

THE COMMON

Keynote address by Roger Brown at the 43rd HRA AGM, 11th April 2019

As the largest urban common outside London, and bigger than Hyde Park, Southampton Common is one of the jewels in the City's crown. But it is a somewhat tarnished one. Many years of neglect and underinvestment have left large parts of it looking very tired. Many of the facilities – such as the Hawthorns Urban Wildlife Centre – are badly in need of refreshment. And large parts of the Common have become overgrown and uninviting, reducing the area available for its main contemporary purpose of human recreation. There has also been a history of difficulties in relations between the City Council and local residents over the Council's stewardship of the Common.

It was against this background that in 2017 HRA and SCAPPs (the Southampton Commons and Parks Protection Society) established the Southampton Common Forum as a focal point for issues concerning the Common and its immediate environs. The Forum's main objectives are:

1. To see that all those with an interest are informed of any issues that may affect the Common
2. To give all those with an interest a means of influencing and contributing to those issues
3. To work alongside the City Council, to contribute to the positive management of the Common
4. To raise awareness of the Common and its benefits to the City

The Forum has a Management Committee on which both HRA and SCAPPs are represented. The Chair is Professor Adam Wheeler, formerly Provost of the University of Southampton.

Working constructively with the City Council, and building on the work that HRA through Common Sense has done on the Little Common, the Forum has undertaken three major initiatives during its so far short life.

First, in 2017 it conducted an online survey of the views of Common users about the Common which attracted nearly 2,200 responses. The survey confirmed that the Common was widely appreciated and used by people and groups from across the City. However there were a number of concerns. The main ones were children's play facilities (this was before the excellent new play area was open); toilets; litter and waste; lighting, safety and conflicts between different users (e.g., cyclists and pedestrians); footpaths; and management and maintenance.

As a result of the survey, and after discussion with members and the Council, the Forum took the lead in producing a new strategic plan to respond to these concerns. After extensive consultation, the new plan was approved by the Council just before Christmas. The main objectives are:

1. To increase people's usage and enjoyment of the Common
2. To improve the facilities for recreation and education
3. To increase the proportion of usable and accessible space
4. To increase biodiversity whilst safeguarding species deemed nationally to be in need of special protection
5. To improve paths, access and safety.

Work is now beginning with the City Council to develop plans for delivering these objectives, the aim being to go out for consultation on the whole plan early in 2020.

Achieving the plan will present two major sets of challenges. The first is to find resources additional to those that are likely to be available to the City Council. The second is to build on the progress made by the Forum by building a governance model that involves a wider set of people and organisations in the improvement of the Common. It is to meet both sets of requirements that the Forum is now undertaking a public consultation on its proposal, with the City Council's support, to establish an independent charitable trust – provisionally called the Southampton Common Foundation – to raise revenues and promote the Common alongside the Council. The link to the consultation is <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/XKF9XWQ>. The deadline for comments is Friday 3rd May.

Finally, although these larger strategic issues have inevitably absorbed much of the Forum's resources, we have also made progress with a number of incremental improvements. Current examples include: the installation of water bottle points at the Hawthorns and the new play area; the refurbishment of the activity/education room at the Hawthorns; the clearance by Forum volunteers of an area south of the Ornamental Lake; and a workshop on Green Travel across the Common on 24th April (details on the Forum website: <http://www.southamptoncommonforum.org>).

The Forum has achieved a good deal in its short history but there is much more to do. Those interested should consult the website to see how they can be involved.

Roger Brown

19th April 2019