

Access Assessment Around Victory Park, Addlestone

9th April 2021

As a result of the Government's new loneliness strategy, a multi-agency working group set up by Runnymede Borough Council identified wheelchair users as needing places to go and socialise. One suggestion was to create local wheelchair trails.

In June 2020, a trail was created for Gogmore Park Farm, Chertsey in the south of the borough then another one was created in August 2020 for Hythe Park, Egham in the north of the borough.

Now in April 2021, it is hoped that Victory Park, Addlestone could be made more accessible to wheelchair users. The park also offers a courtyard space that could be redesigned to become a Sensory Garden. The garden could provide an alternative area that welcomes and appeals to a wider selection of members of the local community, especially to those with sensory impairments who are often overlooked.

Suzanne Stronge from Runnymede Borough Council had been researching the history of Victory Park and had put together a draft guide leaflet of the park.

Suzanne asked if RALG could assist her with assessing the park for wheelchair users and also to discuss how to adapt the park's courtyard garden into a Sensory Garden for people with sensory impairments.

RALG members Jonathan Fisher (a totally reliant white cane user), Anica Zeyen (a guide dog user), Cllr Margaret Harnden, Mary Smith (Treasurer) and Pauline Carter (a wheelchair user) met Suzanne and her husband Ian (who was taking photographs) to conduct an assessment. The day selected was during the Easter holidays when the weather was partially sunny, dry and with a cool breeze.

The two hours spent together highlighted a few minor accessibility issues but also generated some very exciting ideas on how to make the courtyard truly sensuous and appealing to people not just with sensory impairments but to all age groups.

Covid-19 rules were still in force at the time, but it was easy to maintain social distancing throughout the walk because the paths were wide.

Accessibility

- There is road signage for Victory Park on Station Road which leads to Pyle Road but it is not clearly signposted from there. This is the only vehicular entrance for the park. If you don't know the area the carpark would be very difficult to find.

- The main pedestrian entrance is on Chertsey Road. This is a busy road if you were to drop anyone off by the entrance.
- The car parking area is at the end of Victory Park Road. There are 2 disabled parking bays: one is right beside the entrance to the park on the right hand-side, the other one to the left beside the beginning of the main tarmacked path, facing the football pitches. The disabled bays could be too small for many Motability vehicles due to the width of the bays marked being too narrow, preventing a car door from opening widely enough for the passenger to exit/enter easily.
- The disabled parking bay adjacent to the entrance seems a dangerous place to put a bay because if a wheelchair user is exiting from the rear of a vehicle, they would be in the main thoroughfare for vehicles entering and exiting the carpark. Also, this bay is some distance from the main tarmacked path that enters the park.
- The other disabled parking bay is right beside the main tarmacked path that enters the park, therefore anyone entering/exiting from their vehicle would have to contend with people entering/exiting the park and could even temporarily block the path while exiting from that side of the vehicle.
- There are 59 parking bays with 2 disabled parking bays. The number of disabled parking bays seem too few for the number of bays available.
- There is a wide well defined tarmacked path going from the carpark to the main pedestrian entrance at the other end of the park. The other paths running from it are well maintained and bounded by concrete edging then cut grass, so there is enough white cane roller ball detection between the different surfaces. The paths are easy to navigate by wheelchair and long cane, and there is enough width for a walker with carer/guide and an electric wheelchair/scooter and companion. However, in a few places, there are some adverse cambers at the edges of the path which could sidetrack a wheelchair.
- The gardens are very well maintained and accessibility around the gardens is good. The grass areas are cut short enough for easy movement and are generally flat.
- There are female, male and disabled toilets at one end of the Pavilion. At the time of visiting, there was no signage on the men's toilet. To access the men's toilet, you must descend 4 steps but there is a handrail on one side. There is a slabbed path to the women's and disabled toilet - one slab needs realigning because it poses a trip hazard.
- The disabled toilet is accessed by radar key. At the time of visiting, the toilet roll holder was broken, the emergency cord was not full length to the floor and the toilet's left-hand drop-down support rail did not drop down. There were no "Changing Places". The disabled toilet was not hygienic on the day of visiting.
- There are no refreshment facilities or shelters for rain or wind protection in the park.

- In the Courtyard Garden there are lovely long benches with space for 4 people. However, they are unsuitable for the elderly or people with mobility problems as there are only armrests at each end.
- The paths are not lit although the park is only open during daylight hours.
- Visitors need to leave the paths to reach the football pitches, bowling green, croquet lawn, outdoor gym and paddling pool. There are 3 football pitches, 3 tennis courts, a bowling green, a croquet lawn, a paddling pool, an outdoor gym, children's playground and a nursery which can all be accessed according to one's ability.
- There are plenty of benches along the main path, every 200m. There are also a few benches beside the football pitches, croquet lawn, bowling green, children's playground, courtyard garden and tennis courts. Apart from the picnic tables in the children's playground, no other picnic tables were seen.

Suggestions for the new Sensory Garden

Repairs are needed to coping stones and some loose brickwork on the walls to the raised beds in the Courtyard Garden.

Ideas generated to transform it into a Sensory Garden were:

- Increase the seating area by installing benches with individual seats and armrests.
- Use the central circle area as a sunken planting area, or water feature (Solar?), or a sectioned area for different planting for different senses.
- Install an information board and small labelling plaques for plants/sections of the garden. Incorporate raised type/braille.
- Potential plants for all senses:
 - Taste – Spearmint, Rosemary, Chives, Nasturtium, Wild strawberry, Pot marigold, Sweet basil, Vegetables etc.
 - Sight – Sunflowers, Love-in-a-mist, Chameleon plant, Swiss chard 'Bright Lights', Heuchera cultivars etc.
 - Sound – Greater quaking grass, Miscanthus oligostachyus 'Nanus Variegatus', Sweetcorn, Bamboo, Fountain grass etc.
 - Touch – Lamb's ears, Silver sage, Jerusalem sage etc.
 - Smell – Curry plant, Lavender, Chocolate cosmos, Stocks, Lemon scented geranium, Oregano/wild marjoram etc.
- Install windbreaks in various positions around the garden to provide shielding from winds from all directions (could use trelliswork with climbing plants?).
- Improve the quality of the topsoil in the beds which are currently fine and dusty.
- Involve local community groups and/or the children's nursery in the park to help maintain or plant some of the plants.

- Place the planting beds at wheelchair height so that they are accessible to all (including young children).
- Provide areas of light and shade in the garden.
- Plant plants of different heights, ones that creep, climb, trail, bush, or stand upright. Incorporate plants with different bloom, leaf, bark, and stem colours.

User Experience

It is suggested that:

- The leaflet:
 - could be produced as downloadable Word and PDF documents for phone/laptop.
 - could be made accessible for the visually impaired by being Arial font size 16 in black on a yellow background.
 - could include descriptions of the plants in the Courtyard/Sensory Garden.
- Access:
 - the signposting to Victory Park's carpark could be improved around Addlestone.
 - re-positioning and enlarging the disabled parking bays would make it easier for the disabled to access the park and potentially less hazardous. Moving them to beside the entry/exit to main tarmacked path is recommended, while putting in a low wooden rail to separate the parking from the path entry/exit would enable disabled people to safely enter/exit their car.
 - increasing the number of disabled parking bays to 4, in accordance with government guidelines, would make the park more accessible. https://www.britishparking.co.uk/write/Documents/Library%202016/Bay_Sizes_-_Jul_2016.pdf
 - checking the size of the disabled bays is recommended, in accordance with government guidelines. https://www.britishparking.co.uk/write/Documents/Library%202016/Bay_Sizes_-_Jul_2016.pdf
- Toilets/facilities:
 - the men's toilet needs new signage and directional signage to the ladies and disabled toilet could be improved. One slab on the path to the ladies and disabled toilet needs attention because it poses a trip hazard.
 - the disabled toilet needs the toilet roll holder reinstated, the emergency cord replaced and made to be full length to the floor, and the toilet's left-hand drop-down support rail needs to be able to drop down. Ideally it would be updated to provide a "Changing Place". It also needs to be cleaned better.
- When renewing the park seating, the installation of benches with individual seats and armrests are recommended.

- There should be a few picnic benches in the park suitable for a wheelchair user.
- Refreshment facilities in the park would make the park a more appealing place to meet friends etc. eg a mobile refreshment van selling ice cream, teas, coffees, snacks etc.
- Install some covered seating areas for shelter in inclement weather.
- Cycle racks would encourage users to cycle there, instead of coming by car.
- The park would benefit from some sort of type of tactile indication to indicate when to turn off the main path to get to, for example, the outdoor gym. Otherwise, it is hard to find if you are without a sighted guide.