

Play Area Review Group Report December 2012

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**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.

I would like to take this opportunity to give my personal thanks to Members of the Review Group, Councillors John Hawthorn, Mick Legg and Rob Middleton for their collective help and support for the review.

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:

Overview & Scrutiny Officer: Lesley Sung

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 2013 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 the Policy outline in Appendix 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 Review of Wheeled Sports Facilities in Milton Keynes.

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 Milton Keynes Council's play assets are currently valued at £14.1m (replacement cost). 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 and young people, 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 area 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. The Group felt assured that officers had taken on board some of the lessons learned in respect of play area provision. Officers could draw upon the experiences relating to the type of equipment installed at the Claridge Park play area and the siting issues in respect of Broughton Gate.
4. 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.
5. 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 of 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 would 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.

6. 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 two-stage Play Area Impact Assessment be carried out to ensure that the proposals are 'Fit for Purpose'. Assessment should be undertaken at both the design stage and at the more detailed implementation stage and should be based on set criteria including appropriate siting, accessibility, safety, natural surveillance and the provision of a good functional range of quality, age-appropriate play equipment. Further, the assessments should take into account the impact on the local and wider area with consideration being given to 'whole life' maintenance costs, social issues and in the case of existing play areas, the condition and age of the equipment.
2. That, taking into account the lessons learned, and 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 key stakeholders, young people, the local community and other interested parties (including Ward and Town & Parish Councillors) in the process, from the outset.
4. That the Review of Wheeled Sports Facilities 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 a policy be drawn up for the provision and allocation of strategically placed destination parks, to cater for the wider catchment area and ensure that appropriate consultations take place with key stakeholders. Discussions with potential users / key stakeholders should take place at the initial design stage.
6. That the Council adopts a policy for the replacement and upgrading 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

Milton Keynes Council
Civic Offices
1 Saxon Gate East
Central Milton Keynes
MK9 3EJ

T 01908 25

E scrutiny@milton-keynes.gov.uk

www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/scrutiny