

Briefing paper: Future ownership and management options for Stoke Park

1. Background:

1.1 Stoke Park is a Registered Historic Parkland in a prominent location overlooking the M32 and forming an important element in the setting and entrance to Bristol. The park was designed and developed by Thomas Wright between 1749 and 1786 for Norborne Berkeley, making the most of the topography and natural features to provide a setting for the Dower House. The importance of Wright's work is growing in national prominence within the garden history movement. The main structural elements of the original scheme survive and have been restored over recent years. The diverse plantings of imported trees and shrubs, largely from America, set within glades and grassy rides within the woodland were a key feature of the scheme but have not survived the years of neglect. The imposition of the M32 has also damaged the integrity of the parkland, although today the parkland still forms an important green gateway to the city. The majority of the park falls within Bristol.

1.2 The land comprises grassland, currently managed by cutting for hay and mowing of the steeper slopes, scrub, a pond and settlement lagoon feature connected with the water management scheme for the housing development and several areas of woodland. Residents in Lockleaze and Stoke Park have ready access to the park both on public rights of way and through the woods and across the grassland. New development of 1200 homes on the former Hewlett Packard site to the north of the woodlands will directly overlook the site and greatly increase visitor pressures and the numbers of people using the site regularly. The re-creation of the carriage drive from Duchess Gate has given informal cycle access from Stapleton Road to the UWE campus. Motor cycling and joy riding within the park, whilst it has decreased over recent years, still occurs and requires regular coordination with the local community police to manage.

1.3 The parkland area at Stoke Park is currently managed by the Parkland Committee, although in practice the consortium have day to day responsibility and manage the park via consultants, a land agent and contractors. The Committee is governed by the Section 106 agreement (dated September 1999 and overseen by South Gloucestershire Council as Planning Authority) attached to the housing development at the former Stoke Park hospital site. The Committee consists of representatives of Bristol City Council (Parks Service Manager), South Gloucestershire Council (Cllr Trevor Jones) and The Gardens Trust (Rosemary Harriott), together with representatives of the builder's consortium from Barrett Homes and George Wimpey. The City Council also has a further nominee on the Committee, who is David Lambert who was a former Stoke Park Trustee and well known national garden historian.

1.4 Under the 106 agreement, the Parkland Committee may approve the transfer of the Park to another body having the facilities and funding to permanently maintain the Park. The builder's consortium are proposing the transfer of the parkland to a Trust run by a body called the Greenbelt Company, who started life as a Glasgow based regeneration body but now operate nationwide taking over post development open spaces and other public assets. Greenbelt have a proven track-record of managing open spaces and currently service over 600 sites throughout Britain.

1.5 The City Council's former Executive Member for Health Promotion and Leisure Cllr Simon Cook was briefed on the consortium's progress with the restoration works on 18th December 2006. Officers were asked to give further consideration to the operational

implications and financial risks of the City Council taking over ownership and management of the park as an alternative to the Greenbelt Company.

2. Greenbelt proposal by the Consortium:

2.1 The new Trust proposed for Stoke Park would be set up to manage the estate and run by two trustees, who would be employees of the Greenbelt Company, and two other Trustees. The current proposal is that these should be a representative of both Bristol City Council and South Gloucestershire Council. The freehold would be held by Greenbelt.

2.2 The future management of the parkland under this arrangement would be financed by a lump sum endowment fund transferred from the Consortium to the Trust of £1.2million. A proportion of this money would be used to finance set up costs and the remainder invested to generate income for long term management works. An average annual income from the endowment of £40,000 is estimated by Greenbelt.

2.3 In order to generate additional income from the site and to reduce overall maintenance costs, the Greenbelt scheme proposes the letting of the main parkland for grazing – around 200 acres - and hay cropping; plus the area to the south, outside the boundary of the historic parkland as horse grazing with stabling, and the commercial letting of Duchess pond to a fishing club. The fishing club would be responsible for the maintenance of the pond and the grazier would be responsible for the parkland areas. Pens and storage areas would be required for the grazier. The Trust would supply fencing materials but the grazier would be responsible for maintenance of the fences. New fences across the parkland would be required and these would be put in place as part of the initial setup costs. A proportion of any monies generated by additional fund raising would go to the Greenbelt Company to cover their costs and enable them to make a small surplus.

2.4 The Trust would retain responsibility for the woodland which would be managed via a commercial land agent who would also liaise with the tenants and public and manage the tenancies.

3. Issues for further consideration:

There are a number of issues which both councils have been addressing in relation to the consortium's proposal to transfer the park to Greenbelt:-

- a) Is the Greenbelt Group a suitable body to take over responsibility for the park? It is understood that transferring the land to Greenbelt would require a variation of the 106 agreement approved by South Gloucestershire Development Control Committee.
- b) Is the current proposal to manage the site largely through tenancies a viable solution with the growth in visitor pressures and does it retain sufficient public access?
- c) Does the Greenbelt option secure in the long term the character of the parkland which has been (partially) restored?
- d) Will increasing visitor pressures be managed adequately to avoid damage to the historic character/ features?
- e) What happens if the tenancies prove unviable/ uneconomic due to pressures such as vandalism/ motorbikes, and is there sufficient revenue funding available for alternative 'fall back' management options?
- f) Would the Trust be eligible to apply for grant aid such as the Heritage Lottery Fund and how would any future funding bids be managed?
- g) Could sufficient funding be secured to continue the progressive restoration of the

parkland, to promote education about the historic interest/ importance of the park?

f) Are there potential liabilities / risks to the Council's of becoming trustees?

4. City Council option:

4.1 Although some years back, the former Leisure Services Dept formed the view that the City Council would not wish to take on the risk of Stoke Park becoming a significant liability, the former Executive Member on 18/12/2006 asked officers to reconsider this position in the context of the Parks and Green Space Strategy and Bristol's regeneration objectives for Lockleaze.

4.2 As well as there being some reputation and marketing benefit in the city 'securing the parkland for the people of Bristol' and adding Stoke Park to its amazing suite of historic and cultural landscapes (including Ashton Court, Blaise Castle, Kingsweston, Oldbury Court and Snuff Mills), there is scope to integrate the acquisition of Stoke Park into the wider regeneration plans for Lockleaze, to help meet the green space needs of the increasingly high density residential communities on two sides of the park - in Bristol and South Gloucs. The adopted Parks and Green Space Strategy states that the future ownership and management remains to be resolved, and in the Delivery Plan prioritises this decision to be taken in 2008/2009.

4.3 Informal consultation has been undertaken over the past 12 months with *Lockleaze Voice*, the resident led community organisation set up by the council and South West Planning Aid to oversee the regeneration programme for Lockleaze. Residents were unanimous that the City Council should take over the estate as they perceive an alternative ownership option via Greenbelt does not secure the long term access and public interest in the site. The Avon Gardens Trust are also encouraging the council to take over the park, and South Gloucestershire Council also appear (informally) to favour City Council ownership.

4.4 City Council officers are in the process of identifying the potential liabilities and risks involved in City Council ownership and management, in preparation for this being considered by Cabinet on 27th November. Since briefing the former Executive Member in December 2006, the consortium has confirmed that the key asset liability – the high and lengthy stone wall off St Johns Lane – would be reduced in height, restored and stabilised before the land is transferred to a future owner. The remaining management challenges presented by the Scheduled Ancient Monument WW2 gun emplacement at the end of St John's Lane would be inherited by any future owner.

5. Other options to be considered:

The other potential options that might be considered are:-

- A new Stoke Park Trust, independent from the Green Belt Company, with local authority representation (less than 20% so not LA controlled);
- A formal, statutory Joint Committee to manage the park on behalf of both councils;
- An informal advisory committee, with BCC as the owners and managers.

It is understood that South Gloucs not are interested in managing parkland which is largely in Bristol. Splitting the ownership into two in line with local authority boundaries would not make sense. The partners have also ruled out considering other bodies, such as the National Trust and Avon Wildlife Trust, as appropriate and/or likely future players.