

# **A Tree Strategy for Highbury Fields**



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A discussion paper prepared by Highbury Community Association

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# A Tree Strategy for Highbury Fields

*A Vision for Highbury Fields*, published by Islington Council in 2007, (the Vision), called for a dedicated tree strategy for Highbury Fields. This document contains a range of proposals and objectives for a tree strategy set out by the Highbury Community Association in concert with the Vision's position of endorsing "the principle of increased community engagement in the management of the Fields" and its encouragement of "pre-emptive dialogue on issues related to planning matters, management and maintenance with the aim of safeguarding the character of the Fields".

All quotations in this document are taken from the Vision unless otherwise identified.

## Purpose

### **The development of a local tree strategy for Highbury Fields.**

This tree strategy for Highbury Fields relates to the emerging Borough tree policy, *A Policy for Trees in Islington*, 2010, in order to set the parameters for the management of the trees on the Fields and it aims to give as much detail as is necessary for decisions to be taken by the Highbury Fields Management Group and Islington's Tree Service in accordance with the design of the park as a whole, (see the general map on page 14).

This local tree strategy covers caring for existing trees, new planting of trees and felling and removal of trees, all seen against the arboricultural, landscape, visual, historic and social values with which the park is imbued.

## History of Highbury Fields

### **Local authorities and Highbury Fields.**

An Act of Parliament in 1885 permitted land used largely as pasture and known as Highbury Fields to become parkland for the "perpetual use by the public for exercise and recreation". Highbury Fields was laid out as parkland in 1886 following the purchase of the land under the Act. The park was designed and managed by the Metropolitan Board

of Works and subsequently by the London County Council from 1889, by the Greater London Council from 1965 – becoming part of Islington’s Conservation Area No.5 in 1969 – and by the London Borough of Islington from 1986 to the present day.

Islington Council has recognised in the Vision that: “The Fields are a significant heritage asset both to the local community and the Borough as a whole characterised by open grassland, mature plane trees and Georgian terrace architecture. The Vision document shows options that retain and enhance this special character, a priority voiced by most people during the consultation.”

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### **Arboricultural design and Highbury Fields.**

The original layout of trees in the park followed a standard pattern used across London by the Metropolitan Board of Works: a perimeter avenue of trees flanking a pathway, with a series of interlocking pathways from side to side, each lined with a similar avenue of trees. At Highbury Fields, these avenues incorporated a considerable number of existing trees – such as the row of lime trees along Highbury Place, trees near Christ Church and other trees around Highbury Crescent – in a pattern that can be fairly reliably understood from the Ordnance Surveys of 1869-71 and 1894 and from many postcards printed around the turn of the century.

The main tree planting took place immediately following the establishment of the park; it was of avenues of regularly alternating elm trees and London plane trees. From the Ordnance Survey of 1894, one can see there was also some planting of small groups of trees but most of these have been lost over time. However, the 1914 Ordnance Survey shows the circle of plane trees around a bandstand at the centre of what is now Queen’s Walk, planting that must have been achieved by c.1900, given the present size of the trees and evidence from contemporary postcards. This completed the layout of the park’s trees as its main arboricultural design statement. The Boer War Memorial statue dates from 1905 and a contemporary postcard shows it set amongst established trees.

### **How the arboricultural design has changed over time.**

After the passage of 125 years, the key element of the arboricultural design of the park – its interlocking avenues of maturing plane trees – has very obviously succeeded despite a number of changes, some natural, some executed by the local authorities.

Of particular note, one major change occurred: in 1966, the GLC sought to fell the elm trees to permit the London plane trees to grow to their full size rather than become compressed by their proximity to the elms – a form of stand thinning. This plan was resisted by Islington Council and the GLC did not implement it. Within about ten years, however, Dutch elm disease caused all but a very small number of the elm trees to be cut down, despite measures being taken to try saving them by injecting against the disease. The last of the elms, one that grew near the entrance to the swimming pool, was felled in 2009.

Unfortunately, the GLC's original reason for having proposed the removal of the elm trees appears to have been forgotten and many of the gaps left by the elms' removal were filled with new trees but with insufficient thought to their effect once they grew up. Additionally, it seems that fears of a similar event causing the destruction of the plane trees inspired the equally inappropriate planting of lines of oak trees set amongst the planes along Queen's Walk.

What to do about former inappropriate planting is one of the current issues in the management of the trees in the near and mid-terms; whether or not to begin the selective removal of these 35-year-old trees, since they are beginning to compromise the continued expansion of the original plane trees. The planes can be expected to grow very considerably over the next hundred years. The younger, infill trees are also beginning to cause a disruptive overall effect on the appearance of the original arboricultural design.

### **A Vision for Highbury Fields**

A substantial review of Highbury Fields resulted in Islington Council publishing the Vision in 2007. The proposals in the Vision are supported by extensive public consultation. The Vision covers all aspects of the park including a section devoted to a tree strategy.

*To “rationalise tree planting to favour trees in character with the Fields, rather than memorial and ornamental trees”.*

The Vision has been the guide, within Islington's borough-wide tree policy, in formulating this proposed tree strategy which aims to secure, amongst other things, one of the Vision's overall concerns: to “rationalise tree planting to favour trees in character with the Fields, rather than memorial and ornamental trees”.

The Vision described the need for several courses of action:

“It is recognised and acknowledged that the interlocking network of avenues and groups in its entirety forms a significant heritage asset and the character of the Fields depends on them.

It was broadly agreed that a tree management and planting strategy should be commissioned to define a co-ordinated approach to pruning, planting and felling. This strategy should also be co-ordinated with the Council’s tree policy and other detailed surveys and design.

The long term strategy should seek to manage the existing London plane trees that make up the Avenues such as to ensure their long term survival. A maintenance strategy of selective felling and replanting of healthy existing London plane trees should not be adopted.

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The long term strategy should consider the feasibility and practicalities of:

- Replanting the outer avenue on Highbury Place, replacing the limes and planting into an enhanced below ground planting trench an avenue of evenly spaced (20m) non drip limes.
- Define areas for the infill planting of plane trees on Highbury Crescent and Highbury Terrace.
- A replanting strategy.
- Selective felling of trees in the Orchard to allow the possibility of creating a garden and to allow remaining trees to fulfil their full potential.
- Crown lifting of trees adjacent to the war memorial to allow a clearer view under the canopies when walking south on the broad walk.
- Keep under review the ongoing issue of plane trees and proximity to the back of Baalbec Road properties.
- Infill with plane trees if the ranger’s office is demolished.

- Plant a new line of plane trees on the north edge of the mound, alongside Highbury Pool.
- Review the policy of memorial trees, which was raised through consultations and generally thought not to be appropriate for the Fields.
- Contact the Nature Conservation Team for advice on shrub removal and tree pruning.
- The impact of a limited range of species on Highbury Fields.
- that plane trees, especially in avenues, form a fundamental part of the character of Highbury Fields and therefore should be protected."

### **Objectives of the proposed Highbury Fields tree strategy**

Highbury Fields is an historic park which requires careful thought to identify those parts that have not been maintained adequately in the past and to restore important elements, including its trees and grassland, that have become degraded.

The Vision began to define for the Conservation Area a restoration project which will evolve over time; the first objective flows from the Vision's recognition that Highbury Fields has its own, special character and its "analysis demonstrates how some sections of the Fields could be returned to their original spirit and form of the Victorian times".

#### **Objective 1: Landscape restoration at Highbury Fields**

A landscape restoration action plan will be undertaken in support of the Highbury Fields Conservation Area; the plan will:

- Acknowledge the skill and intentions of the Victorian landscape designers.
- Recognise that management of the Fields involves moving, removing or replanting trees and plants to retrieve some attractive effects.
- Improve the look of the Fields, removing unsightly features that have developed over time.

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*Acknowledge the skill and intentions of the Victorian landscape designers.*

## **Objective 2: Restore avenues of trees and the arboricultural design concept**

The second objective is based upon the Vision's recognition of the visual, historical and cultural importance of the main avenues of trees. Tree management work in the interests of amenity, recreational opportunity and wildlife will continue and will be improved. It is planned to:

- Continue management in support of mature parkland trees.

- Remove some municipal tree planting from recent decades which detract from the landscape and especially from the good prospects for the avenue trees.

- Plant new large-growing broadleaf trees in historic locations: Plane trees along Church Path, near Framfield Road, filling large gaps on Highbury Crescent and Highbury Terrace, on the site of the former toilets, (once they have been removed), at the top of the Mother Field, on the north

edge of the Mound alongside the pool – all at about 20m centres, straight-growing and +5m in height; native lime trees, +5m in height, along Highbury Place to fill gaps in the row of lime trees and along the northern boundary of the park.

- Undertake tree removal as a regular part of this management and as necessary to ensure that healthy trees are grown to their full potential in appropriate places. The interests of mature trees may require competing young trees to be removed so that they have enough light and room to survive and to grow to their anticipated full size; stand thinning is also required in the Orchard areas "to allow more light to reach the ground and to enable the remaining trees to mature", and in other areas where it is shown that trees are too densely planted.

With particular reference to the interlocking avenues which are key to maintaining and restoring the original Victorian landscape design, it is proposed to:

- Gradually restore the original boundary to the Victorian design along the north end of the park.

*Remove some municipal tree planting from recent decades which detract from the landscape and especially from the good prospects for the avenue trees.*

*Gradually restore the original boundary to the Victorian design along the north end of the park.*

- Commission the raising of new trees by taking cuttings from the rarer varieties of London plane growing in the park following DNA analyses.
- Select young plane trees to grow into good specimens.
- Restore the trees along the Broad Walk.
- Plant new trees in locations where they may grow to full size.
- Protect and conserve the mature plane trees with a view to their continued healthy growth over the next one hundred years.

### **Objective 3: Grassland improvement**

Traditionally at Highbury Fields, grazing was the main use of the grassland. A part of the problems now faced by the grass as a recreational amenity involves the coating of fallen leaves over substantial periods of time that leads to the death of areas of grass. It is important, therefore, that these areas are identified and that special care is taken to ensure fallen leaves do not remain on the grass for too long. Prevailing wind patterns across the Fields are quite regular and it can be forecast where leaves will settle, making it possible to institute a management programme to relieve this tree-related problem.

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Other aspects of grassland improvement are outside the scope of the tree strategy save improvement of soil conditions. However, mulching over wide areas and around mature trees is generally unwanted in a relatively small and heavily used park as it severely reduces the amount of grass for general recreation and because it has a disproportionate effect on visual amenity. De-compacting the soil is an alternative for improving soil conditions for the trees. Despite the fact that London planes are tolerant of considerable compaction it is proposed to make a small number of tests to explore whether de-compaction techniques would be of benefit more generally to the mature trees.

### **Objective 4: Developing the sense of wellbeing in the park**

The views and vistas at Highbury Fields were carefully designed to enhance the layout of the Fields and to provide attractive walkways and other tree planting. Today, views through and around the Fields are guided by large London plane trees which, although

originally close-planted with elm trees, have now grown sufficiently to show they provide complete avenues that fulfill the original intentions of the arboricultural concept. It is most important to remember that, in 1966, the GLC had wanted to remove the elms in order to provide the space necessary for the planes to grow to their full potential; the chance occurrence of Dutch elm disease may achieve that goal and it is counter-productive to plant young trees between the planes in these avenues. Plane trees are a long-lived species and those forming the avenues can be expected to survive for at least another hundred years providing they remain healthy.

Trees of various species have been widely planted across the park from about 35 years ago as ornamentals or trees of “interest” due to their differing forms and foliage but without adequate understanding of their longer term effect on the design of the park. In some cases these additional plantings add considerably to the seasonal interest in the park but in some other cases they are spoiling the clarity and simplicity of the avenue design or are encroaching

on the precious open space; selective removal over time is appropriate as part of the stand thinning that is needed in several areas to reveal the full grandeur of the older trees and to support the Vision’s intentions “aimed at securing the long term health of the considerable number of majestic trees and tree groups that contribute culturally, environmentally and visually”.

It is therefore proposed to manage existing trees to create avenues as uniform as possible, continuing to clarify the lines by formative pruning of the trees, and replacing missing trees where it is possible to maintain a distance of around 20 metres between new planting and existing mature trees. Beyond the avenues, there will be a presumption against the planting of more trees if by such planting areas of open space would be reduced.

Some of the areas suitable for infill trees and for tree removal were identified in the Vision and also in “*Highbury Fields Trees*”, 2008, published jointly by Highbury Community Association and Highbury Fields Association.

*Today, views through and around the Fields are guided by large London plane trees which, although originally close-planted with elm trees, have now grown sufficiently to show they provide complete avenues that fulfill the original intentions of the arboricultural concept ...*

*Aim at “securing the long term health of the considerable number of majestic trees and tree groups that contribute culturally, environmentally and visually.”*

### **Objective 5: Source appropriate new trees**

We are not aware of the nurseries from which the original planes and elms were purchased, but the plane trees have considerable variety in their forms; the general shape of the trees varies, as do the shapes of the leaves, some being more akin to the occidental plane, some to the oriental plane. In general, during the twentieth century, nurseries themselves grew fewer in number and the trees they grew became more standardised than in the nineteenth century. A part of this tree strategy is for new plane trees to be sourced such as to maintain the wide variety of planes at Highbury Fields. To this end, attempts should be made to interest a research body in the propagation of the rarer trees currently growing on Highbury Fields.

With the growth of international trade it has become easier for pathogens and parasites to spread and this may be facilitated by climate change. Therefore, it is of particular importance that new tree stock is as varied and healthy as possible and a rigorous system of inspection of new trees for damage or disease be practised. Equally important is the quality of maintenance of the trees; appropriate pruning of trees is critical for their continuing good health. The Council will keep abreast of developments so that, should new pests or pathogens blight the tree stock on the Fields, it will be in a position to take remedial action that has the most positive and least damaging implications for the current tree stock.

### **Objective 6: Maintain and make publicly available accurate, relevant tree data.**

The council's computerised tree database, EzyTreev, makes possible as never before, the collection and long-term storage of a range of information useful to both the local community and to the tree service.

- Maintain an accurate record and survey plan of the trees.
- Place a plan of the trees, including species identification, on the Council's website.
- Consult the local community on types of data to be recorded on EzyTreev.

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*The council's computerised tree database, EzyTreev, makes possible as never before, the collection and long-term storage of a range of information useful to both the local community and to the tree service.*

- Consult the local community on pruning schedules, planting and removal of trees.
- Commission DNA profiles of a range of plane trees on Highbury Fields.

#### Plane trees

- Set up a Resource Bank scheme to support the diversity of the plane trees, propagating from the rarer variants of the London plane, of which Highbury Fields has a special collection, so that a varied stock of original trees is available for new planting when necessary.

#### Lime trees

- Retain the existing mature, healthy lime trees in Highbury Place and fill gaps, where appropriate, with replacement native lime trees, (*Tilia cordata*).
- Seek to plant new trees, including lime trees, along the northern boundary behind the hard-surfaced recreation areas.

### **Objective 7: Tree removal**

- Reduce overcrowding in the Orchard, allowing the possibility of a garden and more usable open space.
- Remove very badly damaged trees and replace, if appropriate, in line with Highbury Fields planting guidelines, i.e. trees with an historic and cultural association.
- Remove infill trees of other species in avenues where they impede the continuing growth of the plane trees, including oak trees along Queen's Walk.
- Fell dead trees, using dead wood as habitat and screened from view where feasible to maintain the amenity benefits of the park.

*Remove very badly damaged trees and replace, if appropriate, in line with Highbury Fields planting guidelines, i.e. trees with an historic and cultural association.*

### **Objective 8: Tree planting**

- In view of the pressure on amenity space and to reduce overcrowding, it will be a presumption that trees to be taken down will not be replaced other than for

planes in the avenues and limes along Highbury Place, except where new planting can be justified as not encroaching upon necessary open space.

- Place a moratorium on any tree planting on new ground, including memorial trees, for the preservation of open space and to ensure the values of the existing historic landscaping are not reduced.
- New trees will be protected against damage from dogs with suitable fencing or by other means.
- Water young trees in dry periods more frequently than at present and for 3-5 years from planting until root systems are well established.

### **Objective 9: Tree pruning**

Tree pruning is a regular activity designed to form the shape of the tree as it grows, to remove dead wood and for health and safety reasons. The presumption is that no pruning should take place unless necessary.

- Insofar as possible, permit trees to grow to their natural forms.
- Prune trees as lightly as possible to avoid multiple pruning wounds and avoid crown lifting and crown reduction.
- Crown reduction should be undertaken only where it is confirmed to be of benefit to the tree.
- Crown lifting should be as minimal as possible; CCTV shall not be a reason for crown lifting or pruning.
- There should be no presumption that epicormic growth must be removed; however, this may be necessary for safety or other reasons.

*Water young trees in dry periods more frequently than at present and for 3-5 years from planting until root systems are well established ...*

*Insofar as possible, permit trees to grow to their natural forms ...*

*Protection of trees involves all Council departments that operate any maintenance, events or other projects on Highbury Fields.*

### **Objective 10: Protection against tree damage**

Protection of trees involves all Council departments that operate any maintenance, events or other projects on Highbury Fields.

- The Tree Service will be pro-active in keeping abreast of developments in combating pests and diseases that may attack trees in the park.
- Guard existing and new trees against dogs and grass cutting equipment such as strimmers.
- Avoid damage to trees from inappropriate chemicals and protect them from road works and from salt put on the roads in cold weather.
- Clear fallen leaves regularly, especially in autumn, to maintain hygiene and counter otherwise harmful micro-organisms and to improve the grass.
- Repair fencing to prevent vehicles driving over tree roots and install additional fencing for root protection where required.
- Enforce a tree work and park maintenance code of practice to the standards in BS 3998, "Recommendations for Tree work".
- Do not engage in unnecessary pruning.
- Reduce the amount of vehicular traffic within the park.
- Establish policy and practice norms with ground staff that increase their understanding of trees and reduce accidental harm to trees; imposing a range of substantial financial penalties on contractors for damage that has resulted from their activities.

### **Objective 11: Community support**

Local community groups and individual residents are stakeholders in Highbury Fields and they will be engaged with by the Council in the overall strategy of the Fields and in detailed planning of how the trees are managed. Their views will be communicated to agents of the Council who are

engaged in management of the Fields and to those who are commissioned to draw up proposals for change and development of the Fields.

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**Objective 12: Other tree support**

- Take measures to decrease soil compaction on the Fields, at the same time ensuring adequate access to water for trees.
- Take up tarmac between trees along Highbury Crescent and replace with a strip of grass to improve water penetration to the trees. This would also increase the area of grass and enhance the visual appearance of the park. Apply this procedure wherever feasible.
- If considering mulching trees at present surrounded by grass, monitor the benefits of mulching on previously created test areas.
- Explore ways of storing rain water that runs off the park to service trees of all ages during periods of water shortage.
- Make provision for the watering of all affected trees in times of water shortage.