

London Friends of Green Spaces Network

virtual general meeting on Monday 4 May 2020

Attending: Dave Morris (co-chair, LFGN + Lordship Rec), Alice Roberts (co-chair, CPRE + Hackney Downs), Laura Collins (LFGN and Figge's Marsh), Jean (Tooting Common), Alona (Mayow Park), Richard and Judy (Wandsworth Common), Joy and Tara (Woodcock Park), Helen Monger (LPGT + Lambeth), Elizabeth Sinclair, Charles (Coronation Gardens), Monika Sudek (Sydenham Wells), Pat Gross (Wandsworth Park), Adrian (Lloyd Park), Simon (Hilly Fields Park), John Griffiths (Gwendwr Gardens), Marian (Roe Green), Richard Desmond (Victoria Park), Rob (Fr of River Crane), Simon Walton (Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens), Miriam Ashwell (Caledonian Park), Jeremy Clyne (Open Spaces Society Lambeth and Wandsworth), Catriona Sinclair (Burgess Park), Suzanne Morpurgo (Brent Parks Forum), Marian (Wood Green Park), Mark (Udney Park)

London and National Picture

Dave updated the group. National organisations have been highlighting to Government the importance of parks during lockdown – their profile has rocketed. The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces had been contacted at the end of April by the Ministry for Local Government on views regarding the extent of parks remaining open. The NFPGS then conducted a snap survey completed by 800 friends groups in 2 days. This found that around 95% of parks remained open, and underlined the importance of this issue. The Ministry then issued a press release about the vital importance of parks, quoting the survey and Dave (as NFPGS chair). Fields in Trust have just promoted toolkits for children to help them enjoy nature in their gardens or in parks. The NFPGS site, www.parkscommunity.org.uk has hired a website developer and social media expert to build the site as a dedicated resource for all Friends Groups, and to help identify what friends groups are currently doing..

Laura updated the group on the work she is doing for LFGN and GoParks. She is working with borough forums and friends groups to build the GoParks website. GoParks is a freesite for all of London's parks and friends groups. Friends groups and forums can submit information about their park (including features, facilities, history, social media links) or forum (activities, social media links, history) and the information will be displayed on the park or borough's individual page. GoParks is undertaking a media campaign to raise the profile of the parks and friends groups to encourage Londoners to visit parks and engage with friends groups. Laura is also seeking to identify boroughs without an active forum to try to encourage groups to set up a forum to enable friends groups to support each other and work effectively with the council.

Helen reported that the London Parks and Gardens Trust has experienced a loss of income due to the need to suspend their main fundraising event Open Garden Squares Weekend as a result of coronavirus. The Trust is also continuing to work to save the Victoria Tower Gardens from the planning application to create the Holocaust Memorial. The current proposals if they go ahead, will set dangerous precedents for all parks in terms of the rules relating to preserving parks and their historic integrity.

Parks updates – friends group continuing activities and concerns during lockdown

A discussion threw up the following examples

- Sending out regular bulletins to members
- Difficulty managing social distancing, the most controversial example being Victoria Park facing temporary closure (now reversed) and social media pressure on the friends group
- Councils and management companies have in some cases furloughed staff so routine maintenance might then fall to the friends groups or doesn't get done
- Small group/physically distant gardening (including animal rescue)

- Putting plans on hold till next year
- Meeting by Zoom
- Issue with vigilante enforcement of lockdown rules (not associated with the friends group)
- Lack of parks rangers or a police presence to encourage/enforce social distancing and reduce crime
- Running a virtual dog show – photos and videos of dogs will be used for judging and proceeds to the local hospital
- Building up friends' websites
- Adopt a tree – volunteers tie a ribbon to a recently planted tree and to indicate they will water it throughout the spring and summer (socially distant park maintenance)
- Weekly surveys of the park to count visitors
- Online learning for families
- Increase in social media posts of photos and animals, particularly beneficial to the membership who are isolating
- Online butterfly and birdsong identification classes
- Virtual walks using photographs of the park
- Friends helping improve park 'social distancing' signage
- Cancellation of commercial events means a significant reduction in annual income for parks services
- Virtual events, for example a talk on butterflies
- Checking in on elderly members who are isolating
- Planning for future events (including a musical!)
- Postponing AGM and other events
- Weekly online reports on parks
- Exhibition of lockdown art
- Campaign to reclaim privately owned parkland recently achieved a legal victory
- Using social media to promote borough forum pages
- Increasing numbers of people joining friends groups and maybe forming new friends groups
- Problems with increasing amounts of crime – drugs and knives
- Park looks unkempt as maintenance has stopped

Forums update

In addition to mentions in reports above, Haringey is meeting via Zoom and has completed a series of workshops with parks service officers to help develop a new open spaces strategy. Wandsworth is continuing to organise regular networking and is an active forum. Brent has mainly been using social media to interact and is considering Zoom meetings. A Lewisham rep reported evaluating what kind of voluntary work can be done in parks and the community. Barnet is now a well-established forum.

Concluding remarks from Dave

Parks have a higher profile than perhaps for decades so now is a good time to push for the parks charter – www.parkscharter.org.uk. We want to keep up government attention on parks and use it to drive an increase in funding for adequate staffing and maintenance. There is concern about loss of income and threats to existing and future budgets from underfunded Local Authorities. While we as Friends Groups aren't able to spend as much time on our usual volunteer activities it might be a good time to fundraise for projects etc as that is an activity that can be done from home.

A massive thank you to all those continuing to promote their groups and their parks!.