

13th September 2023

Agenda item 9.1

Nature Recovery in Kingston

September 2023

Proposal by the Kingston Nature Recovery Group (KNRG) to KPC for changes in land management practices to enhance the biodiversity of land in the parish.

1 Background

1.1 Following the report on **“Nature Recovery Opportunities in the parish of Kingston near Lewes”**, the Kingston Nature Recovery Group (KNRG) was established to develop and support plans for nature recovery within the Parish. The report highlighted the opportunities for and recommended **“allowing sections of the grassland areas to grow, and introducing more diverse habitats in the Greens, the verges, and in gardens, in conjunction with recreation and people & nature areas”**. The report was welcomed and approved by the Parish Council.

1.2 This paper to KPC from KNRG provides an overview of the possibilities for action to enhance the biodiversity of land owned by the Parish Council itself, as well as land owned by other statutory local authorities over the management of which the KPC has an influence. **Specifically, it recommends action in autumn 2023 for a proportion of St Pancras Green**. Proposals for other areas of land detailed will be submitted later this year as they are not quite as time critical. These include Bumpy Lane, Fox Twitten and the verges on the estate.

1.3 The KPC owns the Village Green, most of St Pancras Green and the verges in The Avenue with the exception of those east of Lockitt Way (which are owned by East Sussex County Council (ESCC)). It also owns the tracks known locally and unofficially as Fox Twitten and Bumpy Lane. Fox Twitten, a bridleway, connects Bumpy Lane with Lockitt Way. Bumpy Lane, part of which is also a bridleway, runs from Mushroom Field to Ashcombe Lane. All the other verges in the village are owned by ESCC. Lewes District Council (LDC) owns the green at Snednore and the former allotments at Gow’s Croft. One of these allotments is unused. The other is currently run by the Kingston Action Group (AG). Land around the church, including a small section of St Pancras Green is owned by the Parochial Church Council (PCC). See section 4 for full details of current land management of these sites.

1.4 The Action Group’s creation of meadow areas on the Village Green has proved extremely popular with villagers, with lots of appreciation expressed and just a single negative comment. Evidence suggests that support for intensive grassland management is diminishing. The village demographic has changed in recent years and many more people in the community are very aware of and interested in biodiversity issues. The number of householders sowing wildflower seeds in their front gardens or verges is increasing steadily. The Kingston Wildlife WhatsApp Group established last year already has 95 members. Some residents of St Pancras Green have expressed a wish for that Green to be managed more like the Village Green.

1.5 Elsewhere in the village, the AG will continue to use its own resources to expand existing planting programmes including those of snowdrops on The Avenue and The Street, wildflowers

around the tennis court, primroses elsewhere and a variety of plants on the Community Wildlife Garden.

1.6 Surveys of the flora and fauna of the parish are being planned including the Pavilion green roof. This will perhaps to be undertaken freely by experts in the village. This was suggested by the latest judge in the Parishes in Bloom competition, who was very impressed not only by the green roof but by many of the other measures the village has already taken to enhance biodiversity. (Kingston has been awarded a gold certificate in the last two competitions).

2 KPC's Environmental Policy

2.1 In May 2021 KPC agreed an **Environmental Policy and Action Plan**. This most welcome step committed the Council to "manage the land we own to minimise environmental pollution and....to *promote biodiversity*". The Council also committed itself to reviewing the contracts for managing the Village and St Pancras Greens to see what improvements might be made. We are unsure whether such a review has yet taken place.

3. Proposals for Future Management

3.1 There is scope for changes in the management of much of the land owned by the Parish Council, as well as land owned by other statutory local authorities over the management of which the KPC has an influence to increase its biodiversity (Detailed in Section 4). We believe it is sensible to take this one step at a time. Initially, we propose the following management changes on St Pancras Green starting in October 2023.

- Establishing a meadow area along the western side of the Green (c 100 metres), to a depth of c 30 metres, with a scalloped edge. This would involve stripping the turf (with the aid of a hired turf stripper) and sowing wildflower seed and would best be done in October. The stripped turf could be offered to villagers via WhatsApp. This work would be undertaken by members of the Action Group and could be done within two days.
- Leaving a further strip of similar length and 20 metres wide, similarly scalloped - uncut until late summer. (St Pancras Green is approximately 140 metres wide).
- Reducing the frequency of cut of the remaining area, except for the football pitch. We suggest the remaining area is cut only twice during the summer (once before the fete and once at the end of the summer), with the exception of the football pitch which should continue to be cut at the current frequency.
- The meadow area would be cut only in early October and the grass removed from the site to reduce its fertility. Care would need to be taken to ensure that neither the meadow area nor the uncut area encroached on the space needed for the village fete or football pitches. Paths would be established through the meadow area, as they have been on the village green. ***The altered management regime would not compromise the prime use of St Pancras Green which would remain an area for sports and games.***

3.2 The proposal has not yet been precisely costed but could certainly be accomplished by spending well under the £6000 which the KPC has already notionally allocated to the Action Group for the financial years 2023/24 and 2024/25. It is therefore proposed that these funds are used for this purpose and that any unspent surplus be used on buying and planting crocus bulbs along the northern perimeter of St Pancras Green. (KPC has already given the AG £4000

for planting in the village, with a promise of a further £6000, spread over the next two financial years (ie 23/24 and 24/25), subject only to agreement on proposals).

3.3 The cost of removing grass cuttings might be covered by offering the hay to a farmer.

4. Current land ownership and management

4.1 St Pancras Green.

Most of St Pancras Green is close-clipped rye grass, cut at frequent intervals throughout the summer. Although this area is not completely devoid of wildlife interest – corvids, gulls, and various thrushes finding worms there, especially in winter, while the occasional presence of pied wagtails is testament to the presence of at least a few small insects – it is of relatively low value. Part of the main section is a football pitch. The small area of woodland on the west side of this Green – which has three separate owners – is effectively unmanaged other than when broken branches or fallen trees block the bridleway which runs along the western side. Some of the area next to the lower tennis court has been planted with bulbs by the AG and also sown with a wildflower mix. The AG has also planted bulbs around The Pavilion and beneath some of the trees at the western side of the green. Between the two tennis courts is a large, unmanaged patch of nettles and bramble, excellent for nesting birds like dunnoek, wren and robin. The green roof of The Pavilion is undoubtedly useful to a variety of wildlife but it would be interesting to survey it. There are now several villagers with the expertise to do this.

4.2 Village Green

Grass at the Village Green is also closely mown, with the exception of two areas managed by the AG since 2021, where wildflower meadows have been established. Here the grass is cut only in autumn and removed by AG members. The change in management has resulted in an explosion of colour at the Green and there are now several species of butterfly to be seen there– Meadow Brown, Common Blue, Small Heath and others - where there were none at all before. Nor is it just butterflies that have benefited from the new regime. Even as this is written (5 September) there are, besides, ladybirds, spiders, grasshoppers and other invertebrates to be found there. This is a good indication of the huge increase in biodiversity to be expected on St Pancras Green if the proposals in this paper are endorsed.

The AG has also planted hedges on the green, notably along the western side. This hedge, adjoining the newly installed zip wire, has been underplanted with bulbs and primroses.

4.3 The **banked verge on the western side of Ashcombe Lane**, below the village green, was designated by English Nature (one of the predecessor bodies of Natural England) around 20 years ago as a wildflower verge, presumably in recognition of its large colony of Cuckoo Flower, food plant of the Orange Tip butterfly. The AG has planted scores of wild primroses along this bank, nearer to The Street. The Group has also planted primroses on the verge outside Apple Cottage on the C7.

4.4 **Verges in The Avenue** are, by tradition, managed by householders rather than the KPC. Some householders have effectively annexed the KPC-owned verges, incorporating them into their own front gardens, action apparently never challenged by the Council. Many of The Avenue's verges have been planted with snowdrops by the AG, with the approval of householders, some of

whom have added a variety of other bulbs. Most of the grass verges are kept short by householders or their contractors. When The Avenue was established in the 1920s, apple trees were planted in each of its verges. While just a small handful of these ancient trees now survives, the AG has filled some of the gaps left by the deaths of the original trees with new trees, all of them old Sussex varieties. The trees concerned were paid for either by the AG itself or, more recently, by KPC.

4.5 There has been little or no planting in either **Bumpy Lane or Fox Twitten** so the vegetation there is largely adventitious, an exception being laurel trees planted without KPC permission outside the house adjoining Ashcombe Lane. Other vegetation is managed by KPC contractors.

4.6 There are **grass verges on some of the roads in the estate** – Lockitt Way, Monckton Way, St Pancras Green, Cordons and Bramleys. Although these are managed by ESCC contractors, many householders have assumed responsibility themselves and several verges have been extensively planted with bulbs and others with wildflowers. Other householders have, in recent years, been happy merely to allow the grass to grow unchecked. There are some birch trees in the verges, all planted by ESCC when the estate was built. However, ESCC's current policy excludes tree planting on verges altogether while, officially at least, any form of planting at all requires a cultivation licence from ESCC as well as the agreement of all affected householders. The KPC has recently agreed a new management regime with ESCC under which the verges are cut far less frequently.

4.7 The **former allotment** at the junction of The Street and Gow's Croft is now managed by the AG as a Community Wildlife Garden. The AG has spent about £2000 here on plants including trees, bulbs, climbers and other perennials, most of them selected for their wildlife value.

4.8 The **green at Snednore**, managed by LDC, has been planted with around 12,000 crocus by the Action Group over the last six or seven years. At the request of the AG, LDC has postponed cutting the grass in the spring to allow the crocus plants time to die back.

4.9 Many of the **verges in Ashcombe Lane and Wellgreen Lane** have been planted with bulbs either by the AG or householders. Most of these are daffodils and of little wildlife value but there are also extensive plantings of snowdrops.

4.10 The **bridleway linking The Street and St Pancras Green** (ownership unknown but believed to be shared between the Parochial Church Council (PCC) and the former owners of the house in The Street known as Juggs Way) has been actively, if intermittently, managed by the AG for some ten years. Here - among the nettles and brambles - there are primroses, hemp agrimony, alliums, teasel and ivy – all of them especially attractive to wildlife.

4.11 Some areas of the **churchyard** are intensively managed while in other areas the grass is left uncut for the summer. The large area of ivy here is of enormous value to bees, butterflies and hoverflies, especially in late summer and early autumn, as well as nesting and sheltering wrens. The KNRG will be contacting the PCC separately to discuss their future management plans for this whole area of land.

4.12 Most of the few **verges in The Street** are too narrow and too liable to be damaged by parked vehicles to be of any interest but there are two exceptions in the upper part of that road. The area opposite the three cottages (Friars Cottage and Nos 7 & 8, The Street) has been planted by a householder with a variety of bulbs and perennials while the verge at the very end of the road

outside Kingston Manor is full of snowdrops planted by the AG, as is the area opposite. The Street is also notable for its array of colourful native and exotic wildflowers which have established themselves in various pavement cracks and hollows. Species include Hollyhock, Hemp Agrimony, Red Valerian, Cow Parsley, Ivy-leaved Toadflax and others.

Appendix 1 – Map of proposals



Appendix 2 – Photos



Image of turf cutting to show pre-planting ground preparation



Image showing planned outcome of proposals