

<b>Committee</b>	<b>Dated:</b>
Open Spaces & City Gardens	5 December 2016
<b>Subject:</b> Finsbury Circus Reinstatement – Bowling Green Issue Report	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Director of Open Spaces	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>Report author:</b> Martin Rodman – Superintendent of Parks & Gardens	

### Summary

This report addresses a representation from the City of London Bowling Club regarding a possible return to Finsbury Circus.

The Bowling Club has submitted a business proposal to the City Corporation setting out details for its more efficient use of a reinstated facility and is seeking reconsideration of your Committee’s previous decision not to reinstate a specialist sporting surface. The proposal (Appendix 1) suggests some potential reductions to future maintenance costs but fails to address other key issues. Evidence supporting your Committee’s earlier decision is grouped under three main headings relating to cost, space and need.

### Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Reaffirm the resolution taken in December 2014, that is, to endorse the reinstatement of Finsbury Circus Garden to be laid out for general public access as a high quality garden space and without the introduction of specialist sporting surfaces exclusively aimed at specific user groups.

### Main Report

#### Background

1. In autumn 2009, Crossrail Ltd (CRL) was in the process of acquiring Finsbury Circus as a worksite. Consequently it had entered into negotiations with parties that had an interest in the premises. One of these parties was the City of London Bowling Club (CoLBC), which used the bowling green and clubhouse at Finsbury Circus as its “home ground”.

2. The CRL works necessitated the removal of the bowling green and therefore the relocation of CoLBC. CRL paid compensation to CoLBC to facilitate its relocation to another site. The removal of the green provided an opportunity for the City Corporation to review the terms under which CoLBC used the facilities at Finsbury Circus.
3. In December 2009, the Open Spaces Committee considered potential options for the reinstatement of Finsbury Circus Garden following completion of the Crossrail works, and resolved that;
  - a. The City of London Bowling Club be advised that, should it return to Finsbury Circus following the completion of Crossrail works, the City would want to formalise its future occupation of the club room at a rent with maintenance obligations and appropriate costs and recovery, including staff time;
  - b. If the City of London Bowling Club declined the basis for returning to Finsbury Circus, a project evaluation group consisting of relevant officers be set up to fully explore suitable options for the reinstatement of Finsbury Circus upon completion of Crossrail.
4. The City Surveyor wrote to the then secretary of CoLBC setting out the proposed terms for future use of the bowling facilities, should they be reinstated. The secretary responded by email on 20 January 2010 stating that: “no bowls club could afford the proposed rent, so the club would simply not be able to afford to return to Finsbury Circus post Crossrail”.
5. On this basis, negotiations continued between the City and CoLBC over such issues as temporary storage of equipment pending the club’s removal, and clarifying the extent of its use of Finsbury Circus to assist with the Club’s negotiations with CRL. It was clear from this correspondence and from telephone conversations at that time that CoLBC were expecting to permanently relocate to another site. Consequently the City’s negotiations with CRL proceeded on the basis that a green would not be reinstated at Finsbury Circus upon completion of works.
6. The 2009 report set out a number of details relating to the practicality, expense and resources involved in maintaining the bowling green for the benefit of a small section of the community, which was disproportionately expensive. Moving to 2014, further issues arose that needed to be considered;
  - a. The post-Crossrail Cityscape was to be significantly different to that of 10 years ago. The work carried out as part of the City Vision 2050 report highlighted the anticipated increase in the number of City workers over the coming decades. So close to the Eastern City Cluster, it was likely that much of this influx would be concentrated through Moorgate and Liverpool Street, at either end of the new central City Crossrail platform. Consequently pressure on open space was only likely to increase, and so it was essential that any new space retained maximum flexibility whilst

providing a much needed oasis of calm for as wide a section of our community as possible.

- b. The Service Based Review tasked officers with delivering more for less, amplifying the disproportionate cost of maintaining a bowling green which the City was never able to fully recover, and which only benefitted a very narrow section of the community.
  - c. Bowling greens remained very expensive to install (circa £166,000). Whilst an upper limit figure had not been discussed, CRL suggested that any monies not required for the reinstatement of a green could be utilised for an improved Garden landscape.
  - d. Use of the green was largely limited to the latter part of the day, leaving a substantial part of the garden sterile for much of the day and wholly unavailable for wider public use. Strategically, the City strives to maximise the amount of usable public open space and to increase its accessibility.
  - e. It was widely known within the industry, and had been publicised in the National press, that bowls clubs find it increasingly difficult to attract new members.
  - f. Metre for metre, bowling greens are one of the most expensive sports surfaces to maintain.
7. At this time, CRL was pressing for a definitive position on the design parameters for Finsbury Circus, in preparation for their Urban Integration Design document. In December 2014 your Committee considered a report on the reinstatement design for Finsbury Circus. Your Committee resolved to:
- a. Affirm the reinstatement of Finsbury Circus Garden to be laid out for general public access as a high quality garden space and without the introduction of specialist sporting surfaces exclusively aimed at specific user groups.
  - b. Note the Equalities Impact Assessment which indicated that a reinstated garden without specialist sporting surfaces would serve all users rather than any one specific minority sports group.
8. Moving to summer 2016, a representative of CoLBC expressed displeasure at the historic decisions taken by your Committee, and proposed that the reinstated green could be directly managed by the Club much more economically than by the Corporation's City Gardens' team. The Club was therefore invited to submit a proposal in a short and succinct report for consideration in advance of the December meeting of your Committee. This submission was to set out the Club's business case for running the facility, state the currently active membership of the Club, and its activities since the closure of Finsbury Circus six years ago. The submission deadline agreed with the Club was 15 October 2016, and the representative was invited to attend the meeting at which the proposal was to be considered.

## **Current Position**

9. A proposal was received from CoLBC on 17 October 2016. This is attached as Appendix 1. Whilst some interesting points are made, the proposal fails to fully address the following issues:

## **Maintenance Cost**

10. The cost of annual maintenance broken down by task is set out in Appendix 2. There are additional costs outlined in the 2009 report amounting to approximately £22,000, which include horticultural materials, machinery running costs, utilities, maintenance of the club room and staff overtime costs for evening and weekend working. This makes the total cost of running a green and associated facilities approximately £50,000.
11. Appendix 1 shows that some of these costs are disputed by CoLBC. Whilst it is accepted that the facilities would be run differently today (for example, implementing a different working rota to remove the need for overtime), a number of assumptions are factually incorrect. A green does not exist solely at the times at which it is being used for play, but leaf clearance, brushing (to remove dew and worm casts), and chemical treatments all have to take place throughout the relevant time of year in order to prevent the build-up of pest and fungal infections, and to keep the green in a playable condition. The proposal demonstrates a lack of knowledge of green-keeping requirements and thus does not instil confidence that the City's standards would be met and maintained.
12. It is not proposed to pick through the details in Appendix 1 item by item. Suffice it to say that there can be little doubt that the actual maintenance costs for a bowling green would substantially outweigh the income generated from the green (figures also shown in Appendix 2).
13. It is also worth expanding on point 6 (c) above; the compensation payable by CRL to the City is a finite sum and, in accordance with the Crossrail Act, only applies to the area of land taken by CRL as a worksite (i.e. the area within the hoarding). This sum is unlikely to be sufficient for the re-landscaping of the entire garden, and so will need to be spent wisely in order to improve the landscape outside the hoarded area so that the reinstated landscape design reads as a contiguous whole.
14. Officers contacted six bowling clubs across London, thought to have facilities of a similar standard to those that existed at Finsbury Circus, in an attempt to obtain comparable benchmarking costs. Of those six clubs, one reported maintenance costs of approximately £40k per annum, one had closed and, despite repeated follow-up reminders, four did not respond.

## **Space**

15. The area of land taken up by the bowling green and clubhouse equated to 31% of the total garden area. Based on the bowling playing season and opening hours, even this part of the garden was only accessible to paying bowlers for 30% of total garden opening hours each calendar year. For the remainder of visitors it was inaccessible at all times.
16. Strategically, the City strives to maximise the amount of usable public open space and to increase its accessibility. The reinstatement of Finsbury Circus Garden with a landscape that suits a wide range of uses throughout the day, and encourages access for all, strongly supports the following strategic objectives in the City of London Open Space Strategy Supplementary Planning Document.
1. *Maintain and increase public access to existing open space and enhance the quality of these spaces, in terms of both design and management.*
  2. *Increase the amount of high quality public open space in order to maintain the existing City wide ration of 0.06 ha per 1000 week day-time population and focus efforts on creating additional public open space in the east of the City, particularly in the Eastern Cluster and the Aldgate area.*
  3. *Ensure that all open spaces are designed and managed to be safe and accessible to all and, where appropriate, enable opportunities for different activities at different times of the day and year, including as outdoor work spaces.*
  4. *Provide where appropriate, additional play opportunities that are accessible to all in existing and new spaces*
  5. *Ensure that existing and new spaces make a positive contribution to the biodiversity value of the City through appropriate plant choice and habitat creation*
  9. *Promote the potential contribution open spaces can make to the improved health and well-being of City and wider communities*
17. An alternative way to consider this is, were the City to construct a brand new garden elsewhere in the Square Mile, would a bowling green form part of that new landscape? Given the current financial constraints, it seems highly improbable.

## **Need**

18. Paragraph 6 (e) above refers to the reduction in uptake of bowling countrywide and the repurposing of green space (latest article in Horticulture Week, 30 September 2016, refers). Whilst this alone is not an argument to contribute to that decline by removing another green, user consultation supports the prioritisation of green garden space over specialised sports surfaces.

19. The last City Gardens survey of users and non-users carried out in 2012, captured the in depth views of over one thousand residents, workers and visitors. When respondents were asked to think of ways in which the gardens and churchyards in the City could be improved, 'more sports facilities' was ranked eighth. The top four rankings in order of priority were "more open space" (i.e. increase in amount of); "more nature-attracting"; "more lawn areas"; and "more trees". These results closely mirror those of previous surveys (undertaken approximately every four years).
20. It is also worth noting that there is a bowling facility at Finsbury Square in the London Borough of Islington, just 250 metres north of Finsbury Circus.

## **Proposal**

21. In summary, whilst CoLBC has clearly made an impassioned plea for the reinstatement of a bowling green at Finsbury Circus, its proposal fails to adequately address the fundamental issues outlined in this report. Moreover, it omits altogether the issue of future maintenance of the bowling green and fails to support the Club's assertion that this could be undertaken much more economically by its members than by the City Gardens team.
22. Furthermore, the Finsbury Circus reinstatement project is now at the stage where it needs to make progress through the City's formal projects procedures in order to be ready for implementation when the garden is handed back by CRL in March 2018. Extensive design work has already been undertaken by CRL on the understanding that a green would not form part of the reinstated landscape. A reversal of this decision would lead to further delay and duplicated design costs which, Crossrail may argue, are beyond the scope of the compensation terms.
23. It is therefore proposed that your Committee reaffirms the decision taken at your meeting on 9 December 2014, that Finsbury Circus Garden be laid out for general public access as a high quality garden space and without the introduction of specialist sporting surfaces especially if to be provided exclusively for niche user groups.

## **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

24. As well as supporting a number of key aims in the City of London Open Space Strategy SPD (see paragraph 16 above), this report also supports two of the four key departmental objectives in the Open Spaces Business Plan 2016-19:

**OSD2** - *Embed financial sustainability across our activities by delivering identified programmes and projects*

**OSD4** - *Improve the health and wellbeing of the community through access to green space and recreation*

## **Implications**

25. Financial Implications – Despite increases being applied to salaries to help keep pace with the cost of living, City Gardens local risk bottom line has reduced by more than £90k over the past 10 years. 2017/18 sees a further reduction of £50k (Service Based Review contribution), and further savings of 2-3% year on year from 2018 are anticipated.
26. Property Implications – If CoLBC returns to Finsbury Circus, the City Corporation would need to provide suitable accommodation for players' facilities, thus potentially significant construction works and with subsequent operating and maintenance cost implications that would impact upon local revenue. Care would then be needed to ensure that CoLBC did not obtain an interest in property that could frustrate the City Corporation's ownership or future management requirements.

## **Conclusion**

27. Although the CoLBC proposal makes an impassioned plea, it fails to address some key issues, such as proposing an alternative model for future maintenance of the green staffed by the Club's 25 active members, or providing evidence-based detail on how future income may be increased in order to offset running costs. It also makes some incorrect assumptions about maintenance requirements.
28. Although a bowling green existed at Finsbury Circus Garden for several decades before the site was acquired by Crossrail, the cost implications of its reinstatement and ongoing maintenance greatly exceed the income it generates making it disproportionately expensive and unsustainable in the long term. Rather than being perceived as a negative move, this is a prime opportunity for the City to gain a modern, fit for purpose green space that encourages greater use by a wider range of visitor groups, and to be seen to be embracing access for all.

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – City of London Bowling Club Proposal
- Appendix 2 – Bowling Green maintenance costs, Income Generation and visitor numbers

## **Background Papers**

Committee Report 7 December 2009 – Finsbury Circus Bowling Green  
Committee Report 9 December 2014 – Finsbury Circus Reinstatement Update  
Committee Report 10 October 2016 – Finsbury Circus Reinstatement – Issue Report

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