



Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators

Annual Open Meeting – 29 July 2020 Chairman's Report Diane Neil Mills

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When we look back at this confused and troubling period of history, one of the most clear and enduring images from this corner of the world will be that of Wimbledon and Putney Commons and the critical role they played throughout the event that will almost certainly come to define an era.

Although the Commons have long been recognised for their role in the pursuit of outdoor exercise, an activity deemed essential even during the most restrictive period of lockdown, the past few months have also emphasised the importance of this unique resource in meeting the mental and social needs of the entire community.

The images of families walking and cycling together in those early and uncertain days of lockdown, for some possibly their first ever outing to the Commons, remain curiously memorable, representing a familiar dimension of an otherwise alien landscape. As restrictions eased, group sizes and compositions evolved, yet the fundamental purposes served by the Commons remained the same. And throughout the entire period was the overwhelming sense of gratitude felt by everyone and reinforced with every visit as though it were the first, to those who provided the vision and leadership to establish this treasured open space in 1871.

There is no question that the COVID crisis has tested the strength and resilience of this unique organisation. The immediate impact of the virus was largely operational in managing the inherent health risks and the vast increase in visitor numbers. Some of the measures that were implemented to limit transmission of the virus would have been unimaginable under normal circumstances and we are grateful to everyone for their understanding and compliance.

The independence afforded to us by our founding legislation ensured that even during the most serious times of crisis, we were able to deploy resources and establish operating practices to suit our particular circumstances. And I am very proud to say that the staff have demonstrated exceptional commitment, competence and selflessness throughout, despite the enormous pressure that has been upon them. Given the fact that they almost all live on site, the delineation between their work and home lives, which under normal circumstances is blurred, has become totally invisible. The 1871 Act remains fundamental not only to our operating practices but to our character, culture and ethos and the staff are a clear reflection of the values that we represent.

Longer term, the damage that the virus has inflicted across the globe is so pervasive that it is difficult to think of any organisation that has not been impacted and WPCC is no exception. In financial terms, whilst we are fortunate in that almost 70 percent of our funding is provided by the levy, the additional income from events has suffered and is expected to remain depressed due to ongoing health concerns, continuing government restrictions and economic contraction.

The contributions made both in-kind and through donations and long-term contracts are therefore critically important and I would like to thank all of our partners for their co-operation in working with us to find mutually supportive solutions.

In terms of longer-term strategic initiatives, although most activity has been suspended due to the pandemic, significant progress has been made over the year in a number of areas, three of which I would like to highlight due to their contribution to the longer-term resilience of the organisation: governance; the masterplan; and community engagement.

1. Governance

Bringing the Charity Commission's Statutory Inquiry, opened on 18 August 2016, to a close has been our highest priority and to that end the Conservators have worked with the Commission to support the inquiry throughout. We therefore welcomed the recent publication of the final report on 2 July.

As many of you are aware, the inquiry was established to investigate the charity's governance arrangements with particular focus on the Putney Lower Common Easement. It represents a challenging period in the charity's long and distinguished history and publication of the report closes an important chapter in these events. With its closure, our intention is to move on and focus on the delivery of our charitable objectives.

The complexity of the matter under investigation is reflected in both the protracted timescales to complete the inquiry and the Commission's conclusions. And although I do not believe it is in anyone's interest to continue the debate, I do think it is worth summarising the key findings, which as much as possible, adopt the wording of the Commission.

- (i) The Commission did not make any findings about the decision to grant the easement or the terms of that grant.
- (ii) The inquiry found that the decision of trustees in February 2017 not to recover any funds which may have been lost was reasonable and properly taken.
- (iii) The inquiry did not find any one individual responsible for any incorrect decision, act or omission.
- (iv) The inquiry found that the inability of the trustees in post between 2015 and 2018 to manage the dispute resulting from the granting of the easement was costly to the charity and evidence of mismanagement.
- (v) The Commission found that the administration, management and governance of the charity has now significantly improved, in particular since the elections of 2018, and the current trustees have demonstrated their ability to act collectively in the best interests of the charity.

I would also like to make one final comment, which is to recognise and thank our chief executive, Simon Lee, for the important role he played in supporting the Conservators throughout this difficult and protracted process. Simon provided a critical bridge between the various cohorts of Conservators that served over the years and deserves enormous credit for his role in bringing the matter to a close whilst allowing the organisation to continue to move forward throughout the process. We are greatly indebted to him.

In support of the inquiry's underlying objectives, the Conservators openly recognised the opportunity to provide further resilience in governance related processes and over the course of the past two years have put in place measures to deliver additional clarity, structure and

rigour in a number of areas including the Access Framework, the Code of Conduct and the Enquiries and Complaints Procedure.

In addition, we recognised the value in clarifying certain election procedures, a matter addressed by the Commission as part of the inquiry. As a result, we are in the process of finalising new Election Guidelines, which will be published and put in place in advance of the 2021 triennial elections.

Finally, the inquiry report also identified the scope to further clarify certain provisions of the 1871 Act. We initiated a review of the constitution in 2018 to identify potential changes to the constitution to enable the charity to better achieve its charitable objectives. Last December we announced that we would begin a phased consultation process this year, which unfortunately has been suspended due to the pandemic. Significant progress has however been made to identify the key provisions requiring amendment and the procedure through which any changes could be effected. Through meaningful consultation, the level of public support for such change will be tested.

Given my earlier comments about our constitution serving us well through the pandemic, I would like to reassure everyone that constitutional reform is not about introducing a more permissive regime or diluting the fundamental purposes of the charity, but it is about enhancing the organisation to achieve its fundamental purpose of preserving, protecting and enhancing the Commons for the purposes of exercise and recreation as so clearly articulated in the founding legislation.

2. Masterplan

The Masterplan for the Commons will provide a long-term vision for both the natural and built landscapes as well as the way in which this open space functions to better meet the wide-ranging purposes that it serves.

The project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and capably led by the chief executive, has already established a foundation upon which further research will be progressed. The work carried out to date has demonstrated the strength of the bond between the community and the Commons, reinforcing the value of public consultation and engagement in developing the vision.

3. Community Engagement

Strong community support for the Commons has always been a defining characteristic of this unique open space and the launch of the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons in September 2019 formally brought together all those who share a passion for the Commons. The Friends provide a structure for fundraising and collective celebration, including that of the 150th anniversary of the date on which the 1871 Act received Royal Assent, 16 August 2021. My fellow Conservator, Sarah Jane Holden, will be speaking later this evening on this matter.

The year ahead also marks the triennial elections and I would like to encourage all of you to engage in the election process, which remains at the very heart of our constitution, in whatever way you find most appropriate.

In closing, I would like to thank my fellow Conservators for their support and commitment to enable the achievements of the past year to be delivered. The individual perspectives and diverse range of skills, interests and experience that they bring to the board allow for thorough and considered deliberation and effective decision-making and I am grateful for their dedication to the role.

Some of you will have noticed in the annual report that both Dr Ros Taylor, DEFRA appointed Conservator, and Mike Rappolt, MOD appointed Conservator, will be retiring from the board. Now I am told that our convention is to delay the valedictory speeches until after the event, perhaps because we have managed on occasion to persuade Conservators to extend their service just a bit longer.

In respect of this tradition, I will save the full tributes for a later date but I wanted to thank both Ros and Mike for their outstanding service. The Whitehall appointments bring great distinction and confer a sense of authority upon WPC and there is no doubt that both Ros and Mike through their service have done exactly that.

On behalf of the Conservators, I would also like to thank the external members of our committees: Francesca Quint and George Laurence QC who serve on the Constitution Working Group and Sarah Wilton who serves on the Audit and Risk Committee. All have provided invaluable guidance and insights and we are grateful for their commitment.

I would also like to pay special tribute to our regiment of volunteers, who through their quiet, and in many cases anonymous, contribution, be it picking litter, bashing scrub or recording wildlife, support the organisation. They are motivated by nothing more than a love of nature and a sense of community. Their collective contribution is periodically measured in terms of numbers of hours but the value they bring to the organisation is absolutely impossible to quantify and we are sincerely grateful for their enormous effort, particularly throughout the crisis.

We are also enormously grateful to those who have supported us financially, either in aid of a specific project or more generally, including membership of the Friends. The generosity of all our donors is genuinely humbling and we value each and every contribution.

Finally, we thank the chief executive and every single staff member for their passion, commitment, dedication and expertise. The trophy cabinet is at capacity and yet there is absolutely no sense whatsoever that their contribution is driven by a desire to accumulate accolades but simply by a sense of duty and humble pride in providing a public service that is treasured by so many, and we are sincerely grateful to them for all that they do.

Thank you.