

Citizens' Panel Focus Groups**GREEN SPACE CITIZEN PANEL FOCUS GROUPS****Background**

Opinion Research Services (ORS) was commissioned to undertake three focus groups (one in Hitchin, one in Letchworth and one in Royston) with members of NHDC's Citizens' Panel to discuss the Green Space Management Strategy Review. The groups included a total of 29 people: they were recruited by ORS through its social research call centre, with quota controls to ensure a relatively proportional representation of different demographic and socio-economic groups.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**Play Areas**

In general, NHDC's strategic approach for reducing equipped play areas was rejected; many residents were of the opinion that removing play equipment would discourage children from being active and exacerbate childhood obesity. Indeed, it was argued that the policy directly contradicts the government's focus on encouraging healthy lifestyles and that, long-term, the Council would face public health issues as a result of implementing it.

The focus groups commented that while some of the play areas are small and don't serve a big catchment area without them people have to travel further and drive to bigger parks instead of being able to walk to a close by play area.

However currently we only have £85K pa in the capital programme. To retain and refurbish all 47 play areas on average every 15 years would require an ongoing capital investment of £235K pa.

Football Pitches

Many argued that there would be little point removing football pitches given they generate income, cost little to maintain and already represent green space when matches are not being played. It was suggested that usage should be encouraged and that even pitches in low demand should be retained insofar as they offer play opportunities at little cost to the Council.

Football Pavilions

The majority of participants across all three focus groups accepted that several of NHDC's football pavilions are in a poor state of repair. Not only are they of little benefit to local residents, who in the main prefer to change at home prior to matches but they also considered them dangerous and unsafe due to their poor condition. As such, there was general support for the proposal to remove most of them.

Some residents at Hitchin argued against the need for a brand new pavilion at Walsworth in the grounds that it would rarely be used and more important green space sites (such as parks and play areas) could be invested in instead.

Overall Conclusions

Participants frequently stressed the importance of retaining a wide of range of accessible, local services - including both equipped play areas and green space sites. Specifically, the proposals for play areas and grass football pitches were generally negatively received, but participants agreed there is little or need for football pavilions, to the extent that there was even some opposition to the proposed potential new site at Walsworth.

Hitchin and Royston participants described the current capital investment for green spaces as being insufficient.

Overall participants considered it difficult to give a fully informed opinion because of a lack of detailed site by site information. There were also misgivings about whether the Council would preserve reverted green spaces in the long-term, as opposed to allowing them to be built upon for housing.