

Wildlife Groups Meeting

**Minutes of the Meeting held 7pm, Wednesday, 21st October 2009
Booth Museum**

Present:

Martin Robinson (MR)
John Patmore (JP)
Gerald Legg (GL)
Tessa Pawsey (TP)
Gill Taylor (GT)
Maureen Holt (MH)
Colin Leeves (CL)
Phillipa Shaw (PS)
Nigel Bowie (NB)
Ann Parker (AP)
Bernard Evans (BE)
Martin Wilson (MW)

Benfield Wildlife & Conservation Group (Chair)
Botanical Society of the British Isles/ Eco-Logically
Keeper of Natural History, Booth Museum (Host)
Friends of Bevendean Down
Friends of Hollingbury & Burstead Woods
Keep the Ridge Green (minutes)
Keep the Ridge Green
Friends of Withdean Park
Sussex Ornithological Society
Friends of Sheepcote Valley
Friends of Sheepcote Valley
TWEAK

Apologies:

Phil Belden
Dave Bangs
Ruth Baxendale
Alex.Gerard
Christine Fitzgerald
Ian Lawes
Jane Terry
Janyis Watson

Brighton Urban Wildlife Group
Friends of Whitehawk Hill
Friends of Three Cornered Copse
Brighton Sea Life Centre
Friends of Waterhall
Friends of Blakers Park
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Sussex Wildlife Trust

Welcome and Introduction of Groups

Background - MR explained that this meeting was called in an attempt to establish a credible alternative group which can represent wildlife interests in this City. This follows on from the 'brief' WAG meeting held on 8th September, where Gillian Marston (GM), Matthew Thomas (MT) and Hugo Blomfield (HB) from Brighton & Hove City Council, made it clear they were no longer interested in the continuation of WAG Meetings in their present form and these would not be included in their future advice groups' structure. Their alternative proposal would have allowed no voice for biodiversity to be prioritised over other issues. It is not certain whether GM's vision for enlarging and changing the meetings to include single issue themes will come to anything, but we do still need to co-operate with them and hope enough council support will mean the WAG can rise phoenix-like from the ashes.

In our proposed 'new style meetings' we hoped to retain the 'WAG' expertise, while also addressing the concerns of Local Community Wildlife Groups (LCWGs). The Brighton Urban Wildlife Group (BUWG) acts as an 'umbrella' for all site based groups, who in past years had come together periodically for a 'Forum' at the Booth Museum. Unfortunately these 'get-togethers' have been 'allowed to drift' but in the current climate it was considered more important than ever for them to be re-activated after serious doubts had been placed on current 'green space' management. GT questioned how could B&HCC consider 'Biosphere Status' when they struggle to keep up with their open spaces management policy?

MR read out a printed email sent by Phil, unfortunately unable to be present. He reported no reply as yet from Geoffrey Theobald (GL checked the post for BUWG but nothing had arrived) to the letter written from LCWGs, after the recent Scrutiny Committee, which highlighted the need for proper consultation with local groups to input into the Downland Management plan. Phil considered better ways of engaging with the council needed to be investigated and this consultation process might just provide the catalyst! There is considered to be little 'joined upness' and a lack of strategic aims at present.

It was decided we needed another meeting 'soon' but that generally meetings four times a year would be about right. After checking with those present, Tuesdays appeared to be the most favourable day on which to hold meetings.

Re-activation Ideas

JP considered we could all quite easily work together and in fact had done so in the past, as many members present had attended both WAG and Local Group meetings. This new group can choose to establish sub-groups for particular interests such as site protection/site management/strategy/policy/planning etc. In that way members can choose which topic area they particularly want to be involved with. He considered there were many advantages to retaining the name 'Wildlife Advisory Group' but wondered if that name was now tarnished amongst some council people? However, other members valued the WAG, which should be considered as a tool to access people such as councillors. Recent experience had shown we had not succeeded in getting our voice heard. CL thought we should be encouraged by the elected councillors at the recent Scrutiny meeting, who had been

impressed by the input from the voluntary local wildlife groups and wondered why the council did not take more notice of our advice.

JP had written to Prof Laing and T Crockett of CSP with a view to building on the link between CSP and WAG. See <http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1102381>

It was felt the opportunity is there if we can pull ourselves together and give ourselves a structure! The City Sustainability Partnership (CSP) which formally has a position for a WAG member was to hold its next meeting on 10th November. It may be possible to improve the WAGs reporting service/professionalism to the CSP (which GM wanted 'in house'?). The new, improved WAG should help to channel more communication through to the City Sustainability Partnership.

JP considered some council staff wanted to see this strategic input as one strand and local group interaction as another strand, but we know it's the same individuals they will end up speaking to. However it would be advantageous for us to keep both plates spinning. GT was surprised that the Council has no Biodiversity Action Plans in place for the City, apart from the School Grounds BAP.

Physical meetings will need to be held and for this we will need a strong Chair, but it is equally important to co-ordinate the sub-group meetings. People need to know date/location/topics. It was considered this information would need a web-site.

After discussion, those present recommended that the WAG should be expanded to include both strategic advice and to represent LCWGs interests. It will be inclusive in membership and structured to incorporate sub groups which have specialist input to consider regarding site specific issues and policy or broad practice.

Local Groups updates and current concerns

Most LCWGs were obviously more concerned with their individual sites, but these do all join to become a part of the bigger community picture. It would be beneficial to work holistically, although MW considered WAG meetings had often been too complicated and thought having a structure might be helpful.

Those representing sites spoke of their recent experiences:

Bevendean Down – TP reported they had issues with the grass cutting regime and management plans.

Hollingbury & Burstead Woods - GT reported similar problems with the mowing and management plans redrawn by the ranger service. On a positive note she told of funding for the local Downs junior school's education plan and thanked GL for the loan of stuffed animals for this.

KTRG - MH reported big problems over cut grass in thick piles - difficulty arose when enlightened public kicked or raked the worst lumps on to mown paths and others put it back again! Residents backing on to the ancient hedge still practice strimming nettles or dumping garden rubbish and the council have not led by example! Local School appears 'on board' again and two members are becoming 'dormouse trained'.

Withdean Park - PS reported that the National Lilac collection had suffered badly. Having been vandalised earlier in the year, it had finally lost its status although it was still an important collection. They had requested to be allowed to have a wildflower meadow on part of the site unsuccessfully for years.

Benfield Wildlife Group - MR reported they had successfully organised scrub clearance events in conjunction with the SDJC and Green Gym. Their latest talk 'The Sussex Year' by David Lang had been arranged for 28th October at the usual Church Hall, where all would be welcome.

Sheepcote Valley - AP reported some collection of grass arisings had taken place recently by what looked like council workers? BE confirmed they also had problems with the grass mowing. The group had obtained training grants for operating strimmers, etc. Continual traveller encampments were causing difficulties.

TWEAK – after getting upset with not having one particular ranger to help them manage their site, they were now very satisfied with their ranger Neil Doyle's input.

Any other business

JP reminded us all that next year, 2010, was International Biodiversity year.

Another meeting date has been postponed until we receive a reply from Councillor Theobald.

We thank Gerald Legg for his contribution of a venue at the Booth Museum.

The meeting closed at 9.20pm