

TITLE OF REPORT: COMMUNITY PLAY PROJECTS UPDATE

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF POLICY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 To provide information about the impact of the Community Play Projects, their cessation and the cost of maintaining the service going forward.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision and has not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Following an announcement in the Members Information Service in late May 2011 about the imminent closure of the Community Play Projects, and subsequent reports in the local media, members requested a report for presentation at area committee to set the context of the original funding, the reason for cessation of the scheme and potential for its future funding, as is expressed below..
- 3.2 The Community Play Programme began in 2007, following a successful grant application to the Big Lottery Children’s Play Programme. Under the scheme, every local authority in England was allocated a ‘ringfenced’ grant which they would receive upon submission of a portfolio of play projects that met the Lottery Fund’s criteria. Following consultation with the local community and an analysis of existing play services in North Herts, three play projects formed our portfolio; in Purwell in Hitchin, Westbury in Letchworth and Burns Road in Royston.
- 3.3 Between 2007-2009 the grant also funded a full time officer who established and developed the individual projects. Since the lottery grant ended in 2010 it was felt that the now well established projects required less management support and therefore management was taken on in addition to existing work by the Play Development Officer and Children & Young Persons Development Manager.
- 3.4 Following the closure of Westbury Primary School in 2009, that project was moved to the adjacent Wilbury area of town. A successful partnership was developed with Icknield Infant School. Unfortunately, we were not able to do the same with Wilbury Junior School.

3.5 At the same time, the service had been running a play project at Oughton Primary School in Westmill, Hitchin. This was also externally funded through Hertfordshire County Council's '513 Prevention Fund' which was specifically to target areas of deprivation. The three year funding has already been allocated and used to running play services on the estate, however the existing service running from the Coffee Mill had to close due to staff moving on and the building was not fit for purpose for this younger age group. A proposal was made to HCC by CAYPOW (Children and Young People of Westmill), a local network of professionals and community representatives, that the remaining year's funding be redirected into a new play project, managed by NHDC and run from Oughton Primary School. The funding was coming to an end in 2009. On enquiry, the Big Lottery agreed that the underspend from the Westbury project could be redirected into continuing the successful Westmill Play project beyond 2009.

3.6 At the current time, there are four projects running under the Community Play Programme:

Venue	Age range	Average attendance per week (March 2011)	No. of sessions per week.	Cost per term / year
Burns Road Hang Out				
Coombes Community Centre (hired venue)	9-13 years	25	One	£2000
Icknield Play Project				
Icknield Infant School (venue provided in kind)	4-7 years	40	Two – divided by age range – attendance too high to accommodate all ages on one night	£3100
Purwell Stay and Play				
Purwell Community Room (venue provided in kind)	4-11 years	46	Two – divided by age range – attendance too high to accommodate all ages on one night	£3100
Westmill Play Project				
Oughton Primary School (venue provided in kind)	4-11 years	56	Two – divided by age range – attendance too high to accommodate all ages on one night	£3100

3.7 The projects provide an unstructured youth club style play environment for children. Children are free to come and go above a certain age and we have arrangements in place for younger children that their parents are contacted should they not wish to stay. We do not market ourselves as a childcare facility and by only running one night a week for each age range, do not believe we compete with the local private 'after schools clubs' providing childcare. Under the original lottery grant the projects were required to

be free at the point of access. Since this ended we have introduced nominal entry fees, 50p at first, now increased to £1 per session.

- 3.8 Play projects aim to provide compensatory play environments for children who no longer have the freedom to play out around their homes and communities. Staff provide a range of adaptable resources – paper, wood, ropes, sheets, second hand clothing, balls etc and children make their own choices about what to play, how and when. There is no structured programme. Although without the traditional structures, we attempt to recreate the freedom of the adventure playgrounds of the 1960's and 1970's. Staff provide constant supervision and will assist with activities such as cookery or fire play, but intervene as little as necessary providing support only with regard to immediate safety, first aid or conflict if needed. Children continue to play out in the rain or the mud, develop independence and learn to make choices and negotiate with others. Children who often struggle with the structure of the school day often thrive in the play environments.
- 3.9 In September 2010 the original lottery grant ended. Both prior to this date and throughout the intervening period, Children's Services officers have either submitted or approached twenty different funding sources, including making a substantial Reaching Communities application to the lottery fund. We were successful in stage one and then rejected in stage two as the fund nationally was £14 million over subscribed. Other smaller local sources of funding were more successful including County Councillor Locality Budgets, and Extending Opportunities funding reached through the host schools. These funding bids and ongoing discussions have required a significant commitment in terms of officer time, over and above the management of the schemes themselves.
- 3.10 A number of organisations and networks have been involved throughout the last four years in our progress including the Extended School's Consortia, Royston Youth Network, Hitchin Youth Issues, Children & Young People of Westmill (CAYPOW), and the District Children's Trust Partnership and Letchworth Action for Young People (LEAYP).
- 3.11 Since the projects started, every effort was made to gain local community support in the hope that volunteers would continue the projects beyond the original lottery funding. Volunteers have indeed come forward and do regularly support the projects but these tend to be for limited periods of time (e.g whilst in sixth form) and they do not wish to take on leadership responsibilities, or are unable to provide the continuing commitment we need.
- 3.12 Schools, families and local networks have been kept up to date on our funding progress term by term since September 2010 and were finally informed in May 2011 that the Council had not been successful in finding continuation funding to secure the projects beyond July 2011
- 3.13 In September 2010 a MIS briefing reported that the projects only had funding until December 2010. Since April 2010 regular progress updates on the funding situation were communicated with the Portfolio holder via Community Engagement briefings, and by way of those briefings to the shadow portfolio holders for community engagement.
- 3.14 The potential cessation of the projects was a managed risk number RR423 on the risk register.

- 3.15 Local communities and partners have been similarly informed at regular intervals over the last four years of the potential for the programme's cessation.

4. IMPACT OF THE CLOSURE OF THE COMMUNITY PLAY PROJECTS

- 4.1 The closure of the projects will affect the attendance of approximately 170 children per week who each access one session per week. There are not currently any alternative similar services we can refer these young people to, as many of those which previously existed have suffered the withdrawal or termination of former funding schemes too.
- 4.2 It is not possible to quantify the exact impact on these children from not being able to attend the projects. However our evaluations demonstrate that their attendance improves their confidence and self-esteem, provides opportunities to be physically active and therefore can improve their health, provides opportunities to make new friends and improve social skills and take on new challenges and enhance their skills through play.
- 4.3 In 2009, Cabinet approved recommendations to significantly change the Play Service, another scheme core funded by NHDC. Playschemes, which had provided subsidised summer holiday childcare, ceased to operate and were replaced by a year round Play Rangers service providing drop in short sessions in parks across North Herts. The service was restructured to provide a full time Play Development Officer who manages the Play Rangers service but also provides community development support to local play organisations to encourage community based services. A £35k saving was also made and the efficiency of the service has continued to increase considerably. The remaining core funded Play Service costs £130k per year.
- 4.4 Across Hertfordshire, the remaining nine districts have also faced the end of their lottery grants. One District has decided to mainstream the service and continue to provide it, but all the other Councils, facing funding reductions, already have, or are taking steps to, close the lottery funded projects.
- 4.5 The original lottery grant was provided as part of the then government's National Play Strategy launched in 2008. Funding to continue the delivery of the play strategy was removed, alongside a number of other similar funding streams, by national government in 2010 and significant cuts have been made to the sector nationally since that time.
- 4.6 Whilst officers recognise the community impact caused by cessation of this project, it is important that in any consideration to allocate continuation funding the following issues are considered:
- Short term funding means that the project could come to a halt at a slightly later date, stalling and yet duplicating the disappointment already expressed in the local press;
 - Continual 'top up' funding does mean that the officers granted rolling, short term continuation of contracts are becoming demoralised and are already demonstrating they will move elsewhere to more sustainable projects, which also puts the Play Rangers Scheme at a significant risk in its continuation;
 - Grant requests to Area Committees are increasing in the light of other funding constraints increasing elsewhere – what is the criteria to be applied to this scheme which may or may not apply to other, subsequent bids in due course, particularly where grants are not generally intended to provide full 'running costs'?
 - As the council reduces in size, there must be full consideration made of the time required to complete and submit numerous funding bids, particularly when those

bids are ultimately unsuccessful or where 'match funding' (which is not available from the Council) is required.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Council does not have a statutory to provide play services for children and young people, they are provided as a discretionary function.
- 5.2 Section 19 of the Local Government Act 1976 provides this Council with a wide statutory power to provide recreational facilities including the provision of staff to support those facilities. In addition the well-being powers provided by section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 provides that the Council has power to do anything which it considers likely to promote or improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of its area.

6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 As the Community Play projects have always been funded through external grants, their closure does not provide a financial saving to the Council.
- 6.2 Whilst we have always ensured partners and local communities were aware the service was solely funded through external grants, as it has been seen to be 'Council run' we are aware that the frustrations of local communities at the closure is directed at the Council despite the well publicised funding situation being made apparent.
- 6.3 Although not possible to accurately quantify, there are potentially low level risks to the children who previously attended these projects through not having a play service to access during term time and gaining the benefits identified at 3.8 above. However, again it should be remembered that the District Council is not required to provide such facilities as a statutory function.
- 6.4 However, it is worth remembering that the expectations of the local community could be raised by the short term continuation of these projects and whilst the closure of the service is clearly to the detriment of these communities, we may only be deferring their closure temporarily if further funding was found; that 'reputational' risk does need to be considered alongside any decision to continue funding the projects post July 2011. Given the substantial but unsuccessful efforts that have already made to gain long term funding and gain community support, we do not believe these are likely solutions in securing long term sustainability, particularly in the current funding climate when grants are increasingly more difficult to secure and are reliant on 'match funding' being available in the medium term.
- 6.5 Notification of the cessation of the funding for this project was made in a number of ways, including the quarterly monitoring report of the Corporate Plan, budget workshop papers for 2011/12 in the autumn of 2010, and through updates in MIS and Community engagement briefings with the portfolio holders/shadow portfolio holders. In order to ensure a greater knowledge of such time limited funding across the Council in future, officers in the risk and accountancy teams are looking to implement a 'marker' on budget and risk databases which would flag up the approaching end of such grants.

7. HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The staff delivering these projects are on zero hours contracts and therefore there are no associated redundancy costs. They also work for our holiday Play Rangers service. However there is a risk that with decreased or increasingly uncertain hours they will look for alternative employment. The resignation of these staff would therefore impact upon the sustainability of our other play services. Some have indeed have already moved on to find increased job security, and officers would therefore recommend that this aspect be considered alongside any aspiration to continue funding for the scheme in the short term.
- 7.2 Under the Equality Duty, in force from 5th April 2011, the Council is required to have 'due regard' to the impact of relevant financial decisions on its communities with 'protected characteristics', that is due to age, sex, race, disability, sexual preference, gender, pregnancy/maternity or religious belief. In this case it is clear that the user group most affected would come from our younger communities, but that the cessation of funding from an external, short term source is clearly beyond the Council's control or decision making process.

8. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 8.1 Although not specifically consulted on this report, a number of partners have been in constant dialogue with us about the projects over the past four years.
- 8.2 The following organisations partner each of the projects and are keen to continue should further funding be made available:

Royston Community Association (Coombes Community Centre)
Ickniel Infant School, Letchworth
Purwell Primary School, Hitchin
Oughton Primary School, Hitchin

The Royston, Letchworth and Hitchin North Extended School's Consortia, Royston Youth Network and Hitchin Youth Issues have expressed disappointment at the closure of the projects.

None of the above organisations have been consulted on specifically in relation to this report.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That the Committee note the steps already taken to protect and obtain funding to safeguard the Play Projects scheme
- 9.2 That the Committee consider the costs, risks and opportunities regarding the continuation of this scheme as expressed in this report and comment accordingly.

10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The recommendation(s) contained within paragraph 8 are made due to this being the only course of action that can be accommodated within the approved budget.

11. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

11.2 None

12. APPENDICES

12.1 None

13. CONTACT OFFICERS

Policy and Community Services

Liz Green, Head of Policy and Community Services,
01462 474230, liz.green@north-herts.gov.uk

Helen Turner, Children and Young Persons Development Manager,
01462 474333, helen.turner@north-herts.gov.uk

14. BACKGROUND PAPERS

14.1 None

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