

Hitchin Committee 5 September 2017
 Final Report regarding Minute 71 (4) of 7 March 2017
 Play Areas in Hitchin

Cllr's Stears-Handscomb and Harwood were tasked by the Area Committee on 7 March to investigate the feasibility of retaining play areas (identified for closure) in Hitchin. We presented a progress report to the June meeting of the Committee.

In August, we met with the portfolio holder, Councillor Jane Gray and with Vaughan Watson, Steve Geach and Andrew Mills. We asked for information to explore two options:

1. If Hitchin Committee sought to ask the Council to use Special Expenses to save one or more of the three play areas designated for removal of equipment, what would be the revenue and capital costs?
2. What would be expected of a group who wanted to take over one or more of the areas?

Officers provided us with a full dossier of information. Of the 12 play areas in Hitchin – 5 were marked as 'retain with full investment'; 4 with 'Retain with limited investment' and the remaining 3 were marked as 'Remove equipment & landscape back to green space'. The Portfolio holder and officers wished to stress that Hitchin had fared well in comparison to other parts of the District in terms of retention of its play equipment. They pointed out that the Council had made its decision on play areas reflecting the current financial constraints it finds itself in and that under the Constitution, Hitchin Committee could not resolve to do something the Council had decided not to do. (i.e. Hitchin Committee would have to make a request to Cabinet if it wished to use Special Expenses to seek to change the Council's decision)

In answer to the first question, the average revenue spend per play area is £2,200. The average life of play area equipment is 15 years with average refurbishment costs of £71,000. (The capital cost of removing the equipment is estimated at £30,000 which would be saved if the play areas could be retained fully.) These figures would also apply to any community group that expressed an interest in taking over the play areas and officers were keen to facilitate the use of our existing contractors, John O'Conner Ltd (particularly as the cost per play area is likely to rise, the fewer play areas are being maintained).

So, moving on to the second question, we are pleased to report that should one or more community groups wish to retain / maintain the 3 areas designated for removal of equipment then there are realistic options for doing so. If one group could be established to take on all three play areas it might then be expanded to take on the 4 marked with limited investment, which we were advised would be likely to receive the same fate in future unless council finances improve. We detail on page two our recommended approach.

We recommend:

1 That Hitchin Committee consider whether to ask Cabinet to recommend to Council that Special Expenses be used to retain the three play areas designated for removal of equipment

2 That Hitchin Committee ask officers to encourage an interested group to come forward, initially to take on running the three play areas designated for removal of equipment

Encouraging a Community Group

There is a fact sheet and other material available on the Council's website. We feel however that there is a need to be proactive in assuring such a group of the Council's and the Committee's support.

Such a group needs to be assured of a sympathetic hearing. The group should be encouraged to do two things:

1. Apply to the NHDC Community Facilities Capital Projects Fund (CFCPF) to obtain funding for the renewal of play equipment (if needed). – i.e. Capital costing - <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/community/grants/community-facilities-capital-projects-fund> - of course subject to the grants T&C.
2. Apply to the Hitchin Committee grants panel for biennial funding to undertake the required maintenance – circa £4400 every two years/pa

Other grants may of course be relevant such as:

- I. <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/leisure/active-communities/grant-aid-sport>
- II. <https://directory.hertfordshire.gov.uk/kb5/hertfordshire/directory/service.page?id=ehtENJ8OcBw>
- III. <http://www.hertscf.org.uk/grants>
- IV. <http://hitchinyouthtrust.co.uk/grants/>

The community group should be encouraged to contract NHDC to use its existing maintenance contract for the remaining play areas to maintain the equipment. This would provide additional benefits such as insurance.

It should also be noted we are still trying to clarify the required legal standing of any Management Committee, Parish Council / Meeting or a Charitable Trust in maintaining the play areas.