

Coram's Fields User Group
Representing local users,
parents and children in Coram's Fields

Trustees and Management - Coram's Fields
Camden Councillors: Kings Cross and Holborn Wards
Sir Keir Starmer, MP for Holborn and St Pancras

Monday 12th November 2018

Dear Sir or Madam,

Please find enclosed our comments on the following document:

“Coram's Fields – Pitch usage policy – Final Draft - October 2018”.

We have looked carefully through your proposal. The key areas of concern are the following:

- This Policy proposal offers no improvement to the present situation whereby, due to aggressive rental to adults, thousands of youth and children users are displaced from Coram's Fields during key hours - after school and on weekends.
- Based on the proposed Policy, in our calculation, over 65% of the key hours (where we focus on after school hours and on weekends), is dedicated to adult rental.
- The Policy proposal is vague on many points. This leaves an ample scope for such a policy to be continued to be applied negatively.
- Inadequate and unworkable proposals in relation to free play time scheduling for all children, as well as confusing proposals in relation to 16-19 year olds.
- The proposal contains a number of anomalies, such as offering subsidy to adult renters aged 20-25, whilst at the same time no mention is made of Youth sport clubs.
- A number of areas are simply not dealt with at all, or are not dealt with in sufficient detail: these include rental to schools, rental of multi sport arena (basketball), rental of other areas of the park, revenue reinvestment, pitch maintenance procedures.
- No specific data is provided in the Policy document, nor is there an indication of what is the policy trying to achieve in real terms, apart from seem to be broad catch-all statements.

Please note that we have looked at the Survey, however as a group we have not considered worthwhile answering. The Survey appears to modify or supplement a number of points made in the Policy proposal, whilst containing a number of leading questions. We have taken the Policy proposal document to be the sole relevant reference document, and we refer exclusively to what is contained within it.

Our detailed comments are contained in the pages that follow. We hope you will find our paper useful. We are very much encouraging Coram's Fields management and Trustees to continue with efforts to develop a comprehensive and useful Pitch use policy as well as a general park Rental policy.

With regards

Coram's Fields User Group

APPLICATION OF CORE PRINCIPLES

- I. **CORAM'S FIELDS TRUST DEED:** As per the **Trust Deed**, Coram's Fields in its entirety belongs to children. It is Coram's Fields policy that adults are not allowed unless accompanied by a child. The "**Pitch use policy**" needs to state that rental of the pitches is a temporary and unwanted measure forced on Coram's Fields due to financial cuts.

Rental to adults during operational hours undermines these core principles - the very nature of the park. Aggressive rental has been an unwelcome development over the last 4 years from the perspective of users, and has caused numerous and well documented issues (primarily lack of play space for children and youth, as well as safety, safeguarding, loitering, aggressive behaviour, pitch encroaching by adults, etc.). Coram's Fields needs to acknowledge and deal with this key issue, rather than stealthily institute an indefinite change to its own nature.

- II. **RENTAL REVENUES:** In the opinion of the Coram's Fields User Group and many local users we represent, the revenues from rental ought to be directed towards capital investment in the park. Coram's Fields has suffered a major capital underinvestment in the last number of years. As a matter of common moral sense, it would be highly unprincipled that the rental of a kids facilities is used to fund salaries. Not only is this a slippery slope, where the salaries and the number of employees can grow continuously, it is changing the nature of the park all together. The Management of the park needs to be directed by the Policy and the Trustees, and incentivised not to rely any more on rental income for salaries, since this has led to skewed incentives.

It is a matter of public record that Coram's Fields salaries take up the vast part of Coram's budget (well over £1 million in 2017). The salary bill has increased by over 35% in the precedent period, mirroring the rise in rental revenue (as shown in our Rental Policy recommendation, p11, table 2). See: [Rental Policy recommendation \(10.7.18\)](#).

The management and the Trustees of Coram's Fields need to act swiftly to acknowledge these issues and to establish a timeline for ending these practices, which are undermining the very being of Coram's Fields.

COMMENTS ON THE “PITCH USAGE POLICY”

1. **Vague statements.** A number of policy statements are vague, and need to be clarified:

- 1.1. Page 1, Paragraph entitled “**Prioritising Young People**” states: “*No less than 65% of the pitch availability is for young people*”. The basis for calculation is not known.

Our own calculation of key hours (afternoons and weekends - i.e. after school hours that matter to visiting children) would produce an opposite result, with over 65% of the pitch available for rental by adults. Coram’s Fields own website states that rental to adults is available as follows: *Weekdays: 4pm-10pm (term-time); 5pm-10pm (school holidays excluding Christmas) and 5pm-8pm (Summer holidays). Weekends: 10am to an hour before dusk.*

- 1.2. There are 3 available pitches in Coram’s Fields, and when discussing their use, this needs to be kept in mind and needs to be clearly specified. E.g. Page 2, paragraph entitled “**Free Play**” does not specify what is meant in: “*The provision of free play, whereby young people have the opportunity to turn up and play without booking....*”:

- 1.2.1. In practice, free play is currently available on one (1) pitch only (“free play pitch”). This appears a continued intention here, and if so this needs to be clearly stated for the avoidance of any doubt.

2. “**Free play**” **Page 2, Paragraph 2 and Table 1:**

Based on our reading it would appear that 5-11 year olds are expected to be displaced from the pitch, **at 1pm (!)**, by 11-16 year olds! It is not explained that children are to share a single pitch, whilst 2 pitches are continued to be rented to adults.

Furthermore, the attempted division between 5-11 year olds and 11-16 year olds is artificial. In real life and observed practice, most age groups (small and big children) congregate together at various times of the day.

Children are congested because there is no sufficient area for them to play - since two pitches are rented to adults. Subdividing children into time slots on a single pitch is a continued disparaging policy of drip feeding so called "Free play" to children.

2.1. In relation to Saturday mornings 9am-2pm, what is stated as available for the "Free play" is not correct. Two (2) pitches are taken by Saturday youth football league, and one (1) pitch is being rented to adults. Thus there are no free pitches available. (NB The Youth League does not provide any free drop-ins as initially promised when the league was inaugurated). This is contrary to a basic Coram's rule of having at least one free play pitch available. Thus, at present there is no free play pitch to play on in Coram's on Saturday mornings.

2.2. **Rental to adults on weekends:** Weekends are an **absolute key** time for the park and for all children. Many children arrive to Coram's Fields, including many visitors from other parts of London. However, currently on weekends, 65% of the time on the pitches is available to adults - 2 out of 3 pitches, from 10am until closing. This is the exact inverse of the figure quoted in the Policy proposal.

This is clearly highly damaging for children, youth and teenagers and for Coram's reputation. Many of these are children from the poorest backgrounds, with no access to outdoor space, fighting against obesity, living in the most polluted zone in Europe, and surrounded by numerous other major problems such as violent knife crime. Removing 65% of pitch access represents a mass removal of teenagers out of Coram's Fields and onto streets.

If a reminder is needed at all, knife violence is increasing dramatically. Three teenagers have been murdered in London this week alone.

2.3. **Rental of "Free play pitch" to adults - Saturday mornings:** Coram's Fields has continued to rent aggressively on Saturday mornings too. Whilst we have both initiated and welcomed the introduction of the Youth football league on Saturday mornings, this was incorrectly and unfairly implemented, with the sole available "Free play pitch" soon after rented to adults - against all promises.

The Youth league has immediately dropped free sessions, making the league operation a commercial structure, with scant attention paid to local needs.

3. **State schools in Camden, (Islington and Westminster) - Page 2, Paragraph 3**

Whilst this is an admirable policy, in practice local Camden schools rarely use Coram's Fields. Indeed, some schools, such as Christopher Hatton, never use Coram's facilities.

We would like to query if there are indirect ways in which the state schools are effectively limited in using Coram's Fields? How are schools made aware of pitch usage availability? Do schools need more assistance? Has there been a any consultation by Coram's Fields with state schools about their needs? Has there been a consultation with the councillors of Camden, Islington and Westminster, about how to increase the school's use of Coram's facilities by state schools?

To be able to assess the actual value of this element of Policy, could we please see the annual statistics in relation to the use of pitches by schools from all listed boroughs?

4. **Young people Pitch bookings (16-19 year olds) - Page 2, Paragraph 4**

The Policy proposal is very confusing in relation to Pitch use by 16-19 year olds. The Policy states that the 16-19 year olds are free to **turn up** and play, and that the availability is available on the website. The Policy also states that there is **no cost** to booking pitches for 16-19 year olds. So which one is it - are the teenagers supposed to to Turn up (as is currently the case) or are they supposed to book for free? It must be noted that the availability is **NOT** available on Coram's website.

Teenagers have deserted Coram's en masse, exactly for this reason - they do turn up to play but are unable to play because the pitches have been rented to adults.

If on the other hand, we take it that 'bookings by 16-19 year olds' is related to the "**Free play**" pitch and based on the time schedule in Table 2 on Page 2, it would imply no free play pitch for children on Weekends. Clearly, this would be absolutely unacceptable.

Conversely, if it relates to pitches currently rented by adults, this needs to be expressly and transparently stated. Furthermore, it needs to be clearly stated that youth (16-19 year olds) will have a priority in booking over any adults, including over any block

bookings. Otherwise this element of the Policy proposal would be both spurious and meaningless.

5. Subsidised rental to 20-25 year olds - Page 2, Paragraph 5

While we do not comment on the merit of subsidising 20-25 year olds, Coram's Fields does belong to children, and 20-25 year olds are very much adults. This element of the proposal is a significant anomaly.

Has there been an internal discussion or a policy decision by Coram's Fields Trustees that people in the 20 to 25 year old bracket are treated differently to adults? When and why was this initiated? For example, why would 20-25 year olds be prioritised during day hours vs Youth sports clubs for 8-18 year olds, which appear not to have been given any consideration at all?

This element of the proposed policy is open to abuse and clearly needs to be rethought.

There may well be a merit in prioritising 20-25 year olds in the evening hours - after park closing times at app. 7pm until the closure of the pitches at 10pm, when young adults in this age group 20-25 should be prioritised over other adults.

6. Rental to adults - Page 3, Paragraph 3

The Policy provides very limited information in relation to Adult rental. Thus, it would appear that the Policy proposal silently condones continued aggressive rental to adults.

However, rental to adults is a major issue, with an estimated 45,000+ adults now encroaching on children's space solely in key hours (afternoons and weekends), thus mass displacing youth and teenagers from Coram's Fields.

Secondary issues that flow from adult presence are the Safeguarding (entrance, toilets, changing rooms), block bookings and adult priority over schools on weekdays. We list issues where proposed Policy is deficient:

6.1. **Rental to adults on Weekends:** Discussed in section 2.2.

6.2. **Saturday morning rental to adults:** Discussed in section 2.3.

- 6.3. **Adult block bookings:** Adult block bookings (often for entire seasons ahead) would prevent Youth (16-19) to book, unless the Policy proposal becomes clear on Youth booking priority.
- 6.4. **Rental of “Free play pitch” to adults:** Unfortunately, the “Free pitch” has been regularly rented - to adult Rugby players on Wednesdays and to adult Female Football players. Such practices have created a further negative impacts on youth users. This is not dealt with in the Policy.
- 6.5. **Priority to adults 12-2pm:** Adults appear prioritised over schools at the key mid day hours. Why not replace adults in full with long term partnership with schools? Certainly, we would argue that Schools should be given a priority here.
- 6.6. **Enforcement and rules for Adults:** Enforcement of rules are rare and highly limited. The signage at the entrance is not prominent; Coram’s employees normally do not enforce “no adult rules”; Rules are disregarded, etc.
- 6.7. **Pricing for adults:** Pricing for adults still appears too low, for a premier facility in the very centre of London. The facility is used by professionals in the central zone. Having looked at similar facilities in London, we believe the pricing for adults should be increased further to app. £10 per person per hour, i.e. £160 per hour of pitch hire.
- 6.8. **Off-peak rate for adults:** In all cases there should be no off-peak or subsidies for adults and they should pay a full rate.

7. **Rental to Private Schools / Charities**

Whilst private schools do use Coram’s Fields, we believe the use could be increased and improved by improving Coram’s offering. For example, we believe ALL schools ought to be prioritised at 12-2pm weekday slots. There seems to be no good reasons to prioritise adults over schools in Coram’s Fields. Further elements which may improve Coram’s offering to schools and lead to improved partnerships may include:

- 7.1. **Storage facilities, Equipment, Service offer:** Storage facilities; Consultation re equipment (e.g. goal sizes); Refereeing services; After match refreshments.

- 7.2. **Flexibility and long term planning:** Allow schools to book single pitches (rather than block book all) by hosting more than one school at once; Offer long term planning (e.g. multi-season agreements).
- 7.3. **Parking:** Forecourt parking in day hours, for schools that arrive in mini buses.
8. **Special Fundraising Event days - Exclusive use, Page 3, Paragraph 4**

Exclusive fundraising events need to be justified. Revenues from such events need to significantly exceed the actual cost per hour for a pitch rental. Given that most events are time limited, Coram's ought to ensure prompt reopening to children, when possible.

Such fundraising schemes should be avoided on weekends or during school holidays.

Missing elements in the Policy proposal:

1. Youth Sports Clubs

Youth sports clubs are currently under represented in Coram's Fields. A number of sports are not represented at all, such as rugby, athletics, basketball, cricket, tennis, netball. Youth sport clubs are often small operations that certainly can not be classed as "profit making", but provide an invaluable service.

2. Youth league

The Pitch use proposal does not establish what are the conditions of rental to a Youth league (Saturday morning). This needs to be clarified.

3. Coram's Fields Sports Programme: Sports programme occasionally occupies the Free play pitch. The Policy needs to take this into account and detail which pitches and at which times will be occupied.

4. Transparency - Policy, Availability, Financials

The entire policy needs to be fully transparent and publicly available.

The availability of pitches on a monthly and longer term basis should be published on the Coram's Fields website (NB It is not currently), including on the available information boards, and on the sports pitches.

The data on rental revenues, statistics, hours and revenues needs to become transparent, and provided to users, including in Coram's Fields annual accounts.

5. Cleaning and maintenance events

No Pitch cleaning and maintenance events are to be scheduled during school holidays or on weekends. These are to be scheduled solely during periods when the pitches are in low use by children (e.g. weekdays or winter term time). We have seen examples of maintenance events being scheduled during half term for example.

6. Basketball & Netball pitch (Multisports arena)

The Policy proposal does not deal with the Basketball pitch ("Multisports arena").

Will this be rented to schools for example, at what times, and on what conditions? Could you please clarify.

7. Comprehensive rental policy of grounds and buildings

This is a suitable opportunity for the Trustees to reflect on the broader policy re building rental (e.g. Wolfson building), grounds rental (Marquee, Wedding parties), and other rental. Namely, what are the criteria, what is the purpose and what are the targets of such rental, and how are children needs reflected in those plans.