

Councillor Matt Hartley

Leader of the Opposition, Royal Borough of Greenwich
Town Hall, Wellington Street, Woolwich SE18 6HQ
matt.hartley@royalgreenwich.gov.uk • 0208 921 6393



Councillor Anthony Okereke
Leader of the Council
Woolwich Town Hall
Wellington Street
Woolwich
SE18 6HQ

26 January 2025

Dear Anthony,

Withdrawing the Council's proposal to close Maryon Wilson Animal Park

You will be well aware of the backlash in the community caused by the Council's proposal to close Maryon Wilson Animal Park, a much-loved community asset that is valued by residents not just in Charlton but across our whole borough.

We will have the opportunity to discuss this publicly at Full Council this Wednesday, when I understand you will also be presented with the community's petition (which is approaching 9,000 signatures as of Saturday evening) – and also during the Budget Scrutiny session at Overview and Scrutiny this coming Thursday.

During the course of preparing the Opposition Group's response to your Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) proposals, Council Officers have confirmed to me that the net saving from closing Maryon Wilson Animal Park is a staggeringly small sum.

Your own proposals show that a total of £115,000 will have to be invested over the next three years in order to safely re-home the Park's 93 animals and to cover other closure costs, with a revenue saving of £60,000 a year only achievable from 2027/28. Closure will therefore generate a net saving of only £5,000 over the 4-year period of the MTFS.

In more than a decade of scrutinising the Council's budget proposals, I have never seen a more nonsensical or ill-judged proposal – which brings about a completely unacceptable loss of amenity, and for next to no financial benefit to local taxpayers.

Respectfully, I believe you have badly misjudged this element of your Budget proposals, and significantly under-estimated the social value provided by the Animal Park, to our schools, families and the borough more widely.

I am equally sure it will not have escaped your notice that residents and campaigners have drawn a comparison between these savings and your administration's decision to impose the unnecessary Political Assistant system at a cost of £83,000 a year.

I do understand that producing a balanced Medium Term Financial Strategy is a significant undertaking, and requires difficult decisions – but respectfully, given the miniscule savings involved, this decision is not one of them.

I am therefore writing in order to:

1. **Urge you to withdraw** the Maryon Wilson Animal Park closure item from the Council's proposed Medium Term Financial Strategy, and give immediate reassurance to the community that you have listened and will not proceed
2. **Give you advance notice** that if this item is not withdrawn by the time the final Medium Term Financial Strategy reaches Full Council in late February or early March, then the Opposition Group will put forward our own Amendment to remove this element of the Budget ourselves.

To be clear, this Opposition Amendment to save Maryon Wilson Animal Park will be subject to a **separate, dedicated vote of all councillors** at Full Council – and put forward entirely separately to the Opposition's main alternative Budget proposals which are currently under development.

I am sure that you will be keen to avoid such a vote from taking place on this matter – including to avoid putting the ward councillors in your Group in the invidious position of either voting to close the Animal Park, or breaking your Group's whip.

I sincerely hope that we will not reach this point.

For what it's worth, I believe that by showing you are listening and withdrawing this proposal to close the Animal Park now, you will earn a great deal of respect from residents – and demonstrate that the Community Engagement Pledge, which your administration has put such store in, is more than just words.

I am copying this letter to the relevant colleagues, MP and will place this in the public domain given the high level of interest in this issue.

Thank you for your consideration of this letter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Matt Hartley
Leader of the Opposition

cc. Councillor Denise Hyland, Cabinet Member for Finance
Councillor Sandra Bauer, incoming Cabinet Member for Communities
Charlton Village & Riverside and Charlton Hornfair ward councillors
Debbie Warren, RBG Chief Executive
Matthew Pennycook MP, MP for Greenwich & Woolwich