



NATURAL GOLDSWORTH PARK



A Review of the Vision Statement Projects for the North Meadow and Woodland, Revised Proposals and Action Plan

By the Natural Goldsworth Park Working Group

Executive Summary

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The following Executive Summary must be read in conjunction with the detailed Review document and associated Appendices.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Natural Goldsworth Park Working Group has undertaken a detailed review of the aspirational projects identified in the Vision Statement issued in 2016. The purpose of the Review is to interrogate each project in terms of its

- *Feasibility*
- *Desirability*
- *Sustainability*
- *Benefits and costs to the habitats and their users*
- *Priority for implementation*
- *Financial and resource costs*
- *Implementation time*
- *Post-implementation ecological and user consequences*

The review proposes an Action Plan to take the NGP project forward for consideration by key stakeholders and suggests alternative approaches where appropriate with some new ideas for realising NGP's objectives.

In reviewing the Vision Statement and reaching its conclusions, the Group has called on guidance and advice from the many naturalists who have kindly volunteered their time, support and knowledge towards improving our understanding of the Meadow and woodland as wild habitats, and has sought input from representatives of WBC and Thames Water ("TW"). The Group has researched information from many organisations with specialised knowledge as referenced in the report.

1.0 NGP OBJECTIVES

NGP's objectives have been revised and expanded (revisions in blue):

1. To maximise the contribution this area makes to the Natural Woking and Woking 2050 Strategy objectives;
2. To improve and enhance biodiversity and sustainability through a high quality natural habitat;
3. To provide a safe, enjoyable and visually stimulating natural environment for users;
4. To provide encouragement and opportunities for schools to use the area as an outdoor classroom;
5. **To inform and increase the community's knowledge and understanding of the Meadow's and woodland's plant- and animal life and of that more generally found across Goldsworth Park through personal experience and by print, broadcast media or social media-based information sources e.g. local press and radio, Goldsworth News, Facebook, Twitter; GPCA website;**
6. **To actively promote and encourage the community's engagement and involvement with the Meadow and woodland habitats;**
7. **In collaboration with other parties, to promote and create opportunities for community participation in expanding the natural history knowledge base through volunteering and citizens' science projects;**
8. **To encourage and facilitate recreational use of the Meadow and woodland by the community whilst minimising potential conflicts with the sustainability of their ecosystems;**
9. **To liaise and work with all stakeholders, particularly the landowners, on matters of land management;**
10. To ensure accessibility, every day of the week, on foot ~~or by cycle~~, and so far as is practicable, for those with disabilities and limited mobility;
11. To encourage less active users to improve their fitness, health and well-being;

The Group's review of the Vision Statement's project proposals has concluded:

Conversion of habitat from grasses to wildflowers

The management strategy for the Meadow discussed and agreed with Woking Borough Council is to take a measured and considered approach to conserving the Meadow by recognising and enhancing the prevailing biodiversity in such a way that the existing habitat and ecosystem are not overwhelmed and radically altered by change. The existing management methodology would remain essentially unchanged,

Assessment of the suitability of prevailing site conditions concludes it is Species Poor Improved Grassland and has Low Potential for botanical enhancement. Adapting conditions to suit wildflowers in the commonly understood sense of a wildflower meadow would be highly intrusive, impractical and would essentially destroy the existing habitat and its ecosystem.

Following discussion with Woking Borough Council officers, it has been agreed that most appropriate strategy would be to increase the distribution of the flowering plants now present across the Meadow and to supplement them through careful evaluation and selection of new native species that will tolerate the site conditions without demanding frequent re-seeding.

Retention of a simple network of grassed paths suitable for foot and cycle

A simpler path network to link the key access points onto the Meadow is recommended which hopefully would encourage birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles (if present) to occupy the resulting larger, undisturbed sections of grassland, and also make the transit through the meadow more interesting by introducing curves rather than the current straight point to point path arrangement.

Transformation of the North Meadow woodland and wetland habitat

We are in contact with Woking Borough Council and Thames Water about producing a coordinated management plan for their respective woodland areas.

We are pleased to see that TW has completed the path through its area and will be continuing the removal of the invasive Cherry Laurel over the coming years. Depending on what species colonise the new open areas, we would welcome efforts to improve diversity by planting a more varied range of woodland vascular species to provide cover for invertebrates, amphibians and mammals.

We suggest replacing the Cherry Laurel screen along the north Lake bank with native plants such as hazel and hawthorn as planted around the Lake's nature reserve area. This would considerably reduce the risk of the Cherry Laurel continuing to invade the woodland. Dense planting would deter public access whilst offering a view from the Lake into the woodland.

To achieve a balance between public access and protection of wildlife from disturbance, the existing natural vegetation barriers around the north woodland should be maintained. We would prefer not to see any more access points or paths created to avoid habitat disturbance.

The proposed wetland area is intermittently flooded after prolonged rainfall. We do not believe creating ponds and scrapes in the woodland would offer any benefits to indigenous wildlife and indeed may prove detrimental to amphibians' spawning efforts if they dry out prematurely. However, specialist advice on the feasibility of this proposal and likely outcomes should be sought before its dismissal.

Education

Greater effort is needed to inform the community about NGP's objectives and proposals, and to encourage engagement with and appreciation of the local natural environment. Focus should be placed on use and exploitation of current and new publicly accessible information sources (websites, press, radio/TV media, and social media). The NGP content on the GPCA website will be updated to be more informative about NGP's objectives and activities.

Opportunities for community participation in citizens' science projects with local wildlife groups should be developed and encouraged.

Community involvement in management of the Meadow and woodland is seen as key. As new initiatives are developed and implemented we will continue to seek volunteer assistance from residents. Such opportunities will be publicised through the media outlets noted above.

The Vision Statement projects involving heritage and site history recognition are not considered relevant to NGP's focus on the natural environment and have been omitted. However, recording these aspects may be of interest to GPCA and WBC.

Heritage planting, improvements and increasing accessibility

Whilst the projects identified in the Vision Statement have merit, the Group has concluded that such matters do not fall within the remit of NGP's focus on the Goldsworth Park natural environment. The proposed heritage planting proposal has been omitted in accordance with the wishes of the late Martin Slocock.

Cycle and Footpath Network- New Opportunities and Way Signs

Again, the Group has concluded that the alterations or additions to the cycling and footpath network fall outside the remit of NGP. We note the matter is addressed in the Woking Borough Council Infrastructure Plan report issued in 2020 which contains no proposals for the Meadow and woodland areas.

People Facilities

The matter of a picnic area and additional seating is being addressed by GPCA. The Group does not consider a catering outlet to be desirable from an environmental viewpoint nor financially viable for an operator.

3.0 NEW IDEAS

Tiny Forest

A Tiny Forest comprises 600 native trees contained in an area equivalent to that of a tennis court (~200sq.m). It adopts a planting technique developed in Japan requiring the ground to be excavated to a depth of 1m and the soil enriched with a natural conditioner. It is therefore highly space efficient. The initiative is administered in the UK by EarthWatch, a leading environmental charity. Since completion of the first UK Tiny Forest in 2020, the initiative has achieved extensive media coverage including a feature on BBC's CountryFile programme. At the end of 2020, the Government agreed funding for a further 12 installation across the UK.

We see a Tiny Forest on the Meadow as providing a very valuable long term investment benefitting the local community and in particular local schools and schoolchildren. The small ground area required would have minimal impact on the Meadow habitat.

EarthWatch reports the total cost of a Tiny Forest is ~£30 000 inclusive of VAT. The cost encompasses EarthWatch involvement in project and partnership management for 2 years after planting.

Early investigation has identified several possible routes to funding through the public sector, National Lottery, crowd funding and commercial sponsorship.

A Tiny Forest would provide a focal point for Meadow users and could be integrated with a broader approach to community education and engagement with the adjoining natural environmental features (see below). By including an adjacent area with examples of wildflowers present on the Meadow and identification information, a centralised Learning Zone for school and community use could be provided.

Nature Trail

Recent completion of the path through the south woodland by Thames Water opens the possibility of creating a nature trail taking in the Meadow, the woodland and the Lake.

The multiple paths across the Meadow would allow flexibility in selecting an appropriate route or routes. This could be extended to encompass the small area of woodland to the north of the hockey and soccer pitches. Financial costs would be incurred for simple way marking. In addition, information about what to see will be needed for users, in the form of information boards or material downloadable from the GPCA website or via a dedicated app.

No progress has yet been made on enhancing plant diversity on the Meadow, and clearance of Cherry Laurel in the south woodland has left large open spaces. Wildlife surveys are yet to be completed so a full understanding of what may be seen by users is not available at present. Consequently, the Group sees this proposal as a medium-long term aspiration that should be delayed until the Meadow and woodland planting has been enhanced and meaningful and informative content for a trail can be identified.

Community orchard

A suggestion was made for a community orchard on or close to the Meadow. The Group notes that a community orchard was planted on the Lakeview estate in 2012. The success or otherwise of this is not known. In the Group's opinion its proximity may prejudice any application for funding. Concerns were also raised in respect of potential vandalism and long term sustainability if maintained by voluntary effort.

"Blossom Together"

Blossom Together is a recent initiative from the National Trust which seeks to plant rings of blossoming trees in urban centres. There is very little information about the scheme, funding sources or application process on the National Trust website.

The Group notes the scheme is focussed on implementation in city centres. Taking account of the local authority's reticence about increasing tree cover on the Meadow and the specific locational criteria operated by the National Trust, we doubt an application would be successful.

BioBlitz

BioBlitz is a scheme designed to encourage community involvement with recording biodiversity in the natural environment. The community is invited to participate in surveys and to record plants and animals found alongside scientists and naturalists to achieve a given target within a set period of time, typically 24 hours e.g. maximum number of different species.

We consider the organisation, planning and management of a BioBlitz event would be beyond the resources and capabilities of NGP alone. Partnership with other bodies such as Surrey Wildlife Trust, WBC or TW may be possible.

Exhibitions

Smaller scale exhibitions by local wildlife groups to showcase their work and the diversity of wildlife present on the Meadow, around the lake and in the woodland would be more manageable than a BioBlitz. These could take place at Goldwater Lodge and possibly be tied in with larger events such as the Dragon Boat Challenge and Fun Day.

The Group views exhibitions as something for future consideration and development once there is a better understanding of the ecology of the Meadow and in the woodland. Costs for exhibitions on the lines suggested would be relatively low (venue hire principally).

4.0 ACTION PLAN AND PRIORITIES

The Group has prepared an Action Plan (see main report) setting out an indicative 6 year timeline and estimated individual timescales for implementing the Review's recommendations. It must be noted that in many cases, implementation is wholly dependent on securing funding. The actions recommended in the Review and our assessment of relative priorities are set out in the table below:

Action	Priority	Comment
Extend and update wildlife and botanical surveys	High	48 months update cycle?
Meadow wildflower range expansion and enhancement	High	
Simplify Meadow path network	High	
Complete clearance of Cherry Laurel from woodland	High	Phased
Enhance woodland understorey and field level plant diversity	High	Phased by agreement with WNC and TW
Improve information dissemination to GP community	High	
Develop contacts with local schools to encourage use of the Meadow and woodland for education	High	
Replace Cherry Laurel along north Lake footpath	Medium	Phased by agreement with WBC and TW
Develop community citizens' science participation with local wildlife groups	Medium	
Establishment of a nature trail	Medium	
Organise exhibitions by local wildlife groups	Medium	

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Review has proved worthwhile in identifying where the Vision Statement's aspirations are feasible and/or desirable, and where changes, omissions and additions to those aspirations are considered appropriate. New ideas have been considered and recommended or rejected. The exercise has provided a foundation for an achievable Action Plan and a firm structure for future action.

The Review has given us the opportunity to restate NGP's *raison d'être* and to expand its objectives.

The surveys undertaken to date have shown that the Meadow, Lake and woodland areas offer valuable diverse and vibrant habitats that are worthy of conservation and of responsible, sympathetic enhancement. Our understanding of their ecosystems will grow as more surveys are completed and regularly updated.

There is much to be done to increase the community's engagement with the local natural environment, to develop its understanding and appreciation of the local habitats and wildlife, and to encourage its involvement in their long term care and enhancement. The Group believes the measures and actions it has recommended will advance these purposes.

6.0 POST SCRIPT

Following a meeting with the Trustees of GPCA, the report's recommendations have been refined to identify the following actions to be included in the Action Plan-

Project 1; Meadow

- Increase the distribution of wild flowers now present and supplement with new native species tolerant of prevailing site conditions
- Liaise with WBC in agreeing and implementing a simplified path network

Project 2: Woodland

- Liaise with WBC and TW regarding a coordinated management plan including removal of invasive Cherry Laurel
- Liaise with WBC and TW regarding increasing the diversity and distribution of woodland vascular plant species
- Depending on management responsibility, liaise with WBC and TW regarding replacement of the Lakeside Cherry Laurel screen planting with native species
- Work with WBC and TW on means of achieving a balance between public access to the woodland and conservation/protection of wildlife

Project 3: Education

- Produce regular NGP contributions to Goldsworth News
- Revive production and issue of newsletters for the Friends of Natural Goldsworth Park as and when circumstances demand
- Generate support by expanding membership of Friends of Goldsworth Park
- Update the NGP pages on the GPCA website
- Investigate use of additional social media platforms e.g. NextDoor Goldsworth Park and the GPCA Facebook and Twitter accounts to promote NGP
- Encourage and develop opportunities for community involvement with management of the Meadow and woodland with landowners and other stakeholders
- Develop opportunities for community participation in citizens science research in the Goldsworth Park area through local wildlife groups and other national bodies e.g. conducting plant/wildlife surveys in the field or in gardens
- Develop contacts with senior teaching staff at Beaufort Primary School and investigate how better use of the Meadow and woodland for teaching purposes can be made

New Ideas

- With WBC and TW, investigate provision of a nature trail encompassing the Meadow, woodland and Lake with suitable way marking and information boards
- Arrange small scale public exhibitions by local wildlife groups and national conservation organisations to illustrate their work and to showcase the diversity of plant and wildlife present in the Goldsworth Park and surrounding areas e.g. Horsell Common