



Improving the Crescent

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Introduction

This document is intended to brief stakeholders on recent activity by Friends of the Crescent and to propose specific actions to improve the square and general area.

A high priority is given to the need to quantify the extent of anti-social behaviour and to come up with long term solutions which will reduce and eventually eliminate it, while keeping the park open to the general public.

Current Status

Crescent Park

During the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, maintenance of the park was extremely difficult and the lack of footfall exacerbated the tendency for the park to be taken over by anti-social elements. In 2021 things have started to improve with the help of the relevant City Council teams. These are some of the items of progress so far in 2021:

1. Some broken lighting has been fixed, improving the visibility at night.
2. Friends of the Crescent was set up with a website launched, and a committee and membership has been established.
3. Since Easter the lawn has been mown fortnightly by council staff.
4. Bin collections have improved, with a general pattern being established of the bins being emptied and litter picked up every day at some point during the morning.
5. Friends of the Crescent have organised gardening days in June, mainly to work on things with a more long-term effect such as revealing granite edging and trimming tree trunks.
6. Residents have been more active in calling the police in response to illegal behaviour. We intend to intensify this.
7. Council staff removed graffiti in April, although unfortunately some of it is back.
8. Council staff have added hanging baskets and planters in the park and are maintaining them regularly.
9. Residents of Upper Crescent independently dealt with a rough sleeping problem in Crescent Lane.
10. There has been a programme of information gathering to audit the litter and anti-social behaviour problem in the park.

To highlight the difference some of these changes have made, we have created a table below showing a selection of photos with and without the change. The point to be made here is that small changes in the environment can have a huge impact in the overall feel of the park which in turn can transform the chances of maintaining a healthy park usage by the general public.

LAWN MOWING



LITTER



GRAFFITI



EDGING



PLANTERS



TREE TRIMMING



Having drawn attention to the positive changes that we have been able to identify, we must reiterate that very serious problems remain, and there is as yet no cause for suggesting that the park is in an acceptable state. The problems fall into three main areas, each of which have some interaction with the others:

1. Anti-social behaviour

For a large part of every 24-hour period (mainly at night), the park is inhabited by groups of aggressive and loud individuals, mainly men, who drink alcohol, fight and sometimes inject drugs. Some use the bins but in general their litter is thrown on the ground. They urinate in the shrubby growth around the large elm trees. There is currently a security guard patrolling the build at 11 and 12 Upper Crescent at night (since 15th June). He is observing the situation and calling the police when necessary. He can confirm that the occurrence of illegal activity is nightly. Additionally, we have audited litter from 6-7am and again from 5-6pm on a regular basis since the 1st of May 2021. Each morning we go there we pick up an average of 57 pieces of litter per day. In the evening there are only 8 pieces of litter on average, showing that in the period 86% of litter was dropped at night. We have recorded 1.8 alcohol parties per night (ie a seating station littered with empty vodka bottles etc), and a heroin needle/syringe every 5 days. There are typically three broken bottles or glasses in each 4-day period. All of these more serious and illegal littering incidents are typically being found in the morning. The evening observation shows mainly a few soft drink cans and general items of litter such as crisp packets or plastic bags.

2. Maintenance

Although maintenance by the council has improved, there are some important gaps. We identify these as:

- a) The bin emptying and litter picking by council staff happens at some point in the morning time, we understand after the Botanic Gardens has been completed. Realistically this means leaving the park littered with an average of 57 pieces of litter for the period of morning from 7am to noon or sometimes later. This means that the park will be an inhospitable environment during that period for any morning users, who tend to be law abiding individuals who are not inclined to drink or drop litter. This is a missed opportunity to drive up legal and safe usage of the park during the day.
- b) The lawn being mowed once a fortnight is not enough to keep the park looking tidy, particularly in the early and mid-summer. We suggest weekly. Additionally, it is not clear yet if the Crescent is on a working rota which will be adhered to without reminder calls being made to council managers. We understand that there are still pressures on council staff regarding social distancing so we do hope that this problem will be addressed in the near future as restrictions end.

- c) General maintenance such as removing graffiti, trimming trees, cutting lawn edging and painting benches is not being done to any great extent that we can see. Again, we understand that the Covid restrictions probably play a part in this, which is why we in Friends of the Crescent have been stepping in to help bring the park up to standard in the hope that when restrictions end the council will be able to take it from there.

3. Structural Issues

a) Seating

The seating stations are in groups of benches for two people – 3, 3, 2. This means that the seating is arranged to host groups of 4, 5 and 6. Our observations have shown clearly that law-abiding users of the park generally come in ‘ones and twos’, whereas anti-social behaviour is almost always larger groups - typically 4 to 6. Groups of law-abiding individuals (eg workers or students having a sandwich lunch) in our observational experience come when the weather is dry and the lawn is mowed and they sit on the lawn. We have not seen any illegal drinkers sitting on the lawn – they always congregate around the benches. The seating arrangement has inadvertently created a 24-hour party venue which is very well designed to host illegal drink and drugs parties at night. Our suggestion is to change the seating layout to have five well-spaced individual benches, thereby keeping the park available for use by the general public but reducing its attractiveness to groups of drinkers.

b) Lack of Gates at Night

Related to the previous issue, the park has four entrances and all of them are open for 24 hours a day. Multiple entrances/exits are in general well known in public realm design to be popular with criminals because it’s always easy to make a quick getaway if police arrive. More pertinent to this document is the fact that they are all left open every night. This is the only park that we are aware of in South Belfast that is left open in such a way. The standard in Belfast parks is to have gates which are closed by a team on a rota each dawn and dusk. The evidence we have gathered clearly shows that treating Crescent Park like every other Belfast park in this way would eliminate the majority of the problem and force the habitual drink and drugs users to change their habits. We understand that the gates alone are not a guarantee of a complete end to all anti-social behaviour, but the level and frequency of it at the moment is so severe that it is very clear that structural change is required before it can be reduced to a level manageable by police and community safety patrols.

c) Cameras and Monitoring

There is currently no monitoring by CCTV in Crescent Park, and so no reliable way for patrols to be alerted to anti-social behaviour. We understand that this is an added expense and it may be that after implementing all other recommended changes that a period of observation could show that the problem has been greatly reduced. We are, however, of the view that it is a good idea as part of an overall package of measures which will eliminate the anti-social behaviour problem and create a safe and harmonious environment for residents, workers and the citizens of Belfast. The latest solutions are motion-sensitive, which means that they can be monitored more easily and alerts sent out when there are problems to address.

Streetscape

In addition to the park itself, the street immediately surrounding the park is owned by the Department for Infrastructure (whereas the park belongs to Belfast City Council). Bin collection in both areas is coordinated by council staff, but other issues such as lighting and kerb maintenance on the streets are a DfI responsibility. Our consultation with residents of the square clearly shows that there is very strong demand for a residents' parking scheme. This would greatly increase the attractiveness of the area to residential owners and renters. We have started the process of raising this issue and hope to progress it further. More generally there is an ongoing need to ensure that lighting is kept working and weeds are controlled around the external park perimeter.

Alleyways

There are two main alleyways that are relevant to the immediate vicinity – Crescent Lane (the back of Upper Crescent), and the alley between Crescent Gardens and Botanic Avenue. Both alleys have a history of being used as places to deal and take drugs, and the problems are ongoing and serious. The Crescent Gardens alley was recently highlighted in this press story:

<https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/botanic-dublin-road-anti-social-20759914>

Crescent Lane is currently a little more difficult to access for drug users because of temporary fencing put up by builders on development projects, but a long-term solution is clearly necessary. Belfast City Council have developed a successful model for managing alleyways which involves gates at either end, with keys being issued to residents. Both these alleyways have residential as well as commercial users and both have a very clear need because of their attractiveness to drug users and the regular appearance of used needles.

Friends of the Crescent are determined to progress this issue to ensure that both these alleys are secured and made safe for residents and workers in the local buildings.

Conclusion

In this document we have highlighted the changes required to ensure that the level of anti-social behaviour is reduced and then eliminated, while at the same time increasing the attractiveness of the park to all law-abiding members of the public.

We briefly summarize the measures required below:

1. Empty bins and pick up litter first thing each morning.
2. Mow the lawn every week.
3. Improve general maintenance of the park and the street.
4. Rearrange seating singly.
5. Put gates on the park and close them each night.
6. Introduce motion-sensitive cameras and monitoring.
7. Develop a residents' parking scheme for the Crescent.
8. Secure the alleys behind Crescent Gardens and Upper Crescent with gates.