

**CABINET  
30 JULY 2019**

**\*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

**TITLE OF REPORT: PLAYGROUNDS**

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR PLACE

EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND LEISURE

COUNCIL PRIORITY: ATTRACTIVE AND THRIVING / PROSPER AND PROTECT /  
RESPONSIVE AND EFFICIENT

**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 To consider retaining two of the plays areas originally agreed to be decommissioned that the Executive Member has requested to retain until a decision is made regarding their future.

**2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 For Cabinet to approve delaying the removal of play equipment at Betjeman Road and Farrier Court both in Royston until the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, and agree the additional expenditure of £4,400 for 2019/20, .
- 2.2 For Cabinet to recommend to full Council a revenue budget of £4,400 for the financial year 2020/21 (as part of the budget setting process) to further delay removal of play equipment at the two play areas in Royston until 31st March 2021 to provide sufficient time to re-evaluate the current Green Space Management Strategy (GSMS) with regard to playground provision in the District and align this with a review of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

**3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 To delay the removal of the remaining two play areas identified for decommissioning, to allow sufficient time to evaluate the current GSMS (which may include re-evaluation of demand) with regard to playground provision in the District and review the MTFS.

**4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 To implement the recommendations of Cabinet 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018 and continue to remove the two identified sites.

## **5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1 There has been consultation with Executive Members regarding the content of this report.

## **6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2019.

## **7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1 Previous reports have identified the evolution of this issue and the work undertaken to retain the identified play areas as identified in appendix A.
- 7.2 Appendix B identifies those play areas reported to Cabinet in March 2018 that were being considered for closure. Generally, members wished to find alternative solutions before closure of play areas. The best example was working with Gt Ashby community council, who now fund those play area identified for closure. Members in Royston also looked at finding funding to retain two play areas identified for closure. The original three month period was extended with the Executive Member's approval to provide more time to secure external funding. When the new Executive Member was appointed, he wanted to cease all decommissioning of play areas to allow an updated review of their usage; all those identified for decommissioning had been fully removed by the end of April 2019 with the exception of the two in Royston. Officers have continued to withhold decommissioning the two play areas in Royston until Cabinet have had the time to consider and agree the way forward.
- 7.3 Following Cabinet 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018 Officers have worked to deliver the decommissioning of the identified play areas. This was completed in April 2019 at the following locations – Jackman's Creamery Letchworth, Oaktree Close Letchworth, Linnett Close Letchworth, Symonds Road Hitchin, Dacre Road Hitchin and Ivel Way Baldock.
- 7.4 In addition the play area at Chiltern Road Baldock has been renovated using agreed Capital Budgets that incorporated salvageable equipment from the locations noted above.

## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1 The recommendations of this report are in contradiction to the currently agreed Greenspace Management Strategy (GSMS) 2017 – 2021 which was designed to meet the Council's current Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)
- 8.2 The review of play areas as part of the GSMS was to ensure that we maintained play areas that had reasonable levels of use and considered closing those that had low and poor use. Opportunities were provided for third parties to fund or manage those facilities identified for decommissioning.

- 8.3 Retention of the two sites in Royston – Betjeman Road and Farrier Court will incur on going maintenance costs plus future capital investment that has previously been identified as a saving. Retention of Betjeman Road and Farrier Court in Royston for 2019/20 as a maximum financial liability on the 2019/20 revenue budget of £4,400.
- 8.4 Retention of these two sites may raise concerns about those sites already decommissioned and potential challenges from other community groups. It may be difficult to provide evidence to support the retention of these two play areas particularly as the current decommissioning programme is in accordance with the agreed the GSMS and MTFS.
- 8.5 It has been discussed with the Executive Member that the new administration wishes to review the GSMS and MTFS, therefore providing an extension of time for the two remaining play areas identified for decommissioning until the end of the financial year 2020/21 may be prudent.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 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 strategy has been noted on the Council's Forward Plan as a Key Decision.
- 9.2 The Council provides parks, recreation grounds and open spaces under its discretionary powers.
- 9.3 Given that the decision to decommission the play areas was evidence based, any outcomes from the review of the GSMS and MTFS should be objectively justified and reasonable to minimise legal risk to the Council.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 In terms of the financial decision making process. The budget framework agreed by Full Council is that the play areas should have been removed and the savings achieved. Cabinet only have responsibility to manage budgets within that framework. However given the delays that have already happened, and the costs involved, it seems practical to allow Cabinet to make a decision to delay removal for the remainder of this financial year. To delay until the end of 2020/21 (to enable alignment with a new GSMS & review of the MTFS) would require approval by Council as part of the budget process. For a years delay this could just reflect the revenue costs only.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 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.

- 11.2 Those areas which are well used and valued by the community 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 despite their lower community value and use.
- 11.3 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.
- 11.4 The risks associated with green space sustainability are reviewed annually and updated on the Council's performance and risk management software.
- 11.5 Effective communication will help to mitigate any reputational risks associated with the Council's recommended approach.

## **12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their 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.
- 12.2 There is a likelihood that there will be a difference in the service provision of play areas to arising from this decision. The proposal to retain the two sites in Royston will favour Royston residents and there will be an adverse impact on those areas that have had their play areas removed.
- 12.3 A review of the GSMS will include capturing positive and adverse impacts on our users through a Equality Impact Assessment

## **13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1 The Social Value Act and "go local" policy do not apply to this report.

## **14. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1 The Customer Services Centre and Communications team may be under a pressure due to an upsurge in customer contacts including complaints.

## **15. APPENDICES**

- 15.1 Appendix A – Table of previous committee decisions regarding this issue
- 15.2 Appendix B – Table of play areas considered for closure

## **16. CONTACT OFFICERS**

- 16.1 Andrew Mills, Service Manager Greenspace  
[andrew.mills@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.mills@north-herts.gov.uk) ext. 4272

- 16.2 Vaughan Watson, Service Director Place  
[vaughan.watson@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:vaughan.watson@north-herts.gov.uk) ext. 4641
- 16.3 Ian Couper, Service Director Resources  
[ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk) ext. 4243
- 16.4 Gavin Ramtohal, Legal Commercial Team Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer  
[gavin.ramtohal@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:gavin.ramtohal@north-herts.gov.uk) Ext 4578
- 16.5 Kerry Shorrocks, Corporate Human Resources Manager  
[kerry.shorrocks@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:kerry.shorrocks@north-herts.gov.uk) Ext 4224
- 16.6 Reuben Ayavoo, Policy and Community Engagement Manager  
[reuben.ayavoo@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:reuben.ayavoo@north-herts.gov.uk) Ext 4212
- 16.7 Antonio Ciampa, Accountancy Manager  
[antonio.ciampa@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:antonio.ciampa@north-herts.gov.uk), Ext 4566

**17. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

GSMS, MTFS, Cabinet report March 2018