

The Future of the Annual Fireworks Display in Rowlands Castle

The future of the fireworks display is in doubt, because of current health and safety guidance which advises the need to have a second exit.

A working party, consisting of two members of the Rowlands Castle Association (RCA), two councillors from Rowlands Castle Parish Council (RCPC) and one member from the Recreation Ground Management Committee (RGMC) has been set up to look at the need for, and the feasibility of, putting in a second exit from the recreation ground.

Statement by the appointed Working Group - March 2019

Background

1. There has been an annual fireworks display on the Recreation Ground for many years. The numbers of people attending the event grew substantially in 2016 and 2017 and were estimated to be up to about 4,000, and this led to concerns about the safety of the event.
2. In particular, there is clear guidance from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) that such an event on the Recreation Ground would only be safe if there were 2 distinct and separated exits for use in an emergency.
3. The Firework Display ('Display') has taken place for over 40 years, and is considered a major village cultural event. It marks a significant event in British history, which many communities have celebrated in the past. It also brings residents' families together as well as business to local shops and pubs.
4. The issue was raised with RCPC. Discussions then took place with the Safety Advisory Group (SAG), coordinated by East Hampshire District Council, (EHDC) and with the insurers of both the RCA and RCPC. There was insufficient time to develop plans and put in place a second exit in 2018, so RCPC and the RCA took advice and agreed special arrangements endorsed by the SAG for 2018 only to allow the Display to take place. However, it was made clear that this was a one-off arrangement and that thereafter, firework displays could only take place if the arrangements conformed to HSE guidance and met with the approval of the SAG.
5. The plans for 2018 included making the Display a ticket-only event with a limit on numbers to 2,000. A considerable amount of work was carried out by the RCA in staging the display including the following:
 - Writing an Event Management Plan, and the Risk assessments required by EHDC and by the Hampshire Fire officer in charge.
 - Ensuring that all stall owners adhered to all the regulations and provided the RCA with evidence of having done so.
 - Ensuring that the RCA had valid insurance with a written statement that the insurers accepted that there was only one exit to the Recreation Ground.
 - Organising security staff and volunteer stewards and giving them verbal and written instructions.
 - Trying to publicise sufficiently well that spectators must buy tickets in advance.
 - Organising tickets and monitoring ticket sales; this was particularly difficult and time-consuming.

6. In the event there was an excellent Display last November which was sold out. A modest surplus was created for RCA funds.
7. A joint Working Group has been set up with 2 members each from the RCA and RCPC and 1 member from the RGMC. Its objective is to consider the feasibility of creating a 2nd exit from the Recreation Ground.
8. The Summary below sets out proposals for a 2nd exit in order to gain feedback from the Rowlands Castle Community and allow RCPC to make an informed decision in due course.

Summary of Proposal

9. In light of advice, the Working Group recommends that future fireworks displays only take place on the Recreation Ground if a 2nd pedestrian exit is created for use in an emergency only.
10. The proposed 2nd entrance would be put in place between 2 existing oak trees approximately opposite the entrances to 8 and 10 The Fairway. The entrance would replace 4m (13 feet 4 inches) of chain-link fencing and hedging.
11. The proposed entry gates would form a 4m (13'4") wide gateway comprising a pair of timber five or six bar field gates 1.2m or 1.5m (4 or 5 ft) high, (similar to thousands of such gates on farms throughout the countryside).
12. It would provide a secondary, pedestrian-only exit which would be locked when not required.
13. With a second exit in place, the numbers attending the Display would still be limited to 2,600.
14. The ground between the gate and the road would be reinforced with ACO Ground Guard (or similar) and seeded with grass to maintain permeability and not exacerbate surface water drainage. The same would be done from the gate into the Recreation Ground for approximately 2 metres. The road kerb would be lowered.
15. There would be a consequent loss of 4m of hedging. The existing hedge is patchy, and provides only partial screening. It is estimated to be around 70 years old, and is now in need of some rejuvenation as is normal with deciduous hedging.
16. It would be possible to plant an area of small trees, shrubs and wild flowers within the recreation ground to offset this loss of natural habitat. Small trees or shrubs could be placed in planters on the recreation ground side of the gate to provide screening.
17. No changes are proposed to any parking restrictions.
18. Emergency vehicles would use the existing entrance to the Recreation Ground.

The Current Situation

The following measures have been taken in order to look at the feasibility of putting in a second exit:

19. An application is in hand to the authorities at EHDC for a Licence (under the Hedgerow Regulations 1997) to grant permission to remove the hedge and replace it with gates.
20. An application is in hand to Hampshire County Council (HCC) for permission to modify the verge and install a dropped kerb to allow the gates to be installed.
21. Plans have been commissioned which detail the proposals for a possible second exit.

22. Concerns have been expressed by some local residents that a second exit would increase the risk of flooding to the Fairway. Accordingly, RCPC has commissioned a drainage report from an independent consultant.
23. Local contractors have been asked to give provisional quotes of the cost of carrying out the work.

Next Steps

24. In due course, RCPC will make a decision on whether to construct a 2nd exit from the Recreation Ground which would allow the Firework Display to continue. To give residents the opportunity to be fully informed on the matter, there will be a process of consultation as follows:
 - This statement forms part of the consultation process.
 - Information will continue to be published on the RCA and RCPC websites about the proposals, as and when available.
 - There will be further public discussion on the matter at the Annual Parish Meeting on the 15th April, where the plans for the proposals will be on display. These plans will also be published on the RCA and RCPC websites when they become available.
25. Anyone wanting to make comments on these proposals, or to ask more questions, can do so by emailing Feedback@rowlandscastle.com (Please be aware that your email and contact details may be read by members of the Working Group and of RCPC. However, contact details will not be passed to any other party).
26. After the Annual Parish Meeting on 15 April, RCPC will take all the facts into account and will make a final decision on whether or not to go ahead with putting in a second exit from the Recreation Ground.

Issues raised by some local residents

27. The 2nd exit has been discussed at several RCPC meetings, and at a special meeting held by the RCA immediately after the AGM in February 2019. Since the Working Group was set up in late 2018, a number of objections to the possibility of a 2nd exit have been received, in part resulting from a statement distributed by 2 residents to other properties in The Fairway and The Peak. Some discussions between members of the WP and residents have taken place. Details of the particular issues that have been raised are set out on the RCA and RCPC websites noted above, together with comments from the Working Group.