

Monkey-Do CIC Co. No. 7117111 www.monkey-do.net
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Jon Winder
Greenspace
Islington Council

31st January 2012

Dear Jon,

RE: Semi-permanent tree swing installation in Whittington Park

As promised, here are the conclusions from our site meeting on 16th December 2011, which your colleague from LBI's tree team, Andy Lederer, also attended.

BACKGROUND

On 21st September 2011, we installed the rope swing in a London Plane at the western edge of Whittington Park, following the success of temporary rope swings in Islington's green spaces. The first user was enjoying the swing before we had packed up and left the park (pictured here).





Unfortunately, one week later the swing was found vandalized: the rope had been cut and the seat stolen. The rig, swivel and bracing remained in the tree however, so following discussion we obtained a fixed chain replacement and installed this on the 11th October.

USE & FEEDBACK

The swing appears to have been extremely popular amongst both children and adults who visit the park regularly. The park-keeper reported daily use with no accidents of which he was aware. He noted that the main problem with the swing came from dog owners encouraging their dogs to bite the rubberized seat and swing on it, which had caused some damage.

A local resident whose home is very near the swing site also reported this problem, alongside some other constructive feedback. I have included her email to you in full below:

The swing is extremely popular & very well used. I'm glad to see it hasn't been vandalised again. It's a great addition to the facilities of the park.

We live directly opposite, so we see (and hear) pretty much everything that goes on with the swing.

The positives are:

*Very well used & obviously enjoyed by local children & their parents.
Great to see a "natural" piece of play equipment being so well used.*

The negatives are:

Attracts an older "hoody" crowd who hang round in the evenings smoking drugs & generally being a nuisance.

Attracts an element who enjoy getting their mastif-style dogs to "lock-on" to the swing seat. They encourage the dogs to leap at the swing seat and attack it. I'm worried that a dog may think this is OK behaviour and do it when a child is swinging on the swing.

Every single user of the swing whoops and screams with delight at the top of their voices (who wouldn't?). What this means is that myself & my neighbours are subjected to screaming and hollering from 8.30am before school starts until around 7pm at night (it was later during the lighter evenings, often up until 10pm, when we couldn't open our front windows because of the noise). Not fair to my upstairs neighbours with their new baby, or the elderly lady next door.

I'd like to suggest that the swing be retained - but moved further into the park so as not to disturb residents. I hope this feedback is useful, Jon.



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The nearby Leaping Lizards Day Nursery's manager told us that they had been making daily trips out to the tree swing with groups of 3-4 year olds. She also noted it was a focal point for local youths, and that the main problem was dogs.

SITE INSPECTION

That the swing had been well used was obvious from the condition of the ground beneath it (pictured below) when we returned to review in December.





We noted that the grass had become so worn over approximately 8 weeks of use that it no longer constituted a safe fall surface. The topsoil had also been eroded by an inch or so, exposing a tree root directly in the middle of the fall zone.

We also noted the damage to the seat caused by dogs chewing on it (pictured below).



There were no visible signs of damage or wear to the host tree, either at ground level or at the site of the suspension fixing.





CONCLUSION

The ground condition and exposed tree root in the fall zone were of significant enough concern that we agreed to remove the swing and hopefully re-site it elsewhere in the park. We also felt that the nearby residents had put up with its presence on their doorstep with good cheer, but had probably had their fair turn and deserved some respite from the noise. Potential future tree swing sites should take into consideration the potential noise impact on any nearby residents.

We were encouraged by the lack of any obvious impact on the tree itself, beyond the soil erosion around the rootplate. The main conclusion here is that if installed correctly, a swing is very unlikely to impact the health of the host tree within the likely timeframe of use. This is because unless specialist safety surfacing is also installed, the grass or leaf litter beneath a tree swing is liable to be denuded within a few weeks of heavy use, to the point where it no longer constitutes a safe fall surface. Eight weeks is probably a good guide here, although much will depend on the specific ground condition and volume of users at each site.

Likewise, damage and wear to the equipment from normal use was negligible. Rather, the unintended use of the swing by dog owners to exercise their dogs was the main cause of concern here. The damage to the equipment from dogs was not too serious but evidently a few more months of that treatment might have rendered the seat unsafe by stripping away the protective rubber coating from the metal plate within. It is therefore worth considering whether dogs are allowed to enter the site of any potential tree swings when assessing risks and writing maintenance schedules for this type of play installation.

I expect the issues identified here will be similar for any tree swing situated in an open access urban park. Overall we judged the experiment to be a real success in terms of the increased amenity value of the park to local users.

The new site we selected for re-installing the swing in Whittington Park should mitigate some of the concerns noted here. By placing it further into the park, we should avoid disturbance to local residents; and by siting it within view of the park-keepers office, we hope to deter dog owners from mistreating the swing.

Very best regards,

Leo Murray
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