

REPORT TO CABINET

16 MAY 2024

**REPORT OF CRIME
AND DISORDER
SELECT COMMITTEE**

CABINET DECISION

Lead Cabinet Member – Health, Leisure and Culture – Cllr Steve Nelson

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF OUTDOOR PLAY PROVISION

SUMMARY

The attached report presents the outcomes of the Crime and Disorder Select Committee's review of Outdoor Play Provision.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S) / DECISION(S)

This topic was included on the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2023-2024. Although not explicitly crime and disorder related, this piece of work was allocated to the Crime and Disorder Select Committee in order to balance the distribution of scrutiny topics across the five themed Select Committees. The review is now complete, and the recommendations have been endorsed by the Crime and Disorder Select Committee for submission to Cabinet.

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).

- 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.

DETAIL

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
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.

5. The aim of this review was to:
 - Examine the Borough's existing outdoor play offer in terms of play value and distribution, and identify locations where there is currently an imbalance in provision.
 - Ascertain who is responsible for individual facilities and what the management / maintenance and sustainability requirements are now, and are likely to be in the future (including revenue costs).
 - Consider accessibility / inclusivity factors in relation to play provision so practical and financial implications are understood and factored into decisions around existing and future plans.
 - Contribute to future policy around play area provision, giving an appraisal of potential options.

6. The Committee has taken evidence from Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) departments (Environment, Leisure and Green Infrastructure; Community Services; Inclusive Growth and Development; Town Centres Development), considered key external bodies in relation to this scrutiny topic, and reached out to other Local Authorities regarding their views / experiences around outdoor play provision. Stockton Parent Carer Forum provided input and Members visited several sites across the Borough to observe examples of the existing offer.

COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

7. As the report concludes, 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, safe, accessible, and geographically balanced provision that lasts.

CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

8. There are no direct implications in the report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9. There are a number of financial implications if the Council is to address the issues raised as part of this review. One of the Committee's recommendations requires further clarity on the 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. In terms of the existing outdoor play provision offer, the Committee has identified the need for the removal / repurposing of some sites to relieve pressure on the overall parks budget, though savings made as part of this required exercise may be partially reduced by the possible need to address the current inequality of provision in certain parts of the Borough. As noted within the Committee's findings, '*the Borough has a large amount of valuable play equipment with no plan for the future*' – this will also require consideration if the Council wishes to ensure a sustainable offer.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10. SBC must continue to ensure it meets its legal duty of care (as outlined within the Committee's report) regarding the maintenance of its outdoor play provision offer.

RISK ASSESSMENT

11. The review is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS

12. This review is relevant to all Wards across the Borough.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

13. None.

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