

Report by retiring Chair

The past 12 months, as with previous years, have been dominated by the discussion of the scale, plans, management processes, and works resulting from the successful lottery bid. However, in this year, contractors arrived on site and started digging, and the park has become more of a building site than a quiet green sanctuary. But many will feel it has been worth it once the work is finished, despite the teething problems bound to occur once people start to use the new facilities.

However, one issue has been of major concern above all others during this time – the care and safety of the animals, especially the deer. It was decided to keep the deer in the park during construction work, as it was felt more harmful to ‘dart’ them all and take them unconscious to a temporary home before repeating the process all over again on return. In the event, poor maintenance of the fences resulted in two deer being fatally injured by dogs and another dying of an unknown cause. This has been extremely upsetting and points to poor management, security and husbandry. The CPUG has now taken the line that at present we do not have confidence in the existing management procedures to guarantee the safety of the animals, and therefore think it best they be removed to a safe home. Our concerns also now extend to the other animals and birds kept in the animal enclosure and we are pressing strongly for a dedicated park-worker trained and paid to manage the animal enclosure safely and to the highest standards of animal care. Second to the concerns over the animals has been a continuing worry about damage to the existing tree stock during works, highlighted for us at our January meeting by Russell Miller of the Tree Musketeers.

We’ve had very good attendances all year, with up to fifty people at a single meeting, and for the most part in good temper. I think people now understand that the CPUG is not an adversarial body with its own agenda of what is right and wrong with the park, but is about creating a public forum where individual park users can singly or collectively air opinions about park issues. Of course this only works if Council officers and members attend, listen and engage in discussion – for the most part they have, but to be honest ultimately we have relatively little leverage over Council policies and operational matters unless things seriously go wrong. All we can do is advise and act as a conduit for public opinion.

CPUG officers have been actively involved in the Stake-holder Forum for the lottery bid, though we were not invited to join the Project Board. We expressed concern on a number of occasions at the high turnover of staff in the project management team supervising the park works, which does not augur well for the future management of the newly restored park when it is completed. While over the years we have nothing but praise for the gardening staff and their achievements, along with the continuing success in retaining a Green Flag, there are user conflicts within the park – dogs and children, wildlife and barbecues, cyclists and older people, and so on – which remain unaddressed, let alone resolved. Once again we feel that the rangers’ service lacks overall focus and clear management, let alone sufficient numbers given the sheer number of people using the park. The new playground will test their resources, and resourcefulness, to the limit we suspect.

There continues to be little meaningful partnership with the Hackney Learning Trust over the maintenance of the One O'Clock Club - its site and building - and its role within the wider Clissold Park programme and landscape. This in no way implies criticism of the staff who currently work there, as it is partnership and common purpose at a strategic level that is missing. We have fully supported Clissold Park Tennis Club in its bid to take over the site of 3 Queen Elizabeth Walk, given how successful the club has been in encouraging hundreds of children and young people to get involved in tennis, a number now successfully competing at national level.

Of great importance will be the funding, management and maintenance of Clissold Mansion and its many refurbished rooms, including a much larger catering franchise that will need to be closely monitored – once the house has re-opened. The house and the park have always been integral to each other and we wish to see them managed as a single operation, and will continue to campaign for this as our objective.

It is always important to remember that despite all the problems, Clissold Park attracts over 2 million visits a year, by a very wide range of people, the majority of whom thoroughly enjoy their trip to the park. With nearly £9 million of new investment in facilities their future visits should be even better, as long as we can keep the management and maintenance of the facilities in good shape.

I'd like to express sincere thanks to my fellow officers, in this past year and in previous years. We have been very lucky in attracting very dedicated people, none more so than this year's officers: John Hudson, Matt Jeary, Caroline Millar and Anna Gualtieri. I'd also like to thank Isabelle Gore for her work in maintaining the website which has been a great success and the first thing many people turn to if they want to find out more about Clissold Park. I have greatly enjoyed my time as Chair of CPUG and intend to remain active in support of its work, but I feel it is time to stand down, and therefore wish my successor the very best.

Ken Worpole
Retiring Chair