

# **Friends of Palewell Common & Fields**

## **Minutes of Meeting held on 7th November 2011 at 6.30 p.m. in the Club Room**

**Present:** Francis Rowland (Chairman), Jacqui Pattison, Robin Laidlaw, Andy Sutch, Dhun Kenny, Rikki Marks, Bernard Adams and Angela Howorth.

**1. Apologies for Absence:** Len Griffiths. Bernard Adams told the Committee that LG had done a superb job in organising the Boules Pitches during the summer and the Committee added their thanks.

**2. Matters Arising:** The Minutes of the Meeting on 10th October 2011 were approved by the Committee.

**3. Richmond Council's proposed changes to the Management of Parks and Open Spaces:** FR had forwarded to the Committee two papers prepared by Parks Department of Richmond Council:

- i) Parks and Open Spaces - Strategic Principles and**
- ii) Draft Events Policy - consultation timescale extended.**

It was noted that some Committee members had only received these documents on the 6th and would need time to consider them in depth.

**FR** asked Andy Sutch to update the Committee on a meeting that he and AS had had with David Allister and Gaye Galvin of the Parks Department the previous week.

**AS** said that the Council particularly appreciated the energy and the single voice of the Friends of Palewell Common, 'Friends' groups are very valuable in responding to issues, whether pro or anti. The concern is that, having achieved an initial target/aim, they can go in one of three directions:

- a) remain in existence but lose momentum as no target or goal,
- b) remain a group and add more practical volunteering (a number do this),
- c) retain interest partly practical i.e. woodland management, but also sports facilities and use of other facilities so fund raising becomes important. With less Local Authority money available this will become even more important.

**AS** highlighted the Friends of Barn Elms as an example of a group with a project and a formal MOU agreement with Richmond Council. He briefly described the Council's thinking. The local authority wants to increase participation of local communities and reduce its role in the delivery of services. With over 160 open spaces of many varieties they spend 'too much time in resolving problems' and want to develop a framework where there can be multiple providers while retaining the economy of scale. They will be seeking to maintain or reduce costs through increased local participation, whether through active involvement in management and maintenance or fund raising. They also believe that the local communities, often led by Friends groups, can better define the priorities and manage expectations. They are at an early stage of developing the framework and will share the ideas with local communities as this develops.

Richmond Council have moved the date for these changes forward to 1st April 2013 rather than 2012 to enable them to give time to thinking through the outsourcing process and to deliver a viable alternative.

Some specific opportunities were described as possible examples of changes. Currently Veolia are responsible for all maintenance across the Borough. The park maintenance contract with Veolia is badly written, often being too specific, and therefore some elements have been excluded/omitted from their maintenance work. The Council want to retain economies of scale but want a combination of contractors and local responsibility. One example discussed is the Pitch & Put where the contract today separates operation of the golf course and the maintenance. In future this may be treated as a complete business operation, combining operations and maintenance into a single contract. Other examples included the concept of single contracts for all tennis operations, woodland management, or local management of several open spaces as a group.

Parks are one of the top items of concern for the residents of Richmond Borough and any changes must meet the expectations for quality and service. (These are set out in some Strategic Principles on the council web site.) However, we can expect the budget to be constrained or reduced so local support will be essential.

**FR** explained that he has seen documentation relating to Royal Parks funding which is currently 67% by Government grant and 33% is funded by commercial activities but, by 2015 60% will need to be self funded with Government contribution being reduced to 40%. We may see similar pressures in our borough, however Richmond Council is determined not to lose customer satisfaction while trying to be innovative.

**FR** opened the discussion of the paper he had prepared for the Committee, **Outsourcing of Maintenance for Palewell Common and Fields:** the first part summarised the background and the second part listed the 'Issues' arising from the changes. The Committee concentrated their discussion on the Issues. **FR** said that the Council are happy to discuss with us and explore the possibility of us putting together a management group. **FR** thanked Jacqui Pattison for the comprehensive document she had prepared listing the possible way forward for the Friends of Palewell Common. This document considered four options which were:

**i) Status Quo.**

**ii) Trustee Body.**

**iii) Become a Charity.**

**iv) Become a Limited Company.**

**RM** said that there were significant costs and responsibilities in creating a charity or trustee body. **AS** said that funds could come from the Council or other organisations and that the Local Authority would probably agree to give a deficit guarantee. He cited an example in N.E. London where playing fields that were losing £250,000 p.a. were let to a good contractor and now break even. **RM and DK** expressed concern about volunteers commitment and **DK** pointed out that we had struggled to maintain our membership numbers, it is currently about two thirds of the earlier membership. **RM** did not think that

local people would be keen for FoPC to become one of the contractors. FR agreed that RM and DK had a point, most of our residents are very busy and not available to take on responsibilities. DK said that if FoPC go down this route the only way is to employ a sub-contractor. AS said that woodland maintenance is important, it is a very valuable amenity. Under the new process we could identify local firms or people and bring them in to do the work, if we had somebody on site they would develop a hands on relationship. He cited the example that the Friends of Barnes Common had bought equipment and he agreed that we would need to raise funds. FR said that there are people interested in running a company. AH felt that Palewell Common was too small to make a viable business. A committee member raised the question of the Pitch & Putt course. FR said that this is defined as a 'commercial package' but he thought that the Friends should be involved and would have discussions with the Council and be recognised as a focal point. The possibility of one contractor taking on Barnes, Mortlake, Sheen and Palewell was discussed. DK asked if FoPC would be able to fund and take on the general maintenance. AS said cannot answer that question but without some change the standard of maintenance would not be maintained. **JP** pointed out that the Friends group could be alongside the project. AS said that FoPC could have a Memorandum of Understanding with the Council, he did not think it was an option to do nothing. The Committee understood that the Council have a Memorandum of Understanding with Barn Elms and wondered whether we could see a copy and understand the framework. AS said that Barn Elms's Memorandum impacts on everything the Borough does on the site.

**RL** pointed out that if a local operating company was set up with responsibility for the maintenance of Palewell and possibly Sheen Common, it would receive an agreed budget from the Council. From this budget, this company could outsource work to local maintenance firms. New operating contracts would be administered by that company which would clarify regular operational responsibilities as well as leaving some degree of working flexibility. The outsourcing of work, as and when required, by a local operating company would reduce the current fixed costs and have obvious financial benefits.

To sum up FR said that taking no action was high risk and not an option. FoPC could take the initiative and be partly instrumental in the appointment of an operating company without being a working member of that company. FoPC would work in association with the operating company. To be discussed further.

**4. Role of the Committee:** to be discussed at the next meeting.

**5. Consultation with Members:** **BA** suggested we do a leaflet drop and perhaps an Event. AS said that, from the Event on the 10th September, there was a list of 10 names who had expressed an interest in helping the Friends he suggested that we should invite them together to a meeting with some of the Committee, this should be done before the AGM. It was also suggested that we aim at attracting some parents of younger children to join the Committee. An event to coincide with the AGM was also suggested.

**6. Development of the Website:** This was briefly discussed and is a top priority to be addressed by the Committee at the next meeting.

**7. Kiosk:** To be discussed at the next meeting.

**8. Any Other Business:** The Chairman had prepared a list of Resolutions to be voted on by the Committee:

- Resolutions:**
- |  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| 1. We believe that FoPC should continue:   | Yes unanimous vote |
| 2. We require new goals and agreed plans:  | Yes unanimous vote |
| 3. We should include events and activities that involve the membership and community, e.g. social events, maintenance tasks etc:   | Yes majority vote  |
| 4. Committee members will be accountable for the roles that they take on and ensure that actions are completed in a timely manner: | Yes majority vote  |

**Operating Principles**

Committee members agreed to consider their nominated role.

It was agreed that a schedule of Committee meetings for 12/18 months will be organised.

Committee meetings will be for committee members only but, where relevant, members will be invited to attend to make specific contributions.

It was agreed that reports or discussion papers will be prepared at least a week in advance to enable better discussion.

**Membership cards:** **DK** informed the committee that she had done some research but had found the options very expensive. **RL** said that a cheap and viable option was vistaprint.com who charge about £5. for 250 cards.

**AGM:** **RL** will check All Saints Church Hall for April dates.

**BCTV dates:** **JP and RM** will arrange dates for 2013

**Date of Next Meeting:** 12th December 2011 at 6.30 p.m. in The Club Room.

The Meeting closed at 8.30 p.m.