

## Council

24 April 2019

## Petitions

Under the Council's Petitions Scheme, the Council welcomes petitions from those who live, work, or study in the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, and will debate any petition with over 500 eligible signatures. This report therefore provides information to assist Members to debate two petitions which have been submitted with over 500 eligible signatures.

The petition organiser will be given five minutes to present the petition at the meeting and the petition will then be discussed by Councillors for a maximum of 30 minutes. The Council will decide how to respond to the petition at this meeting, and the petition organiser will receive written confirmation of this decision after the meeting. The Council's decision may be to refer the petition for further detailed discussion at a relevant Committee.

### **(A) Children's Centres Petition**

Report by the Director of Children's Services

#### **Background**

1. At the Council meeting on 26 February 2019 a petition relating to Children's Centres was submitted by Ms Jenny Lister. The hard copy of this petition received 234 eligible signatures and an online version of the petition had collected 345 eligible signatures on the e-petitions facility on the Council's website through which it was submitted on 28 February.

2. The wording of the petition was as follows:

*"We strongly oppose the proposed closures of half of the children's centres within the borough of Kingston. We fervently believe that the changes in how the remainder operate, including the removal of sessions into the community will not be sufficient to meet local need and will raise serious safeguarding concerns. We insist that the children's centres remain open. In the event of closures, we demand financial investment ensuring that:*

- *The remaining centres can be fully staffed;*
- *Each centre has a full time member of staff available to parents throughout the week;*
- *The remaining centres are able to meet the needs of a greater number of families;*
- *Sessions currently being held continue to run within the children's centre buildings;*
- *Any sessions held in alternative local venues must guarantee that:*
  - a. *the general public cannot access families;*
  - b. *parents can converse with staff privately in a separate room; and*
  - c. *there is wheelchair access.*

*We ask that the Council seriously consider the detrimental impact that the proposed changes would have for many families and that the investment in our children and their futures should be a priority."*

3. The petition relates to proposals for the Children's Centre Strategy which were subject to consultation from 12 December 2018 - 4 February 2019. A report on the proposals and consultation was submitted to the meeting of the Children's and Adults Care and Education Committee on 21 March 2019. This report is attached at **Annex 1** of this report. After consideration of the report and after hearing representations at the meeting, the Committee agreed that:

1. the results of the public consultation (as set out in paragraphs 12-15 and Annex 1 of the report) on the future direction for children's centres provision in Kingston are noted and considered;

2. Norbiton and Surbiton Children's Centres are remodelled from June 2019 and the provision of services will be offered through outreach into the local communities; and
3. New Malden and North Kingston Children centres are remodelled from April 2020 with a phased reduction in children centre activity to target those most in need (as set out in paragraph 10 of the report).

### **Comments of the Director of Children's Services in response to the petition**

4. The Director's comments in response to specific points in the petition (shown in italics with bullet points) are as follows:

- *The remaining centres can be fully staffed;*

Response: There will continue to be appropriate staffing arrangements to ensure safe and effective delivery of Children's Centre provision at remaining Children's Centre sites.

- *Each centre has a full time member of staff available to parents throughout the week;*

Response: Our current model of staffing is based on flexible deployment of the Children's Centre workforce across our delivery sites rather than having staff linked to particular buildings. This enables effective and efficient use of the workforce whilst also providing better resilience. We do not envisage this to change as a result of our proposals.

- *The remaining centres are able to meet the needs of a greater number of families;*

Response: An outreach delivery approach alongside the core provision at remaining sites will continue to meet the needs of local families who access the service and potential new service users.

- *Sessions currently being held continue to run within the children's centre buildings;*

Response: The programme in each centre is planned based on needs/themes and service user consultation and is produced on a termly basis with a variation in provision across the school holiday periods. Current provision will continue for core activities and as is currently the case some sessions may change to accommodate new activities, such as Adult Learning courses, parenting programmes. We will also continue to plan the programme of activities in consultation with service users and emerging needs/themes to ensure we meet the needs of the local community.

- *Any sessions held in alternative local venues must guarantee that:*

*a. the general public cannot access families;*

Response: In our current outreach provision all sites are Risk Assessed prior to use and safety of families remains of paramount importance. Access by the general public is not something we currently allow and we would continue to apply a robust assessment to any future venues from which we may deliver provision.

- *b. parents can converse with staff privately in a separate room; and*

Response: Where possible we seek outreach venues with the facility to provide separate spaces for private discussions; however, this is not always possible. In our current outreach venues we manage this on a site by site basis with the Children Centre staff members. We do not always have access to a separate space but discreet conversations are still undertaken and support, information and advice are regularly given by staff members during outreach sessions.

- *c. there is wheelchair access.*

Response: As is the case currently, all of our venues are assessed to be DDA compliant.

### **Recommendation**

The Council is **recommended** to note the petition and the Director's response above.

## **(B) 'Save the Fishponds Park' in Surbiton Petition**

Report by the Director, Corporate and Commercial

Relevant Members: Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainable Transport and Chair of Surbiton Neighbourhood Committee

### **Background**

1. At the Council meeting on 26 February 2019 a petition relating to the Fishponds Park in Surbiton was submitted by Mr Bob Phillips. The hard copy of this petition received 263 eligible signatures and an [online version](#) of the petition had collected 577 eligible signatures on the Change.Org petition site.

2. The wording of the petition was as follows:

*“The Surbiton Branch of the Labour Party demands that Kingston Council invest in a professional engineering project to repair the Fishponds water pumps. Kingston Council must then allocate funds to maintain a healthy wildlife environment thereafter.”*

### **Comments of the Corporate Head of Contracts in response to the petition**

3. RBK is committed to working with the community and the 'Friends of Fishponds' to improve the quality of the site, including the pond system.

#### **Pond System**

4. Investigations into water quality facilitated by the Freshwater Habitats Trust testing kits have indicated the water quality is in good condition with low levels of nitrates and phosphates. The ponds currently support healthy populations of a number of bird species including mallard, moorhen, tufted duck and heron, while also supporting good numbers of amphibians. Other habitats within the park also support a rich biodiversity.
5. The pump system does pump water to the top pond but there is concern over the ability of this pond to sufficiently retain water due to partial disintegration of the pond liner. This means any water that is pumped to the top pond cannot effectively flow down to the main bottom pond.
6. The ponds are naturally topped up through rainfall and consideration must be given that locally the water table has dropped. The Hogsmill River is seeing extremely low flows, alongside prolonged periods of low rainfall. This reduction in the water table may be detrimental to the viability of the ponds circulation system and prevent it from being operated unless the water levels rise. However, circulation of the water is not a direct requirement for the ponds to be healthy.

#### **Funding a scheme**

7. RBK has previously recognised the need for investment within this site and considered the likely scale of funding required. Whilst the focus of this petition is on the water bodies and associated environment within the park, it is the view of RBK that there are also wider historical landscape and heritage parkland features which should also be considered for improvement and restoration.
8. It was considered that the scale of capital funding required to complete a significant improvement of the site was beyond that currently available for this type of project within the Council's own capital programme. It was also considered that the project could be eligible for grant funding to match fund any contribution put forward by the Council and would be a preferred option for taking the project forward.
9. In order to take forward a realistic external funding bid for Fishponds, it was considered that several specialist studies needed to be completed, these included an initial historic parkland and landscape study to assess whether the site had sufficient heritage merit to make it a

potential candidate for heritage lottery funding (HLF). HLF are one of the few funding bodies of sufficient scale to make this project a reality.

10. The project was defined within the Community Parks Programme, 2018 – 2022, which was approved by Council in February 2018. The excerpt from the programme, referring to Fishponds is outlined below. It should be noted that in the interim, HLF has withdrawn its specific Parks for People funding programme and all bids will now be considered within a single heritage programme.

PROJECT FEASIBILITY & DEVELOPMENT				
15	Fishponds, King Charles Road	Berrylands	Surbiton	This funding will be used to develop a bid to the parks for People Programme of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), to permit a full restoration and improvement of the park. Generally if successful the HLF will fund up to 90% of the project costs.

### Next steps

11. The part of the project to complete the heritage study of the site has been procured and awarded. The consultants will commence the project with a public meeting of interested stakeholders and individuals and it is planned to hold the initial meeting during April 2019. Following that meeting the consultancy will complete their assessments and report on the priority options for restoration and improvement, and the potential to receive grant funding for the site. This report will be completed in July 2019.
12. Given the complexity of the existing and past water features and degree of contouring within the site, a full topographical survey is being carried out by the council's surveying team. This will ensure that any proposed physical changes to the site and water systems are correctly measured and assessed prior to any interventions. This will also greatly assist in developing future designs and costed proposals prior to submitting grant funding applications.
13. The Council also has access to the hydrological surveys and water management plan for the site which were prepared on behalf of Thames Water, prior to them completing the Browns Road, Storm Water Flood Alleviation Scheme in 2009. The delivery of this scheme included the construction of a storm overflow to outfall in the existing ponds in Fishponds and attenuation of flows in the ponds. There were also modifications to control structures and earthworks. The integrity and purpose of the flood alleviation scheme will have to be retained as part of any future site modifications.
14. The existing and potential biodiversity and environmental value of the site is of great local importance, a Phase 1 Habitat Survey to confirm the value of the site will be completed this year and is also a requirement of potential grant funding sources. For example, HLF announced a new funding strategy in January 2019 and where the application involves parks or landscapes, bidders have to demonstrate that their proposals retain existing biodiversity and create additional biodiversity enhancements.
15. If there is confirmed merit in progressing external grant funding applications for the site, RBK will consider the resource implications of developing detailed funding applications. If the preferred option is to apply to the Heritage Lottery Fund an 'Expression of Interest Form' would be submitted in September/October 2019 and that would indicate by the end of the year whether there was an option of progressing the application. The decision on whether to progress a funding application would be taken by the appropriate Service Director.
16. The community will be kept fully engaged and informed with what is planned for the site as their support will be essential if any application is to succeed. This will include engagement with the Friends of Fishponds Park and through the Council's communication platforms. The stakeholder and community engagement process would also be required to develop a body of evidence that the community were supportive and enthusiastic about the proposed improvements to Fishponds Park.

17. The clear support from the community which has already been generated by this petition will also be valuable evidence of support to demonstrate to potential funders that this is a worthwhile project for consideration.

### **Recommendation**

The Council is **recommended** to debate the views expressed in the petition in relation to Fishponds Park. It is further recommended that the Council considers and agrees the approach in responding to the petition which officers have proposed within the report above.

The ultimate decision on whether to progress the project, will be determined by the financial contribution required to be made by the Council and in compliance with Standing Orders.

