

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – June 2019

Minutes of the Conservators' ANNUAL OPEN MEETING held at St John the Baptist Church Hall, Kingston Vale SW15 3PY on Wednesday 26th June 2019

Conservators: Diane Neil Mills, Elected (Chairman)
Shirley Gillbe, Elected
David Hince, Elected
Peter Hirsch, Elected
Sarah-Jane Holden, Elected
Mike Rappolt, Appointed MoD
Dr Ros Taylor, Appointed DEFRA
Nigel Ware, Appointed Home Office

Officers: Simon Lee (Chief Executive)

Auditor: Simon Webber, Kreston Reeves LLP

Approximately 45 Levy-payers and other members of the general public.

1. Welcome **Chairman**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, particularly those past Conservators who were present and thanked them for the contribution they had made over the years and then asked the Conservators, Chief Executive and Auditor to introduce themselves.

2. Apologies **Chairman**

None

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting on 27th June 2018 **Chairman**

The Minutes of the meeting had been approved by the Board of Conservators and the Chairman asked for any comments on the minutes which would be recorded in the minutes of this meeting. No comments were forthcoming.

4. Chairman's Report **Chairman**

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Evening

We are all drawn here tonight by a shared passion for Wimbledon and Putney Commons, a passion driven not only by an appreciation of the sheer splendour of this unique resource but also by a sense of collective responsibility for preserving and protecting this wonderful asset in perpetuity.

As Conservators, we are united by a shared sense of purpose and a collective ambition to achieve the long-term vision.

And in pursuit of this objective, we have over the past year focused on strengthening the foundations of the organisation. Although there has been progress on many fronts, I would like to focus tonight on developments in a few key areas.

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But first, if you will indulge me, I would like to speak about one recent event in particular, the annual Bio Blitz, which was held over the course of this past weekend, because in many ways it epitomises everything that Wimbledon and Putney Commons represent.

The event is officially described as a 'Weekend of Nature' and, although technically accurate, I would argue that this is yet another wonderful example of the British love for the understated.

The programme included a number of events from early sunrise to well past sunset, led by volunteers, staff and Conservators, all of whom demonstrated an intimidating level of knowledge of their subject areas. But critically, the events provided not only mental stimulation but opportunities for outdoor physical exercise and social interaction across the generations.

This was particularly evident during Saturday's bat walk and moth evening, enthusiastically attended by a number of young children, well beyond what are deemed to be acceptable British bedtime hours, alongside people well into their eighties, who seemed truly exhilarated to be clambering around Queensmere Pond in the pitch dark.

Community events such as these make an enormous contribution to well-being in so many dimensions and should be celebrated. I thank all of you who made it such a success.

I will now turn to three specific areas of focus over the past year: governance, finance and community engagement.

1. Governance

Our unique model of directly elected and appointed Conservators, governed by a separate Act of Parliament and financed by a dedicated levy, allows both local and the wider public interests to be represented and decision making to be fully devolved.

And as Conservators, we value the independence and powers that we have been granted but equally recognise the enormous responsibility with which we have been entrusted.

It is because of this independence that we still have dedicated staff living on site and outsource very little. We are also almost unique amongst open spaces in this country in still having mounted keepers. The combination of these factors is critical in engendering a sense of security across the estate, something most of us take for granted.

The closure of the Statutory Inquiry remains the charity's highest priority. In terms of progress, I am able to confirm that the Charity Commission has issued the Statutory Inquiry Draft Report on a strictly confidential basis to an undisclosed number of recipients for the purposes of commenting on the factual accuracy of the draft report.

The commission has confirmed that the deadline for submissions has closed and that they have received a number of detailed responses, which are currently being considered.

As set out in our annual report, the last communication received from the commission in terms of timescales was that they expected to issue the final report by the end of the second quarter 2019. Given however the time required to consider the detailed responses to the draft report that they have received, it seems likely that this deadline will be further extended.

We recognise the need generally to strengthen our governance arrangements and one of our highest priorities over the past year has been a focus on delivering greater consistency,

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transparency and clarity across our internal processes in areas such as complaints handling, publication of resolutions, code of conduct and the triennial elections.

In addition, and of particular importance, have been the arrangements that govern the way in which third parties access the Commons, from outdoor learning schools to sporting event organisers.

Visitors to the Commons continue to expand in both nature and number reflecting not only population growth but a growing appreciation of the value of accessible wilderness, which for many people is an experience they may otherwise never have.

We welcome this growing participation and it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the harmonious way in which the diverse users have co-existed over the decades continues unabated. This is very much a defining characteristic of the Commons.

It is therefore critically important that all arrangements governing use of the Commons are fair, fully compliant with our regulatory requirements and do not deter appropriate use of the Commons and it is these principles that underpin the entire Access Framework. We intend to share this document with the Stakeholder Group and look forward to receiving the feedback from this distinguished body.

Over the past year, we have also initiated a review of our constitution with the aim of improving our ability to perform our fundamental duties of preserving, protecting and enhancing the Commons for the purposes of exercise and recreation as set out in the 1871 Act. The work in this area remains at the exploratory stage. I appreciate the sensitivity of this area and assure you that this is not about introducing a more permissive regime or diluting the fundamental purposes of the charity, which are absolutely immutable.

2. Finance

Strict financial discipline has allowed the business plan to be delivered and a small operational surplus to be achieved. Despite this focus on effectively managing short-term expenditure, however, we struggle to make the sustainable long-term investment in our assets that is required.

We have therefore begun to explore the feasibility of amending the levy, which at present provides approximately 70 percent of unrestricted income. We recognise that any amendment would require secondary if not primary legislation and as such this initiative remains a long-term endeavour.

I would however like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to all levy-payers for their continued financial support. There is no doubt in our minds of the duty incumbent upon us to spend every penny of levy-payers' money in the most cost-effective manner and in the best interests of the charity.

Given the limited capital budget, fundraising for specific projects continues to play an important role in enhancing the estate with the benches appeal, memorial garden and horse rides all benefitting from the generosity of residents, visitors and organisations over the past year.

On this topic and, hot off the press, is confirmation that the Thames Hare and Hounds, the world's oldest cross-country running club has just secured a sizeable grant for the desperately needed replacement of the Beverley Brook Bridge. This running club, in which I must declare an interest, pre-dates the 1871 Act and has always been, like so many other

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local organisations, a most faithful and generous supporter of the Commons. We are extremely grateful for their leadership in this initiative and thank all of those involved.

In an effort to further build on the goodwill of the community, we are in the process of establishing a Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons Programme to focus on fundraising and provide opportunities for members of the local community to collectively celebrate their passion for the Commons. My fellow Conservator, Sarah Jane Holden, will be speaking later this evening on this topic.

3. Community Engagement

I spoke earlier about the importance of community to well-being and it is perhaps in this area that the greatest opportunities exist. Whilst the Commons have always been recognised for the importance of the physical asset, less well appreciated is the contribution they make to both the social and spiritual dimensions of the local community.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the dawn and dusk Remembrance Day Centenary Services, where the need in the community for collective commemoration was clearly visible.

The role of the Commons in providing opportunities for collective community experiences of this nature is of increasing importance given the demise of other traditional community facilities and services.

In addition to hosting these one-off events, the Commons provide a regular programme of guided health walks, bird walks, fungi foray as well as the Annual Open Day, Bookfest in addition to a multitude of sporting events.

And in doing so, the Commons play a key role in not only providing a vast open space for these events but also in providing staff with the requisite management capabilities, experience and confidence to manage these events in an orderly and safe manner.

In closing, and on behalf of the Conservators, I would like to express our appreciation to the small army of volunteers, whether operating as part of our teams or individually, whose selfless and quiet contribution is so vital to our operations.

We are also indebted to all of those who have supported us financially, enabling specific enhancements to be delivered for the benefit of all.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff, led by the chief executive, for their expertise, commitment and dedication. They are often the first if not the only point of contact for members of the public and they are a great tribute to us all.

Thank you.

5. Presentation on the Financial Statements, Nigel Ware

Good evening. As I am the Chairman of the Finance and Investment Committee, I am going to give this short presentation on the annual financial statements and I will take any questions on them at the end of my talk.

The financial statements will be found starting on page 25 of the annual report.

Firstly, I would like to deal with Statement of Financial Activities which is in essence the profit and loss account of the charity. The important thing to remember about charity accounts is that there are two types of funds – unrestricted funds and restricted funds.

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Restricted funds are those funds that have been given to the charity for a specific purpose and may only be used for that purpose. In our case the restricted funds during the year were The Windmill Restoration Fund, the Footpath Appeal, the Horseride Appeal and the Wildlife Garden Appeal.

All other funds received are unrestricted funds and can be used generally for the purposes of the charity. Within unrestricted funds it is possible for the Board at its discretion to designate funds for a particular purpose and the charity does this for Election Expenses and in past years has done this for the Mill House Fund which represented the net proceeds from the compulsory purchase of the Mill House in 2007. In the 2018-19 financial year the Conservators decided to remove the designation in respect of the Mill House fund and transfer the balance to the General Conservancy Fund because we considered that there was no particular merit in keeping the Mill House proceeds as a separate fund within unrestricted funds.

You will see from the Statement of Financial Activities that the results are broken down into the two types of funds. If we look first at the restricted funds you will see that we started off the year with a balance of £80k, we received £27k of income in the year and spent £69k leaving a balance of £38k to be carried forward to the current financial year. Page 39 of the accounts shows that we spent £56k on the restoration of the Inner Windmill Road and £12k on horserides.

Moving on to the bulk of the income, the unrestricted funds. Our income this year was £1,717k which was £54k higher than the previous year. The main component of this increase was an increase of £43k in the levy income.

As I explained last year, a consideration of our expenditure is complicated by the inclusion of a number of non-cash figures relating to the Local Government Pension Scheme, of which all employees are members. By non-cash I mean that these are items which under the relevant accounting standard are required to be charged to the Statement of Financial Activities but do not result in us having to make a physical payment to the pension scheme in respect of them. These additional non-cash costs amounted £250k in the year ended 31 March 2019. If you turn to page 12 of the annual report you will see that we have summarised the statement of financial activities in order to distinguish these non-cash LGPS costs. Ignoring these additional costs our expenditure on unrestricted funds was £1,625k which was an increase of £8k in comparison with the previous year. One of our largest items of unexpected expenditure during the year was the £28k that we had to spend on dealing with the traveller incursion and subsequently obtaining a three-year injunction.

The overall result for the year was an operating profit of £92k before the non-cash items relating to the LGPS. That compares with an operating profit of £46k in the previous year.

Taking the non-cash items into account we ended up with net expenditure of £158k for the year from which we deduct an unrealised profit on our investment portfolio of £13k and an actuarial gain on the LGPS of £471k giving a net increase in unrestricted funds of £326k for the year.

I would now like to turn to the balance sheet which you will find on page 26. The charity's net assets before the LGPS liability were £1,921k at the year end which was £63k more than last year. Unfortunately, we then have the pension scheme liability which turns the net assets of £1.9m into net liabilities of £792k. However, you will note that the pension liability has gone down this year by £221k as a result of the large actuarial gain that arose during the year.

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The next triennial actuarial valuation is being prepared now and when published later this year will inform the next three years contributions.

The cash flow statement on page 27 shows that our cash balances decreased by £5k during the year which left us with bank balances at the year-end of £293k.

Looking ahead to the current financial year we are expecting to make a loss because of the cost of replacing the maintenance centre roof and the almost certain need to replace the boilers at the pavilion at the playing fields. These two items are likely to cost in the region of £150k.

That concludes my presentation on the accounts but I will do my best to answer any questions that you may have.

The Chairman explained that under the founding legislation, the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act 1871, the permanent auditor was appointed by the Chairman of the Court of Quarter Sessions for the county of Surrey. That role had now been assumed by the Director of Corporate Services at Merton Council and the Chairman was pleased to report that the Director had approved the appointment of Kreston Reeves as Auditor.

Question 1 - Pension

A Levy-payer asked if it might be possible to publish the accounts prior to the meeting. Mr Ware confirmed that they were published on the Conservators' website on 10th June.

He asked if Mr Ware could help him understand the pension situation. First and foremost the accounts state that there was a negative pension reserve of £2.7m, but if that was ignored, there was a positive surplus of £1.8m. However, at some stage, it would be necessary to make up that deficit in relation to the pension fund and it would go from non-cash to cash at some point. Mr Ware explained that the accounting basis for including pensions in the financial statement was not the same as the basis the actuary used for determining how much contributions WPCC have to pay. When the last actuarial valuation was done in 2016, the Merton Local Government Pension Scheme was 94% funded and as a result of that the contributions increased by a small amount and that was what was currently paid - an amount that the Actuaries believed in 2017 was sufficient to meet WPCC's future liabilities and to recover the deficit. There would be a new triennial actuarial valuation as at 31 March 2019 and this will determine the level of contributions WPCC would have to make, including recovery charges, for the three years commencing 1 April 2020.

He then then asked about support costs. One of the largest items was defined pension benefit costs in excess of contributions made. In 2018 this was £203,000 and in 2019 £198,000 was this correct? Mr Ware confirmed that it was. With regard to interest costs on pension liability, were the Conservators paying £73,000 of interest? Mr Ware responded that the £250,000 was made up of the cost of the pension scheme plus interest and a small administration charge but this amount was never paid. It was simply caused by the perverseness of the accounting standards relating to pension schemes. Mr Ware confirmed that a cash reserve equivalent to that amount was not being built up. Mr Ware explained that the £2,713,000 that appeared in the pension scheme liability line was matched by an equal and opposite figure on the other side - negative pension reserve. Mr Ware confirmed that the pension contributions actually paid were £153,000.

6. Chief Executive's Presentation, Simon Lee

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, my presentation covers some of the operational achievements by the charity over the past year.

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Back in February 2018 our Winter Talk focused on the rivers of London and Toby Hull of the South East Rivers Trust was able to explain the works that had been undertaken along the Beverley Brook in Richmond Park to restore this section of the river.

Looking back through our archive it was with interest that I read the words of Richardson Evans in 1910, whose public appeal to save 175 acres of the agricultural meadows in Kingston and Putney Vale from development was driven by a need to maintain the natural character of the Beverley Brook from urban development.

Sadly over the years we have changed the character of the river, the introduction of toe-boards making it very shallow and wide. Tree growth had blocked light and altogether the ecology of the brook was very poor.

Raising over £100,000 of external grant funding the South East Rivers Trust, in partnership with Wimbledon and Putney Commons staff in December 2018 commenced a project to rejuvenate the river. Having secured a five year woodland grant through the Forestry Commission our staff were able to remove trees opening up light to the brook and providing material to create new berms. These new berms have already begun to silt-up and the flow of the river is revealing the fine-washed gravels ideal for fish to spawn and the berms acting as refuges to invertebrates. Already fish are colonising this rejuvenated 1.3km section of the brook and with light the vegetation is healing the scars from the works. We have had a number of groups come forward to help with litter management for which we are very grateful.

Our links with Government Departments is an important part of our heritage and we were pleased to welcome two officers from DEFRA on a visit to the Commons in mid-February. This provided them with an opportunity to meet volunteers, visit the heathlands and also view the works to the Brook. DEFRA has recently launched its 25 year environment plan and The Commons own strategy aligns with many of the actions DEFRA are looking to progress in terms of protecting our precious natural environment for future generations to enjoy.

Our active volunteering opportunities go from strength to strength ably led by Peter Haldane our Conservation and Engagement Officer. Last year at our open meeting the question of introducing a volunteer corps of litter pickers was raised. Having divided the Common into 22 distinct zones, some 36 regular volunteers, supplemented by others are now undertaking regular litter clearance activities. The impact is considerable, please do speak to Peter if you or an organisation you are involved with would like to participate in this scheme.

Our Saturday morning scrub-bashing sessions are now an integral part of our habitat management activities, removing the secondary birch and other scrub that would, if left unmanaged quickly swamp our rare and protected heathland habitats. Our Maintenance team has undertaken further works to remove some of the larger trees from the heathlands creating scallops and opening up areas to allow the heather and acid grasslands to flourish. The newly formed estate management volunteers have undertaken an array of work, from painting the stable yard, to coppicing in the woodlands and helping with litter management in Beverley Brook they are a dedicated group of regular volunteers.

Our volunteers who monitor the flora and fauna of the Commons have under the leadership of Dr Ros Taylor undertaken further sterling work and our fifth monitoring report of The Plain is published on our website.

Engagement with users is essential on the Commons and our Stakeholder Group provides an important means of receiving feedback and also a body with an increasing knowledge and understanding of the complexities involved in managing these 1140 acres of public open space. It was feedback from this Group that spurred our recent campaign to raise awareness

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of responsible dog control on the Commons. Anecdotal evidence from our staff has seen a huge increase in the number of dogs being walked on the Commons in recent years.

Three simple messages are being conveyed to all dog owners (including our staff):

- Please pick up and responsibly dispose of your dog mess
- Keep your dog under proper control – if it's out of sight, you can't know what it is doing;
- Only four dogs can be walked in any one group of people

These issues are all covered by our Byelaws and a fine of up to £200 plus costs could be awarded by courts where a breach occurs. It must be stressed that we would only seek to bring a prosecution as a last resort where someone was repeatedly breaching the Byelaws, our main approach is to educate and persuade. Our Mounted Keepers are currently undertaking education sessions to raise awareness of the need to have dogs under proper control at all times when on the Commons.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all the volunteers who contribute so much to the management of the Commons, your passion and commitment is very much appreciated.

Following the success of the 'Access for All' appeal, which raised £55,000, works commenced in April 2018 to restore the Inner Windmill Road, which forms a main arterial route through the middle of the Commons. A second stage of the restoration was the siting of new memorial benches along the road and the introduction of new wooden field gates. When this project was nearing completion, the Conservators hosted a small ceremony on Friday 22 March 2019, when Mr Ian Hewitt, Chairman of the Wimbledon Foundation, and the Chairman of the WPCB Board officially opened the new access path. Can I also thank Wimbledon Village Stables who raised a further £14,000 towards the enhancement of horse rides.

In terms of access unfortunately on the 10th September 2018 there was a traveller incursion at the REMPF. This was a group who were known for breaking up cars and given the threat of damage to the site the Board agreed that immediate steps be taken to seek a Writ of Possession. This was obtained from the High Court on the 12th September 2018. Utilising the services of a professional enforcement agency the travellers were removed from the playing fields by 6:00pm that same day.

To further protect the Commons the Board agreed to seek an injunction covering the whole of the Commons and on the 16th October 2018 supported by our legal representatives an Interim Injunction Order was obtained from the High Court. On Thursday 13th December 2018, Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators, again supported by our legal representatives, obtained a three year Injunction Order in the High Court of Justice. Together these issues incurred the charity in £28,000 of unplanned expenditure.

During the course of the past year we undertook a series of very successful events, very much aimed at families and encouraging people to access and learn more about the Commons:

- The Easter Egg Hunt in late April 2019
- BioBlitz weekend of Nature – thanks to Dr Ros Taylor who has led the events over that busy weekend – this last weekend was the 2019 event, another great success.
- Our Commons Open Day on the 9th September 2018 attracted several thousand people – the whole team comes together, but a special mention has to go to Bill Rowland and Angela Evans-Hill and for all their hard work
- Halloween Trail in October 2018
- Commemoration Event that the Chairman has already mentioned.

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Some 31 walks, talks and presentations were given by Conservators, officers and volunteers. These ranged from updates about the Commons to local Residents' Associations to bird song and butterfly walks and visits to the Stable yard by local schools and nursery groups.

We've also hosted some events, including at the REMPF in March the annual Rosslyn Park 7's rugby tournament with over 1500 games during the five day competition. How many people here are aware of the annual Mongolian Day of Culture held at the REMPF. It's a great event with traditional events including wrestling and wonderful Mongolian food.

Finally in looking back over the year, we were delighted to announce in September 2018 that both Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common had won Gold awards in the "Common of the Year" category of the London in Bloom competition. In addition we were thrilled that Wimbledon Common was named the overall 2018 winner in this category – a much coveted award.

These awards are a fantastic recognition of the hard work all our small but dedicated team of staff and the increasing efforts our volunteers put in to ensure the Commons remain a wonderful place to visit. We are particularly delighted with the accolade of the "Common of the Year" Award for Wimbledon Common.

We hope that during the forthcoming year we can continue to focus on the long-term investment in the Commons, we have submitted a Heritage Lottery Bid for seed funding to prepare a fully costed masterplan which we hope will provide the platform for major external funding. We are looking towards the 150th anniversary and you'll hear more shortly about the Friends Group that we hope will provide a catalyst for celebrating this momentous anniversary.

7. Establishing a Friends Group, Sarah-Jane Holden

The establishment of a supporters' organisation was incorporated into the WPCCC's Vision and Strategy in June 2017 which led to a series of meetings and discussions during 2018 by our group and which resulted in abandoning the concept of a separate Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons and incorporating 'a Friends group' within the charitable organisation of Wimbledon & Putney Commons Conservators.

Naturally there have been even more discussions, legal advice (pro bono) etc, but we are there. In February the concept was put to the Conservators and approval to go ahead was given.

In practice the WPCCC website will have a page 'How to Support Us' which will incorporate 'Become a Friend' as well as Volunteering, Donations, Legacies, etc. This section of the website is now under construction and will be usable by the end of July.

At this point there are three categories to 'Become a Friend':

- Individual Friend £30
- Household Friend £40
- Benefactor Friend £250

Friends will be able to sign up via the website using the online payment system 'Stripe'. Friends will also be able to join by setting up a standing order with their bank.

The formal launch of the Friends will be at the Rangers Compound at 7.00 pm on Friday 20 September in the presence of The Rt Hon. Justine Greening MP & Steven Hammond

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MP. Zac Goldsmith MP has been invited but is yet to confirm his attendance. The form this event will take is still very much in the discussion stage but the basic idea is a welcome drink, a wander down to Queensmere for 'some entertainment' (as long as we don't disturb the bats too much) then back up to the London Scottish for further beverages.

This has been very much a group effort by our Chairman - Diane, CEO – Simon Lee and Angela Evans-Hill, Simon's PA.

This is not by any means a mutually exclusive group and so any suggestions, help and advice would be very gratefully received. I look forward to hearing from one and all.

8. General Discussion and Questions

Question 1

Q. Although the Chairman had said in her statement that WPCC had increased the openness of the organisation in the last year, it was almost impossible by looking at the public documents to know what was actually happening. There were no minutes for the Board meetings published, just a short summary. The Agendas did not include the Board papers that were to be discussed; the Board considered the minutes from the sub-committees, which were not available; the dates and agendas of the sub-committee meetings were not available. The Stakeholder Group meeting dates and agendas were not published, nor its decisions. He considered this fell far short of how open and transparent the organisation should be. He also commented that although the Chairman had said that the WPCC was unique, it was not. There was another Trust which is very similar, the Malvern Hills Trust and they had open Board meetings with immediately available minutes and their sub-committees were also open to people to see and the amount of information available to their levy-payers was much better than WPCC. If he wanted to see what happened at the last Board meeting, there was nothing published about what was discussed and who made decisions about what, not even the Chief Executive's Report. He was not therefore sure that the openness and transparency translated into real openness and real transparency.

A. The Chairman responded. In respect of transparency, the Chairman suggested it might be helpful to set out the initiatives that had been taken since the new Board had been constituted 15 months ago. All the Resolutions from Board meetings were published. A Resolution was an official decision, reflecting matters on which the Board had deliberated and were prepared to discuss and defend publicly. Publishing the Resolutions was extremely important. With regards to the Committees, their composition was announced in Resolutions when they were agreed and membership of the Committees were published in those Resolutions. The Committees themselves did not have decision making authority. They were set up to examine in detail particular issues and put forward recommendations to the Board. When the Board had taken the formal decision which they were prepared to discuss and defend it would constitute a Resolution and would be published. In addition to Board matters, WPCC had taken the decision to publish as many operational metrics as possible, giving a sense of where the main activity of the 23 employees was focused, and helped the public understand the priorities and reflect matters that were of great interest to all users of the Commons. Other matters set out, for example, the clear timescales in the Complaints and Enquiries process setting expectations about responses to an enquiry or complaint.

With regard to Malvern Hills, most other organisations, certainly in London, were created under the Metropolitan Commons Act, they had Conservators who were appointed by local authorities and the Malvern Trust was one of those. Although the WPCC have three

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Government Appointed Trustees, they did not have any local authority appointees. WPCC was unique with its own Act of Parliament with its own Levy.

Mr Hince added that a media release was published after each Board meeting which gave a flavour of the discussions taking place.

Question 2

Q. The Chairman mentioned in the governance section of her speech that the Charity Commission had released its draft [statutory inquiry] report to a limited number of people to check facts. Did the Chairman know who they are checking the facts with and whether the matter was closed to further enquiries. How did they clarify this.

A. The Chairman responded that the list of people to whom the draft report had been issued has not been disclosed so she was not in a position to state the circulation of the draft report. Apologise for not being clear, the Chairman clarified that the closing date to which she referred was the deadline for returning responses to the draft consultation. At this point the Charity Commission were considering responses but some were very detailed and the Charity Commission would be going through them thoroughly. The last publication date they had given was the third quarter.

A member of the audience commented that as a past Trustee he had received the draft and most Trustees past and present had seen the draft. The Chairman replied that the list was confidential and had not been even disclosed to those receiving the draft report.

In answer to a question as to whether she had seen the report, the Chairman commented that she was not in a position to disclose who received copies.

Question 3

Q. With regard to the Heathrow consultation, the Conservators had submitted a response - had any feedback been received and would the Conservators be submitting a response to the new consultation.

A. The Chief Executive responded. The formal consultation documents would be going to the Board for their consultation. A local resident had been compiling a lot of information about the impact of not just Heathrow 3 but also the new flight path and the implications which were very serious. It was possible that aeroplanes would be flying over the Commons every minute which would have a huge impact on noise for visitors. Nitrates were also an issue - the Commons were made up of poor quality spoil which provided the habitat for its unique and important vegetation.

Conservator Peter Hirsch also commented that as Chairman of a local Residents' Association in Wimbledon, there was a high level of concern regarding these proposals. There were two separate consultations, the first was earlier in the year regarding the reconfiguration of flight paths, the second consultation was the Heathrow Expansion or the third runway. Local Councils, Wandsworth and Richmond, were opposing the plans and there were efforts being made to get the London Borough of Merton to also object.

It was commented that in the consultation, there was a proposal to fly aeroplanes over green spaces rather than residential areas so anything that could be done to fight that was essential. All Wandsworth Councillors were united on this matter.

The Chairman also commented that WPCC was working closely with local MPs as this was a wider issue covering neighbouring green spaces.

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Question 4

Q. The Poplars behind Vale Crescent were overdue for pollarding and were now very tall and the adjacent Squirrel Oaks were also a cause for concern especially as the Oak Processionary Moth was present in the area. Both trees were heavy users of water and with the recent dry years both were struggling for water and losing strength - a concern in the event of high winds. Were there any plans to remove the Oaks when the Poplars were pollarded?

A. The Chief Executive responded. He explained a little about tree management on the Commons. With thousands of trees there needed to be a planned approach on how they should be managed. The Commons had therefore been divided into zones and high risk areas, such as along the A3, were given priority. Then there were more regular removal and pollarding programmes. The Poplars near Vale Crescent were in the work programme for the current financial year. Some thought would need to be given to the removal of Oaks - he would not want to remove them for the sake of it but consideration would be given to them and perhaps a meeting held with local residents.

Question 5

Q. Why was there a lack of dog waste bins on Putney Heath, with there being only three, and was there an opportunity to follow the French system whereby dog waste bags were provided alongside the bins to encourage dog-walkers to pick up after their dogs?

A. The Chief Executive responded that there were 89 dog waste bins across the Commons and the waste had to be disposed of by means of incineration, incurring significant cost. It was recognised that there were some areas that needed to be looked at and to consider where best to put them. It was therefore very helpful for visitors to let the Ranger's Office know where they believed were the best locations. With regard to dog bags, there was an issue of cost and this would be considerable for this small charity. Although not a very pleasant subject, it was perhaps something that the Friends could become involved with. The amount and nature of dog waste did have a detrimental impact on the Commons and it was an important issue. Sponsorship for the dog waste bins was also something that could be considered.

Question 6

Q. The scale of the problem of dogs on the Playing Fields could be highlighted by the fact that on one morning 9 commercial dog walkers with in excess of 130 dogs had been counted on the Playing Fields. Perhaps skips were needed rather than bins.

A. The Chief Executive commented that the Board had agreed to undertake a consultation on the use of the Commons by commercial dog walkers. At present there was a policy whereby up to 25 dog-walkers are permitted to walk up to 6 dogs - four off lead two on. Charges could not currently be made to commercial dog-walkers because of the WPCC Byelaws and this was something that also needed to be considered.

Question 7

Q. Were the Conservators looking at the bigger environmental issues, particularly drought and the impact of wireless 5G - considered to be a major issue. To what extent is consideration given to wildlife corridors.

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A. Dr Ros Taylor, Conservator commented. Wildlife corridors were very important and the Commons were very fortunate in being linked through Putney to Barnes and the Wetlands Centre and there were many other important green space linkages in the area. Generally this was beneficial but could also be detrimental, for instance the impact of badgers predated on hedgehog populations. But, in the main, corridors were extremely important in terms of wildlife, particularly in maintaining species populations.

With regard to drought, it needed a long-term perspective and recently through a volunteer a picture of rainfall records was being developed and it was hoped to install a weather station in the new wildlife garden. It was also important to get a bigger local, long term perspective and understand the patterns of rainfall. This tied in with having corridors to allow the wildlife communities to flex.

The Chief Executive added that we did not have much knowledge of the impact of 5G at present.

Question 8

Q. Was the voluntary car parking donation scheme working? Had Parkside Hospital been involved in making any contributions.

A. The Chairman reported that in the last financial year the scheme had raised some £7,000 and it demonstrated that there was support for this approach and a willingness to make contributions. For many people it was important to be able to drive to the Commons but education and awareness about how easy it was to walk to the Commons as an alternative was very important. She also wished to recognise the efforts by the Park Run organisers in supporting efforts to encourage their participants to find alternative means of getting to the Commons.

The Chief Executive commented that with regard to Parkside Hospital parking in the car park, a study carried out by WPCC staff in January showed that there were over 870 vehicle movements through the car park over the course of a day, with about 5% admitting to being from the hospital. He had contacted the hospital and had met with them to discuss how this problem could be stopped. They had agreed to write to all their staff to explain that parking at the Windmill was not acceptable and WPCC would continue to work with them on this matter.

A vote of thanks was proposed from the floor to the Conservators and all the staff who worked the Commons.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending and brought the meeting to a close at 9.30pm.

[Although it has been custom and practice to include the names of those asking questions at the Open Meetings within the minutes, given the requirements of the protection of personal data under the Data Protection Act 2018 the names have been removed on this occasion.]