



CLISSOLD PARK USER GROUP CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT

March 2013 - February 2014

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

The park benefitted this year from a lovely summer when much of the new landscaping and planting became better established showing us the real impact of the restoration work. The combination of fine weather and the growing popularity of the park meant that between the May and the end of 2013 our new gate counters clocked well over two million separate visits to the park. This means we have already exceeded the annual target set as part of the HLF funded project.

Despite the park sometimes being extremely busy, people still seem to enjoy their visits: the user survey run in the summer showed that 94% of those who responded were satisfied or very satisfied with the park.

All the major strands of development work are now well established. Since April 2013 there have been 757 bookings in the House involving 16,500 people; 140,000 transactions in the café and 65 educational workshops involving 1652 primary school children. Income from all these activities has helped to pay for maintenance work on the House and has also helped fund others works in the park.

2. The role of the User Group

The focus of the User Group continues to be on ensuring that everyone feels welcome 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.

Central to this is a close working relationship with the Council both through the park staff and, at a more strategic level, with senior managers and councillors. We are lucky to have strong support from Cllr Jonathan McShane and Ian Holland, Head of Leisure and Green Spaces through the Clissold Park Development Board.

We know that many people are not able, or do not want, to come to our meetings and we have therefore focused more this year on developing our profile in other ways including Facebook and Twitter as well as holding a number of social and community events.

3. Key issues addressed by the group this year

3.1 Park and House management: Eleanor Potter, who has been interim park manager for almost two years, has finally become the permanent manager of the park. She has continued to work tirelessly and with great determination to improve the day-to-day management of the park. The whole park and house team has continued to deliver high quality events, a number of volunteering programmes and the very popular schools' programme. Eleanor is currently on maternity leave and has been temporarily replaced by Bruce Irving. The partnership working between the park staff and the user group is very strong and we are grateful to them for being responsive to our requests and concerns at all times.

3.2 The Café: The café continues to be very popular but the survey in the Summer showed that there was still some dissatisfaction value for money, the menus and the quality of service. Only 58% were satisfied. The shift from table service to counter service has made some difference although we still receive reports of very long waits for food and hot drinks to be brought to tables.

We have continued to negotiate for changes in response to user complaints. In response to concerns about noise levels in the café, they are currently trialling a "quiet room". Further changes have been made to the menu to introduce some cheaper options including the introduction of a baked potato in response to campaigning by some members of the user group. Other steps have also been taken to improve the quality of service and in recent months feedback on service has improved.

3.3 Tennis club: New fencing and lighting have been installed on the tennis courts and work has started on building a new club house at 3 Queen Elizabeth's Walk. It is hoped that it will be completed by early Summer. Once the club house is in use, the club will start using the lights on the courts until 9.30pm when needed with managed access to the park through the club house entrance.

3.4 Events: This summer there were slightly fewer events in the park than in previous years as the revised Events Policy came into effect. Although these events were well attended on the whole, we received a small number of complaints about amplified noise, parking around the park and mess. We were very pleased therefore when Hackney decided to carry out a major review of all aspects of event planning and delivery in the borough's parks. For Clissold this has meant a number of meetings with the User Group to establish what the issues are for us; a detailed survey of the different spaces in the park to clarify what sort of events are most suitable and where these should take place; an acoustic survey to determine the impact of amplified sound on the park and its neighbours and a complete review of programming and contracting processes. An important aspect of this process for us is that, rather than simply taking bookings on an ad hoc basis from whoever happens to turn up, the Council will in future take a more proactive role, shaping the programming across the borough to suit locations and audiences.

We are clear that we want to retain some of the very popular events that take place every year in the park including cultural festivals and funfairs but we also want to have more "low key" and smaller scale events including live music, community events and cinema. We are very happy to receive and pass on any suggestions from park users or people who are interested in running events and activities.

3.5 Trees: A very significant number of the new trees that were planted as part of the restoration project have failed. In addition a number of serious storms in the last two years have brought down and damaged several mature trees. The Council is therefore planning a new planting programme which will be phased to ensure that full attention can be given to the new trees as they take root. Around 40 new trees are being planted early this Spring and a further 40 will be planted a year or so from now.

3.6 Dogs: Dog control orders came into force in the park during 2013. These mean that owners must keep their dogs under control in the park and put them on a lead if asked to do so. The Orders give enforcement officers the power to fine dog owners in certain circumstances. The User Group worked with the park management and the Council's enforcement team to develop a leaflet and poster campaign entitled "Lead by Example". Part of the aim of this was to make it clear to dog owners that dogs must be kept on leads around the outside terrace and the slope of the upper part of the café without the need for further enforcement.

4. Keeping in touch with users

We have had an average of about thirty-five 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 (310 up from 230 last year), through Twitter (250 followers) and via email (417 on our emailing list up from 370 last year). Visits to our website dropped from a high in the previous year (2012) of 25,000 to 21,700, similar to 2011. Our new website, launched in Spring 2013 and our new format newsletters are now fully compatible with smartphones and tablets and there has been a noticeable increase in the proportion of people accessing our information in these ways.

We have received a wide range of correspondence from park users – some complaints, but also many ideas and suggestions for the park as well as offers of help and support.

4. User Group events

We held a fundraising quiz in February 2013 which raised £1200 and was a great evening.

In July to celebrate 400 years of the New River we organised a walk from its source in Hertfordshire and in September we held a celebratory festival in the park.

We also helped with the Open House in September and the Big Draw in October.

We have started planning a number of events in 2014 to celebrate 125 years since the park was opened in 1889. We have also been closely involved in the plans to bring an ice rink to the park at the end of this year.

5. Thanks

Thanks, as always, are due to all the park staff including the park keepers and gardeners. Thanks too to Eleanor Potter, the park manager and Lucy Gijzen, who runs the schools and volunteering programme. We'd also like to thank Emma Finch and Ollie Brennan from GLL for their hard work in running the venue and the other staff working with them.

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 our Vice Chair and Secretary; Anna Gualtieri our Treasurer; Delilah Jeary, our minutes secretary and to Isabelle Gore who designs and 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: Yvonne Hill and Hilde Oord who set up and ran the hugely successful fundraising quiz; Alex Watson who is advising us on changing our legal status; Mark Forsyth our dog walkers' representative; Anthony Larvin our disability rep; Liz Fewings our biodiversity rep; Wendy Forrest our runs rep; Darren Barber our sports' rep; John Dye the skatepark rep and Sylvia Anderson our older people's rep. I would also like to thank Cath Goldstein, Roderick Ryan and Cath Willgress and all the other volunteers who helped out at our New River Event.

Caroline Millar, Chair

1 March 2014