

# Report to Executive

Agenda  
Item:  
  
**A.1**

Meeting Date: 28th October 2013  
Portfolio: Environment and Transport  
Key Decision: Yes: Recorded in the Notice Ref:KD  
Within Policy and Budget Framework YES  
Public / Private Public

Title: CARLISLE'S PLAY PROVISION  
Report of: The Director of Local Environment  
Report Number: LE32/13

## Purpose / Summary:

The report describes the process for reviewing Carlisle City Council's provision of fixed play areas and seeks endorsement of the principles to be adopted in the review.

## Recommendations:

It is recommended that:-

1. The Executive approve the principles adopted for the review of children's play areas in Carlisle as set out in the report.
2. The Executive delegates authority to the Director of Local Environment in consultation with the portfolio holder to implement the approved principles with regard to the individual play areas in line with the review findings.

## Tracking

|                        |                                 |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Executive:             | 30 <sup>th</sup> September 2013 |
| Overview and Scrutiny: | 3 <sup>rd</sup> October 2013    |
| Council:               | N/A                             |

## 1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Safe spaces in which to play are a fundamental right for every child. Play is an important part of the learning and development process in children. It teaches them about the basic capabilities of their growing bodies – balance, hand-eye coordination, strength and stretching. During play, children learn how to take calculated risks and how to challenge themselves to extend their abilities.
- 1.2 Play takes many different forms and can be undertaken alone or as part of a group. Definitions of play vary, but often include the principle that it is not supervised by adults – children are free to express themselves in whatever activities or behaviours seem appropriate to them.
- 1.3 Children will find opportunities for play in almost any environment, natural or artificial. While there is evidence to suggest that the radius of movement (with home at the centre) has declined for modern children, there is no doubt that many of them are engaged in similar activities as their parents and grandparents – building dens, collecting conkers, climbing trees etc. However, evidence of declining levels of physical activity among young people is mirrored by increasing incidence of childhood obesity and a concurrent rise in solitary, indoor activities based around a screen. Many initiatives are underway to try and counter this trend which is recognised as a threat to the future health of a generation. One way is to make play spaces as interesting as possible for young people. Local authorities have traditionally provided dedicated spaces for play, equipped with a variety of apparatus designed to encourage children to challenge themselves and have fun.
- 1.4 In addressing the priorities set out in the Carlisle Plan, we shall also contribute to **Equality** (by ensuring that all areas of the City have access to high quality play areas); **Community Safety** (by working with others to create safe play environments, for example by tackling anti-social behaviour); **Environmental Enhancement** (by improving the quality and environment of play areas as part of our on-going programme of improvements to Carlisle's parks and green spaces); and **Accessibility and Social Inclusion** (by ensuring that play areas are accessible and useable by all children and young people).
- 1.5 The views, opinions and experience of children and young people should be central to the planning and design of the environments in which they play.

## **2. THE RESOURCE**

- 2.1** Carlisle City Council operates 69 play areas serving its population of 106,000. 'Play for Today, Play for Tomorrow' was the City Council's Play Policy and Strategy for Children and Young People 2007 - 2012 and it is now time for the City Council to review its approach to play area management.
- 2.2** The intention will be to create a legacy of play facilities offering high play value in a safe environment, accessible to every child and allowing them to explore their individual abilities and learn to assess and overcome the risks inherent in physical challenge.
- 2.3** To do this successfully our proposed strategy is to focus on quality. A methodology is set out below by which an assessment can be made of the quality, play value and accessibility of each individual equipped play area. The outcome of the assessment will be used to determine the type, specification and maintenance requirements of each site in the future. These may be broadly characterised as:
- 'Destination' sites – where the accessibility and play value combine to attract visitors from a wider catchment area (2,000m)
  - 'Neighbourhood' sites – used by children and young people living in the vicinity (1,200m)
  - 'Local Play' – smaller areas that may have no formal equipment but are managed as spaces for free play by all age groups (500m)

*NB. These distances are suggested as a reasonable accessible radius – they can be adjusted if it is considered appropriate.*

The standard adopted will aim to ensure that every child has access to a high quality play area within a reasonable distance of their home.

- 2.4** In some instances existing play equipment is either obsolete or poorly located (or both) and is no longer providing a quality play experience. Location of play areas is a key factor and experience shows that those that are overlooked by residential properties are less likely to suffer vandalism and anti-social behaviour. Accordingly we have added an index of 'overlooking' to the review criteria. An estimate of the levels of usage received by each play area can be achieved by observational techniques. Numbers of children present during inspection visits can be recorded and indirect evidence can be gleaned from the condition of the safety surface. Heavy use of a play area results in heavy wear on the surfaces which require

regular repair or replacement. Low levels of use are suggested by lack of wear and tear and in the case of bark-chip surfaces, heavy infestation by weeds (which do not thrive in areas of high footfall). Application of the criteria will differentiate between sites and allow decisions to be made on how their future management can contribute to raising quality standards, the outcome of which could be that the equipment is removed and not replaced.

- 2.5** Advances in the construction of play equipment and the materials used have led to the development of 'low-maintenance' options and these have been extensively utilised in Carlisle, for example stainless steel finishes which requires no re-painting. We have also used natural materials where possible, which provide challenging play experiences at low cost. A good example is the 'octopus' climbing frame at Chances Park (Morton) made from a dead oak tree that had to be felled nearby. It will last for many years with little or no maintenance and when it does start to decay will simply be removed from the site. In recent years we have changed our choice of safety surface away from the very expensive wet-pour (crumbs of bonded rubber, heat-sealed to make a smooth, rubberised surface) and instead used grass-mat (cellular rubber mats that allow grass to grow through). This has the advantages of lower cost but is also low-maintenance. Once the grass is established it can be cut over by machine as the soft rubber matting is hidden in the grass roots.

### **3. RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 3.1** A brief analysis of risks associated with the current play area stock includes:
- Escalating costs of repairs and maintenance of out-dated equipment
  - Low play value of obsolete equipment leads to lack of engagement of children and young people in active play
  - Vandalism – associated costs and safety issues
  - Insurance claims resulting from our inability to maintain high standards of safety on ageing equipment (financial and reputational risks)
  - Staff resources at full capacity on inspections and repairs
  - Limited resources for development and improvement of play areas

### **4. REVIEW AIM AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

- 4.1** ***Aim:** Carlisle will be a child-friendly city where all children and young people have access to play opportunities in a range of different settings which offer variety, adventure and challenges. They will be able to play freely and safely and make choices about where, how and when they play.*

**4.2 Outcomes:** *This play area review focuses upon delivering two priority outcomes:*

- *Children are more physically active, emotionally resilient and are able to experience, judge and manage risk.*
- *Good quality and varied play spaces are widely available to children and young people in Carlisle*

## **5. REVIEW METHODOLOGY**

**5.1** The review will be undertaken in 3 parts:

- i. Desk Study – examination of our records, files, inspection sheets, and annual RoSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) reports and risk assessments to get an understanding of the age and condition of each play area.
- ii. Site audit – visit every play area to get an understanding of its location, siting, appearance and evidence of usage levels.
- iii. Mapping – using GIS to map the access radius and status of each play area in order to present the results of 1 and 2 (above) in a way that is easy to visualise and comprehend.

**5.2** The criteria by which the assessment is undertaken includes the following:

- **Play Value**  
RoSPA use a scoring system against a range of criteria in order to assess 'play value'. Depending upon their total score, play areas are categorised as being 'Excellent', 'Good', 'Average' etc. In practice, the approach means that RoSPA's 'Average' will be in excess of the national average for play areas, as measured by the National Playing Fields Association.
- **Play Space Access Standard**

Residents should have access to at least **one** of the following:

- A play space of 'Average' play value within 500 metres walking distance
- A play space of 'Good' play value within 1200 metres walking distance
- A play space of 'Excellent' play value within 2000 metres walking distance

NB. All play areas will be high quality – 'play value' is a specific measure of the range and type of equipment present.

*(Adapted from a similar system used by Edinburgh City Council and based on the RoSPA 'play value' criteria)*

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

- 6.1** The review of play provision in Carlisle is timely and will ensure that the highest standards can be maintained at all times. For the first time the City Council has set out the criteria for assessment and by which our play areas will be measured. As a result the community should be assured that the quality of provision is the best it can be.
- 6.2** In order to fulfil the aims of the review, officers will draw up a programme of work using the outcomes of the review as a guide. The work programme will utilise existing City Council resources, plus any external sources of funding that may be available, in order to deliver a portfolio of high quality play facilities accessible to every child.

## **7. Analysis**

In producing this review we have combined the following analyses:

- i. An audit of all known play areas in the city and district, produced for the City Council by RoSPA, following their 'Playsafe' approach which includes assessing each play area in terms of its age-group provision, age, play value, condition and safety; and
- ii. A spatial analysis, encompassing access to play areas, based upon the agreed access standard.

*(Note that the analysis only covers City Council owned and operated sites)*

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 8.1** It is recommended that:-

1. The Executive approve the principles adopted for the review of children's play areas in Carlisle as set out in the report.
2. The Executive delegates authority to the Director of Local Environment in consultation with the portfolio holder to implement the approved principles with regard to the individual play areas in line with the review findings.

## 9.0 CONSULTATION

9.1 No external consultation has been undertaken up to this point. Ward Councillors, 'Friends' of Parks and residents groups (where appropriate) will be consulted as the review moves to its action phases.

9.2 **The report was considered by the Community Overview & Scrutiny on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013 and comments are shown below:-**

Members would be prepared to support officers in the combined rationalisation of play areas with a capital programme to improve the play areas.

They resolved that:-

1. That the report be noted
2. That the Executive be asked to consider a capital budget to be made available for the replacement of equipment when and where required.

## 10.0 CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 Raising the standards of our children's play facilities will contribute to a number of 'Carlisle Plan' objectives and will also have an impact on wider social issues such as health and physical activity of young people. We believe the Play Provision Review is an important step towards these better standards.

## 11.0 CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES

***Aim 2: Develop vibrant sports, arts and cultural facilities, showcasing the City of Carlisle.*** The provision of fixed play equipment allows young people to develop balance, strength and hand-eye coordination, giving them skills they can use in a number of sports and outdoor activities elsewhere. High standard play areas provide challenges to help children measure their own capabilities and assess risks inherent in climbing, balancing and swinging.

***Aim 4: Support growth by ensuring a high quality environment which is attractive to new businesses and residents.*** Facilities for children's play close to where they live is a factor in determining the attractiveness of an area for residents - play areas on well established residential areas need to be kept at the highest possible standard in order to remain as an asset to residents and the children who live nearby. New developments will normally have play areas included as part of

the planning process and where the provision can only be made off-site the Council will seek developer contributions to improve the standard of existing play areas.

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**Appendices  
attached to report:**

**Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers:**

- LE 29/13

## **CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS/RISKS:**

### **Chief Executive's -**

**Community Engagement** – 'The principles for play ground assessment proposed here are wholly appropriate. In keeping with good practice in developing sport and active recreation, the application of these principles will promote access to good quality play opportunity and enhance healthy and active lifestyles'

### **Economic Development –**

**Governance** – The Council has a responsibility to manage its assets and ensure that those using its play areas (whether by invitation or trespass) are reasonably safe. The proposals in this Report are about ensuring the best management etc of the Council's play assets.

### **Local Environment –**

**Resources** - This review of the Council's play provision will be undertaken by existing staff and within existing base budgets. Any financial implications arising out of the reviews to provide play facilities and equipment must be met from with existing resources or through the receipt of external funding, which must be subject to the Council's procedures on Grants and External Funding.



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## **EXCERPT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON 3 OCTOBER 2013**

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### **COSP.66/13    CARLISLE'S PLAY PROVISION**

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager reported (CD.52/13) that the City Council operated 69 play areas serving its population of 106,000. 'Play for Today, Play for Tomorrow' was the City Council's Play Policy and Strategy for Children and Young People 2007 – 2012 and it was now time for the City Council to review its approach to play area management. He explained that the intention was to create a legacy of play facilities offering high play value in a safe environment, accessible to every child and allowing them to explore their individual abilities and learn to assess and overcome the risks inherent in physical challenge.

To do that successfully the Council's proposed strategy would focus on quality. Details of a methodology by which an assessment could be made of the quality, play value and accessibility of each individual equipped play area were provided. The outcome thereof would be used to determine the type, specification and maintenance requirements of each site in the future. The standard adopted would aim to ensure that every child had access to a high quality play area within 500 metres of their home.

In some instances existing play equipment was either obsolete or poorly located (or both) and was no longer providing a quality play experience. Application of the criteria would identify those sites and allow decisions to be made on how their future management could contribute to raising quality standards, the outcome of which could be that the equipment was removed and not replaced. The Green Spaces Team had conducted a review of the Council's stock of equipped play areas during 2013.

The report outlined the Risk Assessment; Aim and Outcomes of the Play Areas Review; Review Methodology; and Criteria. Although no external consultation had been undertaken to date, Ward Councillors, 'Friends' of Parks and residents' groups would be consulted (where appropriate) as the review moved to its action phases.

The Executive had, on 30 September 2013, resolved to receive Report LE.29/13 and refer it to this Panel for consideration and comment. A copy of Minute Excerpt EX.105/13 had been circulated prior to this meeting.

The Environment and Transport Portfolio Holder advised that, as she was not able to attend the Executive meeting on 30 September 2013, she had recommended to them that no decision should be made until consultation with the Panel had been undertaken.

In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions:

- *The report indicated that there was no capital funding available for investment in old and obsolete equipment. Where would funding come from to replace old and damaged equipment?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager explained that where there was a new development the Council could utilise a Section 106 Agreement. However in established play areas there was some revenue funding to replace equipment but stressed that there was a limited budget for that purpose.

- *How would Members be involved in the review?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager advised that Members could discuss specific areas with him outwith the meeting. Officers needed a set of criteria for all play areas that would achieve good quality play areas across the City.

- *A Member was pleased to see that most of the play areas in the City were above average, good or excellent.*
- *As Chair of the Development Control Committee a Member advised that Members of that Committee stressed to Planning Officers the importance of discussions with developers to provide play areas and their location. Some play areas were hidden away and were often vandalised or used by young people who left broken glass behind.*
- *Less maintenance was required for some types of play equipment. What impact would that have on resources?*

Some play areas were lower maintenance than others eg wooden climbing equipment. Much of the maintenance involved removing broken glass and therefore the siting of play areas was critical. Occasionally young people collect refuse and set fire to it beneath equipment which would require it to be replaced.

- *Members would be prepared to support Officers in the combined rationalisation of play areas with a capital programme to improve the play areas.*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager advised that Officers' intention was to improve the quality of the play areas. If there was a rationalisation of play areas the play spaces would remain but they may look different to how they currently appear.

- *Would the Council be able to match community based initiatives and community fund raising?*

The Environment and Transport Portfolio Holder stated that the intention was to ensure that the equipment in all areas was to a good standard. If the community provided funding and the Council matched the funding it could distort the funding available across the City. Any work with the community would need to be done in relation to the criteria.

The Director of Local Environment explained that Officers were looking at the principles to enable them to undertake the review. If there were opportunities to enhance a play area they may call the community to action to support the Council as the community could access grant funding that may not be available to the Council. The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager and his Officers were experienced in seeking out grants. The Council had a desire and a will to provide high quality play areas but the community and Members also had a role to play to support inventive ways to obtain funding.

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager advised that such schemes had worked well at Hammonds Pond and Belle Vue where Officers had worked with the community. Some community members also provided light maintenance such as litter picking and opening and closing the parks but that situation was not ideal.

- *Why was there a 500m buffer zone between play areas? Would there be the possibility of expanding that distance? The Member believed that 500m was too narrow.*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager explained that such input was what Officers were looking for. The appendix did not include issues such as busy roads.

- *Were there any plans to consult with children and young people?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager explained that it may be useful but it may result in talks taking place about specific areas. When new play areas were being discussed there was consultation with schools and community centres. The Youth Council could also be consulted.

- *What was the timescale for the review and would there be any feedback to the Panel?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager advised that it was essential to start the review as there were various budgetary implications. The criteria could then be turned into an action plan.

- *There had been a review and the start of a strategy in 2011 and 2012. Were they finalised?*

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that that work had stopped due to transformation issues and a reduction in staff. The current work was looking at the same issues in respect of the strategy and young people involved in play. If the focus was on the principles behind the review there could be consultation on the types of equipment and how children played. The Council did not have the same resources as in the past to stimulate those discussions and it was important to get community groups involved.

- *Some areas are implementing Play Streets schemes which were working well. It may be interesting to look at such schemes.*

- *The report indicated attendance at play areas. How was that monitored?*

The Neighbourhoods and Green Spaces Manager explained that whilst the Directorate did not have the resources to formally monitor the use of the play areas the figures were based on observations while Officers and staff had been on the sites and from experience. The number of reports of vandalism and broken equipment was also an indicator of the use of the sites.

RESOLVED: 1) That Report CD.52/13 – Carlisle’s Play Provision – be noted and the comments from the discussion referred to the Executive in consideration of the criteria for the review.

2) That the Executive be asked to consider a capital budget to be made available for the replacement of equipment when and where required