



FRIENDS OF WARNEFORD MEADOW

Media briefing 8 June 2009

CAMPAIGN TO SAVE WARNEFORD MEADOW GOES TO HIGH COURT

The Oxon and Bucks Mental Health Trust announced on 3 June that it planned to seek a judicial review by the High Court of Oxfordshire County Council's decision to register the Warneford Meadow in East Oxford as a town green.

Warneford Meadow is 18.5 acres of mostly rough grassland behind Warneford Hospital, between East Oxford and Headington, and includes an orchard with a mix of interesting and some rare old apple trees. It was bought in 1918 by the trustees of the hospital, then a charity, to protect it from development and provide outdoor recreation for patients. Since the early 1980s the Meadow has been neglected by the NHS and has become highly valued by local residents for recreation and for its ecological diversity.

In 2007 the NHS submitted plans to sell the Meadow and adjacent playing field for development, for a mix of uses including mainly student housing. These plans were rejected by the City Council, but the land remains zoned for development in the Oxford Local Plan. In December 2007 local resident and environmental campaigner Paul Deluce applied to Oxfordshire County Council to register the Meadow as a "town green", on the basis that it had been freely used for recreation by local people for at least 20 years. Registration would give the Meadow lasting protection as accessible open space. Following a 15-day public inquiry conducted by an eminent QC to which over 30 local residents gave evidence, and in line with a firm recommendation from the Inspector, the County decided in April 2009 to register the Meadow. The Mental Health Trust now plans to challenge that decision in the High Court, on technical legal grounds.

Friends of Warneford Meadow (FoWM), with over 300 members, and many other local residents, are disappointed and angry that the Trust has chosen to spend public money to prolong the uncertainty about the future of the Meadow, and impose substantial legal costs on the County Council and on residents, when the factual and legal issues have already been thoroughly considered by the public inquiry.

The Trust says it needs the £10 – 20 million that the Meadow would be worth as building land to improve wards at the hospital. Local residents naturally share the desire to see mental health patients in Oxford benefit from up-to-date facilities. The Department of Health understandably puts pressure on Trusts to sell unused assets; but Britain has a National Health Service, and if wards in Oxfordshire need upgrading, but the Meadow is protected from development as a town green, the Trust can obtain necessary finance from NHS central funds at little or no extra cost.

FoWM members accept that Brookes University needs more student accommodation, and that new housing is required for hospital staff and other families. However, other sites in the area, including the Warneford playing field, the Park Hospital in Old Road, and Dorset House in Headington, are proposed to be developed for these uses. To build also on the Meadow would be over-development, adding to the area's traffic problems besides destroying a beautiful and much-loved open space.

The Meadow is more than just an attractive open space. It hosts a rich variety of wildlife, and is a key link in the "wildlife corridor" from the Cherwell via Marston, Lye Valley and Cowley Marsh to the Thames. Expert opinion increasingly recognises the value of access to open space for mental as well as physical well-being. Professor Sir Muir Gray, Oxford-based former Chief Knowledge Officer of the NHS and prominent advocate of walking for health, said at a May Day celebration organised by FoWM that "*in saving the Meadow, you aren't taking something away from the Health Service but contributing to it*". The Meadow offers a resource not only for residents but also for patients at the Warneford and at the Churchill Hospital on its eastern boundary; indeed the architects of the new Cancer Hospital at the Churchill and of the proposed Maggie Centre for cancer patients have cited the health benefits of the views of and access to green space that the Meadow offers. Promoting the use of the Meadow as a health resource will be no more than restoring it to its original purpose when it was bought by the hospital nearly a century ago.

Besides the County Council which is legally responsible, the campaign to save the Meadow has attracted cross-party support on the City Council, and is backed by Andrew Smith MP and by the Green, Liberal Democrat and Conservative candidates for East Oxford.

Speaking in response to the Trust's announcement, Town Green applicant Paul Deluce said: "*The Meadow is a special place. We urge the Trust to stop spending public money on lawyers' fees, and instead to work with FoWM and local residents' associations to make the most of the Meadow as a recreational and environmental resource for local people, patients and staff alike.*"

Contact for inquiries: info@friendsofwarnefordmeadow.org.uk

www.friendsofwarnefordmeadow.org.uk