Committee(s)	Dated:
Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee – For Discussion Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queen's Park Committee - For Decision	13/03/2017 15/05/2017
Subject: Model Boating Pond Island – Options Appraisal	**Public**
Report of: Bob Warnock, Superintendent of Hampstead Heath	**For Discussion**
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Summary

This report looks at a number of options regarding the future management of the new island in the Model Boating Pond on Hampstead Heath, taking account of a current petition which is campaigning for the island to be managed as a refuge for swans and free from public access.

Recommendation(s)

- The Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee discusses the proposed options, noting the preferred option 3b, subject to a review of the restoration of the island and bird monitoring data which is currently being undertaken.
- The views of the Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee be conveyed to the Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood & Queen's Park Committee.

Main Report

Background

1. As part of the Ponds Project the Model Boating Pond has changed shape and been re-landscaped to look more natural than it previously did. The pond is shorter in length due to the construction of a new larger dam, and the western edge has been dug out so that the overall size of the pond is approximately the same area as it was previously. In the early designs a peninsula at the western edge of the pond was proposed which would save a group of mature trees. This design evolved into an island, about 1,600 square metres in size, to save the trees and provide an interesting landscape feature. After further debate and discussion with staff and stakeholders, concerns were raised about safety and anti-social behaviour that could occur if people tried to swim to the island, so a causeway was included in the design. It was on this design that planning

permission was granted and the island and causeway were constructed and finished in autumn 2016.

2. In addition to the creation of the island, aquatic marginal planting was also added around the new ponds edges. This provides habitat and feeding for wildlife, improves water quality and softens the pond edges to give it a more natural feel. The pond has historically been used by both anglers and model boaters and gaps have been left in the planting to allow access to the water for both of these activities. One fishing peg has been created on the island; it is intended to limit the number of rods on the island and fishing bivvies will not be permitted. A report which went to the Consultative Committee and the Management Committee in March of 2016 detailed the different edge treatments, which were designed to make the pond less accessible to dogs.

3. A petition has been started by a member of the public, which to date has received over 5,000 signatures, which is campaigning for the island to be a wildlife refuge and particularly a place for the swans to escape dogs and people. Swans have never previously nested on the Boating Pond, although with the improvements to the habitat the pond may be more attractive to them in the future. A pair of swans with cygnets moved to the Boating Pond in late 2016, but there are currently no swans using the Model Boating Pond as they have returned to Highgate No. 1 where they have nested since 2010. Since the work was completed the number of waterfowl using the pond has returned to what it was before the Ponds Project began. Shovelers, very rarely seen before on this pond, have also been seen feeding here on several occasions.

Current Position

4. The island is currently closed to allow the grass and wildflowers that were sown in autumn 2016 to establish. This could potentially take one whole growing season – until late summer 2017 - and there is also the possibility that some of the seed may fail and areas may have to be reseeded. The Heath's Ecologists will continue to monitor the growth, checking that there is a closed sward of grass and wild flowers before allowing access.

5. The aquatic vegetation is protected by fencing both on the land and water-sides. In December 2016, two gaps in the waterside fencing were made on the north-east side of the island, allowing birds to access the island, although rather few birds have so far taken this opportunity. These gaps will provide nesting opportunities to birds later in the year. Further aquatic planting is planned around the causeway area, where there are currently bare banks straight into the water. This will take place in spring 2017. It is important to note the Model Boating Pond is next to Bird Sanctuary, which is a 3 hectare area, including a pond, permanently fenced off as a refuge for wildlife which is rich in habitat including, for breeding birds.

Future Management

6. A number of options for the future management of the island have been considered by the Heath's Ecologist's. In all cases fencing would remain

around most of aquatic planting to protect it from grazing by waterfowl, but further gaps would be cut to allow limited access, although the number of these additional gaps would have to be reviewed if grazing of the aquatic plants by the waterfowl proved excessive. The island is currently being monitored for use by wildfowl. Number of birds, species and how they are using the island is being recorded twice a week. This will continue not only just during the recovery period, when there is no public access, but also thereafter. The number of incidents recorded by Constabulary and Ranger Team will also be monitored.

Options

7. Proposed options for managing the island after the end of the recovery period are as follows:

Option 1 - Once the recovery period is complete, the whole island would be open for public access at all times.

- No non-ecological management implications
- Accessible for anglers and model boaters at all times
- Access for dogs under proper control and effectively restrained from disturbing wildlife
- Recently opened gaps in the aquatic plant fencing would need to be closed to prevent access to the water by people and dogs

Option 2 - The island would remain completely closed to the public, and would become a refuge for wildlife. The causeway would be secured with a locked wooden gate and some additional planting to encourage wildlife could be introduced.

- Heath staff would be required to monitor access to the island to ensure the public do not climb the fence and gate or that dogs swim across
- Not accessible for anglers or model boaters
- Ecological benefits in allowing an undisturbed area for wildlife. The island would be available for a refuge by birds such as swans, geese, ducks, coots and moorhens. If additional features were added to the island, such as thick shrubs, bird and bat boxes and amphibian and reptile refuges, it could also be of value to additional wildlife.
- The vegetation on the island might be heavily grazed by the wildfowl, especially by geese, reducing the attractiveness of the island's top and sides. Also, the number of Canada geese on the pond might increase, causing problems on adjacent grassy areas with grazing and defecation.

Option 3a - Once the recovery period is complete, the island would be open to the public but about a third of it, or about 500m^2 would remain fenced off as a wildlife refuge.

- Heath staff would need to monitor access to ensure people and dogs kept out of the refuge area
- Partially accessible for anglers and model boaters

- Ecological benefits from keeping a section of the island as an undisturbed area for wildlife. The area reserved for wildlife would be sufficient as a refuge for waterfowl including swans; the latter are able to nest relatively close to publicly accessible areas, as they do at Hampstead No. 1 pond. Additional features for wildlife could be installed, as Option 2
- The reserved area might be heavily grazed by wildlife, making it unattractive. Also, the number of Canada geese on the pond might increase, causing problems on adjacent grassy areas with grazing and defecation.
- The fence across the island would be visually intrusive
- Dogs might disturb wildlife close to the fence

Option 3b - Once the recovery period is complete, the island would be open to the public but an area of about 500m^2 would remain fenced off as a wildlife refuge, as for Option 3a. Dogs would not permitted onto any part of the island at any time and a gate with clear signage would be installed.

- Heath staff would need to monitor access to ensure dogs are kept off the island
- Accessible for anglers and model boaters but not dogs
- A gate would be required at the causeway to prevent dog access
- Ecological benefits from keeping a section of the island as an undisturbed area for wildlife as for option 3a, with the additional benefit that wildlife would not be disturbed by dogs nearby or that inadvertently got into the refuge
- The reserved area might be heavily grazed by wildlife, making it unattractive. Also, the number of Canada geese on the pond might increase, causing problems on adjacent grassy areas with grazing and defecation
- The fence across the island would be visually intrusive
- Anglers find the presence of dogs disruptive so this would be an advantage to them

Option 4 – The island would be closed to the public from March to September. A locked wooden gate with clear signage would be installed.

- Heath staff would need to monitor access to ensure the public do not access the island during the closed season
- No access for the public, anglers or model boaters during March to September
- Ecological benefits from the island being a wildlife refuge for seven months of the year, comprising the bird nesting season plus an additional month for any, especially swans, which had nested late
- Birds resting up and grazing in the winter would still be disturbed
- There would probably be public disturbance to other wildlife features which might be being used as a refuge in winter, e.g. log piles-ending up in water
- Recently opened gaps in the fencing would need to be closed from October to February to prevent access to the water by people and dogs

Proposals

8. **Option 1** would not enhance opportunities for wildlife, while **Option 2** would allow no public access. **Option 4** does not allow public access in the summer, which is the most attractive part of the year and when the Heath is most heavily used. **Options 3a** and **3b** cater both for public access and for wildlife. Public access would be year-round, allowing people to enjoy views from it over the pond and the value of the island for wildlife would suffer little from being restricted to a third of the area. Swans would be able to build a nest in the unfenced gaps in the aquatic vegetation and would be able to access the refuge area for safety.

9. At this point, **Option 3b** is considered preferable to **3a** in that dogs would be more securely prevented from gaining access to the reserved area. Almost all the Heath is open to dogs, and the proposed restriction is considered reasonable in consideration of its benefits. However, a final decision should be subject to a review of the restoration and the monitoring data.

10. We have also gathered the views of the Community Working Group, who were set up to monitor the Ponds Project during the construction phase. Five members agreed that Option **3b** was the preferred option, however the Heath & Hampstead Society, who are represented on the Community Working group, preferred Option **2** as they felt **3b** was a compromise.

Conclusion

11. The final decision chosen for management of the Model Boating Pond island will take account of the views of the Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee as well as assessing the results of the bird monitoring exercise.

12. The favoured management option for the island at this point is that one third of the island should be fenced year-round for wildlife and that the rest is open to the public but not to dogs. This dual use will provide a refuge for birds without denying access to much of the island for the public, anglers and model boaters.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Map of proposed wildlife refuge on island

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