

November Round-up of Borough Parks Forum News

Barnet

False economy of ceasing to lock parks at night and inspiration for other Borough's to set up Forums – message from the Chair, Roger Chapman

I became Chair of my local open space in January 2019. It is a piece of Ancient wood land called Cherry Tree Wood in East Finchley, Barnet. Later that month I became aware that Barnet Council were intending, for financial reasons, to cease locking parks and open spaces that up until then had been locked. This had been done before – back in the late 1990s – and then the Council reversed their decision 2 years later because the cost of dealing with the increased vandalism and anti-social behaviour outweighed the cost of locking the open spaces up.

I thought this needed some action and so wrote to my local newspapers, started a petition on 38 degrees opposing the proposal. Within a few weeks there were some 2000 plus signatures on the petition. What also became clear was that a number of other Friends groups across the Borough were concerned about this and many other open space issues but there wasn't a network where such matters could be discussed. In talking to Council officers about closing parks it became clear that they were keen to have a forum where matters could be discussed and in fact it was an item in their Open Space Strategy that they wanted to deliver on.

Cutting a long story short I decided to set up an independent network of Friends Groups for Barnet. If we waited for the Council to set one up we could be waiting a long time but I think it is important that we maintain our independence to allow us to be a critical friend to Barnet. Critical when we need to be; putting pressure on them to deliver improvements to open spaces at a time when maintenance has been cut to the bone and yet the growing importance of green space for mental and physical health, wellbeing and tackling climate change is gaining recognition.

The inaugural meeting saw 15 friends groups represented; heard from senior Barnet Council officers and had Dave Morris extolling the need for networks to form and develop. That meeting was in July. Since then we have held another well attended Network meeting; have a programme of meetings planned for 2020; we are in discussions with the Council about funding grant applications and support from the Council and looking at common issues on crime in parks and water catchment areas with Brent and Harrow Forums. We have no formal constitution or bank account. We exist because people see the need for it. We meet at venues that groups already have and give us for free. Bureaucracy is kept to a minimum.

Barnet are still looking to cease locking Parks but have taken a more leisurely, phased approach to implementing their programme and with more emphasis on consultation with local parks users. That battle is still in progress. Other Friends groups have found the Network extremely useful. It is a place to share ideas and information. It is a place where groups can support one another. It is a place where we can get things done. It is a place where we have greater collective influence over Council decisions and thinking than if we tried to do things individually. Every borough needs a Forum of Friend groups.

Merton

Concern about the future of Merton in Bloom

Independent Merton Green Spaces Forum (IMGF) has had to campaign hard for Merton Council to run this in 2019. The Forum felt Merton did so in a half-hearted way with the results not getting circulated until pressed for them by IMGf. GDPR was cited as a reason for not sharing most of the winners and the results didn't go online.

Merton has already pulled out of London in Bloom citing financial constraints. The Forum fears for it in 2020 and beyond despite it being such an effective, affordable way to promote civic pride.

The Forum would like advice from other Boroughs about the existence, success and challenges they have faced – please provide feedback email: campaigns

Merton's favourite tree - Merton Tree Wardens collaborated with Merton Council in running this year's [competition](#) which was won by the fabulous Pagoda Tree on the site of the former Canons nursery in Mitcham. The former nursery is the subject of a planning application for housing by Merton Council's development arm Merantun Development. There is a [local campaign](#) to ensure the tree is protected.