

LFGN General meeting – 8th May 2024

Attending Friends Groups/Forums reps: Dave – Haringey (chairing), Roger - Newham/City of London (took notes), Miriam – Islington (managed the IT), Alona – Lewisham, Adrian – Waltham Forest, Jeff – Wandsworth, Alan - Bromley, Larry – Bromley, Anna - Ealing, Michael – Ealing, Frances – Hammersmith & Fulham, Fran – Lambeth / Southwark / Bromley, Suzanne – Brent, Richard - Tower Hamlets, Louise - Haringey, Suzanne - Barnet, Sharon - Richmond, Karen - Croydon, Jennie - Kensington & Chelsea, Jenny - Islington, Glynis - Southwark.

And: Tony – Parks for London **Apologies :** Laura - Merton, Alice Roberts CPRE.

1. Protecting Trees

Dave, as chair, explained that the discussion potentially would cover a wide range of issues, situations, experiences and concerns. This could include issues relating to the ages of any trees, the kind of sites involved, who is looking after them, different kinds of ‘threats’ (eg lack of water, vandalism, disease, general maintenance, development etc), and different solutions (good management, Friends lobbying, borough policies etc).

Louise of Finsbury Park explained the experiences and consequences of inappropriate or poorly supervised large commercial events in the park - heavy equipment, toilets, vehicle movements etc encroaching on, and damaging, trees and other planting in the north part of the park. Land compaction, tree stress and damage, litter etc were the main issues. They have been working with Woodland Trust to help control the issues but Haringey don’t provide adequate on-site supervision of events.

Richard of Tower Hamlets – Concern over planned increase in number and size of huge commercial events in Victoria Park. Have suffered similar issues to Finsbury Pk but Council more engaged and undertook intrusive tree surveys before events - but the results are not made public.

Fran of Lambeth/Southwark/Bromley was concerned that Tree preservation Orders (TPOs) were not made public or consistently applied to park trees. Tree works should be undertaken with regard to tree based wildlife. A number of speakers emphasised the need for Friends to engage other expert groups on tree issues in each Borough and work with Council to encourage understanding and importance of the LA’s Tree Strategy.

Susanne of Brent emphasised the need to develop strong working links with the Council lead on Tree preservation. Involving Woodland Trust and others can help (see link to a new general self-assessment tool below). Councils can be reticent about tree condition in parks and open spaces and focus more on trees adjacent to highways. Borough Friends Groups’ Forums can help raise important concerns. Some councils undertake regular tree condition surveys and this can be used as a focus for communication. Each Local Authority is required to have a tree Strategy. Also emphasised the impact from ground compaction and erosion and too much canine urine. Installing vertical drains to help change rain run-off towards ground water would also help. Where trees are felled their wood can be left in situ or some used for artwork installations.

Adrian of Waltham Forest Other points to consider are the type and size of tree, Climate Change, and moving to smaller but more drought resistant species rather than the traditional London Plane. Waltham Forest trialled this approach 30 years ago for street trees and it seems to have largely worked.

Jane, ex-Merton Tree Wardens Group, had produced a note on tree protection and management outlining a wide range of issues and useful recommendations This is included below as an annex to the minutes.

Roger of Newham West Ham park had purchased a tractor-hauled ‘ground spiker’ to help reduce the impact of compaction. After a year of use it seems to have had an impact but can only be used

in very open locations. It would help if it could be shared with other boroughs. Parks for London agreed to discuss with City of London and raise at their next meeting with London's parks service reps.

2. Our LFGN Working Groups

Climate Resilience A recent Webinar discussed water table levels and monitoring in London and the successful introduction of beavers in Ealing. Over 50 people attended. A video recording of the event can be found here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=az-YLLEPwqw The next planned webinar will be in the autumn.

Biodiversity A recent webinar focused on Biodiversity Net Gain – an important new policy every Borough needs to grapple with. See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihUmiFVGEIq

A previous webinar focused on how to use 'i-naturalist' to record wildlife observations, as well as reporting survey info to the GIGL (Greenspace Information for Greater London) database. See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwVfRjpher0

Commercial Events in Parks A number of Friends Groups are impacted by large commercial events at their site. They meet to share their experiences. Most Local Authorities were seeking to increase the number and scale of events as they are chronically underfunded and so desperate to generate additional income. Some of the greatest impacts included exclusion of the public, litter, noise, disruption and soil compaction. The next meeting of the group will take place next week including a GLA representative.

Note: On a more positive note, LFGN has previously organised a webinar to 'showcase' good practice in organising our own community events, which can be viewed here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAZbVC7Lqlq

Dogs in Parks The Group monitors experiences of Friends Groups. Have discussed signage with the Dogs Trust, and noted some successes with 'responsible dog walking' events especially in East London encouraging self policing and care of nature.

Note: Friends Groups' reps can join any of the above working groups, or help set up other ones around key relevant issues.

3. LFGN social media

LFGN email list / monthly bulletins: If not on it, please sign up here to receive our monthly information/news bulletins (often in collaboration with GoParks): <http://www.lfgn.org.uk/contact-us/>

LFGN Greenspaces youtube webinar and video channel: Here's the link to all our videos: www.youtube.com/@lfgngreenspaces4122 For example another recent webinar was 'Creating and strengthening Friends Groups'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKRNigyAdUE>

LFGN facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/LondonFriendsofGreenspacesNetwork/

LFGN website: We're currently aiming to improve it: <http://www.lfgn.org.uk/>

LFGN on X: LDNgreenspaces

4. Borough Forums The Chair emphasised the importance establishing these in each and every Borough. These forums play a crucial role in sharing news, good practice and in engaging Local Authorities.

Tower Hamlets reported efforts to establish a forum, but no success so far and little Council support.

Brent reported a very successful forum with over 80 members. The Council support this and work well with the forum, encouraging communications and contacts between Friends Groups.

Ealing established a new forum at the start of 2024, the second meeting will take place this month. Council are involved. Seeking to expand membership - 10 Groups are involved so far. Would like advice from other Forums on how to ensure success. *Note:* Here's some good advice: <https://parkscommunity.org.uk/how-to-guide/setting-up-a-friends-forum/>

5. London Wide Partners

Go Parks London continue to increase their profile through a wide variety of communication channels, especially through social media. Over 400 Friends Groups already have a page on their London-wide map – so add yours if you aren't already on it! www.goparks.london/join

A More Natural Capital This coalition of London's key environmental organisations, including LFGN, organised a recent Mayoral elections hustings with all the main parties in London. Over 200 attended in the room and on line. They will continue to monitor the delivery of the promises made by the winner (Sadiq Khan).

Parks for London. Their annual 'Good Parks for London' benchmarking of parks services in each London borough takes place later this year. Advice on safety in parks for women and girls was being developed and tested before launching late this year. Details in the following links: <https://parksforlondon.org.uk/resource/green-space-quality-manual/>
<https://parksforlondon.org.uk/resource/women-and-girls-safety/>
Presentation by Make Space for Girls: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGbz-6wQwr4

London Woodland Assessment This was being led by London Wildlife Trust and TCV, developing tools and self-assessment techniques for Friends Groups to understand the quality and health of woodland. Recent pre-launch review was in Lordship Recreation Ground in Tottenham. See: <https://www.wildlondon.org.uk/london-woodland-condition-self-assessment>

CPRE Have recently launched a '**Green Defenders Network**' with representatives of nearly 40 groups so far engaged in London and beyond. The aim is to share good practise about how to effectively oppose development threats and sell-offs of green spaces. CPRE are also highlighting the number of **potential green spaces around London** which are not publicly accessible - with their 'Ten New Parks' campaign. See: www.cprelondon.org.uk/news/lets-create-10-new-parks-for-london-now And they are also promoting a '**M25 of Nature**' tree ring around London - <https://www.cprelondon.org.uk/what-we-care-about-2/m25-of-trees-cpre-london-tree-ring-around-the-capital-an-m25-for-nature/>

London Gardens Trust Their annual Open Gardens weekend takes place on 8th/9th June. Tickets here: <https://londongardenstrust.org/whatson/london-open-gardens-2024/>

Restore Nature Now A national 'Restore Nature Now' demonstration and rally takes place in London on 22nd June - assemble noon, Marble Arch, then march to Parliament. Tens of thousands are expected. It is backed by pretty much every major national environmental organisation, including our own National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (of which we are the London region). The aim, in an election year, is to call for effective action to reverse the shocking decline of our natural environment, and to protect and restore nature and green spaces throughout the UK. We in the LFGN agreed to promote widely this much needed mobilisation! Details at: www.restorenaturenow.com

Annex: Tree Warden Group, Merton - Tree protection and management

I note for this meeting, the interest is limited to protecting trees in parks & open spaces but no doubt there is also concern amongst members for street trees & privately owned trees.

In the past when Arb Manager Dave Lofthouse was in charge at Merton Council the survey of trees in parks & open spaces was kept up to date using the Ezytreev software & his approach was the protection of all trees & retention measures were taken to extend their life which included keeping some dead trees as monoliths for the value of habitat or history.

In recent times additional qualified officers have been employed to principally update the survey of street trees so that all publicly owned trees are on the database & it is hoped that they are now on the same software for the first time.

The council has a duty of care, health/safety commitments & wishes to avoid paying out on householders' insurance claims where publicly owned trees affect property. These issues may now be considered a higher priority than before and as a result more trees may be felled. This supposition of a change of policy at Merton could be verified.

It is clear that Merton council needs to provide more information and improve communications with residents and in particular Friends groups, who would benefit from dialogue with a knowledgeable contact within the council with whom concerns can be raised.

The council could do much to reduce residents concerns & improve the situation to benefit the borough's trees:

- Reappoint a Tree Manager to oversee & coordinate the management of the borough's trees
- Improve the council website regarding access to relevant subjects, improving information & the reporting system
- Finalise the Phase 1 Tree Strategy to include dates & costs so that it can be implemented
- Notify Friends groups & ward councillors of impending tree works (Tree Wardens used to do this & I believe a tree officer now does)
- State their policy of replanting which should increase canopy cover & age range of trees. It seems likely more trees will be planted in parks as locations for street trees are ever more limited in which case Friends should be invited to input into it
- Introduce a policy of no-mow under trees, wherever possible, allow vegetation to grow, continue the use of logs, clamp down on use of bbq. And crucially explain it.
- Control their ground staff when using mowers & strimmers that irreparably damage young trees (e.g. 10 of 11 upright oaks in John Innes rec next to Rutlish school boundary)
- Revise their policy about the use of herbicide to control weed growth under trees & path edges
- Be more open about the performance of idverde's maintenance contract & Barklands tree planting contract (e.g. how often are trees watered, with how many litres & how do they get the water to individual trees – bowser or stand-pipe?)
- Encourage the interest & commitment of Friends & other community groups rather than try to shut them out. In my opinion, Friends & other residents could be helpful to the protection of trees by carrying out any of the following (many of which they are already doing):
- Advising what information is needed on the council website

- Pressing the council for the Tree Strategy to be implemented & to input into Phase 2 (privately owned trees)
- Request TPOs on trees in parks that might be impacted on by neighbouring developments (as do some London boroughs). Residents are permitted to cut back the canopy of a tree to their own boundary but cutting roots may destabilise the tree
- Suggest locations for tree planting to increase numbers, species, habitat types
- Encourage the no-mow policy by suggesting areas not needed for ball play, picnicking etc
- Look to help the council but when necessary complain in a consistent, collaborative & informed way, to keep the number of interactions with council staff to the minimum necessary to resolve an issue
- Be the eyes & ears for the council & whenever possible report issues on the website so that comments are recorded, rather than attempt to phone individual officers (unless phone numbers have been exchanged of course)
- Arrange the watering of young trees weekly if possible & request a stand pipe in every park & open space
- Maintain tree pits of young trees by removing weed growth & mulching at least annually.
- Check tree stakes & ties are effective for at least 3 years & don't damage the bark. Ensure they are removed when not needed
- Report damage to tree trunks of young trees & branches or a need for pruning
- Request all trees are planted with a tree guard to protect the tree from vandalism & mowing equipment
- Prepare tree walks of their areas using recognition apps which can be linked with other groups when a similar format was used
- Check the Forest Research website for all manner of accurate, expert produced information on tree issues & spread information amongst members

Conclusion: In my opinion it's a good time to discuss these issues in Merton as the Tree Strategy still needs to be implemented. By producing the document the council has made a good start but it needs to be actioned to be worthwhile or be value for money and the result of your meeting may hasten and shape that.

On a personal note having moved from Merton to Hackney in 2021, I note Hackney council's better attitude to trees & the environment & also the results. To demonstrate this do check out this link <https://hackney.gov.uk/trees> & <https://hackney.gov.uk/trees/#treemap> which shows a map with details of species of all 45,000 trees in parks & open spaces & streets. Something for most London Boroughs to aspire to!

Jane Plant
Ex Volunteer Coordinator Tree Warden Group Merton