

CRIME AND DISORDER SELECT COMMITTEE

A meeting of Crime and Disorder Select Committee was held on Thursday 22 February 2024.

Present: Cllr Pauline Beall (Chair), Cllr Paul Rowling (Vice-Chair), Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Richard Eglington, Cllr Jason French, Cllr Barbara Inman and Cllr Alan Watson.

Officers: Stephen Bowerbank, Graham Clingan, Reuben Kench, Neil Mitchell (CS,E&C); Gary Woods (CS).

Also in attendance: Emma Zenaj (Stockton Parent Carer Forum).

Apologies: Cllr Shakeel Hussain and Cllr Sylvia Walmsley.

CD/34/23 Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

CD/35/23 Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared.

CD/36/23 Minutes

Consideration was given to the minutes of the Crime and Disorder Select Committee meeting which was held on 25 January 2024 for approval and signature.

AGREED that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 25 January 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

CD/37/23 Scrutiny Review of Outdoor Play Provision: Quality and Distribution, Maintenance, and Physical Accessibility

The fourth and final evidence-gathering session for the Committee's ongoing Scrutiny Review of Outdoor Play Provision: Quality and Distribution, Maintenance, and Physical Accessibility focused on external bodies associated with this scrutiny topic, the experiences of other Local Authorities in managing outdoor play provision, and the views of Stockton Parent Carer Forum on the Borough's existing offer.

Led by the Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) Head of Environment, Leisure & Green Infrastructure, and supported by the SBC Strategy & Greenspace Development Manager and the SBC Care For Your Area (CFYA) Asset Manager, a presentation was given which covered:

EXTERNAL BODIES

- Play England: The national children's play charity for England, Play England had published 10 principles for designing successful play spaces – these advocated movement and physical activity, the stimulation of the five senses, provision of good places for social

interaction, allowed children to manipulate natural and fabricated materials, and, crucially, offered children challenge (all guiding principles which SBC would endorse). Play England were previously more active in terms of officers on the ground, though now tended to focus on the provision of strategic advice.

- Association of Play Industries (API): The lead trade body in the play sector, API represents the interests of manufacturers, installers, designers and distributors of both outdoor and indoor play equipment and safer surfacing. It also promotes best practice and high-quality play provision within the play industry.
- RoSPA: The British and European safety standard BS EN1176 and the Health & Safety Executive strongly recommend that all play areas be inspected annually by an independent qualified body such as RoSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents). SBC commissioned RoSPA to carry out annual inspections of existing play areas and safety surfacing, assessments of life-expectancy of equipment / areas, post-installation inspections of new sites, and play value assessments. Regarding the latter, the overall site, ambience, and suitability / value of equipment and features for the age groups for which the site is designed were all considered, with a rating then given for each of these three elements – the aim was for a minimum grading of ‘good’.

The Committee was informed that RoSPA had recently been commissioned by SBC to conduct an updated play value assessment of the Borough’s existing outdoor play spaces (with a view to the results of this being available in March 2024). Outcomes would be shared with Members once received, though any delay in submission may mean the Committee has to make recommendations subject to RoSPA’s findings.

Officers also drew attention to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 which aimed to ensure that all those who were disabled had the same access to public services (and by implication, public parks and playgrounds) as those who were not disabled. Successful play spaces should, as far as was reasonably possible, offer the same quality and extent of play experience to disabled children and young people as was available to those who were not disabled, whilst accepting that not all equipment could be completely accessible to everyone.

OTHER LOCAL AUTHORITIES

SBC officers had contacted other Local Authorities for views / experiences around this scrutiny topic. Feedback was relayed which demonstrated the differing approaches to the provision of outdoor play areas, including:

- Barnsley: No consideration of rationalising spaces thus far, but, since 2018, any new play spaces that were required within new housing developments as part of the planning process would not be adopted (these would need to have a management company in place to maintain / inspect and repair). Any Section 106 off-site contribution raised from any new development would go to support existing play spaces for refurbishment or replacement.

- Wakefield: Looking at a current proposal to remove five play areas, all of which were on tarmac surfacing, and three of which were of poor play value. The Council was looking at reducing its play area provision, not so much for financial reasons, but more around compliance and quality of what it was actually providing.
- Leeds: Increasing its provision, but also removed a couple of areas in consultation with ward members and residents. New provision was installed where there had never had a play area and the Council had obtained a commuted sum. Where possible, the Council liked to refurbish existing play areas before building new.

In addition, links to a selection of publications by several other Local Authorities were included for the Committee's perusal. This included reports on the impact of aging play equipment and the protection of play provision (Brighton & Hove City Council), a play area investment plan and considerations around inclusive play (Newcastle City Council), public consultation for proposed investment in facilities (Walsall Council), and examples of two play area strategies (Burnley Council and Rochdale Borough Council).

Ahead of the Committee's forthcoming informal 'summary of evidence' session (which would follow the completion of the review's evidence-gathering phase), some suggested principles / discussion points were outlined which Members could reflect upon prior to the formulation of draft recommendations in March 2024. These potential options for the future provision of outdoor play spaces across the Borough were based on two overriding factors – firstly, SBCs current revenue budget did not allow it to maintain existing formal play parks to the standard it desired, and secondly, that the Borough had an unequal distribution of play facilities, and the Council should work to 'balance' provision to allow as many people as possible to benefit from play. Members were also reminded of the importance of informal play and the integration of the natural environment in terms of designing play spaces.

Committee discussions began with the decision of Barnsley not to adopt new play areas required within new housing developments as part of the planning process, with Members noting concerns that had previously surfaced around the use of management companies to maintain / inspect and repair a site (as well as other wider issues). Officers observed that this arrangement was not necessarily something that they would propose, though some spaces within the Borough did already involve management company oversight.

Continuing with this theme, it was suggested that the alternative situation of Councils assuming responsibility for future inspection / maintenance of a play area (requiring a 25-year lump-sum to cover maintenance) could be seen as a good deal for the developer who was able to pass long-term financial liabilities to a Local Authority. Shifting attitudes around play area expectations may lead to more sustainable provision, though ensuring the correct standard of any equipment was vital, irrespective of who was ultimately responsible for the provision of a specific play space.

Referencing the Council's desire for the Borough's play areas to receive a 'good' rating, the Committee referred to previous evidence that had shown a raft of sites falling short of this minimum aim when last assessed. Members commented that the forthcoming RoSPA assessments may assist in understanding the costs of improving

any below-standard provision – this information may, in turn, play a factor in what the Committee recommended regarding future prioritisation of sites.

Members spoke of problems with vandalism within play areas resulting in the need for equipment to be replaced, as well as the popularity / use of a site being enhanced by parking availability. Officers noted that links with walking / cycling routes were also beneficial, and that whilst it would be challenging to address all inequalities which may / may not impact on play space use / access, factoring-in the ease of which people could get to / from sites should form part of a future strategic view of the Borough's offer.

The Committee further probed the definition of 'easy access' by pointing out the fact that some people did not have the ability to travel to larger 'destination' sites and therefore valued the provision of smaller play areas that were closer to their place of residence. Officers added that a focus on developing new / existing large-scale provision may be hindered by surrounding environmental restrictions, and that a balanced approach may well be needed to ensure the greatest access possible for the Borough's residents.

Looking ahead to next month's debate on potential draft recommendations for this review, Members concluded that the development of a Council play strategy, setting out principles for future decisions around outdoor provision, may be a useful outcome in determining any change to the existing offer. Given that revenue considerations were clearly critical, the Committee also expressed a need to see more detail around existing cost pressures (daily / weekly / monthly / annual) of inspecting / maintaining current sites.

STOCKTON PARENT CARER FORUM

The Co-Chair of the Stockton Parent Carer Forum was in attendance to provide views on the Borough's existing outdoor play offer.

A brief overview of the Forum was initially given which noted that most Local Authority areas included a designated group which provided a voice for parents and carers with special educational needs (SEN) children. The Forum had around 1,800 individuals listed on its database (a small amount given the total number across the Borough who had a child with SEN), received some funding to aid its activities, and was run entirely by volunteers (there were no paid roles). The hub was based at Newtown Community Resource Centre, and if a family was struggling, the Forum was often the first port-of-call to assist them and help the breaking down of any barriers. From a strategic perspective, its role was to ensure consideration of the Forum's voice in the development of services / facilities.

Regarding outdoor play areas, the Forum began working with SBC around three-and-a-half years ago when public focus on the Borough's play offer had sharpened. Work with the Council was initiated in order to reflect views and influence plans, with issues around accessing the larger 'destination' sites and a lack of changing places / accessible toilets raised (the latter being a real area of concern, with families noting that provision of a disabled toilet did not necessarily make a site accessible due to the complex needs of a child / young person). Visits were also undertaken to some of Stockton-on-Tees' existing play areas, as well as Daisy Chain park (an exclusive offer for SEN children) – the types of play / equipment that were more appropriate for the Forum's members, how play was different for children with SEN, and how equipment could be made more accessible, were all explored.

A highlight for the Forum, and a good example of an accessible space, was the newly refurbished Victoria Park in Thornaby (an area visited by Members in December 2023 as part of the Committee's evidence-gathering for this review). Wynyard Park also had positive features in terms of layout and sensory experiences, and Norton (Tinkers Yard) was also liked. Whilst it was difficult to pinpoint what a 'perfect' park was for a child with SEN, allowing families to make their views heard was important. What was evident was that families were compelled to use some spaces outside the usual busy times (as this was an easier situation to manage), and did travel within and outside the Borough (e.g. Thirsk, Northallerton, Picton) to use facilities that were more accessible for their children.

Picking up on the positives in relation to Victoria Park, the Committee asked what made the Forum's families warm to this site – the mix of provision for different age-ranges, risk and challenge, and sensory considerations were all subsequently praised. It was, however, noted that the toilet facilities at this site were run by Thornaby Town Council, and were only open when a representative was present.

The key issue of changing areas was discussed, with officers noting that plans for Preston Park and the new Stockton waterfront park would both include such facilities. Members suggested that future developments for new / existing outdoor play spaces could / should incorporate or utilise other nearby offers like coffee shops (enabling toilets / changing places). Seeing a play area as part of an overall collection of facilities within a designated location (rather than in isolation) was a concept supported by the Committee, something which local enterprise may wish to get involved with through the opening of their own establishment or by possibly sponsoring a play space.

Referencing the notion that some play spaces were too busy / noisy for families with SEN children, Members asked if quieter areas would help. The Forum Co-Chair felt that decisions on whether and when to access play areas were taken on an individual basis depending on family circumstance / need, but that many looked for somewhere quieter / smaller during peak times (e.g. school holidays) – this may not be as inclusive a space, though. When thinking about accessibility, it was important to consider how SEN children and their families tended to be viewed by wider society, and the fact that it required a high degree of confidence to go into a public space if they had previously had a negative experience.

Reflecting on the perspectives of these families, the Committee commended the Forum for shining a light on the value of smaller provision which some may regard as less important compared to the larger, busier play spaces – indeed, this emphasised the significance of neighbourhood sites such as Victoria Park (Thornaby). That said, Members were still keen to know the extent to which so-called 'doorstep' provision was accessed – the Forum agreed to attempt to ascertain this for the Committee.

Concluding this item, the Forum was thanked for its previous input on play area provision and the Co-Chair was asked to reflect this back to families. For their part, the Forum expressed gratitude for being given the opportunity to be part of the Committee's work and to highlight the variety of challenges faced by its members, some of which impacted their ability to access spaces that others took for granted.

AGREED that:

- 1) the information presented be noted.

- 2) further detail around existing cost pressures (daily / weekly / monthly / annual) of inspecting / maintaining current outdoor play sites be provided.
- 3) Stockton Parent Carer Forum attempt to ascertain the extent to which the Borough's 'doorstop' play spaces were being accessed.

CD/38/23 Chair's Update and Select Committee Work Programme 2023-2024

Chair's Update

The Chair drew attention to the forthcoming SBC Executive Scrutiny Committee meeting in March 2024 which would consider plans for the 2024-2025 scrutiny work programme. It was being proposed that next year's reviews focused on supporting the Council's transformation agenda – as such, it was likely that the Committee's previously scheduled review regarding vaping would no longer be undertaken.

Work Programme 2023-2024

Consideration was given to the current Crime and Disorder Select Committee Work Programme. The next meeting was scheduled for 21 March 2024 where the first update on progress of the agreed Action Plan following the Committee's previous review of Tree Asset Management would be presented. Following the formal agenda, an informal 'summary of evidence / draft recommendations' session in relation to the ongoing Scrutiny Review of Outdoor Play Provision was scheduled to be held.

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

CHAIR