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Public consultation report

Reuniting Sydenham Hill Wood & Dulwich Wood development phase

– June-November 2023

Prepared by London Wildlife Trust for the National Lottery Heritage Fund

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The project

Reuniting Sydenham Hill Wood & Dulwich Wood is a project led by London Wildlife Trust (the Trust) in partnership with The Dulwich Estate (the Estate) and the London Borough of Southwark (LBS). In May 2023 the project received a one-year development phase grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). As part of the development phase, the Trust has delivered a multi-faceted public consultation. The Trust submitted a consultation report to the NLHF as part of a round two application for a 3-year delivery phase grant. This report was used to inform the development of the project's Activity Plan.

1.2 Background of the Woods

Sydenham Hill Wood (SHW) and Dulwich Wood (DW) are a contiguous area of secondary/semi-natural woodland ('the Woods') but are separated by ownership boundaries and in their management. SHW is leased to the Trust by LBS on a 30-year lease (dated 2023-24) and has been managed as a nature reserve since 1981. DW is owned and managed by the Estate with limited management interventions, and no conservation management plan.

The project was conceived by the Trust in response to an 80% rise in visitor numbers between 2019 and 2020, resulting in severe impact on the habitats, heritage and access to the Woods.

There have been a number of projects since 2011 where the Trust and the Estate have worked together, including the Ambrook & Dewy Pond project, a cross-boundary habitat project to restore the Ambrook stream and Dewy Pond. From 2017-2023 the Trust delivered the Great North Wood project, installing new paths, conservation fencing and delivering volunteer taskdays in DW. This was supported by a range of funders including NLHF and the Estate.

1.3 Social demographics of the local area

The Woods are located in the London Borough of Southwark, sharing a border on the eastern side with the London Borough of Lewisham. The Southwark Council Census and Demographics report 2021 states:

- In 2021, over half the Southwark population recorded their ethnicity under the broad category 'White'.
- The next most common broad ethnic group in the borough was 'Black, Black British, Caribbean or African', representing one-quarter of Southwark residents.
- The usual resident population of Southwark was 307,600, a 19k increase in 10 years.
- Southwark's rate of population growth over the decade similar to that seen across London and England.
- The age structure of Southwark has also changed during this time, with children aged 5 and under making up a smaller percentage of the total population, and adults aged 55 to 70 making up a greater percentage of the population.

1.4 Previous surveys

In 2022-23 an online survey was conducted for all the Great North Wood sites, which includes SHW & DW but there have not been any online surveys specific to SHW & DW recorded.



The Project Manager and trainees leading a site project tour, July 2023 (Sadatu Futa)

2.0 Methodology and aims

The consultation methodology aimed to provide passive and interactive opportunities for the public to share their views and ask questions about the potential impact of the project, including:

1. Online survey, open for 3 months
2. On-site guided tours for the public, showing the need for management in particular locations, and generally to raise awareness about the sites' history and differences
3. Visits to local communities to share information about the project and invite participation including: Lordship Lane Estate, Sydenham Hill Estate, Countisbury House, and Kingswood Estate
4. Drop-in sessions at local community spaces for people who were unable to physically access the Woods
5. Information stalls on-site to speak to visitors about the project plans and record visitor feedback
6. Tailored events to involve under-represented communities and garner their views with support from our partner Black Girls Hike

7. Pilot sessions in the Woods with school-age children and young people to inform education session plans for the delivery phase, and consultation with teachers on how they currently use the Woods.
8. Youth consultation event for young people aged 16-25 to understand new perspectives on the Woods and which activities could improve nature connection for young people
9. Specific partner surveys
10. Employment of access consultants to engage visitors and relevant groups or organisations not met by the Trust's survey methods
11. Survey of current London Wildlife Trust volunteers at Sydenham Hill Wood & Dulwich Wood

The online survey was created to understand public experience along the lines of the following:

- The nature and frequency of an individual's visit to the Woods, if at all
- Barriers to access, particularly regarding visitor demographics including social, ethnic or cultural heritage.
- A visitor's understanding of the site's natural and cultural history
- Views on the quality of access and relevant infrastructure or facilities
- Views around access to and quality of volunteering experience
- Popularity of events and particular activities

The online survey was promoted online, in person on site, through project tours, and with posters placed on site using QR codes to provide direct links to the survey.

Local social housing estates were identified as being potentially disconnected with both the Woods and the work of the Trust. The Trust undertook the following steps to assess the situation:

- Identified priority local social housing estates in London Borough of Southwark (LBS/Southwark)
 - Sydenham Hill Estate, Lordship Lane Estate, Countisbury House, Kingswood Estate
- Made contact with relevant Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs)
- Attended meetings or events with TRAs to introduce the project and encourage involvement in online survey and relevant activities
- Understanding issues around physical access to the Woods
- Understanding issues around awareness of the Woods and activities taking place there
- Leading guided walks for residents and other relevant activities in the Woods
- Received and digested feedback on issues around accessing the Woods
- Considered activities to include in activity plan that will improve access for people living on local social housing estates



3.0 Consultation results and analysis

This section will exhibit data from the surveys and consultation sessions, as well as detailing findings and discussing how they will inform the project’s activity plan.

3.1 Engagement statistics

Below is a table showing all the events that took place during the consultation period and the number of people who attended. 30 events were held and 386 people were engaged in person.

Date	Location	Event	Audience	Public/ closed	No.s
12/06/2023	ORTUS Learning Centre, 82 Grove Lane, London SE5 8SN	Monthly group meeting	Older Adult Service User and Carer Advisory Group (SUCAG)	Closed	10
21/06/2023	SHW/DW	Site visit/tour	Countisbury House Gardening Group	Closed	4
25/06/2023	SHW/DW	Project guided tour	General public	Public	12

25/06/2023	SHW/DW	Project guided tour	General public	Public	7
16/07/2023	SHW/DW	Project guided tour	General public	Public	17
16/07/2023	SHW/DW	Project guided tour	General public	Public	16
20/07/2023	Dulwich Library	Drop-in	General public	Public	8
23/07/2023	SHW	SHW Open Day	General public	Public	25
24/07/2023	SHW/DW	Summer holiday kids sessions	Holiday camp group	Closed	71
25/07/2023	DW	Site engagement	General public	Public	12
29/07/2023	Sydenham Hill Estate	Summer fete	Sydenham Hill Estate TRA	Public	30
07/08/2023	SHW/DW	Project guided tour	Countisbury House Gardening Group	Closed	3
07/08/2023	Lordship Lane Estate	LLE TRA meeting	Lordship Lane Estate TRA	Closed	17
08/08/2023	SHW	Site engagement	General public	Public	5
08/08/2023	SHW/DW	Project guided tour	General public	Public	18
17/08/2023	Kingswood House, Dulwich	Consultation	Schools/child groups	Closed	7
17/08/2023	Dulwich Library	Drop-in	General public	Public	8
30/08/2023	SHW/DW	Project guided tour	General public	Public	8
06/09/2023	SHW/DW	Project guided tour	General public	Public	7
09/09/2023	SHW/DW	Partner-led walk (Black Girls Hike)	Black Girls Hike participants	Public	19
10/09/2023	DW	Project guided tour	Peckarmans Wood RA	Closed	5
10/09/2023	Sydenham Hill Estate	Family nature sessions	Sydenham Hill Estate TRA	Closed	3
30/09/2023	Lordship Lane Estate	Guided walk	Lordship Lane Estate TRA	Closed	2
12/10/2023	SHW/DW	Education session	Dulwich Wood Nursery	Closed	10
15/10/2023	SHW/DW	Youth volunteering consultation	Young people aged 16-25	Public	10
19/10/2023	SHW	Volunteer project tour	LWT personnel	Closed	7
19/10/2023	SHW/DW	Education session	Dulwich Wood Primary	Closed	10

22/10/2023	SHW/DW	Partner-led walk (Black Girls Hike)	Black Girls Hike participants	Public	20
22/11/2023	SHW/DW	Sensory nature walk	Refugees and non-EU migrants	Closed	15
				<i>Total</i>	386

3.0 Public consultation report conclusions

3.1 Overall conclusions

Health and wellbeing

- The most strongly agreed-with statement in the online survey was that ‘Visiting the Woods makes me feel better connected to nature and wildlife’, underlining the Woods’ importance as a place for personal nature connection.
- The ‘wildness’ of the Woods is an important part of what allows people to feel relaxed, compared to formal landscapes, public spaces or the built environment.
- In general, the Woods are a place that provides a high level of enjoyment for visitors and the local community.

Access to the Woods

- The general quality of visitor experience is good, with 49% of 402 respondents choosing ‘excellent’, and 46% ‘good’. Visitor facilities are less well-viewed, with 52% of respondents choosing either ‘good’ or ‘fair’. 10% of respondents felt they were ‘poor’.
- Accessibility (paths, entrances, and wayfinding) is middling, with around 80% of respondents defining it as ‘good’ or ‘fair’. Signage is rated as either good or fair by 77% of respondents, with 17% seeing it as excellent, showing there is a need for improvement.
- The Cox’s Walk footbridge (closed for reconstruction at the time of the consultation) is mentioned 37 times, highlighting how this closure has harmed public access to and perception of the Woods.

General state of the Woods

- The Woods are a place people value for wildness and nature
- People do not want the Woods to become a formalised, park-like landscape
- That said, there is a good level of understanding for why paths need improving and wildlife needs protecting, particularly from volunteers.
- Fencing areas of severely eroded and declining habitat for the purposes of protecting the health of the woodland and its wildlife is supported by those who have been consulted through this

process.

Guided walks and public events

- Demand is high for nature-focused events but awareness of events that have happened previously is low.
- Partnerships with local communities can increase access to the Woods and allow people who have never visited to gain access.

Accessibility of this consultation

- The online survey had a high level of engagement but the respondents did not reflect the social and ethnic diversity of the local area's housing communities, underlining the importance of a more dynamic range of consultation activities.

Dog walking

- There are concerns raised about dogs that are not under control, dog fouling and a general fear of dogs that an individual may have.
- Dog walker feedback to the survey was not high, which suggests that the perspective of dog walkers is not fully covered by this consultation.
- More signage and information that outlines the requirements around dog walking in the Woods is requested on several occasions.

Access to the Woods for residents of local social housing estates

- Residents of local housing estates don't enjoy the same level of access as other visitors due to a number of issues, including available time of residents, motivation to take unknown routes, sense of safety in the Woods, awareness and the closure of the Cox's Walk footbridge, and for some residents the South Circular Road is simply too dangerous to cross.
- Some residents of Southwark estates only minutes away from entrances had never visited despite living there for over 20 years.
- There is a demand for guided walks beginning from the Lordship Lane, Sydenham Hill, and Countisbury House Estates and passing into the Woods and back.

Access to the Woods for Black women, women of colour, and non-binary people of colour

- There is a demand for more walks/safe spaces for Black women, women of colour and non-binary people of colour to access the Woods under the leadership of specialist organisations, who excel at building trust with under-represented communities.
- There remain barriers for this demographic of people in the form of not feeling welcome or part of the community because of being different from a largely White visitor profile. This is in the context of Southwark and Lewisham being some of the most racially diverse areas in London.

Young people

- There is a natural draw to being in woodlands for young people, with an understanding of all that could be learned from nature through species identification, craft and creativity
- There are serious safety concerns around woodlands for young people, with a focus on group activities and community presence helping to alleviate those worries or any potential threats
- Activities for young people should be flexible and weekends were ideal
- The phase 'youth programme' should be avoided in favour of a '16-25' indicator when advertising activities.
- 'Volunteering' is a problematic term for young people as it indicates unpaid work, a real point of stigmatization for people trying to develop themselves and gradually become independent from their parents/guardians.
- 'Practical conservation' is a meaningless and confusing phrase for young people when describing outdoor volunteering and should be avoided.

Volunteering

- Currently active volunteers are supportive of the project's aims to reunite SHW & DW and are keen to play their part.
- There was a keen understanding of the need for Dulwich Wood to be managed, due to the high number of visitors in recent years but lack of management in response.
- There is strong support for the increased accessibility and feeling of inclusion that a sustainable toilet would bring, particularly from female volunteers.
- Shelter is not an issue for most volunteers but some feel it could make volunteering much more inclusive to them and others not represented in this survey.
- Volunteers underlined the potential to expand volunteering opportunities, particularly in relation to ecological monitoring, community and school engagement, and historical research.
- There are concerns about an increase in visitor numbers generally but clear recognition of the need for people to access the Woods in the long-term, and for more local people from diverse backgrounds to visit the Woods.
- Some volunteers feel that the Woods should be a place for 'nature play' for their families and other local people and that the Trust should be open to maintaining safe spaces for this.

Schools

- The Woods offer a rich learning environment for children and can experience higher levels of wellbeing from accessing the Woods as part of their education.
- Being in the Woods gives a freedom of expression for children who may not excel in a formal learning environment.
- Pond dipping is an extremely popular activity, underlining the need to upgrade the pond dipping platform in the Dewy Pond to allow more children to partake in this activity.
- Dulwich Wood School are unable to make independent visits to the Woods due to lack of personnel, highlighting the benefits of a Learning Officer as part of the project.
- There is a clear need for schools to visit the Woods and to benefit from all it offers to physical and mental wellbeing, and the dynamic learning environment it provides.

- It proved challenging to engage schools in the development phase, partially because of the timeframe of the consultation (July-October) and the clear issues around lack of capacity within schools (gauged by the low levels of response and communication).
- The project would provide the opportunity to re-establish the Woods as a dynamic learning environment for local schools.

4.0 Recommendations based on this report

- The project should look to **maintain a balance** between inclusive, sustainable access for visitors and protection for wildlife and their habitats, as the Trust has always sought to.
- The Trust can use the project to express to people the role it has taken in **protecting wildlife and the Woods** and that it has no intention of turning the Woods into a park or garden.
- The project should continue **upgrading paths** in a manner in keeping with the setting – not tarmac or anything that may distract from the visual amenity of the Woods.
- Though the Trust would not be able to provide public toilets due to maintenance requirements and site challenges, a **sustainable compost toilet** will increase the accessibility of the Trust's activities on site, including volunteering, school sessions and activities with participants who have medical conditions.
- There is a clear **demand for more signage** that is sensitively included in the landscape that can inform people about the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Woods' landscape.
- **Sensitive wayfinding signage**, and other relevant interpretation, should be introduced into the Woods appropriately to give clear guidance to visitors on routes, regulations, and educational information about the Woods via QR codes, without distracting from the setting.
- The **online information** regarding the Woods (pre-visit information, etc.) should be upgraded through the project and more done to connect site visitors to this information through QR codes when on site.
- **Events taking place in the Woods** should be clearly highlighted and accessible, and how the public can partake in activities should be clearly advertised both online, on-site and through the relevant digital and community communications channels.
- Events should continue to **focus on nature and wildlife themes** to help the local community to feel a strong sense of connection to and understanding of the nature on their doorstep.
- Regular channels of communication and tailored activities should be included in the project for **social housing communities** engaged in this consultation.
- The project should include **targeted guided walks and events** for the local social housing communities, and Black women, women of colour, and non-binary people of colour to build confidence.

- Groups who specialise in **creating safe spaces** for underrepresented communities of people (Black Girls Hike) should be delivery partners for the project to ensure activities are meaningful and effective.
- There is a clear benefit of a **schools programme led by a dedicated Learning & Engagement Officer** – this increase in learning personnel will allow more schools to access the Woods under the guidance of an outdoor learning specialist, and for the children to experience the learning and wellbeing benefits both in the Woods and when returning to the classroom/home environment.
- The volunteering programme can be expanded and diversified, and should include **half-day, one-off and weekend volunteering opportunities** to allow more people to feel a part of the Wood’s volunteering community, especially for young people.
- The public desire for **increased community safety** should be met with the creation of a volunteer role that increases the Trust’s presence in the Woods: ‘welcome’ volunteers can provide visitors with helpful information and act as a point of contact on-site.
- The Woods are an attractive space for families, and more can be done to **connect local families** with nature in the Woods as part of the project’s activities.
- As a key location for **community wellbeing**, the project should focus on the wellbeing impact of the Woods by trialing events that can embellish this further.
- The Trust and its partners should continue to **listen actively to people of a variety of ages, cultural and social backgrounds, and with disabilities** on what activities are most important and meaningful.
- A communications strategy is required to improve messaging around **responsible dog walking** in response to concerns raised through this consultation – dog walkers should be consulted as part of this process to ensure that methods of communication are sustainable and inclusive.