

TITLE:	Equipped Play Areas Strategy
TO/ON:	Executive - 10th July 2006
BY:	Nick Wiggins, Acting Head of Leisure Services
PORTFOLIO:	Strong Communities
STATUS:	Report

STRATEGIC FACTOR CHECKLIST

The Council's Corporate Management Team has confirmed that the Strategic Factor Checklist has been applied to the development of this report, and there are no key issues, over and above those set out in the body of the report, that need to be brought to Members' attention.

1. SUBJECT MATTER AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 An Equipped Play Strategy was originally adopted by the Council in 1997, following a review of the current provision of play areas and an anticipated budgetary level for maintenance and inspection. That strategy has now been completed, but following the removal of a number of older play areas a perceived imbalance across the District has developed. Both individual Ward Members and the Strong Communities Scrutiny Panel have requested the extension of that strategy and the provision of additional Local Play Areas. This report details the implications of such an extension and the revenue requirements to fund it.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At a meeting of the former Community Services Committee in June 1997, a strategy for equipped play areas was adopted. Within this strategy provision was made to provide one District Play Area, three Regional Play Areas and eight Local Play Areas.
- 2.2 Members will recall that the capital commitment for funding the Play Strategy was to be taken from Commuted Sum payments from developers, the Council having previously agreed to the pooling of Commuted Sum payments to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources available for play areas across the District. As a result of funding the Strategy from this source, progress of implementation is dependent upon the availability of Commuted Sums.
- 2.3 Members will also recall that the District Play Area was to be located at Allensford Country Park, with the three Regional Play Areas to be based in Consett, Stanley and Annfield Plain. Further reports confirmed the locations to be within Blackhill & Consett Park, Oakey Park and Annfield Plain Park. Initially the location of the central Stanley park was presumed to be View Lane, but following wide consultation the Ordinary Meeting of the Council on 12th July 2005 chose to locate the play area and wider park facilities at Oakey The specific Wards for the

additional eight Local Play Areas were chosen by the Council based on a criteria of isolation, usage and poverty. Exact locations within those Wards were chosen in consultation with Ward Members. The Local Play Areas have now been completed and are located at:

- Eastfields / Westfields
- Craghead Village Hall
- Shield Row Primary School
- Holly Terrace, Catchgate
- Watling Bungalows, Leadgate
- Snows Green Road, Shotley Bridge,
- Moorside Community College
- Thornfield Road, The Grove

- 2.4 With regards to revenue funding, the Council's General Fund currently budgets £50,000 per annum in order to maintain and inspect play areas under the strategy. As a result of this it was envisaged, and has since been carried out, that play areas falling outside the strategy would be removed. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of play areas across the District from 56 to 12.
- 2.5 Members may be aware that in recent months additional play areas falling outside the strategy have been installed on Council owned land, such as at Railway Street, Craghead, and Cookson Place, South Stanley. These play areas are not the responsibility of the Council, and we do not revenue fund them. In issuing leases for this land it has been made very clear to the relevant organisations that the Council will neither maintain nor adopt them should they no longer have the resources to manage it. On the completion of the lease, or any early termination, it is the responsibility of the organisation to remove any equipment and reinstate the land. Separate contractual undertakings have been made by the DSO to inspect and maintain one of these play areas, but this is at a commercial rate and is not subsidised by the general fund.
- 2.6 The current level of available balances within Commuted Sums stands at £224,656, once the final instalment of £60,000 to Oakey Park has been made. This will continue to grow in time, albeit at a slower rate as future development opportunities and the Regional Spatial Strategy place some restriction on future growth. Recent expenditure within Commuted Sums has also included £18,000 to upgrade all play area gates to full DDA compliance following a complaint, and £17,000 to fund replacement equipment at Allensford following the urgent removal of dangerous equipment on the grounds of public safety. Given their urgent nature both projects were discussed at the relevant Scrutiny Panel and agreed with the Portfolio Holder.
- 2.7 Members may wish to note that in public consultations undertaken by Leisure Services for preparation of the District Play Strategy, the Best Value Review and relevant Service Plans, play provision has continued to remain high on the public agenda as far as leisure is concerned.
- 2.8 Within the current strategy is also a provision for Parish Councils to "opt out", taking with them the responsibility for providing access to local play. To date a number of Parish Councils have taken up this option, and received a one-off legacy payment. These parishes include Esh, Lanchester, Greencroft and Hedleyhope Parish Council. Initial discussions have recently also begun with Cornsay Parish Council.

- 2.9 Individual feedback from Members, and continued debate and discussion at the Strong Communities Scrutiny Panel suggests there is some level of unease with the current level of provision. A number of Wards are now left with no play areas at all, and limited access to newly installed areas. A report to Strong Communities Scrutiny Panel on 25th October 2005 and a further presentation to the 25th April 2006 panel made reference to an extension to the current strategy, suggesting a minimum provision of, or access to, equipped play areas in each ward.

3. **RELEVANT MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS/OPTIONS**

3.1 **Extension to Existing Equipped Play Strategy**

Using the methodology agreed by the Scrutiny Panel on 25th October 2005, the number of extra play areas required to ensure a more balanced distribution is five. These would be placed in the following Wards:

1. Burnhope
2. Burnopfield
3. Dipton
4. Ebchester & Medolmsley
5. Tanfield

Other Wards have been excluded on the basis of:

- Existing District / Parish / Community Provision (see Appendix A)
- Proximity to existing provision
 1. Castleside (and limited community provision)
 2. Consett East
 3. Consett North
 4. Stanley Hall
- Opted Out Parish (see paragraph 2.8)

A full list of all Wards and their proposed provision is detailed in Appendix A.

- 3.1.1 There are a number of implications in approving the installation of five additional play areas, namely:

- 3.1.2 **Capital:** The recent installation of eight new Local Play Areas allowed for a capital budget of £30,000 per Play Area. This figure was first specified in 1998 within the original Play Strategy. Given that this was some eight years ago and the above inflation cost increase in play equipment, there is some danger of effectively getting less play equipment than originally envisaged. We would therefore recommend an increase to £40,000 per play area to ensure a similar play experience, giving a total cost of £200,000 for five play areas (inclusive of all costs). Adequate budgetary provision exists in Commuted Sums to fund the capital costs of this scheme in its entirety.

- 3.1.3 **Revenue:** The anticipated revenue cost of each additional play area is £4,000 per annum. This includes:

- Weekly / Bi-Weekly Routine Inspection
- Routine Maintenance
- Responsive Maintenance / Inspection
- Weekly Clean / glass & litter removal

It is obviously necessary to ensure the revenue funding is in place prior to the installation of any new play area. Therefore an additional bid of £20,000 is required prior to going to tender for any new play areas. An additional bid (ref: LSREV06/07-05) was submitted for the 2006/07 financial year, but given budgetary constraints was placed on hold until further details of the proposal or other resources were made available.

Given the likely lead-in time for any new play areas, and a maintenance / defects period with the successful contractor, it is unlikely that any additional funding would be required until 2007/08 financial year. However, Members will be aware of the current and predicted financial constraints for the Authority, and a potentially extensive list of additional revenue bids that will require prioritisation in the budget setting process for 2007/08. In recommending the extension of the current Play Strategy, as detailed in this report, Members will be effectively prioritising an additional bid of £20,000 for 2007/08 to be at the highest level, as it will not be feasible to refuse funding once the play areas are installed. Whilst this scheme does meet with the Council's Corporate Aims, it will be competing for resources with other projects, against a backdrop of the Council's stated priorities. The overall budgetary position for next year is still unclear and is likely to be unresolved until late 2006. A continuation of zero percent Council Tax increase may make this, in addition to other priority bids, hard to resource.

- 3.1.4 **Location:** Whilst within this report we have specified the Wards that may benefit from a new play area, we are currently not in a position to confirm exact locations. Should approval be given we will continue to work closely with Ward Members to choose an appropriate location within their community, continuing the methods we used to install the recent eight local play areas. Further consultation will then be required within those communities to choose specific items of play equipment, within the limitations of the tender.

3.2 Alternative Uses for Commuted Sums

Within the Strong Communities Scrutiny Panel of 25th October 2005, Panel Members expressed a desire that the resources available within the Commuted Sums budget are allocated and used within this financial year, rather than delaying any potential spend further. However, given that the installation of new play areas required an ongoing revenue commitment, it is only prudent to look at alternative uses of the resource that may have a reduced revenue requirement.

In requesting a contribution to Commuted Sums from developers at the time of planning approval, it is usually agreed on the basis that this is in lieu of any equipped play areas or significant recreational space within their development. In agreeing to this the Council enters into a contract with the each developer to provide this facility, albeit pooled into a central pot and then allocated on the basis of need. Therefore it is not possible to allocate this money to uses other than localised leisure facilities or services.

Below are a number of potential alternative uses of Commuted Sums with more limited revenue implications.

3.2.1 Implementation of the Playing Pitch Strategy

- Members will be aware of the Draft Playing Pitch Strategy which, following additional widespread consultation and discussion within the Scrutiny process, is likely to return to Executive for adoption later this year.

- It is likely to see an increase in quantity of junior football pitches to reflect current demand, but a slight decrease in adult football pitches.
- Increasing centralisation of pitches (particularly junior pitches) on “campuses”, in line with governing body guidance
- Significant capital resources required, to enable major refurbishment and improvement of most playing surfaces,
- No significant revenue implication. Grounds maintenance works for all pitches is already accounted for within existing budgets

3.2.2 Redevelopment of Tennis Facilities

- A number of tennis courts across the district have fallen into disrepair over many years. This includes:
 - South Moor Memorial Park
 - Burnopfield
 - Dipton Park
 - Annfield Plain Park
 - Sherburn Park
- The use of approximately £200,000 from Commuted Sums could enable the complete refurbishment of all these tennis courts to a competitive standard
- A revenue budget of approximately £5,000 per annum would be required to maintain these facilities to a high standard.
- Working in close partnership with our Sports Development Section and the recently appointed Community Tennis Coach (funded by the Lawn Tennis Association) we would aim to encourage and develop tennis within these communities.

3.2.3 Change in Play Area Strategy

- Members may wish a review of the Play Strategy to focus entirely on low / zero revenue facilities.
- This could include adding items to existing play areas or skate parks, where possible, or potentially creating a single “super play park”
- This may severely limit the quantity and quality of the play experience, as only limited equipment with zero maintenance / inspection is available, and some level of revenue funding depending on the nature of the installation would still be required. It is anticipated that this would require revenue funding in the region of £10,000 per annum.

3.2.4 Purchase of Mobile Play Equipment

- This funding could be used for the purchase of new, mobile, high quality play equipment.
- This would be trailer mounted and could include climbing walls, traditional play equipment, simulators etc.
- The equipment would be used as part of the holiday activity programme, within the existing Parks Days / Larks in the Parks.
- Whilst adding significantly to the quality and range of entertainment at these events, it should be noted that usage levels would be relatively low with only a small number of activity days per season.
- Additional revenue costs for annual inspection / maintenance would be in the region of £4,000

Should Members decide that they wish to pursue these alternative uses, a further paper to Scrutiny would be prepared for them to debate the issues in more detail.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND REASONS

- 4.1 It is recommended that, due to the Council's existing decision not to prioritise revenue growth bids as part of this year's financial plan, that no capital investment in new play areas is agreed.
- 4.2 That Executive refers this matter back to scrutiny to consider investment in other facilities, using commuted sums, that require a minimum revenue support.

Reasons: Whilst Executive acknowledge the views expressed by scrutiny, the Council's overriding requirement to reduce its General Fund revenue burden takes precedence.

Background documents:

None

For further information on the details of this report, please contact:

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APPENDIX A

PROPOSED PLAY AREA PROVISION

Ward	Provision		Provision
Ann' Plain	Existing Provision	Craghead	Existing Provision
Benfieldside	Existing Provision	Dipton	NEW PROVISION?
Blackhill	Existing Provision	Delves	Community Provision
Burnhope	NEW PROVISION?	Ebchester	NEW PROVISION?
Burnopfield	NEW PROVISION?	Esh	Parish Responsibility
Castleside	Proximity & Com. Prov	Havannah	Existing Provision
Catchgate	Existing Provision	Lanch'ter	Parish Responsibility
Consett E	Proximity to Existing	Leadgate	Existing Provision
Consett S	Existing Provision	S Moor	Existing Provision
Consett N	Proximity to Existing	Stanley H	Proximity to Existing
Cornsay	Parish Responsibility*	Tanfield	NEW PROVISION?

* = Cornsay is provided by Hedleyhope Parish (opted out) and Cornsay Parish (expressed an interest in opting out, but yet to agree terms)