

Draft Environment Committee Meeting	
Meeting Date	13 March 2024
Report Title	Scrapsgate Field, Minster – Horse Riding Field Review
EMT Lead	Emma Wiggins, Director of Regeneration & Neighbourhoods
Head of Service	Martyn Cassell, Head of Environment & Leisure
Lead Officer	Graeme Tuff, Greenspaces Manager
Classification	Open
Recommendations	1. It is recommended that the adjusted grounds maintenance arrangements continue, with the additional cutting of a section of the former rough grass area, at no additional cost to the Council.

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 The use of Scrapsgate Field, Minster for a dedicated horse-riding area was raised at Sheppey Area Committee in September 2022 and subsequently debated at Environment Committee on 2 March 2023, Minute 761/3/23.
- 1.2 It was agreed that grass cutting for an informal horse-riding area on Scrapsgate Field be undertaken at no additional contract costs, by reducing maintenance elsewhere on the site and that a review be undertaken after a year to ensure operational success and consider any Health and Safety issues.

2 Background

- 2.1 Scrapsgate Field is approximately 4.6ha of open space located to the west of Scrapsgate Road, Minster on the edge of the urban area. It forms part of Minster Marshes, designated part of a Local Wildlife Site and consists of a small car park and large grass areas with a small amount of tree planting bounded by drainage ditches, including the main Environment Agency maintained Scrapsgate Drain. Approximately a quarter of the area is maintained as short amenity grass with the balance long grass, with a series of grass paths cut through for circular walking and riding routes. A plan of the site is included as Appendix I.
- 2.2 The site is used for casual recreation, dog walking and in the past has been utilised for informal horse riding. This site along with part of The Glen, Minster was informally designated for casual horse-riding use with the installation of appropriate signing to try to provide local stables with the ability to ride off road. In addition to the active recreation use of the field, it is also a valuable area for biodiversity given the varied features and maintenance regimes.

- 2.3 In addition to the regularly maintained short grass for informal recreation, the rest of the field was cut once or twice per year (rough-cut) until the early 2000's, when the rough-cut grass was removed from the ground's maintenance contract.
- 2.4 The request to the Area Committee arose from an informal local riding group who identified concerns with training horses on uneven, uncut rough ground and who requested construction of an all-weather training menage. While this was not possible due to cost and restrictions due to the site's designation as a registered Village Green, a compromise was agreed to cut a further area of the rough grass area as marked red on the plan Appendix I.
- 2.5 A 1,500m² section of the rough grass has been cut for potential use by horse riders. This has been achieved at no additional grounds maintenance cost by swapping with other areas on the site which would have been cut in the past, but have been planted with tree whip planting.
- 2.6 From observations on site, there is currently limited evidence of use and although very wet at this time of year, there is no churning or areas of wear that are of concern.
- 2.7 Site signing, including specific warning – horse riding area, signing has been refreshed recently to both try to increase awareness and provide the necessary information to all users of the site. The site risk assessment is up to date and includes identification of the horse-riding risk, to all users of the site.

3 Proposals

- 3.1 It is proposed that the adjusted grounds maintenance arrangements continue, with the additional cutting of a section of the former rough grass area at no additional cost to the Council. This will enable horse riders to feel more confident to use this space, but not interfere with the legitimate other informal uses of the site.

4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

- 4.1 Return the additional cut area, back to rough grass. While the area appears to have had limited use to date, this will once again prevent potential use by horse riders and is therefore rejected.
- 4.2 The previous report to the Environment Committee identified estimated costs of £15,000-£20,000 to develop a horse menage with appropriate surfacing. However, there are considerable on-going maintenance, management and insurance implications and it was not recommended given the current Medium Term Financial Strategy challenges. These challenges remain and as such this option is rejected.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 We have tried but been unsuccessful trying to communicate with the local horse-riding group who originally raised the issue.
- 5.2 There has not been any objection or concern communicated from the community to the additional grass cutting.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The proposal would align to the Environment section of the Corporate Plan - to provide a cleaner, healthier and more sustainable and enjoyable environment and to prepare our borough for the challenges ahead.
Financial, Resource and Property	The proposal to provide an area of maintained grass will be cost neutral by reducing grass cutting elsewhere on the site.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	The site is a registered Village Green (VG263) and as such legal restrictions are placed through the Inclosure Act 1857 and the Commons Act 1876. In addition, the owner of a Village Green cannot do anything that interferes with the lawful recreational activities of the local inhabitants.
Crime and Disorder	None identified at this stage.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	The proposal does not impact the Local Wildlife Site or biodiversity as varied cutting regimes promote different species.
Health and Wellbeing	None Identified at this stage
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	None Identified at this stage
Risk Management and Health and Safety	Officers have considered the potential implications of a clash of users e.g., horse riders/dog walkers/walkers. The site is well known locally and new signing has been ordered to refresh the existing warning signs. Risk assessments for the site will detail the steps taken.

Equality and Diversity	There are no differential equality issues raised by the proposals in this report at this time.
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified at this stage.

7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Scrapsgate Field Horse Riding Area

8 Background Papers

- None