

## **Deputation by Wandsworth Common Friends and Wandsworth Common Management Advisory Committee (the MAC) – OSC meeting Nov 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Good evening Cllr Flook and fellow committee members. My name is Julia Bott, Co-chair of the Friends of Wandsworth Common, with Richard Fox, also here tonight. We are making this deputation jointly with the MAC, represented here by George Meakin, MAC Chair. We also have the support of the Wandsworth Society, whose Vice Chair, David Kirk, is observing.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this paper, and thanks also to Paul Chadwick, Ishbel Murray and their team for being open to our approaches to discuss the re-tendering process and other issues. Both our organisations are extremely keen to continue our dialogue, with a view to achieving a contract which continues to protect and enhance our green spaces to as high a quality as possible.

We represent an old and a very young organisation. The MAC, under its constitution, agreed by the Council, has monitored and advised the Council, and latterly it's Management Company, on the management of the Common for over 30 years. The Friends, by contrast, was launched only in May. It works alongside the MAC by seeking to engage the public in the protection and enhancement of the Common. In just 6 months the Friends has gained over 280 members, with numerous other contacts and followers on social media, so that our reach exceeds 1,300 people. We have successfully used that reach to help inform the Council's preparation of a Management and Maintenance Plan for Wandsworth Common.

During that process we have submitted detailed views on nitty-gritty issues which go to the heart of managing greenspaces, covering areas such as litter picking and recycling, sports bookings, landscape maintenance, biodiversity etc. We will pass those suggestions on to the officers working on the new contract specification. We think it is essential for users to influence the contract specification, notwithstanding the suggestion in para 28 that such decisions, including the all-important trade-off between quality and cost, will be taken in isolation under Standing Order 83(A). Not to be able to influence such critical decisions would be unacceptable to us and we hope tonight's committee will agree that due account should be taken of the views of user groups like ours.

A general issue we want to see reflected in the specification is what we feel should be the Council's overriding concern, which is to preserve and enhance greenspaces for the benefit of Wandsworth's residents. In our opinion, the appearance of the Common has improved over recent years and we are keen that it should continue to do so. We are particularly impressed by the expertise and knowledge of key personnel in the current contract holder, especially in the biodiversity and arboreal areas, and we are keen that this expertise should not be lost as a result of the re-tendering process. We also want that expertise to be more readily shared with users. A contract specifying greater transparency and user engagement by the holder will result in better informed, and therefore more understanding and supportive, users.

There is rapidly mounting evidence demonstrating the benefits of greenspaces to peoples' health and wellbeing, both through the direct impact to physical and mental wellbeing of users and residents, and indirectly via the many environmental impacts. We would like to see greater acknowledgement of this in the Council's policies and decision making. Money spent on greenspaces is money well spent and will bring cost benefits in other areas of council spending, especially in the

health sector. Greenspaces should not be regarded as a cost centre, but as an asset to be carefully nurtured and enhanced. This goes to the root of the quality/cost trade-off.

We recognise that the paper before us is a procurement document but we have several comments that we trust the committee will keep in mind during their further deliberations on the drafting of the final documents; specifically:

1. As user representatives, one of the biggest complaints we receive is about the management of sports/fitness professionals' permits and bookings. The system is clearly not working, with a chaotic and seemingly arbitrary booking system, limited policing of permits and bookings, and with apparent inequality of bookings across the borough's greenspaces, with Wandsworth Common appearing to get more than its fair share. Despite prolonged and repeated attempts to get to the bottom of this, we are still not clear whether this is an issue of contract enforcement or contract resourcing. Either way, it needs addressing.
2. Secondly, although we have no problem in principle with the tendering of services in lots, we are concerned that this might result in further fragmentation and create more, not less, inefficiency. Much leisure and sport, including schools', takes place on our open spaces and it is crucial that the managers of open spaces have control over what takes place there. What we see on a daily basis is the importance of preserving a balance between the different and increasing demands on their use whilst protecting the vital biodiversity. That is arguably best achieved by having overarching management of the key activities and events that take place, especially those with heavy footfall, which can have a detrimental effect on the fabric of a greenspace if pushed too hard.
3. Thirdly, we note the concern expressed in the paper about the inefficiency of 'double handling' of third party contracts. We agree there is inefficiency, but taking monitoring back in-house is but one way of resolving the problem. An equally effective approach might be to give the contractor full control of necessary sub-contracts while making the contractor's overall performance, including that of subcontractors, subject to Council monitoring and scrutiny. We are therefore not convinced that separating the management of key elements of parks maintenance, like arboriculture and ground management, from the overall managers of greenspaces, makes sense from the point of view of holistic management of greenspaces.

To conclude, we would like to reiterate our request that, within the specifications for the contract, clear provision is made for regular dialogue with the recognised user groups.

Thank you for your attention