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Stoke Park - Future Plans – the Society’s response to consultation

Introduction and summary

Bristol Civic Society very much supports the plans to improve Stoke Park. Stoke Park is a valuable and attractive landscape within the city, despite the M32’s noise and barrier to access. The park is insufficiently appreciated because of its lack of accessibility, and lacks its own identity due to the invisibility of its connections with its past. It is in need of proper management.

The consultation asks respondents to prioritise a list of improvements. All the listed improvements are needed, but we would prioritise first getting more people involved and improving access, second visitor information, and third repair and maintenance. We suggest that encouraging the active use of the park should be given more weight than is shown in the consultation documents.

Our order of priority for the developments would be:

1) Encourage involvement and activity

- Encourage more community involvement in the management of the park
- Develop a programme of community events and activities for volunteers
- Restore historic paths so that everyone of all abilities can enjoy the park
- A café
- A car park

The café/ visitor centre/ carpark would be an initial focus for the community involvement.

2) Provide visitor information

- Interpretation boards and visitor information
- Provide signage to direct visitors around the park

3) Repair and restore

- Repair historic structures
- Replant parkland trees and remove some trees and scrub
- Introduce good woodland management

Comments

The Society’s concerns and suggestions are:

- 1 Encouraging active use of the park

The plan is understandably and reasonably very much driven by the objective of managing the heritage and natural assets of the park, and these aspects are analysed exhaustively in the conservation management plan and form most of the plan's proposals. However, if the park is to meet the green space needs of the residential communities on two sides of the park, and other visitors, these considerations need to be complemented by plans for encouraging the active use of the park. The consultation documents do not address these aspects so exhaustively, but they are equally important, and potential funders will want to have confidence that the plans are robust in that respect.

1.1 Access to the park

Even if the improvement proposals are implemented, the numbers of people accessing the park could remain lower than it could be. There needs to be more of a travel and access plan for the site. The conservation management plan recognises "the need to increase the capacity for pedestrian and cycle access to Stoke Park, and to facilitate the use of public transport to visit the site" (section 6.5.4) and the plan addresses access within the park, but the plan does not address access *to* the park by active travel modes.

There may be many entrance points, but they are not obvious and there are no welcoming gateways. In particular, more could be done to improve the gateway from Stapleton, ie the access from the road that goes over a bridge over the M32 and leads up to Heath House.

The Society does not wish to encourage unnecessary travel by car, but one would expect an open space of this size to have more than one car park. There would seem to be a need for a car park at one of the two entrances on the Stapleton/Broomhill side of the park – P7 or P8 on the map on the Site Description areas map. The choice of location and design of car park would have to take into account the comments made on page.

One of the access points considered in the Conservation Management Plan (labelled C7) is at Lockleaze Community Centre on Romney Road. This is next door to St James Church. An access point, ideally with café/visitor centre/car park, close to the centre of Lockleaze would be a good way of supporting the community aspirations to intensify the use of Gainsborough Square. This would support the local community, and perhaps generate greater visitor numbers to support local shopping, to bring about a better retail offer. Both buildings are currently in active use and the access point is not currently deliverable, but it might be worth at least adding to the plan an aspirational access point opposite Cameron Walk as a place-marker for the future.

1.2 Walking routes

More should be made of the superb views from the high ground in the park, not just from Dower House. The proposed accessible routes should take advantage of these views, perhaps diverging from the historic routes in order to take more advantage of the views. Care should be

taken so that proposed new trees and hedges do not obscure the views, as the restored St John's wall has done.

Consideration should be given to providing an accessible route which follows a circular route around the park, not just linear routes. The plans include short circuits within the woodland areas, and longer secondary non-accessible routes, but not any longer circuits through the park. In particular, the plans do not include an accessible circuit starting and ending at the entrance by the Duchess Pond.

The walking routes should indicate the points of interest in the park, of which there are quite a few, and views of note.

Has Bristol Physical Access Chain been consulted about accessible routes? The group is not listed in the list of organisations in the Conservation Management Plan.

1.3 Cycling routes

We understand that the Council's aspirational network of cycle routes includes a leisure route between the Romney Avenue 'Vench' playground and Muller Road (near the junction with Stortbury Road), making use of St John's Lane for part of the route. This would link up with cycle routes at either end. This will not be welcomed by all park users, but needs to be considered.

1.4 Other facilities

The Conservation Management Plan (3.12.3) refers to 2013 consultation feedback, which included the following facilities: more benches, more bins, bike racks, woodland play equipment. None of these are mentioned in the plans. To this could be added play activity areas spread around the park.

1.5 Activities

The Conservation Management Plan records existing activities (3.9.1): dog-walking, jogging, fishing, pedestrian and cycle link, sledging, picnicking, unauthorised off-road motorcycling, events such as wildlife walks and talks.

The Conservation Management Plan (3.12.3) refers to 2013 consultation feedback, which included possible events and activities: various annual events, e.g. fireworks night, fetes, concerts; cycle hire; boating; mountain bike races; community picnics; cross-country running/orienteering; not as appropriate as Ashton Court for big events due to proximity to residential areas.

We are unclear why the plan makes no mention of the use of Lockleaze open space for playing fields. They may not require much development, but they are an important use of the park.

2 Comments on specific areas of the park

House Park – this flat area nearest the M32 and the lower areas of Purdown feels under-used.

Sims Hill – could a footpath be created between Sims Hill across the new bus-only bridge over the M32 towards Stapleton Road, and perhaps creating a circuit by linking through to the Broomhill section of Stoke Park ?

M32 – the Conservation Management Plan acknowledges “the overwhelming noise of the M32 traffic in the park adjacent to the motorway”. The proposed mitigation (section 7.4.6) is to “reduce the acoustic and visual impact of the M32 by seeking the replacement of the decaying wire security fence with a standard (2.1/2.4m) timber noise barrier fence along the more accessible level motorway section. This would be enough to reduce the level of road surface noise in the areas closest to the motorway.” This does not seem to have been carried through to the summary proposals, but it should be part of the plan. The noise from the M32 permeates the park more widely than “the areas closest to the motorway” and takes away the tranquility of the area. If possible, the noise abatement measures should be stronger than that proposed in the conservation management plan, so as to be effective over a wide area.

3 Lack of Council resource

The huge task of restoring and improving the park is being tackled at a time when the Council has proposed massive budget cuts for parks in Bristol. Plainly the capacity of community-based resources to fill the gap will be tested. Hopefully the risk to council resource will not jeopardise the funding bids. Similarly the ongoing maintenance and facilitation of activity will have to rely on community resource – co-ordinated by the Stoke Park Delivery Group.