

Written evidence – The Friends of Finsbury Park (PTC0028)

Long-term impact of the pandemic on towns and cities

With particular reference to green spaces:
north London's Finsbury Park

This is a response to the COVID-19 Committee's call for written submissions to their inquiry into the long-term impact of the pandemic on the UK's towns and cities.

We understand that consideration will be given to inequalities between and within places in the UK's urban areas. We also understand that the enquiry will focus in particular, *inter alia*, on the long-term impact of the pandemic on green spaces.

We are *The Friends of Finsbury Park*, a registered Charitable Trust founded in 1986. Our mission has been to preserve and protect north London's 110 acre park located entirely within the London Borough of Haringey but two of whose sides abut the neighbouring Boroughs of Hackney and Islington.

1. When the first lock-down began in March 2020, there were some well-intentioned suggestions that parks should be closed to the public in the same way that other forms of recreation, such as gymnasia, were closed. Some local authorities did briefly close parks before the Government stepped in to direct that all parks must remain open.
2. We believed instinctively parks should not be closed:
 - (i) because of the intrinsic value of parks at all times;
 - (ii) given that all commercial forms of entertainment and recreation had been shuttered, there needed to be a safety/pressure release valve, not least because of the mental stress of residents being cooped up in flats in urban areas, many without gardens; and
 - (iii) the impracticability of keeping people out of parks with many 100s of metres of border
3. Haringey Council never closed Finsbury Park and we believe that they made the right decision to

keep all their parks fully open (but see '9' below).

4. In the context of a virulent pandemic, open spaces have proved their worth. Social distancing (and lower risk) is far easier to achieve in the fresh air outdoors, when compared with the default lock-down situation of indoors, where the "viral load" is likely to be heavier.
5. In acknowledging the possibility of future pandemics, it is important that open spaces, especially parks in urban areas, are kept fully open and recognised for the public resource they always have been. And the bigger parks, like Finsbury Park, can provide the most for the public.
6. With the possibility of future pandemics and lock-downs needed to slow transmission, sports-halls and the like would again be closed, while the need to exercise for physical and mental health will remain.
7. Last year and through the winter, Finsbury Park has been used more often and by many more people than possibly ever in its history. The Park Manager has told us that he believes some residents were using the park for the first time, as they had lost their bearings and seemed lost!
8. One of the consequences of the lock-down and the continuing pandemic has been a reduction in the number of commercial events. The main example of which was the cancellation of the huge "Wireless" music festival that had been scheduled for the summer of 2020.
9. It is important to note that that event was cancelled due to the Government's prohibition on Mass Gatherings, rather than the council recognising the social value of keeping the park fully open (which was the effect). The government compensated Haringey Council for the cancelled rental by more than 70%.
10. Live Nation's «Wireless» is the largest product of Haringey Council's Major Events Policy, a policy in place since the summer of 2014. This policy lifted the ceiling on visitors to 50,000, comprising up to 45,000 ticket-holders and 5,000 others.

11. We have long objected to events of this size and we have been to the High Court and to the Court of Appeal in order to try to limit the largest events. The Court reaffirmed that councils hold parks in trust for the public.
12. The practical effect of the Major Events policy, is to deny to the general public, the best, south-facing part of the park at the height of the summer, for several weeks.
13. The alienation takes the form of a steel wall, about 12 feet high, for 100s of metres around the rented area, with an outer "moat" marked by *Heras* fencing and in between which are guard dogs. There are also watchtowers.
14. In addition to the days of the concerts themselves, the build-up and break-down of this imposition lasts for about three weeks. The promoter Live Nation claims that only 27% of the park is occupied, which is misleading of itself, but the impact is such that it dominates 100% of the park and in terms of noise, affects a much larger area in 3 (three) Boroughs.
15. The alienation of much of the park, as above, is bad enough. However, our park suffers lasting damage to the surface due to the erection in a short space of time, of the equivalent of a small town. Then, tens of thousands of pairs of feet trample the ground. In the last 20 months, our park has experienced an unexpected fallow period and healing. The greatly amplified noise is a nuisance in a radius of up to two miles; the stress on neighbouring roads and parking is felt over a less-wide radius.
16. The biggest Major Event (Wireless) has decamped this year (2021) to Crystal Palace, but we are concerned that it could return to Finsbury Park.
17. In large part, the Major Event Policy is a function of inadequate funding of parks and a view that parks are a liability, rather than an asset.
18. As with libraries, councils have no statutory duty to maintain parks. And in a time of overall cuts to local government funding, non-statutory services bear the brunt of any cuts.

19. A change of council leadership and a new cabinet member for parks has given us some hope that this objectionable policy may be rescinded, but there can be no guarantee of that.
20. Inequality of parks provision: there ought to be consistency in national parks policy and we are concerned about variability in access to properly funded parks. For example, the often cash-strapped Haringey Council has taken a proprietary attitude and has treated our park as a cash-cow. However in another area, Milton Keynes, parks are owned and managed unusually by a Trust rather than their local council. Given that councils are under no obligation to fund parks, the Milton Keynes example is an arrangement that has proved its worth.
21. Parks prove their value every day, but we believe that they have never more demonstrated their true value as a public resource, than during a time of pandemic and lock-down.
22. The inequality of green space that exists, is between those who have gardens, and those who have no open space. And even the largest private garden in London cannot compare with the freedom to gambol in more than 100 acres.
23. In order to mitigate inequalities within urban areas, the action that the authorities could take is to implement a proper funding of parks. Please see our submission in 2016 to a Commons Committee, below. This, in order to keep them fully-open at all times, with or without future lock-downs.
24. The Local Government Act 1972 permits councils to rent out *any part of a park*.
25. It would also help if legislators would consider amending the earlier 1967 legislation*, so that the limit on leasing out of 10% of total area, as set out therein, is made clearer, is unambiguous and so the local authorities can no longer pick and choose which Act applies to them.

*The Greater London Parks and Open Spaces Act
1967

Public Parks:
Submission in 2016 to the House of Commons

The Communities and Local Government Committee sought evidence to their inquiry into the future of Public Parks.

In October 2016, we submitted evidence to that Commons Committee, especially on the question of funding for parks.

"Published written evidence"
Appendix No. 355, Reference PKS0273

This contained novel, innovative suggestions and we were disappointed that the Commons Committee's conclusions were not taken more seriously by the Government. We hope that is not the fate for the current Lords' inquiry.

8 July 2021