

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

6 JULY 2021

QUESTION NO. 1

Lin Godfrey to ask the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee:

Christchurch Meadows Ditch

Christchurch Meadows are a well used open space on the banks of the Thames in Caversham. They lead via various paths to Christchurch Bridge. Besides the usual mowing & bins emptying a small amount of regular maintenance takes place. To the maintenance list needs to be added the ditch that runs through Christchurch Meadows.

The ditch is there for a reason. It's part of the flood defence for Lower Caversham & needs to be kept clear.

There is no question that the ditch is owned by RBC. In 2018, in a letter, it was 'accepted that some works are now becoming overdue & hope to plan some maintenance later in 2018'. Part of the ditch was cleared in 2019. Approximately 100 metres wasn't touched. Volunteers from Caversham Globe also cleared a section. The ditch is now so overgrown & silted up that it is debatable that it can carry out the function it was designed for.

Although Christchurch has a new bridge & access paths many of the problems, of which the ditch is one, identified in Thameside Parks Vision Statement 2004 remain. Recommendations have largely been ignored. There is a reluctance to engage with the local community & groups.

It is now 3 years since Parks 'hoped' to clear the ditch.

My question is will RBC clear the ditch this financial year (2021/22) & give an undertaking to carry out maintenance on a regular basis?

REPLY by the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee (Councillor Davies):

I invite Councillor Rowland, the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation (Councillor Rowland):

Thank you for your question. The ditch, which is also known as the "Dannell" is an ancient drainage ditch which serves to remove surplus water from the meadows but also as an important wildlife corridor.

The Council carries out a range of maintenance tasks in Christchurch Meadows including grass and hedge cutting, tree works and clearance of marginal vegetation along the river bank. Part of the regular litter picking work at Christchurch Meadows is to remove as much litter as possible from the ditch and every few years scheduled maintenance and clearance work is carried out by the Council as required to maintain flood defences without adversely affecting wildlife. As you noted, the most recent occasion was in the summer of 2019, when our teams removed self-seeded trees and flailed the vegetation on the banks. The 100 metre section that were not cleared then is the next area to be

completed when the weather conditions allow this autumn. The Environment Agency carried out dredging works between 2008 and 2011 however, this is only done when required for flood defence purposes.

The Parks Team will carry out a scheduled inspection of the ditch and aim to carry out some clearance work in the Autumn of this year, subject to ground conditions and available resource. The meadows are usually too wet to support the heavy machinery required for the works between mid-November and March and the bird nesting season prevents any clearance work between March and September, limiting the opportunity to carry out clearance work to largely between September to Mid-November. Prior to any works starting an assessment will also be made of the possible effects of the work on wildlife as periods of non-interference are important.

Managing the Council's large estate of open spaces involves considerable resources and as such, the Council is always appreciative of the efforts that volunteers do in many open spaces and parks in Reading and we work frequently with a number of groups in those efforts. We are always happy to facilitate the involvement of community volunteers in maintenance and improvement work. Officers in the Parks Department would welcome any offers of help in clearing the ditch, and I would certainly urge you to get in touch with myself and Officers to progress this.