

Minutes of the Meeting of Open Spaces held in Rickards Hall on 16 September 2024 at 7:30 pm

Present: Cllrs. Angela Baker (*Chairwoman*), Michael Gemmell Smith (*Vice-Chairman*), Carey Jacques, Alan Layland, Stuart McGregor
In attendance: Town Clerk, Head Groundsman, Minutes Clerk - no members of the public and no press.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received, noted, and accepted from Cllrs Aldridge, Compton, Cummings, Streets, and Sumner.

2 Declarations of Interests, or Predeterminations

None.

3 Public Questions

19:31 *The Chair closed the meeting.*

None.

19:31 *The Chair reopened the meeting.*

4 To Receive and Sign Minutes of the Open Spaces Committee 22 July 056/1-7

Resolved: the minutes of the Open Spaces Committee meeting of 22 July to be signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record of the meeting (056/1-7).

5 To Receive Analysis of Receipts and Payments to 31 August 2024

Members noted the committee's income and expenditure for the first five months of the year, including £1,996 income generated from two children's fair bookings (not budgeted), and allotments rents £3,945. Total sports clubs rents (to be invoiced) £4,380 were due, and there was £8,852 grant funding for grass football pitch improvements (Recreation Ground and Mowshurst) due to be claimed for 2024-25.

Within expenditure, staff costs for salaries were under budget due to the Open Spaces officer vacancy, and the decision to delay replacement of a groundstaff employee until April. Maintenance items costs included street furniture four-yearly repaint (£6,686); biennial tree survey (£5,090); also some tree works; repairs to Doggetts courtyard; and a Churchyard wall repair. The vehicles heading included the new Kubota (£25k), insurance, and tractor fuel (expenditure and budget overspend approved at April Committee).

Members had no further comments.

6 To Ratify Operational Decisions for Open Spaces Activity

None.

7 Correspondence

None.

8 Head Groundsman's Report

Members received the report and noted routine seasonal work which had included grass cutting at all sites, weed treatment, maintaining planters through town and Doggetts Barn, and the beds in the cemeteries. Pitch marking-out for the new season rugby and football had been completed, as had erecting all football goals, and installed two new sets of rugby posts on behalf of the Rugby Club. Some time was spent fertilising areas of the Council's pitches at the Recreation Ground which had the most action and should help to provide the best playing surface possible throughout the

season.

Various shrubs and hedges had been pruned across all the Council's sites. The team had also been working through the biennial external tree survey report carrying out low level work, any items outside of their remit being passed on to local contractors for quotations. The in-house summer tree survey had now been completed and a programme of works set for the grounds team.

8.1 To confirm the expenditure under the annual works programme: for the hedge cutting at Council sites £1995; and the sports pitches decompaction £2400

Prices had been sought for the routine seasonal hedge cutting and sports pitch decompaction. Both contractors previously used responded with unchanged quotes from last year, and the work had been scheduled for the coming months.

Resolved: to ratify the expenditure of £1,995 plus VAT for annual hedge-cutting.

The annual decompaction works were dependant on weather conditions. It had not been possible to complete works for 2023-24 until March this year; these works would normally take place from October/November onwards. Members were advised it would be good to book the works with the contractor, to be done only once conditions were suitable. Also, to note these works were now funded through the FA Kent PitchPower grants awarded to both the Recreation Ground and Mowshurst.

Resolved: to ratify the budgeted expenditure of £2,400 plus VAT for pitch decompaction work.

8.2 To approve the expenditure for hire of Chipper, £360; and training on safe use of a chipper (costs to be confirmed at meeting)

Members were advised that a costing for a training course for the grounds team on the safe use of a chipper had been sought (£600), with the aim of hiring a chipper for two days during the winter months to recycle collected tree cuttings to use on the Council's flower beds and pathways. Having discussed the limited use of a chipper against the purchase cost, Members unanimously,

Resolved: to confirm the expenditure of £600 for staff training on safe use of chippers, and the expenditure of up to £360 to hire a chipper for two days.

8.3 To consider changing the fuel used for the tractor and Kubota from white diesel to a more greener sustainable fuel, Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO)

The Council had previously received information on switching its fuel used for the tractor and Kubota from white diesel to Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO), a drop-in diesel-alternative which offered a cleaner way to fuel commercial vehicles, on and off road, giving an instant reduction of CO2 emissions without the need for changes to engine infrastructure or machinery. The Council's fuel supplier was supporting this greener alternative to the white diesel. Manufactured from 100% renewable and sustainable waste, Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) is a paraffinic drop-in fuel that can be used as a replacement for diesel, meeting EN15940 standards. FAME, Sulphur and fossil free, is made using vegetable fats and oils. Unlike conventional biodiesel, hydrogen (rather than methanol) is used as a catalyst, which makes HVO cleaner burning and ensures a long shelf life. HVO is winter grade all year round.

The Council's fuel supplier was advocating the change, HVO provided a real opportunity to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by up to 90% instantaneously, offering the following:

- Longer shelf life (Up to 10 years)
- Low temperature performance CFPP to -30 degrees
- Completely biodegradable
- Fossil/FAME free and odorless
- Improved combustion over some diesel alternatives NO Palm oil

The supplier was itself taking significant steps to reduce its own carbon emissions by 20% before 2025, introducing HVO and bio fuels into its own fleets, and developing solutions focused on future fuel technology with a long term view.

Members were advised the price was now much the same as white diesel. Members discussed and unanimously,

Resolved: to switch from white diesel to HVO as a greener sustainable fuel, subject to checking that this would not affect the servicing, nor the warranty for the new Kubota.

9 **To receive and update on the 2-yearly tree inspection report work**

The full biennial tree report, was reported to Committee at the last meeting. The grounds team had been working through recommendations and carrying out some of the works themselves. Committee had approved that works identified in the tree programme could go ahead, assuming within budget (£4320). Works included:

- Felling of poplar in the top North West corner of the Stangrove Park, fell to stump height 1m - £800 (May 2024)
- 2 Limes adjacent to the play area at the Recreation Ground to remove deadwood - £300 (to be done)
- Dead Sycamore Blossoms Park, fell to ground - £300 (to be done; details agenda item 9.2)

9.1 **Stangrove Park: To approve the expenditure of £600 to reduce an oak tree by 3m on the boundary of resident's garden, on the property side**

A resident had contacted the Council in July regarding an oak tree overhanging their property. The tree report had not identified this tree for work. The tree surgeon the Council used had now looked at the overhanging branches confirming the tree could benefit by 3m reduction (tree no 1810) and to remove the dead branches. There was money available in the annual tree works budget currently.

Resolved: to approve the works to the oak at the rear of a resident's property (Stangrove Park), tree no 1810, and the expenditure of £600.

9.2 **To note additional feedback on two trees raised for in tree report: Sycamore (Blossoms Park) and Austrian pine (Stangrove Park)**

Members were advised the report had been received on two trees identified in the tree report for further inspection:

The Sycamore T54 at Blossoms Park was completely dead, not dangerous but needed to be removed before too much longer, and could be incorporated with the next treework operation. As it was peripheral to the site and growing in a 'wild' patch, the surveyor suggested that all the wood was heaped around the stump as dead wood habitat. A quote had been received from the tree surgery contractors, £300, and was included in the annual tree works (updated agenda item 9).

Regarding the Austrian Pine T1760 in Stangrove Park it "is a spectacular tree and although it leans to the south-west, it has been so for a great many years. The tree is clearly healthy and in good condition and the root system will have grown adaptively to accommodate the asymmetry. There was also concern expressed about the structural integrity of the multiple stems. To have such a multiple stem formation suggests that there was a loss of the single stem in the distant past, resulting in responsive shoot growth. The unions at the base of each secondary stem are all sound and I could not see any indications of decay or fracture. The formation is not "crowded" where diameter growth might induce internal pressure". The surveyor saw no reason to doubt the tree's stability and could confirm that the pine did not present any unacceptable level of risk.

Members had no questions or comments.

10 **Open Spaces Business**

Members noted the following updates:

Byelaws update: The accompanying report summarising Council's reasons for the updates to the byelaws had been drafted to send to Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).

High Street street furniture 4-year repaint Following approval for the expenditure from the 10-year maintenance plan, these works had now been completed. There had been a question over the gold paint. The paint supplier discontinued 'gold' in their smooth metal product a while back, so had to change supplier for the gold equivalent called 'brushed gold' for the range of exterior solvent based products.

Pound Green: SES Water had been undertaking pipe replacement works along Lingfield Road since February. There needed to be some re-routing works, and it had been advised that this would be through Pound Green. Council had now been advised "the scope has now been reduced and the installation of any pipe through Pound Green was no longer required. Instead, work would involve removing the existing valve covers in the green for the main that is to be abandoned. These covers would be reinstated with grass (likely topsoiled and re-seeded), and no new apparatus would be installed on the land".

10.1 To receive the Burial Report

Members noted the following interments:

July: one burial

August: one ashes interment

September: one burial, and two ashes interments

There were currently eight on-going inquiries for ashes interment.

10.2 Cemetery matters

Work continued to ensure the standards of the cemeteries and consistency with the rule book and the memorials. A recent review identified 12 memorials not compliant (some new, some previously written to). Letters had been sent to those Grant of Right (GOR) holders. The solicitor's letters to GOR holders re non-compliant memorials had resulted in some success to return memorials to the approved specification.

Members were sorry to hear that there had been some unpleasant behaviour to which the office staff had been subjected, details having been recorded and reported accordingly.

10.2.1 To approve the draft artwork and wording for the new cemetery signage

Members had received the proposed artwork and wording for the new Cemetery signage. The proposed sign would be approx. 1500mm x 900mm. Expenditure of £1,500 was approved at Committee February meeting. Members unanimously,

Resolved: to confirm the draft art work and wording for the Cemetery signage.

10.3 Allotment matters & updates

Members were advised all allotment rents had been paid for Forge Croft and Marlpit Hill/Swan Lane sites. Total allotments income £3,374.95; of which £40 needed to be paid to the Edenbridge Allotment and Gardens Association (EAGA) for the insurance and membership.

Replacement doors to the stores/garage at the Forge Croft allotments (approved Committee July 24) had been ordered and installation expected fairly soon.

The EAGA had signed the formal Allotments Agreement with the Council. This outlined the obligations of the EAGA, to the best of its ability, to exercise the authority delegated to it by the Town Council to oversee the general day-to-day running of the Allotment Gardens; and the Council's obligations in maintaining the area, and its responsibilities. The Agreement was for the duration of 5-years, to 2029 when it would be reviewed again.

10.4 To receive an update on the Annual Works Programme

Routine annual works were being progressed, including tree works and arranging the hedge cutting; Mill Leat and Recreation Ground pumps annual service were booked. The playground inspections booked with Wicksteed had been delayed due to its inspector had left, they were

currently looking to engage another. The Clerk had confirmed that Council would still like the playgrounds inspected, but would also investigate alternatives in case they can do the annual inspections sooner. Committee discussed, noting that the previous year's inspections reports had not raised any major concerns and **agreed** to wait for Wicksteed, and bring back to Committee if they were unable to do within a fair period of time.

10.4.1 Annual gully post clean for Market Yard car par and East car park, Recreation Ground

The annual maintenance work included the gully pots emptying at Market Yard car park and the east car park at the Recreation Ground.

Costs £708 for the hire of the vehicle and staff; £190 est. for up to 2 tonne waste. The budget had allowed only £756. Expected cost to be £898 plus VAT. There would be an over spend of £142. Budget 2025-26 would note, and allow for the increased costs.

Resolved: to approve the expenditure of £898, noting there may be additional costs if the waste exceeds 2 tonnes.

10.5 Vandalism report

Members were advised there was little to note - some small graffiti on noticeboards was cleaned by the Community Warden.

10.6 Gardening Competition feedback

Special guest Neil Miller, Head Gardener at Hever Castle, had presented awards for this year's winners of 'Edenbridge Gardens in Bloom' on 2 September. More than 40 residents attended the event, receiving some great prizes, including days out at Penshurst Place, Wakehurst Place, cinema tickets and other local attractions, as well as some vouchers. Categories were: allotment, front & back garden, youth/school groups, young gardener, window boxes & hanging baskets, and the strangest/unique space to create a colourful display. Members believed the competition created positive publicity for the Council, though they felt more in-person communication with groups would help support the website/posters/flyers and social media to increase entry numbers. Members unanimously,

Resolved: to continue with the competition for 2025-26

10.7 Summer Family Fun Days feedback

Four children's summer fun days had taken place, one session funded by SDC and three funded by the Town Council. Activities provided included crafts and games to sports and face painting, in a friendly, safe environment for children up to 12-years old, parental or guardian supervision always being required. All sessions went well and were popular, though unfortunately the final session was affected by heavy rain. Members unanimously,

Resolved: to support for budgeting to continue with funding three sessions in 2025-26.

10.8 Bulky Waste collections - Saturday 21 September

Members noted the next collections were 21 September and 16 November. The usual four locations would be served: Church Street (9.15-9.45 am), Skeynes Road (10.00-10.30 am), Park View (10.45-11.15), and Fircroft Way (11.30-12 noon). For The June collections SDC sent two freighters, which had helped to reduce the issues with fly tipping. Members had no questions.

10.9 Spitals Playground relocation: To receive an update following the recent movement of the playground

Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) contractor had relocated the Town Council's playground (equipment owned and maintained by the Council) from Farmstead Drive to its new location (rear of Farmstead Drive/Fircroft Way). The relocation and installation was completed by the contractors late August. However, upon first inspection by the Head Groundsman and then the Town Clerk, there were several issues raised including shoddy grounds work and the siting of some of the

equipment and benches. In short, the handover condition was not acceptable and the Town Clerk had refused to take handover and responsibility of the playground from SDC and the contractor. There had since been several site visits and discussions with SDC.

Subsequently, the Committee Chair and Vice-Chairman Cllrs Baker and Gemmell Smith, had met with the Town Clerk and Head Groundsman to discuss the issues. Of note, the grass which had been poorly laid and was placed under equipment where it would be exposed to wear and tear; the original playground had had wetpour under all play items (which had been an additional cost to Council at the time). The benches/ seats were set on grass and should be on concrete as per previously, and away from the end of the slide; the contractor had since confirmed they would reinstall both seats on concrete bases, and relocated the one at the foot of the slide. There was no hard surface at one of the entrance gates, so the grassed surface would become muddy and worn quickly from repeated foot traffic. SDC had said to the Town Council during planning presentations, that it would receive a like-for-like playground in moving the playground to make way for development on the estate.

Members examined some photographs taken at site, and agreed the relocated facility did not meet the criteria or the standards of the previous playground which had cost the Council (and CIL fund) in the region of £80k. Members felt strongly that the reinstated playground was not acceptable or fair on the residents. Members unanimously **supported** that the Council should not accept responsibility of the playground until the issues had been satisfactorily resolved, and

Resolved: that the Town Clerk and Cllr Baker (as District Member) should liaise with the SDC project manager to negotiated Council's concerns are addressed fully.

10.10 To receive a request to consider a resident's dog's ashes at Stangrove Park

It was reported that a resident had written to the Council to ask if they could scatter their dog's ashes at Stangrove Park (top end of the park, near one of the large trees) where they had walked often and was also close to their home, and plant a couple of white crocuses in memory. Members were advised ashes can be scattered on public land, but it required the landowner's permission, in this case the Town Council. After some discussion Members voted: four in favour and one against the decision, and

Resolved: in this case to permit the ashes scattering and crocuses, provided that it was carried out discreetly and Council was notified when it had been carried out.

10.11 To consider investigating costs for a pond clearance and cutback of the trees at Stangrove Park

Members noted back in 2019 the pond had had a severe issue with duckweed, the likely contributing factor was the hot summer. An eco friendly treatment was applied which aimed to break down the mulch, but this had not eradicated the weed. Duckweed had not been a major issue in recent years as the past few summers had not been as hot. However, the pond water appearance was not great and some residents had asked what is the Council doing to improve the pond. The other contributor to the water condition would be the trees with leaf droppage into the water. Thinning of the trees would help to reduce this and increase light. Whilst there was ducks and ducklings, moorhens, and coots, this year there were minimal tadpoles and newts. Improving the conditions of the pond could help other wildlife thrive.

The most effective way to improve the condition and appearance of the the pond would be to have the silt removed, which would mean draining the pond, and would have the added benefit of being able to access the trees and to have them cut back. Members recognised that this would be a substantial project needing to budgeted, possibly for 2025-26, more likely for 2026-27 budget, and there may be the opportunity for grants. Members liked the idea of improving the pond at Stangrove Park , noting it would be a considerable project for the Council (and should possibly to be part of the Council's strategy/forward plan) and unanimously,

Resolved: to support this as a potential future project to improve the appearance of the pond and its wildlife, and instructed officers to investigate costs and potential grant sources. This would need to be reported back to Committee to consider if to proceed with the project.

10.12 Open Spaces walkabout for councillors

Members,

Resolved: that the "walkabout" should take place in the Spring, and with the new Open Spaces Officer.

11 Update on Streetlights 2024-25 replacement programme

Members noted the update: the confirmed replacement programme 2024-25 (budget £45k) now had a total spend of £36,606, reported June meeting. UKPN was expecting to undertake its work to streetlights 25 Church Street, 31, 33 and 32 Croft Lane, 109 and 111 MYCP, 118 and 117 Marsh Green Road on 9,10, and 11 September. Column nos.120 and 122 Marsh Green Road required a road closure, so would need to be booked separately. Streetworks work on these columns would follow similar timeframe. In addition to this, Council had approved to include street light 110 Market yard car park, cost £3,492. These works were yet to be scheduled. Members had no questions.

12 News Release

To publicise the use of the chipper to process tree arisings and re-purpose for mulch, after completing the work as a sustainable "green" activity.

13 Date of next meeting - 04 November 2024

Noted.

The meeting closed at 8.35pm.