

RBKC LETTER TO ST HELENS RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION (emailed 6th Jan 2017)

Dear Mr Peterson,

Thank you for your letter dated 30 November. I am sorry that due various internal discussions and the Christmas break it has taken a while to respond.

To clarify some of the points made in your letter there is no developed plan to install an artificial pitch in Kensington Memorial Park. The idea is being consulted on, along with other park improvements, to ask residents and other park users' opinions on what could be done to improve the park.

One rationale for the council considering an all-weather pitch is to provide a facility that is available more often than the current grass pitch is/would be. With few outdoor sports facilities within the borough but an increasing demand, particularly from schools, the council is having to consider how it addresses this pressure. The grass pitch is heavily overused (for formal and informal activity) and by the end of the season the condition of it reflects this. Likewise, with the council's reducing budget its ability to maintain a good quality grass surface will become an issue. Officers are looking at a variety of options for how we might resolve this, from trying to repair and restore the grass as it is, to installing a woven product of artificial grass that sits alongside the natural grass. They are visiting a number of sites, where these solutions are being trialled, to see if they work in the first instance and if they are cost-effective and will work long-term as well. Alongside this, the suggestion from the 2005 consultation to install an artificial pitch in the park is also being revisited.

Of all of the options above, the artificial pitch proposal is the one with the biggest impact hence the reason we have included it in the consultation in order to gauge opinion.

The outcome of the consultation will determine the next steps for the Council in terms of looking at various improvement options for the park, the feasibility of these proposals and any associated planning implications and costs.

The park's designations as a Green Flag site, Centenary Field and Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) is something the Council takes great pride in and we are in not intending to jeopardise this. The Green Flag Award is judged against a series of criteria; making changes to the site does not necessarily put this at risk, however the Green Flag judges will look at how any scheme was consulted on and how it fits with the overall park and other council, local and national policies. Judging is done holistically; on-site, considering the written submission the council makes, not just on one element of the park or its management.

As part of the planning process SINC's trigger a need for additional ecological assessments for any developments on the site or nearby. An artificial pitch would not necessarily put Kensington Memorial Park's SINC status at risk, however, the fact that it is a SINC would need to be addressed and mitigated for if any of the habitats within the park were deemed to be at risk by development. It is common practice in developments that the loss of habitats can be mitigated for elsewhere in the park or even off-site.

I understand your concerns about commercial activity in parks and am aware that there is some commercial activity in the park, however, the parks service relies on its sports bookings to offset some of the core contract costs and allows us to retain site-based park keepers and provide the horticultural standards that we do. The Council's new Parks Strategy highlights a need for the for us to manage commercial activity so that its parks still provide a positive user experience while being able to support themselves financially so we can avoid the situation that other Councils have unfortunately found themselves in; having no park keepers, no bedding, closing lavatories and other facilities, and having little or no horticultural interest. The recent use of the park by Little Foxes was permitted by the Council and the company paid for the space, use of Council facilities by companies like Little Foxes is monitored and restricted by the Council for the reasons stated above.

The results of the consultation are currently being analysed and will be published in late January.

We will then be in a position to determine what improvements we will look at in more detail and also consider the items that were identified in the S.106 agreement.

Yours sincerely

Nicholas Paget-Brown
Leader of the Council