

**HITCHIN COMMITTEE
7 MARCH 2017**

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

AGENDA ITEM No.

11

INFORMATION NOTE: UPDATE ON THE DECISIONS REGARDING THE GREEN SPACE STRATEGY

This note provides an update on the decisions regarding the Green Space Strategy by way of extracts from the following:

- Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17 January 2017;
- Minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 24 January 2017;
- Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee made on 15 February 2017.

Extract from Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17 January 2017

85. REVIEW OF THE GREEN SPACE STRATEGY

The Parks and Countryside Development Manager presented the report of the Head of Leisure and Environmental Services entitled Review of the Green Space Strategy.

The Parks and Countryside Development Manager informed Members that the report presented to Cabinet on 22 November 2016 identified that, in light of the financial outlook described in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and the financial pressures facing the Authority, the existing relatively high level of capital and revenue expenditure devoted to green space could not be continued.

The Council then consulted on the draft proposals contained in that report by way of focus groups made up of members of NHDC's Citizen's Panel. This method was adopted as it ensured a representation of different demographic and socio-economic groups with the District and allowed a more considered opinion of the wider community. There was also a lot of press coverage that generated email and letter correspondence that also formed part of the consultation process.

One of the main findings of the consultation was for the Council to look at alternative ways to retain, wherever possible, equipped play areas.

There was particular concern about the proposed removal of play equipment from Brook View Play Area, Hitchin. The Brook View Play Area was the only play area included to have equipment removed that had been identified as medium use and had originally been included due to its close proximity to another play area. However the consultation revealed that the two play areas served different sections of the community, one was aimed at younger children whilst the other catered for teenagers. In view of the consultation feedback and that it was assessed as medium use the proposals had been updated to retain this play area.

It was proposed that the remaining 13 play areas, where it was proposed that play equipment be removed, would be given until March 2018 to enable interested third parties to put forward sustainable proposals that would fund both the capital and revenue requirements to safely continue to provide such facilities.

It should be noted that the existing proposals in the Green Space Management Strategy (2014-2019) were developed prior to the adoption of the current Medium Term Financial Strategy, with many of the proposals within the existing strategy not holding up to the scrutiny required by the current Medium Term Financial Strategy, therefore these had been reviewed.

Section 9 of the report detailed the recommendations of the Project Board as follows:

- Paragraph 9.1.1 contained recommendations in respect of play areas;
- Paragraph 9.1.2 contained recommendations regarding football pitches. The maintenance of football pitches was relatively low cost at about £400 per year;
- Paragraph 9.1.3 contained recommendations regarding football pavilions. The consultation recognised that football pavilions were used by a very small section of the community on a limited number of days and therefore this was an area where the Council could reduce expenditure without impacting on large portions of the community.
- Paragraph 9.1.4 contained recommendations in respect of other green space infrastructure.

Taking into account the results of public consultation, the revised Green Space Capital Programme focused investment on areas of greatest community benefit and would ensure that the Green Space Management Strategy met with the requirements of the Council's current Medium Term Financial Strategy, whilst maintaining adequate and sustainable green space infrastructure for the next four years.

The Chairman reminded Members that this report would be considered by Cabinet on 24 January 2017 and that, if approved, the Strategy would be in place for 4 years. If Members of this Committee wished to make any recommendations for Cabinet to consider, this meeting was the opportunity to do so.

Members asked whether closing football pavilions would have a detrimental effect on the use of the adjacent football pitches and whether it was likely that any group would wish to take on the maintenance and upkeep of any of the pavilions.

The Parks and Countryside Manager advised that in Letchworth there was only one football site with an associated pavilion, yet all of the other pitches were in use and the consultation identified that many football players, particularly teenagers and children change at home. In respect of groups taking on the management of the pavilions, he felt that it was unlikely that any offers would be made, mainly due to the current condition of the buildings, however whether they were taken over or not, the Council would still make a saving by not having to maintain them.

Members commented that if consultees were asked if they used the pavilions, which were in a poor condition, the expected response would be no thank you and queried whether they were asked whether they would use a pavilion if it were of a good standard.

Members expressed some concern about whether the demographics and size of the focus groups were appropriate for the type of consultation, particularly whether young people were included, and felt that they would have more confidence if the demographic make up of the focus groups was included in the report presented to Cabinet.

The Parks and Countryside Manager advised that the consultation was undertaken by an independent company who were asked to select people who were representative of the population of the District and it was these people that identified that, although they, or their children used the football pitches they got changed at home and did not use the pavilions.

One Member stated that he felt that Baldock did not receive a fair share of the funding for its green spaces and leisure facilities, despite a report by the Playing Fields Association stating that Baldock had provision vastly below the national average. He was also concerned that discussions regarding a skate park in Baldock had not resulted in any action.

The Executive Member for Leisure stated that she would look into the details regarding the amount of the leisure budget spend on Baldock and would happily accept an invitation to attend a Baldock and District Committee meeting to discuss this point. She pointed out that parished areas of the District, which were mainly rural, paid a Parish Precept and did not receive any funding from the District Council for play areas. In respect of the discussions regarding a skate park, she advised that the Council would be unlikely to afford the revenue implications associated with the maintenance of such a scheme.

Members asked what had changed between the two reports provided.

The Parks and Countryside Manager advised that the original draft report had been published prior to the meeting of the Project Board on 9 January 2017 and therefore did not contain any recommendations from them. Following this meeting their recommendations were inserted into the report and the Strategy was updated to reflect these recommendations.

Members noted that previous efforts made by community groups to take on management of Council assets had been quite difficult and protracted and asked what the Council would do to proactively seek groups willing to take on play areas or pavilions and how they would make the process of taking these on as easy as possible, particularly as many of these were in areas without parish or community councils.

The Parks and Countryside Manager advised that he had already held discussions with the Communities Manager who would be working with the Parish Councils and community groups to support and assist them to take on the facilities.

Members noted the prospective capital savings and costs, but were concerned that no revenue figures were quoted in the report, particularly as this was the area with most pressure on it and asked for confirmation that approximately 20 percent of the proposed capital expenditure was for the removal of facilities.

The Parks and Countryside Manager confirmed that a proportion of the capital spend was allocated towards removal of facilities, but this was regarded as invest to save as the removal of pavilions would result in a revenue saving in no longer having to maintain them.

Members expressed some concern that, if play equipment were removed, the sites may then no longer be maintained and become an eyesore or be sold and possibly developed.

The Parks and Countryside Development Manager informed Members that the key driver of the strategy was to retain and maintain the green space for future generations. The green space was the most important element whilst the play areas and pavilions were additional benefits.

Members further discussed that Recommendation 2.3 was very passive and that the Council should be more proactive in seeking community groups to take on facilities and advertising that support would be offered to guide groups through the process, particularly through use of social media.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Parks and Countryside Manager be requested to provide Cabinet, at the meeting to be held on 24 January 2017, with details of the demographics of the focus groups;
- (2) That the Parks and Countryside Manager be requested to circulate the information provided in (1) above to all Members and Substitutes of this Committee;

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That Cabinet consider whether the demographics and size of the focus groups were appropriate for the type of consultation, particularly whether the views of young people and children who were the main users of these facilities, had been included;
- (2) That Recommendation 2.3 of the report be amended to reflect that the Council should be more proactive in seeking community groups to take on facilities and advertise that support would be offered to guide groups through the process, particularly through use of social media.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider the report entitled Review of the Green Space Strategy prior to consideration by Cabinet on 24 January 2017.

Extract from Minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 24 January 2017

102. REVIEW OF GREEN SPACE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Executive Member for Leisure presented a report of the Head of Leisure and Environmental Services in respect of the review of the Council's Green Space Management Strategy. The following appendices were submitted with the report:

Appendix A – Green Space Management Strategy 2017-2021;
Appendix B – Citizens' Panel Focus Groups;
Appendix C – Comments from Area Committees;
Appendix D – Proposals for Play Areas;
Appendix E – Green Space Capital Programme 2017-2021; and
Appendix F – Impact Assessment.

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee presented the following referral from that Committee, made at its meeting held on 17 January 2017, in respect of the Review of the Green Space Management Strategy (Minute 85 refers):

“RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (3) That Cabinet consider whether the demographics and size of the focus groups were appropriate for the type of consultation, particularly whether the views of young people and children who were the main users of these facilities, had been included; and
- (4) That Recommendation 2.3 of the report be amended to reflect that the Council should be more proactive in seeking community groups to take on facilities and advertise that support would be offered to guide groups through the process, particularly through use of social media.”

The Chairman of the Royston and District Committee (Councillor Fiona Hill) reinforced the comments made by the Royston & District Committee at its meeting held on 30 November 2016 regarding the Green Space Management Strategy. There were nine play areas in Royston referred to in the Strategy, and the proposal was to continue with full investment in three play spaces, limited investment in four, and removal of the equipment in the remaining two. (Betjeman Road and Farriar Court), unless an alternative source of funding or another provider could be found.

The Chairman of the Royston and District Committee stated that the above proposal had been formulated after a visit which had showed that the two play areas were apparently not being used and lack of equipment wear and tear. The areas were comprised of wet-pore safety surfacing and so little wear and tear would be evident in any event, hence the Royston & District Committee’s view that the evidence was flawed. The Committee was aware that the areas were used by small children. There may be other well-used play areas in close proximity, but often younger children felt intimidated by older children and preferred the smaller play areas.

The Chairman of the Royston and District Committee commented that childhood obesity was a huge problem, and play areas were recognised as a vital requirement in the National Planning Policy Framework in planning future developments. At least two of the play areas mentioned in the Green Space Management Strategy were located in fairly new estates. NHS England and Public Health at Hertfordshire County Council also encouraged active play. Although the proposal was to leave open spaces, this would not encourage young children to use them without the play equipment.

The Chairman of the Royston and District Committee explained that she had visited the Royston play areas with the Executive Member for Leisure, and had pointed out the concerns of the Royston and District Committee. She asked Cabinet to take these concerns seriously and to re-consider the proposal to remove play equipment before finally adopting the Green Space Management Strategy 2017-2021.

The Executive Member for Leisure advised that the report recognised the great value of the District’s green spaces, but identified in the light of the Council’s financial outlook described in the Medium Term Financial Strategy that it was no longer considered prudent to continue with the existing relatively high level of capital and revenue expenditure devoted to those green spaces.

The Executive Member for Leisure stated that the draft proposals had been the subject of consultation by focus groups comprised of members of NHDC's Citizens Panel. This method had employed an open questionnaire approach as this allowed a more considered opinion of the wider community. It ensured a relatively proportional representation of different demographic and socio-economic groups. There had also been press coverage, which had generated a good deal of e-mail responses. By and large, the feedback from the focus groups, the e-mail responses and the Area Committees had been largely similar, particularly in respect of equipped play areas. One of the main comments was that the Council should look at alternative ways to retain all 47 play areas.

The Executive Member for Leisure explained that the Brook View play area in Hitchin had given rise to the most comments. This play area had been identified as having medium usage, in which case the equipment could be removed, as the nearby Broadmead play area could be used instead. However, having listened to the consultation responses, the greater use of Brook View by younger people had been recognised, and hence the last Green Space Project Board meeting had accepted that this play area should be upgraded to the next level (ie. retained with limited investment).

In respect of the Project Board's further recommendations following the consultation exercise, the Executive Member for Leisure advised as follows:

- Great Ashby play areas – historically, NHDC had taken on responsibility for these play areas, as there was no parish/community council for Great Ashby. Great Ashby now had a community council and, should it take on responsibility for these play areas it would provide parity with other parishes in the District which had such responsibility, paid for through parish precepts. At the request of the Ward member for Great Ashby, it was proposed that all 8 play areas would be up for discussion with the community council over the next 12 months. Accordingly, the categorisation of these play areas would be amended in the Strategy to allow for flexibility, provided the outcome was at no greater cost to NHDC;
- Play areas in the District's towns – it was now proposed to remove the equipment from 13 smaller play areas, with a view to a new proactive campaign (as recommended by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee) with town/parish councils and community groups over the next 12 months or so to seek alternative funding sources/providers to take over the capital and revenue costs of running these play areas. In respect of the two such small play areas identified by the Royston and District Committee, the relatively low usage of these areas had been corroborated by the Council's Grounds Maintenance contractor, although it was hoped that an alternative provider (possibly Royston Town Council) could be approached to take over the responsibility for these areas. 14 larger play areas would receive full investment and 20 play areas would receive limited investment;
- Football pitches – the level of use of these pitches would be monitored and, if supply exceeded demand, the aim would be to reduce the number of pitches accordingly;
- Football pavilions – the consultation recognised that these pavilions were used by a very small section of the community on a limited number of days each year. The 2016/17 Capital Programme currently contained a £50,000 contribution towards a new pavilion at Walsworth Common, but in view of the fact that it may take some years to secure additional funding for the project, it was now proposed that the £50,000 be moved to the 2020/21 Capital Programme. In respect of the 4 pavilions recognised as being beyond economic repair, it was proposed that they be closed at the end of the 2016/17 football season and that, following a

year's consultation similar to the play areas, the pavilions be either demolished or taken over by local community groups. The future of Swinburn and Ransoms pavilions in Hitchin were dependent upon the outcome of the new Walsworth pavilion project, but would remain open for the time being;

- Other Green Space infrastructure – it was proposed to not develop further the provision of wheeled sports, tennis courts and Multi-USE Games Areas (MUGAs), with the exception of items contained in the approved Masterplan for Bancroft Recreation Ground, Hitchin; and
- Green Space Capital Programme – the revised Capital Programme contained a 4 year, £809,000 NHDC capital investment for green space on areas identified as priorities by residents. It also aimed to secure £479,000 of Section 106 contributions and external grants, giving a total 4 year investment of approximately £1.3Million.

The Executive Member for Leisure concluded by stating that the revised Capital investment programme took into account the results of public consultation and focused investment on areas of greatest community benefit. It would ensure that the Green Space Management Strategy met with the requirements of the Council's current Medium Term Financial Strategy, whilst maintaining an adequate and sustainable green space infrastructure.

The Executive Member of Policy, Transport and Green Issues commented that he had attended the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee where the consultation exercise had been discussed. There had been discussion at that meeting about the 29 residents involved in the Focus Groups, but with his knowledge of the Council's Citizens Panel from which the 29 were chosen, he knew that those individuals were "scientifically" selected. Assuming the science was right, it was going to be reflective of the demographics of the District.

The Executive Member of Policy, Transport and Green Issues continued that it was important to note that further responses had been received through the local press, via e-mails and Area Committees and from users of the play areas and that, unsurprisingly, they wished the play areas to be kept open. He felt that it was also important during consultation exercises to capture the views of Council Tax payers who were not regular users of the play areas, and that their views were just as valid. The regrettable fact was that their views tended not to get reflected in petitions and other forms of response.

The Cabinet was satisfied that the consultation exercise on the review of the Strategy had been appropriate and robust.

In approving the Strategy, the Cabinet supported the recommendation of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that the Council should be encouraging and working with potential alternative providers, such as community groups, in taking over capital and revenue maintenance responsibility for the facilities scheduled for closure. Members imposed a deadline of 1 March 2018 for the submission to the Council of proposals from any such alternative providers.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the results of the consultation, as identified in the body of the report, be noted, and that it be further noted that Cabinet was satisfied that demographics and size of the focus groups were appropriate for the type of consultation, and that the views of young people and children who were the main users of these facilities had been included in the consultation results;

- (2) That the draft new Green Space Management Strategy (GSMS) 2017 – 2021, as attached at Appendix A to the report, be formally adopted;
- (3) That it be noted that, prior to removing facilities identified in the Strategy, the Council shall allow up to 1 March 2018 for interested parties to put forward sustainable proposals that would fund both the capital and revenue requirements to safely continue to provide such facilities, and that a proactive approach be adopted in seeking community groups to take on facilities, including advertising that support would be offered to guide groups through the process, particularly through use of social media;
- (4) That the work programme in the new Green Space Management Strategy be incorporated into the 2017/18 budget setting process; and
- (5) That, so far as Cabinet's authority is required in respect of any variation to the contract with the Grounds Maintenance contractor, to give effect to any future revenue saving options identified within the GSMS, such authority be delegated to the Head of Leisure and Environmental Services, in consultation with the Executive Member for Waste, Recycling and Environment.

REASON FOR DECISION: To best enable the retention of the green space within the budgets available to the Council.

[Note: Councillor Tony Hunter requested that his name be recorded in the Minutes as abstaining in the vote upon the above resolutions.]

Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee made on 15 February 2017.

92. CALL-IN OF DECISIONS MADE BY CABINET ON 24 JANUARY 2017 – REVIEW OF GREEN SPACE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

At the time of publication of this agenda the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 15 February 2015 have not been produced.

These will be tabled at the meeting.