

Overview and Scrutiny Play Area Review Group

MONDAY 10 DECEMBER 2012

6.15PM

ROOM 3, CIVIC OFFICES
CENTRAL MILTON KEYNES

AGENDA

www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/scrutiny

Members of the Review Group: Councillors Hawthorn, D McCall and Middleton (to be substituted by Councillor Mick Legg)

PLAY AREA REVIEW GROUP – TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. To review the Council's Play Area Strategy and associated Planning Policy and guidance.
 - To review existing and new play area provision to ensure that relevant strategies, guidance and procedures, play facility types, additional facilities (car parks, toilets etc), and existing and new locations are fit for purpose and meet the needs of the whole community.
 - To consider sustainability, maintenance and replacement policies and how maintenance costs could be provided for the lifespan of a play area.
2. To consider the Council's approach to play area provision for:
 - (a) New Sites:
 - Siting of new play areas
 - Siting new play areas alongside other community facilities e.g. cafes, community facilities, public toilets etc.
 - Location
 - Funding mechanisms
 - Life-time maintenance costs / budgeting
 - Type of play area
 - Age-appropriate play equipment
 - (b) Existing Sites
 - Siting of existing play areas
 - Maintenance of existing sites and allocation of maintenance budget
 - Compliance with current and proposed policy
 - Assessment of successful play areas and those that have caused some concern:
 - (i) Broughton Gate Skate park
 - (ii) Middleton Play Area
 - (iii) Walnut Tree
3. To assess how the Council engages with the community in respect of new and existing play area provision e.g. the type of play provision to be provided at a new site or replacement equipment / re-development at an existing site.
4. To evaluate the Council's approach to play areas and feed into the Council's consideration of a Play Strategy to be considered by the Cabinet in January 2013.
5. To Review and recommend changes to policy where appropriate.

AGENDA

1. Apologies

2. Minutes

To agree the Minutes of the last meeting held on 14 November 2012 (Item 2) (**Pages 5 to 6**).

3. Disclosures of Interest

Members to declare any disclosable interests, or personal interests (including other pecuniary interests), they may have in the business to be transacted, and officers to disclose any interests in any contracts to be considered.

4. Play Area Review Group Report

The Review Group met on 4 occasions from September to December 2012 to carry out the scrutiny of play area provision with the aim of making recommendations to the Cabinet in January 2012 in anticipation of the introduction of a Play Framework and Wheeled Sports Policy.

Members of the Review Group are asked to consider the draft report and make comments and amendments as appropriate (Item 4) (**Pages 7 to 17**).

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Please detach the slip below and return it to one of the officers attending the meeting.

THE PROCEEDINGS AT THIS MEETING MAY BE RECORDED FOR THE PURPOSE OF PREPARING THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING.

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Meeting Attended: Play Area Review Group

Date of Meeting: 10 December 2012

Comments:.....

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Minutes of the meeting of the Play Area Review Group held on Wednesday 14 November 2012 at 6.15pm

Members Present: Councillors Douglas McCall (Chair) and Councillors John Hawthorn and Mick Legg (substituting for Councillor Rob Middleton).

Officers Present: Rob Ward (Neighbourhood Manager), Phil Snell (Project Manager, Neighbourhood Services), Mark Haynes (Senior Landscape Architect), Robbie Caddock (Neighbourhood Improvement Team Leader), Stephen Gee (Planning Manager) and Lesley Sung (Overview & Scrutiny Officer).

Witnesses: Philip Bowsher (Parks Trust – Head of Landscape, Strategy & Development)

Also Present: Councillors John Bint and Lee Barney

Apologies: Councillor Rob Middleton

Minutes
<p>Agreed: That the minutes of the meeting of the Play Area Review Group held on 25 September 2012 be agreed.</p>
Play Area Review – Play Area Provision for Older Children and Young Adults (Including a Wheeled Sports Policy)
<p>General Discussion</p> <p>The Group discussed play provision within the Borough for older children and young adults. The group focussed mainly on the proposed Wheeled Sports Policy.</p> <p>The Senior Landscape Architect reported that the policy had been drawn up on the back of the popularity of the Broughton Gate skatepark. To address the popularity, neighbourhood play areas had become more bespoke and the Council was consulting with professional skaters to produce a successful skatepark design. However, the Group recognised that as a result of the skatepark' popularity, some issues relating to noise had impacted on the residents living close by. However, they also recognised that small local provision of skateboard facilities did not have the same impact on residents.</p> <p>The Group discussed further, the issues relating to Broughton Gate skatepark and acknowledged that there was only one skatepark facility in the area which has added to the impact on residents. The Group made reference to and wished to highlight page 14 of the proposed Wheeled Sports Policy which stated that the policy should “avoid any prescriptive planning policies that sets a minimum buffer distance for wheeled sports areas. Their location should be decided using a strategy that includes criteria for acceptable site locations and must consider a wheeled sport hierarchy for smaller local provision, through to larger ‘destination’ type sites”.</p> <p>The Group considered if it was appropriate to provide small scale wheeled sports provision in residential areas, if appropriately sited, with the provision of larger areas further away from residential properties or away from residential areas.</p>

The Group discussed the provision of large 'destination sites' which could be located next to existing facilities such as, toilets, car parking and cafes and whether such a facility could be built on Parks Trust Land or possibly in one of the industrial areas. For this type of facility, s.106 agreements would need to be flexible enough to ensure provision could be made.

The Group would welcome the provision of destination sites and recognised the different types of provision from small, local play sites, to destination sites with free access and auxiliary facilities that may not necessarily be provided by the Council to a full commercial facility with auxiliary facilities.

The Group noted that the Parks Trust had undertaken master-planning with a view to providing some play sites with auxiliary facilities in Campbell Park and that this had been fed into the Neighbourhood Plan.

Agreed:

1. That the Review group recommend to Cabinet that the proposed Wheel'ed Sports Policy' be approved, subject to the title of the policy being changed from 'Wheeled Sports Policy' to 'Skate Park Policy.'
2. That planning policies take a more flexible approach to the siting of wheeled sports facilities, taking into account the impact a facility would have on residents living close by.
3. That the Cabinet be recommended to support the provision of strategically place Destination sites.
4. That this Review Group's final report make recommendations recommending the introduction of a Play Area Impact Assessment.

Review Group Work Plan	
Date	Item
December 2012	To recommend amendments to play area strategies and policies as appropriate.
	To feed into the Play Strategy which is to be considered by Cabinet in January 2012
	Final meeting to approve report and recommendations as appropriate.

Actions	Owner
Review Group Report and recommendations	Lesley Sung / Douglas McCall



Play Area Review Group Report December 2012

www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/scrutiny

**Membership: Councillor Douglas McCall (Chair)
Councillors Rob Middleton (later substituted by
Councillor Mick Legg) and John Hawthorn**

Overview and Scrutiny Officers: Lesley Sung (Tel: 01908 252325)

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Introduction

The Play Area Review Group has been established to consider the Council's approach to the provision of new and existing fixed play areas.

This particular report focuses on the Council's relevant strategies, planning policies and guidance as a means of ensuring that play facilities throughout the borough were fit for purpose and that those policies could sustainably deliver high quality outcomes to the communities they serve.

As part of the Review, the Group considered play area provision in respect of type, siting, the provision of age-appropriate play equipment, older children and young adult play areas and the Council's proposed Wheeled Sports Policy. Following a Council resolution, the Group also looked at the issues around Broughton Skate Park and Claridge Park play area to see if there were lessons to be learned and provide recommendations on how some of those issues could be resolved.

The Group undertook site visits to a number of play areas throughout the borough which highlighted exemplary play area sites and some of the issues around those play areas that were not so successful, were nearing their end of life or did not provide a diverse range of play opportunities or a high level of play value.

Councillor Douglas McCall
Chair of the Play Area Review Group
December 2012

Membership and Scope of the Review

The Play Area Review Group was established by the Environment & Transport Select Committee at its meeting on 18 July 2012 with a membership of 1:1:1 from the main political groups on the Council.

The following councillors were nominated to serve on the Review Group:

- **Councillor Douglas McCall (Chair)**
- **Councillor John Hawthorn**
- **Councillor Rob Middleton**

The Environment & Transport Select Committee requested that the Play Area Review Group should consider whether the Council was taking the right approach in developing its policies and strategies associated with fixed play provision and whether that provision was appropriately located and fit for purpose.

At its first meeting held on 6 September 2012, the Review Group elected Councillor Douglas McCall as its Chair. Some way through the Review, it was unfortunate that Councillor Middleton was unable to attend some of the forthcoming meetings and his political Group provided a substitute Member, **Councillor Mick Legg**.

Officer Support / Witnesses

Officer support was provided by:

Lesley Sung (Overview & Scrutiny Officer)

Witnesses (Milton Keynes Council):

Rob Ward (Neighbourhood Manager)

Phil Snell (Project Manager)

Robbie Caddock (Neighbourhood Improvement Team Leader)

Mark Haynes (Senior Landscape Architect)

Stephen Gee (Planning Manager)

Mike Brown (Assistant Director Neighbourhood Services)

Nick Fenwick (Assistant Director Planning, Economy & Development)

Witnesses (External):

Phil Bowsher (Head of Landscape Strategy & Development – The Parks Trust)

Dawn Morland (Leading Community Ranger – The Parks Trust)

Louise Reidy (Resident – Galley Hill)

Review Group Considerations

The Review Group met on 4 occasions from September to December 2012 to carry out the scrutiny of the play area provision with the aim of making recommendations to the Cabinet in January 2012 in anticipation of the introduction of a Play Framework and Wheeled Sports Policy. In addition, the Group undertook a site visit to a number of play areas to gain a perspective on the type of play areas that were considered to be highly successful and those which did not aspire to the same standard.

1. Background

1.1 There are currently 493 play areas maintained by MKC and a further 11 maintained by the Parks Trust serving a total population of 245,000. In comparison to other local authorities, Milton Keynes has a large number of play areas per population. Play area provision has evolved as Milton Keynes has developed. The level of provision over time has been guided by adopted policies that has resulted in a wide disparity in numbers and types of play spaces in one area compared to another i.e. Stantonbury has 29 play sites (originally in excess of 47) and a population of 3700 (1 play area for 127 head of population). Of the 493 play areas, just 199 (40%) meet the standards within current planning policy in terms of providing 5 or more items of play. The majority of sites were installed at the time of major growth of MK and as such are 20-30 years old. Although regularly inspected and maintained, much of the equipment and surrounding hard landscaping is approaching the end of its serviceable life, and would require a large capital investment if the Council was to maintain the current play area provision.

Of the 5299 play area assets their condition is as follows:

As New	359 = 6.78%	Average	3022 = 57.02%
Good	1031 = 19.46%	Poor	887 = 16.74%

1.2 The number of play areas located in an area is not necessarily synonymous with play quality. Many of the older estates have many small play sites with one or two pieces of equipment whilst many of the newer estates have fewer sites that provide high quality neighbourhood extended area of play. However, parents do like provision for younger children to be close by.

1.3 In recent months several issues have arisen around play areas, in particular Broughton Park Skatepark facility, Middleton local play area (Claridge Park) and Walnut Tree play area (Heronshaw). Whilst play was seen as good and benevolent, on occasion play areas can generate noise and disturbance, either through the large numbers of children who use the facility or by a minority who seek to abuse them.

1.4 There is an increase in the number of older children and young adults using larger play facilities. With an increasing popularity in wheeled sports, neighbourhood play areas have become more bespoke to address this need. Recent developments in high quality wheeled sport design, along with larger sites, have resulted in some play areas becoming very popular and, on occasion resulted in

complaints of noise and disturbance to the point that the existing policies in respect of separation distances may no longer be adequate for this purpose.

2. Review Group Assessment

2.1 As part of the Review, the Group considered the following policies relating to play areas:

- Milton Keynes Local Plan - in particular Policy L3 which sets out basic standards for types of play areas, catchment areas, types of equipment and buffer distances from roads and properties.
- Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) for Leisure & Recreation – this builds upon the local plan with additional detail on trigger points for the provision of facilities (based on number of dwellings) and financial contributions.
- Planning Policy Guidance 17 – Planning for open space, sport and recreations.

2.2 The Group undertook site visits to a number of play areas throughout the Borough to gain an understanding of what would be considered as exemplary and those which were considered to be not so successful. The areas visited were:

Existing sites at:

- Broughton Gate Skate Park
- Claridge Park
- Two Mile Ash
- Piggot Drive, Shenley Church End
- Bradwell Common

Designated sites at:

- Oakgrove development site
- Site at Garden behind Centrecom Community Centre, Central Milton Keynes

2.3 By using Galley Hill estate as a case study, the Group considered issues around sustainability, maintenance and replacement / re-development of existing sites. In addition, the Group gave consideration to the proposed Wheeled Sports Policy which was scheduled to be approved for implementation in January 2013.

3. Findings of the Review Group

3.1.1 Current Policies and Strategies

Appendix L3 of the Milton Keynes Local Plan provides guidance on the number type, standards and size of play area in relation to population and size of area. The Group felt that the policy was restrictive and lacked flexibility and made little reference to quality of play.

3.1.2 Distance, layout and types of equipment in relation to housing were key to ensure noisy activities did not cause adverse noise nuisance to residents. The Group felt

that the distances as stated in the local plan were not appropriate for all sites and activities. Separation distances between residential properties and some play facilities may require some flexibility of approach, particularly when providing specialist facilities that may attract more people than those residing in the local area.

3.1.3 The Group looked specifically at issues relating to Broughton Gate Skatepark and considered this to be an example of where a more flexible approach to issues around separation distances and design, could have had a more positive outcome for residents living close to the skatepark area.

3.1.4. The Group acknowledged that current policy related only to the provision of new sites (Local Plan L3) with no clear policies / procedures to provide guidance on the ongoing management, impacts and maintenance of its current play area sites. Particularly in light of:

- Demographic changes within a local community
- Changes in customer demand i.e. the demand for more exciting and dynamic facilities
- Changes in technology and design.

3.2 Impact of Play Areas

3.2.1 The impact of a play area will vary greatly depending on a number of factors. The impacts will be greatest with the provision of new play areas although there can also be impacts associated with changing equipment on an existing play area or as a result of other demographic changes to an area.

3.2.2 The location of a site in relation to other sites, adjacent estates, access to paths and schools will add to the impact of a play area. Additional impacts can occur when a play area is accessed by more users than originally intended. The type and age specific play equipment installed may result in greater noise levels and disturbance primarily because they attract larger numbers of teenagers and young adults. The Group considered the type of equipment that created the most impact to be:

- Play equipment designed for wheeled sports, primarily skate ramps made with metal parts.
- Large play equipment designed for teenagers and young adults such as basket swings and cable runways
- MUGAs and teen shelters.

3.2.3 The Group gave consideration to the phasing and timing of provision of play areas. Play areas in new development sites appear to cause the greatest concern because new residents are often buying “off plan” and are unable to assess the impact of an adjacent site prior to purchasing the property. However, the Group acknowledged that having the ability to consult residents on the type of equipment they would like to be provided ensured resident’s ‘buy-in’ to the process.

3.2.4 During the site visits, the Group observed that the play area at Two Mile Ash had a significantly lesser impact to residents than those residing near to Broughton

Gate skatepark. With regard to the play area at Two Mile Ash, the community had the opportunity to engage fully on an existing play area's re-development whilst at Broughton Gate, although consultations had taken place, the play area had not previously been established at the time residents had moved into their homes. Thus the play area may be a very different site than expected.

3.3 Funding, Maintenance and Process

3.3.1 The existing play assets are currently valued at £14.1m. The Group noted that the current maintenance budget was sufficient to inspect, cleanse and undertake repairs but there was no capital budget to replace key assets that had come to their end of life.

3.3.2 Play area issues can evoke strong feelings within the surrounding population and in particular issues around noise or the removal of equipment through rationalisation. On occasions one or two complainants have been able to adversely influence good governance by the council which has to balance the wider benefits of play against the rights of an individual. There is often local resistance to the removal of play equipment due to a perceived loss of amenity.

3.4 Wheeled Sports and Facilities for Older Children and Young Adults

3.4.1 The Group recognised the popularity of the Broughton Gate skatepark, but also the impact this facility had on nearby residents. Any skatepark facility should be located in a safe environment where there was security and natural surveillance, yet far enough away from residential properties so as not to cause a noise nuisance.

3.4.2 The Group fully supported the provision of skatepark facilities, proposing that low key facilities, which would encourage young children to take up the activity, could be provided in local areas, whilst larger skatepark areas with full provision, which would attract older, more experienced children, could be situated further away and at an appropriate distance, from residential properties.

3.4.3 This proposal would encourage children to build up skills locally whilst keeping the impact to a minimum. Older children were likely to have the means to travel further afield. The Group considered that officers should look carefully at how such facilities could be funded and whether s.106 monies could be used for such facilities if built outside of a development's catchment area.

3.4.4 The success of such play areas has led to an increasing demand for parking provision, access to toilets etc,

3.5 Destination Sites

3.5.1 There are very few sites in MK which could be considered destination sites. These are sites where a family or individuals may chose to visit for the day and/or the facilities are of a particular type or range that they may attract users from a much wider area than the immediate site, possibly even from outside MK.

- 3.5.2 In these instances, the Group found that there would be a need for them to be sited adjacent to other facilities, providing toilets, parking and shops, examples being Emberton Country Park, Willen Lake and CMK (Buszy) skate park.
- 3.5.3 Such areas would require substantial space and need to be planned to be close to the additional facilities required. There was currently no reference in the local plan for such sites and as such no planned strategy for provision of these exemplar sites which could, if planned properly, provide free of charge facilities for families to visit and Borough scale facilities for all residents in Milton Keynes. Agreements and policies would need to be flexible enough to ensure that provision of this type and scale could be provided.
- 3.5.4. The Group accepted that there was a sliding scale of provision such as the provision from a local facility (i.e. halfpipe), to a larger destination park providing free access, up to a fully equipped commercial facility providing the full-day family experience.

Conclusions

1. The Review Group agreed with the principle that residents should have free access to good, high quality play provision.
2. Issues around play area provision were complex and overall, the Group concluded that the Council's current policies and strategies lacked the flexibility and depth required to ensure appropriate and well-maintained play provision throughout the Borough. This was particularly apparent when assessing the provision of successful, quality play facilities balanced against the impact such a play area would have on residents living close by.
3. Flexible policies were key to ensuring appropriate separation distances between residential properties and neighbourhood parks which may include MUGAs, wheeled sports facilities and / or youth shelters.
4. Officers had a lack of direction with regard to balancing the needs of a community against those of individuals. This became apparent with regard to noise complaints about the skatepark at Broughton Gate and Claridge Park as well as discussions around the removal of single play item play areas in Galley Hill. This gives favour to the implementation a Play Area Assessment (by estate or settlement) to be carried out for new sites or when changes to a play area were being considered. This kind of assessment could also be applied to existing sites that are reaching their end of serviceable life. The Play Area Assessment could contain specific criteria against which officers would determine whether a proposed or existing play area was 'Fit For Purpose', as well as the criteria upon which decisions should be made to ensure the needs of all the community can be fully met.
5. When applying any criteria, the Group considered it important that the local community be involved in the process from the outset so that when decisions were made there was a clear understanding of how conclusions were arrived at so that even if there was not a complete agreement, at least there would be an understanding of the rationale. This process should take place prior to making any significant changes to existing play areas or the removal of any play equipment.

Recommendations

- 1. That, prior to the installation of any new play area or substantial alterations to any existing play area, a Play Area Impact Assessment be carried out to ensure that the proposals are 'Fit for Purpose'. The assessment should include criteria for appropriate siting, accessibility, safety, natural surveillance and the provision of a good functional range of quality, age-appropriate play equipment. Further, the assessment should take into account the impact on the local and wider area with consideration being given to 'whole life' maintenance costs, any potential for anti-social behaviour and in the case of existing play areas, the condition and age of the equipment.**
- 2. That, as a matter of urgency, Play Area Impact Assessments be carried out for those sites located in those areas where planning permission has already been granted but not yet built. i.e Eastern and Western expansion areas.**
- 3. When considering substantial alterations to the play provision, including the removal of a play area, that a Play Area Impact Assessment (by estate or settlement) be completed involving the local community and other interested parties in the process, from the outset.**
- 4. That the proposed Wheeled Sports Policy be supported, in particular the recommendation that planning policies should avoid setting a minimum buffer distance for wheeled sports areas. Their location should be decided using a strategy that includes criteria for acceptable site locations and must consider a wheeled sport hierarchy for smaller local destination provision through to larger 'destination' type sites.**
- 5. That consideration be given to the provision of strategically placed destination parks, with appropriate facilities, to cater for the whole of the borough.**
- 6. That the Council adopts a policy for the replacement of end of life play equipment and that a Capital Budget be set up for this ongoing purpose.**

Acknowledgements

The Play Area Review Group would like to thank MK Council Officers, Phil Bowsher and Dawn Morland from The Parks Trust and Louise Reidy of Galley Hill for their assistance during this review.



Democratic Services



Overview and Scrutiny

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