

Subject:	Centenary Wood
From:	Claire Wilding
Date:	23/09/2021
For discussion and decision	
<p>Summary of decisions or actions requested: Councillors are asked to note the issues posed by ash dieback and blackthorn encroachment and to agree the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To establish regular contact with OCC and the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens so that the Town Council has a say in management of the woodland ● To write to OCC to raise concerns about ash dieback and blackthorn, to recognise the fantastic work being done by local volunteers, and to request a plan to deal with and replace dying ash trees ● To agree that the Town Council should contribute towards a new noticeboard and/or information board, to discuss with OCC and the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens and bring a costed proposal to the Town Council at a later date ● To agree to explore the idea for a new kissing gate between the woodland and Blenheim Farm Nature Reserve, which would require consultation with landowners ● To agree we shouldn't seek to add benches or make other changes in the wood at this stage. As and when the management plan is revised we could get the community involved to talk about any bigger changes that might be desired. 	
<p>Financial implications: The kissing gate and noticeboard/information board proposals would require Town Council funding if agreed. Costed proposals would be brought to the Town Council for agreement before any commitments were made.</p>	
<p>Communications: We will need to speak to local partners about any proposed changes to the entrance from Blenheim Farm Nature Reserve.</p>	

Management of the woodland

Centenary Wood is owned by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) who led the initial planting in the 1980s and developed a management plan in 2012. The woodland is for the benefit of the community. There is a theoretical management committee chaired by OCC and on which the Town Council is represented, but in practice this has not met for a number of years. OCC no longer has a forestry officer and does not have the staff resource and skills to actively manage the woodland as envisaged in the 2012 management plan.

Management activities are carried out by the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens who are in regular contact with OCC (Nick Mottram) to report on the condition of the woodland and

ensure their management activities are in line with OCC's plan. However the Wardens' remit is footpath maintenance and woodland coppicing and they are not in a position to do all the management work that might be needed or desired. Christine Elliot had a community representative role on the committee and continues to take a close interest. OCC are exploring whether the Wychwood Forest Trust might take a role in management of the woodland. Centenary Wood was designated as a Local Green Space in the Neighbourhood Plan, which affords it a high level of protection against future development.

This note reflects conversations I have had with Councillor Potter, Bruce Crawford (Cotswold Voluntary Wardens) and Christine Elliot (community representative on the management committee) as well as input from Simon Walker (Cotswold Voluntary Wardens) and a brief conversation with Nick Mottram (OCC). Many thanks to all who offered advice and insights.

Challenges

There are two major challenges facing the woodland. It has a mix of trees including cherry, oak, beech and hazel, but ash is by far the most common species. **Ash dieback** has affected or killed a number of trees already and it is expected that eventually all the ash trees in the woodland will succumb.

OCC does not currently have the resources for large scale replanting (although this could change in future with tree planting becoming a national priority). The Wardens have removed some dead trees and have marked a number more for removal, however it may be more difficult for the volunteers to deal with larger ash trees which need removal in the future. The Wardens and Christine Elliot have carried out some limited replanting and there are also new saplings that have sprung up spontaneously. It is hoped that the Wardens will be able to continue some gradual replanting.

The second challenge is encroachment by **blackthorn**. Blackthorn does benefit wildlife, as it blossoms early providing a food source for bees and pollinators, and also provides food for birds (as well as sloes for local gin). However it is also invasive and forms a dense, prickly thicket which smothers other plants and prevents access. The blackthorn seeks light, so it thrives at the edges of the wood and where good leaf cover has not been established. This includes the wildflower swards, rides and sections where ash trees are in poor health. Members of the Wardens have put in a huge amount of work during lockdown to control the blackthorn, creating dead hedges with the cut down stems and branches. Without this maintenance, wildflower areas, footpaths and newly planted saplings would be overrun by blackthorn. The Wardens use machinery to remove the blackthorn, however this leaves short stumps in the ground which can be problematic for walkers and runners.

The blackthorn is also encroaching upon the skatepark and football area at the south western edge of the woodland, where it acts as a litter trap and poses a hazard to people trying to pick litter or retrieve footballs.

Town Council interests

The Town Council's interests in the woodland are in the following areas:

Amenity - it is valued by local people as an area for exercise, dog walking and play. It is the only area of woodland that is immediately accessible on foot from the town and where people are free to roam off footpaths.

Biodiversity - while the woodland is never going to have the rich biodiversity of e.g. the quarry because of the high number of walkers and dogs visiting it, it forms an important part

of our “green corridors”, linking the quarry with Blenheim Farm Nature Reserve. It provides food and habitat for birds and butterflies, as well as small mammals and deer.

Carbon sink - although the Town Council does not own or manage the woodland, it would be consistent with our climate emergency commitment to encourage and support management of the woodland to absorb as much carbon as possible, including by ensuring dying ash trees are replaced.

Suggested Town Council actions

While I do not think it is necessary to reinstate the formal management committee, it would be worth establishing regular contact with OCC and the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens so that the Town Council can have a say in management of the woodland. Bruce Crawford of the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens has offered to send me updates every couple of months on the work of the Wardens in the woodland, which would be most welcome.

I suggest that we press OCC to develop a plan for dealing with ash dieback, since the presence of large numbers of infected trees will speed up the spread of the disease within Charlbury, causing issues for other landowners. There is also a health and safety risk if dying trees are not appropriately managed in the future. The Wardens are taking an active role in management, but this is dependent on the input of two or three highly active local residents. It would be preferable for OCC to have more formal arrangements in place for dying trees. There’s an opportunity for us to encourage replacement planting with trees that will be resilient in face of climate change and to encourage the greatest possible carbon sequestration. We could also explore whether Centenary Wood could be a site for the Sustainable Charlbury funded project on land management and carbon.

I have discussed the blackthorn issues with Bruce Crawford, and it may be possible for the Wardens to do some occasional cutting to prevent blackthorn encroaching onto the skate park area. There isn’t unfortunately an easy solution to the issue of stumps, although we could try to raise awareness when the areas around the footpath are mown to prevent accidents. We could also discuss with OCC and the Wardens other simple changes that would benefit residents, e.g. cutting back small areas of nettles to allow picking of elderflower in May/June.

Various suggestions have been made for changes in the woodland. A number of residents and Councillors have proposed **installing an information board and/or notice board**. Nick Mottram (OCC) has indicated that some OCC funding may be available for this, but it would also require a contribution from the Town Council. Bruce Crawford has proposed **installation of a kissing gate between the woodland and Blenheim Farm Nature Reserve**, next to the existing vehicular access gate, in order to divert people from the alternative entrance which passes an active badger set. Clearly this would require further consultation and agreement of landowners, but I would like the Town Council to consider whether it would fund a gate in this location. It’s already used as an informal entrance by many who squeeze through the gap and it offers an easier access than the alternative route which can be steep and slippery or full of nettles depending on the time of year.

Suggestions have also been made to add **benches or picnic areas** within the woodland to facilitate people sitting and enjoying it, or even for a **dedicated area for children to play**. These would have pros and cons, for example, they might encourage litter and vandalism. The original management plan suggested a bench and mown glade near the memorial stone, which we could pursue. I suggest that we leave these issues for now and

concentrate on the other points above, but as and when the management plan is reviewed we could engage the community to talk about how the wood should be used and how we get the right balance between public access/enjoyment and a quiet, natural environment.

Summary of proposed Town Council actions

I would like the Town Council to agree the following:

- To establish regular contact with OCC and the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens so that the Town Council has a say in management of the woodland
- To write to OCC to raise concerns about ash dieback and blackthorn, to recognise the fantastic work being done by local volunteers, and to request a clear plan to deal with and replace dying ash trees
- To agree that the Town Council should contribute towards a new noticeboard and/or information board, to discuss with OCC and the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens and bring a costed proposal to the Town Council at a later date
- To agree to explore the idea for a new kissing gate between the woodland and Blenheim Farm Nature Reserve, which would require consultation with landowners.
- To agree we shouldn't seek to add benches or make other changes in the wood at this stage. As and when the management plan is revised we could get the community involved to talk about any bigger changes that might be desired.

Subject:	Proposals for Welcome Back Fund
From:	Claire Wilding
Date:	23/09/2021
For decision	
Summary of decisions or actions requested (including timing): Councillors are asked to agree the suggestions we should put forward to WODC for spending, so that we can reply immediately to meet the end-September deadline	
Financial implications: None.	
Communications: These ideas would need further consultation before going ahead.	

WODC has received money from the Welcome Back Fund, which has been provided by the European Regional Development Fund to support the safe return to high streets and help build back better from the pandemic. A provisional amount of £4,000 has been earmarked for Charlbury with the purpose of encouraging visitors and shoppers back to the town centre. The Town Council has been invited to put forward proposals for how the money should be used. The final decision will be made by WODC, who will also be responsible for any procurements. There are a number of guidelines, key ones being that the money must be spent by the end of March 2022; it is intended for revenue spending not capital works; and any changes to the public realm are intended to be temporary. WODC have asked for our views by the end of September.

The Town Council asked the public for input at Street Fair. Only a small number of people contributed views so it's not in any way a representative survey. The main areas people were interested in were traffic/journeys/parking. Full details of the proposals and votes received are below.

Councillors Gary Harrison and Claire Wilding have spoken briefly to Chris Potts of the Thomas Gifford Trust about ideas for the fund. Any formal proposals involving TGT would need to be formally agreed by the Trustees, however Chris was interested in the proposal to make the Playing Close more accessible to disabled residents and pushchairs by removing some of the single standing posts. We also discussed the traders' area in the Community Centre car park, and the idea of having a structure that could be used by traders who do not have their own van to trade from.

Taking account of the various discussions so far, and also bearing in mind the restrictions of the fund, we would suggest putting the following suggestions to WODC in priority order.

1. **Improve access to the Playing Close** by removing some of the single standing posts. This would make the benches, green space and the Farmers' Market more accessible for disabled residents and those with pushchairs. This would require agreement of the Thomas Gifford Trust and Listed Buildings approval.

2. **Extend town centre pavements to allow more outdoor seating space** for dining and drinking. This could support the pubs and the Deli. However if it required changes to the road layout this would not be deliverable in time, as it would require consultation, permissions and new signage. If it was more limited it might be easier to deliver, but may still require removal of a small number of parking spaces and consideration of safety aspects. I suggest we would need a Councillor willing to explore this further if it's going to go forward as a suggestion to WODC as there would be a number of details to be worked up.
3. **Create a Charlbury Town Map** showing pubs, shops and points of interest, to be displayed on the noticeboard by the Co-op and if possible at the train station. This would promote local businesses and help visitors see what is on offer in the town.
4. **Provide a shelter at the traders' area in the Community Centre carpark** that could be used by traders who do not have their own van. This could particularly help new businesses. It could also provide shelter for customers queuing to use the traders' vans. This would require agreement of the Thomas Gifford Trust.
5. **Promote local shops and business and/or the Farmers' Market**, possibly including advertising the Christmas Farmers' market and the Christmas late night shopping (if going ahead this year)

Ideas we aren't proposing to put forward:

6. **Traffic calming on the Slade and at entrances to town** - these were the most popular ideas in voting at the stall but we do not think they would be deliverable through this fund for a number of reasons, including the high cost and short time frame. We would expect physical traffic calming measures to cost tens of thousands. We should consider traffic calming measures in the future however.
7. **Cycle map showing safer routes** - a good idea for the future but probably not sufficiently linked to promoting the town centre for this fund.
8. **Shelter for Corner House garden** - I believe the Corner House already has access to a gazebo but we should confirm.
9. **Changes to road layouts, parking and pavements** - interesting ideas but not suitable for this fund because of the time scale to agree and deliver such changes and because capital works are not covered by the fund.

Annex: Proposals from Councillors and members of the public at the Street Fair stall

Ideas proposed by Councillors	Votes
Slow traffic on the Slade through placements of planters	12
Slow traffic entering town with planted "buildouts"	8
Encourage cycling with map of safer routes	8
Extend town centre pavements to allow more outdoor seating space for drinking and dining	8
Promote local shops and businesses	6
Promote the farmers' market	5

Make the playing close more accessible for disaled residents/buggies by removing corner posts	4
Promote local Christmas shopping	4
Temporary shelter for Corner House garden or Spendlove carpark traders	4
Charlbury town map on display showing pubs, shops, points of interest	4
Ideas put forward by visitors to the stall	
Remove pavements, pave roads for “ambiguous” areas for traffic/ pedestrians	1
Countdown markes to 30mph limit on Enstone Road approaching Charlbury	1
Residents parking in the town centre	1
No additional town centre parking	1
Make all routes through town centre access only to motor vehicles - priority for cyclists and pedestrians	1
Rebuild the market hall (for traffic calming and a shelter)	1
Resurface (flat) pavements (particularly by Quakers hall)	1
Better link between spendlove/co-op and town centre	1
Put more information about local business on charlbury.info and on local Facebook groups	1