



Wimbledon and Putney Commons

Report of WPCC's Levy Consultation Public Meetings Held on 11, 17, 19 and 21 October 2023

Four meetings were held to allow Conservators to present their proposal for increasing the levy and to provide attendees with the opportunity to learn more about the levy and to ask questions (during both the formal question sessions and by speaking individually to staff and Conservators before and after the meetings). Three face to face meetings were held and a fourth meeting was held via Zoom.

The meetings were held as follows:

- Wednesday 11 October 2023 at 7pm – Sacred Heart Church Lower Hall, Edge Hill, Wimbledon London SW19 4LU (25 levy-payers attended)
- Tuesday 17 October 2023 from 7pm (formal meeting started at 7.30pm) - Putney Community Church, Werter Road, Putney SW15 2LL (12 levy-payers attended)
- Thursday 19 October 2023 from 7pm (formal meeting started at 7.30pm) - Roehampton Holy Trinity Church, Ponsonby Road SW15 4LA (6 levy-payers attended)
- Saturday 21 October 2023 at 5pm - Online via Zoom (4 levy-payers attended)

In welcoming everyone to the meeting, the Chairman explained that this was a consultation and the primary purpose of the evening was to provide everyone with the opportunity to learn more about the levy proposal and to ask questions. The Chairman also explained that it was not a referendum and at the end of the consultation a report summarising the results would be published. The Chairman also confirmed that a note of the meeting including questions would be published.

There were three speakers at each event and copies of the text of their presentations can be found here: [\[links\]](#).

1. Introduction, background, reason for review and alternatives considered - Chairman of the Conservators, Diane Neil Mills
2. Background to the levy and how it operates - Conservator and Chairman of the Finance and Investment Committee, Nigel Ware
3. How the increased levy could be spent to improve the Commons' biodiversity - Conservation and Engagement Officer, Peter Haldane (Wimbledon and Putney); Conservator Oliver Bennett (Roehampton); and Chief Executive, Colin Cooper (Zoom)

Copies of the slides used in the presentations can be found here: [Presentation Slides](#)

Those attending the meetings asked questions covering a variety of subjects. Many questions were prefixed with supportive comments. If a question addressed material that was not fully covered in the consultation documentation or in the original Q&A, additional material was added to the Q&A following the meeting, as described below.

The questions and discussion covered at each meeting are listed below. Please note that this note provides a summary of the answers to the questions and is not intended to be a transcript.

Wimbledon

- Question: Are professional dog-walkers considered as commercial users of the Commons as they are making money from the Commons? (covered in additional Q&A)
- Question: Why do you not charge for car parking?

The 1871 Act does not give the Conservators an express power to charge for car parking and the Act would have to be amended to allow that.

Malvern Hills Conservators have amended their constitution a number of times and it is the Conservators' understanding that they now have an express power to charge for car parking. The Conservators are looking at making amendments to the 1871 Act and have agreed that the power to charge would be considered for inclusion as part of that process in order to potentially enable Conservators in the future to implement a charge if they decided to do so.

A concern had been raised by a local councillor that should the Conservators introduce charging, it could drive cars onto local residential roads. The experience of Richmond Park when they had tried to introduce charging on two occasions but failed to do so was also noted.

- Question: Could the grass area of the Plain be used for festivals? (covered in additional Q&A)
- Question: When is the levy set?

Under the regulations, the maximum levy that the Conservators can set each year increases by the previous year's rate of RPI. Because of the financial situation, since 2017 the levy has been raised to the maximum permitted under the regulations every year. Prior to 2017 however the levy was often not increased by the maximum permitted. It should be noted that the costs of maintaining the Commons have also increased due to inflation.

The Conservators set the total levy at the start of the year and that total amount is shared out amongst the three councils who then divide it amongst levy-payers. All other things being equal, an increase in the number of properties would result in a decrease in the per household levy, not an overall increase in the total levy revenue.

- Question: Given the expansion of the population and that those using the Commons now come from a much wider area, in the longer term the levy will likely need to be increased again so surely the only option is to expand the area from which the levy is collected. I am happy to support the increase but can the Conservators provide reassurance that they will look at that?

This has been considered by the Conservators but to do so would be a complex and lengthy process. The Conservators' understanding is that it would require primary legislation which is a drawn out procedure that is expensive and risky as it could fail anywhere in the process. However, it remains a longer term initiative for the Conservators.

There are other ways that those who lived outside the levy-paying area are able to contribute, such as by joining the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons or by making a donation through the voluntary donation scheme in the car park; income from that at present was around £6,00 to 8,000 per annum.

- Question: The levy produced just two thirds of the income required so how does WPCC raise the additional funds? For example, do the golf clubs contribute? (covered in additional Q&A)

The golf course was in existence before the Commons came into being in 1871 so the clubs have a right to be on the Commons. The playing of golf is regulated through the byelaws rather than through a licencing arrangement. The clubs are not charged rent for the golf course but both clubs make voluntary contributions and maintain the course; these arrangements have been in place since the early 20th century. The London Scottish Golf Club also pays commercial rent to WPCC for the clubhouse. Both clubs are finding the current economic situation challenging.

- Question: Could memorial trees and benches provide a small income stream? Is the signage for the donation car parking scheme obvious? (covered in additional Q&A)

Planting trees is restricted on the SSSI, which includes the Rushmere area, and the woodlands are not suitable for further planting just yet. The Fundraising Manager manages a bench donation scheme but again, places are limited, as we don't want the Commons to be over-populated with benches.

The signage has recently been renewed in the car park and signs have been placed at the donation machine and around the car park. It was proposed to put a new banner at the car park entrance.

- Question: What is "Plan B" if the Conservators don't get 51% support?

The consultation is **not** a referendum or a vote so the actual percentage outcome will not determine the next steps.

Other options would be considered and work would continue on a longer term proposal to consider extending the levy-paying area. It is not only that households that use the levy do not pay the levy but they are also not part of the democratic process in terms of standing for election as Conservators or having the right to vote in the elections.

Further commercial events would also be considered provided they aligned with the charity's objectives, wouldn't cause irreversible or excess damage or interfere with the right of others to use the Commons. Further cost-cutting measures would also need to be considered but the charity had to uphold its duties to protect the Commons.

- Question: WPCC should put out more publicity on the work that they do as most visitors probably don't know what it takes to maintain the Commons.

Communications were something that the Conservators and staff were very much aware of and when any conservation work took place on the Commons signs were put out to explain. This was something that could be expanded, focusing on the fact that the Commons were managed by a charity and not the local authorities.

- Question: There was a lot of negative information coming out from the councils on social media. Should WPCC respond?

The Conservators will not respond to comments on social media as it would not be appropriate for WPCC to participate in a debate through these channels. WPCC is conducting a formal consultation process and has published a document setting out the information. The Conservators have used WPCC's own communications channels, including its own social media accounts, to raise awareness of the consultation process.

Putney

- Question: Little information had been provided about the Commons' finances, the Masterplan, the proposed major projects, and what the staff do; there was not enough information to make an informed decision. I am happy to support the levy but as "shareholders" we have not received many details.

All the information is available on the WPCC website and links were provided to this information in the consultation document (covered in additional Q&A).

- Question: It was understandable that the Act did not expressly say that the Conservators could charge for car parking but does it say that WPCC could not charge? Those who live nearby are those that pay the levy but many others can visit the Commons from outside the area, and are likely to come by car, so they pay nothing towards the Commons. How much income is received from the voluntary donation scheme, and how much income would charging for parking bring in?

WPCC has sought legal advice on whether they can charge for parking and has been advised that there is no express power to do so. The voluntary car parking scheme raises around £6,000 to £8,000 a year (corrected). The Conservators are looking at making amendments to the 1871 Act and have agreed that the power to charge would be considered for inclusion as part of that process in order to enable Conservators in the future to implement a charge if they decided to do so. There are other ways that those who live outside the levy-paying area could contribute, such as by joining the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons. Amending the levy-paying area remains a longer-term objective.

- Question: It feels as if Putney Lower Common is often sidelined and ignored. There is no mention of Putney Lower Common and what benefit might be to that area of the Commons from the additional funds.

The Conservators have undertaken a significant amount of work on Putney Lower Common over the last two years (covered in additional Q&A).

Pound for pound, more money is spent on Putney Lower Common than any other area of the Commons. The Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons are organising a walk around Putney Lower Common and details would be published shortly.

- Question: How are the Conservators deflecting the incipient political interference by the local councils? (covered in additional Q&A)
- Question: The figure of 23% of the budget for administration seemed high. Is it likely to go higher? (covered in additional Q&A)

Whilst it is difficult to compare organisations, particularly as what is included in “administration” could vary between organisations quite significantly, 23% is considered low in comparison to other organisations (particularly local authorities) and WPCC’s five year average was 25%.

Roehampton

- Question: What would the increased funds be spent on?

The funds would be spent on a combination of things:

- Ten year backlog of maintenance to buildings
 - Additional maintenance costs associated with the project work arising from the Masterplan
 - Resolve the issue of running a deficit budget
- Question: How will the results of the consultation affect whether the rise is permitted?

The consultation was not compulsory but something that the Conservators felt was important to do and had established this view when WPCC embarked on the initiative in 2019. If, after the consultation exercise, WPCC decides to pursue an increase in the levy WPCC will discuss the proposal with DEFRA to explore next steps (covered in Q&A).

- Question: It seems that longer term thinking is required and it is obvious that expanding the levy-paying area is the only way in which sufficient funding could be achieved rather than targeting those who already pay.

The Conservators’ understanding is that a change of this nature would require primary legislation which is a lengthy and complex process (covered in Q&A).

- Question: Do the London Scottish Golf Club and Tea Rooms pay anything?

The clubhouse is leased to the club and subject to rent at a market value. The two golf clubs that use the Commons pay a contribution to the upkeep of the Commons. The Tea Rooms also pay a market value rent.

- Question: Could you approach the Mayor’s Office for funding? (covered in additional Q&A)

Zoom

- Question: Why was the proposed levy increased expressed in pounds rather than the percentage increase of 25%? (covered in additional Q&A)

- Question: Instead of increasing the levy, would it not be possible to make other efficiencies elsewhere? The letter mentioned gave as one of the reasons to increase the levy that there are more people living in the area now, but shouldn't this mean that there are more levy-payers, which would mean an increase in revenue for the Commons? (covered in Q&A)
- Question: Why do the Commons get a levy when other green spaces do not? How does conservation and upkeep of paths etc in the Commons differ from, for example, that goes on in other green spaces that are not covered by the levy? (covered in additional Q&A)
- Question: Surely if there are more properties in the levy-paying area, the levy revenue increases? (covered in additional Q&A)
- Question: What makes up the £375,000? (covered in Q&A)