

## WPCC Annual Open Meeting - 26 June 2019

### Chairman's Report

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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 majesty of this unique resource but also by the sense of collective responsibility that we all feel for protecting this precious asset in perpetuity.

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

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 even one of our most distinguished 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 those 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. 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.

In terms of governance, 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 Draft Report on a strictly confidential basis to an undisclosed number of recipients for the purposes of commenting on factual accuracy. 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.

In any event, 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, transparency and clarity across our internal processes in areas such as complaints handling, publication of resolutions and metrics, 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.

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 and we thank the staff for their effort in doing so. 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 and to reassure levy-payers that there is no doubt in our minds of the duty incumbent upon us to achieve the highest possible standards in everything we do 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 running club, has just secured a 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 local organisations, a most faithful and generous supporter of the Commons. We are extremely grateful for their leadership in this initiative and wish them well in raising the remaining funds for this project.

In an effort to further build on the goodwill of the community, we are establishing the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons 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 and a multitude of other 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.