

Report

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Report to:	Performance and Review Scrutiny Forum
Date of Meeting:	18 January 2011
Report by:	Executive Director (Community Resources)

Subject:	Member/Officer Task and Finish Group, Review of Fixed Play Areas
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1. The purpose of the report is to:-

- ◆ Outline the results of the Member/Officer Review on Fixed Play Areas.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. The Performance and Review Scrutiny Forum is asked to approve the following recommendation(s):-

- (1) that it be noted through the APSE criteria, the Council has a considerable number of fixed play areas (357) which individually provide a differential play value.
- (2) that the intrinsic value provided by fixed play areas is recognised in regard to children's physical, mental and social development and well being.
- (3) that the service options available to the Council in terms of the future management of its fixed play areas be noted.
- (4) that the preferred service option is accepted where a reduction is made to the existing number of fixed play areas (by 118) and that a reinvestment programme is made into the remaining 239 fixed play areas.
- (5) that the allocation of any planning gain contribution (less than £25k) be automatically made towards the provision of children's fixed play areas.
- (6) that recognition is made of the possible use of "surplus" fixed play area sites.

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 (Last).
 - ◆ “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. Perhaps, even at this outline stage of the Member/Officer Review, a view could be taken that the Council is currently spreading its resources too thinly, given our low play value and high number of fixed play areas. Hardly a foundation to build a future policy on.
- 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. 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 new fixed play areas being subjected to acts of vandalism and antisocial behaviour e.g. Springwells, Blantyre.
- 3.6. The review does not take into account the number of private fixed play areas situated throughout the authority.

4. The Value behind Fixed Play Areas

- 4.1. So why are fixed play areas so important?
- 4.2. 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 conurbations, provide opportunities to improve children's mental well being and for social interaction through the provision of safe and well designed fixed play areas.
- 4.3. 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.
- 4.4. 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. Each survey was carried out on weekdays.

5.2.2. The audit contained four main criteria and a weighting factor was applied to the combined criteria of 'Location and Development-65%' and a similar treatment was given to the other two criteria of 'Existing Play Equipment and Play Value- 35%'. Detail on each criteria includes;

◆ Location.

A total of 7 individual elements were used to assess the location of each fixed play area. Details included -

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

Each of these elements carried a points range (1 to 5) which was assessed against each play area. An overall 'location' score was consequently secured.

◆ 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

Similar to the 'location' criteria each of the above carried (where feasible) a points range (1 to 5) which was assessed against each fixed play area. An overall score was subsequently created on the 'development' potential of each of the fixed play areas.

◆ 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. The type of safer surfacing can vary from wet pour, grass matting, rubber tiles, bark, sand and, in some of the older sites, tarmac. A score was subsequently created for the 'Play Equipment' criteria.

◆ Play Value

Each item of play equipment, the existing range amounts to 21, was given a points value and each play was assessed. A value on the actual 'play value' of each fixed play area was subsequently created.

5.3. Appendix 1 of the report provides a full analysis of the results of the fixed play area audit. 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 quite independent and crucial role played by fixed play areas in the rural areas of the Council, the fixed play area in many circumstances being the only recreational facility available .
- ◆ 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 who independently arrange for an inspection to be carried out on the condition of the Councils fixed play areas. From 1 April 2010 to date a total of 58 inspections has occurred(Clydesdale 25, Hamilton 3,Rutherglen/Cambuslang 8,East Kilbride 22),the findings being of a common theme i.e.

- ◆ Clydesdale , Comments.” Equipment beyond repair, items of equipment missing ,main support timbers rotten, ground erosion, trip hazards, no signage, toddler swing seat belts corroded, ground base is red ash and concrete, foot treads broken off, worn chains, chain links excessively worn, damaged and rotten panels, fixing bolt (lack of one), splintered bike seat and rotten side car panel ,front handle bar distorted”.
- ◆ Hamilton, Comments. “Damaged swing seats ,seat anchor eye bolts need adjustment, uneven ground surfaces, no signage ,broken spring clips ,graffiti, panels missing, no swing assemblies, tumble car cover missing”.
- ◆ Rutherglen/ Cambuslang. Comments. “Corroded support frame, handles missing, overflow pipes from houses can dispense water onto play area, fire damage, chipped boards, locking nuts needed, no signage, chute side panels missing”.
- ◆ East Kilbride, Comments. “Concrete supports exposed ,no signage, timber support base exposed, seat chain anchor bolts loose, corroded panels on high chute, swing assembly missing, ground bases exposed, concrete surfacing, worn board treads, rocker assembly missing”.

Out of the 58 independent inspections carried out only 3 secured a full pass mark i.e. “No Defects”. Whilst there are areas within the inspection reports that would have been automatically resolved during our weekly inspection i .e. tightening of locking nuts, the alternative action would be to chain off or formally decommission a piece of play equipment where the level of repair or degree of safety concern is too big a risk to leave unresolved.

Many of the fixed play areas recommended for closure have also been inspected and are part of the inspections carried out by Royal Sun Alliance.

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. *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 to bring all 357 fixed play areas up to the same standard. An action of this nature would apparently be palatable, clause 8.2 of the report outlining how sections of the local communities wish the Council to retain all of its fixed play areas. Whilst such a view is understandable the reality is such that our current ad hoc revenue budget of £50k (materials) is completely insufficient to support the repair, let alone upgrade, the current fixed play area stock.

6.1.2. *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 consequences, however, of supporting this option is not difficult to envisage. Those fixed play areas that are currently deemed unsuitable will degenerate even further, and those which are currently considered satisfactory gradually falling into an unusable condition. The play value offered to the Council's communities, and in particular to the children, will reduce. Moreover as more items of equipment are de-commissioned there could be an increase in levels of anti social behaviour as well as increasing the number of wasteland sites within urban housing areas.

6.1.3. *Reduce the number of Fixed Play Areas.*

In order to **halt** the general decline in play value it is advocated that a reduction is made to the total number of fixed play areas. A direct consequence of such a reduction 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: -

◆ *Adopting clear principles in regard to categories of fixed play areas*

Provision of a preset number (4) of major fixed play areas within the District and Country Parks 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

Each of these sites would conform to the full European standard and would accommodate all ages and abilities of children.

These sites, by their nature, would offer the opportunity to maximise play value and would include equipment for children who may have restricted sight and mobility issues.

◆ *Provision of suitable local play areas*

A typical local fixed play area should ideally contain a combination of swinging, sliding, rotary, balance and rocking equipment as it is widely accepted that the greater the variety of play the greater the opportunity for children to develop physically, emotionally and mentally.

Arriving at a position whereby the Council has a provision of suitable local fixed play areas would be achieved by using the fixed play area audit. Sufficient detail and guidance is at hand from the audit to identify play areas that should be retained. In order to provide a proportionate balance of play provision throughout the Authority, a level of reduction in each electoral ward was set.

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.

◆ *The revised 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

Appendix 2 of the report provides a list of the fixed play areas that are to be removed.

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

◆ *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. The specification that would no longer be necessary for the 118 fixed play areas includes: -

- Painting of landscape features (once per annum)
- Painting play equipment(once per annum)
- Rake/Brush/Bulking up of surfaces (once per annum)
- Inspecting all play equipment (weekly)

- Litter collection/brush hard surfaces on playgrounds and landscaped areas (weekly). This task is the most time consuming element of fixed play area maintenance and the task that generates the biggest revenue saving.

It is estimated that, on an annual basis, the Council could save (and consequently reinvest) £118k into the remaining 239 fixed play areas. Almost all of this expenditure would be spent on procuring new play equipment and safer surfacing, with our own Grounds team carrying out the implementation works.

Over a 5 year period some £590k (5 years at £118k per year) of equipment and surfacing investment would be made on behalf of the remaining fixed play areas. And all of this without any capital investment.

Preset qualifications relative to the investment programme on the remaining 239 fixed play areas includes: -

- No investment to be made within the '30' local fixed play areas which, over the past five years, have been upgraded
- Equally, the '4' local fixed play areas which are currently subject to an external funding application or approved planning gain contribution would be excluded from the five year investment programme.
- From the fixed play area audit '42' of the local fixed play areas scored sufficiently high to warrant each of them being excluded from the proposed five year investment programme. Each of these facilities remain in a fit for purpose condition.
- Investment on the remaining '163' local fixed play areas would occur, the range of play experiences and activities increasing beyond which is currently in place. It would be our intention to focus the investment programme on those fixed play areas within the total of 163. This holistic approach focuses very much on improving the play value of those fixed play areas that require immediate investment which will lift the overall fixed play provision throughout the authority to the same standard.
- Due to excessive vandalism to wooden items of play equipment all future equipment purchases will be made of galvanised steel .
- An allocation of £30k to 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. (This allocation would not return to grass any redundant hard surfaces within the fixed play areas that are to be removed). An estimate for this task is £100k.
- The four 'major' play areas have 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 to the value of £180k and is being led by the Lanark Play Parks Group. Targeted funding agencies will include the Renewable Energy Fund, Landfill Tax Credit Scheme and the Rural Development Trust. An allocation of £16k has been set aside in

year 3 of the investment programme to assist the application. It is worth noting that a proposal is being developed which could realise investment of £80K into the nearby Castlebank Park during the next financial year, funding coming from the Councils Capital programme.

- *Cambuslang Park.* A major new fixed play area will be introduced through the successful Heritage Lottery Fund, a total of £136k being spent.
- *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 addition it is wrongly situated. In year 3 of the fixed play area investment programme an allocation of £80k has been set aside in order that a partner can be found to facilitate an external funding application being made. Ideally, the Councils partner would be a fully constituted community group, with an obvious interest in fixed play but who nevertheless have a wider environmental outlook which focuses on areas like Community Gardens or Environmental Improvements. Consolidating fixed play initiatives into a funding application of this type could be palatable to external funding agencies. The estimated value of creating a new “major” fixed play area at Calderglen is incidentally set at £160k.

6.1.5. On an electoral ward by ward basis it would be advantageous to outline to the local Councillors what (and when) investment proposals would be carried out on the remaining fixed play areas in each of their wards. Appendix 3 of the report provides detail on the 5-year investment programme.

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 concept that any planning gain contribution of a value less than £25k should automatically be allocated to fixed play areas. Support of this type, regardless of frequency, will sustain the value of the Councils fixed play areas and accelerate the refurbishment objectives within the investment programme. Associated licence should be given to Community Resources (Facilities, Fleet and Ground Services) to strategically invest any such planning gain outwith the locality of the Residential Development site, a business case being created to justify the alternative play area investment.

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. Appendix 4 of the 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 to be 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 communities of the Council**
- ◆ 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 communities of the Council** 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 current use in the last 6 months of our fixed play areas, 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. Comments received included: -

- ◆ Current use of fixed play areas – 68% of the survey confirmed they had experience of using either a local play area or a major play area within the last 6 months. Respondents who had pre-school or primary children/grandchildren had the highest percentage which had used a local play area in the last 6 months.
- ◆ Of the numbers surveyed, 598 respondents gave ratings for the local play parks they had recently used and the overall satisfaction level was 55%. Level of use of major play areas like Chatelherault and Calderglen was low, with only 13% of those surveyed visiting these sites. Satisfaction levels from users of these major fixed play areas was however high at 71%.
- ◆ Respondents were given the opportunity to comment on the future provision of local fixed play areas, with 33% saying that the Council should continue to spread its resources over all of the existing facilities, with 20% of respondents supporting the idea of reducing the number of fixed play areas so that we can have better facilities rather than lots of fixed play areas which are not used. Around 20% of the respondents did not respond to either of the above options.

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 and comments received included: -

- ◆ Just over one quarter go to a play park near where they live lots of times, and just under half go sometimes. Around a quarter hardly ever or never visit a play park near where they live.

- ◆ Just over a quarter do not go or do not enjoy going because the play park is dirty or the equipment is old and broken. For around one fifth they feel the equipment is for much younger children.
- ◆ Almost half said if the smaller play parks near where they live were taken away they would not like it as they do go to their local play park and enjoy it and 15% would not like it as they would have nowhere else to go. Only 10% said it would not bother them as they do not go to the local play park much and 7% said it would not bother them as they would go to another small play park.

An executive summary on both items of consultation is provided in Appendix 5 of the report.

8.4 **Overview**

Whilst the consultation programme has been of general interest it is clear that the provision of existing local fixed play areas remain of value to local communities. Almost half of those surveyed in the **primary school survey** said that if their local play areas were taken away they would not like it.

In addition 33% of those surveyed (**General Community Consultation**) said that the Council should continue to spread its resources over all of our existing play areas. Very much countering these views however is the fact that unless the Council acts firmly both the local and major fixed play area stock will diminish beyond their current condition. Action has to be taken to support the communities expressed appreciation of their local play areas by **halting** the decline in fixed play area standards.

You will recall that one of the main objectives of the Member/Officer Review was to recommend a course of action to address the current high levels of provision and low levels of play value. Removing 118 fixed play areas achieves this objective. At the same time, the remaining fixed play areas will be left in a supported financial framework where their play value will be supported. In conclusion the following table illustrates the significant fixed play investment which could be made on behalf of our communities children through the provision of new fixed play area equipment i.e.

◆ Rotary	-	54 items
◆ Swings	-	8 items
◆ Slides	-	8 items
◆ Seesaw	-	31 items
◆ Multi-play	-	9 items
◆ Spring Mobiles	-	22 items
◆ Safer Surfacing	-	28 locations

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, given the overall reduction in the maintenance of fixed play areas.

10. **Financial Implications**

- 10.1. There are no financial implications relative to the report, as any additional expenditure on new equipment will be financed by the reduction in seasonal staff brought into the service.

11. Equality Impact Assessment and Consultation Assessment

- 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. It is further recommended (clause 6.1.5) that a consultation programme be introduced with each of the local councillors on a ward by ward basis to outline the detail behind the proposed changes.

Norrie Anderson
Executive Director (Community Resources)

6 January 2011

Link(s) to Council Objectives and 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

Contact for Further Information

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

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Appendices – Summary

Appendix 1	Copy of Fixed Play Area audit
Appendix 2	List of Fixed Play Areas to be Removed
Appendix 3	Five Year Investment Programme
Appendix 4	Fixed Play Areas to be Removed – Possible Re-use Options
Appendix 5	Consultation: Executive Summary

Appendix 1
Audit of Fixed Play Areas

Appendix 2

List of Fixed Play Areas to be Removed

Appendix 3

Five Year Implementation Programme

Appendix 4

Fixed Play Areas to be Removed Possible Re-use Options

Appendix 5

Consultation: Executive Summary

