

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Masterplan FAQs

Why are you doing this – aren't things fine as they are?

Most of the Commons are a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation because of their value for wildlife. Because of these designations, we have a legal duty to maintain and improve the wildlife value of the Commons. It's worth remembering that much of the work we do to improve the site for wildlife will also make the Commons more attractive for visitors.

This summer we have seen the impact that climate change can have on the landscape and unless we can build more resilience into the habitats on the Commons through better management, the negative impact on wildlife will worsen over coming years.

The path network has been more heavily used than ever before during COVID, resulting in potholes and waterlogging during winter. Investment is needed to restore the surface of many paths so that they are usable by everybody.

Signage will (a) help to inform people of the importance of the Commons and thereby encourage visitors to value and protect the area and (b) help people to navigate their way around the site.

This is going to cost a lot of money – how can you afford this?

One-off costs for major projects will require external funding from grants and donations and we have employed a fundraiser to help us secure this additional funding. Cost estimates for the one-off costs have largely been provided by external consultants though in some cases these estimates have been adjusted (downwards!) by WPCC.

The ongoing maintenance costs (estimates for which have been provided by WPCC) will have to be funded from our operating budget but this budget is at present insufficient to meet these needs. We are therefore considering an increase in the levy of about 15 pence per household per week (for a Band D property) to help ensure that this vital work can be carried out.

How will you make sure you do not harm wildlife and damage the habitats on the Commons?

We have fairly extensive data about the ecology of the site and therefore know where there are important habitats/species. Where we don't have this data, we will undertake surveys prior to carrying out any work. Furthermore, work will be implemented gradually and with care with a 20-year timescale envisaged for completion of the projects outlined. Finally, we have long-serving staff, who know,

understand, and care about the site and its wildlife and will therefore ensure that the needs of wildlife (and visitors) are considered in all decisions.

How will you make sure you do not disturb the users of the Commons?

The work will be undertaken gradually, over a 20-year period, to minimise the impact at any one time. Alternative routes will be provided when work necessitates the closure of paths. It's worth remembering that much of the work has been proposed because it will improve the experience of visitors.

I fully agree with the projects, so why don't you get on with it – 20 years is way too slow!

Sudden change can be difficult for wildlife, so a gradual approach is often better from an ecological perspective. Where appropriate, projects will be completed relatively quickly. At the same time, it is important to recognise that projects need to be carefully planned and properly implemented. Many of the projects will require funding and raising the necessary money can take time. Finally, we have a relatively small team of staff on the Commons and so there is only so much that we can achieve in any given period.

[Levy Changes FAQs](#)

Why do you want to increase the levy?

Income from the levy has not kept pace with costs. Use of the Commons has increased, resulting in more wear and tear and more litter to manage. Changes in legislation over the years in relation to things such as tree safety and building safety have also increased our costs. Because our income has fallen behind our costs, we haven't been able to invest in the proper maintenance of buildings, paths, car parks or habitats. We now find ourselves in a position where investment is needed in these areas, which cannot be met from our existing operational budgets. An increase in the levy will provide us with the operational budget to carry out the necessary preventative maintenance to protect the Commons.

How much will you increase it by?

For consultation purposes, Conservators are suggesting an increase of about £8 per annum per household for a Band D property, which is a 25 percent increase on the current level and represents what the Conservators believe is necessary to deliver the works over a 20 year period. This would be outside of any annual inflationary increase. Before formally putting forward a specific proposal, however, we are asking if the principle of increasing the levy is supported.

How do you justify an increase of £8 per year?

The detailed cost analysis that has been undertaken demonstrates that the Commons need an additional £300k per year to fund the essential works and maintenance,

including works that have not been possible to carry out because operating budgets have been insufficient (e.g., to better maintain the properties on the Commons, maintenance of the footpaths and car parks).

Even after the proposed increase, the cost of the levy would still be less than £1 per week for a Band D household. (To be precise, for a Band D household, the levy is currently 62 pence a week and we are looking at increasing it by 15 pence a week; in annual terms, the levy is currently £32.14 a year and we are looking to increase it to £40.18 a year.)

If you don't deliver the Masterplan projects, you'll have less need for maintenance, and less need to increase the levy, so why do this?

The Conservators have a legal duty to preserve and protect the Commons. This includes (for example) protecting the landscape and its special habitats; these habitats have suffered losses over the decades and this needs to be addressed, particularly in the face of climate change.

Conservators also have a duty to make the Commons available for recreation and exercise and this includes ensuring the footpaths, cycle routes and horse rides are properly maintained in a condition which is safe and usable by all.

Informing visitors about the importance of the natural environment (e.g., signage) will help to ensure that they value the Commons and treat them with the respect that they deserve. We therefore consider the Masterplan projects to be essential.

Have you heard of the cost-of-living crisis? This is an insensitive thing to do currently!

We recognise that there is never a good time to implement an increase in the levy and the current economic situation makes this particularly true. Equally we recognise the importance of properly maintaining the Commons and this is also more true now than ever. Population in the area around the Commons has grown in particular since 1990 and this growth in population, along with an increased recognition of the importance for peoples' mental and physical health of spending time in open space, means usage of the Commons has increased. The growing financial pressure on households also means that people will increasingly depend on activities that are affordable (or free) and use of the Commons is likely to increase even further.

The natural environment is very fragile and this vulnerability has been exposed by the increased demands placed on the Commons, particularly during the pandemic. Climate change will worsen the situation unless action is taken. It is therefore more important than ever that the Commons are properly maintained so that they continue to meet the needs of the community.

The levy has not been reviewed since 1990 and the annual increase that has been allowed for since that review took place, which was over 30 years ago, has been small. Income from the levy has therefore fallen behind the expenditure required to properly

maintain this very special open space. It's also worth noting that the kind of increase we're thinking of would only result in a rise in the levy of 15 pence per household per week (for a Band D property)

The levy goes up by inflation each year and with inflation so high, aren't you going to get a big increase in your income next year anyway?

We will benefit from an increase in income from the levy as a result of the change in inflation (measured using the Retail Prices Index (RPI)) but unfortunately our costs have also risen as inflation has increased. Therefore, any extra income we receive is likely to be consumed by extra costs.

A high proportion of visitors come from outside the levy paying area. Why aren't you asking them to pay?

Widening the area from which people pay the levy would require an Act of Parliament, which is a very lengthy and expensive process, and there is no guarantee this would succeed. Some people have suggested that we charge for car parking, as the people driving to the Commons are more likely to be from outside the levy paying area. The Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act (understandably as it dates from 1871) does not give us the power to charge for car parking.

Why doesn't the government or local council pay for the work required?

Wimbledon and Putney Commons are an independent charity and are not part of local or national government. The organisation was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1871 in response to a movement led by local residents to transfer the land from Earl Spencer to the Conservators, an independent body. Under the Act, it was a founding principle of the Commons that the levy would be the main source of income. It should be noted that Wimbledon and Putney Commons are unique in being an independent body as most other common land in Greater London in particular is owned and funded by local authorities.

Aren't there other ways you can increase income, without having to charge levy payers more?

We have done everything we reasonably can to bring in more money. We have revalued licence agreements with commercial users of the Commons to ensure we are achieving market value and we have employed a fundraiser to help secure grants and donations. Our playing fields, which are an important source of revenue are at capacity.

Some open spaces have gone down the route of increased commercialisation (concerts, open air theatre, festivals) to bring in much needed income, but we do not believe that this would be appropriate for the Commons (or consistent with the founding legislation of the Commons) and the feedback that we have received from users of the Commons supports this view. The Act of Parliament that created the

Commons in 1871 was very clear in that the Commons were intended to be primarily funded through the levy, making this unique open space available to all without charge. As we have just completed the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Commons, we feel it is important to retain this fundamental principle.