

Cabinet

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Review of Fixed Play Provision

NS/14/11



Report of Corporate Management Team

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Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to propose an approach to reviewing fixed play provision across the County. The report sets out a basis for considering the future distribution of fixed play resources in the short, medium and long term, and proposes a range of consultation measures in progressing this work.

Background

- 2 County Durham has a population of more than 510,000 people, of which approximately 20% are children and young people aged 0-15 years. Most of the County is rural in nature and many parts have significant levels of deprivation.
- 3 Prior to local government reorganisation all 7 of the former districts had varying approaches to fixed play that reflected district priorities and boundaries. Therefore, there is a substantial variation in the provision of play across the former districts. In addition, the availability of capital funding, from both internal and external resources, is leading to increasing pressures for the development of existing and new fixed play sites although the Council's revenue budgets are under significant pressure following reductions by Government.
- 4 The Council's Open Space Needs Assessment (OSNA) is an important and useful document that sets the standards and typologies of open space provision and assists with the planning of future play provision. In such a diverse geographical area, it presents the need to develop standards for play. While the quantity standard within the OSNA of the average level of fixed play provision across the County of 0.2 ha/1000 population is exceeded the distribution is uneven which presents a significant challenge.
- 5 Currently, the Council, Town & Parish Councils and other partners provide fixed play opportunities for children and young people. This mix of provision makes it difficult to develop or agree an overarching approach for the County. It is, therefore, necessary to determine a Council offer that can direct resources where needed and create an equal and fair standard of provision whilst taking account of wider provision.

- 6 The Council is currently responsible for 174 of the 299 play sites in the County and has recently invested over £1m in play via the ‘Playbuilder Programme’. As a comparative to Durham, we have looked at neighbouring authorities’ direct provision and these are set out in the table below. Looking at the overall number of play areas Durham has a relatively high number of sites. When considered as number of sites per 1000 children and young people or number of children per play area, Durham remains above average. A strategic approach to the management and development of Durham’s existing and future sites is fundamental in achieving the delivery of the Sport & Leisure Strategy together with ensuring these resources are best used and access optimised.

Authority	No of play areas (owned by local authority)	Population of children & young people	No of play areas per 1000 population	No of children & young people per play area
Sunderland City Council	100	45,600	2.2	456
Northumberland County Council	94	62,300	1.5	662
Darlington Borough Council	29	20,160	1.4	695
Newcastle City Council	126	42,400	3.0	336
Gateshead City Council	21	38,340	0.5	1825
Middlesbrough Council	47	27,496	1.7	585
Hartlepool	18	17,000	1.05	944
Durham County Council	174	102,000	1.7	586

Material Considerations

- 7 There are a number of relevant and material considerations in undertaking a review of fixed play provision. These form the basis or criteria that is proposed to be used to assess future provision.
- i. The Strategic context and priorities of the County with regards to Sport and Leisure.
 - ii. Service access issues; including the service offer and distribution.
 - iii. Supply and Demand for facilities (core offer).
 - iv. The financial pressures facing the Council
- 8 The key is to establish fixed play sites that can or will continue to be most effective in providing play opportunities whilst also identifying any gaps. A

matrix of factors are appropriate and need consideration in reviewing future play provision including; the emerging priorities from the Local Development Framework (LDF), the scope and nature of provision, accessibility and revenue subsidy. These are explored further in the following sections.

Valuing Play

- 9 Play is an essential part of every child's life. It allows children to develop a sense of wellbeing; it develops their emotional responses and helps them to manage risk. It improves their interpersonal skills, develops their learning capabilities and increases their ability to interact with other children in their community. It can help prevent obesity, can increase resilience to mental health problems and can make children feel more independent. Play can take on varying forms, in the home, the garden or school, but it is to be recognised that open access and public places for play, provide additional opportunities for children and young people to socialise, explore and gain independence. Such public places for play may be enhanced by their natural environment or by the addition of fixed play to help prompt and support young people to develop and have fun.

Strategic Context and Priorities of the County

- 10 The provision of facilities needs to be informed by strategic need and reflect the strategic priorities and strategies of the County. The wider strategies of the County have been developed in response to a number of Sport and Leisure related drivers including:
- i. Tackling health issues, the wider physical activity agenda and the debate about what sport and leisure can contribute to this;
 - ii. The inherited legacy concerning the age and condition of community facilities' asset;
 - iii. The issues and options being considered as part of the development of the Local Development Framework (LDF) to focus new housing in the main towns of the County and to establish a settlement hierarchy.
- 11 The LDF document articulates the overall strategic direction and long term vision for the economic, social and environmental well being of the County based on community needs and priorities set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy for County Durham 2010-2030 (SCS). This document set out a range of shared visions and outcomes for the County.
- 12 The LDF is the spatial plan for County Durham ("County Durham Plan: Planning for the Future of County Durham" (June 2010)) and is the principal document that will guide future development and growth in the County to 2030. It is an objective of the Core Strategy that:

"All members of the community have access to employment educational, social, sporting, health, recreational and cultural facilities"

In determining the future distribution of play provision it would appear appropriate to consider use of the LDF framework in guiding the location, and thereby accessibility, of services in association with the Sport and Leisure Strategy.

- 13 The over-riding aim of the Council's Sport and Leisure Service Strategy 2011 – 2014 is to increase participation in physical activity by 0.5% per year in accordance with the SCS, whilst anticipating a significant reduction in funding over the plan period. The strategy generally seeks to reduce dependence on built facilities with a refocusing on the natural environment and development of targeted activities as a resource for people to take part in physical and recreational activity, as part of either sport or day to day routines, and to make this easier through well designed and strategically located facilities.
- 14 The strategy specifically aspires to young people having lots of opportunities to participate in sport, leisure and physical activity and increasing the levels of involvement. Specifically identified is the need to encourage participation in activities in the natural and outdoor environment. The strategy recognises that achieving the vision will mean making significant changes in investment priorities, if increases in physical activity are to be met.
- 15 There is recognition within the Sport and Leisure Strategy that in some areas, investment is not currently proportional or equitable. Nevertheless it is acknowledged that a "core offer" of fixed play provision could form part of the essential infrastructure necessary to meet participation targets in the future.

Strategic Drivers

- 16 The main objectives of reviewing play provision across the County are to:
- Ensure the County provide equal and fair access to quality fixed play provision for children and young people
 - Provide safe and accessible fixed play provision for all children and young people, including safe access routes to play
 - Provide a sustainable offer within current resources
 - Ensure that County Durham also provides an attractive offer for visitors to enjoy a diverse and quality play experience through destination sites.
- 17 Community demand for fixed play sites across the County will always outstrip the Council's ability to provide them. In this sense demand will always be greater than supply which makes it all the more important that a framework for future decisions is established in order to manage this position in a consistent and fair manner. It is therefore logical, that a hierarchy of development priorities is established that encompasses both the scope and nature of provision to shape future developments. The following section sets a proposed approach to determine future levels of provision for consultation.

Shaping Future Provision

- 18 Settlement Hierarchy: Key council documents have been consulted including The County Durham Settlement Study, which identifies a settlement hierarchy. This contributes towards identifying the places that have, or require, the largest infrastructure of services including leisure facilities. In addition, the settlement study takes account of where most of the new housing development in the County will be located and which settlements will be the focus of transport routes and future economic development. It would therefore appear appropriate that the study be used as a basis for determining the future development priorities of fixed play sites too.

19 It is, however, worth noting that the study will have occasional discrepancies, as it has been developed to take into account a wide range of factors. One of the main discrepancies is that the boundaries of some main towns take in neighbouring communities. However, it remains the most useful tool for the purpose of defining levels of fixed play provision albeit that main towns will require closer attention.

20 The Settlement Study breaks down settlements into the following groupings. It is proposed that these settlement categories should be fundamental to determining future priorities for fixed play provision.

1. Main Towns (12)
2. Secondary Settlements (24)
3. Local Services Centres (30)
4. Larger Villages (38)
5. Small Villages (52)
6. Hamlets (101)

21 Scope of Provision: In order to establish a service offer for fixed play linked to the hierarchy settlement groupings it is also necessary to classify the types and size of facility aspired to for each settlement group. Due to the diverse geographical nature of County Durham, officers have used the Fields in Trust guidance to develop the following classifications for use in future provision.

Type of Space	Type of Provision
Type 'A'	Small equipped with three to five items of play equipment
Type 'B'	Large equipped play space with four to eight items of play equipment
Type 'C'	Large equipped play space include over 6 items of equipment but supplemented with other facilities such as Skate Parks, BMX Track Multi Use Games Area (MUGA) etc

22 Matching provision to settlements: The scope of provision i.e. A, B or C sites, may be matched to the settlement hierarchy. Where settlement hierarchies are to be employed it would be necessary to determine the scale of provision to be provided to each settlement category.

23 It is recognised, however, that population sizes vary considerably both between and within the settlement categories. So whilst settlement hierarchy could provide the primary principle for guiding future development, reflecting infrastructure needs, it is also recognised that population size could be a factor in the scope of provision. It is, therefore, further proposed that the size of provision could be increased when specific population thresholds are reached and provision not provided beneath a minimum population level.

24 Main Town Provision: Proposing the level of provision for main towns is not straightforward; the settlement study does not always identify individual communities even when they clearly exist. The position is further complicated as there are no existing divisions for the main towns, such as AAP areas or wards, that lend themselves to fixed play provision.

- 25 In order to overcome this, it is proposed that all main towns be divided into meaningful areas in terms of planning for fixed play provision. Proposed play sectors have been developed around natural conurbations within the County's 12 main towns for use in identifying future priorities. Maps detailing draft divisions are given at Appendix 2 to this report and would form part of the consultation process. Using these divisions would provide for the following numbers of play sectors in the main towns.

Main Town Settlement	Number of Play Sectors
Barnard Castle	3
Bishop Auckland	5
Chester-le-Street	5
Consett	5
Crook	3
Durham City	9
Newton Aycliffe	5
Peterlee	5
Seaham	6
Shildon	3
Spennymoor	5
Stanley	5

- 26 Destination Parks: In addition, many areas will have existing or potential sites for 'destination parks', these contribute to the overall offer and are likely to provide fixed play provision for wider reasons than the standard offer.
- 27 A 'Destination park' is defined as: '*a play area that, whether by design or otherwise, attracts a range of people from a wider area and may be treated as a day out. For instance, it may attract users from neighbouring towns or districts.*' –Department for Education (DfE)
- 28 The value of developing destination parks would make County Durham a more attractive place to live and visit and would encourage visitors to spend time participating in the parks attractions, before hopefully visiting other facilities or attractions for recreational purposes, with a possible intention of returning in the future.
- 29 It is proposed that Durham County develops Destination Parks as part of its offer. The following is a list of potential destination sites: -
- Riverside Park Chester le Street
 - Hardwick Park Sedgfield
 - Allensford Park, Consett
 - Wharton Park Durham City
 - Town Recreation Ground Bishop Auckland
 - Scar Top Barnard Castle

Town and Parish Council Provision

- 30 This report focuses on fixed play sites directly provided by the Council. It should be recognised, however, that a number of fixed play sites (approximately 125) are provided and maintained by Town and Parish

Councils as well as other agencies. In some instances these organisations contract the council to maintain the site.

- 31 The Council has previously received representations in relation to a lack of fixed play provision within certain areas. These claims have emerged, predominantly, from Town and Parish Councils in areas where the Council has low or no provision. Under the proposed model areas with sites provided by other organisations could receive a lower priority which may lead to further representations.

Consultation

- 32 As identified through the equality and diversity impact assessment and also through the service, there are many stakeholders potentially impacted by any review. It is important, therefore, that a period of consultation is entered into before any decision is made on the future of fixed play provision. A consultation plan has, therefore, been developed to ensure those users, residents, partner organisations and other key stakeholders are given the opportunity to contribute to the review during a thorough consultation period.

- 33 In terms of the review of play provision, the Council will be seeking three key outcomes as a result of carrying out the consultation process.
- i) To seek views and comments in relation to the nature and scope of criteria for provision specifically:
 - a) Use of settlement hierarchy as a basis for provision
 - b) The definition of play area types and their match to settlements
 - c) Views on the use of child population as a basis to enhance or lower provision, and in particular what level this should be set
 - d) Views on the 'Play Sectors' to be used to identify main town provision
 - e) Inclusion of destination sites within the Council's offer
 - ii) To identify bonafide third party groups who may consider adopting sites, in excess of the Council's offer
 - iii) Identify the views of Town and Parish Councils in relation to their provision and the delivery of the Council's offer

- 34 Support for this process which will commence in the autumn will be provided in accordance with the Council's agreed mechanisms, but initially channelled through the project team assigned to this review within the sport and leisure service.

- 35 The consultation process will be tailored to ensure that those potentially impacted by the proposals are provided an opportunity to put their views forward in terms of the three outcomes identified above. In order to achieve this it is intended to utilise the AAPs who will be asked for their views.

- 36 The outcome of this consultation stage will then be brought back for Members' consideration setting out a final criteria, based on the consultation together with its application in terms of priority areas. Further consultation will then be undertaken via the Council's AAP network prior to any final decision being made on the future of fixed play provision.

Moving towards a fair offer

- 37 It should be recognised that moving from existing provision will take a considerable time, potentially many years. The importance of identifying priorities is in providing a framework or essential background against which decisions on future resources can be made.
- 39 Any review will represent a proposed re-distribution of resources that identifies areas to be prioritised for future investment as we move towards a fairer level of provision.
- 40 Once the process has been consulted on it will be necessary to bring forward a robust process for moving towards the fair level of provision. This will need to take into consideration both under and over provision, and the condition of existing sites. It will then be possible to prioritise areas for investment.

It is anticipated that priority will be based upon a range of factors including:

- i. The level of other fixed play provision in settlements including Town and Parish Council sites.
- ii. Availability of capital resources to develop any proposed site and
- iii. Identification of suitable land for the development.

A full priority list would be presented as part of a further report, post consultation.

- 41 It is anticipated that the Council would be happy to support any third party who either wished to adopt existing sites or develop new sites, where there was no on-going repair and maintenance cost to the Authority.

Short term issues

- 42 Officers also recognise that the development of this policy has been delayed. The portfolio holder for Leisure and Libraries has previously written to all elected members requesting that any new investment in fixed play be placed on hold until the this work was completed. It is possible that the delay in delivering this work could therefore result in a loss of resources, particularly from earmarked AAP and Member funds, for fixed play. Therefore it is proposed, in recognition of the need to undertake a comprehensive consultation process, to put in place a short term measure for allowing this revenue to be utilised.
- 43 It is proposed that a process be undertaken to identify sites, both existing, and proposed, for which all development resources are in place and available. The process would be run in conjunction with the consultation arrangements over a period of 12 weeks to identify sites. Sites coming forward that could evidence that all development resources were in place and were capable of being progressed over the next 6 months would be considered for approval to proceed and receive revenue support going forward.
- 44 Where such investment relates to the enhancement of existing sites this is unlikely to create an additional revenue burden to the Authority but may result in enhancing provision in an area that is not later deemed to be a high priority. New sites, however, would be more difficult as they would present the possibility of being developed in low priority areas and would also incur an

additional revenue demand on the repair and maintenance budget for fixed play sites.

- 45 Clearly the level of impact that they present will only be known once the nature and number of sites has been identified. Once sites have been identified it is proposed that approval to progress schemes be a delegated decision to the Corporate Director of Neighbourhood Services in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Libraries and Lifelong Learning.

Financial implications

- 46 It is essential that members and other consultees are aware of the financial implications in relation to fixed play sites. This will help inform future decision and ensure that any long term offer is sustainable. In developing the review a range of costs for maintaining sites has been produced. The below table sets these against the proposed play area types.

Type	Annual Maintenance Cost per Site
Destination Site	£3000
Type C	£2500
Type B	£2000
Type A	£1500

- 47 The Capital resources to invest in developing priority areas, once established, will be sought from a range of external sources. Whilst capital bids in relation to this work stream will be submitted by the service, identification as a priority area would not guarantee capital resources for the development of sites. Any future prioritisation is intended to act only as a framework for future development decisions which are anticipated over the coming years.

Informal Play

- 48 It should be noted that play provision in settlements extends beyond fixed play provision as discussed in this report. The OSNA has highlighted a typology of open spaces which in some areas can be used for informal play. Whilst out of the scope of this review an informal play space is defined as a small grassed open space or hard stand areas allowing residents to spend time out of doors and provide opportunities for children to play. In areas where fixed play sites may be de-commissioned over time it is proposed that these spaces will be retained as open green space.

Conclusion

- 49 Developing an approach to fixed play sites that attempts to provide an equal offer from such a variable starting position is challenging. Play is an issue that is sensitive in most communities and regarded as a high priority for many. It is, therefore, important that we consult fully on the basis upon which any future provision may be premised.
- 50 Ultimately what the Council seeks is to ensure that the children and young people of County Durham receive a high quality play offer that is fair and equitable within the limits of funding. Durham County Council must be able to

sustain this offer and it is therefore necessary to set agreed levels of future provision in conjunction with the community.

- 51 In recognising that it will take time to undertake a comprehensive consultation process, measures to allow existing funded projects to progress are proposed.
- 52 In order to take this work forward it is important that a comprehensive consultation process is now undertaken and the outcome reported back so as future levels of provision may be finalised. At this point a detailed transition plan will be developed to facilitate the move towards any proposed offer.

Recommendations

- 53 It is recommended that:
- (i) The Council consults on the approach to determining future fixed play provision as set out in this report.
 - (ii) The process outlined in section 42 to 45 to allow existing projects to proceed be adopted.
 - (iii) A further report setting out the results of the consultation and transition plans are presented to a future meeting of Cabinet.

Background papers

- Durham County Leisure Sport & Leisure Service Strategy 2010 – 2013
- Planning Policy Guidance 17: Planning for open space, sport and recreation
- Design for Play: A guide to creating successful play spaces, Play England www.playengland.org.uk
- The County Durham Plan, County Durham Settlement Study 2010
- County Durham Open Space Needs Assessment 2009
- County Durham Sustainable Community Strategy 2010 – 2030
- Durham County Council Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2009
- Neighbourhood Statistics www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk
- Better Places to Play Through Planning
- Index of Deprivation www.communities.gov.uk

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance

Financial implications are shown in sections 46 to 47 of this report.

Staffing

None directly from this report. There will be an ongoing review of staffing levels during the transitional period of establishing a core offer.

Risk

A full risk assessment has been completed for this project and there are no reportable risks.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

An initial Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment, attached as Appendix 3, has been undertaken as part of this review. This assessment has sought to initially identify the impacts to users of fixed play sites who may be affected should the principles of this report be adopted in the future.

It is recognised that any redistribution of fixed play sites may have a disproportionate impact on children, parents and guardians as they may have to travel further to access fixed play provision than previously and may have limited access to a car or public transport. The increased costs associated with accessing services incurred through transport may disproportionately affect these groups. Conversely, residents from the same groups in areas prioritised to have increased access to fixed play provision in the future.

In order to ensure that comprehensive consideration has been given to this issue, any future review will use the latest data available on the levels of deprivation, as indicated by the Index of Deprivation in relation to the location of fixed play sites affected, so that any potential detrimental impact on particularly vulnerable communities can be examined and the most vulnerable areas identified.

Accommodation

None

Crime and Disorder

None directly from this report however it is recognised that the provision of good facilities for children and young people assists in reducing anti social behaviour in communities.

Human Rights

None

Consultation

An Engagement plan has been developed which shows the consultation methods that will be engaged as shown in sections 39 to 44 of this report.

Procurement

None directly from this report.

Disability Issues

This review considers the inclusion of provision for play facilities for young people with disabilities and will be dealt with in detail when new sites are developed in communities.

Legal Implications

When making decisions based on this report and the result of subsequent consultations the Council must comply with its public sector duties.