SOUTH STOKE PARISH COUNCIL

Lower Meadows/Water Meadows/Lower Marsh

Lease Q&A

1. **Why does the Parish Council want to lease the Lower Meadows?**

   In 2022, Christ Church (via its agent Savills) offered a lease of the site for a 20-year period. This offer presented a unique opportunity for the SSPC to secure approximately 44 acres as a key riverside space for the benefit of the South Stoke community for the next 20 years.

   Christ Church believed that the Parish Council was best placed to assume responsibility for the Lower Meadows and to manage the different community interests that they had previously had to deal with. The Parish Council agreed to take this on so that the site could be managed for the benefit of the whole community and not given over to third parties that could potentially exclude villagers from accessing the Lower Meadows.

   In addition, there are opportunities to do more than what Christ Church has done to date to maintain the Lower Meadows and to potentially improve the environmental condition. There is significant interest from the Environment Agency, BBOWT (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust), and Mend the Gap to help with this, given the nature of the habitat.

2. **Why does the SSPC need a lease if the public already has access?**

   At present, the village is reliant on an unregistered public right of way to access part of the Lower Meadows. This unregistered public right of way does not extend to the full site. As such, unrestricted access is not guaranteed. There have been various conversations about the registration of a public right-of-way to secure access rights. Formal registration (if successful) would result in a public right-of-way being included on the Definitive Map and that could lead to wider public use. Also, a public right-of-way only grants a public right to use the designated path and would not enable access to the wider area of the Lower Meadows.

3. **What is the current status of the Lease**

   Heads of Terms were negotiated by Councillors with Christ Church and after significant discussion were approved at the Parish Council meeting in October 2023. Since then, the Parish Council spent time finding solicitors to instruct who were prepared to assist the Parish Council at low cost. Mend the Gap were also interested in funding some of the legal costs and the cost of the village consultation event. The Parish Council successfully applied and were granted £2,500 towards legal costs and £500 for the costs of the village consultation. Once this funding was secured, the

Parish Council was able to instruct the drafting of the lease. This is currently in progress and is expected to be completed during August.

4. What are the main terms of the lease?

The lease will be for a period of 20 years. This was the period of time that Christ Church considered appropriate and were comfortable offering to the Parish Council. The permitted use of the Lower Meadows will include, walking, fishing, grazing of livestock, mooring of boats and community based events (with Christ Church consent). Christ Church retain responsibility for all the trees. There will be a requirement for the Parish Council to keep the area in good environmental condition and maintain appropriate insurance and health and safety requirements. The annual rent will be £1,000. There will be a rent review every three years, but any rent increase will be capped at 10%.

These terms are subject to confirmation in the final version of the lease.

5. How much will the lease cost the SSPC and how is this funded?

Apart from the annual rental, the Parish Council is required to pay Christ Church's solicitor costs of £5,000 + VAT. The Parish Council's solicitor costs of £2,500 + VAT is being funded by Mend the Gap. Ongoing annual costs will include insurance coverage and mowing and maintenance as a minimum.

The Parish Council has been carrying an ear-marked reserve of £7,000 to fund lease costs (solicitor fees and first rental payment) a reserve of £8,000 for initial mowing and maintenance. Volunteers have already offered mowing and maintenance assistance and this will help reduce the need to draw on this reserve fully and reduce annual maintenance costs. The existing insurance will cover the Lower Meadows and we do not expect any material increase in premium as a result of taking on the lease.

An indicative annual budget is included at the end showing how this could support the annual lease payment and general mowing/maintenance without an increase in the precept.

The Parish Council proposes to build an ear-marked reserve over time to support unexpected costs. Grant funding will also be sought where appropriate.

6. How does the SSPC plan to develop the Lower Meadows as a community asset?

Over the past year, a local steering group comprising members of the community, current and former Councillors, Environment Agency representatives and a BBOWT/Mend the Gap project manager have been investigating the environmental credentials of the site and looking at options for potential environmental enhancement, environmental maintenance and community use.

We are in a much better state of knowledge about the Lower Meadows and potential options due to the steering group efforts. The Parish Council thanks the steering group and has drawn on this information to produce the presentation materials today.

Ultimately, the Parish Council will be guided by what the community wants. Please do contribute your feedback on the forms provided.

7. **Does the SSPC have the right resources and capacity to manage the Lower Meadows?**

   The SSPC will designate a Councillor with responsibility for leading any initiative that the Parish Council decides to take forward. However, the Parish Council does not have the depth of knowledge that the steering group has been able to draw on and will require community input and specialist support on environmental and other topics. We are encouraged by those who have shown an interest already and believe that the necessary resources are available to support these efforts.

8. **How will the SSPC address Health & Safety considerations?**

   The SSPC will conduct a formal risk assessment of the Lower Meadows once it becomes a community asset. In the interim, it has considered interim maintenance activities that would be required to ensure safe access and use of the land.

9. **Can I get involved in the Lower Meadow efforts?**

   Yes, we need volunteers to help take this initiative forward. If you are interested in getting involved in these efforts, please contact Neil Proctor (Neil.Proctor@southstoke.org.uk) and Victor Meyer (Victor.Meyer@southstoke.org.uk)

Indicative Annual Budget Coverage:

Projected Income	**Budget £**	**Projected Expenditure**	**Budget £**
Precept	26,445	**General Finance and Grants**	
Newsletter advertising	600	Audit and Accountancy	1,000
Park rental income	240	Bank Charges	100
Bank interest	1,000	Amenities Charity Grant	2,518
VAT reclaim	500	Church Grant	870
AC Insurance Contribution	0	S137 and Other (Non-Grant) Pay	0
TOTAL INCOME	28,545	Staff costs &HMRC	10,000
		SUB TOTAL	14,488
Projected Expenditure			
Administration Costs	**Budget £**	**Facilities**	**Budget £**
Clerk training	500	Bus shelter land rental	30
Hire of meeting room	200	Dog Waste Bins	500
Postage and printing	250	**Lower Meadow Maintenance**	**2,777**
Newsletter	2500	Grass Weeding Strimming	3000
Subscriptions	500	Insurance	1750
Legal fees	0	Office equipment	200
Website	270	**Lower Meadow Lease**	**1,000**
Annual meeting of the parish	100	Slipway license	200
SUB TOTAL	4,320	Software and backups	200
		Utilities - Water	80
		SUB TOTAL	9,737
		TOTAL EXPENDITURE	28,545

Current Ear- Marked Reserves:

Ear Marked Reserves				Amount
General Reserve				£7,383.00
EMR Phonebox				£750.00
EMR Hall Heaters				£1,500.00*
EMR Slipway Renovations				£5,000.00
EMR Village Hall*				£0.00
EMR Water Meadows lease				£7,000.00
EMR Water Meadows maintenance				£8,000.00
EMR Park Project				£9,389.33
EMR Park Project Cashflow				£20,000

* To be reallocated if confirmed that no further invoice is payable

** To be reallocated to Village Hall upon completion of Park Project.

Potential CIL Funding:

SSPC Unutilised CIL	Final Spend Date
£1,433.50	26/04/2027
£9,751.61	25/10/2027
Total: £11,185.11	

CIL money could also be considered. Parish Councils can spend their CIL allocation on:

- Community facilities: Improvements or new facilities such as village halls, community centres, and sports facilities.
- Open spaces and parks: Enhancing green spaces, play areas, and recreational grounds.
- Environmental improvements: Tree planting, flood mitigation, and biodiversity projects.
- Public realm enhancements: Street furniture, signage, lighting, and beautification projects.