

TITLE OF REPORT: REVIEW OF GREEN SPACE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY**DRAFT CABINET MINUTE EXTRACT – 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:

- (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; and
- (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.”

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