

## **Motion re- Happy Mount Park Gates**

Submitted by Cllrs Dennison and Caroline Jackson

### **MOTION**

*There are problems arising from the occasional situation of the gates of Happy Mount Park not being locked at night.*

*This has resulted in cars driving in, and youths congregating inside, with the possibility of accidents and vandalism.*

### **Proposal**

*This council agrees to request officers to develop a contingency plan for the locking of H.M.P. gates each evening at dusk. This contingency plan should include the resources of the friends group.*

### **OFFICER BRIEFING**

The Council's default position with regards to open space is that it is left open for use by the public at all times. The only two exceptions to this are Happy Mount Park and Regent Park which as a matter of custom and practice are still locked at night and unlocked in the morning.

The recent restructure of the Council's public realm functions has highlighted this as a potential area for review. Experience shows that in terms of securing Happy Mount Park locking and unlocking the gates is more of a token than practical exercise. There are numerous 'unofficial' points of access into Happy Mount Park, which people can and do use both when the parks are locked and tellingly when they are unlocked. The facts are that incidents of vandalism in all our parks, locked or unlocked, remain relatively low. When incidents do occur they tend to be heavily publicised via the various media channels which then unfortunately creates the perception that open space is constantly being vandalised. There is also a need to avoid the perception that there is a direct correlation between the congregation of youths in areas of open space and wanton vandalism. Indeed much of the Council's open space provides facilities specifically for the enjoyment of youths, who in the overwhelming majority of cases show respect for the open space on which they congregate.

With regards to the specific incidents referred to in the motion. There have been, due to staffing issues, only two occasions over the last 12 months (one occasion for several days) where it has not been possible to provide locking / unlocking of the gates. On neither occasion did any actual damage occur within the park. Furthermore, whilst not disputing the information provided in the motion, there was no evidence found of cars driving in the park.

There may be a debate as to whether the act of entering a locked park via a non-official entrance does actually constitute anti-social behaviour. In any case the motion refers specifically to an incident when those congregating inside could legitimately claim to be in there because the gate was open. Clearly what there is no debate about is that vandalising public property constitutes anti-social behaviour. As has been established the token act of locking the gates will not stop people who are determined to commit acts of vandalism. The Council recognises there is a need to tackle the problem of anti-social behaviour on public open space. This it does indirectly through design and management of open space but also very directly through the contribution of £99,000 per year to fund 9 additional PCSOs in this District.

There is a considerable ongoing revenue cost to locking and unlocking the park, especially out of season when it can't be combined with other operation. Work is currently taking place to bring forward options for savings to help address the Council's budget position for 2016/17. Officers are likely to recommend that bringing Happy Mount Park and Regent Park in line with all the rest of the District, and indeed with the majority of parks in the country would be one area where savings could be made. In this option it is recognised that vehicles accessing the park could be a cause for concern and efforts will be made to see if there is a cost effective way of ensuring cars cannot access the park that can be brought forward.

In the meantime arrangements are in place for the locking and unlocking of these parks. For unforeseen operational reasons it may be that on occasion it is not possible to lock / unlock the park. Every effort will be taken to minimise these.

With regards to using 'Friends' groups to undertake this. The purpose of 'friends' groups is to augment activity within parks and open space. Friends groups work on an entirely voluntary basis. To then extend this relationship to the point where the group is taking direct responsibility for a specific aspect of management of the park would require serious and detailed consideration of a number of issues including- agreement of relationship between the Council and 'Friends' group (as this would go far beyond existing agreements) health and safety, training, insurance and the views of Council staff and their Trade Union representatives. For this reason it is not an option that Officers would recommend to Council.

Chief Officer (Environment)

#### Section 151 Officer Comments

The Section 151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

#### Monitoring Officer Comments

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.