

## **CRIME AND DISORDER SELECT COMMITTEE**

### **SCRUTINY REVIEW OF OUTDOOR PLAY PROVISION**

#### **1.0 Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the Crime and Disorder Select Committee's scrutiny review of Outdoor Play Provision.
- 1.2 It is widely accepted that play is an essential part of every child's life and is vital for the enjoyment of childhood as well as social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. Play facilities are therefore seen as an essential element to allow people to live healthy lives and help ensure activity is established at an early age, thus reducing long-term health conditions. However, despite these recognised benefits, concerns have been increasing in recent years around the closure of play facilities across the country, as well as other issues such as declining quality, inequality of distribution and accessibility.
- 1.3 From a Stockton-on-Tees perspective, previous analysis has indicated that outdoor play provision is uneven across the Borough, with significant variations in the play value, age and accessibility of equipment and sites. Many older play areas are in decline and, as is being felt by Local Authorities up and down the country, there is insufficient budget to maintain all the current sites. In terms of new sites, the majority of these are established through planning obligations and consequently increase provision in areas where new development is taking place. Conversely, there are limited opportunities to establish or improve play areas in existing residential areas. In either case, it should be noted that all sites are subject to challenge relating to accessibility and play value.
- 1.4 Play areas can be an emotive topic and have elicited a range of comments (both positive and negative) from the public with regards the existing offer. Like so many other Council-related activities, balancing public expectation with the realities of deepening Local Authority funding pressures is becoming an increasing challenge. There is a well-established need to maintain an effective portfolio of high-quality play area assets within the Borough's communities, but this must be sustainable, provide value-for-money, and be accessible to as many people as is feasibly possible.
- 1.5 The main aims of this review comprised three key elements. Firstly, the Committee endeavoured to establish the distribution of the Borough's existing outdoor play offer and identify any areas where provision was lacking. The second strand focused on the key issue of responsibility for individual facilities and associated management / maintenance and sustainability requirements. Finally, accessibility / inclusivity factors in relation to play provision were to be considered so practical and financial implications could be understood and factored into decisions around existing and future plans.
- 1.6 The Committee found that there is no statutory obligation for Local Authorities to provide outdoor play spaces. However, there are legal requirements associated with the inspection and maintenance of such sites – responsibilities SBC is fully aware of. Regarding accessibility / inclusivity considerations, there is a need to be mindful of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 which aims to ensure that all

those who are disabled have the same access to public services (and by implication, public parks and playgrounds) as those who are not disabled.

- 1.7 A number of external bodies provide advice and guidance on designing, developing and installing play spaces – these include Play England (national children’s play charity for England), Association of Play Industries (API) (lead trade body in the play sector), and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) (help people recognise and reduce their risk of accidents, at home, on the road, at work and at leisure). The latter is used by SBC 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.
- 1.8 As of December 2023, the Borough had 49 publicly accessible play areas and 20 sites with informal sport facilities (some of these were located at the same sites). SBC owned and managed the vast majority of these, and also managed five sites on behalf of Town / Parish Councils (*note: any facilities not freely accessible to the public (e.g. those located within school grounds, sports centres, or locations such as RSPB Salthome) were not within scope of this review*).
- 1.9 The categorisation of play areas is based mainly on the quantity and size of play equipment, but also took into consideration the provision of other facilities and services. ‘Destination’ sites are larger play spaces within parks that serve a wide catchment area and provide good play value for a range of users from toddlers to teenagers. ‘Neighbourhood’ sites are mainly situated within larger green spaces of a community (with a more moderate quantity of equipment), whilst ‘doorstep’ sites are smaller facilities which are located on green space or self-contained zones within housing areas (many of which have been installed by housing developers).
- 1.10 Ongoing inspection and maintenance of the Borough’s outdoor play sites is a significant pressure area for SBC, involving a budget which has not been uplifted since before 2017. Indeed, there was a £60,000 shortfall in the annual budget allocation (£114,000) compared to the amount spent as of 14 September 2023 (£83,000) plus anticipated costs in relation to outstanding work still to complete (£92,000). If there is a desire to maintain the existing level of outdoor play provision across the Borough, a capital injection appeared necessary. Critically, the present budget is earmarked for maintenance only and is not a replacement fund – as such, the Borough has a large amount of valuable play equipment with no plan for the future.
- 1.11 Regarding ‘play value’ (determined by looking at the overall site, ambience, and suitability / value of equipment / features for the age groups for which the site is designed), SBC aims for a minimum rating of ‘good’ at each of its facilities – however, a raft of existing sites fell short of this when last assessed (2018). Recognising that a more up-to-date re-evaluation was required to provide an accurate picture of the current state and value of local facilities, RoSPA was recently commissioned by SBC to conduct an updated play value assessment of the Borough’s existing outdoor play spaces. The results of this showed that, of the 39 play sites assessed:

- Only four scored at least 'good' across all graded categories; nine sites were rated at least 'average' across all graded categories (*note: SBC officers advised that the ratings given are RoSPAs assessments and are not national averages – in practice, a site rated 'average' is probably above the national average*).
  - Dependent upon usage and vandalism, seven had a (worst-case scenario) life expectancy of play equipment of 3-5 years plus; three sites were deemed to have 5-8 years plus.
  - A number of 'neighbourhood' play areas appeared to have surface issues.
- 1.12 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 (funding from developers towards the costs of providing community and social infrastructure) 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 – a growing inequality of provision across the Borough has thus developed. As per the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA), forthcoming changes to planning obligations (the Infrastructure Levy (IL)) are due to be introduced – this would largely replace planning obligation except for 'large and complex sites', with the Council potentially losing its ability to use section 106 funding as it currently did.
- 1.13 In terms of the future creation of new play facilities, SBC planning advice indicated that larger scale developments were likely to justify a need for on-site provision due to the level of population increase across the site (indeed, policy direction indicates a preference for on-site provision). For smaller developments, however, there may be no requirement for open space to be provided, and it may be more appropriate for an off-site contribution (where necessary and justified). Where SBC was to assume responsibility for the maintenance of either on-site or off-site open space, the Council required a commuted revenue lump-sum for the equivalent of 25 years maintenance – however, whilst this covered grounds maintenance, cleansing, and maintenance of the equipment in the play area, it did not tend to cover the future renewal of the play area. Careful consideration is therefore required around whether SBC should be adopting future play sites from developers (particularly in terms of proximity to other existing provision), and the Committee urges a focus on supporting the current portfolio as far as possible before additional spaces are agreed (adding to the long-term financial burden associated with these areas).
- 1.14 The high-profile Stockton waterfront scheme, which includes a new 'destination' play area, is a significant development with regards this scrutiny topic. Whilst assurance was given that longer-term revenue requirements for this substantial addition to SBCs play offer would be picked up and included as part of the future MTFP budget-setting process, the Committee remain concerned that, since SBC was not in a position to maintain what it already had (with Local Authority funding likely to get even tighter), this would further compound financial challenges which may have potential implications for other existing provision across the Borough.

- 1.15 From an accessibility / inclusivity perspective, there is a significant cost attached to certain play equipment which is not necessarily compatible for all those with a similar need (e.g. wheelchair-users). SBC should be commended for its previous engagement with Stockton Parent Carer Forum to better facilitate access for all, and there is a clear need to continue this dialogue as the Council reflects on the findings of this review, and makes future decisions around the types of equipment sourced and, as importantly, the location of this (particularly given the comments received from the Forum's members in relation to the value of the smaller 'doorstep' sites).
- 1.16 Councils are adopting different approaches towards their outdoor play provision, ranging from increasing provision / consultation on proposed investment in facilities to rationalising / removing existing sites. For SBC, whilst there will be an understandable reluctance to compromise much valued resources for children / young people and their families across Stockton-on-Tees, it is clearly not sustainable to keep all existing play sites open, and difficult decisions will need to be made around removing / repurposing some sites. Allied to this, longer-term thinking about the maintenance and replacement requirements of the Borough's existing and planned future offer must ensue to ensure quality, accessible, and geographically balanced provision that lasts.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) SBC ensures both revenue and renewal considerations are an intrinsic part of any existing and future outdoor play space proposal within the Borough to maximise the long-term sustainability of such sites.**
- 2) To encourage a greater sense of community ownership, consideration be given to approaching relevant Town / Parish Councils and the local business community within the vicinity of existing outdoor play spaces to potentially support the development / maintenance of a site.**
- 3) Regarding future proposals by developers for new outdoor play spaces, SBC does not adopt any site installed by a developer which contravenes the key outcomes from this review.**
- 4) SBC considers support of existing play areas before any additional outdoor play spaces are agreed / approved.**
- 5) Regarding inequality of outdoor play provision across the Borough, SBC clarifies where it is deemed there is little / no provision and possible steps to address these inequalities (including, in exceptional cases, the provision of new play spaces).**

*(continued overleaf...)*

**Recommendations (continued)**

The Committee recommend that:

- 6) As part of a required rationalisation process in relation to the existing outdoor play offer:
  - a) Informed by the recent (March 2024) RoSPA assessments and an analysis of the distribution of existing outdoor play provision, proposals for the removal / repurposing of sites be developed with the aim of reducing pressure on the overall parks budget.**
  - b) Complementing sub-section a), SBC undertakes a piece of work around those sites requiring more urgent attention to ascertain costs of either removing the play area or raising it to an appropriate standard.**
  - c) Further detail be provided around the anticipated longer-term maintenance requirements of the new Stockton waterfront park and the impact that this may have on the available funds for maintaining other existing outdoor play spaces.**
  - d) With due regard to the SBC *Powering Our Future* initiative, appropriate consultation (particularly with Stockton Parent Carer Forum and SBC Ward Councillors) is conducted around any proposed changes to existing outdoor play provision.****
- 7) Reflecting the main outcomes from this review, SBC develops and publishes an outdoor play provision strategy which includes the following elements:
  - The Council's aims in relation to the provision of outdoor play spaces.**
  - The locations and assessments of existing and outdoor play provision, as well as any planned developments.**
  - The key challenges associated with providing these spaces.**
  - How the Council will seek to address these key challenges (including guiding principles).**
  - Timelines for action and who will be accountable.****
- 8) This final report be shared with the SBC Planning Committee for information only.**