

Pieter Morpurgo, Chairman Keep Bushy Park Free Alliance – speech at Richmond Rally against introduction of car parking charges in Bushy Park

The Keep Bushy Park Free Alliance represents the views of 8 local groups, having a membership of well over 6,000 members, who have consistently objected in the strongest possible terms to the charging proposals and will continue to do so.

Bushy Park is a free space gifted by the crown for the public's free use, and it must remain so. It should not become a space only for those who can afford it. This proposal discriminates against those for whom the £2 charge would be unacceptably high. It is nonsense of the Royal Parks to say it is the same price as a cup of coffee. Most people go to the park for recreation not for a cup of coffee. Anyone on a fixed income will find it very hard to find up to £700 a year for a daily visit to the park, whether they belong to ABC1 bracket or not.

It is also nonsense to suggest that everyone can arrive by public transport. The north side of Bushy Park has one bus once an hour during the week. On Sundays, the busiest day of the week, there is no bus at all. It is not practical to expect a mum with two children, a pushchair and a dog to get onto a bus. Many older people unable to walk to the park sit in their cars in the car parks and enjoy the parkland. Charges will make that impossible for many. Bushy is used by many organised sports clubs and groups as well. All have junior clubs where exercise for children is thought important for their health, but in the Royal Parks the parents will have to find yet more money to pay for keeping them healthy. These proposed charges will make membership of all these clubs much more expensive. All this after £7.2 million has been spent to attract people to Bushy Park.

Much of that money has been raised by local people and frequent visitors to the park who were never told that having given so generously; they would be expected to pay for the privilege of visiting some of the wonderful features for which they have paid.

There has been no consideration of alternative ways of attracting income. This is an unthought out, quick fix solution. If charges are to be levied at all, it should not be against the people who go to the park for the enjoyment of the park. 96% of the traffic driving into Bushy Park drives straight through and out the other side. These grossly unfair proposals will fine the 4% who are using the park for the purpose for which it is intended – that is the enjoyment of a great and beautiful and historic open space.

These plans will change the nature of the park forever. Gone will be the tranquil atmosphere of people relaxing and enjoying the wonderful wildlife, the facilities and the beauty of this 1000 acre haven in the west of London. This is not Central London – this is a rural park just like Margaret Hodge's Barking Park, where there are no parking charges. Why does she think we in west London should be different from her area?

There is a commitment to fight on – such is the strength of opinion that exists. The minister and the Royal Parks should listen to us and not underestimate the strength of public opinion that exists locally. This problem is not going to go away whether we are allowed to carry banners or not.