

Report

17

Report to:	Executive Committee Report
Date of Meeting:	11 May 2011
Report by:	Executive Director (Community Resources)

Subject:	Member/Officer Task and Finish Group, Review of Fixed Play Areas
----------	---

1. Purpose of Report

1.1. The purpose of the report is to:-

- ◆ advise Committee on the outcome of the Member/Officer Review on Fixed Play Areas.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. The Committee is asked to approve the following recommendation(s):-

- (1) that, following a detailed evaluation of the three service options available to the Council in terms of the future management of its fixed play areas, the preferred service option to reduce the number of existing fixed play areas (by 118) and to develop a reinvestment programme covering the remaining 239 fixed play areas be approved.
- (2) that the allocation of a full project planning gain contribution (£25k or less) be automatically made towards the provision of children's fixed play areas.
- (3) that the possible use of "surplus" fixed play area sites be considered in detail at an appropriate time in the future.

3. Background

3.1. Approval was given from the Executive Committee on 23 June 2010 to carry out a review of fixed play areas through the use of a Member/Officer Task and Finish Group. The objectives of the review were to: -

- ◆ Establish, through a robust audit, the current condition, value and level of provision of fixed play areas throughout the Authority.
- ◆ Generate clear principles of play provision, acknowledging key areas of play value (as recognised by the National Playing Fields Association) and sustainability, which will be the foundation on which to build a strategic approach towards fixed play area provision.
- ◆ Recommend a course of action to address the current high levels of provision and low levels of play value, health and safety and antisocial behaviour issues.

3.2. It is prudent to note where the Council features, on a national perspective, in regard to the provision of fixed play areas. Two key performance indicators available through the APSE framework which are of interest include: -

- ◆ “Average play value of children’s playgrounds”
 - Out of a family grouping of 7 local authorities we came in 7th.
- ◆ “Playground provision per 1,000 children”
 - Out of a family grouping of 57 local authorities we came in 9th.

3.3. It is clear from the above that the actual play value of our fixed play areas could be significantly improved and, secondly, the Council scores comparatively high in terms of the overall number of fixed play areas that it has.

3.4. For general information those local authorities which border South Lanarkshire Council have the following number of fixed play areas;

Authority	Population	Number of Play Areas	Ratio Population Per Play Area
Glasgow	588,000	274	2,146
North Lanarkshire	326,000	200	1,630
South Lanarkshire	311,000	357	871
West Lothian	171,000	57	3,000
Dumfries and Galloway	149.,000	268	555
East Ayrshire	120,000	102	1,176
Scottish Borders	112,000	188	595
East Renfrewshire	89,000	38	2,342
Average		186	1,539

Outline observations relative to the table include: -

- ◆ South Lanarkshire Council has the highest number of fixed play areas from the 8 local authorities
- ◆ The highest ratio of fixed play areas per 1000 population lies with West Lothian, the lowest being Dumfries and Galloway.
- ◆ Acknowledging a broadly similar population between the two Lanarkshire authorities, North has 157 fewer fixed play areas than South Lanarkshire.
- ◆ Despite Glasgow having a population of 227,000 more than South Lanarkshire Council they have 83 fewer fixed play areas.

3.5. Investment, from a capital perspective, on fixed play areas was last provided in 2003/04. There has been no further capital investment.

3.6. Out of the current 357 fixed play areas in the Council there are excellent examples of high play value and inclusive fixed play areas (Chatelherault Country Park). Unfortunately, the Council also has fixed play areas with ageing play stock e.g. Fernhill Pavilion and Bothwell Road Public Park and new and established fixed play areas which have been subjected to acts of vandalism and antisocial behaviour e.g. Springwells, Blantyre and Calderglen Country Park, East Kilbride.

3.7. The review does not take into account the number of private fixed play areas that exist throughout the authority, all of which should be under a private factoring arrangement.

4. The Value behind Fixed Play Areas

- 4.1. Fixed play areas are an integral part of South Lanarkshire's play provision and are important assets which assist with child development by providing opportunities to stimulate and challenge children. Fixed play areas within all the communities, both in the urban and rural areas, provide opportunities to improve children's mental well being and for social interaction through the provision of safe and well designed fixed play areas.
- 4.2. Fixed play areas, far from being a simple, enjoyable pastime, are a crucial element in the growing up and development of children. Through play a child develops agility and co-ordination skills, learns the social rules of society and explores and learns about the environment.
- 4.3. Through the provision of fixed play areas the following core benefits are achieved:-
 - ◆ They will help a child develop physically, mentally and emotionally.
 - ◆ They will provide a means of learning.
 - ◆ They will encourage social interaction.
 - ◆ They will develop a child's communication skills.
 - ◆ They will give a child a source of satisfaction and feeling of achievement.
 - ◆ They will encourage a child to explore and learn about his/her environment.
 - ◆ 'Quality' play can be used to direct children away from antisocial behaviour.
 - ◆ Encouragement of the use of leisure facilities in later years.

5. Review of Existing Fixed Play Area Provision

- 5.1. The Council currently has 357 fixed play areas, geographically located as follows: -
 - ◆ Hamilton 42
 - ◆ East Kilbride 110
 - ◆ Clydesdale 170
 - ◆ Rutherglen/Cambuslang 35
- 5.2. A fundamental objective behind the creation of the Member/Officer Working Group was to establish the current condition of each of the 357 fixed play areas within the Council.
 - 5.2.1. In order to do so an audit was carried out whereby all 357 fixed play areas were assessed during the period June through to August 2010.
 - 5.2.2. The audit contained four main criteria and detail on each criteria included:
 - ◆ Location.

A total of 8 individual elements were used to assess the location of each fixed play area. Details included –

 - Public Transport
 - Private Transport
 - Parking at each fixed play area
 - Pedestrian access network
 - Adjacent fixed play areas
 - Existing amenities
 - Proximity to other local facilities

◆ **Development**

A total of 9 individual elements were used to assess the development potential of each fixed play area. Details included -

- Scope for development
- Existing ground conditions
- Proximity to properties
- Existing examples of anti social behaviour
- Type of existing infrastructure
- Health and Safety Issues
- Lighting Opportunities
- Site Access for any development work
- Existing service restrictions

◆ **Existing Play Equipment**

The score for this assessment relates to the current provision and associated condition of the existing play equipment. The assessment took into account levels of wear and tear, damage, graffiti and vandalism. Also included was an evaluation of the type of safer surfacing in place (if at all) and its condition.

◆ **Play Value**

Each item of play equipment, the existing range amounts to 21, was given a points value and each play area was assessed.

5.3. It is clear, very much endorsing the performance indicator from APSE, that the Council has limited play value in many of its fixed play areas. General observations that can be taken from the audit include: -

- ◆ The level of vandalism that occurs to both new and old fixed play areas.
- ◆ The increased play value and associated experience provided through some of the major fixed play areas (Chatelherault, Calderglen)
- ◆ The concern as to the current location of fixed play areas e.g. next to roadways and water courses.
- ◆ The provision of fixed play areas (albeit small) which are less than 500 metres from one another.

5.4. Acknowledgement has been made of the role played by Royal Sun Alliance, the Councils Insurers, who independently arrange for an inspection to be carried out on the condition of the Councils fixed play areas. The results of this independent assessment very much endorses the results of the Councils own fixed play area audit.

6. Service Options for the Provision of Fixed Play Areas

6.1. Acknowledging the current and variable condition of the Councils fixed play areas there are three service options that should be considered:-

6.1.1. *Service option 1; Status Quo*

Notwithstanding the very clear national indication that the Council has a comparatively high number of fixed play areas with many carrying limited play value, there is nevertheless an option to do nothing, leaving the fixed play area stock as is. The Status Quo in other words. Such action carries no financial risk or outlay. The consequence of taking no action however will merely be that a further reduction in the play value of our existing play areas will occur.

6.1.2. Service Option 2; Raise the condition and play value of all of the Councils fixed play areas.

Clearly this represents a major financial undertaking. On a broad basis it is estimated that as much as £3.00m could be spent on bringing all 357 fixed play areas up to the same standard.

6.1.3. *Service Option 3; Review the current provision of Fixed Play Areas*

In order to **halt** the general decline in play value it is proposed that a reduction is made to the total number of fixed play areas. A direct consequence of such action would be the opportunity to invest the revenue allocated to those fixed play areas that are to be removed in those that are to remain. First and foremost however is the exercise to identify the fixed play areas that are to be removed. This would be achieved by: -

(1) *Adopting clear principles in regard to categories of fixed play areas*

It is proposed that four major fixed play areas within the District and Country Parks be recognised which would provide a geographical spread of excellent sites that generally corresponds to the population distribution in the Council. Suggested locations would be: -

- Chatelherault Country Park – Hamilton
- Calderglen Country Park – East Kilbride
- Lanark Loch – Clydesdale
- Cambuslang Park – Rutherglen/Cambuslang

Sufficient detail and guidance is at hand from the Council's fixed play area audit to identify play areas that should be retained at a local level. Recognition is incidentally made of those fixed play areas situated in the villages of Clydesdale and other rural settings which, in many circumstances, represent the only recreational facility available. As such all of these fixed play areas would remain.

(2) *Reduce the number of local fixed play areas*

Using the results of the fixed play area audit could realise the removal of 118 fixed play areas from Hamilton, East Kilbride, Clydesdale and Rutherglen/Cambuslang. The following table illustrates the scale and location of the proposal.

	East Kilbride	Hamilton	Clydesdale	Rutherglen / Cambuslang	Total
Current number of play areas	110	42	170	35	357
Proposed number of play areas	66	28	124	21	239
Variance	44	14	46	14	118

6.1.4. The next stage in the process would be to create an investment framework on behalf of those fixed play areas that remain.

◆ *Increase the play value of the remaining fixed play areas*

This could be achieved by redirecting the revenue budget associated with the maintenance of the 118 fixed play areas that are to be removed into those that are to remain. It is estimated that, on an annual basis, the Council could save (and consequently reinvest) £118k into the remaining 239 fixed play areas. Over a five year period this equates to £590k of investment. Almost all of this expenditure would be spent on procuring new play equipment and safer surfacing, with the Councils own Grounds Section carrying out the implementation works.

Preset qualifications relative to the investment programme on the remaining 239 sites would include: -

- No investment to be made in a local fixed play areas which, over the past five years, has been upgraded
- Equally, any local play area which is currently subject to an external funding application or approved planning gain contribution would be excluded from the investment programme.
- From the fixed play area audit any local fixed play area which was assessed and scored sufficiently high will be excluded from the proposed investment programme.
- Due to excessive vandalism to wooden items of play equipment all future equipment purchases will be made of galvanised steel.
- An allocation of Capital be set aside in year 1 of the investment programme for the removal of all play equipment on those fixed play areas that are to be removed.
- The four 'major' play areas are recognised as having a key role within the overall hierarchy of fixed play provision as they each deliver a diversified and inclusive play experience that is quite different from that enjoyed at a local level. An outline play value assessment on each of these four facilities includes: -

- *Chatelherault Country Park, Hamilton.* This major facility, in terms of its overall play diversity and value, is satisfactory and there are no plans to invest in this facility.
- *Lanark Loch, Lanark.* A major funding application is being prepared by the Lanark Play Parks Group
- *Cambuslang Park.* A major new fixed play area will be introduced through a successful Heritage Lottery Fund application.
- *Calderglen Country Park, East Kilbride.* The current site, while diversified in terms of fixed play experiences, is currently subject to anti social behaviour and acts of vandalism. In year 3 of the fixed play area investment programme an allocation of revenue has been set aside in order that a partner can be found to facilitate an external funding application being made.

6.2. On an electoral ward by ward basis it is proposed that a meeting be arranged in order to outline the full results of the fixed play area review.

7. The Role of Planning Gain/Possible Re-use of Surplus Fixed Play Areas

7.1. Formulation of a Planning Gain policy (on behalf of fixed play areas) would further increase the play value provision and, at the same time, accelerate the time needed to standardise the quality of the remaining fixed play areas. The Council has, over the past few years, gained new recreation sites and upgraded existing facilities through the Planning Gain process – Section 75 Agreements.

7.1.1. Already in place, through liaison with the Council's Enterprise Resources Department (Planning), are recreation requirements that feature within the Residential Development Guide. It is not proposed to alter this framework. For consideration however is the recommendation that where the full development contribution is £25k, or less, it should automatically be allocated to fixed play areas.

7.2. Whilst the current economic climate is such that private housing development initiatives are not as active as in previous years, there is nevertheless an opportunity to review the proposed list of fixed play area sites which would be declared surplus in order to assess whether or not they are suitable for reuse or indeed as a capital receipt. The full report identifies those fixed play areas sites which may have a possible alternative use and those which may have a capital receipt value (the necessary planning, roads and title checks having first of all being carried by the Councils Estates section).

8. Consultation

8.1. A commitment to consult with users of the Council's fixed play areas has been carried out, very much running in parallel with the audit process and the general development of the future provision of fixed play areas. Two different consultation commitments have been fulfilled i.e.

- ◆ Engagement with **the general public**
- ◆ Engagement with users of the fixed play areas (**Primary 5, 6, 7, in 24 primary schools**).

8.2. The first consultation was with the **general public** and occurred over a 4-week period, 7 September 2010 through to 5 October 2010. In all, 23 locations throughout the Council were used. Typical locations included Libraries and Supermarket sites. The purpose of the survey was to determine the level of use of the play areas during the last six months, how users rated these facilities and their expectation and preference for future fixed play area provision. At the close of the survey period 1,238 responses were received.

8.3. The second consultation occurred over a two week period and focused **on primary school children**. In all 24 primary schools were selected, geographically spread throughout the authority with standpoint electronic terminals being used to collect the views of the school children. At the close of the survey on Monday 8 November 2010 a total of 1399 valid responses were received.

9. Employee Implications

9.1. The removal of 118 fixed play areas will not effect the Councils permanent workforce. There will however be a reduction in the number of seasonal employees,(9) given the overall reduction in the maintenance of fixed play areas.

10. Financial Implications

10.1. There will be a capital allocation of £100k made available during 2011/12 as well as £590k, over 5 years, of revenue investment in the Councils fixed play areas.

11. Equality Impact Assessment and Consultation Arrangements

- 11.1. The report does not introduce a new policy, function or strategy or recommend a change to an existing policy, function or strategy and therefore no impact assessment is required.
- 11.2. Consultation has already occurred with the general public and Primary 5, 6 and 7 schoolchildren in 24 Primary schools.
- 11.3. A copy of the relevant supporting documents is available within the Members area or upon request from Community Resources.

Norrie Anderson
Executive Director (Community Resources)

7 April 2011

Link(s) to Council Objectives/Improvement Themes/Values

- ◆ Efficient and effective use of resources
- ◆ Improve Community Safety
- ◆ Improve the quality of the local environment
- ◆ Improve Health and Increase Physical Activity

Previous References

None

List of Background Papers

- ◆ Executive Committee 23 June 2010
- ◆ Corporate Management Team 23 December 2010
- ◆ Performance and Review Scrutiny Forum 18 January 2011

Contact for Further Information

If you would like to inspect the background papers or want further information, please contact:-

Stephen Kelly, Head of Facilities, Fleet and Grounds Services

Ext: 4705 (Tel: 01698 454705)

E-mail: Stephen.kelly@southlanarkshire.gov.uk