

## **CRIME AND DISORDER SELECT COMMITTEE**

A meeting of Crime and Disorder Select Committee was held on Thursday 9 November 2023.

**Present:** Cllr Pauline Beall (Chair), Cllr Paul Rowling (Vice-Chair), Cllr Carol Clark (sub for Cllr Richard Eglington), Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Shakeel Hussain (sub for Cllr Sally Ann Watson), Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Sufi Mubeen (sub for Cllr Alan Watson), Cllr Marcus Vickers (sub for Cllr Jason French) and Cllr Sylvia Walmsley.

**Officers:** Stephen Bowerbank, Graham Clingan, Keith Jackson, Andie Mackay, Neil Mitchell (CS,E&C) and Gary Woods (CS).

**Also in attendance:** None.

**Apologies:** Cllr Richard Eglington, Cllr Jason French, Cllr Alan Watson and Cllr Sally Ann Watson.

### **CD/18/23 Evacuation Procedure**

The evacuation procedure was noted.

### **CD/19/23 Declarations of Interest**

There were no interests declared.

### **CD/20/23 Minutes**

Consideration was given to the minutes of the Crime and Disorder Select Committee meeting which was held on 19 October 2023 for approval and signature.

AGREED that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 19 October 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **CD/21/23 Scrutiny Review of Outdoor Play Provision: Quality and Distribution, Maintenance, and Physical Accessibility**

Following the Committee's approval of the scope and plan for the Outdoor Play Provision review at the last meeting in October 2023, this first evidence-gathering session involved initial submissions from the Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) Community Services, Environment and Culture directorate.

Introduced by the SBC Head of Environment, Leisure & Green Infrastructure, and supported by the SBC Strategy & Greenspace Development Manager, the session began by analysing maps and lists of existing informal sports facilities and play areas. Regarding the former, there was a variety of provision across the Borough, mostly involving multi-use games areas (MUGAs) which were sometimes accompanied by outdoor gyms and / or skateparks. Kick walls and / or other surfaced games areas were also highlighted, as was one third-party MUGA in Billingham.

Consideration was then given to the spread of play areas across Stockton-on-Tees, with the mapping of the different types of provision supplemented by the 2018 'play value' assessments for 'toddler', 'junior' and 'teen' categories. Members noted that there seemed to be no reference to the Morley Carr, Yarm site which was linked to a housing development – it was acknowledged that, to ensure accuracy, colleagues from the Planning Team may need to provide input regarding knowledge of any additional play area facilities which were in the pipeline.

A presentation giving more detail around the current position in relation to the Borough's play areas and informal sports facilities followed. Led by the SBC Head of Environment, Leisure & Green Infrastructure, and again supported by the SBC Strategy & Greenspace Development Manager, areas covered included:

- Existing portfolio
- Classification of play areas: destination, neighbourhood, and doorstep
- Play value
- Types of informal sport provision
- Inequalities in provision

The terminology used to classify play areas was outlined, as were examples of each type. As larger facilities within parks, 'destination' sites served a wide catchment area and had been invested in considerably by SBC in recent years, offering a wide variety of equipment that provided good 'play value' for a range of users from toddlers to teenagers. 'Neighbourhood' sites were mainly situated within larger green spaces of a community (with a more moderate quantity of equipment), whereas 'doorstep' sites were smaller facilities which were located on green space or self-contained zones within housing areas (many of which had been installed by housing developers). It was noted that there was variance even within these three categories (for example, one site within the Borough contains just a single slide).

In terms of 'play value', the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) had developed an industry-standard methodology for assessing the quality and variety of play experiences – this considers the value of equipment across age-ranges, as well as the characteristics and quality of the site itself (e.g. landscape, infrastructure, access). Scores for each of the Borough's sites were included within the SBC submission for this evidence session, though it was noted that these assessments were quite dated (2018) and would need to be re-evaluated to provide an accurate picture of the current state and value of local facilities.

Reasons for the growing inequality of outdoor play provision across the Borough were highlighted. The last significant investment in Stockton-on-Tees facilities was back in 2008 (though not all areas benefitted at that time), and since then, many sites had been provided (or improved) with Section 106 contributions as a result of housing developments. However, this had the potential for a higher density of smaller-space provision, and those areas of the Borough which had not seen new housing had therefore not gained in relation to additional / upgraded play facilities.

Reflecting on the information provided, the Committee began by focusing on the list of play areas and associated play value assessments. Noting that the Councillor role enabled them to get out and about within their communities, Members were not surprised to see preconceptions about the state of facilities realised when analysing the play value scores, many of which were deemed 'average', 'below average' or 'poor'. Mindful, too, that the last tranche of significant investment was over 15 years

ago, the Committee queried if the Council would be better served to focus on quality over quantity – officers present subsequently confirmed that they would welcome a future concentration on fewer sites that had an improved offer.

The introduction of new play areas, often with limited value, as part of housing developments was explored, with Members expressing concern that some of this may be happening against the advice of Council officers or built just so the Council could say it was using Section 106 money (contributions from developers towards the costs of providing community and social infrastructure). Officers acknowledged that there were play areas within the Borough that were not appropriate and in need of investment, and that a clear rationale needed to be made available, and properly assessed, for the future development of new and existing sites. There was also a planning issue at the heart of this, too, something which the Committee may wish to probe further as part of this review.

With regards Section 106 funding, officers stated that this finance provides SBC with more control over the quality of provision to ensure better play value. It was also noted that a number of the play value assessments should perhaps have been represented as 'not applicable' for certain age-ranges as some sites were not aiming to cater for all children and young people from toddler to teen. In response, Members observed that there were instances where all three categories were ranked 'poor', and also highlighted concerns that areas were being used by some young people despite them being targeted at much younger children, with associated problems arising such as bad behaviour / language which caused parents of toddlers / juniors to have a negative experience or even stay away from sites.

The Committee returned to the theme of play value and was informed a re-assessment of the Borough's existing sites was not yet scheduled – contact with RoSPA, either as part of or after this review, could be initiated, though. Whilst wanting to get a fair and updated measure of standards across the Borough's facilities, Members did, however, point out that any official assessment of play value was not necessarily an indicator of popularity, and that even a simple space can be creatively used by children and young people, some of whom come from outside the local catchment area to access it.

Focus was drawn onto those play sites owned by Town / Parish Councils (most of which were deemed to offer 'poor' play value), with Members keen to ascertain what pressure was put on these bodies to repair / replace equipment. Officers noted that some Town / Parish Councils had invested in recent years to strengthen the offer, though they do this out of their own budget which, like SBCs, is limited and stretched.

Emphasising the need to ensure value-for-money as part of any investment, Members pointed to problems with soft matting within certain play areas which did not appear to be overly durable despite the high cost. Officers gave assurance that value-for-money considerations were prioritised when designing a new play space, not just regarding the equipment itself, but also the maintenance of the overall facility.

Specific attention was drawn to the existing situation at Norton Meadows, with the Committee relaying concerns from local residents who were paying a management fee to a developer in relation to nearby play provision which was deemed by the wider community to be a public area and therefore accessible to anyone. Asked if there were similar examples elsewhere, officers stated that they were not aware of other such issues within the Borough, and that individual planning conditions would need to

be understood to determine any further action – that said, officers committed to following this query up after the meeting to establish any problem with third-party-owned sites.

The Committee concluded its questions by emphasising its awareness that, like within most Council services, money was tight and needed to be spent wisely. To this end, when considering future outdoor play provision plans, Members may need to move away from localism in the pursuit of what is best for the Borough as a whole.

A second presentation was then provided focusing on inspection and maintenance requirements / processes associated with outdoor play provision. Led by the SBC Construction & Facility Services Manager, and supported by the SBC Care For Your Area (CFYA) Asset Manager and SBC Senior CFYA Technician (both of whom were involved in the inspection of facilities on a daily basis), information included:

- Why do we inspect and maintain (legal requirements, best practice)?
- SBCs aim
- Inspections
- Risk management
- Budget financial pressures today
- Playground summary

Emphasising that the ongoing inspection and maintenance of the Borough's outdoor play sites was a real pressure area for SBC, officers explained that checks and any required actions were undertaken to ensure that playground equipment remained safe and compliant with relevant standards. Whilst there were legislative requirements around the need to inspect (with potentially costly repercussions if this was not carried out), there was no defined legal standard in terms of how that was conducted – that said, the Council's insurers would expect that processes conformed with good practice. In essence, inspection and maintenance procedures were about managing risk.

The existing inspection regime comprised weekly / fortnightly checks on any signs of weathering and vandalism, and a quarterly check on the strength / stability of equipment (including rotting / corrosion of materials). Reactive inspections were undertaken in response to any calls or intelligence around faults, and an annual independent inspection also provided external scrutiny of local play provision.

Pressures on the existing inspection and maintenance budget associated with Stockton-on-Tees outdoor play spaces were outlined (exacerbated by increasing incidents of vandalism), an amount which had not been uplifted since before 2017 and which contributed to ongoing challenges around this scrutiny topic. Efforts were made to find alternative funds (e.g. underspends within the directorate) and longer-lasting materials (e.g. use of bark instead of expensive soft matting), and removing any equipment or whole sites would be a last resort given the current brief to keep areas open as long as they were safe. Critically, the present budget was earmarked for maintenance only, and was not a replacement fund – as such, the Borough had a large amount of valuable play equipment with no plan for the future.

The Committee opened its line of questioning on this latter point, expressing deep concern over the absence of a replacement fund for the Borough's play area equipment which would inevitably deteriorate over time. The use of bark instead of soft matting / surfaces as a more cost-effective solution was also debated, with

Members (who were mindful of the Committee's previous review on Tree Asset Management) asking whether SBC had the ability to produce its own bark for the Borough's outdoor play spaces. Officers stated that any attempt to generate chippings would require a sifting process as only soft bark could be used for play areas, and maintenance was still needed for this material to ensure it was kept at the right level (though it was much less costly than matting). The use of bark also provided potential challenges around accessibility, though Members countered that measures could surely be put in place to enable all users to access equipment (e.g. footpaths in between chippings).

Reference was made to the rising demand for statutory Council provision which inevitably had a knock-on effect regarding budgetary pressures for non-statutory services. The Committee also noted that Councillors in Stockton-on-Tees were fortunate to have access to a Ward budget which helped support improvements to their locality, a welcome resource which Members in other Local Authority areas did not have.

Two queries were raised in relation to play area insurance policies and the lifespan of the Borough's existing sites. For the former, officers stated that as long as SBC made facilities as safe as they could be, insurers would assume liability for claims against the Council. Regarding the latter, Members heard that this was difficult to estimate given each play space was different to others (though RoSPA did conduct life-expectancy evaluations). It was, however, noted that the last significant investment into outdoor play space (2008) reflected the focus on natural play (and therefore incorporated numerous wooden products), and that this was predominantly capital funding which did not include a maintenance element.

Mindful of the ongoing developments in relation to Stockton waterfront, the Committee asked if play space planning included considerations around maintenance of any new sites intended for this zone. In response, it was confirmed that officers within the SBC Community Services, Environment and Culture directorate had provided views and calculations with regards play space proposals, and whilst this aspect had not always been factored-in in the past, confidence was expressed that longer-term thinking would feature strongly in the plans to revamp Stockton Town Centre. Members responded by urging any future commitment on capital spend to also consider ongoing revenue costs.

Attention returned to the financial pressures outlined in association with the inspection and maintenance of sites. Noting the £60,000 shortfall in the annual budget allocation compared to the current amount spent plus anticipated costs in relation to outstanding work still to complete, Members felt this demonstrated the justification for this review and also asked for a breakdown on how much of the £83,000 already spent pertained specifically to play areas.

Regarding inspection schedules, the Committee queried if the current SBC programme was a regulatory requirement or was something the Council chose to do. The legislative need to conduct inspections was reiterated, as was the flexibility in which these could be carried out (since there was not a legally defined manner in which to do this). In terms of SBC, officers took a snapshot of an individual site's use – if this was a more popular facility, it would be inspected more frequently. However, it was also noted that the inspection and maintenance team comprised of only four technicians for the whole of the Borough, thus limiting the capacity for more regular oversight.

Focus moved onto the environmental agenda, with Members questioning if this was considered as part of the planning for new play sites – officers highlighted the SBC environmental strategy (one of the aims of which was to increase biodiversity and natural spaces), as well as the need to consider the play value of green spaces and how the environment could be used to enhance play (which in some cases could be more cost-effective than actual equipment). The inclusion of sensory equipment to promote accessibility was also probed, with the Committee informed that there was ongoing dialogue with the Stockton Parent Carer Forum regarding the development of facilities – that said, this was a challenging area given the wide range of accessibility needs.

The Committee finished by asking if a larger capital commitment towards Stockton-on-Tees play spaces was now needed as part of a political agreement. In response, it was stated that if there was a desire to maintain the current level of outdoor play provision across the Borough, a capital injection would appear necessary. Recognising the existing financial situation which the Council was experiencing, the Committee Chair urged that Councillors refrained from requesting feasibility studies for new play areas while this review was being undertaken.

Officers were thanked for their contributions to this first evidence-gathering session, with plans for visits to some of the Borough's play areas then noted (these would be confirmed to Members in the near future).

AGREED that:

- 1) the information be noted.
- 2) details on any other issues with third-party-owned sites where local residents pay a management fee (akin to those raised in relation to Norton Meadows) be provided.
- 3) a breakdown on how much of the annual SBC budget allocation covering the inspection and maintenance of parks, open spaces, cemeteries and allotments had been spent in relation to play areas.

## **CD/22/23 Chair's Update and Select Committee Work Programme 2023-2024**

Chair's Update

The Chair had no further updates.

Work Programme 2023-2024

Consideration was given to the current Crime and Disorder Select Committee Work Programme. The next meeting was scheduled for 21 December 2023 and would focus on the second evidence-gathering for the review of Outdoor Play Provision. A further update on progress of the outstanding actions in relation to the previously completed Bonfires on Public Land review was also anticipated.

AGREED that the Crime and Disorder Select Committee Work Programme 2023-2024 be noted.