

Spencer Park and Recreation Ground: A Vision and a Plan

Paul Smith: 5 October 2015

The Friends of Spencer Park and Recreation Ground was formed in 2012 to restore the park and recreation ground. It was taken for granted that this was a long-term project, with more ambitious goals as success and experience led us to be credible and capable.

The Friends' strategy is based on the view that parks are a vital part of urban life, and that, in Coventry, Spencer Park is of special value given its history, facilities, pavilion, and location (adjacent to the inner city, and to the new development, Friargate, with its large workforce when finished). Our vision for the park is to make it a focal point by providing a range of activities and facilities for a people across Coventry – to 'people' the park. Moreover, as a 'quiet' park it is attractive to a variety of age-ranges and is complementary to Memorial Park. The recreation ground requires careful consideration too.

When the Friends was established, Spencer Park and the Recreation Ground were somewhat rundown, relatively little used, and with some difficult behaviour by local youths. Our goal was to make an immediate and visible impact, with the aim of bringing people into the park. Much was achieved: crocuses were planted in the recreation ground, the park's west border was cleared and planted, and the park was 'tidied up'. The first, 'big' project was the planning of, and securing funds for, a children's play area on the old tennis courts. This required an extensive process of consultation with potential users and others. A number of events were organized, including activities for children and young persons (building bird boxes and feeders, egg hunts, Big Challenge); free tennis and bowling sessions; social events (Big Lunch), and tea and cakes for Bands in the Park. At the same time the Albany Bowling Club was rejuvenated, and is now going from strength to strength: its members' presence in the park (most days and evenings) has been a major deterrent to anti-social behaviour. A co-operative relationship was established with Council officers and workers. Intervention by the police, more mature attendants in the pavilion, and personal intervention led to a decline in misuse of the park and its facilities. To the autumn of 2014 things appeared to be going well for the park, though the recreation ground, despite having its football pitch improved in 2010, remained underused.

The incremental, annual cut in the local services support grant to Coventry Council since 2010 has led to £1 million reduction in the expenditure allocated to parks for the financial year 2015–16. With little notice, from 1 April 2015 Coventry Council closed the pavilion, flat bowling green and tennis courts to the public. Our proposals to reduce costs and increase usage of the park's facilities were not accepted by the Council. Many of our hopes for the park and recreation ground suffered a set-back.

We need a vision and plan, with a timetable, to develop Spencer Park as a local and city-wide facility for range of activities and facilities, complementary to Memorial Park. The following proposals are made in this light.

1. *Play area*

The project to install a children's play area in the park has been delayed because of the discovery of asbestos in the foundations of the old tennis court and the high cost of removal of even the small amount required to embed the play equipment. In view of this, the Council has proposed that the children's play area be located in the north-east corner of the park, next to Dalton Road. We have accepted this as the best alternative location. The play area is not large, the equipment has been purchased and is in store, and we do not agree that the recreation ground is a suitable location. This work will be undertaken late in 2015. It is an important initiative to increase the use of the park

2. *Tennis*

a. Use of the courts

Proposal 1: to establish a Spencer Park tennis club, with access to the courts. An annual fee of £35 could be charged. This will require the Friends to hold the keys to the courts and nets.

Proposal 2: tennis for visually impaired people. Special equipment would be required.

Proposal 3: an open session, with a trainer, on Saturdays:

2 – 3 pm: below 7 years (there is a strong demand from parents for this age-group before they get into computer games).

3 – 5 pm: adults and over-7s

b. Condition of the courts

After rain the courts are slippery, especially at the end under the trees. Deep cleaning (using a street-cleaner) may alleviate this. The courts will need resurfacing in the next few years.

Proposal 4: to request 'deep cleaning of the tennis courts.

Proposal 5: to investigate funds to pay for new surfaces on the tennis courts.

c. Earlsdon School

To investigate use of park as a sports facility by Earlsdon School.

3. *Bowling greens*

a. Crown green

The Albany Club moves from strength to strength. Having grown from 12 to nearly 40 members in just over two years, it is now winning many of its matches. Members play at all times of the day, providing a presence in the park.

b. Flat green

Maintenance of the flat green has been reduced this year. The two clubs that used the green have moved to Memorial Park but have lost members in the process. We have pressed the Council, with some success, to maintain the green to a 'playable' standard but it will need additional work this autumn if this is to be possible next year.

The application to Sport England to fund Bowls for All was rejected on the ground that its viability was unproven. We need to apply to other organizations for 'seed corn' funding.

Proposal 1: to request Coventry Council to undertake minimal maintenance of the flat green this autumn – weed-killing, raking, and aeration – so as to allow the green to be used for bowls next year (though not at club standard)..

Proposal 2: to apply for funds from Coventry Council Community Funds and the Bowls Development Alliance to promote bowling on the flat green for new, Coventry-wide groups, in particular those with disabilities and long-term illnesses. The initiative with the Coventry branch of Parkinson's UK has been a minor success, indicating that this is viable option to explore.

Proposal 3: to explore the viability of a Spencer Park Bowls Confederation to oversee the greens.

4. *Other events*

We should extend the range of events in the park, aiming at new groups. Possible examples are:

- a. Earlsdon Sports Day.
- b. Family rounders
- c. Junior cricket
- d. Pilates/Yoga during the summer, beginning in 2016.
- e. Football on the recreation ground – local teams, including women.

5. *The pavilion*

The pavilion, the focal point of Spencer Park, is an elegant and historic building. The Council is maintaining the fabric but it requires significant restoration and sympathetic refurbishment to equip it for use as a community asset.

This to include office, storage heaters, kitchen/café facilities, toilets, a disabled toilet (currently there are two), storage facilities, and meeting rooms. The building is sufficiently

high to accommodate an additional floor covering two-thirds of the floor space, with access by stairs and chair lift.

The viability of a café as an integral part of facilities for Friargate workers should be explored.

The pavilion could be used as an arts centre and gallery – The Gallery in the Park – with funds applied for as part of Coventry’s bid for City of Culture award.

Proposal: to investigate renovating the pavilion as the focus of the park and for community/arts use, in conjunction with NENA and Historic Coventry. This may require the creation of a dedicated organization (possible name: Spencer Park Pavilion Trust) to act as the vehicle for grant applications.

6. Multi-use games area (MUGA)

A MUGA on the recreation ground would provide an all-weather facility for young people.

Proposal: to explore design options and funding for a MUGA on the recreation ground for 2016/17.

7. The Friends

The Friends was formed to protect and promote the park and recreation in a different context. The tasks that face us, and the timescale, are now very different. A larger committee is necessary:

Proposal 1: to extend the size of the committee by advertisement and co-option.

Proposal 2: to establish sub-committees with additional members. Possible examples could include a parents’ committee and a specialist advisory committee.