

CONTINENTAL LANDSCAPES LTD

Management options proposal for Witney Town Council, 2017

**A selection of different management
techniques which could be used at
Witney Lake and Country Park**

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1. Summary

Witney Lake and Country Park is a popular and attractive open space used by a broad range of visitors. As with many publicly-owned and accessed parks, it faces pressures and challenges through issues such as anti-social behavior, conflicts of interest between different user groups, budget restrictions and environmental concerns. There is no overall management plan for the site, and so there is no defined direction which should be taken, especially as one of the meadows which had previously been grazed is no longer host to any livestock. This report suggests alternatives to advise Witney Town Council (WTC) what options are available, and where Continental Landscapes can assist with these proposals.

2. Location and land use

Witney Lake and Country Park is located to the east and south-east of the town, within easy walking distance of the town centre and is divided in part by the A40.



Fig. 1: Witney Lake and Country Park

There are a range of different habitat types across the site, including (but not limited to):

- Woodland (including wet woodland)

- Hedgerows (in various states of management)
- Meadow
- Wet meadow
- Streams and ditches
- Freshwater lake

There are paths running across the site, both rough paths and desire lines, and more formal paths surfaced with crushed stone. There is a Public Right of Way which runs across the site.

The park is a popular dog walking spot, used both by residents of Witney and professional dog walkers. It is one of the few places in Witney where dogs can be exercised off-lead, which makes it a great asset to this user group.

As well as walking, the lake is used for angling at the northern end, with the southern end designated as a nature reserve. It is a popular area for picnicking and often busy in summer with people paddling and bathing/swimming.

3. Site management

3.1 Previous management

The lake began life as a gravel extraction point for the construction of the A40 back in the 1980s. Since then a variety of work has been carried out to make it more habitable for wildlife including designating the south end as a 'no fishing' zone and nature reserve, and the installation of rafts on the lake to create nesting platforms for waterfowl. Unfortunately these have all been vandalised. Paths have been installed around the lake to improve access whilst reducing the impact on the surrounding meadows, woodland fringes and the banks of the lake and ditches. Hedges have been planted in places.

The meadows were grazed by cattle, with the Public Right of Way being mown to keep access open. In the wet meadow, scrapes were installed to make it more desirable for wildlife which favour these conditions, such as amphibians, various invertebrate species and birds, such as the grey heron.

There has been no obvious management of the wooded areas, other than works required for health and safety or boundary issues.

Ditches and streams have been kept well maintained and free flowing, and paths have been routed to prevent or delay their destruction from natural erosion to the banks caused by meanders in the streams.

There was once a ranger based in the park, a service which was reduced to summer walk rounds

3.2 Current management

At present, due to dispute with the grazier, there are no cattle grazing the meadow, with only the Public Right of Way being cut out as usual. Both the meadow and wet meadow are otherwise unmanaged. There are issues with the boundary fencing not being stockproof, and there were conflicts between the grazier and dog walkers through dogs being loose around the cattle.

All other management is largely unchanged. There is now no longer anyone who monitors the park other than the maintenance team when carrying out works.

There has been a consultation with park users conducted by Witney Town Council and the Lower Windrush Valley Project (LWVP), with whom WTC have been in conversation. This is to assess how the park is used and what users would like to see happening there. There has been a proposal from Adventure Plus to use the lake for recreational activities such as canoeing. There is some speculation as to the impact this will have on the wildlife of the area. WTC are also working with the LWVP to look at improvements for the park and are considering joint applications for funding.

4. Management options

There are a range of management options available which could greatly enhance the biodiversity potential of the site, as well as improving public perception of the site and assisting with maintenance issues such as bank erosion. Certain management practices are eligible for funding from the government. In the tables below are a range of options which WTC could pursue for the major habitat features which appear in the park. Options could be instigated on a standalone basis, or a combination selected to achieve the desired result.

4.1 Meadow management options

Meadow management options summary

Option 1 – no active management

- **Benefits:** *Cost* - Very little financial or manual cost beyond statutory boundary works and cutting out the public footpath.
- **Potential issues:** *Visual appearance* – site will quickly look unmanaged and uncared for. This could lead to an increase in antisocial behaviour such as littering, fly-tipping and increased dog fouling. *Reduction in biodiversity* – rank grasses and vigorous perennials such as nettles, brambles and thistles will quickly dominate, leading to a reduction in wildflower species. *Natural succession* – longer term, the site will naturally develop into scrub/woodland. Although woodlands are of benefit to wildlife, this could create areas where people are less happy to visit if there are potential hiding spots for people engaging in antisocial behaviour.

Option 2 – reinstate grazing

- **Benefits:** *Cost* - Removal of grass arisings without needing cutting or removal, other than public footpath cutting. *Increase in biodiversity (see also improved boundaries)* – suppression/removal of vigorous perennials such as nettles/brambles/thistles (depending on livestock type chosen). Poaching (trampling) of the ground by hooves create open patches in the grass sward for wildflowers to germinate in. *Improved boundaries* – boundaries will need to be stock-proof so hedges could be managed for this purpose, which will add to biodiversity. *Public interest* – coupled with interpretation materials, grazing can be used as a tool to inform and educate the public about biodiversity and farming practices, as well as being a point of interest to the local population.
- **Potential issues:** *Liability* – it must be established who would have responsibility for maintaining the boundaries and keeping the livestock contained, as the current boundary

fencing is not stock-proof. *Cost* – There may be a cost implication if it is determined that WTC are responsible for maintaining the boundary to ensure it is stock-proof. *Conflicts with other users* – As a public footpath runs through the site there may be conflict between the grazier and other users such as dog walkers. Although dog owners are required by law to keep their dogs under control around livestock, there is always the risk that this will be ignored, with dogs worrying livestock, and livestock in turn becoming a potential danger, especially cattle.

Option 3 – cut and leave grass

- **Benefits:** *Visual impact* – the site will look managed, increasing positive public perception of the area. *Suppression of natural succession and rank grasses* – species such as bramble, thistles, rank grasses and nettles will be in part suppressed, depending on how often the grass is cut. Regular cutting will keep them down, whereas a once-yearly cut will allow them to grow and show a presence, but slow down their spread. Tree growth within meadow areas will be stopped by a yearly cut. *Prevention of anti-social behaviour* – a managed site is easier to monitor for anti-social activities such as littering and dog fouling, as it is easier to detect and monitor. This in turn makes tackling problems easier, and as they arise.

- **Potential issues:** *Cost* – Compared to doing nothing or grazing, there is an increased cost implication to pay for someone to cut the grass, either regularly, or on a once- or twice-yearly cycle. *Reduction in biodiversity* – As the grass arisings will be left on-site, the process of them breaking down will release more nutrients into the soil. Although cutting will reduce the presence of species such as brambles and thistles, the raised nutrient status will enable them to dominate over other wildflower species, which will be outcompeted, and thus disappear from site.

Option 4 – cut and collect grass

- **Benefits:** *Increased biodiversity potential* – Removing the arisings removes the nutrient flush that leaving them on site provides. Further cutting and collection gradually reduces the nutrient status of the soil, allowing wildflower species to compete against species such as thistles and nettles, which prefer nutrient-rich soils. *Visual impact* – the site will look well managed, increasing positive public perception of the area. Removal of arisings looks much tidier. *Prevention of anti-social behaviour* – a managed site is easier to monitor for anti-social activities such as littering and dog fouling, as it is easier to detect and monitor. This in turn makes tackling problems easier, and as they arise.

- **Potential issues:** *Cost* – There will be a cost implication to pay for someone to cut the grass and dispose of the arisings. *Disposal of the arisings* – a significant amount of arisings will be produced every year, which will need taking off-site. As the grass is likely to be contaminated by dog faeces and ragwort, it is unlikely that local farmers will want to take it for hay. Composting or burning on-site may be an option, but permits may be required. *Management time* – time should be spent deciding when the meadow should be cut; if a spring meadow is desired, or the site is too wet later in the year to cut, then it should be cut in June, with a secondary cut being done later in the year if possible. Summer meadows can be cut in August or early September (weather-dependent)

Option 5 – active meadow improvement and management

- **Benefits:** *Increased biodiversity* – implementing active management to improve the biodiversity, such as scarifying areas of land and sowing wildflower seed, combined with a cut-and-collect mowing regime, will dramatically improve the biodiversity status of the site. This will attract more invertebrates, birds and mammals. This work will also help towards meeting district/regional Biodiversity Action Plan obligations. *Funding*

opportunities – managing a site for conservation can attract funding from government schemes, such as [Countryside Stewardship](#) grants from Natural England, where you can receive payment for managing land in a certain way. [GS7: Restoration towards species-rich grassland](#) may be of particular interest, which pays £145 per hectare. *Statutory and non-statutory designations* – where sites are of value to wildlife, they can be considered for various designations, some of which carry legal protection, which in turn can prevent a site from being considered for development. Active management will help towards having the site designated as a [Local Nature Reserve \(LNR\) through Natural England](#). *Management plan creation* – management plans ensure that consistent management is planned and followed over a specific period (normally 5-10 years). A good management plan should mean that anyone can pick it up and understand what management is taking place, and at what stage it is at. This ensures a consistent approach, even if a key member of staff driving the plan leaves. Management plans also assure the local residents that a structure is in place, and can resolve any reservations they may have about works carried out on-site.

- **Potential issues:** *Cost* – There will be relatively high cost to active management, such as cutting and removal of the grass, scarifying of the ground and sowing of seed etc. Creation of a management plan is also likely to cost, unless WTC or the district/borough council already have an ecologist on staff. Part of the cost could be offset by grant schemes, however. *Increased management time* – to ensure that the management of the site is successful, and satisfies and funding scheme obligations, staff time will need to be allocated to ensure that works are being carried out appropriately.

4.2 Woodland management options

Woodland management options summary

Option 1 – no active management

- **Benefits:** *Cost* - Very little financial or manual cost beyond statutory boundary works and health and safety work.
- **Potential issues:** *Visual appearance and antisocial behaviour* – site will look unmanaged and uncared for. This could lead to an increase in antisocial behaviour such as littering, fly-tipping and increased dog fouling. *Reduction in biodiversity* – with no management, the woodland areas have mainly developed uncontrolled. There is little diversity in canopy and under-canopy structure, which is less beneficial to wildlife.

Option 2 – management of small pockets of woodland

- **Benefits:** *Increased biodiversity* – carrying out management practices such as coppicing or pollarding will increase biodiversity by opening up areas of woodland. This will allow light onto the woodland floor, encouraging growth of wildflowers and plants, which in turn increases nectar sources for pollinating insects. Certain small mammals and birds also prefer to nest/shelter in coppice stools. *Funding opportunities* – various woodland grant schemes exist to help fund works beneficial for woodland habitats and wildlife, such as [Countryside Stewardship funding for woodlands](#). These include grants to create a management plan. *Educational opportunities* – woodland management sites can be used as venues for school/guides/scouts visits to support the curriculum or improve general natural history knowledge. If willow is included in the management it could provide a source of

timber/whips for bank erosion works on the streams, ditches and lake.

- **Potential issues:** *Cost* – increased cost of paying someone to fell and manage the woodland. This may be offset by grant funding. *Management time* – staff time will be needed to apply for grants, write and adhere to management plans.

Option 3 – full woodland management

- **Benefits:** *Increased biodiversity* – carrying out management practices such as coppicing or pollarding will increase biodiversity by opening up areas of woodland. This will allow light onto the woodland floor, encouraging growth of wildflowers and plants, which in turn increases nectar sources for pollinating insects. Certain small mammals and birds also prefer to nest/shelter in coppice stools. *Funding opportunities* – various woodland grant schemes exist to help fund works beneficial for woodland habitats and wildlife, such as [Countryside Stewardship funding for woodlands](#). These include grants to create a management plan. *Educational opportunities* – woodland management sites can be used as venues for school/guides/scouts/Forest School visits to support the curriculum or improve general natural history knowledge. Willow included in the management could provide a source of timber/whips for bank erosion works on the streams, ditches and lake. *Income generation* – small-scale income could be generated by the sale of timber/firewood produced from the site. *Community engagement* – community groups could be set up engaged with to help carry out regular woodland management tasks.

- **Potential issues:** *Cost* – increased cost of paying someone to fell and manage the woodland. This may be offset by grant funding. *Management time* – staff time will be needed to apply for grants, write and adhere to management plans, and ensure that felling licences are being complied with. Similarly, if volunteers or community groups are being engaged then they will require management.

4.3 Streams and ditches management options

Streams and ditches management options summary

Option 1 – maintain current management

- **Benefits:** *Cost* – very little financial implication. *Low management time* - little staff time required other than dealing with fly-tipping in the streams and complying with any Environment Agency obligations.
- **Potential issues:** *Bank erosion* – currently the site suffers from erosion of the banks through both natural processes and through dogs entering and exiting the water. This affects the navigation of the streams and also threatens the structural integrity of paths which run near to them.

Option 2 – bank erosion control using willow

- **Benefits:** *Cost* – The willow needed can be grown on-site from existing willow trees, greatly reducing the cost. *Erosion control* – installation of willow ‘walls’ using logs and

faggots provides a layer of protection for the bank, slowing down water flow on bends and allowing sediment to deposit. Depending upon the height of the wall, it can also discourage dogs from entering/exiting the water course, and offer protection from claws eroding the bank. If the willow is installed when it is freshly cut, it will continue to grow, and root into the bank, creating a living, dynamic barrier. *Biodiversity increase* – this method will create additional habitat on the streams/ditch bank, as well as introducing a coppicing regime elsewhere on the park.

- **Potential issues:** *Cost* – Although the willow will be free from site, there will still be the cost of employing someone to install it, as well as managing the woodland source. *Management time* – staff time will be needed to instruct contractors or WTC staff on the installation process, as well as on-going management, especially if live willow is used, as it will grow. *Obstruction of channel* - if used in narrow channels, live willow may lead to some obstruction of the channel as it will grow and spread. *Disruption to wildlife* – installation could prevent wildlife such as swans or geese, or their young, from easily being able to enter or exit the water course at certain points. Visual inspections will also need to be conducted beforehand to ensure that no water vole holes or habitats are being disturbed or blocked.

Option 3 – bank erosion control using biodegradable geotextiles and/or coir rolls

- **Benefits:** *Erosion control* – use of geotextiles and/or coir rolls when correctly installed can help reduce erosion control, both by forming a structural support for the soil, plus providing a stable foundation on which plants can grow or be grown. This will support stabilisation of the banking. Coir rolls will also allow for sediment deposits to build up, slowing the flow of the water. *Increased biodiversity* – growing plants up through the geotextiles/coir will improve the habitat of the banks, creating areas for marginal vegetation to establish. Textiles can be seeded, either by hand or hydroseeding equipment may be used. Coir rolls can also be supplied pre-planted. This method will also be easy for swans and geese to use.

- **Possible issues:** *Cost* – there will be a cost implication for purchasing, and installing, the geotextile/coir rolls. *Anti-social behaviour* – as some banks are easily accessible from some paths, they may be subject to vandalism. *Damage* - before the banking has fully established, damage may be caused by dogs' claws as they enter and exit the watercourse. *Getting materials to site* – access is limited at this site, especially for vehicles; which would make moving the textile round site problematic. This is especially of note with coir rolls, and even more so with coir rolls which have been pre-planted.

Option 4 – bank erosion control using aggregate and/or man-made engineering

- **Benefits:** *Erosion control* – a long-lasting and hard-wearing solution, using either piles of loose rocks, stone-filled cages or rolls (gabions) or engineered concrete construction, water flow would be slowed and the bank protected. Where loose rock or gabions are used, sediment would be allowed to deposit, and soil would gradually infill the gaps in the rocks, allowing vegetation to establish.
- **Possible issues:** *Cost* – this option would have a large cost implication as a lot of effort would be required to handle the materials, as well as cost of purchase and delivery. Where a man-made solution was to be installed, there would be the additional cost of skilled tradespeople and civil/structural engineers to ensure compliance with any building regulations. The Environment Agency may also need to be consulted. *Getting materials to site* – access is limited at this site, especially for vehicles; which would make moving the

stone/materials around site problematic.

4.4 Lake management options

Lake management options summary

Option 1 – no additional management

- **Benefits:** *Cost* – costs would be restricted to current maintenance.
- **Potential issues:** *Bank erosion* – on-going issues with bank erosion would not be addressed. *Wildlife disturbance* – on-going issues with wildlife disturbance would not be addressed.

Option 2 – improvement works to banks

- **Benefits:** *Erosion control* – use of one, or a combination of methods described in **4.3 Streams and ditches management options** will help control erosion issues faced caused by dogs and recreational activities from park users. *Increased biodiversity* – all options previously described in **4.3**, with the exception of man-made bank structures, provide habitat creation opportunities.
- **Potential issues:** *Cost/getting materials to site/damage/antisocial behaviour* - as described in **4.3**, each method comes with cost and logistical implications, as well as risk of damage to whatever is installed.

Option 3 – granting of recreational use by Adventure Plus

- **Benefits:** *Income generation* – if Adventure Plus are charged a fee or licence for use of the lake, then this could generate income for maintenance and other works within the park. *Enhancement to local economy* - visitors coming to use the lake may be encouraged to spend money in Witney while they are visiting. *Increase use of the park* – an increase in visitor numbers can help raise the profile of the site and encourage greater community participation.
- **Potential issues:** *Disruption to wildlife* – wildlife may be disturbed by increased activity and human presence on and around the lake, especially if they stray into the end of the lake which is designated for wildlife. Buoys may need to be installed to mark the boundary, although historically anything in the past which has been floated in the lake has been either towed back in or vandalised. *Damage to banking* – if proper launching sites/piers are not installed, further damage could be caused by an increase in numbers of people entering and exiting the lake, especially with equipment such as boats and canoes. *Problems with parking* – as there is no parking at the park, people coming in with large amounts of equipment, and the vehicles/trailers to carry them, may come into conflict with local residents, depending on where they then choose to park. *Unauthorised use of the lake* – park users may start to increase their use of the lake at times other than when Adventure Plus are running sessions. *Conflict with other park users* – there may be some protest from anglers, those wishing to visit the park for peace and quiet, and wildlife enthusiasts.

4.5 Interpretation and community engagement

Interpretation and community options summary

Option 1 – interpretation panels

- **Benefits:** *Informing the public* – a range of panels could be designed and installed to help inform and educate park users on a variety of topics such as why not to feed bread to ducks, why to keep dogs under close control (especially during nesting/rearing season), what wildlife can be seen at certain points of the park, what work is being carried out and why, etc.
- **Potential issues:** *Cost* – production and installation will have a cost and staff time implication. *Vandalism* – signs on-site may be vandalised.

Option 2 – interactive trails

- **Benefits:** *Increased education, public awareness and usage of the park* – the creation of trail maps, which could be downloaded via an app onto a mobile device, or printed off from the WTC website, would encourage greater use of the site from different groups, and educate people about the site at the same time. Features can be marked out on the map, such as ecological or historical points of interest, routes suitable for wheelchair or pushchair users, picnic areas etc. Shared funding could be a possibility if working with the Lower Windrush Valley Project.
- **Potential issues:** *Cost* – there would be a cost to either employ someone external, or dedicate internal staff time, to the creation of the trails, including walking the site to plot features. *Management time* – time should be spent periodically to ensure the trails are still up to date, and also walking the routes to ensure they are still appropriate for the users they target.

Option 3 – community involvement

- **Benefits:** *Cost* – engagement with volunteers can be a great way to get work done more quickly, especially on projects which require a less skilled workforce, at comparatively low cost. *Ownership* – encouraging the community to participate on work on-site engenders a sense of ownership, and so people are more likely to take greater care of their greenspace, and encourage others to do likewise. *Visible presence* - community group presence, especially regular volunteer work parties, can offer a visible presence on-site, which can discourage anti-social behaviour such as littering, dog fouling and vandalism.
- **Potential issues:** *Management time* – time will be required to recruit, supervise and manage community groups and volunteers, including planning works which they are to undertake. *Unreliability* – volunteer numbers can be unpredictable,

especially at certain times of year, or if weather conditions are poor. *Insurance* – unless groups become properly consolidated (such as ‘Friends of’ groups), anyone undertaking work on behalf of the council will have to be covered by council insurance; this usually requires a council member of staff to be directly supervising volunteers until such a time as they can purchase their own insurance, or have it purchased for them.

Option 4 – corporate volunteering

- **Benefits:** *Cost* – again, corporate volunteering can attract potentially large groups of workers to tackle one-off jobs such as Himalayan balsam removal, brash clearance, litter picking etc., for relatively low outlay. *Further involvement* – if corporate groups enjoy their time, they may well book repeat groups, providing a regular source of labour for projects. It may also inspire companies to sponsor features such as signage.
- **Potential issues:** *Management time* – time will be needed to liaise with companies, plan sessions and lead the activities, as well as subsequent tasks, such as disposal of rubbish after carrying out a litter pick. *Low skills set* – corporate volunteers are generally office or retail workers, and tend not to have the skills to carry out complex or heavy work. *Cost* – there needs to be enough tools and PPE provided for all group members.

5. How we can help

Continental Landscapes can offer the skills, knowledge and equipment to manage the variety of options offered in this report. We can offer the following resources to enable Witney Town Council to carry out whichever management options would be of most benefit to them:

- Contract manager Tom Dew – Tom is already overseeing the current contract between Witney Town Council and Continental Landscapes. As well as already being involved with WTC on a contract level, Tom is also the Plant and Machinery Manager for CLL. He will bring a wealth of knowledge to the management of the park, being able to choose the best-suited equipment for each habitat and activity.
- Biodiversity and Community Relationships Co-ordinator Caroline Gooch – with a strong background in practical conservation and volunteer leadership, Caroline will bring her experience to assist WTC in whichever management options they wish to pursue, and can offer support and advice to WTC in running volunteer groups, conservation considerations, and community liaison. Caroline also has experience in producing interpretative materials such as signage and educational materials.
- A range of specialist machinery – As well as the machinery already associated with the current contract, CLL can provide a wide range of other equipment to carry out tasks which may be required on-site. This includes ride-on mowers, tractors and flails, rotovating and scarifying equipment, chainsaws and hedgecutters, all

conveniently located and serviced at our Central Workshop near Bicester. With this resource we can carry out all meadow cutting and improvements, tree works, bank erosion prevention and installation of interpretation materials.

- Qualified staff – both locally and nationally we have a large number of qualified staff who can carry out the management options suggested. These include highly skilled arborists to carry out tree works, experienced machinery operators to manage grass cutting regimes, and highly trained mechanics and fitters who not only provide a fast and efficient service for our machinery, but who are also able to carry out small engineering jobs such as welding and repairs.
- Experienced estimating team – as well as the management and pricing experience which comes with Tom Dew, our estimating team can also offer their assistance in assessing and providing costings for the management options considered in this report.
- A large supply network – utilising both national and local suppliers, we have a large resource we can draw on to ensure that all WTC's requirements can be provided rapidly and efficiently.
- Third Sector Plus – Continental Landscapes Ltd. have developed a specific third sector engagement model called Third Sector Plus. Its aim is to encourage the development of Friends and voluntary groups, undertake regular consultation with users and promote community involvement in parks and open spaces. Volunteers and full-time employees are co-ordinated locally by the contract management team to ensure that the advantages of using volunteers are maximised and add value to the basic needs of the contract. We provide industry expertise, a local manager, any machinery and materials, technical knowledge and training, ensuring standards are met safely and to the required standard.

6. Conclusion

Witney Lake and Country Park is a popular, well-used resource, but suffers from a number of issues. This report has summarised the different options available to Witney Town Council for managing these issues, as well as enhancing its visual, amenity and biological potential. Continental Landscapes would be very happy to assist with any or all of the management options presented, and would welcome further discussions with Witney Town Council on how to progress.