

LFGN General meeting - 12 November 2024

Attendance from Friends Group reps: Dave – Haringey/LFGN (chairing), Roger - Newham/City of London (notes), Laura - Merton/LFGN, Tricia - Waltham Forest, Jo - Islington/CPRE, Alona – Lewisham, David - Lewisham, Jean - Hounslow, Jeff and Pat – Wandsworth, Jane - Bromley, Peter - Bromley, Larry – Bromley, Jenni – Lambeth/Croydon, Suzanne – Brent, Jenny - Islington, Desmond - Newham, Karen - Hounslow, Sean - Enfield, Sophia - Habitats and Heritage, Tim Webb - London Parks and Gardens, Elspeth - Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, John, Annabelle.

1. Discussion - Open spaces staffing and resources.

A **Haringey** rep opened the discussion referring to Haringey's £20m budget cuts this year which included reducing applications for Green Flags by 50% and holding larger and more intrusive commercial events in open spaces. All LAs (Local Authorities) are facing similar financial position and making sweeping cuts.

A **Bromley** rep reported a similar position and was concerned about the future impact of the proposed National Insurance and minimum wage changes which are likely to further exacerbate their LA's budgetary shortfalls. There was also an increase in the use of inexperienced staff which was having an impact on maintenance standards.

A **Lewisham** rep explained their LA were trying to protect parks from significant cuts. The LA's contractor had an excellent relationship with the Council and Friends Groups and was being very adaptable and innovative. In contrast a rep reported that in **Greenwich** the impact was felt to be much greater with inexperienced contractor staff inadvertently destroying some volunteers' planting work, and the Council staff having to re-apply for posts in the new, smaller, organisation structure.

A **Bromley** rep reported a similar experience to Lewisham with the LA's contractor being very innovative.

An **Islington** rep felt their LA was trying to protect parks and staffing levels as much as possible and were being innovative in their approach, using grant funding where these could be secured and transferring Ranger work to charities.

A **Wandsworth** rep reported their LA was taking a completely different approach and bringing parks work back in-house and terminating contractor contracts. Staff morale was much improved and standards of maintenance were improving.

A **Hounslow** rep reported their LA had appointed a new Ecologist and a further review of parks and maintenance arrangements was proposed.

A **Croydon** rep reported a new Environment Officer had been appointed. All parks and open spaces were being reviewed and resources for increasing wild flower meadows were being offered to all parks.

A **Brent** rep reported their LA was using an expert to assess biodiversity across the Borough and sharing results with Friends Groups. A key point to watch was the new biodiversity net-gain requirements from developments and ensuring the funds created were used for this and not to reduce LA costs. A recent case had created a £40k fund for work and planting.

A **City of London** rep explained staffing levels were being reduced and budgets squeezed. There had not been a significant impact yet but was being monitored.

In conclusion, Dave said it was crucial to monitor the Government's forthcoming Local Authority spending review announcements and assess what the impacts might be.

The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (our movement's umbrella organisation) have a renewed opportunity of working with other national bodies in the greenspace sector to lobby Central Government through the new Park's Working Group (Govt/Sector liaison body). The NFPGS aims to try to get the Government to fulfil its responsibilities to ensure the proper recognition, protection and funding for open spaces.

2. Borough Forums

Dave re-emphasised the importance of these in every borough in keeping up pressure on LAs to ensure adequate funding of open spaces was promoted and maintained – and of course to strengthen general coordination at the key borough level..

3. LFGN Working Groups

These groups of FG reps have proved to be very important in discussing and taking up issues of concern, sharing good practice etc. Each of them need to be coordinated by one or two of the reps involved.

Climate Resilience A recent Webinar, led by Nick Cryer of the Royal Horticultural Society, discussed the impact of climate change on water table levels and future planting regimes. 25 reps attended. A video recording of the event can be found along with recommendations for future planting options here https://youtu.be/uSrcjeaS8_M?

Biodiversity Nothing to report back at the moment, although of course lots going on on this issue all the time!.

Commercial Events in Parks A wide variety of Friends Groups are involved with very different experiences of the impact of the events. Finsbury Park and Victoria Park experiences were noted. Most Local Authorities were seeking to increase the number and scale of events to generate additional income. The greatest impacts were litter etc and soil compaction.

Dogs in Parks Nothing to report back at the moment.

4. London Wide Partners

It was noted that a number of London wide groups (e LWT/CPRE) were now adopting the webinar approach with very successful results. For the LFGN such webinars are a vital opportunity not just for information purposes but also to encourage the peer-to-peer mutual aid and solidarity, and the empowerment of our groups.

London Parks and Gardens - Reviewing all the growing number of planning applications across London was not possible with current resources and they were prioritising those which effected the most vulnerable sites. Looking into having some volunteers to act as their reps at the borough level. Their annual 'Open Gardens and Squares' event will again take place in Summer 2025.

Metropolitan Public Gardens Association - They were focusing as usual on small grant applications for open space improvements by voluntary groups. They had received a lot of schools applications but these were declined as they did not conform to their grant criteria. They want to push the scheme hard (as well as raising funds) in 2025 to increase take up.

They were looking for help and support and would let Laura have an item on their work for the next LFGN Newsletter.

Parks for London - Their bi-annual 'Good Parks for London' audit report on the health of all London borough's parks management and maintenance has taken place and the report published. There were some gaps in the data as a number of London Boroughs had not responded to data requests.

CPRE - have continued to promote their recently launched "Green Defenders Network" with representatives for nearly 40 groups engaged. The aim is to share good practise about defending open space facing development threats. They are also highlighting the number of potential green spaces in London which are not publicly accessible with a Ten New Parks campaign.

More Natural Capital Coalition - Have continued their work to lobby around London election times about the value of open spaces and the environment generally. LFGN supports this effort.

Queen Elizabeth II Legacy Fund Dave, as NFPGS chair, has been consulted about the potential scope of this new fund. It will be launched in 2025 and will have a key focus on grant funding for improvements to green spaces. The exact format of the grants and allocations is still being developed but it is hoped this won't be on a purely competitive basis.

5. Future Meetings in 2025 - the annual LFGN Social will take place on 13th January in Farringdon. All FG reps and members welcome. Dates of other meetings etc will be added to our website. A key topic for one future meeting will be the importance of cafes in open spaces as a meeting point, income generator and focus point.

6. AOB - Desmond asked if the format of future meetings could be modified to improve accessibility to the events when certain types of IT are used. Laura agreed to assess this.