles and other plants which like these conditions. The walkways were very damp and slippery. The lack of sunlight will be helping to maintain these conditions. The following is a rough initial programme of work that could be carried out:

1. Display clear notices at the entrances to the garden warning visitors that there are dangerous and slippery surfaces on the paths and that no liability can be accepted for any falls.
2. Carry out a lot of cutting back of the current overgrowth of ivy, nettles, brambles etc.
3. Carry out an arboricultural assessment - a suggested person to do this is Howard Pimborough who works for Cheshire West and Chester Council, but also does private work for third parties. This would identify trees that need to be removed as well as addressing work to reduce canopy.
4. Install CCTV cameras for personal safety reasons.
5. Consider options for replacing the current walkways. This could either be with a compacted path or by replacement of the current planks with reclaimed wood which could be finished with an appropriate varnish to extend its life. ES to advise source of materials.

In terms of future usage and considering local nature recovery, suggestions included having a pond in the centre of the garden. A part of the garden could also be earmarked as a community allotment for growing vegetables.

Planting of native species would also help to make the area more attractive. This could include bluebells, wild garlic and Dog's mercury. Finally, hawthorn could be planted around the periphery to prevent illicit entry as has happened in the past.

There is funding available that could be used for the walled garden from a number of sources including National Lottery, Nature Fund for Cheshire and the Forestry Commission has funding for woodland management. There is also funding for trees from Mersey Forest.

A visit was next made to Locking Stumps Common. The entrance to the common has a BTC planter with begonias in it and an area that has been planted with "wildflowers" The wildflowers have performed very poorly as they did in 2025 because of the dry weather. Most plants are very small and leggy and provide little to no ground cover. ES advised that these should be replaced with proper British wildflower species and perhaps cover a wider area of the entrance with a more well-defined path into the common. The wildflowers could be funded from the Pollinating Cheshire programme run by Cheshire Wildlife Trust. The Lottery fund is another potential source of money for making improvements across the common. With proper mowing with grass collection, these would then come back each year without the need for reseeding. It would be worth considering the placing of bollards across the entrance to keep out vehicles. On the common itself, there is a need for some basic maintenance. Ivy has spread over the ground very substantially in a number of cases and pathways are being encroached upon as well. We should identify where there is maximum tree canopy and potential for primary and secondary canopy. We should enlist the help of Howard

Pimborough again for this who could also indicate what needs to be done next, such as removal of dead trees. It is possible that this could be done as a part of the LNRS.

At the end of the common, the land adjoins Birchwood Golf Club. There was a small fence in the past, but only a small part of this remains. The golf club have been dumping cuttings here, and while some are on the golf club side of the fence, there is a large pile which is on the council side. This should be taken with them as it constitutes green flytipping.

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