

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
15 FEBRUARY 2017**

***PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

AGENDA ITEM No.

4E

TITLE OF REPORT: REVIEW OF GREEN SPACE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF LEISURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: COUNCILLOR JANE GRAY

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report identifies that in light of the financial outlook described within the Council's current Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the financial pressures facing the authority, it is no longer considered prudent to continue with the existing, relatively high level of capital and revenue expenditure devoted to our green space.
- 1.2 The draft proposals reported to Cabinet on the 22nd November 2016 have been consulted on.
- 1.3 One of the main findings of the consultation was that residents expressed a strong desire for the Council to look at alternative ways to retain all 47 equipped play areas.
- 1.4 The results of the consultation have been reviewed by Members of the Green Space Project Board and where possible the draft Green Space Management Strategy (GSMS) has been amended to reflect residents views whilst not increasing capital or revenue expenditure.
- 1.5 This report identifies a revised suggested strategic approach to managing the Council's green space infrastructure, and proposes a reduced green space capital programme that focuses investment on the key elements of green space most valued and used by our communities. Priority is given to the retention of all green space and alternative ways to retain the current level of equipped play areas. The revised proposals still align to the principles of the Council's current MTFS.
- 1.6 The report contains the proposed 2017–2021 GSMS that provides a sustainable approach for the management and maintenance of the Council's green space for the next four years. It contains an investment programme of £809k focusing investment on areas identified as priorities by our local residents.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Cabinet note the results of the consultation as identified in the body of this report.
- 2.2 That the draft new Green Space Management Strategy 2017 – 2021 is formally adopted.
- 2.3 That Cabinet note that prior to removing facilities identified in the Strategy the Council shall allow up to 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.
- 2.4 The work programme in the new Green Space Management Strategy is incorporated into the 2017/18 budget setting process.
- 2.5 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, to delegate such authority to the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services in consultation with the Executive Member for Waste Recycling and Environment.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To best enable the retention of the green space within the budgets available to the Council.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 To increase Capital expenditure by up to £150,000 pa to retain and continue to directly maintain and invest in all NHDC's 47 equipped play areas.
- 4.2 To retain the previous proposal to remove equipment from 14 play areas.

5. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 5.1 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. This methodology was adopted over an open questionnaire approach as it allowed a more considered opinion of the wider community. 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. A detailed summary of the findings of the Citizen Panel focus groups is listed at Appendix B. In summary they wanted to retain all green space, were against the removal of equipment from play areas, but in favour of the removal of football pavilions.

- 5.2 Hitchin and Royston Area Committees made comment on the draft proposals for green space. The main concerns raised related to the proposed removal of equipment from play areas. Full comments are listed at Appendix C.
- 5.3 The proposals for a revised GSMS have been widely published in the local press. This has generated a lot of email correspondence and online petitions raising concerns about proposed removal of equipment from 14 play areas. In particular Brook View play area in Hitchin. It should be noted that Brook View was assessed as receiving medium usage. The remaining 13 sites identified for removal of equipment were assessed as low usage. (The reason Brook View was included was due to its close proximity to Broadmead play area).
- 5.4 The consultation has generated some interest by community groups assisting with the upkeep of play areas.
- 5.5 In that the GSMS is district wide strategic document it was not considered necessary to consult individually with each Ward Member.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This item was first identified in the Forward Plan in November 2016.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1 On the 22nd November 2016 a report was presented to Cabinet detailing the findings of the Green Space Project Board that was established to align the Councils future investment in green space with the Councils MTFS.
- 7.2 The report identified that due to increasing financial pressures there had to be further reductions in the level of investment for green space.
- 7.3 The report noted that it is recognised that significant savings in revenue expenditure are required over the coming years. The capital resource balance is also reducing and if the planned level of spend continues, the Council will relatively soon be in a position where borrowing will be required to fund capital investment, with associated cost implications for the General Fund.
- 7.4 Cabinet noted that the green space investment proposals that comprise the existing GSMS (2014-2019) were developed prior to the adoption of the current MTFS. With many of the proposals within the existing strategy not holding up to the scrutiny required by the current MTFS.
- 7.5 On the 22nd November Cabinet resolved the following:
- (1) That the findings of the Green Space Project Board be noted, and based on their recommendations, the production of a draft new Green Space Management Strategy for the period 2017–2021, which aligns with the principles of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, be agreed;

- (2) That the draft new Green Space Management Strategy undergoes a period of consultation and, following any consequential amendments, a final draft be brought back to Cabinet on 24 January 2017 for formal adoption, and that part of this consultation should include whether there are any opportunities for assets to be transferred into community ownership; and
 - (3) That, once approved, the work programme in the new Green Space Management Strategy be incorporated into the 2017/18 budget setting process.
- 7.6 As resolved by Cabinet the draft Green Space Management Strategy (GSMS) has undergone a period of consultation as identified at Section 5. in the report.
- 7.7 The proposed 2017–2021 GSMS detailed at appendix A. provides a sustainable approach for the management and maintenance of the Council’s green space for the next four years. It contains a four year investment programme of £809k focusing investment on areas identified as priorities by our local residents.

8. STRATEGIC APPROACH

- 8.1 Currently NHDC provide and maintain play areas in Hitchin, Letchworth, Baldock, Royston and Great Ashby. In NHDC’s villages the Parish Council provide and maintain children’s play areas.
- 8.2 Historically NHDC took on the responsibility for play areas at Great Ashby as there was no established Parish Council. Great Ashby now has a Community Parish Council and if they took on responsibility for their local play areas it would provide parity with other Parishes / villages in the district. Royston has a Town Council and there may be scope in the future for the Royston neighbourhood play areas to be managed at a more local level by the Town Council.
- 8.3 In addition to Parish Councils there may be other community groups that could assist with the retention of equipped play areas.
- 8.4 Once the GSMS is adopted Officers can negotiate with the Grounds Maintenance contractor to see where revenue savings could be achieved.
- 8.5 In view of the results of the consultation raising concern about the removal of all the equipment from 14 play areas a new strategic approach is therefore proposed. Whilst NHDC cannot increase its own level of investment it is intended to work with partners such as Parish Councils and Community groups to best enable that, with more limited Council resources available, the current number of equipped play areas may be retained. The detailed proposals for play areas are listed at Appendix D.

9. PROJECT BOARDS FINDINGS

- 9.1 At the Project Board meeting on the 9th January 2017 the results of the consultation was discussed by the board and taking into account the results of the consultation the Project Board made the following recommendations:

9.1.1 Project Board Recommendations to for Play Areas

9.1.1.1 Endeavour to maintain and provide full Capital investment to refurbish 14 large play areas approximately every fifteen years.

9.1.1.2 Endeavour to maintain and provide limited Capital investment to replace individual items of play equipment when they wear out for 20 local neighbourhood play areas. *(As Brook View was assessed as medium usage this is now being retained)*

9.1.1.3 Prior to removing equipment from 13 play areas identified in the Strategy the Council shall allow a period of one year for interested parties to put forward sustainable proposals that would fund both the capital and revenue requirements to safely continue to provide such facilities.

9.1.1.4 The benefits of this option are that it contains capital investment to within the levels included in the existing capital programme and still should facilitate revenue savings. It also has the potential to retain the current level of equipped play areas. Full details of the proposals are listed at Appendix D.

9.1.2 Project Board Recommendations to for Football Pitches

9.1.2.1 In that there is limited scope for savings, the proposed action for football pitches remains the same with NHDC monitoring the level of use and if supply exceeds demand aim to reduce number of pitches accordingly linking provision with planning guidance.

9.1.3 Project Board Recommendations to for Football Pavilions

9.1.3.1 Prior to removing facilities identified in the Strategy the Council shall allow a period of one year for interested parties to put forward sustainable proposals that would fund both the capital and revenue requirements to safely continue to provide such facilities.

9.1.3.2 Currently the 2016/17 capital programme contains a £50K contribution towards a new pavilion at Walsworth Common. In that it may take many years to secure the additional external funds required for the build, it is recommended that the £50k contribution be moved to the 2020/21 capital programme.

9.1.3.3 Subject to Section 106 contributions create a new large hub site for football at Walsworth Common, Hitchin by increasing the number of pitches.

9.1.3.4 At the end of the current football season, close pavilions identified as being beyond economic repair (Bakers Close, Baldock. St. Johns Road, Cadwell Lane and Walsworth Common, Hitchin). If not transferred to a third party by March 2018 demolish pavilions.

9.1.3.5 Subject to securing funding provide new football pavilion at Walsworth Common, Hitchin.

9.1.3.6 Following construction of new Walsworth pavilion close pavilions at Swinburn and Ransoms Recreation Grounds. If not transferred to a third party within one year of completion of a new Walsworth pavilion, demolish pavilions.

9.1.4 Project Board Recommendations for other Green Space infrastructure

9.1.4.1 Not to develop further the provision of wheeled sports, tennis courts, MUGA's, bowling greens etc. With the exception of the agreed master plan to refurbish Bancroft Recreation Ground, Hitchin which aims to secure external funding to provide a new Multi Use Games Area.

9.1.5 Green Space Capital Programme

9.1.5.1 In view of the MTFS and pressures on finance, it is recommended to adopt the Green Space Capital programme for 2017–2021 as detailed at Appendix E.

9.1.5.2 The revised Capital investment programme takes into account the results of public consultation and focuses investment on areas of greatest community benefit. It will ensure the GSMS meets with the requirements of the Council's current MTFS, whilst maintaining an adequate and sustainable green space infrastructure.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Within Cabinet's terms of reference are "*to prepare and agree to implement policies and strategies other than those reserved to Council*" and "*to approve those major service developments or reductions which also constitute Key Decisions.*" The Green Space Management Strategy falls within Cabinet's remit and this project has been noted on the Council's Forward Plan as a key decision.

10.2 The Council provides parks, recreation grounds and open spaces under its discretionary powers.

10.3 Where the Council proposes that play areas or pavilions may be 'adopted' by a third party, this would be achieved by granting that party a long lease which would include an obligation on the Tenant to maintain the play equipment and/or building.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The proposals for the management and development of Green Space as detailed in the GSMS conform to the requirements of the Council's current MTFS in relation to capital and revenue investment.

- 11.2 The GSMS contains a four year £809k NHDC Capital investment programme for Green Space as detailed at appendix E. The investment programme includes the £310k cost to decommission pavilions and equipped play areas. These costs could be funded capital receipts under the Capital Receipts Direction.
- 11.3 With the proposal that 13 neighbourhood play areas will no longer be funded by NHDC (either as a result of asset transfer or removal) there are likely to be revenue savings, subject to negotiations with the Grounds Maintenance contractor.
- 11.5 The proposals for asset transfer / demolition of pavilions should also facilitate the achievement of revenue savings.
- 11.6 **Summary of potential revenue savings:**

Item	Est. revenue saving pa	Year	Comments
Close 4 pavilions identified as beyond economic repair	*£7,900	2017/18	If not transferred to a third party would require £120k to demolish and return 4 pavilions to green space.
Transfer to third party or remove equipment from 13 play areas	**£28,600	2018/19	If not transferred to a third party would require £130k to demolish and return to green space.
Close additional 2 pavilions (once new Walsworth pavilion is constructed)	*£6,900	2020/21	If not transferred to a third party would require £60k to demolish and return to green space.
Total est. revenue savings	£43,400		

* Based on 2015/16 actuals

** Subject to contractual negotiations

- 11.7 If adopted by Cabinet the GSMS Capital programme will need to be incorporated into the 2017/18 budget setting process.

12. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 If a strategic approach is not adopted to reduce expenditure on green space there will be insufficient funds to maintain the current infrastructure and this will lead to a gradual decline in the entire green space infrastructure. Those areas which are well used and valued most by the community however will be the first to wear out and require decommissioning, while other areas that are little used and have limited value will survive and continue to command ongoing revenue expenditure for maintenance.

- 12.2 Where equipment is installed in parks and open spaces, it is important it is regularly inspected and maintained to prevent any injuries to users. NHDC should ensure appropriate procedures are in place prior to transferring play areas.
- 12.3 The risks associated with green space sustainability have been reviewed and updated on Covalent, the Council's performance and risk management software.

13. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 The Equality Act 2010 came into force on the 1st October 2010, a major piece of legislation. The Act also created a new Public Sector Equality Duty, which came into force on the 5th April 2011. There is a General duty that public bodies must meet, underpinned by more specific duties which are designed to help meet them.
- 13.2 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of its functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 13.3 An impact assessment of the draft Green Space Strategy 2017–2021 has been undertaken and is shown at Appendix F.

14. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 As the recommendations made in this report do not constitute a public service contract, the measurement of 'social value' as required by the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 need not be applied, although equalities implications and opportunities are identified in the relevant section at paragraphs 13.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1 There would need to be an increase in officer time for the proposed adoption of play areas/pavilions by third parties.

16. APPENDICES

- 16.1 Appendix A: Green Space Management Strategy 2017–2021 (See separate document)

Appendix B: Citizens' Panel Focus Groups

Appendix C: Comments from Area Committees

Appendix D: Proposals for Play Areas

Appendix E: Green Space Capital programme for 2017 – 2021

Appendix F: Impact assessment

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18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1 2016 Green Space Citizen Panel focus group report.
- 18.2 Green Space Project Board Reports 1 – 7.