



Chairman's Annual Report 2005/6

2005/6 has been a year of achievement and consolidation for the User Group. It has reorganised itself and held a number of social and other participatory events. I have only been a member of the Group since September 2005 when I was encouraged to come along and see the presentation of the first feasibility study based on an extensive local survey. Since then the Group has slowly but surely been making its way towards some real improvements and enhancements to Blythe Hill Fields with support from Groundwork SE, Glendale and Lewisham Council.

1. MEETINGS

Since September 2005, the Group met 8 times:

26 September 2005
3 November 2005
1 December 2005
12 January 2006
9 March 2006
27 April 2006
29 June 2006
7 September 2006

All meetings have been held at the 1st Forest Hill Scout Hall on St German's Road. The Group is grateful for the Scouts' continued support allowing the Group to meet in the Hall for a minimal charge. Thanks also to Sharon Lloyd, for opening and closing the Hall.

2. CONSTITUTION

The need for a constitution was first raised at the December 2005 meeting as one of the documents that would be required to open a bank account and by any potential funder. It would also mean that the Group would have a more formal set of rules by which it could be function and managed.

I met with Kylie & Andrew Barnes to work on a draft constitution which was first presented to the Group on 12 January 2006. A number of amendments were discussed and the final draft was approved at the 9 March 2006 meeting.

The biggest changes to the way the Group worked were reducing the number of meetings per year from twelve to six and the formation of a Committee. The idea behind these moves was to ensure that Group meetings always had full agendas for discussion and that outside the Group meetings, there was a mechanism to push forward issues and action that were raised at the meetings. As part of the constitution, it was also agreed that people attending the meetings should where possible make a voluntary donation of £1 to help cover some of the running costs, including the hall hire for the meeting.

As time goes by and applications for funding materialise, the formation and governance of the Group will be extremely important and the constitution will act as an important reference point. The constitution document is on the Group's website.

3. COMMITTEE

The first committee was elected at the March Group meeting as follows:

Marcel Jenkins - Chair
Elizabeth Downie - Vice-Chair
Kylie Barnes - Secretary
Andrew Barnes – Treasurer (elected in his absence)
Gavin Bolam
Caroline Sefton (elected in her absence)
Josh Smaller
Mark Wellband

Since being elected, the Committee has met 5 times in 2006 as follows:

21 March
8 May
30 May
4 July
17 October

During the year, two members of the Committee resigned (Elizabeth Downie and Caroline Sefton). However, at the first opportunity, the Group elected two replacements, Sydney Couldridge and Ray Ashley at the 29 June Group meeting. Elizabeth has agreed to continue working on fundraising issues with the Committee on behalf of the Group.

The Committee worked very hard to plan and deliver a public consultation day on 15 July on the fields (see Events). It turned out to be a successful and fun event attracting new and existing park users to talk to the Group about their hopes and fears for the future of Blythe Hill Fields. Caroline Sefton, with some helpers, organised a fantastic balloon race that both raised money for the Group and gave the day a real highlight, particularly for the children. Thank you to Richard Peckham at Groundwork SE London and everyone that contributed to the success of that day. It is exactly this sort of event that would be impossible without a small group of committed individuals to do the work; the same will be true of making the most of funding and other partnership opportunities.

4. CONSULTATION REPORT

Following the publication and discussion of the Feasibility Report produced by Groundwork SE London in September 2005 it was felt that a more detailed study needed to be commissioned to focus on specific areas of need. This level of details would give a clear direction for the Group to follow. Working with Richard Peckham at Groundwork, Elizabeth Downie was a key part of the development of the questionnaire that was finally distributed to over 1,000 homes around Blythe Hill Fields. The response rate was not as high as for the previous questionnaire but nonetheless has yielded a clear direction. The report has been discussed by the Committee and is being recommended to the Group at the AGM meeting. It is really important that the Group adopts the general thrust of the report which will allow it start making a difference on Blythe Hill.

Naturally, it will be impossible to please all the people all the time but there has to be a point where the Group moves on and starts making things happen.

5. EVENTS

The Group has held two very successful planting days this year. The first was a hedge planting day on 25 February made possible by the support of Nick Harvey from Glendale. It was a fun morning, starting and ending with a group warm-up. The group managed to plant an impressive number of whips from the far north-eastern corner half way down the eastern boundary towards the path. The only hitch to the day was the Glendale truck getting stuck in the mud and having to radio for a tractor to pull it out. The whips are doing well and their progress is being monitored by park users.

Thanks to Gavin Bolam successfully negotiating for resources from Lewisham Council, the Group was able to organise another planting day earlier this month. On 21 October, between 30-40 people came to help plant 3,000 bulbs on the Fields. It was great to see younger and older members of the community pitching in together and getting stuck in. Everyone involved should rightly feel a sense of satisfaction when (hopefully) Spring arrives and Blythe Hill is awash with daffodils, snowdrops and bluebells. Thanks to Lara Al-Jabi from Glendale for organising the bulbs and tools for the group to use.

It is these sorts of events that increase the sense of ownership and care people feel towards Blythe Hill and so regular events are needed throughout the year. There are some photos on the website of both events.

On 15 July, the Committee organised an open consultation event on Blythe Hill to raise the profile of the User Group, show and explain the ideas and plans for the park and to gauge people's opinions. It was a successful and fun day, not least due to the success of Caroline's balloon race and the games organised by Josh Smaller.

6. BALL COURT

In March this year, the Group managed to raise its profile considerably, following one item of discussion at a Group that was debated in the local newspapers. The issue was the Group considering the possibility of raising money for a ball court on the Fields which would add, for some, a missing local facility. It could have also acted as income for partnership funding within a bigger National Lottery application. It is fair to say that the issue caused a deep divide in the group and those meetings were difficult. The pre-application for the scheme was turned down and the idea was shelved. It is a testament to the Group that collectively, it has survived that difficult time and moved on.

Conversely, the exposure did manage to attract a number of new members and that's always a good thing.

7. BANK ACCOUNT

The Group now has an account up and running with the Co-operative Bank. It is another important step forward in the group's structure that will help in future funding applications.

8. WEBSITE – www.blythehillfields.org.uk

After some sterling work by Mark Wellband, June 2006 saw the launch of the Group's very own website. It is a fantastic resource for the Group in many ways. In practical terms it can be a document store for Group agendas, minutes and reports but it is also a place of reference for new members to find out information about the Group. It is a means of sharing

ideas on the discussion boards and a gallery for pictures of Blythe Hill Fields and events and activities that the Group organises.

As the Group increased the amount of participatory and other events on the Fields, the website is a reminder and an archive of community achievements.

9. MEMBERSHIP

Attendance at Group meetings has fluctuated. There are many more people interested in the activities of the Group than attend meetings but it is difficult to manage their expectations and considerations without their participation in discussions.

It is imperative that with any improvements/enhancements to Blythe Hill Fields they are supported by a majority of park users and local residents. Therefore over the next year, the Group should seriously consider how it can improve attendance or take account of people's views to make sure it is being representative.

10. EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

It is important for the Group to establish relationships with other park user Groups and community organisations. I have met with Robert Shephard, Co-Chair of Ladywell Fields User group and Sylvestra Le Touzel Teale and Paul Milnes at Telegraph Hill. I have also been in contact with Andrew Harper at Hilly Fields.

There is so much that all our groups can learn from and support each other. One thing is clear, members of any park user group are there because they care about their park and want it to be the best that it can be. With continued commitment, energy and genuine partnership we can start helping that vision to become a reality.

I hope that provides a useful summary of the year and apologies if I've left anything or anyone out.

I am stepping down as Chair at this AGM meeting as my wife and I are expecting our first child very soon. Focus and commitment to the Group and the Committee will probably not be top of my list and therefore I am leaving the role to someone who can commit more fully. It has been an interesting time over the last 7 months but I have learned a great deal and have given what I can to Blythe Hill. There are exciting times ahead and I look forward to being part of them, albeit from a back seat.

Marcel Jenkins
Chair, Blythe Hill Fields User Group