

Friends of Montgomery Street Park want to keep their helter skelter

The council is refurbishing the play area in Montgomery Street park in a £230,000 scheme, but one significant part in the middle will take a little longer to complete.

The historic Helter Skelter in the centre has been the subject of a lot of mainly positive discussions between the Friends of Montgomery Street Park (the Friends) and The City of Edinburgh Council who have all but agreed that the play structure can be kept – if the Friends can get the money together to pay for it.

It will take about £15-20,000 to save the Helter Skelter which the Friends say is a focal point in the park and is really worth saving, and they have confirmed that they think they can raise the funds to do so.

Simon Preston has been a member of the Friends committee for around five years, and has taken the lead on both the redevelopment of the play park, and also looking at what the Friends could do to try and rescue the Helter Skelter.

He explained: “The council had ringfenced money for us for many, many years and there was lots of conversation about how it should be spent. We didn’t want the generic kind of stuff you see everywhere which is plastic coated, we wanted something that was sustainable, that was natural, that was

responding to the way that children want to play these days with creative and mindful play.

“So we counter-proposed and counter-proposed to the council about what we could have in here, and they’ve been brilliant, actually, and really compromised. And in the end, we came up with a design and a plan that we think is going to absolutely fantastic.”

The Helter Skelter poses a few problems, mainly down to its age and new health and safety regulations. If it was renovated then it would be covered by the regulations in place when it was first installed, but if a new one is used in its place then it would have to comply with today’s regulations. The road to keeping the structure has so far been a bit long with the Friends asking local people what they wanted to do to the park to improve it way back in 2019. The structure has been fenced off since January 2022 as the council was concerned that it was at the end of its life, but removal has been delayed for now.



The Friends of Montgomery Street Park are working to try to save the historic helter skelter PHOTO Alan Simpson
Simon continued: "It's been complicated. It's old, it was put there in the 70s, and there are some people who say it's old, get rid of it. But we live in central Edinburgh, where lots of things are old and we're not going to get rid of them. I know it's not a Victorian building, but it is something that the local community feel very attached to. They have so many memories. It's iconic. It's something that says 'this is our place'. This is Montgomery Street, this is Hillside.

"There are issues – there's some rust, but that can be fixed. And there are issues around safety regulations having changed over the 40 or 50 years it stood there, but they are all surmountable, we think. We've worked really hard to say no, there are problems, but there are ways around the problems and

the Council have listened. It's easier for them to get rid of it, and we appreciate the fact that they have listened to us and said well, okay, let's see if we can find a way forward. And I feel like we're 90% there now – not quite but almost.”

The Helter Skelter will have to be sandblasted and welded and then the Friends will have it coated employing the same technology used on the Forth Bridge. With this work complete, the council will be able to confirm that the structure is insurable in case of any injuries. Simon is emphatic about managing the risk.

He said: “Risk is important in play and children injure themselves all the time climbing trees, climbing fences and just falling over. So it's not that we want to manage out all the risk. Learning to manage risk is important for children. But of course we need to do everything we can to make sure that the helter skelter is as safe as it can possibly be.”

Rachel Blyth is chair of the Friends explained that others on the committee had been in charge of the refurbishment of the play area in the park. She said: “The Friends have had a long campaign over a long number of years to to maintain the Helter Skelter. I only joined the Friends in the last two and a half years and can't give you details of everything that has been done but I am very happy that we all agree that definitely want to keep it. And because a lot of people in the local community want to do it I think we will be successful.”



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At the council's Culture and Communities meeting in August the Friends of Montgomery Street Park delivered a deputation outlining why their refurbished playpark must include the historic helter skelter. The committee approved the motion to retain the structure, and local councillors are also supportive of the move.

Cllr Jack Caldwell said that while money is a part of the

issue, it comes down to risk assessment and making it safe for future generations.

He said: "Making sure that it can be safe for future generations to use it and love it the way we got the chance to, and I would say it is one of those things where there's quite a lot of cross party consensus. Everyone who represents the area wants to see this thing retained as much as possible. It's not just about the piece of equipment itself, it's what it means to people, it's a landmark of the area, so it absolutely needs to be kept.

"I think the best thing we can do right now is to work with the local community, to find solutions the local community is very good at thinking outside the box. The other thing that we need to do is to liaise with our parks teams in the council who, as every year have a more and more limited resource to work with. But we need to ensure that we can support the community through that. And you know, there's really good parks officers who want to see this retained as well.

Cllr James Dalgleish said: "We really would like it to be retained. It's very sentimental and nostalgic, and you know, it's a really unique part of the park. We've grown up around this area and we love it. We probably used it as kids just as so many families are at the moment.

Cllr McNeese-Mechan said: "I'm hoping there is a way to safely restore this much-loved Helter-Skelter. I would also add that if for any reason it's not possible, I do hope it's not simply scrapped.

"We are so blessed with creative and talented people in the area and I wonder, if it can no longer be used for play, could it be repurposed as a piece of art or heritage, as a starting point for sharing stories about the park and the communities around it?"

Cllr Caldwell concluded: "The Friends of Montgomery Street

Park care deeply about this. Some members of the community because their children used to be able to go through the initiation of sliding down it for the first time. Some members care because they want other children to have that opportunity that they had. It is very rare nowadays for parents and guardians to give young people a unique experience which is truly free. We can't forget that there's a reason helter skelters at fun fairs are usually behind a paywall. This piece of equipment prioritises active, health childhood, a landmark, and a sense of belonging.

- "We should give no illusions that it can be kept. But at the end of the day, we need to stand up as a Council and say we will do everything in our power to save this piece, and if we can't, we shouldn't be leaving volunteers out of pocket."

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save the historic helter skelter PHOTO Alan Simpson



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