Friends of Brockwell Park response to the draft LBL Events strategy

Friends of Brockwell Park (FOBP) welcomes in principle the idea of an events strategy for 2016-2020 for the London Borough of Lambeth and we support the strategy’s principles of safe, popular events that have community benefit and are financially effective. We appreciate the work of Councillor Jack Hopkins to consult Parks and Open Spaces’ Friends Groups/MACs and the Parks Forum and look forward to developing a good working relationship with him and officers.

There have always been some events in Parks, down the years. FOBP is aware of the financial stringency all councils face and how some events in Parks can make a contribution to improving finances. We do not believe the chief function of a public park is to raise money.

**Wellbeing**

Wellbeing is mentioned just once in the whole document, without any elaboration, yet FOBP believes wellbeing is fundamental to the very definition of Parks and their long-term survival. FOBP believes one of Brockwell Park’s main functions is to provide a haven of peace and green for urban dwellers from the incessant busyness and stress that surrounds them in the city. This function of parks and open spaces is increasingly recognised as crucial to health—including mental health—by many organisations and individuals. **It is important that the events strategy is situated within and observably moderated by the wellbeing agenda.** We would welcome working with the Cabinet Members for Healthier and Stronger Communities, Councillors Jim Dickson and Mohammed Seedat, on this point.

**Ecological integrity of the park**

Nowhere in the events strategy document do the words ‘ecology’ or ‘environment’ appear (except in a reference to the Environmental Impact Fee, soon to be replaced). Not to recognise the special character of holding an event outdoors, and the significant damage major events can do to fragile ground even in sunny weather, let alone poor weather, is a significant omission. Lambeth Council is not a short-term owner of the parks, it is their trustee for generations yet to come. Any events strategy worthy of the name must put protection of the park’s environment at its core; **in practical terms, that means professional officers knowledgeable in the environment being part of the decision process**.

**Community Festival Fund**

We welcome the proposed £25,000 Community Festival Fund; but wonder is this an annual sum or an allocation for the whole period of 2016-2020 ie £5000 a year?

**Parks Investment Levy in the wider context of cuts to Parks budget**

We welcome the proposed Parks Investment Levy (PIL); as this is a per capita fee, we wonder how the actual numbers attending an event will be monitored accurately, to ensure the full fee is achieved.

We believe, however, that the sums of money raised by the PIL are no substitute for a properly funded Lambeth Parks service and we note that the cuts imposed on Parks in Lambeth are higher than in neighbouring boroughs such as Southwark and worse than the national average, all of which face the same cuts in overall Government spending.

Greater financial transparency, on the Parks budget in general and the events strategy in particular, would help groups such as ourselves make a better, more informed contribution to the discussion. This has been promised in the past, but not materialised.

Last year, to coincide with the Council’s 2020 survey, which covered all cultural services, FOBP ran its own, Park-centred survey, which had 430+ respondents; the results of this were sent to all Councillors and submitted to the 2020 survey process in good time. Some 62% of respondents to our survey said they would accept a ‘small increase in Council Tax’ to help fund the Park. This willingness to pay more tax goes against accepted wisdom and shows how important parks and green spaces are to local people. **So, while welcoming the PIL, FOBP urges Lambeth Council to rethink its policy of overall cuts to the Parks budget**.

**Parks and community groups running events**

We welcome the continuation of the commitment of the ability of Parks Friends Groups and MACs being able to hold events free of charge. These are events that cost the Council little or nothing to put on and generate greater community involvement, one of the chief aims of this strategy. While we also welcome the proposed one-year funding for events-management training, we are not sure of the level of demand for this, or any realistic prospect of friends and community groups being significantly involved in events management on a greater scale.

**Increasing the decibel level of events**

We do not welcome the proposals to increase the permitted noise level of events to 75db, nor the extension of the opening time to 10pm. In our 2015 survey, 57% of the 430 respondents supported the holding of gated events such as music concerts, at existing noise levels, while a significant majority of 76% (326 people, compared with 220 in favour in Lambeth’s recent survey) opposed the holding of events at higher decibel levels. As a little experiment, we ask councillors to stand outside the Park at one of these events and decide if this major noise pollution impact on local residents is acceptable. **If implemented,** **FOBP believes the 75db level needs to be kept under regular review**.

**Community involvement**

While ‘greater community involvement’ is a laudable aim, many people would not agree with this strategy document that ‘the means for doing this is via the cabinet and the councillor area leads’ ie only Lambeth councillors. It is those with direct knowledge—members of Friends groups and the Lambeth Parks and Open Spaces Forum—who are best placed to deliver greater community involvement, yet the experience of those bodies is that either London Borough of Lambeth does not consult them, or if it does, ignores such advice. Such groups and the Forum are not perfect, of course, but if the Council has better ways of getting greater community involvement, we would all welcome them. In the meantime, **proper officer and cabinet member time needs to be given to listening to and responding in good time to existing channels. And where possible, there should be decent periods to consider proposals: we had only a week to discuss this major strategy document**.

**Revenue from films**

There is no mention of **a proportion of the revenue from films made in Brockwell Park returning to the park. We think this is essential**.

**Lambeth Country Show**

It is welcome that the Lambeth Country Show will remain free. We presume that means to all, not just Lambeth residents, as mentioned in the strategy. If it is intended to charge non-Lambeth residents, we feel an announcement to that effect needs to be made urgently.

In addition, it is good that the Council is exploring sponsorship and advertising means of reducing the cost to LBL council taxpayers.

Perhaps inviting attendees to text £1 on their mobile might be a creative way of getting more money in; such a system might have helped preserve the fireworks in Brockwell Park.

**8 major commercial event days**

We have serious concerns about the figure of 8 major commercial event days per park:

* There appears to be no environmental, park-related reason why the number of 8 major event days has been picked; the figure appears to have been chosen only to meet financial targets. This should not be the sole criterion. **Any figure should only be selected if independent experts also deem a particular Park can sustain that level of intense usage. Perhaps ‘up to 8 days’ is a fairer formula**
* The definition of ‘major commercial event’ is unclear. The ‘Defining a major event’ diagram at the end of the consultation document specifically states that the recent Found festival in Brockwell Park was *not* a major event. Yet that non-major event shut off a large part of the Park for 10 days and resulted in huge swathes of damage. For Brockwell Park to have to host 8 ‘major events’ *and* an unspecified number of additional ‘non-major events’ such as Found is unacceptable, in terms both of deprivation of user access to the full Park and potential damage to the precious and fragile Park environment. **There needs to be clarity on the numbers of ‘major’ and ‘non-major’ events to be held in the Park**
* No account is taken of ‘resting time’ between events, essential if the Park is to recover from the intense usage experienced during a festival or the Country Show. **This is an area where expert opinion needs to be sought**. FOBP cannot believe that the present situation within Brockwell Park of the SunFall festival being run back to back with the Lambeth Country Show, within a month of the damage from the Found festival, would gain expert approval
* No account is taken of build-up and break-down time: this can add 7 days to a single event (10 for Found); for 8 days, this could amount to 56 days (8x7)—or 80 days if it is a 10-day stretch—when the general public is deprived of access to a large section of the Park—at least three-quarters of the three key summer months. **Some way of factoring in these extra days needs to be found, so the true impact of events in excluding the public from the full park can be determined**
* It is worrying that the possibility of extending that 8 days is mentioned with little justification and minimal community involvement. **We feel any extension beyond 8 days should only be in exceptional circumstances and with full community consultation, not just by decision of ‘cabinet lead and area representatives’**
* As well as hosting the Lambeth Country Show, it is important to acknowledge that Brockwell Park also welcomes circuses and funfairs, perhaps for 30 days a year, again **something to factor into any decision to add events**

In conclusion, we welcome this attempt to put events in Lambeth on a strategic footing for five years. We look forward to working with the Council’s elected representatives and officers to get the best deal long term for the Park we all love.

Friends of Brockwell Park

8 July 2016