

Park Wardens Deputation Speech

Andy Beresford

My Lord Mayor and councillors, on behalf of ~~the residents of Woodhouse Moor~~, Sue Buckle, ~~Gay Bennett~~, Elly Bailey and myself, and North Hyde Park Neighbourhood Association, South Headingley Community Association and Friends of Woodhouse Moor, thank you for this hearing.

When Woodhouse Moor was purchased in 1857, it was known as "the Lungs of Leeds". But now, 150 years later, thick plumes of barbecue smoke arise from the park whenever it's warm and sunny. Every barbecue releases 220,000 times as many cancer causing dioxins as a single cigarette. Barbecue smoke affects everyone in the vicinity, and not just those in the park. Over the weekend of the 10th and the 11th May, one lady who lives close to the Moor had to keep her windows shut, as barbecue smoke was causing her to experience breathing difficulties. Carelessly discarded barbecue coals cause skip and bin fires. In a recent skip fire, a bottle exploded sending shards of glass everywhere. Someone could have been blinded. If Leeds City Council continues to allow barbecues on Woodhouse Moor, it's only a question of time until there's a serious accident, and the council could find itself being sued for negligence. And by failing to stop illegal barbecues, the council is wasting fire brigade resources..

Woodhouse Moor has been neglected for many years. Badly rutted paths make the park inaccessible to wheelchair users. Tennis courts are unusable being covered with weeds and saplings, and they have no fencing. The skateboard park is permanently covered in graffiti and litter and stinks of urine. Lack of security is encouraging unprecedented levels of anti-social behaviour. According to police figures, one person is mugged there every week. Illegal barbecues are converted to bonfires with branches torn from trees. There are skip and bin fires. There's under-age drinking. Street drinkers congregate near the children's play area. There's class A drug-dealing and consumption. Litter and broken glass is strewn everywhere. There are professional all-night sound systems with petrol generators. There's quad bike racing and public urination. The Police Community Support Officers, when they are present, ignore all this. The result is that the park is now unsafe for children and families. And if children without gardens can't play in the park, where are they to play ?

Woodhouse Moor receives 3 million visitors every year and is the second most visited park after Roundhay, which receives 6.5 million visitors. But Roundhay Park has over 700 acres, whereas Woodhouse Moor has just 60. That makes Woodhouse Moor the most intensively used park in the city. It should be funded accordingly. How does spending on Woodhouse Moor compare with spending on other parks ? The answer is we don't know. That's because Parks and Countryside don't produce individual parks budgets. All we know for certain is that in 2001 Leeds spending per hectare on parks was a quarter that of other major English cities, ~~and that~~ it needs to be greatly increased.

Hyde Park and Woodhouse has lower car ownership than any other ward in the city. This means that local people rely on Woodhouse Moor to fulfil their greenspace needs. Many do not have gardens and this makes them even more dependant on the Moor. By neglecting Woodhouse Moor, and by allowing anti social behaviour on it, the council is depriving the residents of one the most deprived areas of the city of the use of their only greenspace. The scenes we're witnessing on a regular basis on Woodhouse Moor would not be allowed in any other city and they should not be allowed here. It's time for Leeds City Council to maintain it's only major central park and maintain order on it. To do this it needs to :

1. Increase overall spending on parks to match that of the other major English cities.
2. Produce budgets for each of the city's parks with resources allocated to parks based on usage and the need of the surrounding area.
3. Institute regular maintenance of the facilities on Woodhouse Moor so that they are at all times fit for use.
4. Provide Woodhouse Moor with at least two permanent park wardens whose sole duty would be to maintain order and enforce the byelaws, and who would issue on the spot fines for littering, and the infringement of byelaws (when this power becomes available under the Local Government And Public Involvement in Health Act). Already, more than 360 people have signed a petition asking for permanent park wardens on the Moor.

We look forward to receiving your response.