

Report from Wildflower Project Team for discussion and decision at Guilden Sutton Parish Council on 7th September 2022.

Background

An outline proposal for a wildflower garden was prepared by four volunteers from the community earlier this year and presented to the Parish Council in March. 'In principle' support was given. The proposal was to transform an under-used amenity area at Fox Cover, into a wildflower garden accessible to all.

Spacehive has worked with Cheshire West and Chester Council to support projects benefiting local communities during the Platinum Jubilee year. External funding was applied for and approval to 'Crowd-fund' was given in May subject to the land being leased to the Parish Council by CW&C. A significant grant from CW&C councillors was supplemented by pledges from over 50 local residents and over £8,000 has been raised.

On 30th June dozens of residents attended a consultation meeting when views, both positive and negative, were gathered on various topics relating to the proposal. I.e. the overall plan; the opportunities to help the environment; paths; seating; and ways in which volunteers might be involved. At the time of writing, a full summary of the comments, questions and concerns raised and the answers given was due to be published on the Village and Parish websites before the end of August and has been circulated to parish councillors.

The Wildflower Project Team (WPT) now comprises Robin Norrie, Matthew Peacock, Tim Price, Eileen Fantom, Gary Chidlow, Mel Littlewood, Trisha Paterson, Sue Proctor, Sue Ringstead and the parish clerk.

History

The land at Fox Cover was identified as a community amenity area when the Oaklands Estate was built. A path leads through Fox Cover from Church Lane to Oaklands. Originally, there was a steep ramp but this was replaced by easier steps at the request of some local residents. A 'No Ball Games' sign was installed at the request of residents. There was a bench but this was removed shortly after it was installed in the 1980s due to anti-social behaviour. In the 1990s, on one occasion, bottles were thrown from Fox Cover into a garden in The Vetches. Since these incidents took place, the area has been left as an open grassed area. It is owned and maintained by CW&C. Apart from dogs being exercised there, it appears to have had little community use although the path between Church Lane and Oaklands is a useful link for pedestrians.

The Proposal

The Parish Council will lease the land from Cheshire West and Chester Council and become responsible for its maintenance. The Parish Council will delegate the installation of the garden and spending within the agreed budget to the Wildflower Project Team. Terms of Reference will include clear lines of accountability and communication. Once established on-going maintenance of the garden will mainly be undertaken by volunteers. In response to concerns from local residents and Crime Prevention the planned layout has been amended. The implementation plan and revised layout is attached.

- The top surface of grass and soil will be mechanically removed and taken off site in September. This is likely to take just one day.

- Bulbs will be planted on the grassed area to the South of the path and along the perimeter of the main garden to provide interest from January to April (snowdrops, crocus, daffodils and bluebells).
- Soil will be prepared and seeds and possibly wildflower plugs planted in October. Local residents and community groups will be invited to help with the sowing and planting
- Paths will be grass and apart from one permanent curving central path, other paths will be cut along different routes each year.
- Low level herb beds will be planted along the border of the path from Church Lane to break up the area so that it is not used for ball games, cycling or horses.
- A 1.5metre border of grass will be left around the west, north and east boundary to allow access for maintenance of hedges and fences by neighbouring property owners..
- One small dwarf fruit tree would be planted towards the top north west corner but away from the boundary so as not to overhang neighbouring properties.
- There will be a mix of wildflower seeds in different areas to provide interest at different times of the year..

Seating will not be installed until the garden has been completed, and, in view of residents' historic concerns, will be removable if necessary. Should any nuisance occur relating to the garden, whether or not it involves the seating, we will endeavour to work with the local police to deal with it. There have been many changes since the 1980s and there are many more open spaces for young people to meet around Vicars Cross, Gt Boughton, Christleton and Upton. There are several other garden or environmental projects created through Spacehive in Chester and Ellesmere Port and CW&C have planted about 50 wildflower areas around the borough so the garden in Guilden Sutton is unlikely to attract interest from outside. We also have excellent support from our PCSO who works with the Parish Council to tackle any issues. Few incidents are currently reported in the parish.

Maintenance

The main wildflower planted areas will only be cut twice per year. Paths through the planted areas and the 1.5metre boundary will be mown weekly through the growing season (approximately April - October) Boundary hedges and fences will be the responsibility of property owners but overhanging branches may be removed as necessary. Volunteers will be involved in regular grass-cutting of paths and tending the herb beds. It would be useful if a combined list of all volunteers who help within our community such as Greenspace (Hooks Wood) and Village Green could be compiled, Volunteers could if necessary be supplemented by the parish lengthsman if or when there is one in post.

Communication

To enable a single point of contact, and to recognise that the project is community-led, a separate email address has been set up which will be monitored and responded to by the WPT. There will also be a separate section on the village and parish council websites. The project developed rapidly between March and May despite Covid. The project was publicised on Facebook, the village website, and a parish council newsletter, but it is acknowledged that arrangements could or should have been made to communicate directly with residents of Fox Cover, Church Lane and The Vetches at an earlier stage. There were various reasons why this did not take place including Covid, the other work that key

members of the team were involved in, and the need to establish whether or not the project was actually viable but we recognise that we could have done better.

A dedicated wildflower email address has been set up guildensuttonwildflower@gmail.com This can be used by anyone with questions about the garden but especially for residents in Fox Cover, and other properties around the garden. Emails will be monitored regularly and replies sent within 5 working days. In the unlikely event that there are any offences taking place in the garden, the first port of call should of course be the police.

The feedback from the flipcharts and the revisions to the proposal indicate how the concerns of residents have been taken into account. These include:-

- Fewer paths so that cycling around the garden is discouraged
- Reduced number of seats, only one double seat and one single
- Seating placed at a distance to discourage gatherings
- Seats will have arms and a divider to stop anyone laying down on them.
- Seats will be removable if necessary
- Seating will not be installed until the garden is completed
- Herb beds to deter people wandering onto the garden on bikes.

Budget

The target set for crowd-funding was exceeded and £8,330 was raised. This should be supplemented by a share of the proceeds of the village fete. Of the initial total budget of just over £8,200, a large portion covered the cost of paths. As it is now proposed that the paths should be less extensive and be regularly-mown grass, not surfaced, the costs will be amended. (Spacehive and borough councillors have been consulted). The main expenditure will be clearance and removal of the grass, purchase of bulbs, seeds, plugs, a small tree, the seats and an information noticeboard. In addition a lawn-mower will be needed for the paths and storage will need to be arranged. We aim to have firmer figures available by 7th September.

Dogs - There are no proposals to exclude dogs from the area though they should be kept on a leash.

Events -As the garden grows there will be opportunities for people of all ages to learn about the plants and wildlife and small 'information sessions' may be held but there are no plans to use the space for social or entertainment activities.

Other structures - Apart from seating, a single dwarf fruit tree, birds boxes, bug hotels, and low level herb planters, there are no proposals to install any other structures

A name for the garden -

There has been little interest in an actual name and only a few suggestions - Fox Meadow; Garden of Peace & Tranquillity; The Flower Patch ; The Marigold Garden, Platinum / Jubilee Garden.

The content of this report has been agreed by all members of the Wildflower Project Team and is presented to the parish council on their behalf.

(Recommendations follow)

Recommendations:-

The Parish Council

1. Approve the plans for the garden including overall design.
2. Agree to lease the land at Fox Cover from CW&C
3. Agree terms of reference for the Wildflower Project Team including reporting back mechanism
4. Devolve implementation to the Wildflower Project Team within the proposed budget
5. Require the WPT to respond promptly to questions from residents during implementation.(i.e. within 5 working days) and to report any issues of concern to the Parish Council.
6. Provide public liability insurance cover for volunteers working in the garden providing risk assessments are prepared and adhered to.
7. Agree to cover the costs incurred in clearing and planting the ground in September and October if the lease has not been completed, and the money not yet transferred by Spacehive, subject to indication being given by CW&C that the lease is being progressed.