

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **15 FEBRUARY 2017**

#### **Message from Councillor Jane Gray, Executive Member for leisure**

Dear O & S Members,

Regrettably, I am unable to attend the Overview and Scrutiny call-in meeting on Wednesday. I understand that there was little or no flexibility in the date of the meeting and I ended up with an unavoidable diary conflict. I am therefore particularly grateful to Vaughan Watson and Steve Geach for their attendance and I fully endorse Mr Geach's presentation. I will therefore keep my own comments to a minimum but here are a few words, if I may.

The call-in is largely concerned with the consultation on the draft Green Space Strategy and the main points of criticism are:

- Too few people were consulted
- It straddled the Christmas period
- It was not transparently adequately representational
- The results were disregarded
- There was a lack of site by site information
- The Local Plan was not considered
- We paid regard to recommendations of the Independent Review Panel (on Members' Allowances) but overlooked the Green Space consultation recommendations
- There may be other Brook View situations that have not come to light
- Savings should be used to encourage community groups to take over play areas / pavilions

I have discussed all of the above matters exhaustively with officers and am confident that Steve Geach will be able to correct misunderstandings and allay concerns so far as it is possible given the budgetary constraints.

One point he may find difficult to touch upon is the reference to the Independent Remuneration Panel so I will deal with it very briefly here by simply commenting that members must surely be aware that the Council has certainly not always accepted the recommendations of this panel. Rather than repeat a lot of what has been said both by other members, and by myself at the end of the last Cabinet meeting, I will just reiterate that I see no point in conflating these two issues unless, dare I suggest, it is for regrettable political point scoring.

Back to the main issue, the Green Space Strategy, it might assist to throw some background light on the overall situation if we look back for a moment. When I took over the Leisure portfolio in 2014 the very first thing that was straight away made clear to me was that the then current Green Space budget was not going to be able to keep things going as they were then and are still, just about, now. Trouble, in the form of serious under funding, inevitably lay ahead as the budget at that time was known by all those familiar with the 2014 / 19 Strategy not to be able to support the revenue cost of maintenance and capital investment for necessary refurbishments of our play areas etc beyond the point we have now reached. And of course at that stage little did we know quite how bad things would actually be.

So, there was a crash looming ahead and we knew that action had to be taken. Inevitably, it's not going to suit everyone but what we have to strive to do is to provide as best we can to serve as many people as possible. Looking just at the play areas, as these seem to have caused the most consternation, we have 47 play areas of varying sizes and intensities of use. Obviously, we want to keep open the major play areas in our four towns and this we will do with ongoing full capital investment without any reductions in the foreseeable future. At the next level, there are the medium sized play areas which, again, we will sustain but, recognising that we cannot at this point commit to full capital investment, we are calling it 'limited investment' in the hope that we will be able to keep these play areas running well for the foreseeable future, albeit probably not at the same full throttle as with our major play areas.

At the lowest level, after consultation, we are left with 13 areas of lower usage which serve much smaller catchment areas than the medium and large areas and it is in respect of these that a hard but necessary decision had to be taken. Initially, the proposal was immediately to decommission the play equipment in these (then 14) areas but to retain them as maintained green spaces with, where possible, simple attractions such as logs and the like which do not require the same intensity of inspection and maintenance. However, following the consultation, we saw the need first to adjust the number of play areas falling within this category (from 14 to 13 - by recategorizing Brook View to the medium 'limited investment' level) and also to work proactively with community groups to see if arrangements might be made whereby they could in fact retain their equipment under the management of such groups. Accordingly, we are allowing the period until 1st March next year for such consultation to take place and hopefully at least some of these play areas will remain equipped wherever such alternative regimes can be put in place.

On the subject of the consultation, I think it is worth observing from my perspective as a rural ward member, and, I would suggest, very likely from the point of view of many in the parishes, it could fairly be argued that there should have been greater representation of that very significant element of our demography. Perhaps they ought to have been asked; are you happy to contribute to the large parks in our major towns, and also the medium sized ones and also some very small ones which serve only a very small number of houses, even though the ease with which you can access all of these play areas is extremely limited and would involve a car journey of at least 20 minutes. The more altruistic parish resident might see the reason for the larger and medium sized play areas in the towns being maintained at their expense, even in these financially tight times, but still they might question the fairness of this given the lack of parity, and they might very well reasonably question whether they ought also to be contributing to the 13 small areas from which we are proposing to remove the equipment (subject to the year's period of grace). They might particularly feel inclined to question the fairness of continuing contributions from their pockets especially considering that for them to have access to a local play area without having to jump into a car, they have to pay for it over and above their contributions towards play areas for the towns, where the residents have a selection of play areas within a *walking* distance of five, ten, probably a maximum of 15 minutes. Just an observation.

Finally on the consultation, I think it is worth noting that the outcome not only largely accorded with the views expressed by those members calling in the item but those views were indeed duly regarded by the Leisure team. As a result, the recommendations were amended and are now, in consultation with the chair of Overview and Scrutiny, being taken forward towards encouraging community groups to take over those play areas where the play equipment is otherwise proposed to be removed (and pavilions which are otherwise proposed to be closed). No doubt she will in turn liaise with other members of Overview and Scrutiny and over the next 12 months we will welcome suggestions on this process from those members, preferably as early in the process as possible.

Turning next to members' expressions of concern over obesity and fitness, I have been looking further into what this Council currently offers and I am happy to say that, as I thought (but just wanted to double check the latest position) we are currently offering the multi-faceted "Get Active North Herts Programme" which involves a number of projects aimed at promoting health and exercise for children and young people. They are too numerous and fact packed to go into detail here but to outline what is offered:

#### Sport Activators

3 sports apprentices training to become sports leaders. They lead sessions in schools and community youth settings.

#### Futsal Sessions

Increasing participation in sport for young people. Based at Fearnhill School.

#### Multi-sport Holiday Camps

Increasing participation in sport for young people. Based at Fearnhill School.

#### Buggycise

Sessions for mums with 0-2 year olds. Based in North Herts parks.

#### Active Tots

Aimed at families with 2-5 year olds, fun sessions for all to get involved. Based in North Herts parks.

#### Families Get Fit

Aimed at families with children 5+ years old, fun sessions for all to get involved. Based in North Herts parks.

#### Family Cycling Classes

2 hour classes to teach families how to cycle on the road. Based in North Herts car parks.

#### Family Cycle Rides

Monthly cycle rides based on quiet roads for families to practice what they have learnt at the Family Cycle Classes.

#### Family Netball Days

4 hours of coaching and games aimed at women and their daughters. Based at Avenue Park and St. Francis School.

#### Tennis Participation Drive

Delivering tennis taster sessions in North Herts schools, followed by courses for those schools who are interested.

Obesity and health concerns have, over this past weekend, also been highlighted by the report from the Government Select Committee on public parks and I will be looking closely at this with officers over the coming weeks and months. My initial thought is that our current proposals are well aligned with the main gist of the report, being principally aimed at bolstering our regime for providing the highest possible quality of public parks and green spaces accessible to as many of our residents as possible.

In conclusion, we have all known that difficult decisions must be taken in these challenging times and this is one of the areas where we have to accept that a difficult decision needs to be made, although we know that this will not please everybody. However, in the context of our Leisure strategy as a whole, I believe that in North Herts we can be very proud of what we offer. We have excellent Leisure Centres and outdoor pools of which we can be rightly proud and, as we all know, we continue to invest in these to the extent necessary to keep them not only usable but also highly desirable. Over the past 10 years we have turned around our Leisure management arrangements to the extent that we are now to the tune of £1 million per annum better off than we were 10 years ago and this helps support those items in the budget which obviously do not create an income, including of course the play areas. So, whilst fully appreciating that there will be a few people who are likely to be disappointed with the possibility of the removal of equipment from some of the small and very local play areas which they have become used to having very close to their homes, as the decision-makers, striving to keep this Council's head above the financial adverse current that is now prevailing, and in particular doing our utmost to maintain our statutory frontline services as our overarching main priority, we have to look at the big picture and in this particular case, looking at the big picture tells us that the sensible, albeit hard, thing to do is to rationalise our strategy regarding play areas. Consultation took place, the results bore out members' concerns and regard was had to them. In light of this, I commend the recommendations to fellow members.

Kind regards,

Jane