TOOTING COMMONS MANAGEMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

CHARACTER AND POSITION STATEMENT

Outline Character

Tooting Commons, situated within a densely populated part of South West London, historically comprise two commons, Tooting Bec and Tooting Graveney. Combined, they cover an area of 220 acres. They are classed as a site of metropolitan importance for nature conservation.

Map by local artist, Joanna Cannessa, for ‘Friends of Tooting Common’

The commons are characterised by a mixture of natural habitat, open spaces and include ten enclosures involving built structures. Together, these provide a wide range of leisure and recreational amenities but also an invaluable place of general relaxation, retreat from city pressures, communion with the natural environment, individual contemplation and shared social meeting ground.

This balance between natural environment and more general open space and sports amenities is key to the broad appeal and environmental and social value of the commons.

Whilst there are many open spaces, leisure and sports facilities in London it is the natural habitats that give Tooting Commons a unique and special character and ambience.

The natural habitats comprise a mixture of acid grassland, secondary woodland, scrub and ponds. The woodlands, natural grass habitats, tree avenues and ponds are particularly prominent and are unique for such a central urban open space.

The woodland is dominated by oak, with a range of other trees including hornbeam. It supports a good variety of woodland birds. The acidic grasslands are dominated by common bent (Agrostis capillaris) and red fescue (Festuca rubra) with typical herbs of acid soils, and pockets of gorse (Ulex europaeus) and bramble scrub.
Setting
The commons afford good views of the sky and extensive stretches of the skyline are free from built elements. The commons are relatively free from light pollution at night. (see CPRE Light Pollution and Dark Skies map below, P 4)

Natural habitats
The sky, natural skyline, extensive ecological grass areas, including rare acid grassland, the many veteran trees in the woodlands and individually on more open spaces, tree avenues and ponds, arguably make the most important contribution to the unique character and ambiance of these commons. These areas all provide good habitat for wildlife and support a rich biodiversity.

It is imperative that these unique characteristics are conserved and, where possible, enhanced. Many of these natural environments, the continuity of veteran trees in particular, require planning and management programmes involving very long timescales – in the order of 100 years.

Specific Purpose built elements:
Tooting Bec Common has ten enclosures with specific purpose built elements: the Lido, tennis courts; café; football changing rooms; athletics track and changing rooms; Redgra football pitch; 2 playgrounds; a building currently used as a boxing club; the contractor’s yard. There is also 1 all-weather cricket pitches.

These amenities are generally exclusive to the purpose for which they were built.

Seasonal sports amenities:
Some open areas of cut grass are designated for specific activities at certain times of the year. Football pitches are marked out and goal posts provided in the football season; ultimate frisbee pitches are marked out in summer.

These areas have a low visual profile, contribute to the sense of openness and can be shared for other purposes when not in specific use, e.g. walking (including dog walking), picnics, military fitness, etc.

General open space
Some open areas of cut grass are non-designated shared spaces which contribute to the overall sense of openness and are used informally for many purposes. This includes an events ground, used for visiting fairgrounds and other temporary events.

Cycling is currently not permitted on the commons except for one route roughly north-south which is designated shared use between cyclists and other users. Pedestrian priority prevails.

Users and activities
There are many different user categories. Most do not involve any specific amenities and so share the common spaces. These include general recreation (walking, dog walking, social meeting, observation of and or communion with the natural world, etc.)

Brief history of the Commons (adapted from http://www.londongardensonline.org.uk/gardens-online-record.asp?ID=WND063)
As London’s population was growing, and land was developed for housing, much of the old
common-land was under threat, which led eventually to the passing of the Metropolitan Commons Act in 1866. By then the commons at Tooting had been divided by building of roads and railways, with the West End and Crystal Palace line in the north, which opened in 1855, and the London, Brighton and South Coast line running north - south, which opened in 1861. Tooting Bec Common, comprising nearly 152 acres, was one of the first commons that the Metropolitan Board of Works took action to preserve following the Act and in 1873 it acquired the manorial rights for £13,798 under the Metropolitan Commons Supplemental Act 1873. Under the Metropolitan Board of Works Act 1875 the MBW then acquired Tooting Graveney Common of 66 acres for £3,000 and also contributed £1,155 to the copyholders' expenses for resisting enclosure by the Lord of the Manor for building purposes. An avenue of trees marks the former boundary line between the two commons, now to all intents and purposes one common. Responsibility passed to the London County Council, followed by the GLC and in 1971 to LB Wandsworth.

An avenue of oak trees remains along Dr Johnson Avenue that was planted in the late C16th to commemorate a visit by Elizabeth I; other avenues include horse chestnuts planted in the C19th, oaks planted in the C17th by Garrad's Road, and a line of elms that marked the southern boundary along Tooting Bec Road. Dr Johnson was connected with the area through his friendship with the Thrale family who lived nearby in Streatham Park. At the end of Dr Johnson Avenue is the old Keeper's Lodge, built in 1979. The lake was originally formed as a result of gravel digging but was created as an ornamental feature in 1895.

Adjacent to the north east of the lake is a fenced area, the Sanctuary, managed as a wildlife area, at the northern end of which is a fossil tree stump said to date from the age of the dinosaurs, placed here in Victorian times. Close to the junction of Tooting Bec Road and Elmbourne Road is the old Yachting Pond near which are now a number of sculptures created from storm-blown trees in 1987; other such sculptures are also found in Bedford Hill Woods.

Facilities provided in the early C20th include the Tea House built in 1906, and the 300 ft x 100 ft bathing lake built in 1905/6 at the joint cost of Wandsworth Borough Council and the Central (Unemployed) Body for London, making it the earliest purpose-built open air pool in London. Excavated soil was formed into an embankment that was planted with trees in 1906 to shield the pond from the common. Tooting Bec Lido was officially opened on 28 July 1906

ANNOTATED WBC MAP.
The inverted 'L' shape identifies an area of relatively low light pollution for an urban environment.
TOOTING COMMON MANAGEMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE - POSITION STATEMENT

This Position Statement has been developed by the TCMAC and sets out recommendations and guidelines for the planning, management and conservation of the commons. It is intended as a guide for use by WBC, the Parks and Open Spaces management body – Enable, and any other WBC bodies with business on the commons, other London bodies and authorities, contractors, user groups, etc. The TCMAC will use it to assess any proposals that may impact upon the character of the Commons.

It is intended to provide a preferred approach (including a “palette” of preferred materials) to guide all Wandsworth Council departments carrying out maintenance and other work on the Commons, as well as any other bodies & neighbours wishing to carry out work that may affect the “character” of the Commons (as defined by the “Character Statement”) and to help shape the forthcoming Management Plan’s development. TCMAC recognises that the uses of the Commons, and the Commons themselves, have evolved considerably over the last two centuries, and will continue to change in future. TCMAC does not want to halt all progress, but rather wants to make sure that all proposals for the Commons are properly assessed, to conserve and enhance the overall balance of the Commons, particularly with respect to the natural environments and special character.

The Position and Character Statements will be publicly available, and should be consulted by anyone who is contemplating proposing and or carrying out anything that could affect the Commons. TCMAC will use the Position and Character Statements to assess all proposals for their impact on the Commons.

Overall position, principles and recommendations

1. The existing **unique character** of the commons, as set out in the character statement, be enhanced and conserved;

2. TCMAC supports any opportunities to expand and improve the commons and is opposed to any reduction in size and or quality.

3. A **balance** between ecological environments, open spaces and sports amenities and other enclosures is key. It is felt that there is some scope to increase the ecological habitats which are so appreciated and so rare in an urban environment. For example, TCMAC would support some appropriate reduction in closely mown grass for example around trees and on verges between roads and paths;

4. A general principle of improving bio-diversity should be applied overall.

5. Ownership and management. The Commons are owned and managed by Wandsworth Borough Council for the benefit of the public. Currently, there is more than one “body” within the Council with responsibility for different elements of the commons, e.g. some paths are Parks and some are Highways. We recommend that responsibility for management and upkeep be unified under one body responsible for the commons as a whole. This should reduce the risk of different standards being applied (e.g. path surfaces)

6. While various user groups are able to put forward their proposals for change, the needs of species requiring protection (plants, invertebrates, birds, animals) must be considered and given appropriate priority.

7. Funding, while not statutorily required, is essential to maintain and enhance this space and must be protected. TCMAC will be vigilant in ensuring resources are dedicated appropriately.

8. The areas designated for sports activities are welcomed but no additional space should be allocated for this purpose.
Involvement of the public and users of the Commons

9. At the previous and recent extensive survey of Tooting Commons carried out by Wandsworth Council the vast majority of respondents declared that they regarded Tooting Commons as, 'a place to get away from it all'. The MAC respects this opinion and will work on behalf of Common users towards ensuring that the flora and fauna of the commons as well as the natural habitats are respected and enhanced.

10. The MAC will collaborate with Friends of Tooting Common where helpful to do so to raise awareness of issues affecting the Commons and to support their work to enhance the space.

11. TCMAC will seek to engage with the public via email and social media and through its annual Public Meeting to which all are welcome.

Planning

12. TCMAC recommends a planning zone covering all areas bordering the commons with a height restriction to all buildings and built structures such as to prevent visual intrusion into the natural skyline currently prevailing.

Depth of the zone and details of height restrictions t.b.c.

13. Any new buildings bordering the commons should not have any preference at any time over existing trees, mature, veteran or otherwise, on the commons (i.e. mature or veteran trees shall not be pruned or felled to alleviate “issues” that may arise at any time for buildings that post date the existence of the tree.

14. Planning shall not be granted for any new non-commons related built structures and technologies that intrude visually, or otherwise, upon the commons.

Ecology

15. The TCMAC recommends that all reasonable steps be taken to protect the habitats of the wildlife of the Common and that any proposed development should be judged against any adverse impact on wildlife. Similarly essential maintenance work or work designed to reduce illegal or anti-social behaviour should be carried out sensitively to minimise the impact on wildlife and the ecological balance. It is critical to have a plan for the replacement on veteran trees that takes the long view for users in decades to come.

16. The deep cover the brambles provide to birds is important but the balance should be reviewed and their growth constrained.

Materials and design of furniture and other built elements

17. TCMAC recommends all materials used for built elements and furniture are compatible with the unique character and ambience of the commons

18. The recycled benches do not sit well in this environment and TCMAC recommends replacement over time with more compatible materials and design.

Signage

19. The TCMAC believe that good quality and well-designed signage is important to inform and guide Commons users and to advise them of the minimal rules to be observed that help everyone enjoy the Commons. However, it equally believes that that there should be an avoidance of clutter which intrudes on the natural visual character of the Common. Generally signage should be situated at entrances to the Common and by buildings such as the Café or playgrounds.
20. Special regard should be given to design of signage to balance the need to communicate with visual discretion – frequency, size, brightness and colour in particular.

Paths

21. TCMAC recommends an end to all tarmac paths over the common. Current use of Breedon Gravel, Hoggin or some similar permeable surface is supported. In time, all paths should be surfaced in material more compatible with the unique character and ambience of the commons; e.g. hoggin.

Enclosures

22. TCMAC is opposed to increase in number or size of existing permanent enclosures.

23. TCMAC is opposed to any increase in “exclusivity” to areas and enclosures on the common, e.g. by the introduction of charges, or disproportionate raising of existing charges.

Chemicals

24. TCMAC is opposed to the use of poisons, pesticides and herbicides on or near the commons. These inevitably get into the food web and damage bio-diversity. If control is necessary, alternative, ecological means should be practiced.

25. Other organisations on or bordering the commons (Railtrack, Thames Water, Gas, electric, etc.) should be required to refrain from use of chemical control of “pests” that will have a negative impact on bio-diversity

Lighting

26. Existing floodlighting: every opportunity should be taken to improve the technology and use management of existing floodlighting. There should be no additional floodlighting on or adjacent to the commons.

27. “Street lighting” along paths should not be increased.

28. Light pollution in general should be supressed and this should include planning proposals to properties bordering the commons.

Contractor access

1. [Use if paths by contractors in vehicles is a big issue that needs discussion and resolution]