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Clare Coghill: Brilliant.

Interviewer: Could we start with you introducing yourself and your role here at the council?

Clare Coghill: Definitely. My name is Clare Coghill. I am a councillor for the High Street ward, where a big chunk of the wetlands is located. I am also the lead member for growth and regeneration.

I've been doing that role for nearly two years now, and at the start of that, following the election in 2014, the leader of the council asked me to take lead responsibility for Walthamstow Wetlands. So I have been involved since the last meeting, the final meeting that we had with HLF, before the funding was agreed.

Interviewer: Brilliant.

If we can kick off with what you feel will be the prime benefits to local communities of that site increasing its access?

Clare Coghill: Well, there are plenty. Thinking about the most important ones, it will be the massive increase in the amount of open space that people are going to have access to.

Rather than being limited to small parks and gardens, or small green spaces that people have in their local communities, they will have access to an enormous great space that they will be able to yomp through.

By that I mean you will have time to walk in a space, where you will be able to lose yourself in thought. Rather than going to a small park and maybe sitting there on a bench and doing all that. To be able to exercise, and breathe, and do all those things in a quite different way.

I think another key benefit will be that people will be signposted to that space. Because technically now you can walk round the wetlands. You can pay £1. There’s a funny little entrance opposite the Ferry Boat, and you can go round, but people just don’t. People don’t.

It will also open up not just the wetlands but all sorts of spaces in and around the River Lee. That will be tremendously important, I think, for people’s understanding of what their area actually contains.

It won’t just be their road, and their house, and their child’s school, and their tube station, or their over-ground station, but this incredible green gem that so few people have access to at the moment.

Interviewer: I suppose there are some obvious points, but in terms of reasons why – you said there, people just aren’t using it at the moment, even though you can just pay £1 and go and walk round it. Can you talk to me or reflect a little bit more on the barriers to [Crosstalk 0:02:55]?

Clare Coghill: Yes, definitely. I think this is absolutely critical. This is why I'm very excited by the research and having this conversation, is there are different barriers. We have a very diverse community in Waltham Forest, and there are different barriers for different groups.

The very basic barriers, that will hopefully be removed by the project, are accessibility and visibility. People will be able to access it more easily because they won’t have to pay. The £1 isn’t necessarily a barrier, but it will be the visibility.

It won’t be like if you know that this is accessible, nudge nudge, wink wink. It will be you will be signposted there. You will be encouraged to go there.

There will be activities happening on the sites. There will be volunteers to greet you, volunteers to work with you. There will be school visits, which will enable young people to know that it’s there. That will guide their parents there in time.

So, accessibility and visibility, and lack thereof, are two key barriers at the moment that affect everybody.

You then start to get into the sub-categories. For me Waltham Forest as a borough has a significantly changing house price issue, and with that comes changes in what people would term gentrification. House prices I think in the last year, or the last two years, have gone up 22% in Walthamstow. That’s a fairly bonkers increase.

Now, that’s not to say that there isn’t a core to our communities. Lots and lots of people are living in social housing. That hasn’t changed in the last ten years. It probably won’t change for the next ten years. But the affluent middle classes have been here for a little while and are arriving in every greater numbers.

I think they will find it easy to access, and with a rightful sense of entitlement will go there and use those facilities, and get involved, and feel even more empowered than they already are to do more in those green spaces, and the built spaces there.

There is the risk that the people who don’t feel that automatic entitlement will feel further and further apart or feel more and more distant and closed off. Also that they just won’t go there. That they won’t feel open.

I think one of the things that we need to learn from is the Olympics. In the south of the borough people were walking distance from the Olympic Park, hectares upon hectares of beautiful green accessible space, that either they didn’t use at the time of the Olympics or they haven’t used subsequently.

A lot of that is to do with very basic things around signage and visibility. Very, very basic things. Also being really actively encouraged to go there. Be given a sense that they're not just going to be wandering around aimlessly, but there is a purpose to going there, and they will be greeted in a friendly way, and they will be helped.

I think specifically for some of our communities – for example, we have a significant and well-established Pakistani community in the borough, largely drawn from Mirpur in Pakistan.

Quite geographically specific, where people have maintained community and familial links from the same village in Mirpur, and still have those connections here.

This wonderful, close, loving, friendly community, that has scooped me up and welcomed me with open arms, like another daughter. I could weep for how wonderful some of those people are.

They are many of the people who have lived and worked in this borough, made it what it is, made it such a wonderful place to live, but who will not automatically think that it’s there for them. Their taxes are contributing to it, but they don’t feel a sense of entitlement. (Laughter) They won’t feel a sense of entitlement.

Lots of them, particularly some of the older generation, have health issues that would make a long walk to the wetlands, before they even get there, a huge barrier, a tremendous barrier.

So things like parking will be very important. Because if there’s a choice between driving down the road for ten minutes and then walking around a green space for twenty minutes, or never walking anywhere at all, then I would rather they did a ten-minute drive and a twenty-minute walk.

So I think that’s quite an important thing as well. Because we have got Mini Holland, so we’ve got this infrastructure that will help, again, the affluent middle classes, by and large, in the first instance, access that space easily. But, again, that doesn’t break down those barriers to some of the people who one might term less entitled.

Interviewer: Beyond health issues are there other reasons why they don’t have that sense of entitlement?

Clare Coghill: I just don’t think there’s an automatic assumption that green space is good for some people. Do you know what I mean?

If you perhaps grew up in a very rural setting, that you perhaps had associations of green space that are to do with poverty, distress, exclusion, past, missing things from home, sadness that would be associated with that, and all of the things around that.

I think obviously people also have religious reasons for not wanting to have dogs jump at them, and be in contact with dogs, but obviously because the site will be dog free that is a really special opportunity.

For example, on Fridays you might have a retired gent who drives himself off to Mosque and then he goes home. Well, he might decide to drive himself off to Mosque, drop his wife off shopping, and then the two of them could drive down to the wetlands and have a nice afternoon walk. And they would do that if they understood that they're not going to be jumped up by a dog on Fridays.

Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: It’s how you then reach out to communities, and certain faith groups who don’t have that sense of entitlement, in my view, won’t automatically go down there, and then you explain to them how it would be made accessible to them.

Interviewer: I guess that leads in to some of my questions around how the opening up of the site, and indeed its sister site, may or may not affect the identity of the area.

Clare Coghill: [No, definitely 0:09:59].

Interviewer: Because you [Crosstalk] issue there that this is going to be a nature reserve [as well as a] park, and that is often associated to be the preserve of [Crosstalk].

Clare Coghill: The affluent, yes, definitely.

Interviewer: So, how do you anticipate, or what are your aspirations for it to affect the identity of the area?

Clare Coghill: That’s a really interesting question.

There’s the obvious fear. You don’t want to turn into Barnes. Do you know what I mean? We’re East London. We’re not West London.

I say that with a measure of knowledge, because one of my best friends from school has just bought a house in Barnes. I will tell you what, it’s lovely, but I wouldn’t want to live there. Do you know what I mean? You're not in Kansas anymore. (Laughter) “Why does everyone look the same? How are we still in London yet everybody looks the same?”

Interviewer: It’s suddenly a parallel universe. (Laughter)

Clare Coghill: It is, isn’t it? It is.

Sorry, what was your question again? I got lost in thought there.

Interviewer: Identity.

Clare Coghill: Identity? It’s such an interesting question. I think there are so many layers around identity.

Something fascinating that I found out about, and I will talk quite a bit about Pakistan and community, because they're such a significant community, particularly in my ward, the people who are literally spitting distance, cheek by jowl.

One of the reasons they talk to me about why they like Walthamstow is the market reminds them of a very famous market in Lahore called Anarkali. Have you heard that?

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: So few people have, and that’s so, so, important.

I think something that I talk a lot to people about is the market itself used to be called Marsh Lane. So there is this connectivity. There is this logical flow, if you keep going.

And there’s the history of it, which is the Black Path. It’s the droving route from Epping Forest into the markets of London, where the animals would be slaughtered and sold.

I just think there’s a kind of – if you can tell people that wider story, about how there is this logical route that connects them to the green space.

I know that’s Walthamstow marshes, not the wetlands, but there is a geographical connection, obviously, because they sit cheek by jowl.

Also a sense of there’s a logical route, there is a historical connection, and there’s something about that you're just going for a walk.

Do you know what I mean? It’s that kind of, “This is part of your community as well. It looks different. It is different. You don’t recognise it, but if you come out your door, you get on a road you recognise, and you just carry on walking, it’s going to take you to this place.”

That’s how I feel about it. It’s almost like you’ve been walking up and down the same road your whole life, but for once the right turn that’s always been closed off is all of a sudden open.

You could do something quite spectacular, so that what people see is something that they find remarkable and delightful, but they will need to be guided down there for that to be the case.

Because you don’t want them to see it as alien. In the best possible way, it will be beautiful but it will be alien, and to go there once and never go again, because it didn’t feel quite right relative to what they had always known…

Interviewer: Yes, okay.

Clare Coghill: I think that will be the case for some people.

Interviewer: Yes, and that’s some of the conversations that you have had and I have had with Rachel about her role in terms of comfort. She used the word comfort a lot.

Clare Coghill: Yes. It’s a good word.

Especially because it’s worth mentioning that the wetlands themselves, because the access has been so limited, they have been characterised by fishermen, who have been traditionally seen as not being terribly friendly.

When they’ve been interviewed in the media, talking about the wetlands, they haven’t come across as being terribly welcoming. That’s an issue.

Also that it’s well-known that people have climbed the barriers for a swim and died there. In some ways the bottom of Coppermill Lane, behind the chain link fence, there’s something quite haunting about. There’s something quite sad, looking at big bodies of water with trepidation.

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: I understand that. I think lots of people do. If you’ve never learnt to swim, they’re dark, bottomless, scary places, aren’t they, potentially?

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: [Oh, what a question. I haven’t done it 0:14:47] justice.

Interviewer: No, I enjoyed that.

Which links me on to my next question around how we hope the wetlands might affect our connection with water.

Clare Coghill: Yes.

Interviewer: I wondered if you could reflect on that.

Clare Coghill: I hope that a lot more people reflect on their use of water and how precious it is. How phenomenally precious it is, and the effort that goes into cleaning it.

If even a few people decided not to flush the toilet every time they just had a wee, then the world would be a better place. It really would. (Laughter) My husband hates that, and I don’t, so we’re in a constant battle in my house, but I'm like, “Yes, you don’t need to flush that, mate. That’s alright.” Do you know what I mean?

The fact that in most modern homes we use perfectly clean, drinkable water to flush lavatories just kind of makes me want to cry. What a waste that is. What a tremendous waste of time.

So I think the opportunity for people to understand water. I think maybe that’s a bonus, if it can be harnessed in the right way.

I'm not a strong swimmer. I'm not built for swimming. I can swim, but I lived in the South of France for a couple of years, and looking out to sea, and swimming in the sea, and just knowing that that water can kill you, and the awesomeness of water, and the respect for water.

When you see it in its more manageable, drinkable quantities, as a commodity in your own home, you have a completely different relationship with it.

Whereas when you're confronted with it en masse, and you feel its awesomeness, you need to remember a little bit of that value and that awesomeness when you're in your own home thinking, “I'm just having another bath.”

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: Hopefully a bit of that, just to reflect on water a little bit, for some people I think will be really powerful.

Also all the children who are going to go there. The work with Rachel has already done, and so many children are going to be able to go there, and learn about water, and reflect on that. If you can get them young, brilliant.

Interviewer: You’ve already hinted at it there. My next question was going to be about whether the access to the wetlands helps build sustainable relationship with water, but I think you’ve addressed that.

Clare Coghill: Yes, I hope so. I really hope so.

Interviewer: I wanted to move on, I guess, to the fact that the wetlands is an example of what is quite a growing number of privately owned public spaces, and whether or not you feel that that will shape people’s experience at all of the site.

Clare Coghill: Privately owned public spaces? Yes.

Interviewer: It isn’t a public park.

Clare Coghill: I think it will be interesting. I think we will only be able to really understand that when it’s open, so the sense of how it’s labelled, how the signage works, how people feel. Will you feel like this is..?

My understanding is that it will lead with its own identity, so, ‘Walthamstow Wetlands’, rather than ‘Thames Water welcomes you to Walthamstow Wetlands’ or, ‘The London Borough of Waltham Forest welcomes you to Walthamstow Wetlands’.

Because even though we’re a public institution, people still think of a public institution even as external to them. Even something that’s a council thing they don’t always connect that with being something that they therefore own.

I think it would have been very much on how its signed. Then how that’s then talked about in the displays, and the exhibitions and things, and by the volunteers, obviously.

It’s quite a careful one to manage, isn’t it?

Interviewer: Yes. You moved there to some interesting questions around ownership.

Clare Coghill: Yes.

Interviewer: Which again is complicated in a privately owned space. Can you talk to me about what the motivations are for the council to be involved in this?

Clare Coghill: Yes, definitely.

It was initially the leader of the council, my boss Chris Robbins, seeing the opportunity of opening up this spectacular green space.

When you look at a map of our borough, and you see what an enormous chunk of it was effectively closed to the public, it was just devastating really.

There was a change of personnel at Thames Water. The new chief executive met with the leader, and they agreed that, “The health and safety issues are manageable. Let’s get this place open. Let’s do something absolutely extraordinary.”

That was the starting point. It was two men in a room, who decided that this had got to change. There was a wonderful opportunity here, if they could get it right. And obviously then started to talk to people who might fund the project, who could see the wonderful opportunities that it presented.

There are so few new green open spaces being opened in London. This will be once a generation, won’t it? I can’t think of where else might open up in the same way.

It’s a site of international significance, classified with the Nile and the Amazon. (Laughter) I still can’t quite wrap my head around it. So that will present so many wonderful opportunities.

I think it was that commitment from two people in a room, who could shake hands on, “Okay, we understand what the barriers are, and we understand what the challenges will be, but how can we overcome this?”

Interviewer: In that case, what do you think Thames Water’s aspirations are for [this site 0:20:56]? What are their motivations for opening this site? It’s a fair risk.

Clare Coghill: It is a fair risk. From what they’ve said, I think they are genuinely interested in teaching people about water, and the message around consumption will be hugely important.

I think also they have such a massive programme of ongoing works across London, it will be helpful for them to be able to point to something that they are giving back. I'm sure there is some reputational advantage to be had when you spend a lot of your time digging up London roads.

Which is doing fundamentally brilliant and important work, actually very cost-efficiently, and time-efficiently, but stopping people from getting A to B as quickly as they would want to on the roads.

People see the Thames Water sign and curse it. “Damn you, Thames Water. Damn you for giving me lashes of cheap, clean water, not in Victorian pipes.” (Laughter)

I'm assuming there would be PR value for them in it as well, but I do think it was a question of a personality difference. Someone at the top of the tree before who was risk averse, and someone at the top of the tree who is prepared to take a risk, presumably marking himself out as different and new. Good on him.

Interviewer: That’s come up a lot, the individuals involved. It’s quite interesting [from a planning perspective 0:22:25].

Clare Coghill: From a planning perspective, and also it’s other things as well. The local authority built a relationship with Heritage Lottery Fund that meant that if somebody said, “Oh, we need to get a couple of million out of Heritage Lottery Fund”, people here didn’t pooh-pooh that as being, “Oh, we can’t do that.”

Interviewer: “That will never happen.”

Clare Coghill: “That will never happen.” We built a relationship with Heritage Lottery Fund where they said, “You’re a priority borough, and we would like to give you some more money. You’ve demonstrated that you can get your act together. You can spend it well. Look at what you’ve achieved with William Morris Gallery.” We won Museum of the Year in 2013.

We know how to work with Heritage Lottery Fund, so it didn’t feel like a long shot. Our leader could be in that room, and have that conversation, and no-one felt like they were sticking their neck out and promising something that they didn’t in their heart think that could be delivered. I think that was important.

Then also the will from the officers to then follow that up. Because it’s all very well to get the silver haired males in the room together, but then you’ve got to have the people who can deliver that beyond that point as well.

Interviewer: I was thinking in terms of that being a very interesting growing example of partnership working [Crosstalk 0:23:39], in a metropolitan [Crosstalk].

Clare Coghill: Oh, yes, definitely. If only. And it’s so hard to do. It’s so painfully hard to do. You can’t believe how hard it is sometimes to get people who…

You're doing something that’s mutually beneficial, and they don’t want to engage because it will involve a modicum of inconvenience, or a degree of changing some kind of boring bureaucratic system, that’s been broken and not delivering for 400 years, but they still don’t really want to be bothered to do it.

I think as well there is a desire to work with political colleagues across the way. That’s not to be underestimated. Haringey is a Labour controlled authority, we’re a Labour controlled authority, so we can talk the same language.

My advantage is my opposite number in Haringey’s advantage and vice-versa. And if we can work together effectively then we will do all the heavy lifting and Haringey will take all the credit. [No 0:24:39]. (Laughter)

I get on very well with those guys, and it’s an opportunity to put Waltham Forest on the map, as this facilitating borough that can build these partnerships, that can achieve these extraordinary things.

The point that I made when I was first doing TV interviews on this was, “Waltham Forest is delivering this. How extraordinary. As of our beneficence the good people of Haringey and Hackney will finally have somewhere nice to go.” (Laughter) Of course it’s teasing, but there’s that genuine…

I’ve built a relationship with Alan, who is my opposite number at Haringey, and Guy, who is my opposite number at Hackney. He is one of the deputy mayors, Guy Nicholson. As part of that coming together and saying, “How do we connect?” Obviously that’s relevant for Woodberry Down and all of that connectivity.

Interviewer: Which is interesting, because my understanding is that historically it had been a little bit of a black hole, from both a political [and administrative 0:25:36] perspective.

Clare Coghill: Absolutely, and I think it’s because the wetlands, in a weird way, it’s in Waltham Forest but it turns its back to Waltham Forest. Because the entrance is so close to Haringey Borough it would make sense for people from Haringey to go there, but of course Haringey had no jurisdiction over it, and didn’t have the power to unlock it, and if you don’t have…

Obviously Haringey used to be in I think – oh, I think it was a very slim Labour majority, with no overall control. We were no overall control until 2010. It was enough for the political leadership of those places to hold it together for itself. The idea of working out of borders was just beyond the pale.

In 2010 we had overall control, they had overall control, both the same party. It’s not to say Labour is the only party that could have delivered that. That’s not the point. Had it been an overall control of the Tories – which would never happen, but you know what I mean.

As long as somebody somewhere could take the plaudits for when it went right, basically, and take them exclusively for their group, their party, and their leadership, then that would be all of a sudden very enticing to people.

Also for the authorities to have the confidence to be able to go down that route. Because they were constantly having to defend their decisions in their backyard.

Had we tried to do this pre-2010, say in 2009, when Chris took over as leader, had he said, “My first thing is I'm going to deliver the wetlands”, it would have been political annihilation in the run up to the 2010 elections.

Once we had taken control we were in a position to say, “Okay, we’ve set out our stall. We’ve got our streets clean. We’ve organised ourselves. Now we can look at this type of project and do it well.”

Interviewer: That political capital is really important for a project of this [Crosstalk 0:27:32]?

Clare Coghill: Definitely. I don’t think that’s peculiar to this project. I think politicians, if we’re honest, we look for political capital in everything that we do.

Really the only thing that you ever do that doesn’t get you any political capital is working for homeless people. That’s it. Because they haven’t got a vote. That is the way I look at it.

Everything else, if you communicate it effectively, and if you believe in your heart that it’s the right thing to do, then you're just a resident like everybody else. If you see value in it other people will also see value in it. You got elected for a reason. You should have that nuanced understanding of what your community likes.

Yes, I think people see it’s not just the right thing to do, it’s not just an amazing project to be involved in, but there is political capital to be had out of it as well.

Interviewer: We’ve spoken about that interesting model of ownership. We’ve spoken about some benefits. We’ve spoken about the barriers, importantly.

Potential tensions and conflicts that may come up, as the range of [dramatically 0:28:38] different users start engaging in this space. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Clare Coghill: Once it’s open then the different people who arrive to use it?

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: That’s an interesting one. Let’s have a think. Yes, it’s going to be very interesting, isn’t it? Because there are going to be so many volunteers involved in the project, and you want volunteers to have a sense of ownership.

When you go to the Globe Theatre, for instance, you see people who are volunteers proudly wearing their aprons, showing you round, and that’s phenomenal. They look very at ease there. You can see they are comfortable. It’s their patch. They know it. They can give you directions.

There is a sense of ownership, but there’s also a sense that the people who have that sense of ownership are experiencing delight at opening that up for other people.

I suppose it would be a shame if the only volunteers were white British middle class people. Because I think one of the challenges will be to have a volunteer base that looks sufficiently like the borough, for anybody and everybody who comes there to feel like there is somebody who looks like them, who engages.

I have to say, as a borough we’ve got a very good track record of that. If you go to our event for instance you see very immediately, and visibly, a group of people who are representative of the census data. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: We do stuff that we understand, through the intensive work that we do around understanding what our residents want, and the surveys that we do, to understand the things that will be appealing to a wide demographic.

We’ve got quite skilled at that. So that you're not putting on events and you're not running things that only one group, or one or two groups, will take benefit from.

If you're spending public money you should try and appeal to the widest reach of people across the community. Because it’s everybody’s money that’s going in, so ideally everybody will benefit.

Interviewer: Do you see any flashpoints with the range of different users engaged in this space?

Clare Coghill: I think there will be a lot of disappointed dog walkers, who are going to kick off quite a lot. I think there will be issues around people who assume that it will be dog-friendly, and who will rock up disappointed, with their pooch, and have to turn around.

When you think about those, I think it’s almost a built space is where I see that kind of thing happening. If you go into the café and there’s nobody who looks like you, and there’s nobody you recognise, say, from your street, and everybody looks exactly the same, then I think you would feel quite excluded from that space, really.

It’s about how you make that emphasis on everybody being welcome, and then how you live that, really, through the project.

Interviewer: It’s predominantly used by fishermen and birdwatchers at the moment, who are-

Clare Coghill: Yes, it is. About ten thousand a year, isn’t it? That many.

Interviewer: Yes, and in terms of their profile, although they are diverse in terms of country of origin, they are predominantly white males.

Clare Coghill: Yes.

Interviewer: In terms of their sense of ownership, some of them have fished those reservoirs man and boy, learning from their father.

Clare Coghill: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Is there a potential risk that actually they will feel in some way displaced/alienated by this [Crosstalk 0:32:34]?

Clare Coghill: I think so, definitely. One of the ones that was interviewed when I was interviewed as well, so I was talking about all the benefits, and how lovely it will be that everyone comes down there, and he was going, “Oh, it’s terrible everyone is going to come down here now.”

So, I do understand that, and I do understand there’s something very special about being in green space, and feeling relaxed and at ease, and safe, and calm, and quiet, and no-one is going to…

If you're a bloke who finds it hard to talk about your feelings, and you take your lad out there, and you're teaching him, and you have a quiet moment and you say, “I'm so proud of you, son, the way you’ve done it.”

If you feel like you're going to be overheard by fifty people, maybe you would be less inclined to have that intimate moment, and to feel that special connection in nature, which obviously prompts that more thoughtful reflection. Well, I find it does anyway.

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: The reality is I feel very, very protective of the idea of opening it up. Because there will be opportunities for those people to still enjoy that space in the way that they have. They will see that.

Who knows? What might start to happen is they have almost got a load of groupies, who are like, “Oh, they're fishing. Oh, this is lovely.” That people appreciate what they're doing. They see the skill in what they're doing. They're more engaged.

Also, frankly, it’s not okay to have 211 hectares, in dense, congested London, not accessible, only to ten-thousand people. In a city of ten-million, you can’t have what becomes a back garden extension, effectively, for the lucky ten-thousand who use it through the year.

I'm not even sure if that figure I'm quoting is right. Someone told me that.

Interviewer: No, they do have anything from ten and twenty-thousand permits, but they could be repeat. So ten thousand is-

Clare Coghill: Is visits?

Interviewer: Yes, so it’s-

Clare Coghill: Miniscule, really.

Interviewer: When you consider it’s such a densely populated part of London.

Clare Coghill: Completely.

Interviewer: With lots of people with no green space, in terms of their immediate experience.

Clare Coghill: Yes. Gosh.

Interviewer: Benefits, challenges, tensions, connection to water.

[Silence 0:34:57 - 0:35:09].

Interviewer: Connectivity. You’ve started already on this, because you’ve spoken about connectivity politically.

Clare Coghill: Yes.

Interviewer: I wondered if we could talk about connectivity and a range of different [Crosstalk].

Clare Coghill: Yes, definitely.

Interviewer: And what you think this opening up may or may not enable, either physically, or between different communities, different user groups, either travelling through-

Clare Coghill: Definitely. You know what? I think this is fascinating and really important. It’s what lots of people don’t understand about our borough, and what they don’t understand about London, is that there is loads and loads and loads of connectivity that I see every day in Waltham Forest. Loads and loads and loads of overlap. Loads of people who know one another.

Parts of Walthamstow, not just Walthamstow Village, parts of Walthamstow operate like a village. Whole families, whole extended families live in one house, and they live a few doors down from another large extended family that they are also related to.

If you are a young person growing up in Walthamstow it’s very, very hard to go somewhere quiet, and be somewhere where you won’t necessarily be recognised.

It’s why I think that being able to lose yourself in that big space is going to be profoundly important. Because obviously you can get on the Tube, and you can do that in Oxford Street. You can do that easy-peasy. But that’s not a nice way to do it.

Also it’s a very expensive way, and a way that means that unless you’ve got money to spend you can feel quite lost in a different way, and quite excluded in a different way.

I just think something I've observed when we’ve had new pubs and things open is that there was this very closed-in, tight-knit, core community in Walthamstow. That used to drink in the Rose and Crown. That used to campaign on the same few issues. And that used to, if I'm honest, in a reasonably self-congratulatory way, dictate through the media channels what Walthamstow was and what Walthamstow thought.

As we’ve seen different pubs open, different areas change and open up, is that there is much more diversity, and there is therefore more freedom for people to express differing views, without feeling like they are stepping out of acceptability.

Unlike where I grew up in the West Midlands. When you go down Broad Street in Birmingham you see a whole range of people, from different backgrounds, having a drink, having a chat, having a walk with their friends, on their mobile, on the bus, going about their business.

Despite the fact that London is obviously a bigger city, Walthamstow is far more closed-in than Birmingham is, for example. I find it far less integrated in some ways.

I hope that having a green space like that, and having that accessibility, will encourage some of our young people in particular to think on a bigger scale. To feel like they can go and disappear with a book, or with a friend, and they can go and have a little bit of freedom in that open space, which I think is profoundly important.

Interviewer: That’s really interesting. The word freedom comes up a lot.

Clare Coghill: I bet. It’s incredibly important. I think it is that thing of being able to walk and walk and walk, a long distance, and walk a circular route, and reflect.

Being in a big landscape, just not a closed-in road. Very important. Where you're unlikely to bump into someone you know. That’s a good thing sometimes. (Laughter)

It’s a very nice thing. People will do the research and say, “If you know somebody, that’s lovely”, and it is, but also, if you're a teenager growing up in Walthamstow, everybody knows your business.

Your GP is friends with your dad, and he sees him down the church or he sees him down the mosque. Your granny works with a load of women who still [work on the market 0:39:17]. You're wanting to go out with a girl, or a boy, and you're walking up the market, and everyone knows you and everyone sees you. Everyone then in your house hears about what you’ve been up to.

Interviewer: That’s incredibly claustrophobic.

Clare Coghill: Oh, claustrophobic. You can imagine if those young people in particular, or people of all ages, feel like, “You know what? See you later. I'm going to go out and yomp around and get lost.” I think that’s lovely. I can’t wait. (Laughter)

Interviewer: [Crosstalk 0:39:44]. (Laughter)

Clare Coghill: Can I go there now?

Interviewer: “Let me out.” (Laughter)

Clare Coghill: Yes, exactly.

Interviewer: That’s interesting, in terms of I was going to ask next around – we’ve spoken a lot about volunteers, and both sites will be volunteer-led and volunteer reliant.

Clare Coghill: Yes.

Interviewer: Which raises questions around the vulnerability of that model, but also questions around active citizenship.

Clare Coghill: Completely, yes.

Interviewer: I wondered if you could reflect on that.

Clare Coghill: Yes, definitely. There’s a project in my ward, and you might have come across it, called The Mill. I was involved in getting that set up, and I faced a lot of hostility.

Interviewer: Did you?

Clare Coghill: Yes, from the institution of the local authority, let’s say. It had been a library. It was closed. It became the focus for a significant anti-council campaign. So when I was first elected as a candidate I couldn’t even get in the room with those people. They knew I was a Labour candidate, and they didn’t want to talk to me at all.

I eventually had to obliquely organise a free yoga session, that I tricked some of them into coming to, so they had to talk to me. (Laughter)

They thought, “I suppose she’s not the most toxic person we’ve ever set eyes on, and she isn’t actually a councillor, so she will probably lose, so we may as well humour her.” Anyway, they humoured me, and I won.

Then I remember having a conversation with one of the volunteers, who now absolutely runs the place. She and I talked on a rainy night at a bus stop at Walthamstow Central, and she just said, “This has got to happen. There is no choice. We have to do it.”

Then I worked to get the council to not sell the building. I had it taken off the for sale list twice, and begged to do so, basically. I said, “I'm putting my neck on the line, and if it all goes wrong you can blame me, and I will take all the political [fallout 0:41:49].

It was my first year as a councillor. It was a pretty terrifying thing to do. I said, “I have faith in this community, and I know they can do it, and they can fundraise. I know they can do it.”

No-one had ever done it, you see. There wasn’t a community group that you could point to that had done it.

All I had done was I had facilitated. I think a good councillor, for me, is a facilitator. “I'm not telling you what to do. I'm not making you do anything. I'm empowering you to go and take control. That’s what I'm doing.

If there’s practical stuff that I can do to help you do that, then I will do it. For instance, if you need someone to take minutes in a meeting, I will take your minutes. If you need someone to make tea, I will make tea.

There’s no need to put me on the board. In fact, it’s not a bad idea, when you're setting up a charity or an organisation, to write a little clause that says you can’t have councillors on the board. You can’t have anybody who has just got a title in front of their name, or thinks that it would be a feather in their cap to sell themselves at election time.”

They wanted me on the board, and I said, “The best thing you can do is write a rule that says councillors can’t be on the board.” I said, “I will still work, and what I will ask you to do is come election time, if anybody asks you ‘Who should I vote for?’ say ‘Well, Clare Coghill has done a lot of work for us.’”

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: A face to face endorsement is more powerful than writing ‘and I'm on the board of a charity’ on my literature, which nobody reads anyway.

Interviewer: Yes, [which nobody reads 0:43:08].

Clare Coghill: Absolutely. Apparently this research was done in America. One hundred and forty-four leaflets get you one vote. Ten face to face conversations get you at least one vote. So, talk to people. And if people see what you do and get on with it.

Anyway, a long-winded way of saying I'm one of the people who has great faith in the community to do stuff, but they also need money to do it. Volunteers can’t do miracles. Well, they do miracles all the time, but there is some stuff that breaks the camel’s back.

They were able to do what they were able to do because the marvellous Alison Griffin wrote a bid to Nesta for £150,000, and they won it. That was a tremendous game-changer. No organisation that was campaigning at that time in Waltham Forest put in a bid like that and won it. Nothing came close.

I'm banging on about The Mill because it’s so close to the wetlands. So many events have been held there.

I think there is that sense of, “You know what? Volunteers can do [some 0:44:12]”, but you need to make sure they have got some money. They do have to have budgets for events. They do have to have, even it’s one or two core staff, to do the facilitating.

Because there are lots of volunteers who have time on their hands because of mental health issues, because of depression, because of isolation. Those people themselves, if you're not ready to deal with that, you're not equipped to deal with that, that can become a very time-consuming, emotionally demanding thing.

That can drive away the volunteers from becoming involved. I've seen it happen myself, and it’s very, very debilitating for everyone involved.

I don’t like the idea of a Big Society, where all volunteers just have to crack on and do it. I do think well-run, well-managed volunteering can be phenomenal, but I think you have to be careful about not abusing people’s openness and willingness to work for nothing. Because that’s what they're doing.

Interviewer: Yes. [We’re out of time 0:45:08], so let’s race through and make sure...

This is particularly around the – linked to this – routes to participate, [your time as a volunteer 0:45:27], groups to shape it.

Clare Coghill: Oh, gosh.

Interviewer: Because of this curious mixed ownership model, mixed ownership/delivery model.

Clare Coghill: Yes.

Interviewer: Where are the routes to shape, have a voice, influence for a site like Walthamstow Wetlands?

Clare Coghill: It’s a great question. I can’t speak on Woodberry, but in terms of Walthamstow Wetlands I think even as a very empowered, forthright, confident cabinet member, I inherited a lot of what I have, so I wouldn’t even say I have had a hand in shaping it.

I can to a degree now, but it was the people who created those plans in the first place, and then funders who have said what we can and can’t do. They obviously have a significant hand in it.

I think there is a risk, isn’t there, when you’ve got lots of people involved in something, that all of a sudden everyone looks around and realises, “Oh, no-one is holding this. No-one is driving this. No-one is leading this”? I think that’s a real issue, but it’s why it’s important to get that connectivity right.

Interviewer: What about local people? What did they have to say? “Well, actually, Walthamstow Wetlands means the world to me. I want to shape it”? The waterside residents [Crosstalk 0:46:47] [earlier on today].

Clare Coghill: Completely. The magical Elizabeth. I'm so relaxed about that. I'm so relaxed about that. I know not everybody is, because it’s a weird thing to get yourself elected and then give all your power away, but I'm so relaxed about that.

Because there are people who are custodians. You can’t ask them to do the work for free and then not give them any power, if they want it. I just think it won’t work if they don’t have that sense of ownership and direction.

Interviewer: Do you think they will be given that?

Clare Coghill: Well, no, if I'm honest, because I don’t see how Thames Water would be able to hand it over. I think they would find that phenomenally difficult.

I can imagine a situation where there are elements, where the local community does have that type and sense of ownership. I can imagine that happening.

Particularly when we’ve got the precedent of The Mill that you can point to. Especially when you’ve got the volunteer engagement at William Morris Gallery to point to. I think that all helps set the scene a bit for quite a healthy open relationship between institutions and people.

Interviewer: I think I've got one more question.

The consultation process, were you involved in that at all? Or are you not able to comment on that?

Clare Coghill: Oh, the consultation process? Yes, I can comment on that. The consultation process that ran in parallel with the bid do you mean?

Interviewer: Yes.

Clare Coghill: Well, to be honest, it was before I had the portfolio. I was underwhelmed, to say the least, because I was not contacted in my capacity as the ward member, a very, very active ward councillor. I know at least two people on every road in my ward. That’s why [I got a great number of votes 0:48:51] at the last election. I wasn’t approached at that stage in proceedings.

Interviewer: That’s interesting.

Clare Coghill: Because not everybody thinks to contact councillors. I can understand it, but I just thought that I could have opened my network.

Interviewer: \_\_\_.

Clare Coghill: Yes, exactly. Young, old, inaccessible people.

Interviewer: To be part of that?

Clare Coghill: Yes.

Interviewer: Because I think LWT struggled to get the numbers they wanted.

Clare Coghill: LWT?

Interviewer: Yes, [Crosstalk 0:49:28].

Clare Coghill: They didn’t pick up the phone to me. That could have been so easily done. Such is life. LWT and myself are working very closely together now.

I do understand that. The perception that lots of people have of local councillors is not very engaged older people, who want to be mayor one day, and take photos of themselves looking grumpy with potholes. In the local councillor world there is a whole website dedicated to that.

Interviewer: Or dog poo.

Clare Coghill: Or dog poo. Don’t forget dog poo. If I had £1 for every time I talk about dog poo. Do you know what I mean? (Laughter)

That is the perception. I understand that in London there is a different group of councillors, in our 30s and 40s, here to change the world, not messing, happy to empower communities, who are active and out there all the time, and could give you a list as long as your arm of people from right across the community.

Interviewer: Do you hope for that to be part of your role, in terms of working with LWT going forward?

Clare Coghill: I think it already is. I think we’ve already had a successful transition to that point, really. They came to my community ward forum recently, so that was excellent.

Rachel has already done a lot of capacity building, and there are people that she has met that I haven’t had contact with, so who knows? It might have actually been beneficial for her to be in that position, and the people who worked on it before her as well, because she wasn’t originally involved.

Interviewer: No, she wasn’t involved.

Clare Coghill: For those people who have started from a different point. Because if I've got my network, sometimes the network can work against you getting different people involved.

Interviewer: Yes. [You’re not 0:51:14] \_\_\_ the usual suspects.

Clare Coghill: The usual suspects. Yes, exactly.

Interviewer: We’re out of time. Thank you so much for your time.

Clare Coghill: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed it. It’s a pleasure to have an excuse to reflect on it a bit. It is going to be phenomenal. It’s going to be-

END AUDIO

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