

Dear Trustee,

**Formal request for support of our EBC-funded projects and to pursue our WAHGA biodiversity and sustainability initiative**

In December 2019, WAHGA was awarded a maximum grant of £5,000, with the potential for additional funding, by Elmbridge Borough Council, after the council had assessed our biodiversity and sustainability proposals for the Churchfields Allotment site.

There are three driving forces behind the initiative that has been under active preparation over the past two-and-a-half years.

1. By creating environments that will foster greater biodiversity, plot-holders will benefit directly through improved soils, increased yields and reduced pests. A healthy ecosystem with the right balance of insects is the key to this.
2. Our two principal biodiversity and sustainability areas – the coppice and the pond-plot<sup>1</sup> - will be at the centre of a WAHGA programme of educational and therapeutic benefits for communities beyond existing plot-holders:
  - Elderly people from the local day centre and individuals with other challenges, such as those with learning difficulties from The Clubhouse Project and other programmes, will benefit from the tranquillity, peace and wildlife that will be abundant in the coppice area<sup>2</sup>;
  - Local schoolchildren will be able to access under supervision the pond area, which will act as a living laboratory to help them with their biology and ecology studies<sup>3</sup>.
3. As guardians of the Churchfields Allotments site, both WLC and WAHGA are required by law to protect and enhance Habitats of Principal Importance and Species of Principal Importance that are already in existence or present on our land.

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<sup>1</sup> The answer to the questions, 'Why a pond plot?' and 'Why a coppice area?' are addressed in the appendix attached to this covering letter.

<sup>2</sup> We held discussions with the local Day Centre prior to the pandemic and have a strong relationship with The Clubhouse Project

<sup>3</sup> During lockdown, we have approached local schools and they have expressed interest in getting involved with our project

Whilst the third imperative is a legal requirement upon both WLC and WAHGA, the first driver supports WLC's object of providing allotments. The more productive the allotments, the more attractive Churchfields will be. We believe that the second contributes to WLC's object of supporting those in distress and need in Weybridge.

Schoolchildren, the elderly and those with learning difficulties have all suffered throughout the COVID-19 period and giving them the opportunity to experience biodiversity in a natural site can offer them mental as well as educational benefits.

### **Biodiversity and sustainability**

Biodiversity refers to the number and abundance of species present within a given habitat or ecosystem and is made up of three interlinked factors: habitat diversity, species diversity and genetic diversity.

Bees and other pollinators are essential to allotment gardeners. They are required to grow nearly all fruit and vegetables. Other ground insects (invertebrates) break down and improve the soil condition for growing. Small mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles help keep pests down, ensuring a balanced environment for allotment gardening.

Allotments are the second most biodiverse habitat in the UK (our back gardens are first). Big agriculture's arable methods (pesticides, large fields, monoculture) have caused a significant decline in countryside habitat diversity. Allotments are particularly good because we have created in them more habitats than are naturally found in the wild. We have done this by introducing vegetables, fruit bushes, native and non-native flowers, hedges, trees, grass, ponds, ditches, hazel coppice, rockery, dead logs, bird boxes, compost bins and more. This means more diversity of species across our site.

Allotments provide more food (nectar) to pollinators than any other type of urban space apart from back gardens, beating nature reserves, parks, verges and cemeteries. This is also true for the diversity of food. Just one flowering currant bush provides 3-5g of sugar a day - equivalent to that provided by over 450 sqm of park/900 sqm amenity grassland.

Sustainability means meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In environmental terms, a good definition is avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance. Sustainability is the cornerstone of the ambitions of the Paris Climate Change Agreement and an integral part of the important UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) to be hosted by the UK in Glasgow later this year.

### **The background to the WAHGA initiative**

In July 2019, Elmbridge Borough Council declared a 'climate emergency', pledged to become carbon neutral by 2030, and stated that they would improve local green spaces. Part of this commitment involved a new community planting fund that was open to allotment associations.

A WLC sub-committee supported the reservation of two full plots for biodiversity and sustainability and subsequently approved a coppice and a pond project specifically. Two WLC trustees<sup>4</sup> actively contributed to the framing of our funding bid which was submitted to EBC in October 2019.

WAHGA's projects were assessed by EBC on the following criteria:

- Contribution to creating a more attractive, greener borough;
- Community involvement, volunteer-recruitment and retention;
- Long-lasting, sustainable improvement;
- Biodiversity.

The bid scored highly for all criteria and the maximum £5,000 of funding was awarded in December 2019. The announcement was extremely well received by plot-holders. EBC deemed the project would help towards improving the allotment site and the wider Churchfields area and creating better growing conditions for plot-holders.

In a survey of WAHGA plot-holders in 2019, outlining a range of 26 potential improvements onsite, optimising natural pollinators and bug controls was the No 1 priority. The WAHGA policy will deliver that priority. Allocating space for a pond was among the other most popular proposals.

### **The scale of the project**

The coppice and pond projects will occupy just two plots – considerably less than 1% of the entire Churchfields site. The benefits in terms of improved cultivation make the reservation of that space extremely good value for all plot-holders.

The location of the pond plot is close to the site of a former pond that was a feature of old Weybridge. As this area has historically provided habitat for native amphibians and reptiles, it is likely to be an ideal location.

### **The policy context**

As well as receiving the full endorsement of Elmbridge Borough Council, as evidenced by the funding, we believe that the WAHGA initiative chimes perfectly with the thrust of Surrey County Council's environmental policies, notably:

- Strategic Priority 1, the promotion of sustainable localised food systems within Surrey; and
- Strategic Priority 2, to increase the potential of Surrey's land, biodiversity, current and future woodland, to sequester and capture carbon, and help to reduce the impacts of climate change.

In 2018 HM Government published: *A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment*. It states: "By using our land more sustainably and creating new

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<sup>4</sup> Supporters of this initiative identified in appendix

habitats for wildlife, including by planting more trees, we can arrest the decline in native species and improve our biodiversity.”

Surrey County Council have already committed to plant 1.2 million new trees over the next 10 years but, in a constrained urban environment, this does not need to be dense woodland. New native hedgerow also contributes to SCC’s new tree commitment. WAHGA’s wildlife team has already planted over 1,000 new hedge plants along the boundary areas.

Elmbridge Borough Council’s new local plan has already committed to:

- Conserve Elmbridge’s biodiversity and protect and enhance recognized priority habitats (HPI) and species (SPI), such as those that exist on Churchfields Allotments;
- Develop wildlife corridors (including hedgerow) to provide ecological 'stepping stones', provide essential links between habitats, and form a coherent local and regional biodiversity network, whilst improving species-resilience to climate change;
- Promote the growth and procurement of sustainable timber products.

The Weybridge proposed Local Green Space Assessment suggests “Churchfields allotments are well screened by vegetation so form an attractive green area, which is part of the wider landscape of the settlement and gives a strong sense of place. The allotments contain notable wildlife habitats, mature trees and hedgerow”.

Locally, other sites are focusing on enhancing wildlife and biodiversity. At the popular Rydens Road site in Walton-on-Thames, they have created a large flower meadow, new hedgerows, managed the existing boundary for wildlife, added bird lofts, 13 new bee-hives and have been visited by a BBC presenter for a programme about promoting local biodiversity.

Richmond-Upon-Thames Council has already drawn up full guidelines for enhancing biodiversity on all their allotment sites.

### **Our requirements**

This is not a request for funding but, rather, a request for your support of our projects, so we can utilise the generous funding that we have been awarded by EBC and pursue our biodiversity and sustainability initiatives. In their criteria assessment EBC identified the specific benefits to the environment, to plot-holders and to the local community that our initiative will bring. The Association will pay rents on all space devoted to biodiversity projects, equivalent to their value as traditional allotment space. We believe that these limited spaces will bring plot-holders and the wider community benefits that far outweigh these rents.

In addition to the £5,000 funding from EBC in support of the project the Woodland Trust have supplied a significant number of native hedge plants. These have all been planted by allotment volunteers. We also anticipate that there will be further funding opportunities from EBC, however the success of the project is not dependent on future funding.

We believe we have the appropriate expertise within WAHGA to carry out our initiatives. Our Biodiversity and Sustainability Officer, James Higgins, is a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London, has produced BBC wildlife programmes and has worked extensively across all five terrestrial TV channels with presenters, conservation groups and wildlife charities.

**Our request**

We are asking the trustees of WLC to agree to our pursuing the initiatives outlined in this paper.

We attach an appendix that includes more details of the projects for which we have gained funding, some background to their gestation, evidence of historic support, including from WLC trustees, and a species list.

Kind regards,

Phil Murphy – Acting Chair WAHGA on behalf of the WAHGA Committee