

Waterlow Park and the People who use it: birds, dogs and flowers.

Summary.

In November (2009), the Friends of Waterlow Park spent a day talking to the people who use the park. The purpose was to hear what they had to say about the Park and to discuss three ideas to improve it: re-opening the aviary, starting a dog club with opportunities for training, and involving local people in a gardening club.

Altogether we spoke to 75 people who between them allowed us to complete 57 questionnaires. (Couples and groups were counted as one response.) Everyone we spoke to loved the park, using it for exercise, with their children or simply for pleasure. Just under three quarters of the people supported the re-opening of the aviary. There was concern about dog fouling and that a few owners failed to respond to requests to control them. However, there was a feeling that anyone who behaved in this way was unlikely to respond to offers of training through a dog club. People thought a gardening club would attract volunteers who wanted to be involved in garden projects but not many felt that they had time to become involved.

Amongst the people we talked to were men with dogs, men with children, men on their own, women with dogs, women with children, women on their own, couples and a group of four people (with dogs) Most of them (42) used the Park often, visiting more than once a week and often every day. The rest came less frequently because they lived further away. A few were visiting for the first time. Several of the people who lived further away had been brought up near to the park and had happy memories of time spent there in their childhood. Several people remembered Charlie the Mynah bird who used to be in the aviary and the things he used to say. Others remembered putting a coin in the slot to 'feed' the birds in the aviary. The majority of those we spoke to, loved the park; it's space, its trees, its gardens and its views. One person said, *'A lovely park. It's really old-fashioned. Could you bring the bandstand back?'* Another said, *'The park is a wonderful place. Full of quiet and calmness.'*

The fact that people brought their children and dogs regularly or just walked in the park, indicates that it is a valuable resource for activities and for enjoyment and not just for local people. The fact that people came back to visit once they had moved away, sometimes bringing their own children, suggests that the park plays an important part across the generations. Sir Sydney Waterlow would appreciate that.

Although we asked three specific questions, about the aviary, the dog and gardening clubs, the spontaneous comments people made during our conversations give a wider view of what things people appreciated. They also made suggestions about the things that could be improved. Many of these comments were about the upkeep of the park, the tree work, the landscaping. The efforts of the gardeners were obviously appreciated. The new playground and the materials used in its construction had brought pleasure to many parents and their children:

'The new playground is brilliant- a major improvement.' and, *'I like the playground with its use of natural materials.'* In this context, several people mentioned that the toddlers' playground could do with some improvements. One mother said, *The toddlers*

playground should be nearer the older children's playground because if you have children of different ages, it's hard to watch both of them. 'One or two parents regretted the removal of the 'horse.'

A few people mentioned the attraction of the tennis courts; *I really enjoy the tennis. If you can do anything to support the tennis, that would be good.* ' But three people were critical: of the poor surfaces and the cost; *The tennis is too expensive. When it rains, it should be free.*

The removal of the fence around the fountain was appreciated, adding to its attraction.

The wild life (upper) pond attracted less positive comments mainly about the fact that it had been closed for some time, and that it could be dangerous: *There are health and safety issues with the decking of the upper pond. It's not safe when it's wet. But I'd like to see it opened.*

People who made these comments couldn't understand why the problems hadn't been sorted out before now.

A few people expressed appreciation about the signs in the park that told people what was happening, about tree felling, for example. Several people felt that there needed to be more signs pointing out where things were (toilets) and what was happening, and why. One or two people said that the NO CYCLING signs should be more evident at all the entrances, Cycling, by adults, not small children, was felt to be dangerous to other park users. A few people felt that there should be signs telling people not to feed the birds.

On the negative side, people were critical of the fact that vehicles were regularly parked (and drove through), all over the park; *Every day there are vans and those mobile things driving through and parked all over. I've written to councilors about it and recently there was a letter in the local paper.*

One person thought the park centre was a poorly used resource, and badly signposted.

Several people had noticed more rats around the park recently, particularly near the recently cleared reed beds and close to the children's playgrounds, and felt they were a risk to children playing there.

Concerns about vandalism and security were mentioned, particularly at night. One person thought the drainage was bad especially after rain. One person wanted the park to be open when it snowed and another wanted it to open earlier in the winter. One person wanted more events but another person didn't want more. Another person mentioned the fact that there had been *loud music* on occasions and that *it ruins the peacefulness of the park.*

The aviary

We asked specifically about the aviary and whether people would like it to be opened again, because Camden is consulting the public about this. Just under three quarters of the people we talked to (41 of 57) were in favour of it re-opening. A few of these people (6) said they would prefer it if the aviary was used as a rescue centre for injured birds, as it had been in the past. Seven people were not in favour because they didn't like the idea of birds in cages. Three people had no comment to make. Some of the people who were in favour of re-opening, felt it would be very nice for children, *My son is very interested in nature and he would like it.* One person said, *That's a nice idea. It would enhance the tranquility of the park.* Others felt it was sad to see it empty. Another person who wasn't sure if it was a good idea to re-open the aviary said, *I think I prefer natural birds. What about peacocks on the lawn?*

When we talked to people about the aviary, we mentioned that fact that the R.S.P.C.A. had no objections to caged birds as long as they were small breeds (budgies and cockatoos). Some people said that they would have no objections as long as the aviary had only these small birds and that they were properly looked after. One person was in favour as long as it wasn't at the expense of *'things of higher priority in the park.*

Dogs and a dog club.

Just under half of the people we talked to thought that a dog club would be a good idea (26 of 56). Quite a few of these were dog owners who said it was a good idea but they themselves would not be interested. There was much less interest in this idea than in the re-opening of the aviary; partly because a lot of people were not dog owners but also because it raised the issue of the unpleasantness of dog dirt around the park. Some people, both dog owners and non-dog owners, were sceptical that those people with dogs who let them run wild or failed to pick-up their mess, were the least likely to join a club or to be prepared to go to training sessions.

One person said, *I'm all for keeping dogs under control. A club would create a culture for people to speak out to those who don't pick up (their mess).*

Quite a lot of people mentioned the danger to children of dog dirt being left around the park, and several disliked large dogs racing around or jumping up at them. One or two people said they had, in the past, asked dog owners to pick up the dog dirt but had been ignored; *It's OK for dogs to run wild but those who don't pick-up...I've tackled a few of them in the past and been ignored.* Two people said all dogs should have licenses and another said that all dogs should be kept on leads, Several people mentioned the lack of dog litter bins around the park.

Garden volunteers

Many of the people we talked to thought involving local people in gardening projects was something they would support, even if they wouldn't want to be involved themselves. (28=49%) Six people said they would want to get involved. One person suggested we might approach the Whittington estate residents association which is thinking of starting a gardening club. Seventeen people said they couldn't get involved because they didn't

have time. Two of these (men) thought that their wives might be interested. Several people said it would be good to involve children too.

Some people thought it was good to be involved especially if people didn't have gardens themselves. Others felt that gardening projects were a good idea because *hands on work is very satisfying* or that *ort it is a good form of exercise*.

Number of views expressed about:

Aviary re-opening	Yes (with small birds)	Yes BUT (rescue only)	Not in favour	Not Answered	Total
	41	6	7	3	57
Dog club- a good idea	Yes	Raised issues of control (dirt & training)	Other (not answered, leads/licensing)	Total	
	26	16	15	57	
Garden volunteers	A good idea	Would volunteer	No, too busy	Not answered	Total
	28	6	17	6	57

Conclusion

Although the outcomes of these discussions with park users are not in any sense representative , they do provide an indication that there is a lot of support to re-open the aviary, some support for a dog club and offered us six potential volunteers for gardening projects. Perhaps, most importantly, it demonstrates that Waterlow Park is a great favourite with local people and with some people from other boroughs, further afield. It's natural beauty and well maintained gardens and play areas, were appreciated by all those we talked to.