

Improving Midsummer Common

1. Once occupied, the Berkeley Homes development will impose new pressures on Midsummer Common and the neighbourhood will need improving. About 600 people will reside on the 1.5 hectare site and Midsummer Common will be outside their back door. A thoroughfare will attract pedestrians and cyclists off the Newmarket road through the site and onto the Common. What can be done to alleviate these combined pressures and improve the appearance and amenity of the Common?

2. When given planning permission, Berkeley Homes agreed to give the Council s.106 money to help ease these new pressures. The Council's Planning Obligation Strategy sets the rules for using this money:

- Projects must primarily provide or improve facilities to cater for increased usage and needs arising from residents of new developments;
- Provision of a range of projects of different types and sizes across the city so that funding arising from development sites can be used locally where possible;
- Planning obligation funding for projects should not replace or substitute existing Council funding/Central Government funding or other more appropriate funding resources.

3. Some of this money can be used for the improvement or provision of open space and recreation facilities. This is further broken down into indoor and outdoor sports facilities, provision for children and teenagers, informal open space and allotments. Berkeley Homes will contribute £188k for informal open space.

4. The Council's Strategy expects this money to be spent:

"... within a reasonable walking/cycling distance from development and therefore contributions will be spent on projects located on a geographical area of the city basis where possible or on schemes which will benefit residents across the city, for example on the commons and central parks that are used by a wider city population."

Midsummer Common is a perfect candidate. The Strategy gives an example (see annex A) of what might be done with costings for a 0.8 ha site serving 444 people (about half the size of the Berkeley Homes site).

5. The Council encourages groups, individuals and officers to suggest ways of spending this money and these are assessed each Autumn by Council officers. These assessments lead to recommendations being made to Area Committees and eventually via scrutiny to the Executive Councillor for Arts & Recreation.

6. FoMC has invited ideas from its members and the following projects have been suggested:

- more regular mowing of the grassland to keep nettles, thistles and brambles under control;
- planting of two more wildflower meadows as recommended by the Wildlife Trust;
- addition of shrubs and hedgerows in places recommended by the Wildlife Trust;
- more fruit and nut trees planted in the Community Orchard;
- improvements to the footpaths;
- clearing the area around Cutter Ferry Bridge and improving the pedestrian/cycle routes;
- creation of picnic and barbecue area in selected places;
- addition and repair of benches;
- rebuilding of boundary wall to Berkeley Homes site; and
- making the Victoria Avenue gate secure.

7. More regular mowing of the grassland to keeps nettles, thistles and brambles under control.

7.1 Midsummer Common is unlike other green spaces in Cambridge that demand and receive regular grass mowing for sports and family usage. Midsummer Common is a flood plain with coarser grasses and grazing cattle. Mowing is necessary before the big events on the Common. Mowing would also help control the growing incidence of chickweed, barley grass, nettles, thistles and brambles; this problem would be eased if the Council were to mow the grass just before the weeds flowered. Failure to do this has left FoMC Members to take it upon themselves to weed large areas.

7.2 The main Common is mown infrequently and rarely completely. The Eastern pound receives scant attention. The overall condition of the Common would improve visually and materially if more resources were given to a structured mowing regime. FoMC would like to see these improvements made but it is for the Council to make a decision and apportion resources.

8. Planting of two more wildflower meadows as recommended by the Wildlife Trust.

8.1 Back in 2008 the Cambridge City Council engaged the *Wildlife Trust* to prepare a Management Plan for Midsummer Common. This Management Plan set the Council 7 main objectives two of which are to:

- enhance the species richness of the grassland to achieve a more natural floodplain grassland habitat
- maintain and enhance the overall habitat diversity of the common.

8.2 To achieve these objectives, it was decided to create three meadow areas with wildflower seeds sown and allowed to spread naturally over the rest of the Common. The presence of wild flowers would improve both the aesthetic appeal of the grassland and its biodiversity. In discussion with FoMC, the Council decided to establish a trial meadow at the Butt Green end of the Common. FoMC members joined Councillor Julie Smith and Council officers in raking and seeding this first trial area. An unfavourable growing season and inadequate grass cutting led to a poor outcome.



8.3 Lessons have been learned from the trial and it is time to sow the other two meadows - near Victoria Avenue bridge and in the eastern pound. It is for the Council's Nature Conservation Projects Officer to lead and resource the way forward but FoMC can muster volunteers to help and do the digging. Staff times and plant seeds are the only costs.

9. Addition of shrubs and hedgerows in places recommended by the Wildlife Trust.

9.1 The *Wildlife Trust*, in their Management Plan for Midsummer Common, say that it is an important wildlife corridor but it's diversity of habitats is limited: "There is little native scrub/hedge habitat to provide food and nesting sites for birds, invertebrates or mammals". A corrective project is presented.

9.2 "The banks adjacent to the Community Orchard are currently dominated by nettles, brambles and thistles. These species can be controlled by regular cutting of the nettles and topping of the thistles. The topping should be done when the plants are in flower as at this point they have expended energy so are weaker but have not yet set seed. It may be necessary to hand pull the brambles. These species of plant thrive on nutrient rich soil so all cuttings should be removed from the area and not allowed to rot *in situ*. It may take a couple of years to reduce the cover of the weeds and for the banks to be ready for shrub planting. The sparse planting of hawthorns (*Crataegus monogyna*) on the banks will provide a much needed shrub habitat on the common. These young trees will require regular watering for two years after planting and pruning in later years to achieve a low level (1-2 metres) scrub layer."

10. More fruit trees planted in the Community Orchard.

10.1 The *Wildlife Trust*, in their Management Plan for Midsummer Common, proposed the planting of a Community Orchard on part of the Common. FoMC welcomed this idea and presented its own planting proposal using heritage trees of local provenance. Three phases of work were planned, spread over a couple of years, and a group of volunteers received the Council's blessing to do the work.



10.2 The first phase started with a section of the Common cleared of brambles, nettles and thistles and 5 *New Rock Pippin*, 5 *Wayside*, 3 *Histon Favourite* and 2 *Jolly Miller* apple trees planted there. Four *crab apple* and 2 *quince* trees have been planted in the same area. In the second and third phases, another section of the Common was cleared and 4 *Wallis's Wonder*, 3 *Cambridge Gage*, 2 *Willingham Gage*, 3 *Laxton's Foremost* and 3 *Warden* pear trees

were planted. Volunteers have kept the trees watered and the grass cut and the orchard has been an inspiration to many.

10.3 It will be a few years before the trees have matured enough to remove the protective fencing. But there have already been suggestions about filling the unused space and shielding the allotments fence. An avenue of wild cherry trees could welcome those entering from the Newmarket road. Fig, medlar and nut trees have been suggested. The Duchess of Cambridge has been invited to plant one of these trees. Others have asked for seats and a picnic area and a notice board explaining what grows where. It is too early to action these suggestions but it would be wise to put some money (£5,000) aside for ongoing maintenance and improvements to the Community Orchard.

11. Improvements to the footpaths.

11.1 Many of the metalled footpaths on Midsummer Common are in a very poor condition. Wear and tare is inevitable but made worse by heavy vehicle traffic on the Common. Pedestrians and cyclists are the main sufferers; residents from Berkeley Homes being amongst them. Large sums of money are needed to make good this damage. The Area Committee is already aware of this need but money has been in short supply - the availability of s.106 money should allow the work to proceed.

12. Clearing the area around Cutter Ferry Bridge and improving the pedestrian/cycle routes.

12.1 Four footpaths converge on the Cutter Ferry Bridge from the west (two of these are public rights of way), two footpaths converge from the east (one is a public right of way; the other comes from the Berkeley Homes site), and the bridge brings pedestrians and cyclists across the river from Chesterton. It is a very busy junction for cyclists, pedestrians and push chairs; daily bike counts are over 1,200. Traffic from the Berkeley Homes site will add to this number. Grazing cattle on the Common dictate the need for gates and cattle grids.

12.2 The present junction is hazardous - see Annex B. Pedestrians and push chairs must cross the bike lanes to use the gates. Cyclists travelling in both directions along the tow path must cross the same cattle grid twice. Many posts in the path give a challenging barrier to movement. Those coming off the bridge are fed at right angle past a blind spot straight into this two-way traffic. Users, cyclists in particular, have asked for improvements to the layout in order to ease congestion and improve safety.

12.3 A better layout is shown in Annex B. A single gate for pedestrians is provided close to the river (in line with the new gate installed at Walnut Tree Avenue). Two cattle grids in parallel are provided for cyclists travelling in opposite directions along the tow path (in line with the grids installed at Walnut Tree Avenue). To reduce conflicts for those coming off the bridge, the base of the slope is redirected away from the cross traffic and a cattle grid with pram irons and pedestrian gate inserted (as on the footbridge next to the Fort St George pub). This work should cost no more than £20,000. Some FoMC members are concerned that this new layout could encourage cyclists to speed through the junction and be a danger to others.

13. Creation of picnic and barbecue area in selected places.

13.1 Picnics and barbecues are popular activities on many Cambridge green spaces. Barbecues can become a nuisance if they are not properly controlled. And littering can become a problem if bins are not provided or emptied.

13.2 There is already a demand for picnic/barbecue sites on Midsummer Common and residents in Berkeley Homes will add to that demand. The area at the back of Cutter Ferry Bridge in the eastern Pound would make a good location for a trial site. It is very tatty area and would be much improved by clearing the nettles from behind the bridge and planting a wildlife friendly hedge along the wall and fence onto the Common - see Annex C (this is something that has been done in the Community Orchard). A couple of picnic tables could be placed in this area (one in open ground, the other under a tree) together with a permanent barbecue on a raised platform under the bridge. Suitable rubbish and litter bins would need to be provided. There is also room for an additional bench facing the river. An existing light in the area will add to the scenery and improve safety. This area cannot be seen from the main Common but is much frequented by cyclist and walkers who should keep anti-social drifters away.

13.3 Given adequate capital funding (likely to be no more than £5,000), most of this project could be implemented by volunteers.

14. Addition and repair of benches.

14.1 There are 13 benches on Midsummer Common. They are all made of wood and many of these are in a very bad condition. There are 7 natural places to put a new bench that residents in Berkeley Homes and visitors to the Common would find inviting for relaxation.

14.2 Views will differ over the choice of bench but long-term maintenance should be a consideration. The metal ones on the tow path leading to Baits lock are robust and sympathetic to the green environment. Council guidelines suggest a £10,000 budget would buy new benches and repair existing ones on the Common.

15. Rebuilding of boundary wall to Berkeley Homes site.

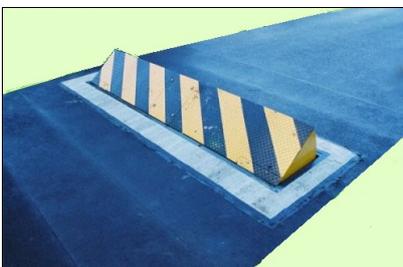
15.1 The boundary wall between the Berkeley Homes site and the eastern pound of the Common is in a very bad condition: the brick wall and pillars are stained, most of the metal railings are missing, and the wicker fence to keep the cows out is an eyesore. The planning permission says that Berkeley Homes will do no more than cut the hedge down to a height of 1.8m. There will be an opening from the site onto the Common for pedestrians but there are no given plans to secure this gap against cattle movements from the Common. FoMC would like to see this boundary wall rebuilt in a pleasing style.



16. Making the Victoria Avenue gate secure.

16.1 Residents in Berkeley Homes next to Midsummer Common will attract vehicular traffic. The Common is fenced to prevent illegal vehicular access. One gate services the western end of the Common and a sign says that "*The gate must be closed immediately after use*". This is not being done and the open gate invites intruders. Berkeley Home residents could worsen the situation.

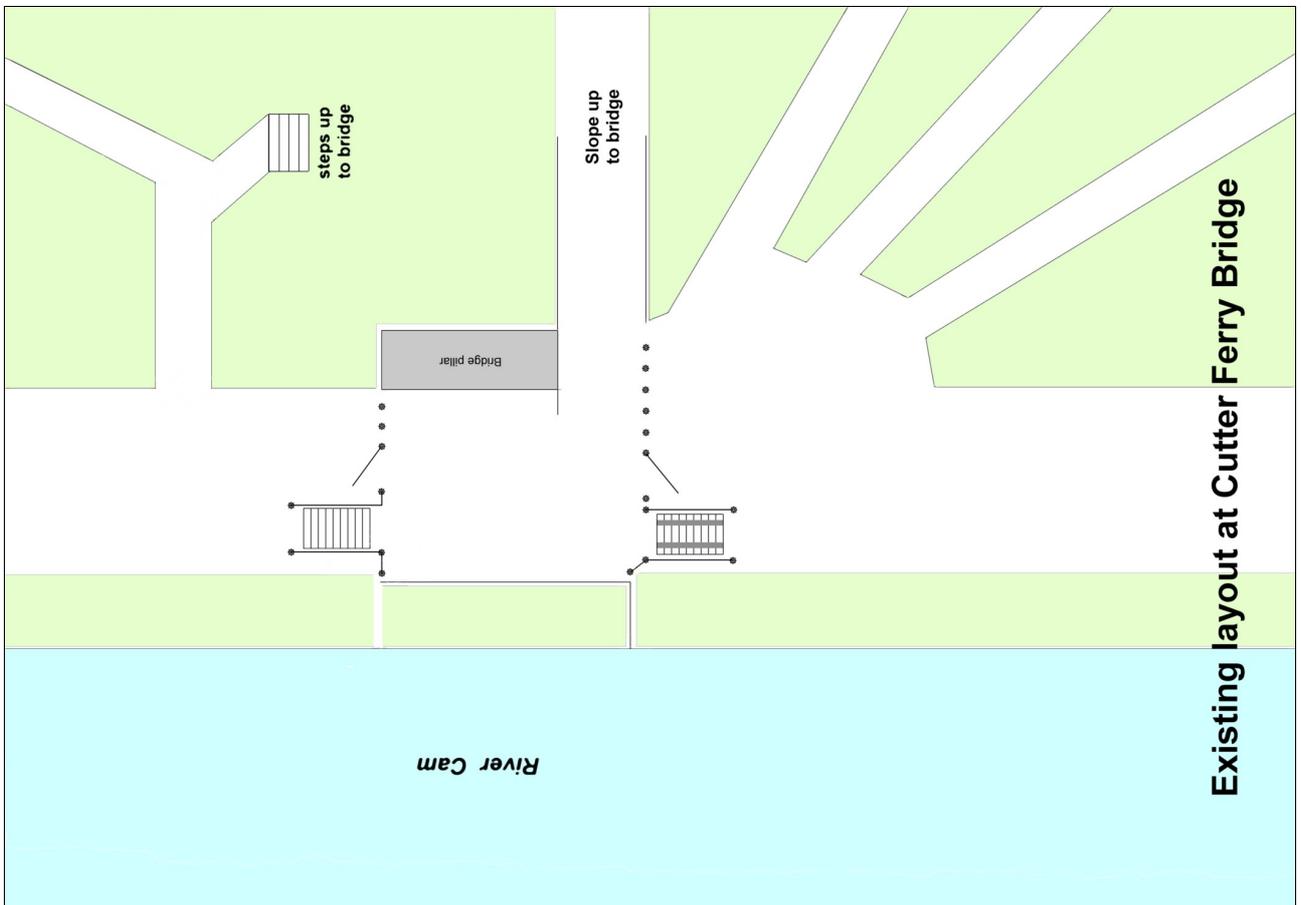
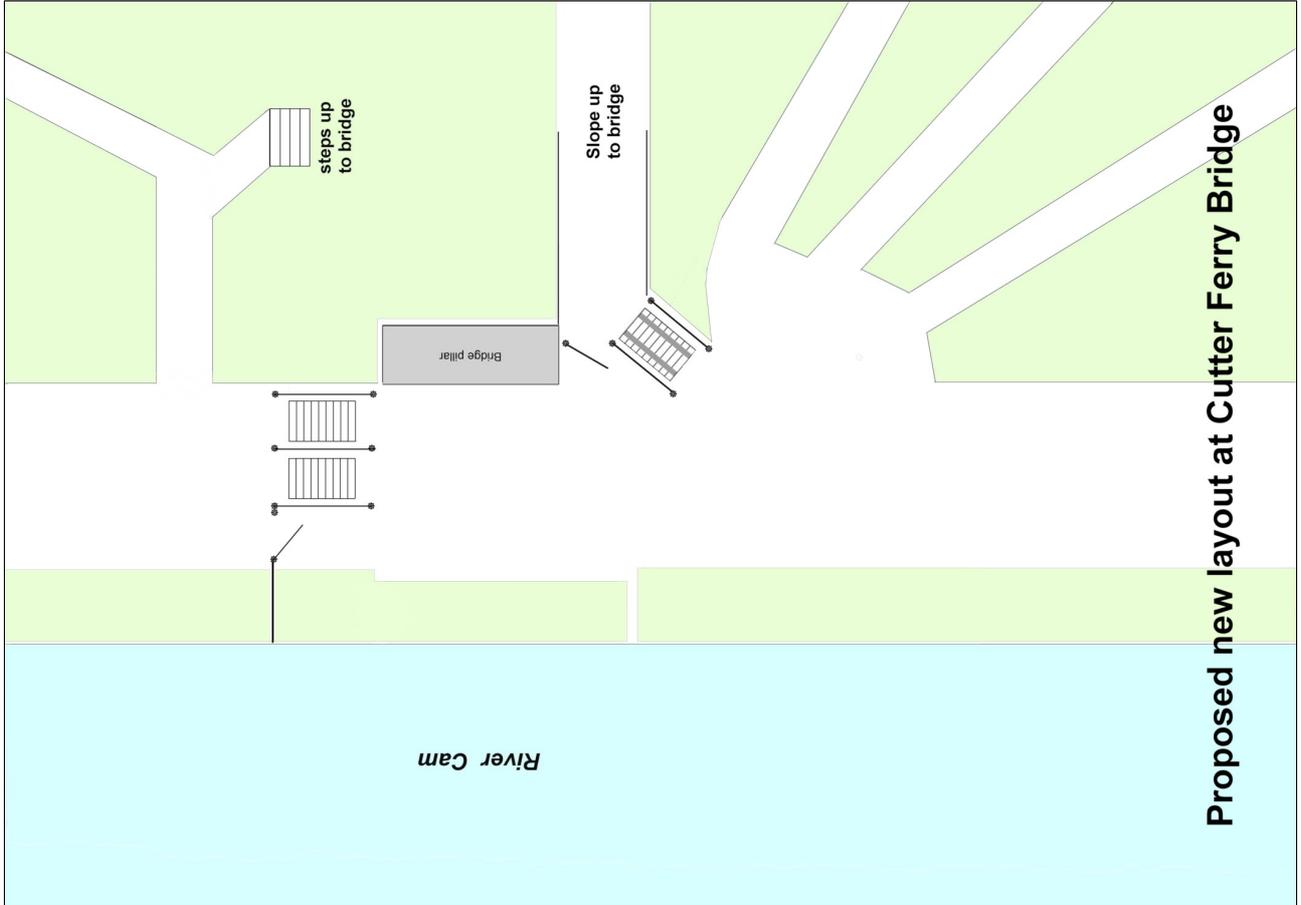
16.2 The present system of chains, padlocks and keypads fail because it is difficult to keep keys and codes secure and because vandals destroy the locks. An automated barrier is needed. Practical experience points in the direction of a rising kerb controlled by an electronic card reader. A new warning sign should be on display. Money from Berkeley Homes might help fund these necessary works.



Annex A: Example costings for 0.8 ha informal open space (Table B4 in Council Strategy)

Facility	Provision	12 year maintenance
Grassland/pasture 3500 m ²	£2,450	£1,260
Mown Grass 2000 m ²	£1,000	£2,400
Shrub 500 m ²	£2,000	£1,800
Woodland/Aquatic 2000 m ²	£10,000	£19,200
20 Park trees	£3,000	£480
Hedgerow 300m	£3,000	£2,520
Pond	£5,000	£4
5 Benches	£5,000	£2,100
Paths cyclist & pedestrian 300m	£9,000	£10,800
Footpath 600m	£9,000	£3,600
Interpretation Board	£1,500	£1,200
3 Bins	£1,050	£1,260
Total	£52,000	£46,624
Total (including contingency)	£60,840	

Annex B: Improvement to the cycleway under Cutter Ferry Bridge.



Annex C: Creation of picnic and barbecue area.

