



## **Epping Forest Heritage Trust's community engagement and conservation activities - July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

**Peter Lewis. Chief Executive, Epping Forest Heritage Trust (EFHT)**

### **1. Executive summary**

The City of London Corporation has 4 new environmental strategies which include objectives to increase outreach and engagement to more diverse audiences, and to engage local communities more in conservation activities.

This paper updates the Committee on EFHT's work in these policy areas, reaching out to more diverse communities around the Forest, engaging them in the heritage, culture and ecology of the Forest, and involving them in hands-on conservation activities to increase biodiversity in the Forest.

### **2. Background**

The City of London's Access & Recreation strategy Theme 3. Equal Access, objective 2 states it will "Work with partners to develop outreach to ensure wider audiences are aware of and able to access sites". The *City's Community Engagement Strategy* Theme 2 on removing barriers states "ensure diverse and representative participation in our work and spaces".

EFHT's strategy has a core value of being inclusive, and is underpinned by a Theory of Change that says that unless people come to know the Forest, they will not come to love or care for it, or want to protect it for generations to come. Polling undertaken in partnership with Waltham Forest Council in 2023 showed that 30% of Black & 48% Asian residents had never visited the Forest compared to 17% of white residents, reflecting the visible reality that people from more diverse communities visit the Forest less than white people.

This has led to EFHT investing its own reserves, and securing support from the City Bridge Foundation, City Central Grants Team, Awards for All, Save Our Wild Isles Community Fund, and the general public through crowdfunding appeals, to increase its community engagement activities and grow its efforts to diversify its conservation volunteers.

### **3. Community engagement: approach, data, feedback, learnings**

#### **a. Approach**

EFHT first researched and contacted 100 local community organisations, and made contact with the voluntary sector lead bodies in each of the 4 adjacent local authorities. From those initial contacts we

have engagement with 36 organisations and have an ongoing relationship with 16 of them.

With each organisation we have co-created an activity to meet the needs of their community, whether in relation to location, walk length, additional activities, access to toilets, the need for prayer breaks or being led by people from their community. This provides better experiences for communities and people who have previously been nervous of coming to the Forest, and in these small ways the Forest becomes more accessible, and in turn many of the attendees feel more confident to come again.

b. Data

Working on this basis over the last year EFHT has led 2 large walks with Muslim Hikers (each of 200 people, and with the support of the City of London Keepers for road crossings and with welcomes from Ben and Caroline), 4 family walks with Black Girls Hike and 12 other walks and activities with a range of different community organisations. These walks have so far involved over 700 local people from diverse communities, most of whom had never visited the Forest before.

The organisations we have worked with are: Muslim Hikers, Black Girls Hike, Sustainably Muslim, Wanderlust Women, Muslim Women Connect, Wanderers of Colour, Epping Forest Pride, VaChina, the Moja Collective, Redbridge Rainbow Group, Home Girls Unite, Fences & Frontiers and Behnu-Ki-Millan from the Trinity Project.



Walk in the Forest with intergenerational group, Muslim Women Connect.

c. Feedback

We have been really delighted with the feedback from the events which tends to focus on people feeling safe, not worrying about getting lost, and learning about the heritage and ecology of the Forest.

*Nawaal: "The walk was amazing as I got to meet other likeminded people and gain more insight into nature. I would recommend anyone to come even if you're nervous as everyone is so kind and welcoming."*

*Nazia, Sustainably Muslim: "Immersed in the beauty of Epping Forest, it was great to learn about its trees and wildlife while connected with likeminded souls! Thank you so much to the team at Epping Forest Heritage Trust for the guided walk!"*

*"I had the most incredible, wholesome time. I met inspiring women and really enjoyed the guided meditation and learning about the forest. It's the first time I've been to Epping and I'm excited to come back again." Anon, walk participant*

*"I enjoyed the opportunity to hear about the history and current efforts to manage the Forest"  
Participant in our walk with Muslim Hikers.*

*"There is a need to remove barriers to access for many diverse communities to Epping Forest; to share stories and build community knowledge and leadership about its heritage." Haroon Mota, Founder and Director, Muslim Hikers.*



The Muslim Hikers group in front of the Hunting Lodge.

#### d) Learnings

- Each community of people is different, and it is really important to listen to each community organisation, and co-create an event that meets their needs. This can be time-consuming, but it pays dividends in the end.

For example, Muslim Hikers wanted a long walk, but not a linear one, so we designed a 14 mile hike in the north of the Forest; Black Girls Hike wanted to pilot family walks, so we partnered with the Hive to

ensure the children and women had a great experience, Behnu-Ki-Millan, an older Asian women group from the Trinity project in Newham wanted do a short walk and an activity, so we enabled them to do traditional block printing in the Visitor Centre at High Beach.

- The majority of people on these bespoke community walks, although very local to the Forest, have never visited the Forest. A pretty typical testimonial is:  
*"Loved the hike, I live 10 minutes from Epping Forest & haven't ventured out on any of their trails so it was lovely to do it with Muslim Hikers & my friends :) I have now joined the Epping Forest mailing list so look forward to joining them on their monthly walks & also venturing out alone :)"*
- Barriers for individuals visiting the Forest include fears around safety and getting lost, having the right type of gear (footwear or waterproofs) , as well as a feeling that "the space is not for them".
- We are gaining credibility with local community organisations. Since the walks with Muslim Hikers and Black Girls Hike local community organisations are now approaching us to work with them, which is a lovely virtuous circle. We are also getting a lot more approaches from local schools and youth groups.
- Some smaller community organisations would like to work with us but do not have the capacity to do so - whether to engage their community in a potential event, or have support workers, for example, to come on an event.
- Our main free monthly walk programme, and the annual Big Walk, is attracting a more diverse set of participants.

#### **4. Conservation. Approach, data, feedback, learnings.**

##### a) Approach

All of EFHT's volunteer conservation sessions are as directed by the City's Epping Forest Conservation team, and deliver outputs/outcomes against the City's Countryside Stewardship Funding.

EFHT has been running its regular Thursday Green Team and its Friday Happy Lopper team of people with learning difficulties for many years. The Green team is a group of regular volunteers, who participate each week and who are mostly, but not exclusively, white men, many of whom are retired. The Happy Loppers are also mostly men. Together last year they contributed over 2,600 hours of volunteer conservation activity to the Forest.

Nick, the Conservation Officer who runs the Green Team and Happy Loppers also manages our corporate conservation sessions, including ones recently for Alpha Financial Software and Apple.

As part of our work to be more inclusive, and to engage a wider diversity of people in the Forest, we secured funding from City Bridge Foundation for an initial 2-year project to engage a broader diversity of



people in our conservation work. The funding pays for a Community Engagement Officer, Robyn, 2 days per week. Since September she has managed a combination of public sessions booked through Eventbrite, some for women\* only (for women, non-binary and trans people), and bespoke sessions for community organisations.

For the public sessions we have varied timetabling, with some sessions at the weekend and some during the week.

#### b) Data

Since September last year this project has engaged 122 new people in new conservation activities through publicly advertised sessions: 60% under 45; 75% women\*; 36% Asian. These new volunteers contributed 437 hours of activity over 23 sessions improving Forest biodiversity, removing invasive holly, birch, sycamore and hawthorn from sensitive wood pasture.

It also engaged 5 community groups involving over 100 people in bespoke walk/conservation sessions. The groups we have worked with are Trans Femme Social, Hiking in Skirts, Redbridge Rainbows, the Tower Project and Muslim Women Connect. Bespoke sessions are also planned for Muslim Hikers, Black Girls Hike and Wanderlust Women.



**Become a Conservation Volunteer in Epping Forest**

Join our Conservation Officer for a day carrying out hands-on work to improve biodiversity of the Forest

- No previous experience required
- Tools and trainings will be provided
- Available on weekdays and weekends
- Women\* sessions available
- Bespoke\*\* sessions available
- Over 18 only

Tasks may involve:

- Clearing bracken and other invasive shrubs on Forest heathland
- Clearing dense ivy growth to allow light to reach the Forest floor, helping to re-establish plant and animal life
- Removing small Hawthorn, Silver Birch and other young trees to open up the grassland more

\*For women, non-binary and trans people  
\*\* Please enquire: [admin@efht.org.uk](mailto:admin@efht.org.uk)

For details and booking info, visit: [tinyurl.com/EPHTConservation](http://tinyurl.com/EPHTConservation)

Epping Forest Heritage Trust  
@EppingForestHT  
[www.efht.org.uk](http://www.efht.org.uk)

#### c) Feedback

The feedback from these sessions has also been phenomenally positive, with a Net Promoter Score of plus 90. For example:

“This was the most fulfilling day I have had for a very long time. Helping with conservation at Epping Forest, nothing better!”

“It was so rewarding spending a day helping to maintain a small area of Epping Forest. I met some lovely people, enjoyed a good physical workout and learned loads about how the local biodiversity is managed and nurtured.”

"It was fantastic to learn more about why conservation is important and gain new skills working with the hand saw to coppice silver birch"

"It was great to do some hands-on conservation work with other like-minded women".



*Trans Femme/Hiking in Skirts Bespoke Conservation Day*

#### d) Learnings

We have learnt that:

- there is demand for more ad hoc, easy-to-book, conservation sessions, where people come just as a one off, or more irregularly
- some people prefer the ability to volunteer at the weekend
- many local community organisations say that capacity is a real barrier for them partnering with us
- it is a big step for people to go from no involvement in Epping Forest to doing hands-on conservation sessions. Some people/organisations need a more gradual introduction such as a guided walk to get comfortable in the space before doing a conservation session
- a significant number of one-off participants use the allowed "volunteering day" from their employer to come and do a conservation session.

## **5. Next steps**

We are seeking funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a 3-year programme, "Epping Forest Heritage for All", to build on our community engagement work so far. We are grateful to the City for their formal written support for this application, and the offer of in-kind support for its delivery.

This autumn, in partnership with the Essex Cultural Diversity Fund and the City, we will be launching a new podcast series by artist Talia Randall about different communities, and their relationship with the Forest.

We are hoping to extend our City Bridge Foundation funded conservation programme for a further 3 years, based on our learnings so far.