

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM

13 January 2004

CABINET

28 January 2004

PLAYGROUND FIVE YEAR REFURBISHMENT PLAN

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report seeks approval for a five year plan of investment in the play areas managed directly by the Community Services Department. The plan is based on an assessment of the condition of existing areas and the establishment of minimum quality standards for playgrounds. The report asks Cabinet to provide a general authorisation for expenditure on works within the programme subject to the availability of an approved budget including the Winchester Town Area Open Space Fund.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That it be recommended to Cabinet that:

- 1 That the principles set out at paragraph 7.1 which define the decisions taken in respect of the provision and maintenance of children's play areas be agreed.
- 2 That the implementation of the five year refurbishment and maintenance programme set out in the report be agreed.
- 3 That the expenditure of any approved funds from the Open Space Fund or Play Area Capital budget on these schemes over the next five years, subject to annual review of the programme as part of the Community Services Department business planning process be agreed.

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DETAIL:

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Although the provision of children's play areas is not a statutory duty, Members will be aware that there is a very high level of public expectation that such facilities will be included in any prominent public park or recreation ground and at many local open spaces. The Council looks after 28 children's playgrounds all bar two of which are in the Winchester town area. Elsewhere in the District, parish councils provide and maintain children's play areas to whatever extent they consider appropriate.
- 1.2 Over the last fourteen years the Council has spent significant sums on works to play areas, both from its own capital programme and increasingly through the use of the Open Space Fund. The Fund is now the principal source of funding for improvements to childrens' play equipment in the town area.
- 1.3 Works to play areas are expensive and can sometimes be controversial – particularly when new provision is being considered. The Council has a good track record on play areas with some very high quality schemes already installed. Officers have always worked to high professional standards and sought to achieve results that satisfy all reasonable expectations and legal requirements. However, until now Members have not been asked to approve a long-term investment programme or to define the criteria on which that investment programme is to be based. This has sometimes led to delays in implementation when individual schemes approved as part of the business planning process have been delayed (usually as a result of difficulties arising from consultation) and no other works can be substituted. The Open Space Fund also has significant resources that need to be utilized as quickly and effectively as possible.
- 1.4 The report asks Members to consider a number of issues relating to play area provision and to agree the criteria that will define its approach over the course of a five-year programme.

2. Background Information

- 2.1 Four issues are most directly relevant to preparing a long-term investment programme in childrens' play areas – the objectives of play area provision, site location, equipment/surfacing selection and maintenance.

Objectives of Provision

- 2.2 Given the large costs involved it is important for the Council to define what the aim of its investment in play areas is and to set out how it will seek to achieve this.
- 2.3 The importance of play in the development of children has been the subject of numerous academic studies. Opportunities for play are now accepted as an essential element in a happy and successful childhood and access to play is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child to which the UK is a signatory. The play experience available to children needs to include physical, outdoor activity as well other forms.
- 2.4 The provision of equipped play areas can make a significant contribution to the outdoor play activities available to children. For many, particularly those in urban areas, other more traditional outdoor activities are simply not available nearby. Even where they are, fears over safety sometimes deprive children of the opportunity to make use of them. Access to private facilities (and some run by the public sector) usually requires the payment of an admission charge and frequently requires considerable travel. The advantage of public play area provision is that it can be enjoyed by almost all children close to home, is free to use and therefore accessible to all, and can be beneficial to children and families in social and health terms.
- 2.5 It is not easy to offer any alternative options for similar levels of capital expenditure which reach children so universally and effectively. Taking these arguments as the justification, the aim of provision should be to provide opportunities for safe but challenging active play within easy reach of every child. Such an aim will not be accomplished overnight, but it provides the basis for future development.

3. Site Location

- 3.1 When looking at new areas of development, such as Whiteley or the West of Waterlooville MDA the Council has agreed to specify the provision of play areas in accordance with the recommendations of the National Playing Fields Association. Put simply, the aim is to provide suitable equipment within easy reach of all children resident in the area. This is relatively straightforward when starting with a green field development, but in Winchester town it would be inappropriate to define 'target standards' which may simply not be achievable because of the layout of housing and the availability of open spaces.
- 3.2 Many existing play areas have a very long history, having been originally laid out at the same time as the housing they serve. Some of the locations are not ideal by modern standards but they are the only viable option for continuing provision and have generally been accepted by residents.
- 3.3 The choice of locations for new playgrounds is a complex matter, particularly in established residential areas. The best playgrounds have easy and safe access and are located where a large percentage of potential users can reach them without crossing roads, railways or watercourses and where there are clear paths and good lighting. The extent to which users (and their parents) feel comfortable with the location – not too isolated, not too near main roads and so on – is also an accessibility issue.

- 3.4 Unfortunately play areas are also associated by some with negative issues, mainly in relation to the gathering together of older young people. This can bring problems of noise and litter that are real even though their extent is sometimes exaggerated. Sometimes these problems can be addressed through the selection and location of equipment but some sites are too small or constrained by other factors to allow this to happen.
- 3.5 The selection of new sites for play areas therefore needs to proceed with caution and a due regard for all the issues. There are obvious shortfalls of provision in some areas, but the Council only has a limited number of open spaces and only some of these would be appropriate locations for additional sites. There is also a strong argument for ensuring that all existing areas to be retained are brought up to a high standard before money is spent on new provision.
4. Selection of Equipment/Surfacing
- 4.1 The selection of equipment which has high 'play value' (which means that it is enjoyable and challenging to children over a number of visits) and meets the necessary standards of safety is the next most important factor after accessibility.
- 4.2 The City Council only purchases new equipment from reputable manufacturers that conforms to the relevant European Safety Standard. Equipment is laid out so as to achieve a safe design taking into account the topography of the site and the nature of its use.
- 4.3 The preferred approach to making a final selection between different schemes is to involve local residents, especially children, through a consultation exercise. This usually involves expressing a preference from a number of schemes that have already been checked to ensure they meet the necessary standards. Minor modifications are often possible after the consultation process to meet local preferences.
- 4.4 The most recent research from the Health and Safety Executive has raised a question-mark over whether impact absorbing surfacing really provides significant benefits in reducing playground accidents. However, insurance companies and the general public now expect such surfacing under all equipment and there are other practical reasons why it is useful. It is suggested that the City Council should continue the policy of installing an appropriate impact absorbing surface under all equipment.
- 4.5 The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) aims to reduce the discrimination which disabled people face in gaining access to services. Part 3 of the Act gives disabled children and young people important rights of access to everyday services that others take for granted. Rights of access that require physical adaptation will come into force in October 2004.
- 4.6 As with many aspects of the DDA there can be no definitive statement of what the courts will consider as reasonable in relation to adaptations or design until case law emerges. Given the costs involved it seems unlikely that the courts will require wholesale changes to be made in a very short timescale. However, the play industry is taking steps to provide some criteria against which accessibility can be assessed. A summary of the criteria is attached as Appendix 2. These have been used to

assess the Council's existing play areas and the scores achieved are given in the Appendix.

- 4.7 Even leaving aside the legal requirements, the Council's Corporate Strategy (and forthcoming Social Inclusion Strategy) makes clear the Council's commitment to ensuring that all members of the community have access to good quality services. To that end it is suggested that all new complete play area projects meet the highest possible standard of accessibility.

5. Maintenance

- 5.1 Maintaining equipment in good condition is essential both to ensure safety and to encourage use. Most damage to equipment dealt with by the Council is the result of deliberate vandalism but fortunately the overall level is relatively low. Modern equipment is designed with much greater regard to ease of maintenance than before. The Council only purchases equipment from companies that can provide an efficient back up service when spares and repairs are required.

- 5.2 In addition to the much more frequent visual inspections undertaken throughout the year, every individual piece of equipment is inspected annually by an independent engineer and a full report made on the condition, suitability and life-expectancy of the item.

- 5.3 The inspection process also involves a risk assessment of each item of equipment with an overall score being given to the play area. The risk assessment figures used are based upon the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents Guide to assessing risk in children's playgrounds.

- 5.4 The overall score for each play area is included in the tables in Appendix 1 and has been taken into account when assessing the priority to be given to work on each area. As Members would expect, any equipment which is found to be manifestly unsafe and beyond repair is removed from use as soon as possible.

6. Potentially Redundant Sites

- 6.1 It is important to be aware that as patterns of residential occupancy change and the requirements for play areas become more demanding a decision sometimes needs to be made as to whether particular play areas should be retained. Those sites that officers consider need to be reviewed are identified in the plan. This will be done in consultation with ward Members and local residents. Depending on the outcome of the review areas might be refurbished, upgraded or removed.

7. Setting Priorities

- 7.1 In order to set an objective test against which decisions on the priority for works on play areas should be assessed it is suggested that the following principles should be agreed as Council policy in relation to existing and proposed sites:

- that every site should achieve a low to medium risk score on every annual inspection
- that all new play areas should achieve a Level 3 access standard or above

- that all playground refurbishment work should contribute to improving access standards
- that all new equipment and surfacing must conform to BSEN 1176
- that all play areas are to be fully fenced
- that an impact absorbing surface is provided under every item of equipment where it is required to conform to BSEN 1176
- that all items of equipment are replaced after no more than twelve years
- that community consultation will take place on any substantial change proposed to a play area

8. Five Year Plan

- 8.1 Given the costs involved it is important the Council adopts a well planned approach to investing in play ground improvements and any new provision. This will ensure that works are tackled in the correct order of importance and making the best use of available resources. In previous years the Council has approved specific schemes rather than a comprehensive programme. This makes it difficult for Members to establish a clear picture of what works are proposed and when they are likely to be carried out. It can also lead to delays when approved schemes are delayed (perhaps due to the outcome of consultation) and others that could proceed but do not have the necessary approval.
- 8.2 To address this problem a five-year plan for improvements to the Council's existing play areas has been prepared. It lists all sites and identifies the works that are required to ensure that they meet the criteria described in Para 5.1. The plan is attached as Appendix 1.
- 8.3 The plan indicates the order of priority for the works by assigning a notional 'year' to each site. The purpose of this is to specify the order of priority to be given. The pace at which the programme is addressed will depend on the resources available (which includes officer and contractor time as well as finances). It is unlikely that works will proceed in a strict chronological order because, for instance, it might cheaper to let a contract for several items of fencing work (including some lower priority ones) in one go.
- 8.4 Cabinet is asked to approve the programme and thereby approve the carrying out of the works described therein. This will provide maximum flexibility whilst retaining a clear direction. The programme will be reviewed and updated annually as part of the Community Services Department business plan.
- 8.5 It should be stressed that this is not a request for the approval of funding necessary for those works. Funding will be sought as part of the usual capital budget allocation process or from the Open Space Reserve. However in future the funds approved will be used against the approved programme, rather than seeking approval for individual schemes.
- 8.6 The five year plan will be incorporated in the Community Services Departments business plan and amended as necessary to reflect changing circumstances.

Progress on its implementation will be monitored by the Community, Arts and Social Performance Improvement Committee.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):

- (i) The Council has a strategic priority to increase access to cultural and sporting activities..

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- (ii) There are no direct resource implications arising from the report. However, approval of the recommendations should help to ensure the more efficient use of approved capital funding and reduce delays in playground development

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1 Five Year Plan

Appendix 2 Method used for assessing Disability Discrimination Act 1995 with regards to play areas.

Appendix 1

Proposed Five Year Plan

The plan indicates the order of priority for works by assigning a notional 'year' to each site. The purpose of this is to specify the order of priority to be given.

Those sites that officers consider need to be reviewed are identified in the plan. This will be done in consultation with ward members and local residents. Depending on the outcome of the review areas might be refurbished, up graded or removed and added into the existing programme.

In the first year where sites have achieved a low score as regards the DDA standards then these sites where possible work will be carried out prior to October to 2004 to ensure they reach the approved standard. These measures will be discussed with local Ward Councilors.

No	Play area Name	Original Installation date	Current risk Assessment & DDA Access Score	Additional Work Currently Identified to bring site to low risk assessment	Budget cost of works	Programme Year
1	Godfrey Pink Way Bishops Waltham	1996	Low	Review future plans for this location		N/A
2	Medlicott Way Swanmore	1999		Review future plans for this area		N/A
3	Blanchard Road, Bishops Waltham	1997	Low Level 3	Review future plans for this area.		N/A
4	Provene Gardens Waltham Chase	1997		Review future plans for this area		N/A
5	Firmstone Road Winnall			All equipment removed. Review future plans for this site		N/A
6	Westman Road			Review future plans for this location		N/A

No	Play area Name	Original Installation date	Current risk Assessment & DDA Access Score	Additional Work Currently Identified to bring site to low risk assessment	Budget cost of works	Programme Year
1	Gordon Ave, Highcliffe	2003	Low Level 3	New Play area. Work completed October 2003	£52,331 Open Space Fund	1
2	King George V Playing Field Highcliffe	2003/04	Low Level 3	New Play Equipment installed Oct 2003. Skateboard Area, Youth Shelter, Games area to be completed Jan/Feb 2004	£150,000 Open Space Fund	1
3	Orams Arbour, Fulflood	1993	Medium Level 3	Consultation Process completed. New equipment ordered. Installation to take place early Feb 2004	£65,000 Open Space Fund	1
4	Abbotts Barton Open Space	1990/94	Medium/High Level 3	Total refurbishment to include fencing	£80,000 Open Space Funding	1
5	Abbey Gardens	1993/2002	Medium Level 3	Replace three items of equipment, which were beyond economic repair	£25,000 Open Space Fund	1
1	Carry out work required to bring existing play areas up to an accepted DDA standard			Inspection work completed. Work to be implemented and completed by Oct 2004	£25,000 Play Area Capital	2
2	Meadowside Sports Ground, Whiteley			Consult with young people, Ward Councillors, Parish Councillors, Residents and Fareham Borough Council. Skateboard and Tennis/Games Court	£50,000 Whiteley Joint Fund.	2

No	Play area Name	Original Installation date	Current risk Assessment & DDA Access Score	Additional Work Currently Identified to bring site to low risk assessment	Budget cost of works	Programme Year
3	Stanmore Recreation Ground, Stanmore	1997	Medium Level 4	Total refurbishment of junior area. Fence toddler area, plus add additional play items. Supply items of equipment for teenage play	£100,000	2
4	North Walls Recreation Ground Skate Park	1999	Medium	Enclose ramps, add two further items of small skateboard equipment. Work with artist and young people to paint ramps.	£8,000 Play area capital	2
5	Winnall Manor School, Garbett Road			Work with County Education, local residents, ward members to improve the play ground to a multi use games area standard for use by young people in out School hours.	£25,000 Open Space Fund	2
6	St Martins Close, Winnall	1993	Medium Level 3	Complete refurbishment required	£50,000 Open Space Fund	2
7	Thurmond Cres, Stanmore	1994	Medium/High	Complete refurbishment with fencing	£80,000 Open Space Fund	2
1	Fairdown Close, Winnall	1995	Low Level 3	Complete refurbishment required. Discuss with resident's future provision on this site.	£40,000 Open Space Fund	3
2	Coriander Way Whiteley	2000	Low Level 3	Add new items of equipment	£20,000 Play area capital	3

No	Play area Name	Original Installation date	Current risk Assessment & DDA Access Score	Additional Work Currently Identified to bring site to low risk assessment	Budget cost of works	Programme Year
3	Friary Gardens, St Cross	2000	Low Level 2	Review area replace items of equipment as required	£30,000 Open Space Fund	3
4	Imber Road, Winnall	1998	Medium Level 3	Review area replace with new items of equipment	£30,000 Open Space Fund	3
5	Arlington Place Hyde	1997	Low Level 3	Review area replace items of equipment as required.	£20,000 Open Space Fund	3
1	Walpole Road, Stanmore	2000	Medium Level 4	Review area replace items with new as required	£30,000 Open Space Fund	4
2	Somers Close, Stanmore	2000	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£30,000 Open Space Fund	4
3	Saffron Way Whiteley	2000	Medium/High Level 4	Review area replace items with new as required	£30,000 Play area capital	4
1	Tegdown Meads, Teg Down	2001	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£30,000 Open Space Fund	5

No	Play area Name	Original Installation date	Current risk Assessment & DDA Access Score	Additional Work Currently Identified to bring site to low risk assessment	Budget cost of works	Programme Year
2	Dean Park, Teg Down	2001	Medium Level 2	Review area replace items with new as required	£30,000 Open Space Fund	5
3	Taplings Road	2002	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£30,000 Open Space Fund	5
4	Cheshire Close, Whiteley	2000	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£20,000 Play area capital	5
5	Angelica Way Whiteley	2000	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£20,000 Play area capital	5
6	Thyme Ave, Whiteley	2000	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£20,000 Play area capital	5
7	Carroway Whiteley	2000	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£20,000 Play area capital	5
8	Mollison Rise Whiteley	2002	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£20,000 Play area capital	5

No	Play area Name	Original Installation date	Current risk Assessment & DDA Access Score	Additional Work Currently Identified to bring site to low risk assessment	Budget cost of works	Programme Year
9	Silchester Place, Hyde	2002	Medium Level 3	Review area replace items with new as required	£20,000 Open Space Fund	5

Appendix 2 Assessing Play areas with regards to the Disability Act 1995

Playgrounds and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995

The DDA aims to end the discrimination, which disabled people face. The discrimination affects children in many ways and includes their access to play experiences, Part 3 of the act gives disabled children and young people, as well as adults, important rights of access to everyday services that others take for granted. Some rights of access came into force in 1999, and the final rights of access will come into force in October 2004.

Within the play industry no one as yet has all the answers and further research will need to be carried out with more informed debate carried out as the DDA gathers momentum. However there is a need to define a measureable goal for inclusion a way of doing this is to access each play area using the following criteria:-

Access Level 1 describes a conventional play place totally accessible to those with severe disability, who with help if necessary, seek purposively to access the place. Accessible.

Access Level 2 describes a place, which is accessible to most but not all people even when help is at hand. Generally accessible.

Access Level 3 describes a place, which challenges the majority of people with disabilities but in favourable circumstances and certainly in partnership can be accessed. Some accessible features.

Access Level 4 represents serious barriers to even strong bold people with disabilities even when skilled help is at hand. Severely limited access.

Access Level 5 relates to locations presenting surmountable but significant challenges even to the fully able and so is inaccessible but in no discriminatory way to others. Inaccessible

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