

Friends of Waterlow Park response to consultation

Email sent to Camden 15th December 2008

Dear Camden

I write on behalf of the Friends of Waterlow Park to give a response to the proposed play area. We have already relayed some of our concerns to Peter Stewart in my letter of 18th November. Firstly it is very important to note that FoWP as a group does not oppose the idea of an additional play area in principle. Indeed FoWP was behind the original idea when it was first mooted in connection with the Heritage Lottery fund application. Any notion that we are hostile [as we have had said to us is the prevailing view in Camden] is wrong. But we do have some concerns which cover the following issues:

- * the consultation process
- * the planning issue
- * the play area site
- * the type of equipment

We are sharing with you the information we obtained from the adults and children that we canvassed. They are in the attachments.

The consultation process

The whole issue of public consultation has been very badly handled. Firstly FoWP was only made aware of the whole issue of a proposed play area by accident at the end of an apparently two week period allocated to consultation when a member of the committee was approached in the park by one of the project design team. A meeting was hurriedly arranged with FoWP, a designer and Camden staff where we were told about the scheme and how successful the consultation with children at St Joseph's School [not in the borough of Camden though a keen park user] had been as they were enthusiastic. This did not seem a remotely appropriate way to handle public consultation about something so important and we said so.

FoWP subsequently expressed some concerns having done some investigation among its members and also "ordinary" park users. These were expressed in my letter of 18th November. The response to this was Peter Stewart's letter of 4th December which I received on 5th telling me that there would be a week long consultation period starting on Saturday 6th to 14th. There was nothing in the local newspaper to alert people to this nor, I understand, on Camden's own website. Leaflets were distributed widely in the area about the proposal but were inevitably not very informative and did not give any options. The display was put up on Thursday 11th but it was not till Saturday 13th that it was staffed so that queries could be raised. The exhibition very much gave the impression that there was no real room for manoeuvre. People were able to fill in a very short questionnaire asking them if they wanted a play area or not and for other comments.

Concerned about the lack of information about all this, FoWP had brought forward the launch of its website and worked to produce more information so that people could make a more informed choice including a short survey which allowed people more opportunity to express their views on a wider range of issues. However the shortness of the actual period of public consultation combined with no effective warning of it and it being held at one of the busiest times of the year before Christmas mean that FoWP feel that the whole process of consultation has been a travesty.

There are genuinely very different feelings about the park among our membership as among the range of park users. It is vitally important that a proper consultation was held so that the best possible compromise could have been established about something so important for the park.

The planning issue

I am very concerned to hear that “none of the play area proposals need planning permission” [Peter Stewart’s letter of 4th December]. This is contrary to what we were initially given to understand. As Camden requires planning permission for the temporary structures like the concert stage at Kenwood or the Heath ice rink it is really difficult to know why Waterlow Park should be exempt for what will be permanent structures with a real effect on the park. We are still taking advice on this.

The play area site

This is the crucial issue. While some people are in favour of the proposed site 4 because they want a play area whatever, others, who want a play area, are not happy with this site for a number of reasons. In addition the choice of this site has really inflamed some people who either don’t want a play area at all or who don’t mind either way but certainly don’t want it there. As there are very different segments of the public who use the park over the year, week, day, FoWP’s job is to try and find a solution which works for the vast majority of people.

The concerns fall in to 5 main categories

- * the impact on the park as a whole
- * reduction in key informal play space
- * location in relation to other play area
- * security
- * drainage problems

If you look at our pdf “impact zones” you will see we have tried to show the greater impact site 4 will have than 5 in terms of visibility etc. People have said that “it will be the first thing that hits you if you come in by Swain’s Lane”; it will “spoil the vista of a the park as a green and calm place”; it takes up “an enormous piece of ground” these and very similar ideas are behind people’s concern with this site from an aesthetical point of view. Others have pointed out that they do not want to lose one of the few flat areas where one off events can take place or where historically children have used it for the type of ball game activity which needs something flat. It is, after all, colloquially know as “the football field”. A play area in site 4 would lead to a reduction in informal play space. Nobody plays in site 5 so a play area here would extend the capacity of the park for children’s play!.

There has been concern among many parents about the play areas not being near enough together to watch different age children at once. Clearly older children would be allowed /encouraged to go on their own but for parents with children say 4 and 7 this would be a problem and indeed parents told this would be a concern even for up to 9 year olds. Site 5 was therefore preferred as it is next to the current play area. Some parents assumed there would be security staff in any new play area but we have to assume this would not be the case nor that the area would be fenced in to encourage greater security. Indeed FoWP would be very concerned if there was any attempt to “fence“ in as this would be very intrusive.

But very importantly too among the comments we have heard are that contrary to what Camden has said this site also gets waterlogged and so the argument that there would be drainage problems with 5 but not site 4 may not hold up. This point needs to be taken seriously as the person making it has been in the park most days each week for over 40 years!

The type of equipment

There has been no proper consultation about the type of equipment to be used. No range of different types of equipment have been shown enabling people to consider options. While we recognise that the structures proposed are wooden etc this in no way is naturalistic play in a way which fits into the environment. The type of equipment is intimately related to the site chosen. FoWP could accept the currently proposed equipment in Site 5 as it would be less obtrusive there. However there is no way that the current equipment could be anything other than obtrusive in the current proposal taking up as we were told on Saturday two thirds of the site 4 with marked out paths etc.

We know that other parks in other boroughs have got much more naturalistic play equipment but in the time available have not been able to research this more thoroughly but this is something that should have been done by Camden or we could have done if this proposal had been considered in a more timely fashion.

Our information

We are sending you the information we collected from people who managed to get to our website [as it was only opened on Wednesday not a lot of people knew about it] and also from school children who we asked about their current usage of the park and their likes and dislikes . We also asked them about older and younger brothers and sisters to get some idea of the likelihood of different age children being in the park at once. All this is attached.

In summary FoWP is NOT against a new play area for older children. It is against hasty decisions being made and permanent play structures inappropriate introduced into this historic park without proper consultation with the Friends and regular park users

I hope you will take these points into consideration. I fear that the whole consultation however has been a sham

Ceridwen Roberts

Chair FoWP