

SAVE WIMBLEDON PARK

The AELTC's Planning Application and their latest "Planning Update" A call to action

It is a year since the AELTC made their controversial planning application to expand their Tennis complex onto Wimbledon Park – developing Capability Brown's historic parkland with an 8,000 seat Stadium, 38 grass courts and 10 ancillary buildings, all connected by 9km of pathways and roads. The aim of the "Wimbledon Park Project" is to enhance the delivery of the Championships and allow the AELTC to bring the Qualifying tournament (currently held at Roehampton) here, making Wimbledon Tennis a three-week annual event in SW19 for the first time.

This is the AELTC's biggest development proposal in decades and has been put forward despite multiple planning policy designations for the site such as Metropolitan Open Land, a Grade II* Listed Registered Park, a Conservation Area and a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation, all intended as protection from inappropriate development, **and despite their 1993 covenanted promise not to develop it.** The application has already attracted over 1,300 objections to Merton and Wandsworth Councils, not just from local people but also from CPRE London, Save Britain's Heritage, The Capability Brown Society, Friends of Wimbledon Park and many local Residents' Associations and Groups. Criticisms have been put directly to the AELTC in public meetings. The GLA's Planning team has raised concerns. The MP for Wimbledon, Stephen Hammond, and the MP for Putney and Southfields, Fleur Anderson, have both voiced objections and a joint statement from them is expected soon.

It is disappointing that the volume, range, and detail of the objections have not persuaded the AELTC to revise the proposals materially before the application comes before the Councils, likely now to be in October. **Their latest "Planning Update Pack" with 60 new documents contains a lot of technical detail but largely ignores the public response. Amendments are described as "minor", and the core principles of the scheme are unchanged.**

The planning process invites a response, and the planning committees of both Councils need to know whether concerns remain. **Residents' Associations are encouraging the community to make their views known, to say if previous objections have been satisfactorily addressed, or maybe to comment for the first time.**

Numbers do count so, even if you responded before, please send in your comments.

Fundamental concerns about the AELTC's Wimbledon Park Project proposals:

- **Unacceptable Environmental Impact.** The former golf course will be excavated, infilled, and levelled to deliver the new tennis complex over 7 years, threatening protected priority habitats. Claims for biodiversity net gains have been challenged in expert analysis.
- **300 mature trees will be felled**, others moved, and an estimated 500 younger trees will be uprooted in the excavations.
- **This is a Grade II* Listed Heritage Site, precious open space, protected Green Belt.** Once built upon, the protection will be lost, and it could become completely developed.
- **At 28m high and 104m wide the Stadium will still dominate this protected open space, contrary to the 1993 covenant, and will stand empty for most of the year.** The AELTC still won't commit to full design and layout details.
- **The new AELTC park will still belong to the AELTC, it still contains a 30,000sqft "central" maintenance hub, and public access to it and the walk around the lake is still only "permissive": it may be withdrawn as their commercial priorities change.** They admit that their Masterplan for the future of their estate is "an evolving vision".
- **With limited tournament use over just 3 weeks the density of courts and infrastructure across the site is excessive and disproportionate.** Community access to play tennis will be negligible. Parking and the Queue will still be on public park land.
- **The plans still assume Church Road will be closed during the Championships, even to pedestrians and cyclists.**

Please send your comments to

Merton Council: email planning.representations@merton.gov.uk Application no 21/P2900

Wandsworth Council: email planning@wandsworth.gov.uk Application no 2021/3609

You can see the documents on the Councils' websites, searching against the application references above. Otherwise, there is more information overleaf.

Environmental Impact

- ❖ The scale of the excavation etc. works is vast. **However, the planning update now doubles previous estimates of the volume of earth to be dug out, infilled and/or removed but the consequential impact of construction traffic on local roads is neither properly addressed nor updated. This needs urgent clarification.** Concrete will still be needed for the courts' supporting frames even though design changes now reduce the amount to 4,000 tonnes.
- ❖ Biodiversity net gain (a planning requirement) assumes that existing habitats and the species they support are secured and enhanced and others added, but expert analysis has highlighted habitat losses and challenged many of the underlying assumptions, including the bird census and soil and grassland evaluation.
- ❖ The courts' layout has been designed around some 40 veteran trees on the site but too many other mature trees will go as they are "in the way" of the development density required. The proposals claim that new tree planting will far exceed the losses from felling, but mature trees won't be replaced like for like, and their lost carbon capture will take decades to restore. Other mature trees are to be relocated but the likely survival rate is probably 50% at best. The Update pack includes a Tree survey, but it omits around 500 younger trees which will also be lost. It is misleading to claim environmental "gains" from planting new young trees without recording losses from removing so many others of the same size already on the site. Fewer courts would save far more trees.

Stadium

- ❖ Suggested design guidelines celebrating the Stadium's visual connection grouped with Centre and No 1 Courts, simply confirm its dominance over the protected open space. Without the full design details normally required for planning applications in a Conservation Area, the AELTC's claim that the architecture, when finally confirmed, will be "world class" is hard to judge. They have had a year to provide details, which should be tested now. The scale and bulk exceed GLA height restrictions. It breaches the 1993 covenant and is inappropriate development for Metropolitan Open Land. Open space is protected for good reason; the Stadium is the thin end of the wedge.
- ❖ The Update pack continues to suggest that the building will eventually incorporate multi-functional community space without evidencing any demand and, from the plans, capacity for such facilities will be limited and risks compromising design ambitions. This is a Sports Arena, not a community building with a tennis court; it cannot be justified by unrealistic aspirations for its purpose.
- ❖ There is now an offer to set aside 500 Stadium tickets for local residents to buy each day during the Championships. Yet in the 2022 Championships we saw a Community ticket scheme for the first time, including grounds passes. Is the chance to compete as well for a residents' ticket in the Stadium on one day enough of a justification for a permanent building with such limited year-round use?

The New "AELTC Park"

- ❖ The principal public benefit claimed for the development is the provision of a new separate park area with public access, linking Church Road and Home Park Road. This will be rough grassland, not for typical park use and unsuitable for pitches, courts etc. Unfortunately, a 30,000sqft maintenance hub to service the whole site is located in this area rather than in the tennis complex from which the public are excluded. As with the Stadium, design details for the hub are not disclosed but the scale is excessive. Pathways will connect to the main Wimbledon Park and the new Lake Boardwalk. The Boardwalk is a welcome addition but merely fulfils another commitment made by the AELTC in 1993.
- ❖ The AELTC still want to retain ownership of this park; public access will only be "permissive" so can be withdrawn at any time to suit their commercial requirements, and they will still use it for parking during the Championships. They say access will be secured by a legal undertaking to the Council, but in 1993 when they bought the freehold of the site the AELTC gave a covenant, a legal undertaking, that they would not develop it. In July 2021 when invited by a Residents' Association to justify the decision to breach that covenant with this application, the AELTC Chairman wrote that the Club's requirements "have developed in the resulting 28 years". A new park will be critical for the well-being of all for generations to come. The only way to protect it from future development and the deliberate disregard of obligations is by transfer to public ownership, eg a community trust.

Density of Courts etc and Public Access

- ❖ Very few of the 38 new courts will be used for Championships' matches. Most are practice courts whose use will diminish as the tournament progresses; up to 12 of them are allocated for hospitality, exhibition matches etc during the event. The density of the layout needed to accommodate so many courts together with their supporting infrastructure buildings and connecting pathways, for at most, 3 weeks' use, is forcing a disproportionately extensive remodelling of the entire site. This cannot be justified.
- ❖ After criticisms about the proposals' lack of public access to play tennis, there is now an offer in the planning update. They say, "up to" 7 courts will be available from mid-July to mid-September for the Wimbledon Junior Tennis Initiative – a weekend coaching programme which already exists – but local residents may play by invitation to "community tennis experiences". With so many courts available and given the application's claims to be supporting participation in tennis, the offer is derisory.

Conclusion

The AELTC's statement of its commitment to "supporting the local community economically, socially and environmentally" is welcome but the present plans simply fail to demonstrate or support any such commitment. The AELTC should offer a substantially scaled-back scheme founded upon an inclusive approach and with transparent objectives which the community can support. **There has been ample opportunity for the AELTC to consult and listen, address concerns, and modify its proposals, but it is disappointing that it is choosing not to do so, despite the covenants it gave in 1993. On that basis the application must be refused.**