**EVIDENCE TO PARLIAMENTARY SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO FUTURE OF PUBLIC PARKS**

**Submission by Friends of Queen’s Wood to Councillor Ahmet**

As the Chair of the Friends of Queen’s Wood (FQW) I am responding to your invitation to submit views on the issues raised by this Inquiry so that you take them into account in developing your own evidence. This is a very important inquiry, raising some fundamental questions about how to preserve and enhance the enormous value that public parks provide to local communities at a time when they appear to be under ever-increasing threat, and we welcome the opportunity that your initiative provides to contribute our views to the long overdue debate on this issue.

**About the Wood**

I shall not go into a full description of the Wood since the detail will of course be familiar to the Council as its owner. However in the context of the issues being addressed here it is important to remember that it is not a park as such. Rather it is a designated Local Nature Reserve and, as such, certain restrictions as to usage must apply to it. In particular its potential to generate income, compared to a more conventional park, is small – restricted to such events as film shooting, small scale recreational activities (eg arts shows) and commercial children’s activities. It is also important to note that it has Green Flag status and last year won the best in class award in the London in Bloom awards: this reflects its special value to the Council and the local community. The more this value is maintained the more the Wood is appreciated and the more it contributes to the health, both physical and mental, of the community and thus the Council’s own broader objectives. One other important point to note is that contiguous to the Wood is a café in the old park keeper’s lodge and behind it an organic garden, which is open to the public. Although this area is run under separate lease, with the facilities operated independently, it is legally part of the Wood and can be regarded as one of its most important assets. It substantially enhances the attractiveness of the Wood to the public and it is vital that its future is not put in jeopardy.

**About us**

FQW is a voluntary group, set up on an informal basis in 1990 and adopting a more formal status in 1999, to help look after Queen’s Wood and its trees, plants, birds, animals, fungi and other forms of wildlife. It has some 200 households in membership. Its principal activities include:

* helping maintain the Wood, through monthly working sessions, collecting litter, cutting back branches and vegetation and other conservation work
* organising events including events for children, themed walks, talks on wildlife in the Wood
* undertaking surveys of wildlife
* undertaking small-scale improvements to the facilities and infrastructure of the Wood
* assisting the Council in carrying out its responsibilities including alerting it to problems, providing advice reflecting the views of users and working with it on new projects.

It has an annual income of some £2000, comprising membership subscriptions and voluntary donations. This excludes grants and donations for specific projects, which vary hugely from year to year but can range up to £12k. Examples of these projects are landscaping in a prominent area close to the major access point to the Wood and extensive coppicing work. In addition we have taken full advantage of the Council’s very valuable small grant scheme providing grants of £500 per year.

**Who uses Queen’s Wood?**

The Wood is not enclosed and is thus accessible at all times and it is not possible to quantify with any accuracy the number of visitors it attracts. The guesstimates we have come up with from time suggest it is around 500 per day on average but the actual number on any one day will depend on the season, the weather, school holiday periods etc.

The types of visitors it attracts include:

* those simply going for a walk or for a run; in particular the Capital Ring Path crosses part of the Wood
* those interested in the natural features of the Wood, fauna, flora etc, especially bearing in mind that the Wood is a designated Local Nature Reserve
* those who wish to enjoy the peacefulness and natural ambience that the Wood provides
* school and community groups. In particular the Wood serves as the site of a flourishing outdoor nursery group
* dog walkers
* users of the Café
* those using the Wood as a route elsewhere, particularly as a commuter route to the nearby Highgate Underground Station.

It is not always easy to strike the right balance between the sometimes competing interests of these categories of user. However it is fair to say that people in the area feel passionately about the Wood and any threat to it provokes a huge reaction.

**Contribution to the community**

Queen’s Wood occupies a special place in the network of green spaces in the Western part of Haringey. Almost all other such spaces are managed, to a greater or lesser degree, as parks; Queen’s Wood on the other hand is an area of natural woodland. As such it represents a place where people can find peacefulness and quiet relaxation, as well as enjoy a close relationship to the natural environment. This is turn relieves stress and contributes to people’s health and reinforces a sense of community. In this sense it is unique for an open space so close to central London. Specific events, almost exclusively organised by FQW, such as walks, talks and children’s activities, contribute to the welfare of the local community.

**Impact of reductions in local authority budgets**

Over the years the continual reduction in Haringey’s spending on the Wood has had a major impact. In the early 1980s the Wood enjoyed the services of three full-time park keepers; it was when these were withdrawn that the Friends Group was set up. Over the years not only was one of the major facilities of the Wood – the children’s paddling pool – closed but there has been a continuous deterioration in the standards of maintenance of the Wood. This is most obvious in the state of the network of paths through the Wood. While a few have been repaired, by virtue of specific grants eg from Transport for London in the case of the stretch of the Capital Ring Path, most have fallen into a poor state of disrepair, affecting accessibility by certain groups of people, especially wheelchair users.

Our Group has worked closely with Council staff to try to mitigate the impact of these cuts. We recognise that with ever reducing resources allocated to the parks service it is impossible to expect the Council to maintain standards much above the bare minimum. For some years we had the benefit of an excellent Nature Conservation Office; he not only acted as a fount of specialist knowledge and expertise but also did much to attract external funding for projects such as coppicing, which has enhanced the diversity of flora in the Wood; he also had the network of contacts, eg with the Forestry Commission, necessary to provide the best possible support for the Wood. However he left his post in January 2016 and has not been replaced, with a question mark hanging over the future of the post altogether. On the operational side the remaining staff endeavour to meet the most pressing needs, but response times to problems such as dealing with fallen trees, illegal encampments, dumping and littering have lengthened. The Group has endeavoured to undertake routine management jobs through its monthly working party sessions but where these require a capability beyond that of the Group, we benefit substantially from the work of The Conservation Volunteers, with whom we have an excellent relationship. However even they cannot tackle substantial jobs like major path repairs, not least because they have to spread their own resources around a large client base and they do not have access to resources for materials. In essence while the Group is becoming more and more the eyes and ears of the Council, it itself and others lack the resources and authority to act to fill the gap in dealing with all the problems that arise.

**Future funding and management**

Given its nature keeping the Wood in an acceptable state does not entail major routine expenditure, but still a minimum is required to cover services such as rubbish removal (emptying of bins and dumped objects), dealing with vandalism, and keeping the Wood safe (eg removing dangerous trees/branches). Volunteers can only do a certain amount and in any event need to meet the cost of materials (eg in making urgent repairs to paths). It may be possible to continue to obtain specific grants for limited projects, just has been the case in the past few years for coppicing work, repair of specific paths and limited landscape work, but these are becoming more and more difficult to access and they do not extend to routine maintenance work or, more particularly, major repair work on the paths, without which the accessibility of the Wood to certain groups of people (eg those requiring wheelchair access) becomes increasingly problematic. It is not realistic to expect activities in the Wood to raise more than a minimal level of income. Thus the Wood will continue to be hugely dependent on external funding.

This raw reality alone will limit the options for a different form of management status. Setting up, for example, a Trust to take over control of the Wood would entail giving it a substantial endowment or a guaranteed income, and it is difficult to see where this would come from if not from existing sources (primarily the Council itself). Quite apart from the financial implications such a solution raises major issues of accountability. Who would the Trustees be and how would they be appointed? Such status would also require more formal procedures, and these could affect the willingness of volunteers to give their services; already it is proving more and more difficult to find enough members of our Group willing and able to give active support alongside paying subscriptions, however laudable they may see our work. Would a Trust for the Wood alone be viable? And if it was to be brigaded into a wider Trust encompassing, say, similar open spaces (eg Coldfall Wood) this could dilute the sense of almost personal identity that our members have with the Wood and in turn reduce their willingness to contribute, whether in cash or in kind. The bigger the body into which the Wood was hived off, whether as a Trust or another vehicle, the bigger the risk of such dilution would be.

Given these reservations we have doubts about introducing a fundamentally different management framework for the Wood in current circumstances. Taking account of the severe financial constraints, the current framework works tolerably well in general terms. In essence a minimum resource to carry out certain basic functions is assured and we work well with Council officers with little bureaucracy. The Council is also able to reflect its core responsibilities on health and security in the way the Wood is managed. Furthermore maintaining the status quo would mean that the current economies of scale in providing services can be maintained. The status of a statutory nature reserve also imposes obligations on the Council which would need to be accommodated, and in this regard we see the appointment of a new Nature Conservation Officer to fill the post that has now been vacant for several months as crucial.

**Statutory status of local authorities’ responsibility for parks and open spaces**

In more general terms we believe that the maintenance of parks and other open spaces is of such importance to the health and welfare of urban communities that their status should be safeguarded by being covered by the statutory duties of local authorities.

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