
Priorities for Victoria Park

Views of the Local
Community

Friends of Victoria Park

Introduction

The Friends of Victoria Park (FoVP) was established in March 2014. As a new group it was recognised that it needed to build relationships with the local community and park users in order to ensure that its work was responsive to local needs. As part of the work to establish a local presence the group took part in two events in June and July 2014 – the summer Queens Road Street Fair, and the Race for Life event held on the park. The purposes in taking part in these events were:

- To make ourselves known to the local community
- To expand our membership
- To establish local community views on priorities for park development

This report sets out our initial conclusions about local community views on priorities for the development of Victoria Park. In doing this it draws upon:

- Fifty six responses to a questionnaire about things wanted on the park
- Additional comments and suggestions on the questionnaire and membership forms
- Many conversations with local people about the park and how they use it

The local community surrounding and using Victoria Park is both large and diverse. We cannot claim at this stage to represent fully the needs of the entire community nor the whole range of park users. In this respect, it is recognised that the priorities identified below will be weighted to some extent towards the local population living to the southern side of the park rather than those living to the east. This is discussed more fully in the conclusions below. However, notwithstanding any variations in need and priority which may exist within different groups making up the wider population surrounding the park, these early conclusions do form a valuable guide for considering its further development in ways which will better meet the needs of local people, promote their use of the park, and engage them more fully with it.

Local Views on Priorities for the Park

Although this section is primarily concerned with reporting the priorities for the park which were expressed by local people the starting point needs to be more general. It quickly becomes apparent that Victoria Park was very highly valued by local people, and there was a high level of interest and expressed support for a local group to promote its further development. The park was recognised as a central and highly significant feature of the local area. However, it also became apparent that much as it was valued, local people also thought the park could be more than it is: that it could offer a wider and better range of facilities and amenities for local people and function more fully as a community park. This, in turn, would promote increased community use of the park and bring it more into focus as a social and recreational centre for the local area. This can be seen quite clearly in the responses to the questionnaire and the wider comments made by local people.

The full list of responses to the questionnaire, in descending order of priority, can be seen as an appendix. This analysis will present the findings in a different way, distinguishing between improvements which would develop the parks facilities and enhance general social and community use, and some more specific improvements linked to different groups of park users.

Priorities for promoting wider community use

Things people would like:	Number of responses
Some quiet garden and sitting areas	30
More flower beds	15
A bandstand or focal point for small events	26
A refreshment facility for the park	23
Drinking water fountains	20
Barbecue areas	16
Some picnic areas	10

The highest response overall, attracting 30 responses, was for some quiet garden and sitting areas. Linking this to the 15 responses for more flower beds, and to other comments wanting to see wildflower planting, meadow areas, and more attractive and exciting planting, what can be seen is a fairly generalised wish for the open areas of the park to be supplemented by the creation of more defined spaces which offer different opportunities to park users. Whilst the generally open nature of the park was seen as part of its character and attractiveness, it also became clear that this openness itself was an impediment to more traditional park use.

The need for more community focussed facilities promoting traditional park use can also be seen in the high number of positive responses to the idea of a bandstand or focal point for the park. There were many additional comments supporting a bandstand or similar facility, it being seen as a potential performance area, a gathering space, a venue for events of different kinds, and a focal point and place where people could meet. Once again, the open nature of the park means there is a lack of definition to different areas, and no identifiable area for people to come together. The nearest the park gets to this is the area around the pavilion. Yet although there was very positive support for the refurbishment of the play area, and the installation of the new outdoor fitness equipment, both proving very popular, that area itself does not attract positive regard, and the pavilion in particular remains unloved by most, with some wishing to see it demolished altogether. The current pavilion arrangements do not appear to be providing the refreshment services park users would like to see, as the four remaining categories of response demonstrate.

The need for access to refreshments, and facilities for people to enjoy their own, can be seen in the level of support for a refreshment facility, access to drinking water, and provision of defined spaces within which park users can enjoy their own food and drink. Once again, these are traditional park activities but currently Victoria Park does not appear well-equipped to meet them.

A general conclusion to this section could be that Victoria Park, although highly valued by the local community, is not fully or effectively meeting the needs of the local community for a community park offering the more traditional park activities and facilities.

Priorities for groups of park users

Things people would like:	Number of responses
Nature trails	24
Adventure type equipment for older children	16
Better play areas	13
A youth facility such as a youth hut	11
A fitness trail across the park	10
Outdoor fitness equipment	9
Mini football pitches	7
More or different sports areas	6
A history or heritage centre	11

This second section is focussed more on particular groups of park users. In some respects the distinction between user groups and facilities for them, and more general community use, is an artificial one. Users with a specific interest are also part of the community and can also have a more general interest in the park. Younger children using the park will be usually be accompanied by adults who will also have needs such as toilet facilities, refreshments, and sitting areas where they can meet other adults also supervising their children. To a significant extent, specific provision for particular groups will only succeed if the more general provision for community use is already present.

The priority which attracted most support was for nature trails which attracted 24 responses, the third highest after quiet sitting areas and a bandstand. This reflects two different things. First, a wider interest among adults in the ecology of the park seen also in the desire for some meadow areas and wild flower planting. Second, a more specific concern with catering for the high levels of interest shown by children and young people in nature and the natural world. In fact, the needs of children and young people figured highly in the wider comments made by respondents who identified the need for better play areas (which also attracted 13 responses in the questionnaire), a paddling pool for toddlers, and particularly the lack of facilities on the park for older children and young people. This can be also seen in the 16 responses supporting more adventure type equipment for older children and young people, and to a slightly lesser extent the 11 responses supporting the establishment of a youth facility. A fitness trail across the park, and outdoor fitness equipment, attracted 10 and 9 responses respectively, with lower levels of support for more facilities for sport. Finally, there were 11 responses in support of a history or heritage centre for the park.

Looking across this section as a whole the main interests of respondents were concerned with the nature and ecology of the park, and meeting the needs of children and young people. There was seen to be little current provision which would attract older children on to Victoria Park. There was a middling range of support for fitness related provision, but only a low priority was given to expanding sports provision on the park.

Wider Considerations and Current Constraints

The main wider consideration which emerged during these consultations, usually in the conversations with those taking part, but also with others having an interest in the park, was that although the park was highly valued by local people, it was not used as much as it could be as a traditional park. Indeed, it was not unusual to be told, particularly by parents, that if they wanted to spend time on a park they went to Knighton Park, even though they lived much closer to Victoria Park. The reasons were straightforward – there was much more for their children to do, and it was a much more attractive park. Victoria Park was seen more in terms of large events and sports fields.

It became clear during the course of the consultations that there was a significant conflict concerning the extent to which Victoria Park was able to meet the needs of the local community. This conflict arises from the dual role of Victoria Park – on the one hand it is designated as a District Park, intended primarily to serve its local community, yet on the other hand it serves as a City Park, hosting many large city-wide events and providing sporting facilities, particularly football pitches, which also have a city-wide role. Both of these functions require large open spaces to be maintained on the park, yet the large open spaces are a significant constraint on the extent to which Victoria Park can serve as a community park. In its current configuration it looks attractive as an open space, but it doesn't attract people to use it as a park.

A further factor which also influences the character of Victoria Park is that it is located between the city centre and densely populated areas of the city. In consequence it becomes a through route for pedestrians and cyclists making their way to the city centre or the university from the southern side of the city. A national cycle route runs across the park to the university and onwards to the city, and there is also significant cycle traffic on some of the other paths reserved for pedestrians. The conflict of interest between walkers and cyclists was noted several times in the wider comments on the park. Some wanted no cycle paths and no cyclists, others wanted segregated provision to provide for both groups of users. In considering how to resolve this conflict, and also in thinking about wider development of the park, it may be important to recognise that currently the great majority of both these groups are using the park as a pleasant and safe way to get to their destination rather than using the park for any other purpose. Other than dog-walkers, few people appeared to stroll around the park as a way of enjoying the environment it provides.

A final point to note concerns the weighting of priorities towards the population on the southern side of the park, which was identified earlier. This arises from the particular events used for the consultation – mainly the Queen's Road street fair. To some extent, it could be argued, some of the priorities which were being identified for development of the park already existed, clustered around the Pavilion area in the north-east corner of the park. Yet what was clear is that the facilities which do exist in this area were not being recognised or used to any significant extent by those living to the south of the park who responded to the consultation. The only facility on the southern side of the park is the children's play area in a relatively remote and isolated position opposite the new health centre, and some considerable distance from any other facility and the main southern entry point to the park at Queen's Road.

Overall Conclusions

The individual conclusions about different local priorities can be seen in the text above. A wider conclusion is that Victoria Park is currently not fully effective as a District Park in meeting the needs of local people. There are three main reasons why this is the case. First, there is a conflict between the city-wide role of the park and its designation as a District Park, with the former having a significant influence on the current configuration of the park and how large areas of space are allocated and used. Second, it is lacking in basic park facilities which would attract people to use the park on a day to day basis for pleasure and recreation. Third, all the main facilities which do exist are clustered together in the north-east corner of the park. These facilities are very accessible to the population to the east of the park, but much less so for those living to the south who enter the park at Queens Road or further down Victoria Park Road.

In the longer term the second constraint on community use of the park can be addressed through the provision of additional facilities, over time and with the necessary resources, which will promote greater community use and more fully involve local people in using the park. However, what can be achieved in this respect is likely to be limited unless the first constraint is also addressed – the city-wide role of the park and the constraints this imposes on the character of the park and the way space is used. This is not to argue that city-wide functions should not take place. However, to develop the community function of the park some rebalancing of the designation and use of space will be needed. This need not eliminate the availability of space on the park for city wide events as one large open area is all that is currently used for most large events, and even those tend to be concentrated in one part of it, leaving other areas which could serve other purposes.

However, this still leaves the third constraint which is the concentration of existing facilities in the north-east corner of the park, some significant distance from a large number of potential park users living to the south. Meeting their needs may best be accomplished by the development of a new cluster of facilities on the southern side of the park, including the relocation of the existing children's play area to a more accessible and attractive location with close access to other facilities for both children and adults. The southern side of the park is probably the busiest point of entry to the park throughout the year as a whole yet it lacks both a recognisable or attractive park entrance, and it has no facilities at all for park users. There is also further scope for improving the existing cluster of facilities to the north-east corner of the park and in this respect the comments made about the appearance and functions of the existing pavilion are probably the most telling.

An important reason for developing the community role of the park is that it is highly likely that continuing constraints on local government expenditure will severely limit the availability of public funds for park development. The role of charitable and voluntary sources of funding will need to increase, yet these demand active community involvement by local people as a requirement for funding. With the current relationship of Victoria Park to its local community this active involvement will be very difficult to achieve and sustain unless the role of the park is rebalanced towards better meeting the needs of local people.

Douglas Smith – Chair Friends of Victoria Park
 Margaret Lewis - Secretary
 Lawrence Whittaker - Treasurer

Appendix**Priorities for Victoria Park**

Preferences of the 56 people who completed the survey forms at Queens Road Street Fair and the Race for Life 2014.

Things they would like	Number of responses
Some quiet garden and sitting areas	30
A bandstand or focal point for small events	26
Nature trails	24
A refreshment facility for the park	23
Drinking water fountains	20
Barbecue areas	16
Adventure type equipment for older children	16
More flower beds	15
Better play areas	13
A youth facility such as a youth hut	11
A history or heritage centre	11
A fitness trail across the park	10
Some picnic areas	10
Outdoor fitness equipment	9
Mini football pitches	7
More or different sports areas	6

The survey form asked: “We want to know what you would like to see on Victoria Park. Here are some of the things that have been suggested. You might have other ideas. Tell us what you think. **Look through this list and then tick the FIVE things you would most like to see– write any other ideas on the back of this sheet.**”