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PARK LIFE

FORMERLY A DERELICT DUMP, ROBBY SUKHDEO'S PAVILION IN HARINGEY HAS PARKS TENNIS ON THE UP

Five years ago, the Albert Road Recreation Ground in Muswell Hill was a self-confessed 'muggers' paradise'. Local gangs ran riot, burning the nets of the park's tennis courts, chucking bottles on the gravel and destroying the netting to escape from police. The only residents to venture into the park were brave dog-walkers.

But then along came Robby Sukhdeo, a 51-year-old Haringey resident, who convinced the council to let him try to turn things around. 'I wanted to be a tennis coach and set up a club,' explains Sukhdeo, 'so I wrote to Haringey council with the idea of turning their derelict pavilion into a tennis club.' Sukhdeo remortgaged his house and put the money into creating a café, from which he now runs a tennis and multi-sports operation. As a result, Haringey has been chosen as one of the AEGON Hotspots, the Tennis Foundation's benchmark of how people of all ages and abilities can have access to tennis in local parks.

Sukhdeo and his team of five coaches not only provide regular sessions in the park itself, giving out

free rackets and balls, but also deliver coaching in two local clubs and six primary schools. 'The fact that we're feeding all these clubs means we've got strong links, and they're coming back to us and asking what they can do to help,' says Sukhdeo. The Pavilion courts cater for roughly 100 adults, 250 children and 80 toddlers per week, a number that is sure to rise once the

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much anticipated development of the eight dilapidated gravel courts takes place. 'The Tennis Foundation have been supporting us all the way through,' explains Sukhdeo, 'and after quite a long process consulting with the neighbourhood we've got our planning permission... There's a real buzz knowing that it's going to happen.' However despite the planned six new tarmac courts, complete with floodlights and mini-tennis

zones, Sukhdeo is not going to change his 'anyone can play' policy. 'We will still keep it open and we will still charge the same rate [£3 for adults, free for children].'

Sukhdeo's Pavilion has done far more for the park than just introduce people to tennis. The café has become the heart of the park community, home to art classes, music concerts, countless football and cricket teams and even exercise classes for mothers and toddlers, meaning the park is constantly used and the local gangs who used to vandalise the courts have all but disappeared. For the council and park authorities, the benefits have come back in spades. 'We wouldn't have won our two Green Flag Awards for best green spaces in the country without Robby,' explains Tony, the councillor in charge of the park.

'It was -4C a few weekends ago and the entire park and courts were full,' says Sukhdeo proudly. 'Everyone's gaining from the park and the more successful we become, the more we can invest back into it.' Visit www.tennisfoundation.org.uk to find out about tennis in parks.

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