

**The centrepiece of
The East London Waterworks Park**
**a future for the ex-Thames Water Depot site
that benefits the whole community**

The East London Waterworks Campaign, January 2020



Save Lea Marshes



The countryside charity
London

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Executive summary

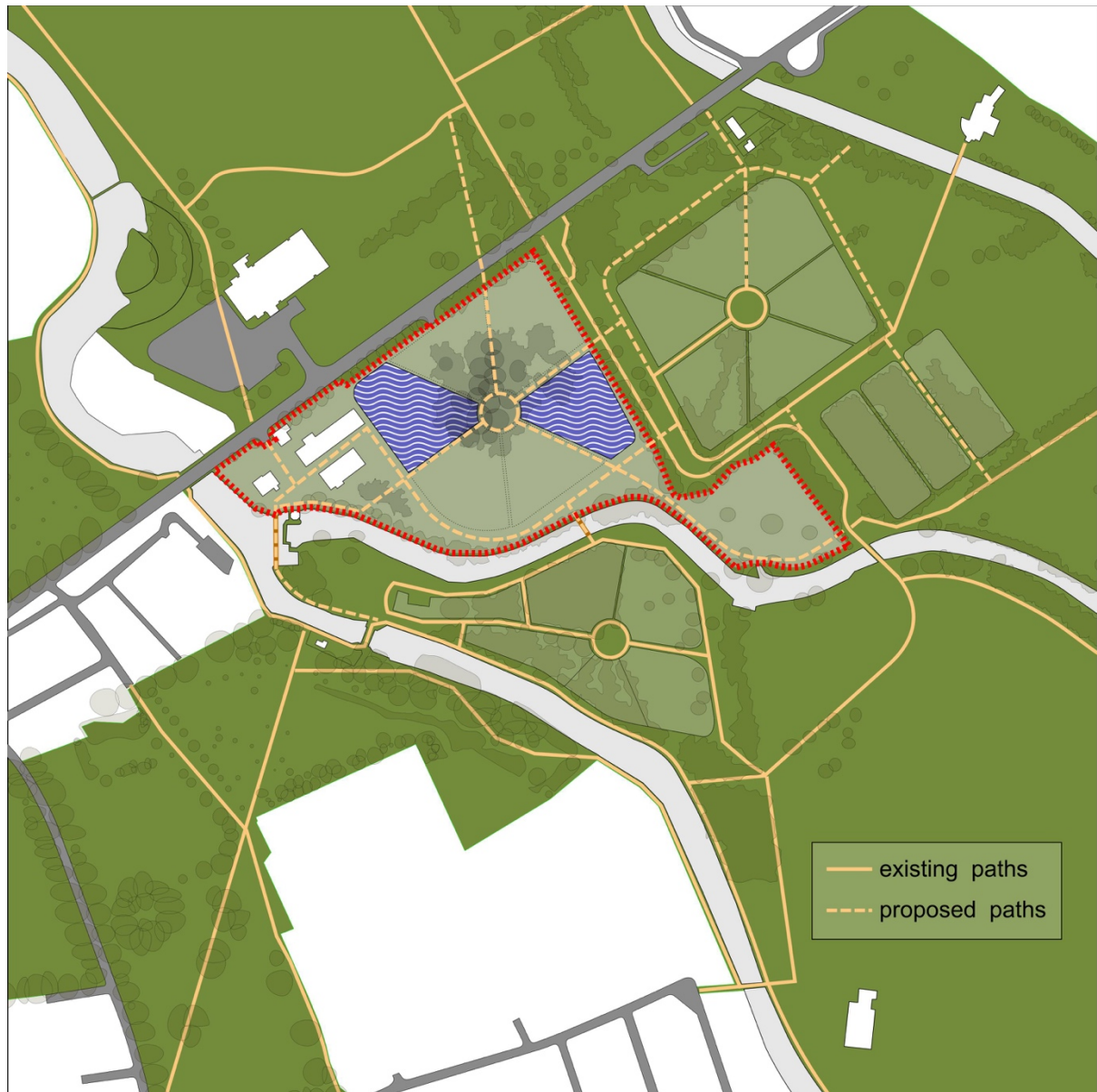
- The ex-Thames Water Depot site is currently owned by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, under the auspices of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The ESFA's planning application to build two free schools on the site was turned down, the ESFA did not appeal the decision and we understand they would like to sell the site.
- The reasons given for turning down the planning application – notably the fact that it was inappropriate for Metropolitan Open Land, it would detract from the character and appearance of the surrounding area and it would fail to provide links to and from the Lee Valley Regional Park – mean that **the only credible future for the site is one involving minimal development and open public access.**
- The East London Waterworks Park Campaign is based on the belief that the 5.68-hectare site can support a wide range of activities that will improve physical and mental health, increase biodiversity and encourage visitors to come and stay and explore.
- **The East London Waterworks Park will provide people with low-cost opportunities to improve their physical health** by promoting walking and wild swimming. Opening up the ex-Thames Water Depot site will enable people to roam throughout the Lower Lea Valley following long-distance walking routes. The site is also an ideal place for wild swimming, an activity that many in the borough of Waltham Forest crave.
- **The East London Waterworks Park will improve mental health** by providing more opportunities for people to spend time in nature and by facilitating a range of volunteering projects that tackle isolation and loneliness, build self-esteem and self-confidence, and support people as they develop valuable work-related skills. This will save the NHS money by helping people recover from serious mental health problems more quickly, and helping people manage mild mental health problems without medical intervention.
- **The East London Waterworks Park will increase biodiversity.** We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to return a brownfield site to nature and, in doing so, create a unique habitat that, in time, could become a 'brownfield rainforest' like Canvey Wick Nature Reserve in Essex, which is home to nearly 2000 invertebrate species, many of them extremely rare.
- **The East London Waterworks Park will encourage visitors to come and stay and explore.** With wild swimming, opportunities to spend time in nature, small-scale food growing and foraging, historic buildings that showcase the area's industrial heritage, and a welcoming high-quality but affordable café and exhibition space where local groups can meet, opening up the ex-Thames Water Depot site will transform the area, increasing footfall to Walthamstow Wetlands and the Waterworks Centre and Nature Reserve in the process.
- We acknowledge that Waltham Forest has ambitious housing targets but, given the site is Metropolitan Open Land and part of the flood plain of the River Lea, it is obvious this is not a suitable location for new homes. Instead, **opening up the ex-Thames Water Depot site would reconnect the Lower Lea Valley into a coherent whole, making it the destination that so many – including the LVRPA and Waltham Forest Council – would like it to be.**

The missing piece of the jigsaw

The ex-Thames Water Depot site sits at the heart of what we are calling The East London Waterworks Park:



It is the missing piece of the jigsaw. Opening it up will stitch together Leyton and Walthamstow Marshes, Walthamstow Wetlands and Tottenham Marshes to the north, the Waterworks Centre and Nature Reserve to the east, Hackney Marshes and Middlesex Filter Beds to the south and the river and towpath to the west to create a huge urban park where people and wildlife can roam.



Presently, the landscape is dislocated, with local people traversing well-worn routes into and out of each individual pocket of green space but unable to vary their walks much because of the fences they find in their way. Local people treasure these spaces, but few travel any distance to visit them and there is little to capture the wider public's imagination. Historic buildings, such as the unusual octagonal sluice house, are hidden from view and the area's industrial heritage and its significance as the boundary between the Danelaw and Anglo-Saxon England are ignored.

Consequently, the vast potential of the area as a place to linger, a place to explore and a place to re-connect with nature is being overlooked. Re-integrating the ex-Thames Water Depot site into the landscape can change all this, bringing real health and well-being benefits to the people and wildlife that call this corner of north-east London home.

The community's vision

The ex-Thames Water Depot site is currently owned by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, under the auspices of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The ESFA's planning application to build two free schools on the site was turned down by Waltham Forest Council's Planning Committee in March 2019. The ESFA did not appeal the decision and we understand they would like to sell the site.

Waltham Forest Council's Planning Committee is to be commended for its decision. To quote the first three reasons for rejecting the planning application given in the Decision Notice, dated 28 March 2019:

1. The proposed development would, by reason of its use represent inappropriate development in Metropolitan Open Land and by reason of its siting, height, excessive foot print, scale, bulk, massing and location, would not protect and enhance the existing green infrastructure, access to the open space [and] complement and improve the quality of the open space, thereby causing substantial harm to its openness. In addition, the application has failed to demonstrate '*very special circumstances*' to justify inappropriate development in Metropolitan Open Land. As such, the proposal would be contrary to the NPPF (2019), Policies 2.18 and 7.17 of the London Plan (2016), Policies GG2 'Making the best use of land' and G3 'Metropolitan Open Land' of the Draft New London Plan (Minor Suggested Changes 2018), Policy CS5 of the Waltham Forest Local Plan Core Strategy (2012) and Policy DM12 of the Waltham Forest Local Plan Development Management Policies (2013).
2. The proposed development would detract from the character and appearance of the street scene and surrounding area by reason of its design, scale, massing, siting and lack of appropriate soft landscaping, tree and screening planting and its detrimental visual impact upon the amenity and character of the surrounding areas and to the openness of the MOL. The buildings would constitute dominant forms of development that would be at odds with the character of the surrounding area and would undermine the existing openness of the site, resulting in discordant forms of development when seen in its context. As such, the proposed development would be contrary to Policies 7.4, 7.6 and 7.17 of the London Plan (2016), Policies CS5 and CS15 of the Waltham Forest Local Plan Core Strategy (2012) and Policies DM12 and DM29 of the Waltham Forest Local Plan Development Management Policies (2013).
3. The proposal would, as a consequence of a gated development, fail to provide links to and from Lee Valley Regional Park that would enhance green infrastructure and pedestrian access at all times, which would be contrary to Policy 2.18 of the London Plan (2016), Policy CS5 of the Waltham Forest Local Plan Core Strategy (2012) and Policy DM12 of the Waltham Forest Local Plan Development Management Policies (2013).

Given these reasons for the decision, the only credible future for the site is one involving minimal development and open public access, and local people came together in September 2019 to imagine what that future might look like. A strong vision for the site – that weaves the dual narratives of water and living in harmony with nature – emerged and the East London Waterworks Park Campaign was born. It is supported by Save Lea Marshes, CPRE London, Millfields User Group and Hackney Marshes User Group.

The community believes the site should be:

- re-imagined as a place for wild swimming
- re-wilded, allowing nature to reclaim the built environment naturally in some places with replanting and landscaping in others

- a space for people to learn how to live harmoniously with nature, perhaps through small-scale food growing or sustainable foraging
- a place to showcase the area's industrial heritage by retaining and enhancing the site's historic buildings
- a valuable part of London's green lung.

At 5.68 hectares, the site is big enough to support a wide range of activities and attractions that will improve physical and mental health, increase biodiversity and encourage visitors to come and stay and explore.

The East London Waterworks Park: improving physical health

According to [Sport England's Active Lives Adult Survey May 18/19](#), walking for leisure is the most popular physical activity amongst adults, with 19.7 million adults walking at least twice a month. It is also growing in popularity, with 514,000 more people walking at least twice a month in May 18/19 than in May 17/18. Opening up the ex-Thames Water Depot site would promote walking, encouraging long-distance walks through the Lower Lea Valley and giving people a wider range of shorter walks, as well as providing walkers with a vibrant destination or an attractive resting place midway through their journey.



Swimming is also a popular physical activity, ranking above team sports, adventure sports, cycling for travel and racket sports. 4.7 million people swim at least twice a month, and swimming is slightly more popular with women, who are generally less physically active than men. Re-imagining the Essex 1 filter beds as a place for wild swimming would encourage more people to swim more often, particularly when it is warm but also throughout the year. And the proposal to provide a place to swim outdoors in this part of London has captured the imagination of local people, as this small selection of enthusiastic comments left on our petition to open up the site to local people demonstrates:

'A no brainer really. So many people of all ages would benefit from access to local open water swimming. I'll be in the queue!' Paul Marsden

'Because it would help low-income families introduce their children to both swimming and the natural world. Plus why let Hampstead have all the fun?' Jamie McKay-Haynes

'It would allow people to swim outdoors safely, and stop people swimming more dangerously in the river. Would be a great asset to the area.' Daneala Mason

Regular physical activity is a critical component of a healthy lifestyle, helping to reduce the risk of developing long-term health conditions including coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes and osteoporosis. Swimming in cold water can also improve your circulation, increase your metabolism, boost your immune system and improve your sleep. Opening up the ex-Thames Water Depot site for walking and wild swimming would provide people with more low-cost opportunities to be physically active and encourage them to improve their physical health.

Further reading on how access to green space improves physical health includes:

- Natural England, 'Green space access, green space use, physical activity and overweight (NECR067)': <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/40017>
- National Centre for Sport & Exercise Medicine, 'Economic costs of physical inactivity: Evidence briefing': http://www.ncsem-em.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/economic_costs.pdf

The East London Waterworks Park: improving mental health

It is now well documented that spending time in nature has a positive impact on mental health and well-being. Feeling the sun or wind on your face, the springiness of the earth beneath your feet, breathing deeply, looking into the distance, watching the wildlife and seeing the seasons change can bring you back to yourself like nothing else. Turning the ex-Thames Water Depot site into a rich, biodiverse landscape, where people can spend time in and around water, would benefit the entire community, something those leaving comments on our petition emphasised as this small selection of comments illustrates:

'People need as many chances as possible to connect with nature!' Tamantha Weisser

'The benefits of wild swimming would be huge for the borough from a positive mental health perspective alone.' Lina Prestwood

'Outdoor space for physical activity and social interaction is becoming increasingly important for physical and mental wellbeing.' Paul Danvers

And the benefits will not be limited to those who enjoy the space informally. There will be opportunities for small-scale food growing and sustainable foraging as well as nature conservation. Projects that encourage people to volunteer and work alongside each other will help to tackle isolation and loneliness, build self-confidence and self-esteem, and support people as they develop valuable work-related skills.

Researchers at Leeds Beckett University published a report in October 2019, [Social Return on Investment analysis of the health and wellbeing impacts of Wildlife Trust programmes](#), analysing the impacts of the nature conservation projects run by The Wildlife Trusts to help people experiencing problems such as anxiety, stress and mild depression. Drawing on three years' research, the report concluded that 'people participating in outdoor nature conservation activities felt significantly better, both emotionally and physically, as a result. They needed, for example, fewer visits to GPs or

felt more able to get back into work.' The report also calculated the social return on investment for The Wildlife Trusts' green prescribing programmes:

- For every £1 invested in regular nature volunteering projects, which play a part in creating a healthy lifestyle by tackling problems like physical inactivity or loneliness, there is an £8.50 social return.
- For every £1 invested in specialised health or social needs projects, which connect people to nature and cost more to run, there is a £6.88 social return.

Opening up the ex-Thames Water Depot site to the community would save the NHS money, helping people recover from serious mental health problems more quickly, and helping people manage mild mental health problems without medical intervention.

Further reading on how access to green space improves mental health includes:

- Natural England, 'Links between natural environments and mental health: evidence briefing (EIN018)': <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5748047200387072>
- Public Health England, 'Local action on health inequalities: Improving access to green spaces': https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/357411/Review8_Green_spaces_health_inequalities.pdf

The East London Waterworks Park: increasing biodiversity

Biodiversity – the variety of plant and animal life on Earth – is critical to human survival. 'Without biodiversity there is no future for humanity' (Professor David Macdonald, Oxford University, quoted in *The Guardian*, 12 March 2018). Yet, too often, biodiversity is designed out of urban areas, as aesthetics and recreation drive the design and management of urban green spaces. With the ex-Thames Water Depot site, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to return a brownfield site to nature and, in doing so, create a unique habitat. Allowing nature to reclaim portions of the concrete landscape, breaking up and crushing the concrete in other areas into different-sized chunks and introducing the material dug out of the filter beds, will create a series of habitats which attract a lot of different species, especially invertebrates.

Canvey Wick Nature Reserve in Essex, which is jointly run by The RSPB and Buglife, is an example of a brownfield site that has become a biodiversity hotspot, so much so it is referred to as a 'brownfield rainforest' and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Once a dumping ground for sediment extracted from the River Thames, the meadows were covered with gravel, sand, chalk and fragments of shell. Then, in the 1970s, asphalt foundations for an oil refinery were built. The refinery never opened and, left alone, an open mosaic habitat developed. The site is now home to nearly 2000 invertebrate species; many, like the shrill carder bee, are extremely rare, while others, like the bombardier beetle, were thought to be extinct before they were spotted at the site.

Far from being a liability, the brownfield character of the ex-Thames Water Depot site is its strength. Allowing people to watch nature take back the landscape will encourage a deeper understanding of the way humans and nature interact, and sensitive management will encourage an urban habitat that could become Waltham Forest's flagship effort in tackling the climate crisis.

Further reading on the importance of brownfield sites for biodiversity includes:

- Stuart Connop, 'Blandscaping – a form of ecological gentrification?': <https://connectingnature.eu/blog/blandscaping-form-ecological-gentrification>
- Buglife, 'Planning for Brownfield Biodiversity – a best practice guide': <https://cdn.buglife.org.uk/2019/08/Planning-for-Brownfield-Biodiversity.pdf>

The East London Waterworks Park: encouraging visitors to come and stay and explore

As the centrepiece of the East London Waterworks Park, the ex-Thames Water Depot site would have a lot to offer: wild swimming, spending time in nature, small-scale food growing and foraging, historic buildings that showcase the area's industrial heritage, and a welcoming high-quality but affordable café and exhibition space where local groups could meet. There would be enough variety to entice people to visit for the first time and then return regularly.



Walthamstow Wetlands was opened to the public in October 2017 to critical acclaim, and its visitor numbers are impressive:

| | Visits | Number of months | Visits per month |
|----------------------------|---------|------------------|------------------|
| October 2017 to March 2018 | 191,798 | 6 | 31,966 |
| April 2018 to March 2019 | 353,031 | 12 | 29,419 |
| April 2019 to October 2019 | 178,161 | 7 | 25,451 |

This demonstrates that there is significant demand for places to walk and spend time in nature close to urban centres. However, it is interesting to note that, although the second full year of operating is not yet over, visits per month do appear to be decreasing after the initial enthusiasm when the site first opened. This may be a reflection of the restrictive features of the site, as activities and access are limited by the site's unique role as operational reservoirs and a nature reserve, and it is certainly not a criticism of a place local people are coming to love. But it serves to highlight that a much wider range of activities could be developed at the ex-Thames Water Depot site, encouraging people to

return time after time. It also emphasises that connecting the Walthamstow Wetlands and the ex-Thames Water Depot site would benefit both locations, as visitors move between the sites and make a day of it.

We acknowledge that Waltham Forest has ambitious housing targets but, given the site is Metropolitan Open Land and part of the flood plain of the River Lea, it is obvious this is not a suitable location for new homes. Instead, opening up the ex-Thames Water Depot site would reconnect the Lower Lea Valley into a coherent whole, making it the destination that so many – including the LVRPA and Waltham Forest Council – would like it to be. It would also bring untold environmental benefits and improve the quality of life and the health and well-being of local people, especially those moving into the high-density housing being built in both Waltham Forest and Hackney. It would provide a wide range of volunteering opportunities and enable thousands of local school children, older people and vulnerable groups to engage with growing and nature.