

Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators – November 2022

Notes of the Conservators' General Open Meeting held on Tuesday 1 November 2022 at the London Scottish Golf Club, London SW19 5NQ

Conservators: Diane Neil Mills, Elected (Chairman)
Sue Bucknall, Elected
David Hince, Elected
Peter Hirsch, Elected
Michael Johnston, Elected
Peter Shortt, Appointed MoD
Oliver Bennett MBE, Appointed DEFRA
Nigel Ware, Appointed Home Office

Officers: Mr Stephen Bound, Chief Executive

Approximately 40 Levy-payers and other members of the general public were also in attendance.

1. Welcome from the Chairman

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for attending.

Welcome and good evening. It is truly wonderful to see so many people here this evening and thank you for joining us. The events of the last few years have, if nothing else, demonstrated the great affection in which the Commons are held and attendance at these meetings was a genuine reflection of that.

I would like to extend a special welcome to Mike King and Meg Elliott of Resources for Change, the organisation we have engaged to undertake the Masterplan and Levy consultation. I would also like to thank the London Scottish Golf Club for their hospitality.

I would now like to introduce the Conservators:

Michael Johnston, elected Conservator
Oliver Bennett, DEFRA appointed Conservator
Sue Bucknall, elected Conservator
David Hince, elected Conservator
Peter Hirsch, elected Conservator
Peter Shortt, MOD appointed Conservator
Nigel Ware, Home Office appointed Conservator

Stephen Bound, Chief Executive”

2. Chairman's Introduction – Diane Neil Mills, Chairman

“Ladies and Gentlemen,

At our General Open Meeting in December 2019, held in this same room but in an otherwise very different pre-pandemic world, we departed from our regular meeting format to dedicate the evening to our newly launched Masterplan and constitutional reform initiatives. Three years on, we find ourselves at important milestones in both of these undertakings and have therefore decided to focus our meeting once again on these two projects.

My opening remarks this evening will address both strategic and operational matters, the latter of which are normally dealt with by the Chief Executive, but in order to allow him to focus on the Masterplan, and with his permission, I will provide an overview of developments in both areas.

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There is no doubt that one of the most important strategic initiatives that the Board has undertaken in recent times is the development of the Masterplan. You may recall that in 2017, with the invaluable support of the Stakeholder Group, we developed the first ever long-term strategy for the Commons and the development of the Masterplan is intended to provide the long-term planning for this strategic framework. The work was funded by a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and was carried out by consultants Barker Langham with the support of a few specialist firms.

The Masterplan assesses the investment requirements of both the natural and built environments of the Commons and the way in which these requirements will be met. It has been progressed in two stages.

Stage 1 focuses on the natural environment, encompassing both the conservation and access aspects, including footpaths and signage, details of which will be presented later this evening.

Stage II focuses on the built environment, including the Grade II listed Windmill and this fine Victorian clubhouse as well as the historic monuments and amenity facilities that are dispersed across the Commons.

Progression of Stage II is dependent on constitutional reform through a scheme with the Charity Commission and as such will be developed at a later date.

The current consultation on the Masterplan therefore includes Stage 1 only. The focus on this area is in many ways entirely appropriate given the fragility of the natural landscape that has been exposed by both the increased usage during the pandemic and the increasingly challenging climatic conditions.

The importance of this area is also reflected in the evolving day to day management priorities for the Commons, which include an increase in cutting and bailing to support meadow creation, the restoration of peat bogs, and the relentless scrub bashing to support our heathland management objectives. All of these activities will improve biodiversity and increase resilience and we are hugely indebted to all those whose voluntary efforts make this work possible.

To support our ambitions in this area, we have realigned internal resources and established dedicated fundraising capabilities. Under the inspirational leadership of Maggie May, our fundraising efforts to date have delivered much-needed repairs to footpaths in Putney Heath and the rebuilding of two bridges that cross the Beverly Brook. None of these projects would have been possible without the leadership, generosity and involvement of the local community and I would like to personally thank all those who have supported these initiatives.

I would also like to pay tribute to the man after whom the bridge in Putney Lower Common is named, Bill Rowland, for his 40 years of service to the Commons. The inauguration of the bridge on 20 October recognised Bill's loyalty, his contribution to the Commons and the high regard in which he is held by all.

I should also add that whilst external funding is absolutely essential for the delivery of major capital projects such as these, we believe that an increase in our Levy is also necessary to support our day to day operating budget and I will be speaking later this evening about this matter.

Over the past few months, we have witnessed the role of the Commons in bringing together the community in times of celebration and in times of sorrow. In early June we celebrated the Queen's Platinum Jubilee and barely three months later found ourselves mourning the death of the country's longest serving monarch. Both were occasions of immense historical significance and will be remembered by all.

During the same period, we also held the final events to mark our 150th anniversary: a very special reception at the House of Commons and the finale of our Art on the Commons competition. Inspired by Sue Bucknall, Chair of Friends, we launched the picture competition on the eve of the

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actual 150th anniversary in August 2020, in the depths and darkness of the pandemic, yet the event provided hope and light for many, attracting over 1500 entries over its 12 month life. Even the process of voting for the winning entry brought together over 800 people and served as a reminder to us all of the role of the Commons in promoting health and social welfare more generally.

In the midst of all of this activity, we received the award of 'Commons of the Year' for Wimbledon Common as well as gold awards for both Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common in the London in Bloom competition. Despite the fact that this is not (by any means) the first time that we have received these prestigious distinctions, it does not in any way diminish their importance. It is an enormously positive endorsement and one that recognised the dedication, talent and commitment of every member of the team to achieve the highest standard of public open space, with the assessor citing in particular: the authoritative and reassuring presence of the mounted keepers; the advanced level of the habitat management programmes; the quality of the sports pitch maintenance; and the level of volunteer involvement. There is no question that it is a team effort and one that has at its core a spirit of mutual respect, co-operation and harmony.

It is our duty, as Conservators, to provide the strategic oversight and support necessary to allow the organisation to continue to build upon its successes over the years ahead. And it is the collective effort of this exceptionally dedicated team, capably led by Steve Bound, that continues to make this possible. On behalf of the Conservators, I would like to express our most sincere gratitude to them for all that they do.

And finally, I have remarked more than once that the key to the survival of the Commons has been the support, the engagement and the generosity of so many, those in the local community and beyond, including all those here tonight and I thank you all for making our role as Conservators such a rewarding one.

Thank you very much.

3. Financial Update – Nigel Ware, Chairman of the Finance and Investment Committee

Good evening.

I am going to give you a brief update on the development of WPCC's finances in the current financial year which started on 1 April.

Although this half year, unlike the previous 4 half years, has not been negatively affected by Covid, we and the rest of the UK have been beset by persistent and now rampant inflation.

When we set the budget for 2022-23 in March of this year we were working on the basis of cost inflation being between 3% and 4.5%. In the event, this has proved to be wildly optimistic and the annual increase in CPI inflation for September 2022 was 10.1%. At the end of September the Bank of England expressed the view that inflation would peak at 11% in October and then start to come down. The IMF forecast a couple of weeks ago was for UK inflation to reach 11.3% by the end of the year and remain at an average of 9% for 2023 and 2024.

However, these are only forecasts and with the multiple uncertainties existing in the world and the UK economy at the moment, the only thing we can count on is inflation continuing at an uncomfortably high level for the next year or two.

We are now experiencing substantial increases in our energy costs and maintenance items.

Turning to the actual figures for the first half year to the end of September. Our unrestricted income for the 6-month period to the end of September was £985,000 which was £24,000 in excess of our budget.

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Our unrestricted expenditure in the six months was £987,000 which was £108,000 below budget. This favourable variance was primarily due to timing differences with expenditure, rather than a miraculous reduction in overheads, which means that we will pick up this underspend in the second half of the year together with additional costs as a result of the increase in inflation.

The net result is that at the end of September we had incurred an operating loss on unrestricted funds of just £2,000 which was £132,000 better than budgeted. This small loss is before taking account of the non-cash adjustments we have to make at the end of the financial year in respect of the Local Government Pension Scheme.

On the restricted funds, we have received £70,000 of income during the half year which was £12,000 better than anticipated. There were encouraging contributions from the horse ride appeal and the two Beverley Brook bridge appeals. The main item of restricted expenditure during the half year was on the renovation of the Putney Lower Common bridge. At the end of the half year our restricted funds had increased by £43,000.

For the last few years, I have been able to report that our investment portfolio has performed well. I am afraid that this half year there has been a set back with the portfolio having lost £104,000 to £1,574,000 at the end of September. This represents a decline of 6.2% which is somewhat better than the decline of 8.3% in the FTSE 100 during the same period.

Our cash balances have remained satisfactory with the figure at the end of October being £273,000.

For the remainder of the year, I expect our operating loss to increase, not least because of the underspend on overheads in the first half of the year.

That concludes my brief summary of where our finances are.”

4. The Masterplan – Stephen Bound, Chief Executive

“As the Chairman has mentioned in her introduction, the Masterplan was prepared by consultants, Barker Langham, and in preparing the plan they did a number of things, including talking to users of the Commons, local residents and other stakeholders to discover what they valued about the Commons and what they felt could be improved. They spoke to the Conservators and staff to find out about our aspirations for the Commons and also to similar open spaces in the UK and world wide to get a sense of best practice in open space management. Once all the information was gathered together, they prepared their proposals for the Masterplan.

The elements of the Masterplan we are consulting on this at this stage are:

- Natural landscape
- Paths and other access infrastructure
- Signage
- Funding

The Chairman will talk about funding in a few minutes but first I will run through the Masterplan with you.

To go through the Masterplan in any detail, would take several hours. So instead I will summarise the main projects under each heading, starting with the natural landscape. The natural landscape is important to the Commons for two primary reasons – firstly, it is rural landscape of the Commons in an otherwise urban setting which is what makes the Commons so valuable and so loved by people. Secondly, the majority of the Commons are a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation, so there is a legal duty to preserve that natural landscape and

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habitat and even the parts of the Commons that fall outside these designations are still a valuable haven, and provide habitat, for wildlife.

So let's look at the key proposals affecting the natural landscape:

Heathland - The Commons contain approximately 50% of all the heathland found in London and so heathland is a very important feature. We currently manage heathland by removing young trees and scrub which would otherwise grow up and shade out the heather and other species typical of the habitat. We will continue this work but we are also proposing to undertake a limited expansion of heathland by removing trees at the edges of existing heathland. This will be limited for two reasons. Firstly, the more open habitat we create, the more work we need to do to maintain these open areas, putting a strain on our resources. Natural England – who are amongst other things the regulatory body for sites of special scientific interest - have indicated they would like to see us focus on managing the existing open areas of heathland really well, rather than restoring large areas which are currently under trees. We are also conscious that some of these areas which were formerly heathland are now woodland – and this woodland, in areas for example like the strip along Parkside, are really important for screening development and also reducing traffic noise for those using the Commons and so these will be retained.

Grassland - Many of you will have read about the loss of traditionally managed grassland and meadows and the impact that has on, for example, populations of pollinating insects including bees. Those of you who are regulars to the area around the windmill will have no doubt seen that we cut and bale the grassland on the Plain once a year. This is important ecologically as by removing the grass it stops nutrient build up in the soil which allows the flower species to compete with the more aggressive grass species which would otherwise thrive and smother the wildflowers. We have seen a marked increase in the floral diversity of the Plain since we have been cutting and baling and we are intending to extend this management technique to other areas of the Common. And these two maps [*See slide 1 attached at the end of the notes*] show some of the areas where we are proposing to cut and bale. The map on the left shows areas of acid grassland, which is one of the habitats for which the Commons were designated a site of special scientific interest. And the map on the right shows areas which are currently quite nutrient rich and as a result quite species poor, where we hope that cutting and baling will have a significant impact on the wildlife value. In these areas which are outside the SSSI designation, we might also consider seeding some wildflower species to help the process on its way

Ponds – The ponds are a very popular feature of the Commons. There are in fact nine ponds to be found here and all are, to some extent, in need of management to maximise their wildlife and their landscape value. For example, on the left is a good example of a pond which is visually attractive and provides good habitat for a range of aquatic species [*See slide 2 attached at the end of the notes*]. On the right is Queensmere and the difference is stark. So in order to improve Queensmere and improve its value, we need to remove some of the silt which has built up over time. This could be used to create islands within the pond for nesting wildfowl and also to naturalise the pond edges if we were to remove the concrete blocks and create a natural, gently sloping edge. We would reintroduce marginal vegetation around the pond edges with species such as flag iris, marsh marigold and reeds and we would seed the land around the pond to improve its landscape and ecological value. The banks at present are devoid of any flora and this is a mark of how popular the area is but that much footfall does destroy vegetation. We are planning to undertake similar works as necessary to improve the wildlife value of the other ponds around the Commons, albeit that some are much smaller and won't require anything like the same scale of intervention.

Other Wetland Habitats – although ponds fall of course fall into the category of a wetland habitat, another wetland habitat on the Commons which is less obvious to the casual observer but nonetheless important, are the bogs. There are four bogs found on the Commons, the largest of which is Farm Bog down towards Warren Farm. You have no doubt heard in the media of the

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importance of bogs in relation to climate change, due to their ability to capture and store carbon. They also hold an unusual and specialised range of plant species, such as the carnivorous Sundew, and the raised mires found on the Commons are probably the rarest habitat on the Commons. Bogs need a high water table to survive but at the moment drainage ditches created over the past 150 years and trees which have colonised the bogs and the areas immediately around them, are drying out this valuable habitat. Therefore, in order to save and restore the areas of bog we intend to install dams on selected drainage ditches in order to hold water back and keep the water table high and to remove trees growing on or immediately adjacent to the bogs to prevent roots from sucking up the ground water.

In relation to this, I am very pleased to announce that we have recently been advised that we have been successful in applying for a grant under Natural England's Peatland Restoration Project which will fund a feasibility study for the restoration of the bogs on the Commons. This work will be taking place over the next few months.

Woodland - The most widespread habitat on the Commons is woodland and, as you may be aware, woodland in this context does need management. A heavily shaded, dark woodland made up of trees of uniform age and height, with a limited range of species, is poor for wildlife. Woodlands which have most value are light, they have a wide range of species and a diverse structure – that is to say a ground layer made up of mainly fungi and woodland wildflowers, a shrub layer made up of flowering and fruiting species like hazel, wild cherry, elder and crab apple and then a canopy layer – which on the Commons is largely made up of oak.

So in order to improve the wildlife value of our woodlands we intend to thin out trees to allow more sunlight into the woodland. This will encourage the ground flora and the shrub layer to establish. We'll plant new trees to establish a wider range of species, particularly some of the shrub species which are largely absent. This will also help to create this more diverse structure I mentioned. And we plan to widen woodland paths to allow more light into the edges along these routes and to create open glades within the woodlands. A combination of these management techniques will encourage a greater range of plant life – which in turn attracts a wider range of invertebrate life – which in turn attracts, for example, a wider range of insectivorous birds – and hence a more species rich, attractive woodland.

Other habitat works – other works included in the Masterplan are a continuation of the river restoration work on the Beverley Brook, this time focusing on where it flows across Putney Lower Common; better management of roadside verges to encourage wildflowers and insects; creation of scrapes to try and establish more heather across more of the Commons, particularly around the edges of the golf course; and where appropriate, improved management of ditches where this is felt to be necessary and appropriate. And there are more details of all of these projects in the draft Masterplan available on our website.

Access - Moving on to access. As winter approaches we will increasingly see paths across the Commons becoming wet and muddy. The path network has suffered from many years of underinvestment. We have begun trying to rectify this and in recent years for example we have resurfaced the Inner Windmill Road – the main path through the centre of Wimbledon Common – and the Beverley Brook path between the Playing Fields and Robin Hood Ride. However, these two paths between them cost £135,000 to restore. So when you look at this map showing the path network [*See slide 3 attached at the end of the notes*] and these paths coloured red and orange are the ones we see as priorities for repair, you can get some idea of the level of cost involved. So this is not a task that can be completed overnight but paths with a good surface not only make the site more accessible to people of all ages and abilities and they also help to protect the surrounding habitats. Where paths are good, people tend to keep to them. Where paths are poor, people stray onto surrounding land trying to find a usable route, often damaging important vegetation in the process. So for these reasons we see path restoration as vital and the Masterplan includes significant investment in repairing the path network.

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While we're looking at access, the other project we have included is improving the provision for cyclists and, in particular, introducing more cycle racks. You'll be aware that on busy days, parking on the Commons can be difficult and obviously, we're all increasingly aware of the need to avoid short journeys in our cars. We hope by improving facilities for cyclists, particularly at the Windmill Car Park and at the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields, we can encourage more people to arrive here on their bikes – reducing pressure on the car parks, as well as reducing pollution locally.

Signage - The final element of the Masterplan that we are consulting on is signage. Signage is a tricky issue on the Commons. We think of the site as an area of countryside in otherwise relatively urban surroundings. Because of this, we want to maintain the rural feel of the Commons and too much signage works against that. However, the feedback received from the public during the preparation of the Masterplan was that people would like to see more signage. Our view is that we need some entrance signs at the major access points which might have a map, some important do's and don'ts and information about WPCC as a charity and about the Commons in general. We are also proposing limited waymarker signage to help people find their way around the Commons, and improved signage indicating for example the cycle routes and the horse rides. We are also considering some local information boards at specific sites of interest. We feel it's really important to ensure that the appearance of the signs is sympathetic to the location and therefore we are looking at using natural materials – primarily timber. And this illustrates the kind of feel we'd be aiming for [*See slide 4 attached at the end of the notes*].

Finally, the small matter of cost. This table sets out the cost of the proposed works based on a 20-year delivery period [*See slide 5 attached at the end of the notes*]. The first two columns show the one-off project costs and the two largest expenditures are pond restoration and path improvements. The major part of the pond restoration costs is the de-silting. Silt in ponds is often classed as contaminated waste as over decades the build up of heavy metals is quite significant however, we will use what we can on site to save money on that part of the project.

The large scale path improvement works have to be done by a contractor, this is not something we can do in house. With the work we have done so far costing over £150,000, it can easily be seen how the cost for path restoration will add up significantly.

All these projects will result in additional maintenance costs and the final column shows these annual costs which would be in the region of £100,000.

So that's the Masterplan in a nutshell – as I say, you can find the document on our website if you'd like more information and I will happily answer any questions you might have at the end of the meeting

Thank you.”

5. Proposed Levy Amendments – Diane Neil Mills, Chairman

The main one off purchase costs associated with the Masterplan will require external funding through grants and donations but the operating budget is primarily financed through the Levy and that is what I would like to talk to you about this evening.

There are three broad areas:

1. Constitutional and historical position
2. Current WPCC financial position with regard to projects
3. Cost and affordability considerations associated with amending the Levy.

To begin, I'd like to say a few words about the approach we have taken in looking the proposed amendments to the Levy. We have adopted a phased approach with the first phase, looking at

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preliminaries, launched at the General Open Meeting in December 2019 to communicate the decision by the Board to assess the case for amending the Levy. That announcement followed 18 months of exploratory work looking at the different parliamentary procedures and the feasibility of amending the Levy. Over the following two and a half years WPCCC was soliciting informal feedback at meetings such as these as well as discussions with local authorities and the three local MPs. Needless to say, when we embarked on this in 2019 it had not been envisaged that this preliminary stage would consume two and a half years but significant delays were caused by the pandemic, local elections and the other two elements of the constitutional reform initiative being progressed through a Charity Commission Scheme. The decision was taken that since the amendment of the Levy would be taken through a different parliamentary procedure with its own timetable, the Levy consultation would be separate from the other initiatives.

The discussion on assessing the principle of increasing the Levy started in July this year. The cost data was compiled, looked at the affordability considerations – the impact of an increase on all Levy-payers – and, for consultation purposes, arrived at an order of magnitude that was considered would be supported. Support for the principle of increasing the Levy was now being tested. We are soliciting formal feedback from local authorities and the local MPs and then WPCCC will be looking to DEFRA, the sponsoring department, for their views. If, as a result of this process, it was thought there was support for taking the proposal forward, WPCCC would re-examine the cost data and consider what an increase would mean and then carry out a formal consultation with all 41,000 Levy-paying households.

The Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act 1871 that created the Commons is absolutely clear that the Levying of domestic rates on properties that ‘primarily benefited from the establishment of the Commons’ was intended to serve as the principal means through which the Commons were to be financed, defined to include all properties within 3/4 of a mile of Wimbledon Common (including Putney Heath) or in the Parish of Putney as it existed in 1871.

The revenue that was generated increased every time a new property was built and also reflected the rated value of all the properties in the area. On that basis the total that was raised through the Levy increased from some £2,000 in 1871 to almost £200,000 – a hundred-fold increase over 130 years. If the total revenue had been indexed to inflation only, revenue would have reached only £90,000 in 1990. I believe the current model works well, it engages the local communities not only through a financial commitment but also through the democratic process as it is only those living in the Levying area that have the right to vote in the Conservators’ elections and also have the right to put themselves forward as a candidate in those elections.

As many of you will remember, the domestic rates were abolished in 1990 and were ultimately replaced with Council Tax and that provided an opportunity for a one-off rebasing of the aggregate Levy. The Conservators at the time felt that the Levy had fallen behind as properties had not been revalued during the very high inflationary period. In 1976, the Conservators tried to take a Private Bill through Parliament to amend the Levy which unfortunately was not successful. In 1990, the opportunity presented itself with the new mechanism being put in place to replace the old domestic ratings system and an aggregate amount of £500,000 was agreed, a 2.5-fold increase, and it was indexed to inflation and no longer reflected the number or value of properties in the Levying area. The agreement to replace the former model with this new one was, in many ways, not surprising as there had been a high inflationary environment since the late 1960s and population had been declining for almost four decades. Following the rebasing in 1990, UK inflation remained low for several decades. To illustrate this, from 1950 to 1988 CPI increased on average by 6.4% per year and in the following period from 1988 to today, the CPI increased on average by only 2.5% per year. So just at the moment it had agreed to tie the revenue to inflation, inflation remained low for several decades. By contrast, population levels in outer London started to increase from 1991, and along with an increased usage of the Commons is something that we believe is one of the reasons why the Levy has fallen behind.

In terms of usage, quantifying visitor numbers is very difficult but there was an exercise that was undertaken in 1976 which estimated that there were about 5,200 visitors per day to the Commons,

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that's just shy of 2 million visitors per year. Even then, over half were from outside the Levy area. This data did not include either the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields or Putney Lower Common. On that basis there were strong intellectual arguments in favour of amending the Levy area but the timescale, the costs and risks associated with that process are quite high. It would involve primary legislation and the Conservators do not feel they are in a position to undertake this process to amend the Act.

By contrast, rebasing the Levy could be done through secondary legislation by means of a Statutory Instrument. This would be far expedient, less costly and it is therefore this approach that is currently under consideration.

A final word on the mechanics of the Levy. The Levy boundary remains unchanged from 1871 and at present there are approximately 41,000 households fall within the Levy area. The Levy is allocated between the three local authorities who collect the Levy on behalf of the Conservators, an arrangement that works very well. About two thirds of the households fall within Wandsworth, just over a quarter in Merton and just 4% in Kingston. For 2022/23, the Levy is set at £32.14 per year per Band D property. All exemptions and benefits to which residents are entitled for council tax purposes also apply to the Levy.

The Levy accounts for less than 2% of the council tax bill within Kingston and Merton and just under 4% in Wandsworth.

In terms of WPCC's current financial position, firstly, in complete accordance with the principles of the 1871 Act, the Levy remains our principal source of revenue, generating £1.26 of £1.89 million of unrestricted revenue in 2021/22. The balance of the revenue comes from a number of sources including user fees, rental income, investment income and importantly grants/donations. With regard to user fees, the Conservators have a duty to charge those who use the Commons for commercial purposes and there are various arrangements in place to ensure those charitable duties are fulfilled. Equally, WPCC has to be respectful of the obligations under the Act to ensure that formal usage of the Commons does not cause any damage or interference with other people's ability to use the Commons and are in line with our charitable purposes which, under the Act, are use of the Commons for recreation and exercise. The additional income from other organisations is certainly important in supplementing the Levy revenue.

Despite this, the revenue no longer meets WPCC's financial requirements and the long-term preventative maintenance of both the natural and built environments that has suffered as a result; the financial situation is unsustainable with WPCC running budget deficits, even with restrained expenditure. Investments need to be made in preventative maintenance which the charity is not currently in a position to undertake.

WPCC also has a statutory limitation on borrowing of £5,000 (as set out in the 1871 Act), this equated to the legal bill debt that the Conservators incurred following the legal action to preserve the Commons and was not indexed to inflation.

Charity Commission guidance also recommends that WPCC should hold reserves sufficient to meet unanticipated expenditure, and this is particularly important given the age and nature of the historic assets for which WPCC is responsible, including a grade II* listed windmill.

Putting all these aspects together, the Conservators feel that an increase in the Levy is deemed to be necessary and the most viable way of meeting the increased investment and maintenance requirements. Despite any increase in the Levy, WPCC will continue to rely on grants and donations for the delivery of major capital projects and we have increased focus on fund raising to help meet these needs.

In terms of the costs that need to be financed, the Chief Executive mentioned the costs associated with the Masterplan project and most of those one-off project costs will be financed externally but the recurring costs in the operational budget that will be attributed to the projects, will amount to

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some £100,000 a year. In addition, WPCC are currently running a deficit budget and the adjusted budget deficit that would need to be Levy-funded is estimated to be approximately £150,000 per year.

Thirdly, the deferred works, these works include repairs to residential properties – one of the greatest features in creating the culture and character of the Commons, is that the majority of the staff live on site but the properties do need maintenance - and works to the natural environment, totalling £51,500 per year.

The total of those three cost sources that need to be Levy financed is about £300,000. With that in mind, the Board looking at the amount of any increase from an affordability perspective and what would be fair, making sure that any proposed increase could be fully justified. For consultation purposes therefore, they agreed to propose an increase of around £8 a year for a Band D property, increasing the current amount of some £32 a year to approximately £40 a year. This increase would be outside any inflationary increase applied to the Levy. That level of increase would generate an increase of around £330,000 per year which the Board felt was the minimum necessary to meet the gap in funding that WPCC is facing.

The final point is that the legislation establishes a maximum rate for the Levy and the Conservators have a duty to set the Levy at a level that is necessary to meet our needs. Since 1990, the Levy increase each year had been set below the maximum for a number of years, with the Conservators taking responsibility for not setting it any higher than it needed to be during difficult national financial periods. Since 2017 however, the increase each year has been set at the maximum.

That concludes my remarks on this matter.

Thank you.

6. The Consultation process – Resources for Change

The Chairman introduced Mr Mike King from Resources for Change (R4C)

What I would like to talk to you about is the approach that R4C are adopting to consulting people on the issues that have been talked about this evening about the Masterplan and the Levy. Although it would not be appropriate to share with you the results from the consultation so far, I will talk to you about the process.

Resources for Change are a small employee-owned company, and they are an engagement company rather than a consultation or market research company but are about how people can be engaged in matters such as landscape and nature conservation, and how to engage people in the important decisions that can affect these.

When asked to do this work, it was important to reach out to as wide a range of people as possible and to do it in a way that enhances their relationship with the Commons and that the engagement was a good process which in turn makes them feel good about the Commons.

In designing this consultation, R4C felt that a number of mechanisms were needed to engage with as wide a range of people as possible. There is a traditional approach with an online survey but as many are not comfortable with using this method, there have been a series of events out on the Commons with a consultation stand, similar to what is set up at the back of the room, using a set of pin boards to allow people to express their preferences. This approach has been particularly successful with younger people and family groups. It's also a good way to start a conversation with people about the reasons behind their views and this is the third way to engage – talking and listening to people and record their views as we chat to them.

We had a stall out on the Commons on Rushmere at the end of September and engaged with around 100 people and the following week we had a stall near the Windmill and chatted to around

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200 visitors. A stall had been set up this afternoon but unfortunately weather conditions were such that this had to be curtailed. A further visit would take place the following week, with the day split between Putney Lower Common and the Windmill. R4C staff had found visitors to be welcoming and were surprised at how keen people are to engage.

The consultation runs until the 30 November and we are keen to get as many people involved as possible. Please do take part and encourage friends, families and neighbours to also take part. The wider range of views that can be gathered will be of benefit to ensure that any issues can be heard now.

Thank you.

7. Questions

The Chairman opened the meeting up to questions.

Q1

Judith Chegwiddden, on behalf of the Putney Society

The Levy will fall hardest on those living on the large estates to some extent as they fall in Wandsworth with the Levy forming 3.6% of the Borough's Council Tax. She was concerned that people living on the estates are not engaged with the Commons with many of them living closer to Richmond Park. If the consultation is limited to those visiting the Commons, what about those who never visit, particularly those in Roehampton who might feel alienated and who will be impacted more by the proposed increase, even if it is only £8 a year. It was important that those who don't use the Commons, but pay the Levy, are also consulted.

She also commented that there were more organisations in Roehampton now that could represent the area on the Stakeholder Forum than there were when it was set up. Perhaps that Forum should try to encompass some of these organisations, such as the Roehampton Women's Network.

The Chairman endorsed comments and commented that WPCC was trying to engage with as many local residents as possible. The second stage of the consultation, if the response from this stage was positive, would be a mailing to all 41,000 households in the Levy area to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to comment. The Chairman also mentioned that any benefits that anyone was entitled to would also apply to the Levy. The Board were also very aware of affordability issues and had factored these into their discussions.

The Chairman also commented that she agreed that engagement with Levy-payers was important.

The Lee Valley Regional Park (LVRP) was funded by a Levy paid by 4 million households across a very large area but the level of engagement with Levy-payers was very low. As a result, the LVRP had not raised the levy for several years for fear of further losing support. By contrast, WPCC enjoyed a comparatively high level of engagement with its levy-payers, something that was greatly valued and certainly not taken for granted.

The CE commented that he was aware that engagement with the Roehampton area wasn't as good as it might be. He had recently been in touch with a charity that worked in the area and had discussed ways in which WPCC could work not only with them but to engage with the local community. He had also asked the local MP for suggestions for groups that might want to be involved.

Q2

The 20 year delivery plan – this was a long period of time and a lot could change in that time. What was the thinking behind that is that a financial or operational consideration? Secondly, respectful of the previous questioner's views, the area in which the Commons sits is, with some exceptions, a high net worth area and, for them, the Levy is very small. Is there a reason why the increase was set at that level and not higher?

CE – With regard to the first question, the CE responded that it was both financial and operational/. As has been mentioned, some of the projects will require external funding and to get that funding will take several years to achieve. Operationally, we are a small organisation and managing major projects are not something that can be taken on all at one time and so they need to be spread out over time. That said, it may be that on some of the funded projects we can also get funding for a project manager which would certainly help.

With regard to the second question, the Chairman responded that the Board wished to be able to demonstrate that the increase could be justified and explain where the additional funds would be spent, and also the affordability issue. The demographics of the Levy area falling within Kingston and Merton are very different to those in Wandsworth and the Conservators wanted to ensure that the engagement that they enjoyed with the Levy-payers remained. The Conservators have put in place ways in which those who wish to give more can do so most notably through the Friends and this also provides an opportunity for those living outside the Levy area to contribute. The feedback from the three MPs during the exploratory work was that as we are publicly funded, we have to demonstrate where we are spending the money. It was conservative but, reasonable, justifiable and fair for all Levy-payers

Q3.

Welcomed the information on the Masterplan, and in particular the reinstatement of the bogs. The improvement work along the Beverley Brook was also welcomed. The issue of concern was the heathland establishment – the majority of the heathland was north of the Windmill on Putney Heath but the area from the Windmill towards the Wimbledon Common Golf Club was a mixture of open space and woodland copses. It seems that in the latter area there has been work to create additional heathland which has meant the cutting down of some lovely old trees and the bracken cut. A lot of the birches have also been cut down and there was no sign of any additional heather, particularly in the area adjacent to Memorial Ride. Is this work really necessary at the cost of other flora.

The CE responded that it was something WPCCC were conscious of, particularly where there were well-established trees. The Commons are a Site of Special Scientific Interest, largely because of the heathland and acid grassland and some of the areas closer to the Village fall more into the acid grassland category which is why you're not seeing additional heather growth. There is an issue with *Molinia caerulea* - Purple Moor Grass - and that is something we are trying to control as it smothers other grasses and heather. Birch does regrow very quickly which is why we are only re-establishing small areas and it is a constant battle to keep the birch under control. Unless the view of Natural England changes, as regulators of the SSSI, there will always be pressure on us to manage and maintain the heathland as it is such a rare habitat, particularly in London. We would be happy to arrange a visit to the area with our Conservation Officer, please do get in touch.

A member of staff commented that any Oak trees felled would be Turkey Oak which was invasive and not of any benefit to wildlife.

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Q4

Two questions, I noticed that during the very hot summer the heather was dying through lack of water and it was hoped that it would recover. Secondly, whilst agreeing with the commendable desire to increase income, why do the Conservators not charge for car-parking. Every other open space in London charges. How many cars parked there, and parked there every day, and what level of donation was received from the donation scheme and what income would be received if a charge were levied?

The CE advised that he was similarly concerned about the heather and we believe it will recover but we are monitoring it.

The Chairman commented that there was no express power in the 1871 Act to charge for parking. Whilst it was appropriate and indeed a legal duty for the Conservators to charge those using the Commons for commercial purposes, in terms of individuals using the Commons, there is no express power. It is something the Conservators are aware of and to change this would require an amendment to the Act and the Conservators may consider including such a change as a future proofing measure. In addition, it is enshrined in the Act that the Commons is principally funded through the Levy paid by those who benefitted from it and the Conservators did need to respect that.

Conservator, David Hince, commented that the old coin donation machine was not hugely successful but the new contactless machine had resulted in donations of over £500.

Q5

Given that a lot of people who use the Common are not Levy-payers, what would it take to change the Act to allow for charging for parking.

The Chairman commented that it would take primary legislation to change this, as would changing the Levy-paying area which would mean taking a Private Bill through Parliament. There is a high risk with this process as it can fail quite late in the process with significant costs having been incurred. The process to rebase the Levy could be done through secondary legislation which was not only quicker but also cheaper. The Friends and also other fundraising appeals were a means to raise funds from those who did not pay the Levy.

Conservator, Nigel Ware, commented that the cost of a Private Bill could be anywhere between £500,000 and £1 million, with no guarantee of success.

Q6

On the car parking, the Conservators were entitled to charge subscriptions and could that not be a means of charging for car parking? Secondly, the plans to talk to the 41,000 Levy-payers as part of the formal process – was this a legal requirement and what would the Conservators hope to achieve given that not all would respond and many may respond negatively. Where would that leave the proposals.

The Chairman responded to the second question first. The Conservators had appointed a Parliamentary Agent to advise on the process and the second stage consultation was still being worked but the Conservators considered that they had a duty to ensure that they engaged with as many people as possible who lived in the Levy-paying area and that they had an opportunity to express their views.

With regard to the subscriptions, this refers to the way in which fundraising was conducted and there was a public subscription between 1911 and 1920 to raise funds to pay for the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields. That is what that reference refers to.

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Q7

John Mays

Thanked the Chairman for the detailed presentation. He was concerned that the proposed increase would very soon prove to be inadequate and he felt that there would not be a second opportunity to raise the Levy. He felt that the projected costs would likely increase significantly and neither was there an element included for inflation, currently estimated to be at some 9% for the next two years. He would prefer the Conservators to apply for a higher amount.

Conservator, Nigel Ware, commented that the rise would still be subject to any yearly RPI increase that the Board agreed on.

The Chairman thanked Mr Mays for his comments and explained that this stage was just exploring support for the principle of raising the Levy and the Board felt they needed to give some indication of the order of magnitude of the increase and, looking at our needs, this was the number that was agreed.

The Chairman reminded everyone that the Carol Concert would take place on 10 December at the Windmill. Following on from the successful Art on the Commons picture competition, calendars had been produced from the 12 winning entries and were available for sale this evening and also at the Rangers Office.

The Chairman then thanked everyone for attending and invited them to speak to the Conservators or staff if they had any matters they wished to raise.