

FRIENDS OF QUEEN'S WOOD

Chair's report to Annual General Meeting 9 July 2024

I reported last year that something close to normality had returned following the Covid years and the apparent demise of the proposed flood mitigation scheme, which had preoccupied ourselves so much in the two previous years. These last twelve months have not been so different. The Wood itself, with the abundance of rain in the last year or so, looks lush, verdant and full of life. However below the surface things are not so simple. It is good that the Wood can be largely relied upon to carry on without much intervention on a day-to-day basis – a sharp contrast with many other open spaces in Haringey. It is also good that the Council allows bodies like ourselves to go about the business of managing these spaces, largely without its direct involvement. This generally works and no doubt it will have to remain the model for the foreseeable future. However we always have to be aware that the Council is the ultimate owner of the Wood and is responsible for the Wood and accountable at the end of the day to its electors. It is also largely the body that has powers of enforcement of the laws that apply to activities in Wood. So a strong partnership with the Council is essential.

In this regard we have not really moved forward; rather the opposite. The key problem is that the Council is chronically short of resources. In my last report I had expressed some optimism on the grounds that Parks Department's budget for the last financial year had been increased. In practice little has happened to justify such optimism. It is not just a matter of the lack of cash, rather too the difficulty in filling complemented posts, with a roughly 30% vacancy rate, only partly alleviated by bringing in temporary staff. Our chief contact – the Zonal Manager with responsibility for the Wood and her team - has been particularly badly affected, and thus some important issues not been properly dealt with. We hope that the staffage shortages relating to our neck of the woods will be alleviated but looking ahead the financial constraints too are likely only to get worse.

A major consequence for us, though, is that we have been left not knowing what is going on, leaving us unsure whether work we may like to, and can, do might conflict with what the Council may have in mind. The chief uncertainties are threefold. First what does it intend to do about the **mitigation of flooding**? We know that the scheme originally put forward has been dropped, but we found out indirectly that some work was being undertaken on the soundness of the existing flood protection wall at the Wood Vale entrance and we have not been able to ascertain either the purpose of this or the outcome. Second, the Council planned to undertake a comprehensive strategy for the improving **the path network**, with a view to making a start on the necessary work in the last financial year: that has not got off the ground, and we do not know when it will. Third, progress has been very slow in formulating the new **management plan** for the Wood. We know it is being addressed but it is now some four years overdue.

We cannot avoid feeling frustrated, tempered by the knowledge that we are far from unique, with the Parks Department having to look after over 50 open spaces in the Borough with very limited resources. But there are some chinks of light. First we recently had, at our invitation, a

meeting in the Wood with **Cllr Emily Arkell**, Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure, whose responsibilities include oversight of the Parks Department, to discuss our particular concerns and to highlight certain locations where those concerns manifest themselves. In the course of that visit Cllr Arkell undertook to arrange a meeting with the Head of Parks and other senior officers to address our concerns in more detail. Second, there has been some encouraging progress on the **nature recovery programme**. The first stage of the programme was completed in the winter with the creation of some hedging in the Witches Coven area, and the Council is working on plans to extend it further. The work is part of the Council's Ancient Woodlands Project, which is also helping two other ancient woodland sites in the Borough, and we were delighted that the project won one of the top honours at the London Trees and Ancient Woodland Awards last November.

Nature recovery and sustainability is the core of what we are about and where our energies should be concentrated in the future. We above any other players have an in-depth knowledge of the Wood, its ecology, its topography and indeed its whole character, and we need to keep that knowledge refreshed and enhanced if we are to help the Wood flourish. One of the ways we are doing that is using a new tool made available to us - the Woodland Condition Assessment Tool - which enables us to record more precisely the condition of the Wood compartment by compartment. We have been steadily mapping out the whole Wood with the help of a number of members. We also have the ability with the financial reserves we have available to commission one or two specific studies if that helps the cause.

We have over the last year kept up with our **programme of walks and talks**. The former are always popular - so much so that it has on many occasions been difficult to accommodate everyone who wants to join them. Our **monthly working party sessions** remain well attended and alongside the work of The Conservation Volunteers do a marvellous job in keeping the Wood looking spic and span – as ever earning the plaudits of the Green Flag assessors. We are delighted by the number of new young members who have joined these sessions and enabled us to do so much more to care for the Wood.

Turning to our engine room we are pleased to have been able over the last year or so to welcome new – and younger! – blood to its ranks. Two long-standing members will be retiring from the Committee - Lucy Roots and Jane Warren - after many years of service but will remain ready to lend their expertise and help to the cause whenever needed. On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank them both for all that they have done for the Friends over the years. We have welcomed to the Committee two new members - Helen Mabelis, who is enhancing our coverage of ecological issues, and Susanna Lada, who is taking over the Treasurer role. We are also in the process of bringing in a new member of the Committee to take on the membership lead. In addition we have set up a small sub-group with a mix of committee and non-committee members to strengthen our work on ecology issues. Our financial position remains healthy and overall we have a sound base for tackling the challenges ahead.

John Dorken. 1 July 2024