



CLISSOLD PARK USER GROUP CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT

March 2012 - February 2013

The Clissold Park User Group has existed for over twenty years and is open to everyone who uses or cares about the park. We hold six meetings a year to which everyone is welcome. We work closely with Hackney Council to improve the park.

1. A park for everyone

2012 saw the completion of the major capital works in the park and the beginning of the second phase of the HLF/Big Lottery works which focuses on bringing more and different people into the park and providing a wide range of educational, physical and recreational activities.

The focus of the User Group continues to be on ensuring that absolutely everyone feels welcome in the park and that we help to ensure considerate sharing of this wonderful public space. This is not always easy with so many different people using the park in so many different ways. Parks such as our have something unique and very special to offer to everyone and our priority is to make sure that people continue to use the park in ways which allow everyone to continue to enjoy it. The best way we can do this is by encouraging people to listen to each other's point of view and find workable compromises where there is a risk of conflict.

Anecdotally it seems that the park is becoming busier and busier. We now have more visitors from further afield with the park becoming a "destination". With new housing being developed, particularly around Green Lanes, we expect this to continue. This means we need to have a better understanding of who is using the park and what they expect from it. We also need to ensure that the park is equipped to deal with these increasing numbers and the changing expectations that park users bring with them. The Council is installing electronic counters on the gates and the first annual survey of park users will be run this summer. This should help us to get a better picture of what people want from the park and how they use it.

2. Key issues addressed by the group this year

This year has been a bit quieter than last year when all the work was taking place. Nevertheless, we have dealt with many different issues.

2.1 Park management: Eleanor Potter, the Interim Park Manager, has now been in post since January 2012. Elle has worked tirelessly to improve the day-to-day management of the park. The user group pushed for many years to have a single person responsible for all aspects of the park and Eleanor has amply demonstrated the value of this post. We very much hope that the post will soon be filled on a permanent basis. User Group officers have developed a strong working relationship with Elle and she is always ready to listen and act on our concerns and suggestions. Ian Holland joined the Council as Head of Green Spaces and has been working hard behind the scenes to tackle some of the long standing issues within the park. In July 2012 Elle was joined by Lucy Gijsen, the new Park Development Officer. Lucy has overseen a number of events including the Big Draw in October 2012 and has developed and begun to promote and deliver the new programme for primary schools.

2.2 The House: The House is now well established as a venue for a wide range of different activities. During 2012 there were weddings and other events across the year and there is now a regular programme of weekly booking including the Stoke Newington Quakers, various sessions for mothers and young children and exercise classes as well as regular mid-week bookings for training, conferences etc.

The user group has always wanted to ensure that the house fulfils the two equally important principles that lay behind the plans to bring the House back into public use. We want the rooms in the house to be used by organisations which provide services to a wide range of local people and which are free for them to use. With the Council taking over responsibility for Public Health in April we hope the Council will feel there is a new impetus to use both the park and house to improve health and wellbeing in the borough. The user group chair now sits on the Stoke Newington Sport for Social Change Network which aims to make a difference to the lives of people of all ages through a wide range of opportunities for sport and physical activity.

2.3 The Café: The poor summer was challenging for the café with six summer weekends in a row being complete wash-outs and many, many weeks of rain when the park was almost completely empty. By contrast there were a few weekends when the sun shone and hundreds of people flocked to the park and the café. This presented some real challenges to the café. We hope that having had a full year getting to know the park, the café is now better placed to provide the sort of service that local people want. During 2012 we continued to hear concerns about the café in terms of poor/slow service and unsuitable menus. Company of Cooks responded to these demands by changing the menu, adding some cheaper, simpler food including much requested baked potatoes. Late in 2012 a new operations manager was appointed and the café decided to move from table service to a counter service. This is still bedding down but does appear to be working better – the real test will come when/if the sun comes out!

2.3 Tennis club: After many years and several planning applications, permission was granted for Hackney City Tennis, which started life in Clissold Park around ten years ago, to put lighting on the courts and this is now being installed. The old park rangers' house at 3 Queen Elizabeth's Walk has been demolished and a new club house for the tennis club is to be built on the site. Although the lighting is being installed now (March 2013), it will not be turned on until the club house is in use and a detailed management plan is agreed to ensure that access to the park and the hours of lighting meet the requirements of the planning application. We expect building work to begin on the house in the Summer with completion in Spring 2014. We hope that the lighting and the club house will allow local people, young and old, to make better use of the courts during the winter months without causing too much disturbance to those people who overlook the courts.

2.4 Events: The summer of 2012 saw an extended programme of large events in the park as park made up of regular annual events and events focused on the Olympics. The appalling weather meant that most of these events suffered from low attendances. As the summer went on the park became seriously waterlogged and, despite considerable efforts to mitigate the effects, the park suffered considerable damage, particularly to the grass on the Green Lanes side. We were very excited that the Olympic Torch was coming to the park along with Hackney's Torch festival including a carnival and dancers from Rio de Janeiro. Sadly this followed several other events and in the end, to our great disappointment, it was decided that the park was not in a fit state to host the festival. On balance this was probably the right decision given the state of the park and the fact that numbers turning up for Torch events in other places were massively above predicted levels but after many days of planning it was a great loss to us nonetheless.

The Council has been planning to review its handling of events in parks for some time and we were pleased to have the opportunity to feed into this, reflecting on the many issues which had arisen over the summer. The view of the user group, expressed in several meetings and correspondence we received was that there was a need to reduce the number and length of events, particularly those where large areas of the park were fenced off for long periods and where there was amplified music. A new policy for events is due to be agreed shortly by the Council. It will ensure that there is a limited number of large events and that they are not held on consecutive weekends. There will also be much tighter controls on how the events are managed with stricter overseeing by the Council particularly with regard to noise, physical damage to the park etc. We are hoping that further work will be done on event planning in coming years to improve the quality of programming so that this is done strategically and not simply on the basis of whoever happens to put in an application.

2.5 Trees: a full audit of the 1000 trees in the park was completed in November 2012. T As a result a significant number of trees were found to be dangerous or at risk and various measures have been taken to address this including the felling of some trees and the removal of limbs on others. There is now a full GPS map of the trees. There is also a plan for future planting to ensure that the right trees are planted in the right places. A policy is being developed for the planting of memorial or celebratory trees so that they fit in with the new plans in terms of the choice of tree and its location.

3. User involvement

I would like to thank the many individual park users who have come to our meetings. We have had an average of about forty people at each of our meetings this year, some of whom are regular attendees whilst others have attended because of an interest in or concern about a particular issue. We have also had input from other users through our presence on Facebook (130 members up from 175 last year), via email and letter (over 350 on our emailing list up from 300 last year and 40 on our snail mail list) and our website (25,000 separate visitors this year up from 21,700 last year). We continue to receive correspondence from park users including a number of complaints. This year we received around 30 complaints. The majority of these were about the café, noise and disruption from events and dogs running off lead in the park.

Thanks are also due to all those people who have given their time as reps for particular issues who have not only dealt with these issues on our behalf but have also contributed to our occasional committees where we have addressed some issues in detail through the year.

4. User Group projects and events

The opening of the House and the establishment of the staff team meant that we were able to start running events and activities in the House. During 2012 we led a series of guided walks around the house. In September we helped at the Open House event which was attended by over 400 visitors. A few weeks later the House team organised a Big Draw event which was attended by around 250 people, again with User Group volunteers. The User Group held a "One Year On" (from the House Opening) party in December attended by around 35 people. With a raffle and bar we raised £300 for our future events and projects.

Early in 2012 we held a series of Tree Walks led by Russell Millar of the Tree Musketeers. Several further walks were held in early 2013.

5. Thanks: thanks, as always, are due to the rangers and gardeners who continued to work hard for the park throughout the grim summer and the cold winter. Thanks are also due to Eleanor Potter and Lucy Gijzen and to Emma Finch and Ollie Brennan from GLL who have made the House one of the most popular venues in Hackney. Thanks also to Company of Cooks and the café staff for providing teas and coffees for our meetings.

Finally thanks must go to all the User Group officers who have contributed in different ways over the last year: Ken Worpole our Honorary President, John Hudson and Richard Logan, our Vice Chairs (Richard resigned during the year), Anna Gualtieri our Treasurer, Delilah Jeary, our minutes secretary and to Isabelle Gore who runs our website. We have a number of special interest reps who have also played an important role in the Group and to whom thanks are also due: dog walker rep, Yvonne Hill, Hilde Oord and Alex Watson our fundraising team; Mark Forsyth our dog walkers' representative; disability and access reps, Anthony Larvin and Carol Lynn Scott; our biodiversity rep Liz Fewings our rep for children and families, Lisa Gormley; Darren Barber our sports' rep; the skatepark reps and older people's rep Sylvia Anderson. Thanks also to Lorraine Worpole for her photographs for the party. Special thanks to Tim Leahy who worked with us all, with infinite patience, to produce our lovely new logo.

