

Comments from Area Committees.

Royston Committee

The Chairman took the Royston and District Committee through the Information Note. They examined Item 3 – Proposals for Play Areas, and did not agree with the findings on several sites, as they had observed these play areas to be well used.

The Committee, through the Chairman, expressed their grave concerns at the proposed loss of play areas for the children and young people of Royston. The sites were listed in the Resolution below.

RESOLVED:

That the Royston and District Committee note the information provided in the Information Note on the Review of Green Space Management Strategy.

However, they expressed grave concerns regarding the following sites, as Members have walked around the following play areas and their findings do not equate with those given in the Information Note.

The sites in question are set out below and the Committee consider it very important that the Parks and Countryside Manager, the Service Manager – Grounds Maintenance and the Head of Leisure and Environmental Services take on board the Committee's objections to the recommendations proposed in the Green Space Management Strategy Review, as all have been observed to be well used.

The play spaces concerned are:

- Betjeman Road
- Studlands Rise
- York Way
- Farrier Court
- Ivy Farm

Members of the Committee also intend to walk around all the above-mentioned play spaces with the relevant Portfolio Holder to register their concerns with her.

Hitchin Committee

Members were concerned at the recommendations to remove play equipment from areas in Hitchin, particularly the small play areas, some of which were developed by the community in partnership with the Council.

They noted a change in demographics of the people using the play areas, which when they were first developed were used by parents bringing their children and now are used by grandparents and child minders and commented on the requirement for child minders to demonstrate the ability to provide acceptable outdoor play.

Members acknowledged concerns about reducing childhood obesity and the part these playgrounds play in that and felt that an impact assessment should be undertaken regarding these issues and the effect closure of playgrounds could have on the health of children and the costs to the NHS in treating those health issues.

They felt that playgrounds were a vital part of children's health and wellbeing and that splash parks, although wonderful, were not a replacement as they were not open all year round.

Members felt that the survey was carried out after a decision had been taken and wondered if any previous surveys had been undertaken that may give a more balanced outcome, There was also concern that the survey may have been carried out at a time when most children would have been undertaking other activities, for instance, if it were a hot day, they may well have been attending one of the swimming pools or splash parks.

There were also concerns that some play areas were under used purely because the equipment had become tardy and therefore people did not want to use them but had they been maintained, would be more used.

It was noted that recommendation 2 had been amended to consider opportunities for assets to be transferred into community ownership and Members felt that the consultation period was not long enough for communities to consider whether they could be involved and investigate whether funding would be available.

Members were deeply concerned about the timing of the consultation, which was mainly over the Christmas and New Year period when families would be fully occupied and would not be involved in responding to consultations.

Members did believe that focus groups and citizens panels were valuable, but were not a substitute for effective consultation with residents and that those consultations should be well publicised.

Members commented that the costs associated with the proposed removal of equipment had not been made clear.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That enquiries be made as to any previous surveys undertaken regarding use of playgrounds in order to provide a more balanced outcome;
- (2) That the consultation period be extended in order to enable communities to consider whether they would be in a position to consider taking on ownership of assets;
- (3) That the consultation period be moved to start after the Christmas and New Year festivities and holidays were over;
- (4) That citizens panels and focus groups not be used as a replacement for effective consultation with residents;
- (5) That consultations should be well publicised by different methods;
- (6) That an impact assessment should be undertaken regarding childhood obesity and the effect closure of playgrounds could have on the health of children and the costs to the NHS in treating those health issues.

REASON FOR DECISION: To inform Cabinet of the concerns of the Hitchin Committee regarding the proposals contained in the Green Space Strategy.