

22 September 2015

Mayor Boris Johnson and the Board Members
The London Health Board
Mayor's Office
The Queen's Walk
London, SE1 2AA

RE: AOB Item Request for Next London Health Board Meeting

Dear Mayor Johnson and fellow Board Members,

I have recently become aware of the work of the London Health Board and note with interest one of the five priority focus areas is to improve mental health and well-being in London. I also note Mayor Johnson's statement from October 2014 where he highlighted "***Mental ill health is an issue that affects millions of Londoners***".

I am writing with a request for consideration as an AOB meeting to your next meeting on 30 September 2015 the content of my letter below. I write on behalf of 3,000 Borough of Bexley residents who have signed an e-petition, 2,500 who have signed a paper petition, and 900 who are members of a local Bexley support group.

As you will be aware given the remit of the board and the professional status of the Board Members, access to green space within towns and cities has proven benefits for mental wellbeing. There have been numerous studies on the subject; too many to disprove the findings. One such recent study conducted by the University of Exeter Medical School in 2014 concluded that "Individuals who move to greener areas have significant and long-lasting improvements in mental health". Further studies have found that the proportion of green and open space is linked to self-reported levels of health and mental health (Barton and Pretty 2010) for all ages and socio-economic groups (Maas et al 2006), through improving companionship, sense of identity and belonging (Pinder et al 2009) and happiness (White 2013).

Looking at wider health issues, a study in the Netherlands showed that every 10 per cent increase in exposure to green space translated into a reduction of five years in age in terms of expected health problems (Groenewegen et al 2003) with similar benefits found by studies in Canada (Villeneuve et al 2012) and Japan (Takano et al 2002).

Perhaps the most surprising study was Ulrich (1999) which drew the conclusion that clinical evidence suggests that exposure to an outdoor green environment reduces stress faster than anything else. Key though was that simply **viewing** nature can produce significant recovery or restoration from stress within three to five minutes.

These are examples but there are many, many more studies that all reach the same conclusions; access to green space reduces anxiety and stress, reduces the symptoms of depression (including chronic depression), increases mental wellbeing, improves physical health, and so provides far-reaching, long-lasting mental, physical and spiritual benefits.

As you are more than aware, within London the cost to the NHS to support individuals with suffering with mental health or stress-related ailments alone places significant stress on budgets and resources. If we factor in the cost to the London economy due to sick days from work then the true cost of not providing mental health support is almost immeasurable.

I hope that this makes it obvious to you the importance of maintaining and developing the green spaces for our urban communities given it can have economic benefits to the economy and significantly reduce NHS pressures for relatively low land maintenance costs.

Which brings me to the issue at hand and the point I wish to raise on behalf of the local community; one of your members, Councillor Teresa O'Neill, leads the London Borough of Bexley, which already has the fourth lowest amount of green space in the nineteen outer London boroughs.

Bexley have just completed the public consultation on the sale for redevelopment of 26 open spaces of which the largest is Old Farm Park in Sidcup. I enclose pictures to the end of this letter. The proposal will see the sale of just over half of the park (6 acres) of prime green space. This is land that sustains considerable local wildlife, is currently under a SINC (Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation) inclusion request (which Bexley council have ignored for 18 months), and is frequented continuously throughout the day, every day by local residents; many of whom are elderly and alone and use the park for social bonding and health benefits. Although the park is known for dog walkers, there are those that just walk in the park, families who bring their children for unstructured recreation, and teens who play football and cricket. I could provide significant amounts of anecdotal evidence from local residents on how, over the years, the park has helped them and how central it is to their lives.

Cllr O'Neill will tell you there is no other choice; reduction in central funding and having done everything else possible leaves no other options. However, this is not the case. Even Bexley's Conservative MP, James Brokenshire has publically written to the council to object to the proposal, citing that the foundations upon which the council is making its financial decision is flawed.

We have been told that half a park will remain and that it will be 'enhanced' (which means adding a children's play area – something local residents do not want as the natural beauty will be lost). However, what will remain is a postage stamp compared to the beauty and benefits that exist today. Many residents will tell you that having the choice to speak to others whilst walking is a blessing; particularly if one is anxious or stressed sometimes one just wants to breathe not socialise. In the remaining space should the sale proceed, this benefit alone is lost. There are many other benefits too that will be lost.

Most serious, though, is that the long term impact will not be felt immediately; the true cost to the local community will be felt when the park is gone; grief, anger, increases in anxiety and stress, increases in mental health issues, even less access to doctors (it already takes around four weeks to get an appointment at our local surgery – imagine with 100+ additional homes what this will do to waiting times).

We have attempted to contact Mayor Johnson, but to no avail. Thus, the request from the local community in Sidcup who are opposed to the proposal for sale and redevelopment of Old Farm Park is that the **London Health Board review this letter at the next meeting** and form an opinion and

response accordingly; one that we hope Cllr O'Neill will take note of from her peers and that will force a fundamental policy re-think in Bexley.

If deputation is permitted, I would be happy to speak to the Board on behalf of the local community.

Thank you for your time, and thank you in advance for reading and reviewing this letter

On behalf of Sidcup residents opposed to the sale of Old Farm Park



Pictures of the proposed land Bexley council wish to sell and redevelop into homes