

Understanding usage, needs, and improvements at Cherry Hinton Hall



**A research report by Phil Back for Cambridge City
Council**

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1 Background and objectives

Cherry Hinton Hall is a large landscaped park in the south of Cambridge, sited on Cherry Hinton Road close to the city but also in close proximity to the village area of Cherry Hinton itself. The park was originally laid out as an estate surrounding the Hall, a substantial detached house in the centre of the park which was built in the Victorian era as a private residence. Cherry Hinton Hall was acquired by Cambridge City Council in 1937.

Under Council ownership, the site has functioned primarily as a local park, although it is also used for some high profile events, most notably the annual folk festival, which has taken place at the park for more than forty years. The Hall building has been let to an independent school, whilst the lodge cottage at the main gates is occupied by a Council employee as a tenant. Behind the Hall, a small depot building, yard, and propagation centre were constructed ; the depot building has since been let to the Cambridge Regional College, while the depot itself has recently been closed down (although some items remain stored on the site). The propagation centre was closed in 2007 and its glasshouses were demolished, leaving a large area in the centre of the park that is currently unused.

This research began as a project to explore future uses for the former propagation centre site, but early on it was realised that the site could only really be appreciated and appraised in the context of the wider park, and that people's interest would be in the park as a whole rather than simply on possible uses for the former propagation area. The scope of the project was therefore broadened out to look at the park as a whole, and the results entirely justify this approach, we believe.

The objectives of the study were:

- To examine how people utilise the park, and to see which groups of people are well served, and which are less well served, by the park as it currently stands;
- To examine which facilities in the park require improvement to meet the needs and expectations of those who use the park for different purposes;
- To explore possible future uses of the former propagation centre, and to gauge public and stakeholder interest in a range of alternative possibilities;
- To present the results of consultation to the Council and to indicate where possible preferred options for improvement or change in the park, its services and facilities.

2 Methodology

We saw the objectives of this study as requiring us to consult both with the general public in the vicinity of the park, and also with key stakeholder groups and organisations who either use the park themselves, or have some professional relationship with it.

To ensure public participation, we set up two focus groups, one for parents of younger children (those of an age to use the play facilities provided on the site) and one for other park users, regardless of age, who use the park more generally rather than the play facilities. A professional recruiter was asked to recruit ten people for each of these groups, which were held in the local primary school early in December 2008; in addition, two other people who had already expressed an interest in the park were invited to the second group. To ensure that the meetings included ordinary people as well as anyone with a specific “axe to grind”, a cash incentive of £35 was paid to each person who attended the two public focus groups.

Alongside this, we also

- Held a focus group-type discussion with stakeholders invited from a list supplied by the City Council (no incentive was paid for this, as people attended as a corollary of their job, or their representative function);
- Met individually with other stakeholders unable to attend this discussion;
- Met with elected members representing the two wards which encompass the site and its immediate surroundings;
- Liaised with the CHYPPS team to ensure their consultation work and ours were properly integrated and that they did not conflict or overlap.

Attendances were as follows:

Group	Committed to attend	Actually attended/met with
Stakeholders	15	14
Residents with children	10	8
Other park users	12	9

The report that follows explores the views of all those who took part. Equal weight is given to each respondent, and quotations are anonymised in accordance with the undertaking given to those taking part.

The groups followed an agreed discussion outline which is included as an appendix to this report. However, the facilitator allowed the discussion to flow in the direction of the agreed objectives and not all tasks were necessary or undertaken by all three groups. Stimulus was provided to the groups in the form of a large map, and cards that allowed people to identify particular parts of the site for discussion. Conversations with individuals tended to be more free flowing and exploratory and did not follow any particular structure, although we ensured that the key issues were discussed. Themes emerging from the discussions have been identified, both the big picture of the park as a whole and the more detailed picture of specific areas or issues relating to the park.

We are grateful to all those who took part, and for their contributions, which are welcomed.

3 The park as a whole

Cherry Hinton Hall is outlined in the site plan below, and can be viewed on Google Earth.



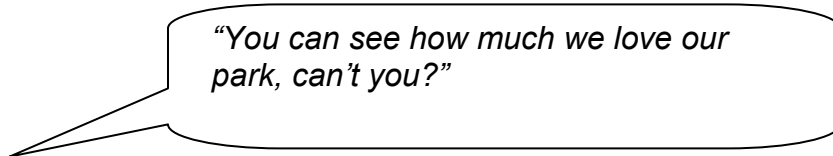


The park lies in a largely urbanised area and is bounded to the south by a main road. The eastern and western boundaries are largely the back gardens of adjoining residential properties, with a small stream lying between the park and property on the northern and north eastern edges. An allotment area to the north of the site is not part of Cherry Hinton Hall, but provides a green link to other parts of the city's open space.

Although people feed back on specific areas of the park that they use or feel strongly about, there are also a number of comments about the park as a whole. These help to set a context in which improvement or modification can be set.

3.1 Value

As with other open spaces in the city, this is a very popular and highly valued site. Although people have little difficulty in identifying improvements they would like to see, they also stress a very positive view of the site as a whole.



Aspects that are valued include the undulating landscape, the open space, the mature trees (and their autumn colours), the facilities available for play and recreation, and the presence of a large recreational space in a busy urban context.

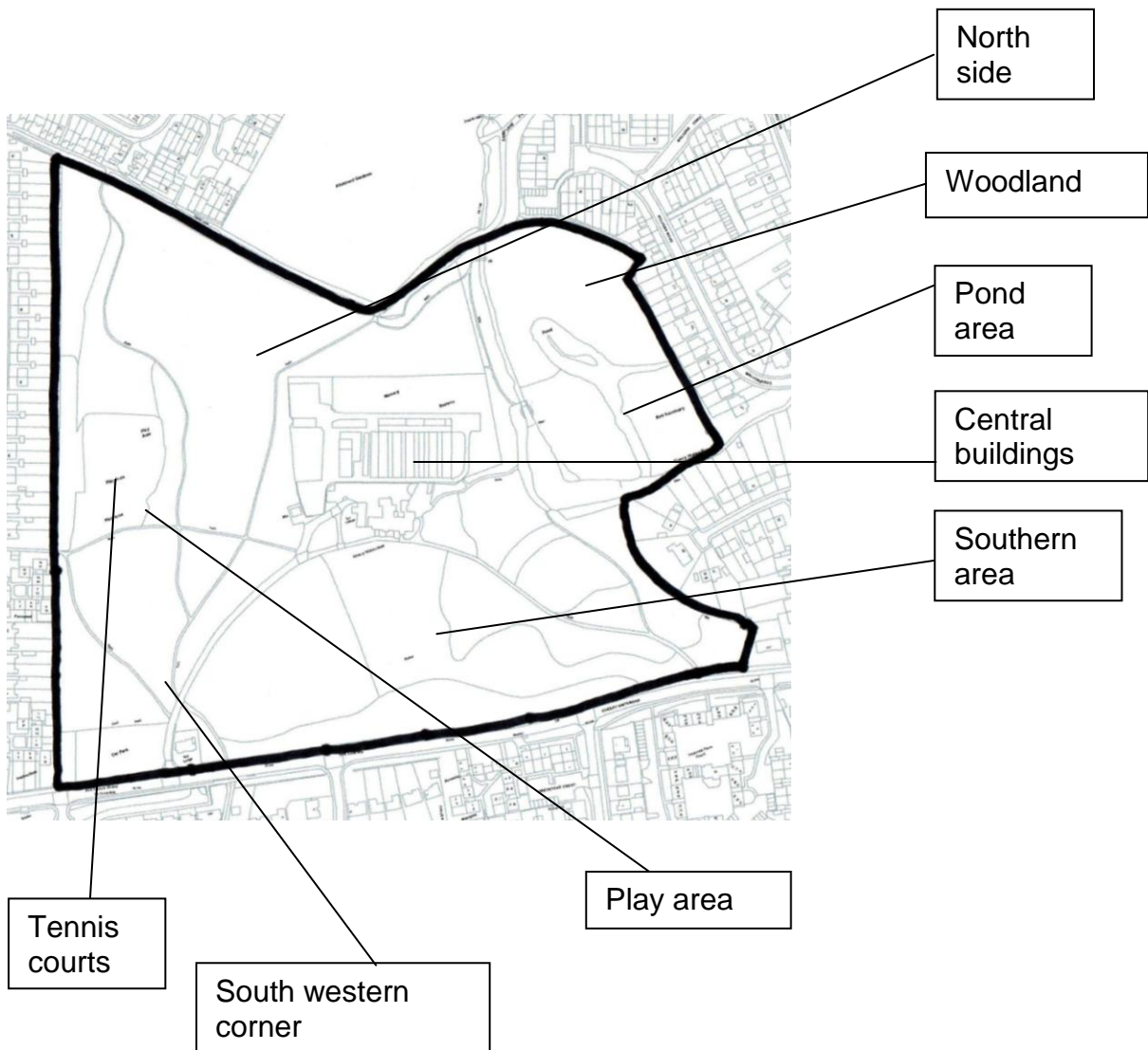
3.2 Heritage

The heritage value of the site is an important dimension. Although the park lacks the long-term history of other more central parks in Cambridge, people are making a lot more of Cherry Hinton Hall's heritage value than of the other, perhaps more historically significant sites. This is especially well seen in the escorted guided tours offered by one local person who explains the history and natural value of the site to visitors. Cherry Hinton Hall has only existed in its present form since 1837 but the site was previously occupied by Netherhall Manor, and even in its present incarnation its various uses as a family home, as an army training location, and as a home for evacuees are of interest as well as historic consequence. There has also been a locally organised archaeological exploration on the site, involving schoolchildren, which unearthed Roman finds as well as more recent ones.

However, the park does not respond especially well to this heritage aspect, and interpretation and information for visitors about the heritage and natural history of the park is very limited.

4 A closer look at the park, area by area

This section looks at different parts of the park in turn, and explores what people do in these spaces and how (if at all) the areas could be improved or enhanced. The areas are in some cases vaguely drawn but in general are defined in terms of the way space is utilised by visitors. The areas are annotated on this version of the site map, though boundaries are of course blurred.



4.1 The pond area

The eastern side of the site includes a significant amount of space given over to ponds, created by managing the flow of water along the brook that flows through this part of the site. The water area takes the form of a U-shaped pond, but one arm of the U is much less easily accessed and seems to be little used. The layout of the ponds and watercourses has also created a small island area which historically was used as a bird reserve but which has now become very badly overgrown. The access to this area is difficult, but a damaged fence means this part of the site is not secure and there is anecdotal evidence of inappropriate use of this part of the area. A bridge crosses the stream at the north end of the western pond and leads into the woodland area and to the rest of the pond space; the stream and bridge lend themselves to the eternally popular activity of Poohsticks.

The ponds are colonised by insects, fish, and a variety of wildfowl including mallards, moorhens, geese, and swans, all of which breed on the site. There is evidence, though, that nests and eggs have been damaged, and that young chicks may have been taken by predators; foxes and herons have both been observed in this area.

Immediately west of the pond area is a widened, surfaced space that is used as a platform for feeding the ducks, and also for activities such as pond dipping. This area has benches and bins, and is popular with young people as a space for hanging out or meeting friends. The space also forms part of the north-south path network on this side of the park.

This area is one of the park's focal points in terms of use, and clearly for many a visit to the park is incomplete without an opportunity to feed the ducks – an activity which seems to appeal to a wide age range.

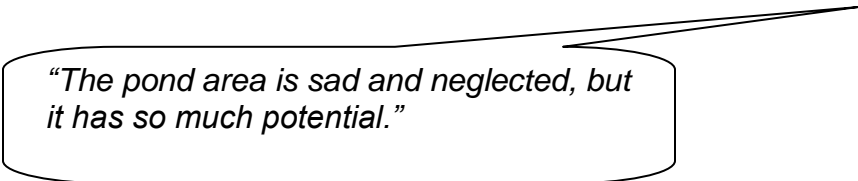


"You're never too old to feed the ducks."

Some people would like to see more ducks and wildfowl (or a variety of species), but others say there are enough already; similarly, some see the ducks as needing to be fed while others note that the ducks are often quite fat and don't take as much interest in being fed. The area also has squirrels and other mammals, and people also feed the squirrels and come to this area to enjoy contact with nature; a kingfisher is known to have been resident on the Cherry Hinton brook for many years. Also present, but much less loved, is a population of rats who may be encouraged by the presence of litter. This is more of a concern because children are sometimes allowed to paddle in the pond.

There is more agreement on the condition of the pond area, which is seen as quite run down and littered, a situation which is exacerbated in the autumn when falling leaves congeal in the pond and make it both shallow and stagnant. This seems to be a particular problem in the eastern, less visited arm of the pond. One specialist stakeholder suggests that a water management plan is needed to protect water quality and to prevent unwanted parasites.

The former bird reserve is seen as badly overgrown.

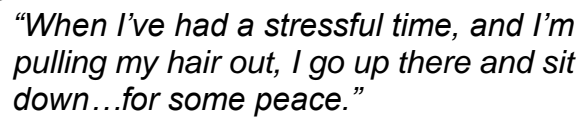


"The pond area is sad and neglected, but it has so much potential."

The pond area is also popular as a site for picnics in summer. A small barbeque area is provided but does not seem to be well used and is thought to be badly sited. Benches beside the pond are popular, and some people sit there to enjoy birdsong and conversation; the pond side benches are also used as a meeting place by younger park users. The latter are however blamed for much of the

litter in this area, and there are reports of some anti-social behaviour, including throwing stones at the ducks. In addition, dog owners allow their dogs to run freely in this area and this is seen as incompatible with protecting the wildlife. A more structured approach to the ecology of this area would be welcomed.

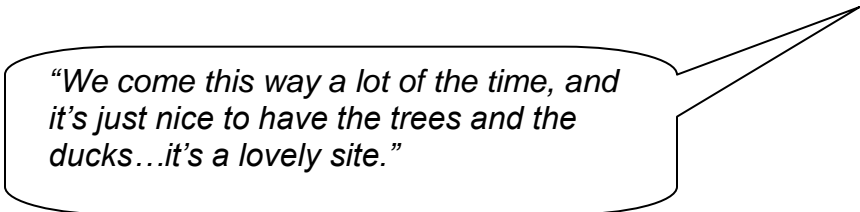
Although this comment comes from several places, the anti-social activity does not stop others from using the pond area.



“When I’ve had a stressful time, and I’m pulling my hair out, I go up there and sit down...for some peace.”

Some people have become so exercised about the condition of this part of the park that they have organised an informal clean up, removing large numbers of cans and plastic bags that they suspect have blown in from unemptied, overflowing bins.

In spite of its condition, though, this is an area people value greatly and use extensively – not least because they are encouraged to do so by the events organised by the Council (pond dipping, for example) and by local people (such as historical re-enactment for children).



“We come this way a lot of the time, and it’s just nice to have the trees and the ducks...it’s a lovely site.”

4.2 The woodland

The north-eastern corner of the park is given over to woodland, and rough paths run through this area. The woodland has not been well managed, however, and presents a scrubby, overgrown appearance that diminishes its attractiveness. Nevertheless, it is still valued for the opportunities it gives for natural recreation and encounters with birds and occasional mammals, even including muntjak deer. Users tend to combine pond and woodland visits so many of the comments about the pond area also apply to the woodland.

Access in this area tends to be muddy at times, and the paths are badly deteriorated and damaged by cycling or motorcycling. Lighting is limited and makes the area feel a little threatening after dark.

The perception is that it's good to have a wild and natural area but that this one is badly managed and neglected, and as a result is badly run down. The CHYPPS project (see Section 7.3) would address this but awareness seems to be quite confined at present to a small group of people in the know.

4.3 The north side

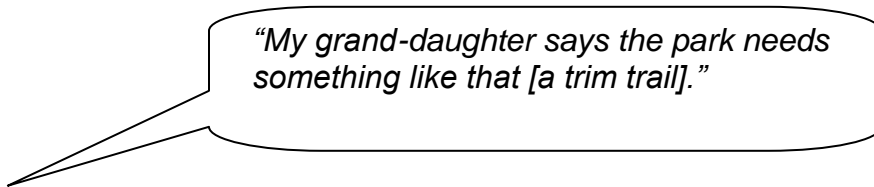
The northern area of the park is largely grass interspersed with trees, and is bordered with mature trees. There are several entrances into the park in this area, which borders a local but well-used footpath along the northern edge of the site.

This part of the park is largely free space with no particular role, but it is the area most used for sports and games (in fact almost all the informal sport activity seems to take place in this locality) and is also used for picnics and for exercising

pets; there is a lot of space here where dogs can run freely. It is also an area people tend to pass through on their way to another part of the park.

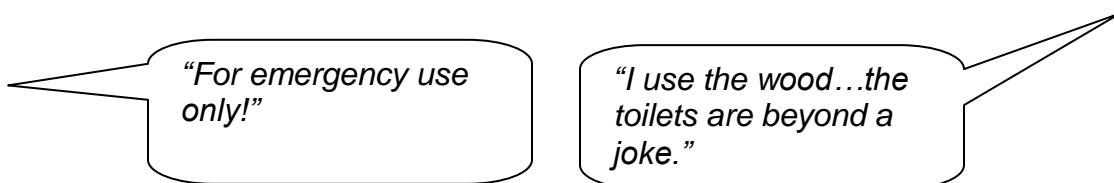
Sports played here include cricket, football, rounders and frisbee, but there are no markings or goalposts, and the ground is undulating, so sport is inevitably informal in nature. The presence of trees is also problematic for those wanting to play sports, as they tend to interfere with free play.

A striking feature of the consultation is the limited use of this park for jogging and exercise. People do walk in the park, but relatively few see or encounter joggers, perhaps because there is no perimeter path or other circular route within the park; joggers tend to run through the park, rather than running in it. There is some interest in providing more support for exercise and fitness, but this is tempered by the possibility that it might be misused.



“My grand-daughter says the park needs something like that [a trim trail].”

On the edge of this part of the park, near to the building cluster, is a small toilet block. This receives very negative comment and the toilets are generally condemned for being in very poor condition.



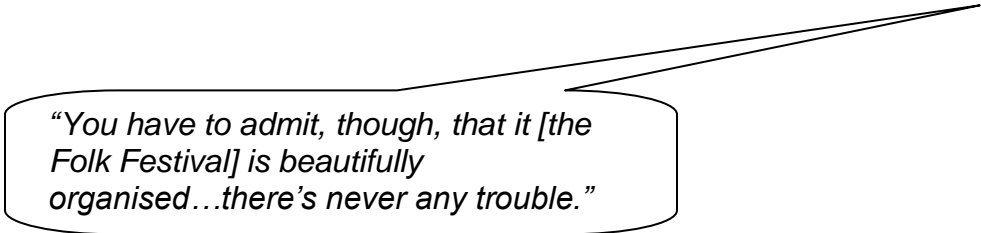
“For emergency use only!”

“I use the wood...the toilets are beyond a joke.”

The toilets are also highlighted as being too far from the play area, so that parents have to round up all their children in order to take one to the toilet. Parents would not allow their children into the toilets unsupervised, for fear they would touch something contaminating, and also report occasional “funny

characters” hanging around. Moreover, the toilets are not always open when they might be expected to be, and whilst the natural alternative of using the undergrowth is acceptable to some, it is not an acceptable option for the vast majority of adults, especially women. The lack of adequate toilets may in practice limit access to the park and shorten the length of time people spend there. This certainly seems to be the case for parents with babies, who are emphatic that they would not take their offspring into these toilets. There is no disabled toilet, but some visitors are aware that the hall has a toilet which disabled visitors can use (at certain times only); this information is not prominent on the site.

The annual folk festival makes extensive use of this part of the park, and not everyone welcomes this, since it closes the park to everyday users at the start of the school summer holidays and forces them to go elsewhere. The festival is also seen as damaging the site, although closer examination of these comments suggests that people have long memories of one bad summer rather than recalling persistent damage. The noise is also noticed, but does not seem to be especially problematic; there are however suspicions that damage is done to the pond area, and that wildfowl are persecuted, during the festival.



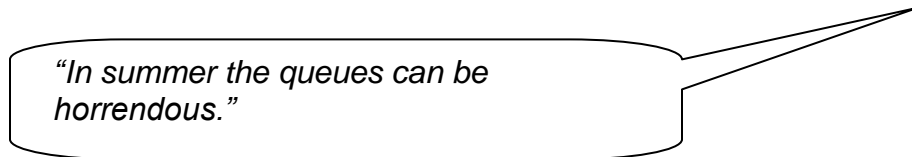
“You have to admit, though, that it [the Folk Festival] is beautifully organised...there’s never any trouble.”

4.4 The tennis courts

On the western side of the park is a hard surface tennis court – a fairly recent addition to the facilities here - which seems to be well used and in demand.

There are no equipment hire facilities so users have to come prepared, and this means that impromptu games are not possible.

Nevertheless the courts are well used in summer, and people report long queues to use them in summer holiday time. There is also a view that other sports opportunities should be provided for those who prefer to play other hard surface games such as basketball.



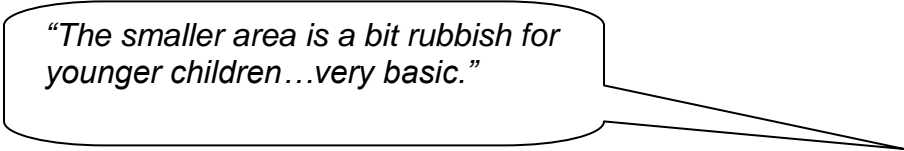
4.5 The playground

A large part of the western side of the park is allocated to children's play. The area is partly enclosed against dogs, and includes a range of play opportunities and equipment. Two small paddling pools are provided (these close for the winter), and there is also fixed play equipment aimed at toddlers, infants and primary age children, whilst a short zipline and a limited combination of rustic play units offers something for older children. There is no specific provision here for teenagers however.

The play area includes some picnic benches and other seating, and also incorporates a new cycle rack which does not appear to be well used. There is also a kiosk-type structure which does not seem to be used at present but which guards the entrance to the enclosed area, and which houses water pumps and filters for the paddling pools..

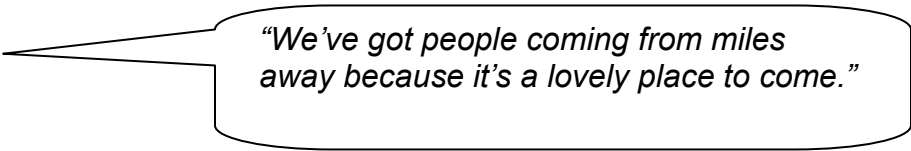
The range of equipment and the age-range being catered for here are both praised. Some children find some equipment difficult to use but this seems to be because they are trying to use equipment that is designed for older children. On

the other hand, the provision for toddlers and very young children is seen as insufficiently imaginative and children get bored quite quickly with this. There is very little provision made for children with disabilities and parents of such children are critical of this shortcoming.



“The smaller area is a bit rubbish for younger children...very basic.”

The older children’s equipment is very popular and the zipline especially so, in spite of its relative shortness and lack of significant challenge. There are sometimes queues to use some equipment, and the provision is good enough to attract visitors from well beyond the typical catchment of a play area. This does not seem to be resented at all, though, by local residents.



“We’ve got people coming from miles away because it’s a lovely place to come.”

The play area is also known to be a popular hang out area for teenagers and this can sometimes lead to graffiti damage, although the problem does not seem to be especially pervasive.

Although the play area is popular and seen as well-equipped, there are nevertheless aspirations for improvement. The paddling pools are very popular and well-used, but as a consequence they quickly become dirty and grubby. Some parents would like to see changing facilities – albeit basic ones – provided, and this would probably be essential if those with cultural sensitivities to changing are to be accommodated. The play area is a significant distance from the car park for those arriving with children and picnic luggage, and there is

insufficient seating for parents and for picnics, so some would like to see it relocated, but there is no strong lobby for this.

Although the primary purpose of this area is play, it must be noted that a large number of people use the play area as a place for socialising. Children meet and make friends here, whilst parents use the opportunity of the play space to sit and chat with friends. This social dimension is almost as important.

Changes people would like to see include a more challenging set of equipment and opportunities for older children, and better provision for the very young. There is also significant interest in catering facilities for this area of the park – an interesting result given that catering is not a particularly prominent priority in terms of city parks generally. There is particular enthusiasm for providing sport/play space for teenagers in the form of multi-use games area, and those who have seen these elsewhere think this would a welcome addition at Cherry Hinton, although not everyone we spoke to would support this.

4.6 The southwestern corner

This area includes a car park, a small recycling centre, and the main entrance, as well as an area of grass with extensive tree cover.

Although there are several entrances to the park, the main entrance is a wide driveway leading off Cherry Hinton Road and giving access to the central buildings and also to a small car park in the south western corner. The car park appears quite busy and evidences the fact that a significant proportion of visitors come to the park by car. There are marked parking spaces, but no specific provision for cycles. The car park incorporates a mini-recycling site.



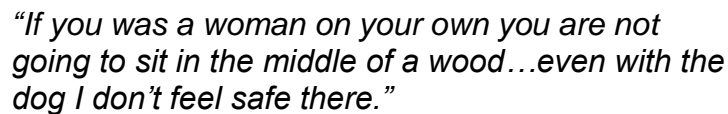
Looking towards the main entrance in the south-western corner

The main entrance is gated, and a secondary gate is sited so as to enable access to the car park but not beyond this point. This second gate has historically been secured at dusk but this no longer seems to be the case. There are noticeboards at the main entrance but these are primarily used for events advertising and give very little or no information about the park itself. There are no visible notice boards with emergency contact details, or with information for visitors about the attractions on offer here.

Next to the main entrance is a small cottage, formerly the gatekeeper's lodge, which is now occupied by a council employee as tenant. Again, historically this person had a defined role in relation to access to the central buildings, but this no longer seems to be the case.

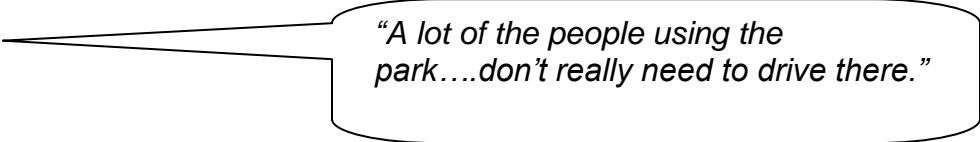
There is a bus stop outside the main gate with regular and frequent services to Cherry Hinton and the city centre.

This area seems to be used mostly for walking through, rather than stopping in. Tree cover means that the grass is poor and often muddy, making this a difficult area to play in, but the area is popular on hot days when it provides extensive and welcome shade from the sun. The area is viewed positively but is not well used, and the benches see limited use only; some people feel unsafe because views are restricted and the area feels quite secluded, in spite of its location. A tree sculpture in this area is very well liked. Dogs are walked in this area so it is subject to contamination by dog poo at times.



“If you was a woman on your own you are not going to sit in the middle of a wood...even with the dog I don't feel safe there.”

The car park is well used and there is evidence that even local people use their cars to get here. Nevertheless it is usually relatively easy to find spaces and there is no strong pressure for more car parking space; residents note that it is easy to park on-street within easy walking distance.



“A lot of the people using the park....don't really need to drive there.”

The recycling centre is however poorly situated and causes noise and (from time to time) anti-social behaviour disturbance to nearby residents, who are primarily older people in supported housing.

The information boards are seen as inadequate and missing an opportunity to describe the facilities in the park (especially for first time visitors) and the natural

history of the site – particularly the identification of trees, and the birds to be seen in the park.

4.7 The central buildings

A cluster of buildings occupies the centre of the park. These include the hall itself, now occupied by an independent school who also utilise part of the immediate grounds of the hall as outdoor educational space. The college is not accessible to the general public, although there is evidence to suggest that its toilet facilities are sometimes used by visitors with disabilities. In front of the hall is a small formal garden planted out with shrubs and flowers and sheltered by a tree border.



The former hall, now accommodating an International School

There is also a single storey building formerly used as a council depot, which is now used by the Cambridge Regional College as a centre for employment training for young people, and this is accessed by a wide driveway bordered on the opposite side by a small compound used for storing small park-related items such as goalposts and other accessories. Behind the depot is the former propagation site, the glasshouses having now been removed to leave a large, flat, but unkempt area that is out of keeping with the beauty of its surroundings. Two poly-tunnel structures remain on this site and are being used for storage of small quantities of plants, apparently kept in reserve against damage to current floral displays elsewhere in the city. The propagation site is bordered by a large and dense hedge which obscures it from general view; however, although this area would technically not be accessible to the public access is easy during the day when the depot is open.



The former propagation site, showing the current surfacing and the remaining polytunnels.

The only public part of this area is the floral garden in front of the main hall. This is generally liked and seen as well maintained, in spite of its contrast with the more natural landscape surrounding it. Some residents would like to see more planting, but there is a mixed view about this; some think this would increase the attractiveness of the park, whilst others value the “natural” and wild nature of the site away from the central buildings. Wild flowers would therefore be more acceptable as planting than formal borders.

Residents have very little to say about the buildings themselves. It is not surprising that the hall building and its environs are accepted as part of the landscape but even the depot and the former propagation centre attract little unprompted comment and seem largely to be seen as part and parcel of the site.

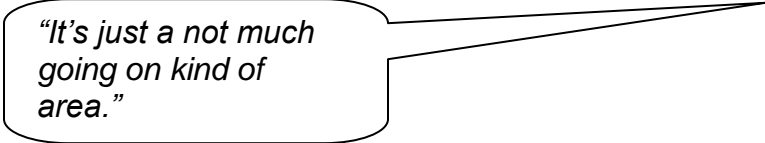
4.8 The southern area

The southern side of the park, between the hall and Cherry Hinton Road, is largely grass interspersed with many mature trees, and with a border of mature trees along the road side itself. In spite of its proximity to a significant local road, noise disturbance does not seem to be a prominent issue here.

Use of this area is primarily for walking and sitting, rather than for more active pursuits, and residents said they were able to shut out the road noise to enable them to enjoy a pleasant walk in this area, among the trees and landscape. A small number use it for playing sports or running but the area does not especially lend itself to this type of activity. This area is generally more sedentary and ambulatory, in spite of ambient noise, and the improvements needed here focus on provision for seating. People have also noticed how well the trees planted

after the 1987 hurricane have thrived, and how they are renewing the tree screen that used to exist in this area.

There is one entrance in the southeastern corner, and this part of the park borders closely on to the back gardens of adjacent housing, some of which have gates from their own gardens into the park. This area gets very little use other than from some people passing through. The area is seen as too near the road and the houses, and has little to cause a visitor to stop and look at anything; it is really an entrance to the park at the moment, rather than a part of the park itself. Residents think it should have something in it that would encourage visitors to pause there or to go there specially.



"It's just a not much going on kind of area."

The area is shaded and (in spite of its proximity to housing) this gate is not as well used as others.

5 The former Propagation Centre

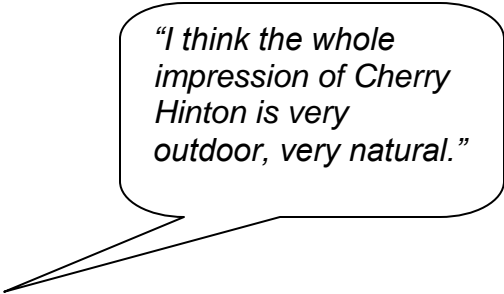
One of the main areas of interest in this consultation was the possible re-use of the former propagation centre. Those consulted were allowed to make their own observations about this space, , but were also invited to react to some suggestions put to them which would help them to think more broadly about possible uses for the space. It was explained to participants that none of these ideas had any particular status and that these were not in any sense to be seen as firm proposals for reuse of the space. The suggestions can be grouped around particular themes as follows:

5.1 Arts

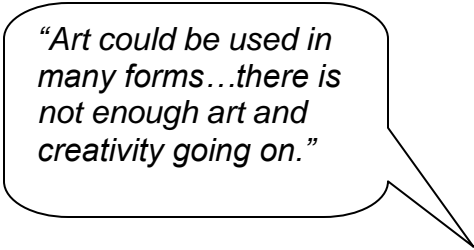
There is a close affinity between Cherry Hinton and the arts. This derives not only from the festivals, but also from the sculptures that have at times been placed around the site using fallen trees, and from the prominence of arts and cultural life in the Cambridge community generally. Some of the suggestions involved using the propagation centre space for arts, either as open air exhibition space or for the provision of an informal gallery for local artists, or performance space.

There is some interest in this as a possibility, especially among residents with arts interests, but it has to be said that there is more enthusiasm for the preservation of the space as outdoors, rather than for a building to house arts activity. It was noted, for instance, that indoor performance space would increase vehicle traffic and require extra roads and parking. It is also noted that the Junction, not far away on Cherry Hinton Road, is doing this already and a facility here might compete. That said, there was a lot more enthusiasm for using Cherry Hinton Hall generally as a showcase for outdoor public art, as at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park near Wakefield, rather than confining arts activity into a single building or space.

A bandstand is mentioned but a more multifunctional outdoor performance space could also be possible.



“I think the whole impression of Cherry Hinton is very outdoor, very natural.”



“Art could be used in many forms...there is not enough art and creativity going on.”

One resident suggests a graffiti wall but this idea is not at all popular with others. There is greater enthusiasm for other, more positive participation in arts, encouraging people to be creative and providing space for that.

5.2 Buildings

Several of the ideas put forward for the space used a building of some form. This could be a community centre, an arts space, a space that could be used for training or employment, or space for catering.

As with the arts proposal, there is a mixed view about placing a building on this space. Although it would not be completely unacceptable or impossible to do this, the idea was received only luke-warmly and with significant reservations. At best, there would need to be some extensive consultation, with possible designs, before a green light could be seen to have been given.

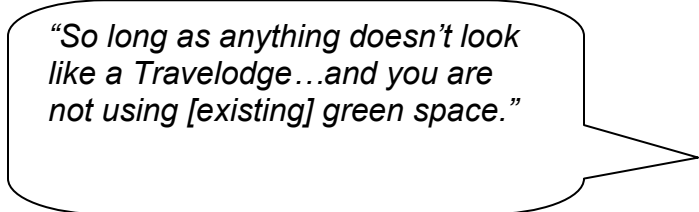
The exception to this rule is in the area of catering. There is enormous enthusiasm for the idea that part or all of a building could be given over to a café type operation offering teas and coffees, baking and so on to visitors, and even after being challenged as to the commercial viability of such an operation enthusiasm remains strong. One person wondered whether this could be done

within the existing structures rather than creating more, but still liked the idea of a café nevertheless.

A community centre to complement existing facilities is a reasonably popular idea but as with other building related suggestions there are doubts as whether this is the right place. People would seem to prefer the improvement and expansion of facilities at the Village Centre rather than here in the park.

The idea of using the space to provide supported learning and work for vulnerable people is welcomed in principle, but there are significant doubts about running such a project in a space of this kind. Whilst some are enthusiastic up to a point, there is no conviction about this idea at present, and there are concerns about the creation of vehicle movement within the park to transport materials in and out.

The main issue about a building is its visual appearance. Any building on this space would need to be constructed so as to create a sense of civic pride and community ownership, according to one stakeholder, and it is hard to argue with this position.



“So long as anything doesn’t look like a Travelodge...and you are not using [existing] green space.”

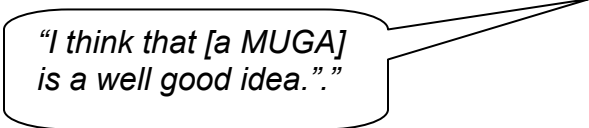
The issue is also raised about the value of retaining the existing council facilities – the depot and the college building – in the centre of a beautiful landscaped park. At least one resident would like the area available for improvement to encompass not only the propagation site but also the depot area generally, and this would have the support of at least one elected member too. The depot represents a hazard to tenants in the college, and is being used as a “bit of a dumping ground” by City Services.

5.3 Play space

Suggestions about using the area to provide play space receive some support. The idea of landscaping the area to provide natural, mixed-surface play space with mounds, boulders, and sand was welcomed as good idea, although some wondered whether such a facility ought to be placed nearer to the existing play area so that parents could keep an eye on their children. It is seen as offering something complementary to the existing formal play area.

A hard surface facility such as a BMX track, skateboard or similar area was also generally welcomed and parents of teenagers thought this would be very popular with their children, in spite of the risk. Adventure play was also a possibility, although there are concerns about erecting what might be a visually obtrusive structure in this space, and again concerns that it might be better located near the existing play facilities so that supervision could be provided from parents.

A multi-use games area is a very popular suggestion, especially if it could be lit with lighting shut down at specified times of night. Not everyone is familiar with the MUGA concept but there is widespread agreement about the need to provide constructive facilities for teenagers, who are seen as a neglected group in terms of park users, and a group that can be problematic if they are not distracted. One stakeholder, however, would oppose this idea as visually intrusive and noisy for local neighbours, and points out that there are such facilities nearby anyway.



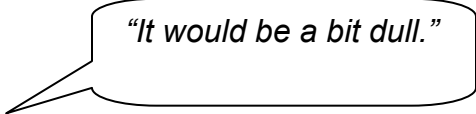
"I think that [a MUGA] is a well good idea."

The school would like to extend its playground into the propagation site.

An indoor play facility was not at all popular, however, and the feeling is that there is already enough provision of this type.

5.4 Parks and gardens

One option for this space is simply to return it to its former place as part of the general area of the park. This would be welcomed as compensation if other parts of the site were to be re-used for other activities such as play or sports, but otherwise was not especially welcomed; there is a sense that people would feel this is a missed opportunity for improvement and enhancement of the park, and that there is already plenty of free open space.



"It would be a bit dull."

Planting would be welcomed by some, but others feel this is not a good use of this space and suggest that formal planting is already sufficient, and informal planting could take place elsewhere on the site. There is some interest in planting of a sensory nature but again it is questionable whether this space would be the best place to site such a facility. One person suggests that the area could be used to provide a maze.

A picnic or barbeque area has support but it is noted that people manage to do this already without needing extra help or dedicated space.

There is little affection, for the dense *Leylandii* hedge that currently screens this area and whatever else happens, it would probably be a popular move to remove or replace this with something more in keeping with the park surroundings.

5.5 Combinations

There is some enthusiasm for not using the whole space for a single purpose. The Folk Festival would like to see the space providing a hard surface which they

desperately need for vehicles and generators, but see the possibility in other uses for that hard surface for sports provision. An art gallery/café would not be incompatible with the multi-surface play idea, in the eyes of at least one resident. There is a feeling that we should not see this space as providing one single opportunity for enhancement. Bringing the depot site into the mix would open up even further possibilities for combinations of activity and one stakeholder suggests that a Masterplan for the site should be considered.

6 General observations

In addition to site specific comments, many people make general observations that apply to the whole park, and these have been grouped into broad themes.

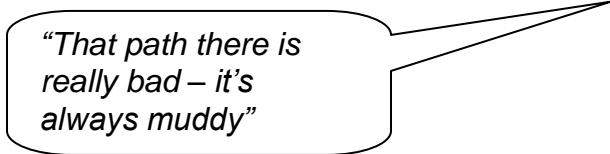
6.1 Paths

Footpaths around the site tend to be through routes and do not offer an easy circular walk around the park. They include some rough surface paths through the grassed areas and some trail-type paths in the woodland areas. Both are criticised for being muddy and at times unpleasant to use; the woodland trails come in for particular criticism, and are off limits for people with wheelchairs or heavy buggies.



A typical Cherry Hinton path

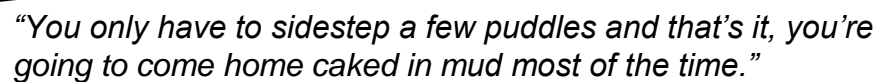
Wheelchair users find the paths difficult, and the grass impossible to negotiate properly. The path network does not seem to follow desire lines, in that there is no link between the gate in the northwestern corner and anywhere else in the north of the site, and no easy way of getting from the pond to the northwestern area without using the grass – which is what people in general do.



“That path there is really bad – it’s always muddy”

There is a pinch point at the main entrance where pedestrians, motorists and cyclists are all competing to use the same space.

Some residents are keen to see tarmaced paths but others are horrified at such a suggestion, and point out that a park on a wet day is bound to be muddy in places. Any solution needs to address the problem of standing water on the path surfaces, and their safety in icy conditions.



“You only have to sidestep a few puddles and that’s it, you’re going to come home caked in mud most of the time.”

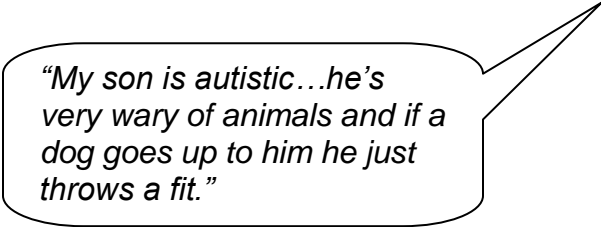
The Folk Festival would like to realign the path running north-south past the toilets to prevent it being damaged by the essential placing of the festival’s broadcast stage across it.

6.2 Dogs

At present, dogs run freely throughout the park, apart from those parts of the play area that are fenced off. There are no prohibitions on dogs using the wildfowl areas, for instance, and no designated areas for dog walking. Dog bin provision

is limited and is generally seen as inadequate for a site that is extensively used to exercise pets. Parents of young children complain that dogs frighten their children by running up to them, whilst those concerned about the wildfowl feel that dogs should be prohibited from disturbing the birds, especially when they are sitting on their nests.

Some residents would like to see designated areas for dogs, so that they could then avoid using these spaces. One resident does not visit at all because she is afraid of dogs.



“My son is autistic...he’s very wary of animals and if a dog goes up to him he just throws a fit.”

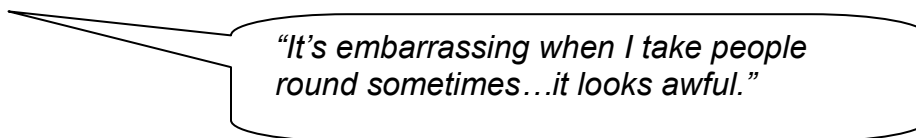
6.3 Seating

Although there is a scattering of benches across the site, the provision of seating is generally viewed as inadequate. Existing benches vary in both quality and aspect, whilst the overall numbers of benches are insufficient and their locations are not always ideal. The play area in particular needs more benches, and there is a need for picnic tables which not only support picnics but also provide opportunity for face to face chatting and conversation at all ages.

Some people worry that providing seating invites trouble from young people, but others recognise that seating meets many needs, not just those of the young, and that young people also need space to meet and socialise. One stakeholder would like to see shelters provided as well as seats, so that young people have somewhere to go in poor weather.

6.4 Maintenance

There are mixed views on maintenance, with some comments that the park is well cared for but others criticising areas like the emptying of bins or the cleaning of the paddling pools, and the cleaning and maintenance of the pond areas, both within and around the water. The Folk Festival generates several maintenance related comments and is criticised for causing surface damage (this seems to relate to one particular incident a few years ago) but it has also been noticed that the imminent arrival of the Folk Festival causes a flurry of maintenance to take place to smarten the site up for its more special guests.



Elected members report feedback from residents on the quality of maintenance, which needs to be improved. There are also regular but limited complaints about the Folk Festival, and some are not convinced that the festival has done enough to restore the area damaged some years ago.

Members also point out that this a damp site due to the presence of underground water near the surface, and that this tends to increase potential for surface damage. Remedies such as filling collapsed areas need to be taken as early as possible after the festival to give them a chance to settle before the next event.

Tenants do not currently do maintenance at all outside their own curtilages, but the school has expressed an interest in greater involvement in the park generally.

6.5 Cycling

There is limited provision in the park for cyclists, although cyclists use the park extensively. Mostly, though, this seems to be for passing through rather than for

visiting as such. A new cycle rack has been provided close to the play area but awareness of this is negligible and inspection suggests that it has received very little use. There is, on the other hand, no cycle rack in or near the car park where visitors might expect to find one.

There is also little evidence of conflict between cyclists and pedestrians using the paths.

6.6 Safety and security

The picture here is somewhat unclear. There does not seem to be an enormous anti-social behaviour problem in the park at any time, but nevertheless residents are wary of using the space after dark. There are reports of incidents around the pond, some graffiti around the play area, and some noise and anti-social behaviour linked to the recycling site, however, and much more serious security incidents have plagued the central buildings, with several burglaries taking place in a short space of time.

This problem now seems to have been resolved, with the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators, but security remains a concern for those using the central buildings especially after dark. Nevertheless both the school and the college are looking into CCTV as a crime prevention and security measure; they note that the cost of this would be much higher than an informal arrangement to close the gate after dark, to prevent van access. Low level lighting and bollard lighting have been considered but ruled out.

It is also unclear whether or not the park closes at dusk. Traditionally the occupier of the cottage would close at least the secondary gate after dark, preventing vehicle access, but this has been less reliable recently and seems now not to happen – perhaps because of the difficulty of having tenants working after dark in the buildings. A lack of adequate lighting on the paths to the

buildings exacerbates fears about personal safety when crossing the park after dark, and also encourages staff and visitors to the buildings to use their cars for access. Most people would support a general improvement in lighting in the park, and are not convinced by arguments about keeping the place dark so that (for instance) the sky can be observed. It is also noted that having lights doesn't mean they have to be on throughout the hours of darkness.

Police interest in the park is largely responsive and low key, moving kids on and dealing informally with issues as much as possible. The park is not seen as a problem site by police now that the burglaries have been tackled.

There is at present no information on site about emergency support or contact numbers.

6.7 Community involvement

Although there is at present no constituted friends' group for this park, there is already some community involvement as evidenced by the informal clean up of the pond organised by concerned local residents. Some of those taking part in the consultation expressed interest in being involved in practical ways on the future of the park and this suggests that there would be potential for setting up a friends' group to support the Council in its management of the site and to act as a liaison between the different interest in the park and the local community. The Cambridge Preservation Society has expressed an interest in helping to establish a Friends' group here.

The school teaches gardening as part of its curriculum and has expressed an interest in working on the floral garden area. There are also possible linkages between the college's horticultural courses, the school, and the grounds. However, the school does not want to use the former propagation centre site for its proposed allotment.

Although the watercourses in the park are managed by the City Council, Cambridge Water would also have an interest in any improvement scheme, especially one that might have a bearing on water quality.

There are also plans to develop a green pathway network linking areas of the city with nearby countryside such as Limekiln Close Nature Reserve, and beyond into the Gog Magog hills, and Cherry Hinton Hall would fit very well into this network, albeit with some realignment of paths and entrances. The Cambridge Preservation Society is taking an active interest in these proposals.

7 Stakeholder interests

Like other major open spaces in the city, Cherry Hinton Hall is used for some significant events during the course of the year. There are also some existing commitments affecting the park which need to be taken into account when considering improvement. Event stakeholders and other influencing factors are set out here.

7.1 The Folk Festival

One of the most significant uses of Cherry Hinton Hall is its hosting of the annual Cambridge Folk Festival, a high profile music event which attracts a large audience into the park and an even larger audience through national broadcast coverage on BBC Radio 2. This event takes place in late July every year over a four day period, and the park is closed for other uses during the festival itself; some areas of the site are closed to allow for setting up and breaking down before and after the event. Access to the park during the Festival requires purchase of a ticket.

The Folk Festival is an important event artistically, and in terms of the city's profile in the music community, but it also has a significant impact on the local economy, especially in Cherry Hinton itself. In addition, the organisers claim that the festival makes a substantial financial surplus which is used to support other arts and entertainments activities over the course of the year, and which also provides general revenue for the authority.

The event is attended by around 14,000 people in total, although the site capacity limits ticket sales to 10,000 maximum on any one day. Visitors include local people but the festival attracts a national, and even an international, audience. These figures suggest that a large proportion of visitors attend over the full weekend, and although a large number of visitors camp in the park and

use the catering, drinks and other services offered by concession stands, the impact on the local economy is nonetheless significant. Local people comment anecdotally that Cherry Hinton village shops benefit significantly from the influx of people looking for food, catered meals and alcohol, and other services, and the garage on the opposite side of Cherry Hinton Road also seems to do well from the presence of large numbers of people nearby. This impact has not been quantified in financial terms but must be substantial, and a significant contributor to maintaining the current level and variety of services available in Cherry Hinton.

The event nevertheless presents significant logistical problems, and these include the need for parking; the car park on site holds very few vehicles, and vehicles (other than essential services) are banned from the park for safety reasons. Existing parking arrangements involving the use of nearby school and open space sites will require revision in the next few years as a local school site is redeveloped. In addition, the space available for production vehicles such as Outside Broadcast vehicles, electricity supply vehicles, artists' and concession holders' vehicles is limited and this is a pressure point for the organisers.

Restoration of the site after the festival is recognised as a key responsibility and significant effort has been put into minimise litter and to restore the site from the inevitable (but heavily weather dependant) surface damage caused by large numbers of people. The festival organisers suggest (and local people tend to confirm) that their presence leads to improvements on the site, with maintenance regimes being stepped up as the site is prepared, and repairs set in hand immediately after the event. However, local people still comment on surface damage and this seems to link back to a previous year (2000?) when the weather was exceptionally bad, and from which some people think the site has not fully recovered even now.

Electricity supply to the festival comes from generators which are acknowledged as causing both noise and pollution, and which are demanding in terms of space.

There is a substation on the site but it is inadequate as an alternative supply source without a significant upgrade. Water is polypiped around the site from the central buildings; waste is partly drained into mains sewers and partly stored for removal.

7.2 Other events

Cherry Hinton Hall also hosts an annual Pink Festival, organised by a local voluntary group as a celebration of the city's gay and lesbian diversity but promoted as an open public event for general attendance and enjoyment. Although this is a large scale event, it does not present the technical and logistical complexities of the Folk Festival and its one-day, non-residential nature means that its adverse impact on surfaces or facilities is much more limited.

7.3 Lottery funded improvements

Cambridge City Council has already, through its CHYPPS team, secured National Lottery funding for two improvements at Cherry Hinton Hall. These have already been consulted on separately and commitments have been made to proceed with these alterations; we were careful in the consultation not to invite people to comment specifically on the plans, as these are already approved (in fact, as is shown elsewhere in the report, people's views would tend to support what is planned).

One of the improvements is in the former bird sanctuary, where it is envisaged that the area would be set aside as a breeding area for wildfowl, protected by its isolation (it is an island) and by adequate security and limited access. The site would also be used as a natural play site for small and carefully managed groups

of children and young people. Implementation of this plan awaits the outcome of tree examination and a health and safety assessment but will take place shortly.

The other scheduled improvement is the creation of play trails in the woodland area, starting near the bridge, to encourage further use of the natural space and to make it more attractive to users. This plan provides new benches and a refreshed barbeque area as well as improved surfaces and accessibility, and woodland interpretation. The plans also include a “secret trail” with hidden sculptures and natural play equipment sited sensitively between the trees. Consultation on this plan restarts in January 2009 and culminates in a workshop event in the Spring.

8 Conclusions and recommendations

- 1 This is a valued site and should be treated as such. There is no evidence to support wholesale change in a park that is valued and used by local people and also by those coming from much further afield. Nevertheless, there is also strong support for changes to certain aspects of the park, and little evidence of the “protect at all costs” attitudes that characterise other parks in Cambridge. On the whole, people welcome the Council’s interest in their park and look forward to improvement.

- 2 A consideration that has existed throughout this study is the relationship between the needs of the once-a-year folk festival and the everyday needs of local residents. Mostly, these interests coincide, in that both see value in a site which offers a pleasant and enjoyable natural environment, well maintained and easily accessed, and with a range of features and facilities for visitors. Generally there is an acceptance of the folk festival, albeit grudgingly because it closes the park and makes a bit of noise, and a recognition of the importance of the event for the local economy. The issues the Folk Festival raises are largely around damage, and this seems to relate to historic rather than current activity, and there is evidence that maintenance improves in the park as a result of the festival.

- 3 The Festival would like to use the propagation centre space as a hard surfaced space for parking broadcast vehicles and power generators. The Festival considers this essential but it is not clear whether the BBC has a long term commitment to broadcasting the event, or whether improvements to the power supply on the site could obviate the need for generator equipment. This should be investigated further.

- 4 The most enthusiastically received option for reusing the former propagation centre is to provide a MUGA or similar games area for teenagers. This would be widely welcomed, but has influential opponents as well. One possible solution that might address the concerns of objectors, and also address the Folk Festival's needs, is to provide an informal hard, or dirt, surface which could be used for imaginative ball games, perhaps with goals or hoops at each end, or could have temporary and removable BMX or skateboard facilities, but which would also be robust enough to take the Folk Festival's vehicles when needed. It is unlikely that a MUGA surface to Sport England standards would be robust enough to bear the weight of the Folk Festival's requirements, so a MUGA would not be a solution to this conundrum even if its fences and lights could be removed to allow vehicle access.

- 5 A building would not be universally welcomed on the propagation centre site, but there would be interest in a facility that offered a café to visitors. It may be helpful to undertake a quick visitor study to ascertain the commercial viability of such a venture and the feasibility of making this available commercially as a concession (or even allowing the Friends Group to manage it as a fundraising activity). Any building would have to be much more carefully designed than the existing college facility to ensure that it added to the visual amenity rather than compromising it.

- 6 Use of the propagation centre site for social or economic purposes, such as those suggested in the consultation, is not recommended. Although this would be in keeping with both the last use of the site, and the activity of the college next door, this does not seem to have the public support it would need, and is not really in keeping with the site as a whole.

- 7 Use of the space for play has supporters, especially for rough-and-tumble type play involving mounds, mixed surfaces, and other “natural” features such as boulders to climb. However, there is a view that play should be located close to existing play facilities rather than here.
- 8 Returning the propagation centre to the park generally is not a popular option and would be seen by many as a missed opportunity to do something constructive with the space to meet genuine local need.
- 9 Although there is little awareness of the lottery funding allocated to improvements in the pond and woodland areas of the park, this consultation would tend to support the planned improvements, at least in terms of clearing and tidying a neglected area and improving paths and amenity in this part of the park. The lack of community awareness of these plans, though, should be noted and tackled.
- 10 Action is needed to protect wildlife from predation and persecution. Whilst some predation, such as by herons, would be difficult to eliminate, wildfowl nests should be protected from foxes, from dogs, and from human disturbance. Activity to recreate the former bird reserve as a protected area might well address all these concerns.
- 11 The pond and watercourses require attention. An ecological study should be undertaken to ensure that water and water’s edge habitats are free from contamination, and action should be taken to remove rats from this area. The knowledge that children may be paddling in the pond should alert the Council to its potential liabilities for illness and injury, particularly in the form of disease from contaminated water, and a programme of testing should be put in place. It may be necessary to erect warning signs.

- 12 There is great interest in the wildfowl and other wildlife in the pond and woodland area, but no interpretation that would heighten awareness and enjoyment; some interpretation is planned as part of the CHYPPS programme but this should extend into the general public realm as well.
- 13 The initiative taken by local people to clean up the pond is welcomed but presents issues to the council – why was such action needed, and was this a safe thing for the public to do? At the very least it calls water maintenance into serious question and this needs to be reviewed urgently. We understand that Active Communities is currently undertaking a study of watercourses under their control, and this one should be brought closer to the top of the priority list.
- 14 The toilet block should be closed and demolished and replaced by something fit for purpose, clean and hygienic. If possible, the toilets should be relocated closer to the play area, although it is recognised that mains sewerage may prohibit this. New toilets should incorporate facilities for visitors with disabilities.
- 15 Play provision for younger children is limited and should be improved with a wider, more imaginative and more challenging play focus. The provision for older children should also be improved and a better, more exciting zip line would be welcomed.
- 16 Maintenance is repeatedly identified as an area where the council is underperforming. This comes across in the pond and woodland area, in the toilet facilities, and in the upkeep of the paddling pools, as well as in general grounds care. There is a perception that the park gets its best maintenance in preparation for the folk festival, and that this is

provided by the festival rather than as part of a routine maintenance programme.

- 17 More seating, and seating of better quality, is required in the play area and in the park generally.
- 18 Notice boards providing information for visitors and offering emergency contact details are needed at the main entrance and at the play area.
- 19 The existing car park is adequate and should not be expanded. However, the recycling facility is not needed in a park context and should be resited to another location outside the park. Residents in houses bordering the car park area should be told that this is being done.
- 20 Pathways require improvement and new surfacing sensitive to the surrounding environment should be considered. The request of the folk festival to realign the north-south path west of the depot could be considered within this path improvement. Better lighting is needed on the main paths, especially the one leading to the central buildings. Tenants do not at present feel safe leaving work at night. These lights should not remain on all night, however.
- 21 Consideration should be given to the removal of all depot activity from this site; there seems little justification for retaining a depot store here in the middle of an attractive public park. The space occupied by the depot store should be brought into the mix for possible reuse alongside the former propagation site. The remaining polytunnels should be removed.

- 22 The floral garden in front of the hall should be opened up and made a more attractive feature of the park with a mix of plants providing seasonal colour. The offer from the school to assist with this area should be considered as part of a wider community engagement plan for the site.
- 23 There is scope for wildflower planting, or for spring bulbs, in the south eastern corner of the site and along the northern edge, but planting should be limited and should not intrude on the essentially parkland character of the site.
- 24 The potential of the park as a location for public art should be considered, and artwork commissioned for specific sites within the park to promote accidental and serendipitous encounters with public art.
- 25 Better locations should be sought for cycle parking, and more information provided so that cyclists are aware of these facilities.
- 26 The heritage value of the site, and its place in the history of the local community, is significantly understated and this should be remedied both by improving information about the park on the Council's website, and in other literature, and by the provision of interpretative material at key locations such as at the main entrance or close to the hall. Local historians should be invited to contribute to this process as part of the Council's commitment to community engagement.
- 27 There is sufficient enthusiasm for the site to justify the creation of a Friends Group and the Council should follow up on this to enable such a group to be formed. The support offered by the CPS should be noted in this context. Formation of such a group should take place

before a decision is made on the vacant site, to enable resident involvement and to prevent any appearance of a fait accompli.

Phil Back

Wetherby

January 2009

Appendix: Action planning

This section of the report summarises, in bullet form, the various action points raised in the consultation and identified in discussion with the City Council. For convenience, these are divided into two sections: the first, those which can be acted on immediately, with little or no further discussion and with little or no resource outside existing budgets and contracts, and the second, those areas where action may require further thought, consultation or even negotiation before any definitive action can be taken. The purpose here is to enable those changes which are relatively easy, and which have little strategic consequence, to be addressed without waiting for the more difficult decisions to be taken.

Immediate or quick actions		
Action	Report section	Notes
Signage and interpretation – improve the information and interpretation available to visitors	3.2, 4.6	Possible activity for a Friends Group
Repair damaged fence in wildfowl area	4.1	May be addressed in Chypps project
Protect nests and other sensitive sites from predators and from human/canine disturbance	4.1	May be addressed in Chypps project
Remove rats from site	4.1	
Test water quality and take action if required	4.1	Active Communities programme under way but priorities may

		need to be changed
Remove or resite barbecue area	4.1	May be addressed in Chypps project
Constitute Friends Group and set terms of reference to include Clean up and site management Interpretation and information Consultation on future, more difficult actions	Numerous, but especially 6.7	Several people from initial consultation interested in this
Address woodland management issues	4.2	May be addressed in Chypps project
Ban motorcycling and ensure path surfaces are brought back to required condition		
Refurbish and renew toilet block	4.3	Neither quick nor easy, but a high priority with universal support
Relocate the recycling centre off site	4.6	
Improve the numbers and locations of seats	4.8, 6.3	
Remove the Leylandii hedge	5.4	
Improve traffic flows at the main entrance and ensure personal safety for all users	6.1	
Improve general routine maintenance on the site, and address ground water drainage and collapsed areas	6.4	

Install a cycle rack where it will be useful – near the entrance	6.5	
Explore arrangements for closing the gates to ensure the needs of tenants and visitors are properly met.	6.6	
Improve lighting, especially on main access routes to the central buildings	6.6	
Raise awareness of existing plans for the woodland and pond area		Chypps already have an event planned for this

More thinking required

Issue	Report section	Notes
Are the toilets sited well for those who use them? Should they be moved, or are additional, child friendly toilets needed near the play space? How are people with disabilities to be addressed in toilet provision?	4.3	
Is it possible to provide equipment hire facilities for city park opportunities like tennis and other courts?		Possible activity for Friends Group?
How can facilities in this park be improved for people (adults as well as children) with disabilities?	4.5, 6.1	
Can basic changing facilities for the paddling pool be provided?	4.5	
Should dogs be banned from some parts of	4.6	

the site?		
What could make better use of the south-eastern corner?	4.8	
Is the propagation centre space big enough to accommodate a variety of uses? Could it house both an arts space and a “sports” type space which could also serve the Folk Festival?	5	
Is the depot space really needed? Does it have to be here?	5.2	
A cafe may not be viable as a formal concession, but the Friends Group might like to provide it as a revenue raiser and social opportunity. A model exists for this.	5.2	
The park doesn't meet the needs of younger people terribly well, but addressing those needs may increase take up by a group that can be disruptive to other park users and neighbours.	6.3	
Would a technical upgrade to the existing substation be a feasible alternative to the use of noisy, polluting generator equipment during events?	7.1	