

REPORT TITLE: BUDGET REVIEW: PLAY REFURBISHMENT PROGRAMME - FINAL PROPOSALS

8 NOVEMBER 2023

REPORT OF CABINET MEMBER: Cllr Kathleen Becker, Cabinet Member for Community and Engagement

Contact Officer: Steve Lincoln Tel No: 01962 848 110 Email [slincoln@winchester.gov.uk](mailto:slincoln@winchester.gov.uk)

WARD(S): ALL TOWN WARDS

PURPOSE

The council owns and maintains 24 play areas located within the town area, which provide interesting and varied equipment that challenge children to be inventive and encourage imagination. This has been achieved through a planned five-year programme of programme of refurbishments funded from the Town Account.

As part of its medium-term financial strategy planning, the Town Forum has requested reviews of areas of its expenditure to identify ways in which costs could be realigned with available budget. One such area was the play area refurbishment programme and this report sets out the proposed new five-year programme and how the programme of work will be managed to ensure the play areas remain safe, high quality and accessible.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Forum approves:

1. The 5-year refurbishment programme to play areas as detailed in appendix 2.
2. That an increase of £5,841 to the Town Account budget from 2024/25, in respect of increased reactive maintenance and annual life expectancy reports on play equipment as detailed in sections 2.6 and 2.7, be considered as part of the town budget process for 2024/25.



## IMPLICATIONS:

### 1 COUNCIL PLAN OUTCOME

- 1.1 Tackling the Climate Emergency and Creating a Greener District
- 1.2 Provision of play areas in residential neighbourhoods supports the ambition of ensuring that everything most residents need is in reach by foot, bike or public transport.
- 1.3 Homes for all
- 1.4 Access to high quality play opportunity helps to achieve the ambition of diverse, healthy and cohesive communities - not just homes.
- 1.5 Living Well
- 1.6 The provision of high-quality play opportunities directly supports a number of Council Plan ambitions:
  - (i) Attractive public spaces where people feel safe and secure.
  - (ii) Well-used and maintained public facilities and green spaces with space to play.
  - (iii) A wide range of physical and cultural activities for all ages and abilities.

### 2 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 2.1 There is a long-term programme of refurbishment and replacement of play equipment, with a 5-year funding requirement included within the council's capital programme. The most recently approved programme included 8 play areas and the total programme value was £830k, but £120k came from the General Fund for the Abbey Gardens play area and the £76k cost of the KGV skate park is outside of the scope for this review, so the cost over five years to the Winchester town reserve was projected to be £634k. The 5-year spend profile agreed in 2020 is shown in the table below, with a more detailed breakdown and delivery in appendix 1
- 2.2 There is reliance on there being enough balance available in the Town Reserve to fund the programme of works alongside other town account priorities, so the programme review aims to reduce the cost of the programme and also defer costs where possible until a later date.

	Approved budget		New costs	
<b>Previous 5-year programme</b>	£40k	2020/21		
	£274k	2021/22		
	£40k	2022/23		
	£80k	2023/24		
	£200k	2024/25	£100k	
<b>£634k</b>		2025/26	£110k	<b>New 5-year programme</b>
		2026/27	£120k	
		2027/28	£50k	
		2028/29	£90k	
			<b>£470k</b>	

Note: Figures exclude skate parks, outdoor gym equipment, MUGAs and trim trails

- 2.3 There has been slippage in delivery of the play area refurbishment programme in recent years due to the COVID pandemic impacted delivery, site-specific issues such as Environment Agency consent for Abbey Gardens and wider site considerations at River Park which have led to delays in those sites being refurbished. Three of the four sites originally planned for completion by the end of 2021/22 have now been completed, with the fourth ready to start on site in the coming months. These delays have had knock-on effects on the plans for 2022/23 and 2023/24. Those sites yet to be refurbished have been incorporated into the new proposed programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29.
- 2.4 Deferral of some play areas has already had a positive effect on the Town Account and demonstrates that an elongated programme approach can be successful without compromising the play quality of the sites. The medium-term financial projects for the Town Account currently include a total of £470k over the next three financial years (to 26/27) but the new programme includes £330k over the same period, reducing the budget pressure on the Town Reserve.
- 2.5 The programme budget estimates had not previously been increased over time to reflect the effects of inflation. This has been a significant factor in recent years, so has now been factored into the proposed programme costs at a rate of 6% in 24/25, 4% in 25/26 and 2% for 26/27 through to 28/29.
- 2.6 A cost of £415 has been incurred this financial year to expand the scope of the annual play area inspections for the sites. The inspections are commissioned from an external provider each year and highlight any issues in need of rectification. With this review in mind, the scope of this year's reports was extended to include an estimation of the life-expectancy of each piece of play equipment. It will be necessary to include this expanded scope in the

future annual inspection which would result in a £500 annual increase to the cost of these inspections.

- 2.7 The suggested approach of extending the life span of some equipment, rather than replacement, will result in an increase in the cost of reactive maintenance as more equipment will need to be repaired. An annual budget of £34,659 currently exists for replacement equipment and general maintenance and it is recommended that a modest additional £5,341 is added to bring the reactive maintenance budget up to £40,000 for 2024/25.
- 2.8 The reduction in overall replacement costs will be slightly offset by the increased maintenance and inspection costs detailed above. The financial implications of the proposed new programme are summarised in the table below.

	Current projections			New programme			Saving
	Refurbish	Maintain & inspect	Total	Refurbish	Maintain & inspect	Total	
2024/25	£200k	£34.7k	£234.7k	£100k	£40.5k	£140.5k	£94.2k
2025/26	£120k	£34.7k	£154.7k	£110k	£40.5k	£150.5k	£4.2k
2026/27	£150k	£34.7k	£184.7k	£120k	£40.5k	£160.5k	£24.2k
2027/28	£150k	£34.7k	£184.7k	£50k	£40.5k	£90.5k	£94.2k
2028/29	£150k	£34.7k	£184.7k	£90k	£40.5k	£130.5k	£54.2k

### 3 LEGAL AND PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 The council is not under a legal obligation to provide or manage play areas. However, where play areas are provided, there is a statutory and common law duty to keep them in safe and suitable condition.
- 3.2 All works that form part of the current play area refurbishment programme are procured in accordance with the council's Contract Procedure Rules and where applicable The Public Contract Regulations 2015.

### 4 WORKFORCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Delivery of the play area refurbishment programme is part of the ongoing work of the Natural Environment and Recreation Team, so there are no additional workforce implications.
- 4.2 Should the approach change to one of increased retention and/or renovation of equipment, some of the schemes would see minimal changes being made to a play site. We do not consult local stakeholders when undertaking repairs or low-level replacement of play items, so there may not always be a need for

public consultation in future, but each site will be assessed on its merits. However, there will still be a need for staff resources to procure and contract manage the repair and renovation works which may be more frequent.

## 5 PROPERTY AND ASSET

- 5.1 The proposal to retain equipment for longer than was previously the case is likely to result in a minor increase in reactive repairs and maintenance.
- 5.2 New play equipment comes with warranties, but these vary depending on the type of equipment. Future decisions are unlikely to have warranty implications, but we will need to consider this when making decisions on whether to retain equipment for a longer period.

## 6 CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 6.1 Options for reducing the cost of the play area refurbishment programme have been discussed at three meetings of the Forum's Parks and Recreation Informal Group, in July, August and October 2023 and those discussions have helped shape the final proposal.
- 6.2 A report presenting the initial options for, and likely implications of, reducing expenditure on the refurbishment programme was considered by the Town Forum at its meeting on 14 September, which supported the approach being taken.
- 6.3 Consultation has always been undertaken with the local community around the brief for each site, and views are factored into the proposal for the refurbishment before the procurement for work is issued. A need for community consultation would remain, although the format and timing of this may change based on the scale and extent of the scheme.

## 7 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 7.1 The delivery of the new programme will support the council's climate emergency declaration by:
  - a) Renovating existing equipment rather than replacement, with positive environmental benefits through avoidance of upstream carbon emissions in the supply chain in new equipment and reduction from waste disposal.
  - b) Including a requirement for bidders to indicate how they intend to minimise environmental impact through their design, including materials sourcing, manufacturing location, packaging, transportation impacts and disposal of existing equipment and materials. This represents a minimum of 10% of the scoring in the assessment process.

- 7.2 The delivery of the new programme will support the council's nature emergency declaration by:
- a) Taking account of any natural water feature that forms part of the wider setting in which our play areas sit.
  - b) Where possible, incorporating natural features that allow children to explore their immediate world through being together and playing together in a naturalised setting; a play landscape where plants and trees provide the background for physical and creative challenges and fun.

## 8 PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY

- 8.1 It is important that the council's play area provision is suitable for all ages and abilities. The specification of all new play equipment is developed with the aim to maximise accessibility and inclusion - in practice this means:
- (i) The use of inclusive and fully accessible equipment as well as consideration of site layout, proximity to toilets and car parking
  - (ii) Inclusion of equipment that encourages children to take risks within a controlled environment.
- 8.2 A recent development has been the installation at Abbey Gardens and River Park of a communication board to assist non-verbal users. This has been very well received and similar boards will be installed in future at the larger, higher footfall sites.
- 8.3 It will be important that any changes do not compromise accessibility and inclusion, so an equalities impact assessment was undertaken and presented with report WTF323 in September 2023. This identified potential impact on users in respect of disability or age, but measures are taken to ensure this does not happen.
- (i) The specification for new play areas includes a requirement for the site to provide some features that are appropriate for all users. This doesn't mean that all new items will be inclusive or accessible, as that would result in reduced play value for more able children, but it means that a balanced overall provision on the site will be a key consideration when planning replacement items in future.
  - (ii) Adults can use the play equipment, but it is not designed or targeted for adult use. This is to ensure that children are provided with healthy and appropriate learning play places.
  - (iii) Most play areas include a mix of equipment to ensure that there is appropriate provision for all ages. In cases where the provision is more targeted towards a specific age of child, there

is always another play area in the near vicinity that meets the needs of other age groups.

- 8.4 An impact assessment is also completed for each play area refurbishment or replacement scheme, based on the detailed proposals for that scheme.

## 9 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 None.

## 10 RISK MANAGEMENT

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
<u>Financial Exposure</u> Cost of refurbishment exceeds approved budget.	Procurement documents set out available budget and seek proposals that can be delivered within budget.  Annual inspections of equipment will identify if deterioration is taking place quicker than expected.	The options presented in this paper reduce the cost of the refurbishment programme.
<u>Exposure to challenge</u> Play areas are not inclusive of the needs of all children.	Procurement documents include specific requirement for inclusive equipment.	
<u>Innovation</u> Play areas do not keep pace with industry developments in play provision.	Regular and scheduled replacement of equipment ensures nothing becomes too dated, although this could become more of a problem if equipment is retained for longer in future.	
<u>Reputation</u> Reduced investment in play provision could be criticised.	Regular inspections ensure that equipment is not retained beyond its safe or useful life.	Retention or reuse of equipment is consistent with the council's climate emergency commitments.



<p>Injury to park users and consequent legal action.</p>	<p>Options include increased investment in reactive maintenance to deal with problems as they arise.</p> <p>As above.</p>	
<p><u>Achievement of outcome</u> Cost of refurbishment exceeds approved budget.</p>	<p>Procurement documents set out available budget and seek proposals that can be delivered within budget.</p> <p>Annual inspections of equipment will identify if deterioration is taking place quicker than expected.</p>	<p>The options presented in this paper reduce the cost of the refurbishment programme.</p>
<p><u>Property</u> Equipment becomes dangerous.</p>	<p>Regular inspections ensure that equipment is not retained beyond its safe or useful life.</p>	
<p><u>Community Support</u> Residents oppose reduced investment in their play areas.</p>	<p>Resident engagement would continue on a site-by-site basis and would allow clear communication of the council's approach.</p>	<p>Potential for community support to increase through their opportunity to influence decisions.</p>
<p><u>Timescales</u> Deferred replacement of some equipment may not be possible.</p>	<p>Annual inspections ensure early understanding of likely replacement date for equipment.</p> <p>Flexibility within the programme to delay work on some sites, if other</p>	<p>Inspections may show that replacement can be deferred even longer than initially thought.</p>

	<p>sites become a higher priority.</p> <p>A piece of equipment may need to be removed if it fails before a scheduled refurbishment, leaving a space for a certain period.</p>	
<p><u>Project capacity</u> Insufficient capacity to effectively manage the refurbishment programme.</p>	<p>Dedicated role with responsibility for this work.</p> <p>Programme managed to ensure work is spread evenly across each year.</p>	

## 11 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

### Background

- 11.1 When approving the Winchester Town Account budget for 2023/24 (report WTF314 refers), the Forum identified four key areas for review to both achieve the medium-term financial strategy and deliver on the aims of the Forum. One of the areas for review was the play area refurbishment programme.
- 11.2 Maintenance of good quality play areas is a high priority for the Town Forum, but it was recognised that a review of the current refurbishment programme is required in order to fully understand the options for delivering a good quality programme. The review was to focus on ensuring the right mix of facilities are available and also give a detailed refresh on how this can be delivered.
- 11.3 Play areas are important and provide multi benefits for residents and visitors to Winchester. Each site is bespoke to the area taking account of the wider landscape and setting and encourages links to other places via pedestrian and cycle paths. They provide interesting and varied equipment that challenge children to be inventive and encourage imagination. There is a commitment to provide safe, high quality and accessible play areas which has been achieved through a planned five-year programme of programme of refurbishments funded from the Town Account.

### The current situation

- 11.4 The council owns and maintains 24 play areas located within the town area, plus one other that is located elsewhere in the district but will soon be transferred to a parish council. One of these sites (Abbey Gardens) is paid for via the General Fund, in recognition of its strategic function within the city serving residents from a wide catchment and visitors to the city. All other play areas are paid for via the Town Account and form the basis of this review – see appendix 1 for all a list of all play areas.
- 11.5 Excluded from the review are skate parks, outdoor gym equipment, MUGAs and trim trails. These items generally require reactive repair and maintenance rather than wholesale replacement, so are inspected annually by the Play Inspection Company and managed through the Town Account revenue budget rather than capital refurbishment programme.
- 11.6 The refurbishment programme has traditionally seen all play equipment within a site removed and replaced with new after 20 years. At its September meeting (report WTF323) the Forum considered alternative approaches that could enable a reduction in expenditure on the play area refurbishment programme. It concluded that retention and/or renovation of some items rather than replacement of all, combined with the deferral of work to maximise the life of equipment, would provide the best overall outcome.

### The proposed new 5-year programme

- 11.7 The proposed approach would see play equipment with life expectancy of more than 10 years retained, and other equipment replaced if near the end of its useful life. We would keep ancillary equipment (benches, bins) where possible and repair/replace wet pour surfacing only as required.
- 11.8 The impact of the proposed changes on specific sites can be summarised as follows:
- a) Talavera Road play area has only been adopted by the council from a developer in recent years, so it did not appear in the previous programme. The equipment has been in situ for a considerable number of years but remained with the developer for a prolonged period due to other complications on the site that delayed transfer. The timber equipment has deteriorated in condition and requires attention in the near future so has been brought up the list to be refurbished in 2024/25. Detailed life expectancy assessments of this equipment have not yet taken place, so it is possible that some equipment could remain, but the proposed budget allows for replacement of all if required.
  - b) The following play areas have been deferred for refurbishment at a later date than in the previous programme, based on recent life expectancy reports that indicate the majority of the equipment is wearing well and is expected to function for at least 10 more years:

- (i) Chaundler Road – deferred from 23/24 to 25/26
- (ii) Imber Road - deferred from 22/23 to 26/27
- (iii) Dean Park – deferred from 24/25 to 28/29

Annual repeats of the life expectancy reports will allow us to monitor the condition of the equipment and ensure that any deterioration is identified and remedial action planned.

- c) Walpole Road play area has been deferred beyond the end of the proposed 5-year programme, reflecting a relatively low usage in addition to the majority of the equipment being expected to function for at least 10 more years. The condition of Walpole Road play area will be monitored each year to ensure that the equipment does not deteriorate significantly.

11.9 It is recognised that the retention of some items of play equipment for an extended period increases the need for low-level repairs and maintenance. This would be minimal in comparison to the cost of full replacement so is cost-effective and the costs have been built into the budget proposal.

11.10 We never prescribe specific items of equipment in our tender documents. Instead, we set out a brief that allows the providers to use their experience and creativity to provide a high-quality design to fit our requirements and available budget. We will continue to use this approach for larger refurbishments to get best value and maximum creativity from our procurement of new play equipment.

11.11 Our greater understanding of the condition of our play equipment has been informed by an enhanced annual inspection report, commissioned to identify the life expectancy of the equipment on those sites. This has allowed us to identify which equipment is likely to last for a significant length of time, so we will trial the annual repeat of these reports, allowing us to test their effectiveness in helping us to plan more efficiently and dynamically to maximise the use of each piece of equipment.

11.12 The proposed approach includes some assumptions around the reliability of the life expectancy reports, market interest in smaller refurbishment projects, ability to partially replace safety surfacing and rates of inflation. Officers will review the 5-year programme each year to identify any unforeseen pressures and will report to the Town Forum should there be any need to revise the programme during its 5-year life. We will also review the impact on individual sites to ensure that the partial refurbishment does not result on the sense of place being lost.

## 12 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

12.1 Continue with the current approach – this has been rejected as the medium-term financial strategy has identified there is a future budget deficit and a

need to reduce costs. Planning now for a more effective and prudent approach to how the town play areas are maintained will ensure savings are made without compromising quality and safety of provision.

- 12.2 A more drastic approach to replacing only equipment with less than five years of life expectancy was considered as part of report WTF323 in September. This option could make significant budget savings of up to 80% of the programme cost, but the Forum felt that the quality of environment and play value of the sites may suffer too much and the risk of equipment becoming unsafe was too great, so this option was not pursued.
- 12.3 Discontinue the five-year programme of refurbishment and decommission equipment at the end of its useful life. This was rejected as play areas form an important function bringing social, health and educational benefits to residents in the across the town. The play areas need to be safe and accessible so, in order to remain open and in use, they require investment in the equipment and grounds.

#### BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:-

##### Previous Committee Reports:-

WTF323 BUDGET REVIEW: PLAY REFURBISHMENT PROGRAMME – INITIAL DRAFT OPTIONS; 14 SEPTEMBER 2023

WTF314 WINCHESTER TOWN ACCOUNT BUDGET FOR 2023/24; 26 JANUARY 2023

WTF280 PLAY AREA IMPROVEMENT - 5 YEAR PROGRAMME UPDATE; 23 JANUARY 2020.

##### Other Background Documents:-

None.

#### APPENDICES:

Appendix 1 Five-year programme of play area refurbishment 2020- 2025

Appendix 2 New five-year programme of play area refurbishment 2024 - 2029