

Coram's Fields User Group  
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Chair: Starr Cottrell  
Secretary: Veljko Zizic

Craig McWilliam  
Chair of the Trustees - Coram's Fields and the Harmsworth Memorial Playground  
43 Doughty Street  
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Monday 26th October 2020

Dear Craig,

Welcome to the Chair of the Trustees of Coram's Fields.

Coram's Fields User Group wishes you good speed in this respected position. You follow in the footsteps of Thomas Coram, George Handel, William Hogarth, famous trustees of the Foundling Hospital close to 300 years ago, to Frank Dobson MP, who headed Coram's Fields Playground in recent decades. We hope you will summon and inspire energy and dedication to Coram's Fields.

Lest it be misunderstood what Coram's Fields User Group is about, here I would like to outline our motives, hopes and ambitions for the Playground. I will list our work over the last several years, as well as our perspective on the key issues in Coram's Fields today.

Coram's Fields User Group (CFUG) is an independent body comprising local residents and users of Coram's Fields. CFUG was created in 2015, following a protest against strong increases in the displacement rental (replacing children with adults) that began to manifest at the time.

CFUG has taken an open approach with both Coram's Fields Trustees and Management. We have tried cooperative working and agreed Terms of Reference with Coram's Fields (Document 1). Indeed, over time CFUG has produced a number of papers for Coram's Fields Trustees and Management, outlining various issues, including:

- Coram's Fields Communication, October 2017 (Document 2)
- Marquee rental, December 2017 (Document 3)

CFUG has been instrumental in correcting major failures: by alerting Trustees we corrected potential misuse of Section 106 grant in 2018. The discussion of issues around this is provided in Document 4 - Basketball investigation. CFUG intervention led to proper resurfacing and the money saved was used to renovate parents and children toilets.

CFUG committee visited and conducted interviews with the management of the Princess Diana Memorial Playground, consequently providing advice to Coram's Fields based on this knowledge. CFUG's detailed proposal prompted the creation of Coram's youth football league.

It was following long CFUG campaigns that Coram's Fields replaced sand in the sandpits, as well as implemented the returfing of the western lawn. CFUG conducted a detailed research into the potential for a winter ice rink at Coram's Fields, etc.

CFUG conducts regular communication with its own members, including via surveys (Survey results May 2020 provided - Document 5), and we published over 30 Newsletters.

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CFUG's initial approach accepted the necessity of seeing Coram's Fields through a difficult patch before displacement rental to adults is scaled down. However, with time, it has become increasingly clear the displacement rental is becoming an apparent new way of life. Rental revenue is now used to prop up an ever increasing salary bill, growing annually with little apparent rhyme, reason or accountability. This in turn creates further pressure to increase rental - and remove children users.

Recently published and currently implemented rogue rental policy confirmed our fears. CFUG provided Coram's with two extensive papers on the rental policy, to little avail:

- Rental position paper, Date (Document 6)
- Response to draft policy, Date, (Document 7)

The rogue rental policy is a crude instrument. It seeks to implement time segregation, control of the pitches, and generally limit the access to the pitches by children (whilst claiming the opposite). This conditions children to believe Coram's is not available to them, and increases the scope and space for commercialised time for adults. The implementation of the "policy" involved kicking children out of empty pitches, or locking the pitch gates so as not to allow them access at "incorrect" times. An obvious consequence is that children simply give up on Coram's.

It is possible for Coram's Fields to hide behind availability and other constructed but irrelevant figures. The users on the ground know full well, and CFUG has amply shown in our submission to the Charity Commission, that this is a misrepresentation.

## **Resolving issues at Coram's Fields**

The issues that are fundamental to be resolved in Coram's Fields today are:

1. Displacement rental to adults, comprising of:
  - 1.1. Sport pitch rental
  - 1.2. Christmas marquee rental
2. Exclusion of 16-18 year olds
3. Lack of investment

These issues entirely link back to displacement practices developed over the last few years.

Some are immediately solvable. For example, the exclusion of 16-18 year olds is an obvious breach of the Governing documents but can be immediately corrected.

Some will take constructive effort, such as investment in the park. Investment will be based on a renewed and constructive fundraising effort.

Other problems, such as Christmas marquee rental, require a reversal in the newly ingrained culture. The Playground in its entirety belongs to children and the focus of the organisation needs to be entirely on children activities. This needs to be respected again.

For CFUG it is an absolute priority that pitch rental to adults, in the afternoons and on weekends, is significantly scaled down, until entirely abandoned. Children and teenagers should be encouraged to play and need to be brought back to Coram's Fields. This reversal, however, should not lead to shorter operating hours. Coram's needs to be open to children from dawn until dusk as has always been the case, and is so in all playgrounds around London.

In all cases strong preference ought to be given to children or children related organisations. Even in the evenings (after normal operating hours), youth sport clubs should have a priority when compared to adults and schools should take absolute precedence over lunchtime league (Monday to Friday).

## **Conclusion**

In word and deed CFUG has proven to be a conscientious and honest body, that cares for Coram's Fields and children's rights within it. In return, Coram's Fields organisation is showing a desire to create an alternative "dependent" User Group. Coram's Fields' "consultations" are often based on some other, unknown users. CFUG would now like to see a significant cultural change at Coram's Fields, based on honesty, transparency and straight dealing. Continued smoke and mirrors misinformation policy will lead Coram's Fields into further disrepute.

Whilst the Charity Commission has given Coram's Fields a benefit of the doubt in this instance, we have no doubt this is for technical or other reasons related to Covid. You will have read the Governing Documents and our Submission. No doubt you too will have understood the correct reading of the Governing documents, as stated in our report.

These issues are not going to go away unless and until the fundamental breaches of the Trust Deed by Coram's Fields organisation and management fully cease.

Our unfortunate Covid dominated present may however become a turning point for Coram's Fields. We assume the Christmas Marquee will not occur this year. It is an opportunity for you as a new Chair to reset Coram's Fields and set its sights on fundraising efforts other than rental. This would be the truest and longest lasting legacy to Coram's Fields, its community of children users. Equally importantly it would be a true defence of the historic legacy of this site.

CFUG are willing to work with Coram's Fields in an honest and transparent framework. We can certainly allow time for the task at hand. CFUG would need to understand the direction of travel and whether the concerns we have expressed are correctly understood.

I would like to propose for us to meet and discuss the issues outlined here, as soon as you have settled into your new role.

We are looking forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Veljko Zizic  
Secretary, CFUG