

Report to the RCC from the Garden Advisory Group Sept 2021

Members of the Gardens Advisory Group carried out their inspections of the Barbican Gardens and then reviewed their findings at a meeting on September 16th.

The broad conclusions are that the gardens have been substantially improved by the additional gardening hours supported by the service charge increase approved by the RCC in March 2020. The whole City Gardens team is thanked for its efforts and achievements with particular thanks to Beth Handley. The work of the City Gardens team was supported by the BEO that facilitated the purchase of new plants where required.

Those increased hours, largely but not exclusively provided by Beth Handley before her departure, show the benefits of having additional devoted resources. Those benefits included a clear awareness of the challenges offered by bare patches, weeds, overgrown shrubs and trees and the impact of climate change. The response has been to fill in the gaps using a mixture of plants recycled from elsewhere in the City, splitting and relocating existing plants in the Barbican gardens and some spending on new plants. Shrubs and bushes were cut back to clear pathways and foster new growth. These plantings were carefully design to increase the overall colour palette and spread it more widely across the year. These improvements have improved the visual aspects of the gardens, raised the support for bio-diversity, enhanced residents' privacy in some areas while continuing to support the multiple uses that Barbican residents make of the gardens. Leaving fewer bare patches helps to minimise weeding.

Without the additional gardening hours provided by the service charge uplift the improvement in the gardens will not only not continue it will rapidly be lost. The gardens will revert to their previous state of gradual decline. The uplift in the service charge was seen by the City Gardens team as a clear signal of the extent to which they were valued and appreciated with a positive impact on morale. It is not difficult to imagine the impact of a reduction in budget.

Despite all these improvements there remains much to be done – remedying gaps in hedges, thinning out over dominant species, pruning to foster new growth and visual aspects, ensuring that trees do not damage neighbouring buildings, continuing planting with new more environmentally friendly species and enhancing the overall appeal of our gardens.

Gardens require more than one off inputs of additional hours – they demand the consistent application of time and resources to fully flourish. Beth Handley was appointed on a short term contract because of the limited nature of the funding provided. Given her evident ability and skill it was entirely understandable that she was offered better prospects elsewhere before she completed that contract.

The Gardens Advisory Group unanimously recommends to the RCC that the temporary uplift in the service charge (averaging less than £25 per flat per year) should be made permanent to ensure that the service levels the gardens require are maintained. By making the uplift permanent the RCC will enable City Gardens to make a permanent appointment to the team thereby reducing the potential for unwanted turnover. We very much hope that the RCC will support this proposal.

Jim Durcan
Chair
Gardens Advisory Group