

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMISSION

MINUTES of the Environment Scrutiny Commission held on Tuesday 27 February 2024 at 7.00 pm at 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Margy Newens (Chair)
Councillor Graham Neale (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Cassandra Brown
Councillor Youcef Hassaine
Councillor Leo Pollak
Councillor David Watson
Anna Colligan
Simon Saville

**OTHER MEMBERS
PRESENT:**

**OFFICER
SUPPORT:** Ruth Arnott, Community Gardening Coordinator
Tara Quinn, Head of Parks and Leisure
Julian Fowgies, Tree Services Manager
Juliet Seymour Head of Policy, Building Control and the
Historic Environment
Charlotte Brooks-Lawrie, Team Leader
Julie Timbrell, Project Manager , Scrutiny

1. APOLOGIES

Councillor Leo Pollak gave apologies for lateness.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

There was none.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There was none.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

5. SITOPIA

A short video, introducing the work of Carolyn Steel, author, on her recent book Sitopia, was played.

The video can be found here: <https://www.carolynsteel.com/>

6. INCREDIBLE EDIBLE

The chair welcomed Victoria Sherwin, a director of Incredible Edible, and invited her to present on their work in Lambeth.

Questions were then invited and the following points were made:

- Incredible Edible said that they have close links with the borough of Southwark and work with council officers, including the officers embedded in community gardening. Southwark's employment of council officers to support community garden is very good and an approach Incredible Edible would like to see replicated by Lambeth Council. Lambeth is good is it is people led.
- Residents in Lambeth have requested seeds and compost to support local food production.
- An Open University report found that food often slips through departmental cracks in councils.
- Incredible Edible are pushing for an Agricultural Strategy in Lambeth.
- The Southwark Land Commission was commended by Incredible Edible as a good initiative. They said that food growing is limited by both resources and land. Land is difficult as there are tensions with the impetus to develop and profit.

Incredible Edible are keen to share knowledge and resources between Lambeth and Southwark.

- Incredible Edible is organising a Right to Food conference in April with Arup and Open University. This will look at developing a strategy and plans to go to decisions makers. Incredible Edible have facilitated the development of 'good stories', which has worked well and the relationship Arup came through that.
- A member asked if Incredible Edible would be encouraging the Mayor of London and local councillors throughout London to support a right to grow food, in order to get the whole of London signed up to this. Incredible Edible responded that there is support by the Mayor / GLA for food growing, but nothing is implemented yet.
- In New York there are 500 plots under use for urban agriculture. This is supported by the NYC council - see <https://www.grownyc.org/about>. New York City have a developed infrastructure, including providing seedlings / water/ trolleys as well as facilitating the provision of green space and education programmes.
- Incredible Edible recommended a policy in favour of Agroecology.
- Councillors noted that there are now several projects in council estates as a result of the community garden programme. One in Denmark Hill, with raised beds, saw a queue around the block and this demonstrates their popularity. Incredible Edible said it is important to invest in both people as well physical infrastructure, as Southwark has done for these recent initiatives.
- Incredible Edible supports local food growing groups, including fostering good relationships between residents, with non-violent communication workshops and other types of support. They emphasized that investing in people and community is very important for projects to thrive.
- Incredible Edible were asked if there was any data on the ability of community food growing to improve nutrition and impact on saving people money. In response they said this data is not yet available but they hope to gather this with future funding.

7. INSECTINSIDE

The chair welcomed Penny Frith, and invited her to present on her work documenting life in the bushes of a small Peckham park, Warwick Gardens: <https://insectinside.me/page/2/>

Penny delivered her presentation and during this the following comments were made:

- Southwark gardening service have offered to do more to facilitate biodiversity however Penny said she has deliberately advocated for low interventions to mimic local parks. She has dissuaded officers from either turning the park into a place managed for biodiversity and also unnecessary disruptions. Penny was asked if she persuaded Southwark's gardeners to not cut the grass. She confirmed she did but there is still some grass cutting in summer. She explained that a range of habitats are good, with both some areas left all year round and some cut short, as different insects have different preferences. Members suggested a protocol might help here.
- Penny reported that gardening by neighbours adjoining the park led to a loss of habitat and reduced insect life. Over time this may change as the logs were left to decay.
- A co-optee noted what the presentation demonstrated that in order to encourage the 672, approximate, different types of insects habitats are crucial and these can be supported by small interventions, such as leaving logs and not cutting some of the grass.
- Penny said she loves public speaking and would like to do more. There is also a book available documenting the park that she has produced. She has presented in a couple of schools. Penny said that it is now possible to get good pictures on phones - but a macro lens shows an additional amount of detail and beauty. She said one of the purposes for her project is to engage children and others in appreciating insects through the photographs and her talks. Members suggested an exhibition in the atrium.

8. MERISTEM

The chair reported that Meristem had met with her, both the co-optees, and the project manager informally, but unfortunately cannot

attend this evening. They have provided some information on their rain gardens and Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS).

9. IMPROVING BIODIVERSITY IN SOUTHWARK : SUSTAINABLE DRAINAGE SYSTEMS (SUDS) DE-PAVING, POCKET PARKS, AND OTHER MEASURES

Simon Saville, Chair of Surrey & SW London Butterfly, and co-optee, presented.

Simon empathised the importance of catering for the whole life cycle of insects. He explained that insect are the base of food chain – so if land is manage for these then birds and other small mammals with thrive.

There are 5 key things required for a good habitat for insects:

- i. Food for mum and dad – pollinators like flowers and other sources of nectar.
- ii. Food for kids – these are the grubs and caterpillars that will later turn into flying insects. They spend a long time in this state.
- iii. Shelter – e.g Ivy
- iv. Water
- v. No chemicals

Simon said that wildlife corridors with the right plants to create a habitat for insects and that then to link up with Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) will maximise the land available.

One of the best habitat provision for insects is flower rich grassy areas, which thrive on low fertility soil. These have the added benefit of being low maintenance so lower cost to maintain.

He explained that if we build the right habitat the species will come.

Simon finished by noting that there are lots of potential partners; both people and groups, who are willing to give their voluntary time to improve biodiversity. The council has an opportunity to create an eco-system of people and groups to deliver the borough's plans.

10. SOUTHWARK NATURE ACTION VOLUNTEERS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATURE RECOVERY IN SOUTHWARK

The chair welcomed Southwark Nature Action Volunteers (SNAV).

The following presented:

- Anna Colligan , who is also a co-optee on the Commission,

- Jenny Morgan,
- Susan Crisp.

SNAV started by setting out their vision, which is that:

- For nature: Southwark's many species will more easily find the particular resources they need to survive and thrive,
- For people - all residents will easily experience significant nature close to home, with safe and pleasant active travel.

In order to achieve this SNAV said that Southwark's places for nature need to be Bigger, Better, More Joined Up and More Exciting.

SNAV proposed two types of nature corridors, set out in a map:

1. One for people and nature: 'Pedestrian/Nature Corridors' – these connect green spaces. These are continuous, or have very frequent "biodiversity stepping stones".
2. One for nature only: 'Strategic Nature Highways' – these inaccessible areas are critical for wildlife survival and nature recovery.

SNAV drew the Commission's attention to specific points to be noted from the SNAV Southwark Nature Connectivity Mapping Exercise:

- Peckham Rye Lane – nature corridors go there and then get lost, this is a major missing link
- Canada Water – this is an opportunity
- Old Kent Road – this is also an opportunity area, as presently a barrier that ought to be made permeable to nature.

Jenny Morgan explained that a lot of habitat is required to feed the diversity of insects and birds. In the absence of large swathes of land then joining up parks and pockets of land is the next best action. A large amount of plants are required in these areas to support insects and small mammals. Reducing cutting, keeping litter leaf, retaining water, will support worms, insects and biodiversity.

Anna Colligan explained that paving reduces the retention of water and washes pollutants into the river and sea. Retaining water through de-paving, better design, provision of rain gardens, will mean water is retained and pollutants removed.

Jenny went on to say that water is important, and certain types of creatures require ponds. Temporary scrap ponds are good for specific plants. Toads can breed if the ponds remain until May. She suggested that opening up rivers such as The Peck can create ponds and several cities have exposed rivers.

Trees are good, and it would be even better to increase the size of tree pits to include more than one tree and to make space for other planting, which can increase biodiversity. Jenny said that around 50% of the trees ought to be native but other pollinators are useful. Trees that can harbour insects, have nuts, berries or pollen is most helpful. Large tree pits can also encourage the community to adopt and maintain the planting.

More diverse habitat in parks would enable greater diversity. Hedgehogs need a large area. In cutting grass it is best to try and replicate animals grazing and the patterns created – for example sheep go close, whereas other animals graze higher. Disruption of the area is also good for diversity, including leaving bare soil. When de-paving it is possible to retain poor soil and the hard standing can be broken up as this creates different habitats.

Jenny said it is generally important to minimise light pollution as it is bad for bats, particularly near water.

Susan Crisp said that there are opportunities coming up with the Green Infrastructure Plan. She advocated for early engagement with the community and to take a co-design approach as there are many residents and groups who are invested in biodiversity. As the plan is not due for completion until 2026 it would be good to have a plan developing as an iterative process. She proposed beginning on the nature corridors and other steps, rather than waiting for a perfect plan in two years' time.

The chair then invited questions and the following points were made:

- Members asked what further steps could be taken by planning to improve biodiversity.
- In response Susan suggested that the Commission review Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and other emergent policies in a year's time. She also said that the climate and environmental SPD policies, that will go to cabinet in June and are linked to the Southwark Plan, ought to go beyond the requirements of the Mayor of London /GLA. She said to do that would require a good evidence base, and there is a good evidence base

around heating and cooling, flooding and health & wellbeing.

- Anna suggested looking at making the Urban Greening Factor (UGF) mandatory not optional. She also added that the thriving nature section of the resilient climate action plan is inadequate and does not discuss habitat protection, habitat creation or de-paving, at all.

11. OFFICER REPORT ON ENVIRONMENT ACT INCLUDING BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN & LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY PLAN

The chair invited the following officers to summarise the report provided in advance:

- Juliet Seymour, Head of Policy, Building Control and the Historic Environment,
- Charlotte Brooks-Lawrie, Team Leader.

Members were then invited to ask questions and the following points were made:

- Officers confirmed that they are now implementing the Urban Greening Factor (UGF) on a 100% of all schemes coming through to planning, with the appointment of two new staff; Charlotte Brookes and an ecology planning specialist .
- The Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirement is being met in all cases and often generating a higher net gain than the 10% stipulated, however as the base line is low the improvements can be low.
- There will be guidance in the forthcoming Householder SPD to encourage pre application discussions with biodiversity officers.
- Officers were asked if there was anything that can be done through BNG or otherwise deployed to prevent paving over front gardens or at least mitigate the impact on biodiversity. Officers responded that as this is usually 'permitted development' there is a right to do this, however they have considered developing best practice guides that the council could provide to householders. Officers clarified that BNG does not apply to householders.
- Officers were asked about opportunities for improved biodiversity on the Thames, particularly with the turn on of the super sewer, and asked if there is anything in place with the Port of London Authority (PLA). Officers said that they could

talk to the PLA.

- Members asked about Southwark becoming a [‘dark sky borough’](#) and officers said they had not considered this, however they do look at applications for light, if development is close to a SINC, or an open space, etc., and consider the impact.
- Officers intend to bring the following SPDs to cabinet in June:
 - a. [Climate and Environment Supplementary Planning Document](#)
 - b. [Householder Supplementary Planning Document](#)

12. OFFICER REPORT ON SUPPORTING COMMUNITY FOOD GROWING AND GARDENING

Ruth Arnott, Community Gardening Coordinator provided a presentation. She was joined by the following officers, who assisted with questions:

- Tara Quinn, Head of Parks and Leisure,
- Julian Fowgies, Tree Services Manager.

Following on from the presentation the chair invited questions and the following points were made:

- Officers clarified that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) cannot be utilised to increase capacity for the community gardening programme, however even with the end of the Great Estates programme work will be continuing with residents in housing estates to increase gardening and food growing.
- The original vision was to facilitate the provision of a 1000 plots.
- Funding sources that have been identified include the Mayor of London’s Grow Back Greener. There will be more work done identifying funding in the future.
- A member commented on the huge waiting list for allotments and the demand this demonstrated, and asked if officers are continuing to engage with Allotment groups. Officers said

that these are volunteer associations that independently run allotment groups on council land, that the council lease, so they are not under direct control. They are invited to network groups and the service does want to foster partnerships while also sustaining the community garden initiatives. There is limited capacity, with two part time workers, so officers do need focus.

- Members noted the benefits of food growing in the report, and asked officers how this is promoted. Officers said that TRAs, word of mouth, social media and the food network are all utilised.
- Officers were asked if the council promote the keeping of Honey Bees and it was explained that the London Bee Keepers have advised there are sometimes too many hives. A co-optee, Simon Saville, endorsed this and said that there is a risk of competition with wild bees. He explained that while people often think that honey bees are endangered or in decline, but they are not, however wild bees are. Adding colonies of honeybees can actually be detrimental to nature if densities are high.

Simon provided the following summary and resources as follow up:

- Research that Simon conducted with colleagues, looking at the availability of floral resources in London (pollen & nectar, or 'forage'), as well as the distribution of managed bee hives in London, is on this website as The London Bee Situation, see <https://lbka.org.uk/london.html>. The Report itself is on the 1st link top right on the website.
- Bumblebee Conservation Trust have a position paper on managed honey bees, see <https://www.bumblebeeconservation.org/managed-honeybees/>
- Buglife (<https://www.buglife.org.uk/>) have said that if you introduce a new honey bee hive into an area, you should consider adding 2ha of good quality wildflower meadow to support them (that's 200m x 100m - about 4 football pitches).

13. SUSTAINABLE FREIGHT SCRUTINY REPORT

The chair drew members attention to an email sent by James Trimmer, Director of Planning and Development, Port of London Authority, to inform the review.

The chair said a draft report is close to completion and will be circulated for comment soon.

The Draft Walking and Cycling Plans will also be circulated for reference as there are quite a few interrelationships. At the outset the review set out to establish the extent the Movements plan (now the suite of Street for People plans) would reinforce sustainable freight.

14. WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was noted.

Meeting ended at 10:25pm