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NORTON COMMON, LETCHWORTH

MANAGEMENT PLAN

2015 – 2020





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Purpose of This Document

The purpose of this document is in the first instance to be a guide to the people maintaining and developing Norton Common. Primarily it is intended to be a document that is used on a regular basis. Therefore it has to be fit for purpose as a management tool.

Secondly this document is intended to assist with the application of the Green Flag process. Therefore the main plan is preceded by a synopsis of the key criteria as detailed within the Green Flag Award Scheme and the management plan will be the key supporting document.

The third aim is to link together the various strategies and objectives of North Herts District Council.

Initially this will be the Corporate Core Values which are:

- Aiming to deliver what our customers want
- Delivering high quality services
- Striving to continuously innovate and improve
- Encouraging a listening and learning culture amongst our colleagues
- Promoting equality in service delivery and within our organisation

The Vision for North Hertfordshire is:

- Making North Herts a vibrant place to live, work and prosper

The following documents will also influence this management plan:

- Norton Common Management Plan 2005-2010 & 2010-2015
- Biodiversity Action Plan
- Cultural Strategy
- Greenspace Strategy & associated action plans
- Tree Strategy
- Community Strategy
- Grounds Maintenance Contract 2012-2017
- Local Bye laws



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Norton Common, Letchworth Garden City

Introduction

Norton Common is owned by North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) and is managed by the Grounds Team, a section of the Customer Services Directorate based at Letchworth Garden City with additional input from Countryside Management Service (CMS) and the Friends of Norton Common.

The District of North Hertfordshire is one of ten districts in Hertfordshire. It is the second largest in land area occupying 37,537sq. hectares. Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, East Hertfordshire, St. Albans, Stevenage and Welwyn and Hatfield border the District.

The District comprises of Letchworth Garden City, the market towns of Baldock, Hitchin and Royston, and a large rural area with thirty three parish councils.

NHDC offices are centrally located in Letchworth Garden City. In recognition of its strong local communities it operates five Area Committees which determine local planning applications, champion community development and consider and report to Cabinet on matters affecting their area. Each of the 26 electoral wards of the district is represented at one of these Area Committees.

The whole of the grounds maintenance service for the North Herts District is externalised and is currently undertaken by John O'Conner's Grounds Maintenance Ltd on a contract arrangement from 1st April 2012 to the 31st March 2017.

Site History

Norton Common lies within the town of Letchworth Garden City, just to the north of the town centre. The area was once open grassland and arable, with marshy areas. Its boundaries were delineated by the Enclosure Act of 1798 which allowed the commoners of Norton to graze cattle on the site. By the late 19th Century grazing had declined at the common and all rights were acquired by one owner who managed the site for game.

Under this regime, the open nature of the site became almost completely lost under a blanket of thick scrub. With it went some of the rich variety of plants and animals that had thrived there. Although in decline, the site was still of high wildlife value and in 1904 the land and freehold were acquired by the First Garden City Ltd..

In 1907 Norton Common was recognised in early designs for Letchworth Garden City as "an area of beauty, worthy of preservation" and pathways were cut through the wood so that local people could enjoy it. In 1922, Letchworth Urban District Council took over, stressing the importance of retaining the natural characteristics

whilst providing some recreation facilities. Between 1931 and 1936 tennis courts, a bowling green, bandstand and swimming pool were built.

Conservation work has been carried out over the years since, by North Hertfordshire District Council, the Letchworth Naturalists Society, the Countryside Management Service and latterly the Friends of Norton Common, to ensure the survival of the remaining flora, some of which are of great local rarity.

Description

The 29 hectare site provides for a range of recreational activities, both formal and informal. These comprise tennis courts, two bowling greens, outdoor swimming pool, skate park, Multi-Use Games Area, children's play areas and picnic area, all located in the south eastern corner. The remaining larger part of the site is a mix of secondary oak / ash woodland, mature hawthorn scrub, parkland, open glades and rides, all open to the public. The Pix Brook and several of its tributaries traverse the common, some rising from springs on the site. An additional man-made channel runs parallel to the brook. The site is the focus of a green corridor following the course of the Pix Brook through the town via Pix Brook Meadows to Standalone Farm, to link with the Letchworth Greenway, the Ivel Valley with its Kingfisher Way path and the long distance Icknield Way.

The common is a Local Wildlife Site, the primary ecological importance of which are two areas of boulder clay marsh with tufa springs. This is one of the rarest habitat types found in Hertfordshire and at Norton Common the marshes support a rich flora including several county rarities. Notable species include Adder's-tongue Fern, Marsh Pennywort, Parsley Water-dropwort, Purple Moor-grass and Southern Marsh Orchid. This habitat is quite fragile and particularly prone to damage by trampling.

In addition, an area of unimproved neutral grassland on late-medieval / Tudor ridge and furrow supports a diverse flora including Cowslip, Harebell, Ladies Bedstraw and Wild Carrot. It is also one of only 5 sites in the county where Sulphur Clover has been recorded.



Southern Marsh Orchid

The woodland and scrub is of particular value to birds including House Sparrow, Starling, Wren, Green and Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Tree Creeper, Blackcap, Chiff Chaff, Garden Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Bullfinch, Linnet, Redpoll, Sparrowhawk and Tawny Owl. Oak and Ash are the dominant trees, with Sycamore and a variety of other planted species including Lime, Silver Birch, Norway Maple, Wild Cherry and Horse Chestnut. The scrub is dominated by Hawthorn, Elder and Blackthorn. Many of these shrub species are coming to the end of their natural lives and as a result parts of the site have an unkempt feel to them. In the past, a regime of coppicing blocks of scrub benefited certain areas of

the site whilst more recently attention has been focused on coppicing along path and ride edges.

The trees and scrub provide cover for mammals including Muntjac Deer, Wood Mouse, Common Shrew, Short-tailed Vole and Grey Squirrel. Letchworth is one of the few places in Britain where the 'Black' Squirrel, a melanic form of the Grey, can be found. Although the squirrels are popular with visitors they can cause damage to trees on the Common.



A main visual feature of the site is the Horse Chestnut and Lime avenue that bisects it from north to south. The Horse Chestnut were planted by local school children in 1937 to mark the coronation of King George VI with the Lime inter-planted around 1978. The avenue follows the main axis upon which the Garden City was laid out in 1903.

Ridge and furrow features, some quite pronounced, are very evident across much of the site, reflecting former cultivation.

Further information on the species found on the common can be found in the appendices.

Access

In keeping with its town-centre location, Norton Common is surrounded by houses and is very well used by local residents for walking, dog-walking, picnicking and other forms of informal recreation; unsurprising in a town with a population of just over 33,000 people. Despite its name, the site is not registered as common land and nor are there any Public Rights of Way across it. There are, however, numerous paths, both official and unofficial, around and across the site, with various access points around the perimeter.

Surfaced paths provide access between Wilbury Road in the north and Icknield Way in the south and between Cowslip Hill in the west and the swimming pool and Norton Way North in the east. There are several wide grassy rides as well as paths following almost the entire boundary of the site. A network of informal paths has developed through the wooded and scrub areas, some of which are encouraged by clearance of encroaching vegetation whilst others are simply 'desire lines'.

Two good quality, tarmac car parks are available, one next to the bowling green and the other adjacent the outdoor swimming pool.

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A surfaced route exists from the common through the adjacent Pix Brook Meadows to Standalone Farm and the Letchworth Greenway in the north-west of the town.

Norton Common is not locked and is accessible 24 hours a day 365 days a year.

Disabled Access is available to many areas of the common and disabled parking bays are provided in the swimming pool car park.



The web site for North Hertfordshire District Council can be found at – www.north-herts.gov.uk

The Service Manager for Grounds, Mr Andrew Mills is available at the following email address – andrew.mills@north-herts.gov.uk

Norton Common is the only large open space in Letchworth Garden City that has conservation of the natural environment as a key element of its on going philosophy. Managing the site is therefore a balancing act between the needs of residents and visitors and the needs of the flora and fauna in the Common.

Available Facilities

- ☛ Bowling Greens
- ☛ Children's Equipped Play Grounds (one for young children, one for older)
- ☛ Bowls Pavilion for use by club members and Friends group meetings
- ☛ Tennis Courts (2 for adults and 3 for children)
- ☛ Outdoor Swimming Pool (including toddlers pool)
- ☛ Refreshments kiosk operating during pool opening hours
- ☛ Multi-Use Games Area
- ☛ Skate board facility
- ☛ 2 Car parks
- ☛ Various areas of amenity grass land
- ☛ Conservation grassland
- ☛ Conservation woodlands of various types
- ☛ Seats, benches, litter bins and dog bins
- ☛ Numerous footpaths throughout the site including surfaced
- ☛ Avenue of trees

This document and management plan are intended to bring together the wide variety of uses that the Common serves and that influence how it is managed, while moving forward from the conclusion of the previous plan that expired in 2015.

As a site the management of the common is divided up into various specialist areas, which are all overseen by The Grounds Team of NHDC.

Here is a brief description of the various maintenance elements to be found at Norton Common.

Bowling Greens

Since 2001 all the bowling greens in North Herts have been maintained by the various clubs themselves. Everything outside the green including the banks are maintained by the District Council.

So as to be able to continue to finance the provision of this facility the District Council negotiated an agreement with the clubs that entails the District Council providing an annual grant for the maintenance of the greens. The clubs enhance this with their membership fees and other fund raising events. The clubs are responsible for the maintenance of the greens, which is currently tendered out to a specialist turf company, they also provide an annual report or feedback about usage and club numbers.

The clubs have also contributed with funding and time to the refurbishment of the pavilions by installing new kitchens, flooring, improving the toilets and changing facilities.

Since the introduction of this agreement the value of the grant has not increased, not even to account for inflation.

The Grounds Team liaise with the clubs and various secretaries on a regular basis. The maintenance of the pavilion, irrigation and surrounding hedges, shrubs and footpaths are all the responsibility of The Grounds Team.



Bowling Green

Skate Park

Proposals for a skateboard park on Norton Common were approved by Letchworth Area Committee after a petition was received from local youngsters. The £50,000 Park was ready for action by March 2007. After the Council decision was made, Councillor Alison Kingman said, 'I congratulate Richard Porteous (14) and his fellow skateboarders for their campaign for a skateboard park on Norton Common, Letchworth. The recent public consultation on the Common was attended by over 150 people, including myself, and showed the tremendous local

interest in the project. In addition the Council has received a multitude of letters from residents.”

Outdoor Swimming Pool

Letchworth Outdoor Pool was built in 1935 and is located on the south east corner of Norton Common. The pool is a short walk from the Town Centre and railway station, and is open between early May – mid September each year. Refreshments are available at the pool and, in 2010, a kiosk to serve park users outside the swimming pool was also opened, through the installation of a hatch in the building wall. This operates during pool opening hours.

The key facilities and services offered at the pool include:

- 50 meter heated pool
- Grassed sunbathing area
- Toddlers pool
- Inflatable's and floats
- Free car parking
- Raised terrace
- Refreshments and snacks inside the pool building
- Kiosk serving general park users outside the pool building
- Private Hire

The pool is managed by NHDC's Leisure Services Section under separate contract arrangements but in partnership to provide a coordinated approach.

Grounds Maintenance Contract

The grounds contract covers the maintenance of the following items:

- General amenity grassed areas
- Play ground inspections and maintenance
- Hedge cutting
- Dog bins
- Litter bins
- Tennis Courts
- Skate area maintenance
- Sweeping of hard surfaces such as footpaths and car parks
- Leaf Collection/Removal

Grounds Contract Specifications (In Brief)

Grass Cutting – This is maintained on a performance basis on the main avenues and rides throughout the common. This also includes the maintenance of the smaller footpaths.



Toddlers play area



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Play Ground Inspections – A visual inspection is undertaken daily and is recorded. At the same time litter collection and minor repairs are undertaken. On a monthly basis maintenance inspections are undertaken and recorded. Required works are discussed at a specific regular meeting and a program of works agreed. On an annual basis an independent external inspector inspects all the districts play areas and this is also recorded. Any identified repairs are given a high, medium or low priority. All high priority works are immediately programmed for action with the medium priority following on. Low priority items are usually monitored.

Hedge Cutting – Formal hedges around the bowling greens and the perimeter of the common are maintained twice annually, once in May/June and again in August/September of each year.

Dog Bins – These are maintained on a once a week frequency.

Litter Bins – These are maintained on a once a day frequency.

Tennis Courts and MUGA – These are swept on a monthly basis and are over marked annually. These are also a free facility to anyone that wishes to use them.

Skate Area Maintenance – This is included within the maintenance regime for the adjacent play ground. This therefore includes daily inspections and litter collection. Other repairs are undertaken on an as and when required basis.

Sweeping Hard Surfaces – These are also swept on a monthly basis.

Leaf Collection/Removal – This is limited to the areas around the bowling greens and along the main avenue. Leaves are collected on four occasions from the 1st November to 31st December of each year.

Conservation and Biodiversity of Norton Common

NHDC works with CMS to maintain the biodiversity of the common. CMS are managed by Herts County Council but are co-funded by the majority of District Councils within the County including NHDC. In return the Districts receive advice and technical knowledge that would not always be possible to acquire. Additionally CMS are experts in managing volunteer task groups, liaison with local interested groups and developing 'friends of' groups with the District Council involved as a key element throughout. This includes the Friends of Norton Common. The main areas of management activity are in the conservation grassland and woodland / scrub.

Conservation Grassland – These are cut annually in the autumn with all arisings removed. The dry grassland is cut as part of the grounds



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maintenance contract whilst the wet grassland is currently cut by CMS and lifted by volunteers.

Trees and Woodland – Unsafe trees are managed by contract on a reactive basis. To date other small-scale woodland / scrub management work has been carried out by volunteers. Through this plan it is intended to introduce a more proactive approach to managing the woodlands and this will be through increased volunteer activity combined with planned contract work.

Previous Plans

In 1978 a plan was devised to guide the management of the site. This plan, agreed by the Council at that time included the introduction of a coppicing regime in the scrub areas (implemented between the late 1970's and mid 1990's), ride management and tree planting.

This was replaced by the Conservation and Site Management Plan 2005 to 2010 and subsequently 2010 to 2015, which this plan supersedes.

Relevant Dates Relating to the Plan

1978 Previous management adopted by the Council and the general principals within were implemented up to the late 1990's.

Agreement of Biodiversity Action Plan by the Councils Cabinet in July 2005

Adoption of the conservation site management plan in 2005

Local Nature Reserve status declared in August 2006

In 2009 & 2014 the Green Space Strategy was adopted

Legislation

The Common is fortunate enough to be covered under the local bye laws for Letchworth which can influence the way the Common is used and is supportive towards any police actions.

Issues

There are issues of flooding and pollution on the common, all from external sources. These are as follows:

Incidences of contamination of the main drainage ditch with pollutants (for instance diesel) apparently from the nearby industrial area. The Environment Agency are informed when incidences are known.

Pollution caused by sewage outflow at Cowslip Hill from the main sewer that crosses the common. This occurs in periods of high rainfall when the sewer cannot cope with the level of flow. The outflow contaminates the adjacent area of the common and waterways and has also damaged the easy-access path



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surfaces. After a sustained and concerted effort to lobby Anglian Water and the Environment Agency to address this issue, remedial works were undertaken in 2013 to install a holding tank for times of high flow. This has reduced the number of sewage pollution incidents but they do still occur and we continue to monitor and pursue this important issue.

Flooding associated with heavy rainfall, when the watercourses experience rapid increase in flow which can and does lead to localised flooding on site. The water brings a large amount of debris with it which exacerbates the problem by blocking the watercourses, especially at the grills across the various culverts. The latter are the responsibility of North Herts District Council and Environment Agency. A major watercourse restoration project was undertaken in 2014. This was primarily aimed at improving biodiversity through deshading and channel reprofiling but also included removal of several outdated and damaged culverts. It is hoped that this will help alleviate some of the flooding on the common.

As is the case in the rest of the UK, tree pests and diseases are a concern or potential concern on this site. Although there are a number of pests and diseases that may become an issue over time, the ones of particular current note on the common are as follows:

Many of the horse chestnut trees are affected by Leaf Minor Moth and / or Chestnut Bleeding Canker. Canker in particular has led to the death of some trees. The trees are monitored and dealt with according to good arboricultural practice and the needs of public safety.

The common also has a high population of ash trees which are, nationally, at threat from Ash Die-back. At present the disease is not recorded on the common but the trees are being monitored by the Friends group for signs of it. As yet there is no realistic treatment for this (or the above) disease(s) and this plan will therefore be flexible in its approach to future management of the trees and woodland areas. Any changes to management will be undertaken in accordance with the current scientific evidence and advice at the time.

Summary of the Green Flag Criteria as it exists at Norton Common

Welcoming Place

Welcoming

Norton Common is bordered on all sides by urban development. There are a number of access points to welcome visitors onto the common, all of which are signed.

There are two free car parks, next to the bowls greens and the outdoor swimming pool. The defined boundaries around the common provide for a safe atmosphere once you have arrived.

Good and Safe Access

Access is well defined for the areas of high use such as with the bowling greens and outdoor swimming pool. The provision of car parking at these areas ensures that pedestrians are kept away from the adjacent highways. Where there is pedestrian only access there is the provision of barriers to prevent direct access onto the highway. The pavement along the main entrance has been extended to meet the highway pavement with drop-down kerbs to allow easy access for walkers, wheelchairs and pushchairs.

Signage

All entrances are signed in the District Council's corporate style. In addition, interpretation panels, designed in partnership with the Friends Group, are installed at four entrances to the Common, showing where people can go and what they can see. Signs direct visitors from the town centre to the common. Notice boards at the main entrances, used by NHDC and Friends Group, providing an opportunity to keep visitors updated and a sense of community ownership.



Equal Access for all

The majority of entrances are accessible to everyone. Access and parking are free. The nature of the site (it is wet and uneven in places) means that access to certain areas can be difficult for those with restricted mobility. A range of access works have been undertaken to help address this. They have improved the surface of existing paths, provided a new surfaced route across the common (from east to west to link to the swimming pool and bowling green areas), surfaced several short sections of well-used but often-muddy paths and provided benches for resting at regular intervals around the path. Disabled parking bays



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are provided in the swimming pool car park. Access for wheelchairs has been provided onto the lower bowling green from both car parks. It is intended as part of this plan to provide more benches around the common.

Healthy, Safe and Secure

Safe Equipment and Facilities

Children's Playground

The playground is inspected daily by John O'Conner's as part of their contract arrangements with North Hertfordshire District Council. These inspections are recorded and undertaken before 12 noon each day 365 days a year. At the time of these visual inspections the operative will also undertake litter picking and minor repairs. Any vandalism or other damage that can not be repaired immediately is reported back to the Contract Manager. John O'Conner's are authorised to undertake small repairs immediately without waiting for an instruction to do so. This ensures the quickest response possible is achieved. If the required repair requires significant investment or liaison with The Grounds Team the piece of equipment concerned will be isolated and signs put up to warn the public of the situation.

Additionally a monthly inspection is undertaken by John O'Conner's which includes the maintenance issues relating to each piece of equipment such as lubrication. This is also recorded.

Finally an annual inspection is undertaken by Rospa or other appropriate organisation, which also includes updating Risk Assessments. These inspections identify recommendations specifically designed to reduce any risk of injury and to ensure the appropriate life span of the equipment is achieved and not curtailed due to neglect.

Open Spaces within the Common

We endeavour to ensure that the footpaths and walk ways are kept clear of over hanging vegetation and that maximum sight lines are achieved. This also helps keep the paths open to the sun and air so that they can dry out after wet weather and are therefore easier to use. These works are identified by undertaking regular inspections and also involve the Friends group, both to report problems and as a volunteer workforce to help keep paths clear where the work is suitable.

Personal Security in the Park

There isn't a problem currently, however due to the nature of the site with large areas of natural vegetation and informal footpaths running through the whole site there could be a perception or fear of a potential danger. As previously mentioned we endeavour to maintain clear sight lines and there is a programme of work to keep paths open and wide.



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Signage has been installed to welcome visitors and show them where they can go and what they can see. These are to a District-wide standard and have been installed across all the District's parks and open spaces.

John O'Conner's are present on the common on a daily basis and have become well known to various members of the public. The Friends group are also well known and regularly on site and have their own branded sweatshirts to encourage awareness and approachability.

The Police PCSOs include the site in their regular patrols.

Dog Fouling

There are numerous dog bins located throughout the Common. The dog bins are maintained on a weekly basis with additional visits if they become full at anytime. These are not always used by dog walkers. Due to budgetary constraints the District Council does not employ a dog warden. The Friends group are active in trying to change the behaviour of the individuals involved and, under this plan, options for appropriate signage to try to reinforce this will be investigated and trialled.

Appropriate Provision of Facilities

The Common provides a mix of formal and informal recreational facilities. The larger part of the site is a Local Nature Reserve and is intended to be as natural as possible within the urban environment of Letchworth. In this area the provision of facilities has been kept to a minimum. Formal facilities, including an open-air swimming pool, bowling greens, tennis courts, skateboard facility, Multi Use Games Area (MUGA) and children's play areas are located together in the southwest corner of the site and together they provide a high level of resource to the community.

A number of years ago the District Council went through a process of identifying areas for significant savings. To achieve this and not to reduce the standards of service delivery the concept of devolving the maintenance of bowling greens to the clubs was developed. After much discussion this arrangement commenced in 2001. To date this arrangement has proved successful for both parties with the clubs being able to achieve the standards of maintenance they expect and keep the clubs running while reducing the costs of the facility to the District Council.

The site lacks a year-round café but in 2010, after negotiations with the company that runs the swimming pool, we have been able to arrange for them to serve refreshments through a new hatch in the wall. This has proved extremely popular and is available when the pool is open between May and the end of September.

Toilets are available for swimming pool users and at the bowling club when the greens are in use.

Quality of Facilities

All the facilities on the Common receive regular maintenance to ensure that they are safe and suitable for their intended purpose.

Clean and Well Maintained

Litter and Waste Management

Litter picking, including emptying of the litter bins is undertaken twice a day 365 days a year by contractors with additional support from the Friends group.

Waste management involves the green waste recycling of any arisings produced as part of our activities. Any woody arisings are shredded on site and are used as a mulch within the general area of any work. When any green waste arisings are removed from any site they are collected and taken to a District-wide green waste recycling scheme. The green waste is composted to produce a soil conditioner product that is sold directly to the public or through local garden centres.

Traditionally, any arisings generated by the volunteer activities have been either composted, burnt or stock piled as brash habitats on site. However, to reduce the amount of burning on site the volunteers are increasingly working with the contractors to enable brash to be chipped and used as path surfacing through the wooded areas. We are also looking at the possibility of removing grass arisings from volunteer activities from site, to be composted off-site with the rest of the green waste.

Grounds Maintenance

All grounds maintenance activities are provided through the current contract arrangements with John O'Conner's Grounds Maintenance Ltd who are also ISO 9002, ISO14001, OHSAS18001 and BS ISO10002:2004 accredited.

Building and Infrastructure Maintenance

The bowls pavilion and hard surface footpaths are maintained by the Grounds Team. The Outdoor Swimming Pool is maintained by Leisure Services as a separate operation.

The footpath running North South through the Avenue in the centre of the Common was resurfaced and widened to include a cycle path in 2006. This work was funded by Herts County Council as part of their cycle network plans and was project managed by the Groundwork Trust. It has significantly improved the major through route in the Common. Other paths have also since been





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surfaced and further minor improvements are included in this plan.

The bowls pavilion was renovated in 2005 with a complete external re-decoration. During 2006 the Bowls Club organised and sought funding to renew the kitchen and replace the flooring within the pavilion. This was a joint venture with North Hertfordshire District Council which provided small grants and technical advice while the club sought quotations and, to keep costs to a minimum, even undertook some of the work themselves.

To ensure their continued high quality, the car parks and tarmaced paths are to be resurfaced as part of this plan.

Equipment, Maintenance, Staff

John O'Conner's maintain all their own equipment. One of the principals of their tender that was favourable, over and above price, was that they have a specific mechanic dedicated to the North Herts contract for the maintenance of the equipment. This ensures that any neglect on behalf of the operatives is immediately identified and that down time is kept to a minimum. Additionally, maintenance and service regimes can be adjusted to the local circumstances. This also ensures that all the machinery is operating at its optimum efficiency and is therefore reducing its environmental impact.

John O'Conner's ride-on machines are all predominately Toro manufactured. The volume and close proximity of the Toro Head Office has developed into a very good relationship where John O'Conner's are providing advice on design and weaknesses that are incorporated into later production models.

To ensure that key horticultural skills are retained John O'Conner's have set up two Apprentice Schemes where operatives are working towards NVQ qualifications. The schemes commenced in 2007 and to date four operatives have achieved valuable qualifications and it has shown that training can help retain valuable staff and help keep an employee base within the local community.

Sustainability

Environmental Sustainability

Due to the nature of the site and the way it is managed the Common is sustainable, a resource for the community and natural habitat and is a major green lung as part of Letchworth Garden City and close to the city centre.

Pesticides

Pesticides are only used on this site in extreme circumstances. The use of any pesticide is only considered as a last resort. Currently pesticides are only being used to control a weed problem with Russian Comfrey, which has been invading (and smothering) areas of the species-rich grassland. Manual removal has been

tried and has proved unsuccessful. There is also a problem with thistles in another area of species-rich grassland and if revised cutting regimes prove unsuccessful chemical control may have to be employed. In both cases it is / will be through careful spot-treating.

Peat Use

Peat is not used on this site. As a general principal across the whole District peat use is kept to a minimum when economic alternatives can not be found for items such as seasonal bedding.

Waste Minimisation

As described in Litter and Waste Management above.

Arboriculture and Woodland Management

NHDC undertake a Tree Survey on the common every three years, to identify any risks and to direct future management. This is in line with the Council's Greenspace Strategy and Tree Strategy.

Technical advice and support is provided by the District Councils Tree Officer, who manages a number of specialist contractors to undertake specific larger operations that involve larger trees and in areas of high risk to the public. This would also include management of the larger trees within the Common so that it remains as safe as possible. Additional woodland management activity is undertaken by volunteers working with the Countryside Management Service and the Friends group.

This plan outlines the vision for the tree, woodland and scrub habitats on the site and provides a 5 year management programme for them. In light of the appearance of Ash Dieback in England and the threat of other tree pests and diseases, management may need to change. The woodland and trees on the common will be managed in line with current scientific knowledge and best practice advice available at the time. This plan will retain the flexibility to deal with any changes in management thereby required.

Conservation and Heritage

Conservation of natural features, wild fauna and flora

Due to the range of flora and fauna species found at Norton Common, including some of County rarity, it is one of the key sites featured in the Council's Biodiversity Action Plan. It is a County Wildlife Site and has also been declared a Local Nature Reserve. The Common is the largest green space in Letchworth and makes a significant contribution to the conservation of the wild flora and fauna within North Herts. This is managed through this Management Plan and associated Grounds Maintenance Contract and with the involvement of the



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Countryside Management Service, Friends of Norton Common and other volunteers.

Conservation of Landscape Features

The management plan and general grounds maintenance contract are designed to ensure that the landscape features of the common are preserved. The key natural landscape features are the Avenue, the Pix Brook and other watercourses, Ridge and Furrow workings of mediaeval origin, boulder clay marsh, neutral grassland meadow and the woodland.

Advice is sought where necessary to ensure that these features are protected (for instance from the District Council's Archaeology Officer when surfacing works were undertaken and from the Environment Agency for the recent watercourse restoration works).

Conservation of Buildings and Structures

All of the buildings and major structures on the Common are maintained to ensure that they are conserved for future generations. The bowls pavilion and outdoor swimming pool are both covered within specific building preservation orders and are typical examples of architecture in Letchworth.

Community Involvement

The Friends of Norton Common held their first meeting in November 2005. This took place following the introduction of new policies by NHDC to encourage the development of Friends of Groups, which subsequently prompted a letter drop to all the neighbours of the common and interested parties. The first meeting was held in the bowls pavilion and hosted by the Bowls Club on the common. Over 60 people turned up.

The second meeting took place in February 2006 when a committee was developed and a basic constitution formulated. The general principals of the then newly-proposed management plan were discussed and future projects for the Common were identified.

The first Friends group practical task was undertaken on the 19th February 2006. This was also well supported and the tasks have been running monthly ever since, sometimes fortnightly during the winter. The group has four trained volunteer leaders and first aid support. They carry out a wide range of activities across the common helping to conserve its wildlife and maintain access and information for visitors. As well as regular volunteer participants, they have involved the local cubs, scouts and school who have taken part in various work parties.



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All this development has been undertaken with our partners Countryside Management Service (CMS) to whom the District Council contribute towards the operation costs. In return CMS act as a technical advisor to the District Council, help run volunteer groups and develop Friends Groups with the local community.

CMS have also significantly contributed to the development of the Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) approach, which is a map based version of the management plan that identifies one years activity on one page.

The Friends of Norton Common role / activities include:

- Annual open meetings and more frequent committee meetings
- Ad hoc site meetings as required
- Regular practical tasks on site
- Involvement in the decision making process including
 - Agreement regarding work programs
 - Agreement of the work program relating to John O'Conner's

Consultation has included:

- Meetings / open meetings / presentations on the management plan and other proposals
- Specific guided walks and talks to highlight the site and management proposals
- Involvement in devising and producing site interpretation
- Articles in the local press
- Emails to Friends group members and other interested parties
- Consultation regarding the cycle path and other access improvements
- Launch of the Local Nature Reserve status
- Information displayed on site notice boards
- Use of the website to keep people informed of proposals and progress

Support for the Friends group has included a range of training to enable them to work in safety with increased independence. This has included Task Planning and Leadership, First Aid, Publicity, Strimmer use, Woodland Management and Tree Health Surveying. In addition, they have been supported to make a successful application for grant funding to purchase their own tools.

Marketing

Norton Common is already a popular resource for the residents of Letchworth. However maintaining the Green Flag Scheme standards and Local Nature Reserve status are significantly increasing the quality and quantity of publicity that can be attracted to the Common.

Interpretation panels and the site leaflet have provided visitors with a new window onto the common. The leaflet, which has been reprinted due to demand, is distributed through a wide range of local outlets, including on-site, and is also

available on-line. Opportunities for additional interpretation for specific aspects of the common will be pursued as part of this plan.

The activities of the Friends group also generates publicity and enjoys the support of local Councillors from Letchworth Town Council, NHDC and HCC, some of whom are also Friends. The Friends have branded sweatshirts and reflective tabards so that they can easily be identified and approached by visitors when working on site.

Events include:

- Regular guided walks
- One-off activities such as:
 - the LNR launch event which 70 people including approximately 30 children attended and for which we achieved articles in the local press and bookshops
 - Green Flag status celebration – articles in local press
- Monthly practical tasks
- Friends of Norton Common Open meetings
- Weekly Health Walks using the site



Promotion includes:

- Friends of Norton Common website, publicity and minutes of meetings
- Regular updates and posters on site notice boards
- Leaflet reprinted due to demand (total 8,000 copies) and distributed widely
- Interpretation panels at main entrances on site
- Dedicated page on NHDC website, including leaflet to download
- Dedicated page on CMS website, including project updates and leaflet to download
- Signage on site and from town centre
- Health Walk promoted through 2,000 leaflets and 750 emails distributed every 4 months and advertised on county and national Health Walks websites
- Articles in local press and other media (such as DC's Outlook magazine)
- Guided walks publicised in County's Walks and More programme
- Friends of Norton Common wear branded sweatshirts and tabards on site
- Several geocaches located on site, managed by relevant interest groups

Management

This is undertaken in conjunction with the Grounds Team and Countryside Management Service, with tasks and operations undertaken by the Friends group, volunteers and John O'Conner Grounds Maintenance Ltd.



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Aims and Objectives

Mission Statement

North Hertfordshire District Council's Mission Statement for Norton Common is as follows:

- To recreate a vibrant community-based open space in the centre of Letchworth Garden City that focuses on maintaining the diverse flora and fauna that can be found at Norton Common
- To link with at least one of the Council's Strategic Priorities. To promote the economic, environmental and social well being of the district.

The Council's Priorities for 2014/15 onwards are:

- Promoting sustainable growth
- Working with our communities
- Living within our means

Corporate Vision for Parks and Open Spaces

North Hertfordshire District Council manages parks and open spaces throughout the four towns in the District. These form an integral element of the environment and appropriate provision and management is essential to meet the Council's vision to:

- Provide high quality services which put people first
- Provide value for money by running our services more efficiently
- Promote the economic, environmental and social well-being of the district

Green space forms a vital element in any urban environment. It provides a sense of natural calm in a man made environment. This has a direct affect on the social well-being of residents and helps to support the ecology and bio-diversity of the urban environment.

Corporate Objectives

1. To contribute to the implementation of the Council's Environmental and community policies
2. To promote and manage the common to meet the local communities expectations
3. To ensure contractors and their staff are sufficiently trained to maintain the common to the specified standards



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4. To provide long term planning to ensure good planned proactive management
5. To provide a high standard of management and maintenance of Norton Common
6. To provide sufficient continuing resources to meet the above objectives

Management Objectives, maintenance and development arrangements

The long-term aim for the site is to retain a mixed semi-natural habitat incorporating trees, scrub, grass and wetland enhanced for wildlife whilst providing the opportunity for quiet enjoyment by visitors. At the same time the aim is to provide quality facilities for formal activities such as the Bowls Greens, Play areas, Outdoor Swimming Pool and other general recreational activities.

To this end the **site objectives** are:

- To maintain, enhance and extend the areas of boulder clay marsh.
- To maintain and enhance the area of neutral grassland.
- To manage and enhance the woodland and scrub, focusing on the ecological value, particularly for birds, to improve the appearance and 'feel' for the benefit of visitors and to support the development of sustainable woodland areas in the light of upcoming challenges including climate change and tree pests and diseases
- To maintain and enhance the recreational value of the whole site and increase enjoyment and understanding of it for visitors.
- To retain a balance between use of the site by visitors and wildlife in keeping with its town centre location and 'garden city' objectives, particularly by focussing visitor pressure away from the fragile wetland habitats.
- To maintain high quality facilities on site such as the Muga, Play Area, Tennis Courts, Bowling Greens, Pavilion and Swimming Pool.

Monitoring and Review

All activities on the common are monitored by NHDC's in-house Grounds Monitoring Team. The monitoring is undertaken as part of the Grounds Contract Performance Monitoring System which is flexible enough to highlight any areas of deficiency.

Norton Common is formally inspected at least once a month which is reported at each monthly contract meeting. Any contract failures are discussed at each meeting with agreements reached with regards remedial actions.



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The Grounds Maintenance Contract also includes the development of partnership arrangements between North Herts District Council and John O'Conner's which are discussed at a quarterly review meeting.

Norton Common is identified within Officers' own annual work programs and also in the Grounds Teams' work programme which is also reviewed as part of individual one-to-ones and the annual appraisal process.

The Action Plan will be reviewed at least once annually with members of the Friends Group. This meeting will have minutes taken and agreement will be reached regarding any alterations to the plan contained within this document.

The Green Flag application and judging process provides an opportunity for additional external feedback on the site and implementation of its management plan.

The Management Plan will be reviewed and updated every 5 years.