

The Friends of Richmond Park
FORMED IN 1961 TO PROTECT RICHMOND PARK AS A PLACE
OF NATURAL BEAUTY AND PUBLIC PLEASURE
www.frp.org.uk

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Dear Jo

ISABELLA PLANTATION ACCESS PROJECT

Following the recent public consultation exercise, the Friends offer the following comments. We have tried to cover the topics set out in the pro-forma response form, with the exception of those which are clearly addressed to individual respondents (such as whether one has difficulty accessing the Plantation).

In summary, we broadly welcome what is proposed, other than the provision of a catering facility.

Access improvements

We appreciate that the access road to the disabled persons' car park is sub-standard, particularly when considered in the light of those who are likely to use it. If the current surface cannot be repaired in a way which would last for some time without the need for constant patching and hole-filling, then a hard surface would be acceptable; it would be important, however, that the top surface should not look stark – at least after a short period of weathering – and the materials should be chosen with that in mind.

The same applies to the surfacing of the disabled persons' car park. In addition, if it is proposed that individual spaces should be marked out, they will need to be wide or to have "dead" space between them so that wheelchairs can be brought close to car doors. We would, though, object to any increase in the present area of the car park.

If the access gates are altered so as to make their use easier, the current *art nouveau* motifs should, of course, be retained.

The upgrading of parts of the internal path network is welcome but, as above, care needs to be taken in the choice of materials. We understand that the leachate from some gravels

whose appearance would be muted would be incompatible with the acid soils in the Plantation, thus ruling out such gravels. The aim should be to create paths which are visually muted and unobtrusive.

Visitor Facilities

We support the proposals, as displayed during the recent consultation, for a shelter, seating and toilets near Peg's Pond. Of the alternatives for the siting of that building, the one which sets it further away from the pond seems to us to be preferable.

We assume that care will be taken to ensure that any such facility will not be visible from outside the Plantation.

We welcome the proposals for the provision of signage, self-guided walks and information generally, as well as the improvement of the wheelchair service.

The one aspect we would not welcome is the introduction of catering, whether seasonal or not. We are not aware of any public demand for such a facility. Indeed it is likely that such a facility would create its own demand from people walking or cycling in the vicinity, or making it their destination, who would then not spend any more time in Isabella (much as a large proportion of Pembroke Lodge customers come just for that and spend no more time in the Park). A catering facility would create noise, litter and disturbance for wildlife, which would significantly and detrimentally alter the nature and character of the Plantation; the impact would be higher if it became a destination in itself. Finally, refreshments are already available at a number of car parks, as well as Pembroke Lodge, and more are not needed.

Environmental and Ecological Projects

We have no objection to the proposed de-silting, water storage and reed bed works.

Community Activities

Similarly, we have no objection to the temporary Partnership and Engagement Officer post. We assume that the appointed person's activities will be limited to the Isabella Plantation. If, however, the "walks, talks, volunteer schemes and conservation opportunities" would extend to the Park as a whole, we would wish to be consulted in detail about what is envisaged.

However, we are concerned that the Draft Activities Plan is very ambitious for one person, and will require substantial expenditure for training consultants, writing of activity packs, access based maps and information, audio downloads etc etc, which will be substantially more than the cost of the one person. We question whether this associated expenditure would not be better spent enhancing the Plantation itself, e.g. through physical access improvements or ecology projects.

Also, more thought is needed even at this stage about how the work will continue after 3 years, since we doubt that voluntary bodies such as the Friends can take over much of the continuing work required. We would be concerned about good initiatives stopping because of lack of resources, and a less ambitious plan may be appropriate.

Priority of Improvements

The Plantation currently operates very successfully and is a great attraction for thousands of visitors every year. We don't regard any particular element of the proposals as something which urgently needs to be carried out and we don't, therefore, follow the invitation in the response form to categorise any element as having a high priority. Having said that, if we

were to rank the elements into three categories, those with the greatest merit (following the order on the form) would be:

- enhancement of the plant collection and wildlife;
- planting reed beds;
- making bridges and gates more accessible;
- improving path surfaces with natural gravel;
- refurbishment of existing toilets; and
- new toilet block to replace Portaloo.

In the second rank would be:

- new water storage and irrigation system;
- more benches and seating;
- simple shelter;
- improved information; and
- improved signage.

Alone in the third rank would be the introduction of catering, which we do not support.

The Friends is grateful for the level of consultation which is being carried out, and we hope that our comments are useful. You are welcome, of course, to get in touch at any time if you would like our views on any aspect which this letter has not covered.

Yours sincerely



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