

Parks in Peril

The urgent need for finding a new model for funding the upkeep of public parks in urban areas has been acutely demonstrated by the seriously flawed Review of the event licence for Gunnersbury Park in west London.

While funding can be sought for capital projects from grant-awarding bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, no equivalent source of funds exists for the upkeep and maintenance of parks, their buildings and activities. As a result:

- Councils, struggling to fund statutory functions, expect their parks to “pay for themselves” and may, as is the case for Gunnersbury Park, devolve management to a Community Interest Company (CIC)
- Councils or CICs, desperate to earn income, hold large commercial events over extended periods
- Local residents, who love and support their park, find themselves paying too high a price in terms of their loss of quality of life
- The desperation of councils/CICs for income leads to an unwillingness to recognise the genuine issues raised by residents or to provide any real mitigation and to a reluctance to engage in meaningful dialogue. The resulting loss of trust is detrimental to all involved and to the future of the parks themselves.

This is not a new problem [see, for example,

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/31/londons-parks-accused-of-creeping-privatisation-of-public-spaces>]

but, despite it getting worse, there appears to have been little attention given to finding solutions. However, solutions are now needed more than ever in recognition of the importance of urban parks to human health and well-being, to biodiversity and to mitigation of and adaptation to climate breakdown. Central government and local authorities need to work together to find ways of providing a level of regular funding for parks that obviates the need for parks and local residents to suffer from the onslaught of summers blighted by large commercial events.

Turning to the recent **Review of the Gunnersbury Park Licence**, the Hearing by the Licensing Panel was held on Friday, 27th March 2026 and the Decision was published on Thursday, 2nd April.

<https://democraticservices.hounslow.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=393&MIId=14085>

I attended the meeting and spoke as Chair of the West Chiswick and Gunnersbury Society (WCGS). My participation is recorded at 3 hours and 36 minutes of the Live Broadcast of the meeting. It should be noted that the start of the meeting was delayed by over 1 hour due to late arrival of the legal advisor to the Panel. While WCGS endorsed the need for a review of the Licence, we were not party to the application submitted by the Gunnersbury Park Garden Estate Residents Association. The major impact of events on residents in our area is excessive noise (public nuisance).

At the Hearing:

- The Licensing Panel was put in a difficult position faced with clear evidence of harm arising from events held under the current Licence and new conditions proposed by the Licence holder made available shortly before the hearing.
- Residents were put in the intolerable position of having just hours before the Hearing to consider lengthy Addendum papers (Appendix F) submitted by the Licence holder, including proposed new conditions. *[I was made aware of Appendix F by e-mail at 1.30 pm on 27th March; the Hearing was at 5.50 pm]*

Why, when the Review request was submitted in early December 2025, did the Licensing Authority not make it clear that modified conditions had been under discussion with the Licence holder since the end of the event season? Surely the right course of action would have been to make these proposals publicly available and to have invited comment on them as part of, or in parallel with, the Review consultation.

The Decision sheet states (para 68) that “The sheer weight of the evidence from local residents meant that, on balance, the Committee was of the view that the continued operation of the existing licence unmodified was likely to perpetuate an unacceptable level of nuisance and anti-social behaviour.”

and (para 69) “Members of the Committee were impressed in particular by the consistency of both the written and oral accounts of public nuisance and often (but not always) low-level crime and disorder surrounding the events. They accepted on the balance of probabilities on the basis of the evidence which they had read and heard that the terms of the existing licence were insufficiently rigorous and specific.”

In these circumstances, while it is understandable that the Panel (para 72) “was uncomfortable engaging in the piecemeal imposition of conditions which should properly be consulted on”, surely it could have reasonably decided to apply those conditions that seemed “capable of offering improved control of sound emanating from the event space” that is, that appeared to be a step in the right direction (para 44), as **an interim measure with a defined time limit**. The Panel could then have required the Licence holder to submit a proposal for variation for consultation.

As it is, with respect to **Noise** (Revised Condition 17), residents are left with the existing single limit of 75dB (L_{aeq}) over a 15-minute period, not even reduced to the current “voluntary” limit of 73dB and with no C-weighted limit for control of bass. Reliance is being placed on a Sound Management Plan being approved by the Council’s Enforcement/Environmental Health Officers for each individual large or special event. It appears that residents will be expected to request such plans (17.9) to find out what sound limits have been deemed appropriate by the Licensing Authority for any individual event. It is pointed out that the schedule required to be published by Revised Condition 31 refers to “The allocated ‘noise band’ for each event” (last bullet). However, while bands were proposed by the Licence holder (para 13 of their proposed new conditions Appendix F). no noise bands have been defined within the Revised Conditions.

Finally, it is left to the Licence holder to decide whether to submit a proposal for any further variation to the Licence. He might well decide not to do so, being content with the results of this review.

Had an **interim** Licence including defined noise bands with a limit to the number of event days allocated to each band been decided, events during the 2026 season could have been used by residents and the Licensing Authority to compare the impact of the different noise bands. This would have provided a sound basis for determining appropriate levels in a future Licence.

There have been several articles in the local on-line media concerning the Review including “A potential crisis for the Gunnersbury Estate” from the Chair of the Friends of Gunnersbury Park. This article underlines my urgent call for a new funding model for parks.

<https://www.chiswickw4.com/default.asp?section=community&link=https://neighbournet.com/server/common/congunnsprk204.htm>

It is more than sad to arrive at a situation where local residents who love their park are pitted against those struggling to manage it.

Marie Rabouhans

Chair, WCGS

6th April 2026