

PLAY AREA PROVISION

Executive Summary

Council Officers previously reported on play areas to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2019 and January 2021. At these meetings Councillors expressed a desire for a review of play area refurbishment requirements beyond those previously identified in the current refurbishment programme. Of those four remaining sites identified for refurbishment, Loop Road Recreation Ground was completed in December 2021, providing an inclusive and accessible design. Progress is now also well underway towards completing the remaining three play areas (Horsell Moor, Oakfield and Sutton Green) within the next year.

Alongside this, officers have been developing a system for assessing the future refurbishment needs across the Borough's existing play areas. This takes into consideration the age, life expectancy and general condition of the play equipment. A scoring system for these criteria will provide a priority score for each play area and help to identify the most urgent works. Through this approach officers will also be able to identify those cases where play areas are in generally good condition but may have individual items or issues that require more urgent attention.

Further to these most essential works, a strategic assessment of the Council's play areas is also proposed, to assess the distribution and effectiveness of all existing play areas and identify where improvements can be made, subject to funds being available, to have the greatest impact to the communities that they serve.

This report has been produced to seek agreement from the Council's Executive for officers to proceed with the approach outlined below. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a draft version of this report for pre-decision scrutiny at its meeting on Monday 23 January 2023 and supported the recommendations in the report.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RESOLVE That

- (i) the proposed approach to assessing play area refurbishment priorities outlined in the report be agreed;
- (ii) Officers begin developing a programme of works for those priorities identified through the refurbishment assessment, within the available project budgets for the coming year; and
- (iii) Officers seek proposals from appropriate consultants to undertake a strategic assessment of the Council's play areas, as outlined in the report.

Reasons for Decision

Reason: The decision will contribute towards the Woking for All Strategy objectives related to play, by enabling officers to implement an evidence-based approach to prioritising play area refurbishment need, thus focussing available budgets where they are most needed and can be most effective.

The Executive has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Background Papers: None.

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Date Published: 25 January 2023

1.0 Introduction and background

- 1.1 The Council manages 42 play areas across the Borough, including Cowshott Crescent which is just outside of the Borough boundary at a Woking Borough Homes development near the Army Training Centre in Pirbright. These range in size from small local play areas, designed primarily for toddlers, to larger destination play areas which cater for children of all ages.
- 1.2 General maintenance of play areas is currently undertaken by Serco through the Environmental Grounds Maintenance Contract. However, where necessary specialist play contractors are engaged to carry out more significant or specialist works.
- 1.3 Serco have suitably qualified operatives who undertake weekly visual and quarterly operational inspections of all Council owned play areas, to ensure maintenance issues are highlighted and resolved appropriately. In addition, all play areas receive an annual independent inspection from an external inspector, usually in the autumn.

2.0 Current play area refurbishment programme

- 2.1 In addition to general maintenance, the Council also has a programme for play area refurbishments.
- 2.2 The current programme was adopted in 2003 and identified 29 play areas for refurbishment. The remaining seven at the time were less than 10 years old, so were not included in this. To date 25 have been fully refurbished, and two removed and reprovisioned locally. Most recently completed was the refurbishment of Loop Road Recreation Ground play area (winter 2021/22), which was designed to incorporate inclusive play opportunities, including equipment accessible for wheelchair users. The Council has also adopted several other new play areas, built as part of local residential developments, during this time. This leaves three play areas from the original programme remaining for full refurbishment - Horsell Moor, Oakfield (in Goldsworth Park) and Sutton Green.
- 2.3 £135,000 has been allocated in the Investment Programme to complete these three sites in 2022/23. Initially it was thought that all three would be procured and completed together. However, officers have been approached by the Sutton Green Residents Association, who wish to apply for external funding through Suez's Landfill Communities Fund to supplement the budget for refurbishment at Sutton Green play area. The Residents Association has made initial enquiries and established that the project would be eligible for this scheme, and it is anticipated that an application will be progressed Q1 2023. Due to the slightly longer timescales anticipated for securing this funding it was agreed that procurement of the new Sutton Green play area should take place separately from Horsell Moor and Oakfield.
- 2.4 Procurement of the Horsell Moor and Oakfield sites was undertaken during summer 2022. An open tender was run, through which four suppliers submitted proposals, and the contract awarded to KOMPAN. The designs for both sites will not only replace the existing play equipment, but also increase the number and variety of play activities on offer to achieve an overall uplift in play value.
- 2.5 A public consultation took place over the autumn via the Woking Community Forum, giving residents the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposals. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and we also received a range of suggestions for additional equipment at both sites, although unfortunately, most of these requests would not be feasible within the existing project budget.
- 2.6 However, during the consultation period, local Ward Councillors also expressed an interest in exploring opportunities to expand the scope of these designs, in line with consultation feedback. Possibly utilising neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) allocations. Officers have since been liaising with the play provider to consider options and understand

implications of including different additional items. Once revised proposals have been submitted, with associated costs, officers will consult with Ward Councillors regarding additional funding requirements.

- 2.7 While it had been anticipated that these two play areas would be delivered by the end of March 2023, additional time has been required to explore options to enhance the designs, which is likely to result in the expected installation timeframes to be extended. It is now anticipated that installation will commence in the spring, with each site expected to take around 4 weeks to install. This means the new play areas would be ready ahead of the summer. Officers will continue to update Ward Councillors on any further revised timeframes as soon as these are known.

3.0 Recent works

- 3.1 In 2021/22 £100,000 funding was agreed to undertake more urgent repairs to address health and safety issues at several play areas across the Borough, the cost for which could not be covered by the annual revenue budget for play area maintenance at the time.
- 3.2 This predominantly related to the rubber safety surfacing, which provides impact attenuation beneath equipment. Over time this is susceptible to damage through general wear and tear, as well as shrinkage around the edges. During the annual independent play area inspections, a number of these issues were highlighted as being a medium risk, meaning they required more urgent attention. The Council subsequently tendered for a package of works to complete surfacing repairs at 14 sites.
- 3.3 The appointed contractor completed the first block of these works during spring/summer 2022 and completed further works in the autumn. Since commencing the project, some sites have subsequently required a change in specification to ensure repairs are suitable. This uplift in specification has resulted in fewer sites from the original list being completed within the contract budget. Those remaining sites will now be completed separately.
- 3.4 In addition to the safety surfacing repairs, it was agreed that this funding would also be used to address significant works required to certain items of play equipment. This has included replacement of key component parts on three multi-play units, replacement of two swing frames, replacement of springers, and the re-painting of play equipment required at 10 sites.

4.0 Future refurbishment requirements

- 4.1 With the current refurbishment programme due to be completed once the remaining three sites are installed, it is now an appropriate time to consider future requirement for play area refurbishment works. Whereas the existing refurbishment programme took the approach of fully replacing play areas one by one, it is recognised that a new programme will need to take a slightly different approach.
- 4.2 Financial constraints, now and for the foreseeable future, mean it is not economical to fully replace a play area without strong justification that all equipment has or is soon reaching its end of life. As part of the independent annual play area inspection, the current condition of most play areas has been assessed as generally good overall.
- 4.3 Modern equipment generally carries a 25-30+ year guarantee. With the number of play areas refurbished under the current programme, it would be expected that a good proportion of equipment should still be in a generally good condition. However, as has been seen with the safety surfacing and other repairs required over the past year, certain parts do wear more quickly and therefore require refurbishment to maintain the overall condition and anticipated life expectancy.

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- 4.4 As well as the condition of these play areas, it is also important to consider how effective they are at serving the community that they are intended for, both individually and between play areas within a given area. Then to determine how best to utilise funding available to provide the greatest overall benefit for local children. For example, might the community be better served by upgrading a larger play area at the centre of a community that is better connected and easier to access for more people, or might more modest improvements to smaller play areas that are currently less effective provide a greater overall benefit to the community.
- 4.5 It is therefore proposed that the approach to assessing play area refurbishment need is carried out in two phases. In the first instance, to identify where the most urgent need is based on the condition of existing equipment. Then beyond this to look more strategically at where investment would provide the greatest benefit to local children.
- 4.6 Through the existing play area inspection regimes, officers had identified a number of these more urgent repair / refurbishment requirements across the Borough. Although these may not be significant enough that they justify wholesale replacement of the play area at this time, those issues identified will need addressing to ensure the site remains safe to use.
- 4.7 To address this, a further £100,000 project funding was allocated in the Investment Programme 2022/23, with a view to funding the same amount for each financial year up to and including 2024/25, to undertake priority refurbishment works. This was in addition to existing revenue budgets. The current financial position for this project is discussed in more detail further down in this report.
- 4.8 Moving forward, the intention would be to refurbish as far as is required to maintain a good condition, prolong the overall life expectancy and where possible to provide an uplift in the overall play value, with specific consideration for inclusive and accessible play. This approach will enable more play areas across the Borough to receive the most necessary refurbishment works, rather than focusing the resource available on full replacement at fewer sites.
- 4.9 To understand and identify priorities across all play areas, and ensure the most effective use of the funding available, a spreadsheet has been developed to individually assess the current need at each play area. This includes a scoring system to evaluate each play area according to age, life expectancy and condition of equipment, to determine priority. A full breakdown of the scoring system and how it works can be found in Appendix 1. Taken together these factors provide a total score out of 60 for each play area, allowing them to be ranked from highest to lowest to indicate priority.
- 4.10 Alongside the scored criteria, various other details have been included in this review, which will help to identify works required at each site and opportunities for other improvements. This includes a play value assessment, opportunities for inclusive play, and specific issues identified through inspections. Full details of these can be found in Appendix 2.
- 4.11 The 'specific issues' will be the primary basis for informing the works which need to be undertaken to bring the play area into better overall condition. However, there are some cases where sites scoring lower for overall priority, may still have issues which individually require more urgent attention. By recording these through this heading it enables them to be picked up and actioned as a priority.
- 4.12 Information on inclusivity and play value will also help to better inform the works undertaken and ensure that the improvements target current deficiencies in play provision at any given site. This means that as well as simply addressing safety issues, the funding will be utilised to achieve an overall uplift in the standard of play provision where feasible. This will include consideration of neurodiverse and other additional needs.
- 4.13 This assessment is flexible and has been designed to be continuously updated. For example, the life expectancy of equipment is re-assessed yearly during the annual independent

inspection. It is also possible that new, more urgent issues will arise through Serco's routine inspections. The assessment spreadsheet will be kept updated with the latest information available, and the priorities list amended to reflect this. Likewise, as improvements are completed at each play area, its score will also be updated. The spreadsheet should therefore be considered as a snapshot of the current position.

- 4.14 Through this assessment mechanism an initial list of works will be compiled to begin working through over the course of the next year, subject to funding. It is anticipated that specialist contractors will be approached to undertake most of these works.
- 4.15 While this approach to assessing condition will help to identify initial priority works, officers will also seek to engage with a suitable play consultant to undertake a strategic assessment of play area refurbishment need. This will consider the distribution and effectiveness of all existing play areas and identify works that will provide the greatest overall benefits. Officers have already held initial discussions with one potential consultant and would intend to work with a consultant to develop an approach to this assessment, subject to agreement from the Executive in February.
- 4.16 This strategic assessment would not delay those more urgent priority works identified through the refurbishment assessment outlined above but will beneficially feed into the overall assessment to refine priorities for play moving forward.

5.0 Corporate Strategy

- 5.1 This report directly relates to the following objective in the 'Woking for All' supplementary strategy for 2022 to 2023:

'Put in place an updated programme for playground refurbishments, recognising the value and importance of accessible play provision.'

This includes the following actions:

Develop a play area improvement plan and ensure delivery of the current plan to upgrade three play areas.

Undertake an audit of the current play area provision and highlight options to achieve accessibility for all including provision for neuro-diverse children.

- 5.2 This work also relates to the Woking for All objective regarding adopting Green Flag standards for the Council's parks, starting in Woking Park. Ensuring our play areas are well maintained will form an important part of meeting Green Flag standards.
- 5.3 The agreed extension to the Environmental Maintenance contract with Serco, from April 2023, includes a requirement for Serco to deliver a Green Flag management plan for Woking Park. Officers will continue to liaise with Serco to develop this management plan over the coming year, while continuing to implement practices and other improvements in line with Green Flag standards.
- 5.4 The Woking for All Strategy 2022-27 also highlights the delivery of the first play area in the Sheerwater redevelopment red phase as a priority for 2022/23. The latest update provided by ThamesWey advises that this will be completed by May 2023.
- 5.5 Play provision across the Borough also helps to support the objectives of the Council's Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Play provides many benefits to children, including encouraging physical activity and providing opportunities for inclusive social interaction, which all contributes to a child's development and positive physical and mental wellbeing.

6.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 6.1 £135,000 has already been committed to the refurbishments at Horsell Moor, Oakfield and Sutton Green play areas.
- 6.2 The Sutton Green Residents Association has expressed an interest in applying for additional external funding. Officers are currently in discussion with members of the groups to take this forward.
- 6.3 £100,000 project funding was agreed to get started with the most urgent repairs identified in 2021/22.
- 6.4 A further £100,000 was identified in the Investment Programme 2022/23 to continue these works, with a view to extending this into 2023/24 and 2024/25. It is now anticipated that £50,000 of this proposed budget will be drawn down in the current financial year to meet requirements.
- 6.5 It is also intended to use part of the Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) allocation to support future spend on this project. Though it should be noted that the majority of the Council's UKSPF allocation will be available in 2024/25.
- 6.6 The UKSPF is the UK Government's replacement for the EU Structural Investment Fund. The Autumn 2021 budget provided commitment of £2.6bn for UKSPF as part of the Government's Levelling-Up Fund, starting in 2022/23 with £0.4bn, 2023/24 with £0.7bn and 2024/25 with £1.5bn. In line with the other Surrey local authorities, Woking was allocated £1m over the three-year period, with a yearly allocation of 4% of the fund in 2022/23, 9% in 2023/24 and 87% in 2024/25. Of this, £349,000 has been identified for green infrastructure projects, of which £150,000 is proposed for play area improvements in 2024/25.
- 6.7 Beyond this, other future spend will be subject to suitable funding being identified, including the yet to be finalised 2023/24 Investment Programme.
- 6.8 There may also be opportunities to fund improvement work through other funding sources. For example, through the neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) allocations or other external community funding.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 6.9 Local play areas provide important opportunities for children to play together, or alone, enjoying exciting and challenging activities, contributing positively to a child's development. In particular for those who may not otherwise have access to such opportunities. The proposed approach to assessing play area refurbishment priorities will ensure that play areas across the Borough are refurbished according to greatest need, reducing the risk of old equipment needing to be taken out of use, or in a worst-case scenario, play area closures.
- 6.10 The play area refurbishment assessment spreadsheet also highlights opportunities to improve inclusivity and accessibility in our play areas. This will include consideration of neurodiverse and other additional needs. Where play areas are presenting a similar priority score, those with the greater opportunities for children with additional needs could be afforded additional prioritisation.
- 6.11 Through this approach there will also be an opportunity to identify potential improvements that contribute towards advancing equality of access to play for different groups. For example, Making Space for Girls has highlighted potential gender inequalities which can exist in public open space provision, including in play provision.

Legal

6.12 The legal team have confirmed that there are no legal implications arising from this report.

7.0 Engagement and Consultation

7.1 Public consultation has taken place on the designs for refurbishments at Horsell Moor and Oakfield.

7.2 The local residents association are engaged in the replacement play area at Sutton Green, so will have input when writing the specification requirements for the new play area. It is also anticipated that a wider public consultation would be undertaken once the proposal for the new equipment is received.

7.3 Public consultation would also be considered on any other larger refurbishment scheme, where a significant proportion of any given play area is being replaced.

REPORT ENDS