

**FELTHAM MASTERPLAN CONSULTATION - MARCH 2017
RESPONSE BY FRIENDS OF THE RIVER CRANE ENVIRONMENT (FORCE)**

Friends of the River Crane Environment (FORCE)

FORCE was set up in 2003 and is a west London charity, entirely operated by volunteers, with around 500 members and a remit to protect and enhance the environmental and community value of the River Crane corridor.

The main focus of our work is on the lower Crane between Donkey Wood and the River Thames and therefore we have a particular interest in the proposals in the “Upper Crane Park” area of the plan. The Longford River corridor is also part of the River Crane catchment and we see there is a unique opportunity for improving this corridor through the Masterplan and we are therefore also commenting upon this aspect of the plan.

More information on our work and values can be found at www.force.org.uk

The River Crane Catchment

The River Crane rises in Harrow and runs for around 35 km through five west London boroughs (Harrow, Hillingdon, Ealing, Hounslow and Richmond), re-joining Hounslow before it enters the Thames in Isleworth. The catchment covers approximately 125 sq km and includes the Longford River, and the Upper and Lower Duke of Northumberland’s Rivers, as well as the Crane.

The Crane Valley Partnership (CVP) was set up in 2005 and includes the GLA, EA, the five boroughs (including Hounslow), Royal Parks, Thames Water and Heathrow, as well as FORCE and London Wildlife Trust, among its 26 members. CVP raises and invests funds to improve the quality and value of the river corridors for the benefit of wildlife and the local communities, and has seen investments of several £million over the last five years.

The River Crane corridor was named in the Middlesex County Plan as “the west London Green Chain” back in 1924, and remains as one of London’s most important green corridors, alongside the Thames, Wandle and Lea Valley. Detailed proposals for protecting and enhancing the value of this corridor are set out in the GLA’s All London Green Grid, part of the London Plan, and reflected in council planning policy and the Crane catchment plan, produced by CVP.

Feltham Masterplan - Overview

FORCE welcomes the Masterplan as a means of developing a coherent overall plan for the development of the Feltham area. The masterplan includes three large open areas of green space – the Feltham Parks area to the north, Hanworth Park to the south and the “upper Crane Park” area to the east. FORCE considers that the value and complementary interest features of these three areas to be a key aspect of the overall masterplan.

The Longford River runs through the centre of the Feltham Masterplan area and has considerable existing value and great potential as an enhanced green link between the urban centre and the two park areas to the north and south.

The River Crane runs through the eastern part of the area and FORCE welcomes this opportunity for Feltham to be better linked into the Crane corridor.

The two river corridors provide valuable green spaces assets and linkages for wildlife and people. They already provide wildlife and walking links between Feltham and Heathrow, Twickenham, Hounslow, Isleworth, and the green space and heritage assets of the River Thames and River Colne corridors for example.

The accessibility and public awareness of these assets and linkages could be greatly improved, at least in part through this plan. We have found that the availability of good quality leaflets, maps and signage, both as physical assets and on-line resources, all aid the public awareness of local open spaces, allowing them to see how they fit together. It gives confidence in how to access and use the open spaces as well as information about their historical and wildlife value.

Support systems can be produced in traditional paper form and on site notices and directional signage as well as in digital and downloadable form, downloadable when visiting the sites, and linked to existing on line information networks such as local web-sites, Facebook and Twitter pages, with well-established followings.

The development and improvement of open space value, and the linkages between them, is recognised as being of considerable importance to the sense of place for local people, enhancing how they value and link into their community, and supporting the physical and emotional wellbeing of the local community. The linkages also provide important green corridors for travel, both within the community and linked to the public transport network, easing congestion on local roads and enhancing public health.

Development on Green Belt and/or Metropolitan Open Land

FORCE is opposed to the principle of development of housing on Green Belt and/or Metropolitan Open Land. FORCE does not accept the arguments that:

- (a) housing development is necessary to generate income to manage green spaces or
- (b) housing development and associated overlooking is a benefit to the remaining green space

We note that the Masterplan includes proposals for around 5000 housing units and that most of these are not within Green Belt. The units outside of Green Belt will (a) generate a considerable amount of revenue and (b) require and/or benefit from the existing green spaces as their open space public assets.

Our experience over the last 15 years has shown that neglected open spaces can be greatly improved with relatively little investment, along with the long term engagement of the local community. These improvements lead to greatly increased public use which in turn greatly enhance their public value, which then improves the way in which they are used and respected, in a sustainable virtuous cycle. This model of improvement has been shown to work in Crane Park (from 2011) and is currently also being applied successfully in Pevensey Road Nature Reserve.

The Impact of Overlooking by Housing

The outline masterplan puts forward the argument that overlooking by housing will improve the open spaces by providing a sense of safety and animation to them. In our experience this does not

hold true. We are aware of local open spaces that are overlooked by one or more of housing, shops and/or main roads, but remain in a poor condition.

We do not believe that overlooking leads to automatic improvement – what overlooking will do though is remove or reduce the quietness and peacefulness of the open space. This sense of being “with nature” and “away from urban noise and bustle” is a key characteristic of some of the larger open spaces in this area. This characteristic is of great actual and potential value to the quality of life of local people, providing enhanced mental and physical well-being. This value is not being maximised at present as the spaces are under-used, but that is a reason to enhance their use and appreciation rather than to build on them.

Longford River

This river is a valuable wildlife and access corridor running through the centre of the masterplan area and a key heritage asset for Feltham. We welcome proposals to enhance the wildlife and green transport aspects of this corridor, and would support seeing this as a key component of the Feltham plan.

We understand that early efforts to engage with Royal Parks, as the owners of this asset, have not been successful. FORCE has good contacts with Royal Parks and we believe they would have a high level of interest in this opportunity as it would be of benefit to Longford River and its environmental value – also as an enhanced link between Feltham, Bushy Park and Hampton Court. Recent contacts with Royal Parks have revealed that they too have early plans for a masterplan focussed on the Longford River and there is therefore a great opportunity to link these two plans into a coherent overall scheme.

FORCE is very supportive of the proposals to remove the river from culvert through Hanworth Park and considers this could be a major benefit in re-vitalising this park and turning it into a “destination” open space. It has been suggested that this culverting is an important legacy of the use of the park as an airfield. In our view this is not a strong argument and, particularly given the amount of runway existing and projected within the local area (RAF Northolt as well as Heathrow) then to return an old airfield into a more natural open space (whilst also celebrating its aviation history) is a much more valuable and appropriate use of the Park.

Feltham Marshalling Yards

This is a major site within the lower Crane Valley and is also a Metropolitan Site of Importance for Nature Conservation in its own right. The site is recognised for its matrix of different habitats, resulting in large part by the process by which it was constructed from various types of inert infill materials in the early part of the 20th century, leading to the development of a patchwork of different soil types suitable to a wide range of flora and fauna.

In recent years it has become more overgrown with silver birch and, ironically, its matrix habitat value has been maintained in part by the scramble bikes that visit there on a regular basis. These bikes fall into two main categories – serious bike people who travel from significant distances, often bringing bikes in the backs of their vans; and local kids who take advantage of the facility. It is the serious bikers who have been using the site for over 50 years, and resist any attempt to close it down, deploying angle grinders to cut through fencing for example.

Bikes have been a long term issue for this site. However, our experience in Crane Park downstream shows that by creating a space that more of the general public want to use then the bike problem

does greatly diminish, because it is essentially not legal and they don't wish to be caught and have their bikes impounded.

There is another major legacy issue for this site, linked to the development of the post office sorting office on its eastern part in the 1990's. An agreement was reached between Network Rail and LB Hounslow, as part of the post office scheme, to transfer all the remaining 25 hectares of the marshalling yards site into public use as a park for a period of 25 years, and with around £250,000 placed in an Escrow account to support its long term improvement and maintenance. This scheme was drawn up but was not enacted, due to a dispute between the two parties as to who would take on the long term maintenance of the tunnels that pass beneath the site.

As it stands, the failure of this deal to be delivered has resulted in there being a major disconnect between the lower Crane valley and the high quality open spaces upstream in Brazil Mill, Donkey Wood and Hounslow Heath, continuing upstream for many kilometres to the source of the Crane in Harrow.

One legacy of this failure is an ongoing mistrust of major scheme proposals that promise public space improvements in exchange for development. This example is an illustration that despite best intentions, development can proceed without the delivery of the promised benefits. FORCE considers that the resolution of this historic agreement, and the provision of the public benefits due from the post office scheme, is an essential pre-requisite to re-building trust ahead of any further plans for this area.

FORCE welcomes the opportunity, afforded by the masterplan, to resolve this historical planning issue and potentially bring the site into public use as a high quality public open space, which would also link again Hounslow's two major areas of public open space along the River Crane.

FORCE is concerned about the potential of building houses on this site due to its status and value as a SMINC and as part of the overall Crane valley green corridor. However, FORCE would be very interested in seeing the open space transferred into the public domain, used and improved as a high value wildlife area and public asset, also providing improved links between Feltham and the Crane valley.

We can see the value in providing an additional bridge across the railway and into the site, but are concerned as to whether it represents good value for money relative to other improvement options, given the potential high cost.

De Brome Fields

These fields consist of meadow and acid grassland and are valuable habitats for the area. The space is much more used over the last couple of years following the creation of a new cycle path across it. FORCE has data from several public use surveys before and after the construction of this pathway showing the increase in use as a result.

FORCE is concerned about the potential of building houses on this site due to its status and value as green belt and as part of the overall Crane valley green corridor. FORCE would have particular concerns with these proposals due to the pressure which would result in further loss of high value acid grassland habitat related to public play space provision following on from any development.

Pevensey Nature Reserve

This is the third of the sites within the upper Crane Park area and is another high value matrix of different wildlife habitats including; River Crane and Mill Stream, backwater and pond habitats, all used by water vole and kingfishers; meadow with stunted oaks; flood plain and wet woodland; veteran fruit trees; rare black poplars; etc.

The value and public use of this site has increased considerably in the last few years due to the provision of a new cycling path, and the commitment of Hounslow Green Gym – a team of volunteers co-ordinated through TCV which has been meeting on site every week for over two years and slowly improving its environmental and community value. FORCE has survey data recording public use of the site over recent years.

This site links with Little Park on the other side of the river and managed by LB Richmond. The Little Park site has also been neglected in the past, although it is currently undergoing some improvement works. A new footbridge, linking the two sites and financed by LBR, is proposed in the next year, which would further enhance the public use of both sites.

Upper Crane Park

FORCE welcomes the proposals to group all these eastern sites together as an extension to Crane Park. We consider there may be value in considering these sites formally as an extension of Crane Park which already has Green Flag status in both LB Richmond and LB Hounslow. We also note that the local public have an attachment to the existing site names that recognise their historic interest and value. We would recommend retaining the existing names whilst also designating them as part of an extended Crane Park.

The community value and environmental interest of these sites could be developed by a cumulative series of small scale interventions designed to engage the local community, open up the sites to more public use and through flow, plus preserve and enhance their existing environmental value. This approach would follow on from similar deliveries by FORCE with LB Hounslow, LB Richmond and other community partners elsewhere along the lower Crane valley. FORCE does not consider that the sites require or would benefit from any major public entertainment installations – although small scale and cumulative improvements to the amenity value of the sites would be welcome.

FORCE notes that the sites contain a matrix of different habitats with a large number of protected and high value species of flora and fauna residing there. We are not aware of recent mapping and survey work to catalogue the uses and value of these sites and consider this to be an important pre-requisite of any further plan developments on the sites.

Context of Heathrow

Heathrow provides an important context for the Feltham Masterplan and the three clusters of open space in particular. The Heathrow site lies within the Crane valley catchment and a third of the run-off from the Heathrow site currently enters the River Crane. Heathrow is an important member of the Crane Valley Partnership and makes a positive contribution to the activities of the partnership.

The Third Runway proposals represent one of the largest development proposals in the UK and a major challenge and opportunity for the environmental assets of the Crane and Colne valleys. The largest (and potentially devastating) direct impact of the proposals would be upon the Colne valley, but there would also be a major impact of culverting part of the Longford River (and Upper Duke of

Northumberland's River) as well as further noise and air pollution issues along the Crane Valley. It is also likely that further housing and associated infrastructure development in the surrounding area would follow any third runway at Heathrow.

Any development at Heathrow is likely to require major environmental mitigations to counter a range of major environmental impacts. The development is also likely to look with interest at any proposals to improve the green transport corridors by bicycle and foot that would link with the Heathrow site.

FORCE considers that the green spaces within the Feltham Masterplan area are likely to increase considerably in their importance and value as green infrastructure assets for the borough in the wake of any development green light at Heathrow. Working together with the Crane Valley Partnership, there is considerable scope for procuring investment for large scale improvements of these assets, to enhance their environmental and community value, and as green links for Heathrow and the towns and communities affected by it.

Next Steps

We have put forward suggestions for helpful next steps to aid the development of the proposals set out in the masterplan. FORCE would be happy to discuss the development of these steps with the council and planners.

1. Engage with key interested parties such as Crane Valley Partnership, Heathrow Airport Ltd, Royal Parks and LB Richmond for example – to assess how the masterplan will best link with their own aspirations for these and adjacent open spaces.
2. Re-visit the Feltham Marshalling Yards POSO scheme and associated agreements with a view to resolving this as part of the Feltham Masterplan scheme
3. Collate existing environmental habitat and species surveys and commission new ones to fill in the gaps. Map the areas in terms of their environmental value and matrix of habitats and species
4. Identify the destination locations within and outside of the masterplan area and compare these with (a) the open space network and the actual and potential walking and cycling routes and (b) the public transport network so as to develop useful linkages using these open spaces
5. Assess the current public usage of these areas – and look at other comparable areas to assess the potential level of usage and the infrastructure and associated investment requirements to achieve this
6. Trial some early interventions to test and develop public interest in these open spaces. Ideas for these are provided below

Small Scale Early Interventions

FORCE supports the proposal for small scale initial interventions to engage local communities with the potential benefits and opportunities associated with the Feltham Masterplan. Key opportunities would include:

1. Volunteer days – engaging local people with the value of the sites whilst helping to improve them. Note that FORCE is running a volunteer day in Pevensey in April 2017. Volunteer days on local open spaces can also be set up working with conservation groups such as TCV, LWT and Green Corridor, as well as local groups such as Friends of Bridge House Pond (FBHP)
2. Green Gym – publicise and support the existing green gyms in Pevensey and Hounslow Heath managed by TCV. Support the creation of new green gyms for other open spaces in the area
3. Support the development of new Friends groups. Open spaces need Friends groups. SW London Environment Network (SWLEN) is already engaged supporting LB Hounslow’s Friends groups. There would be great value in supporting new or extended friends groups in this area – particularly for sites such as Hanworth Park and the north Feltham sites
4. Walks and Talks – these are run to engage local people in the value of their local open spaces. Events can focus on environmental or heritage value for example – or just introduce people to the areas through walks or cycle rides etc. There are existing groups including FORCE, Hounslow Cycling Campaign and FBHP, interested in running and supporting such events
5. Engagement through local schools – outdoor learning events such as those run by FORCE and others with local Hounslow schools. This has been shown to be a great way to engage young people, and through the children their families, in the value of local open spaces
6. Support to a “Park Run”. The Crane Park park run routes through the Hounslow and Richmond sides of Crane Park between A316 and Hanworth Road. It was set up around five years ago and has proved a wonderful means of engaging young people and families in the value of the park and is now used by 100 to 200 people each Saturday morning. Creating a new Park Run location further upstream would engage people in these other sites and build upon the success of the Crane Park event
7. The development of leaflets and signage. Whilst the main efforts regarding signage may follow on from the delivery of key parts of the plan, an initial map and leaflet focussed on these spaces and how they link to Feltham, available to local communities, could be of great value in engaging local people about the proximity and value of these key assets. It would also provide an opportunity to actively engage with local people about their potential and how this might be realised

FORCE would welcome the opportunity to discuss these and other opportunities with the project team.