

TITLE OF REPORT: REVIEW OF GREEN SPACE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTE EXTRACT – 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.