

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY COMMUNITIES
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON
MONDAY 22 APRIL 2013**

PRESENT: Councillors Mrs Blackmore (Chairman), Brindle,
Mrs Gooch, Mrs Joy, D Mortimer, McLoughlin,
Mrs Parvin, de Wiggondene and English

78. The Committee to consider whether all items on the agenda should be web-cast.

It was agreed that all items be web-cast as proposed.

79. Apologies.

Apologies were received from Councillors Munford and Vizzard.

80. Notification of Substitute Members.

Councillors Mrs Gooch and English substituted for Councillors Munford and Vizzard respectively.

81. Notification of Visiting Members.

The following Visiting Members attended the meeting with an interest in Item 7 on the agenda, Play Areas Review:

- Councillor Ian Chittenden;
- Councillor Jenni Paterson;
- Councillor Cynthia Robertson;
- Councillor Red Nelson-Gracie;
- Councillor Mike Hogg; and
- Councillor David Burton.

82. Disclosures by Members and Officers.

There were no disclosures.

83. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information.

It was resolved that all items be taken in public as proposed.

84. Play Areas Review

The Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services, Councillor John Wilson gave the Committee an overview of the Play Areas Review. He

referenced the outcome of the recent Governance Review which was to retain the Cabinet System with enhanced Scrutiny and his decision to involve overview and Scrutiny at an early stage in the review of Play areas to encourage Member involvement.

Jason Taylor, Parks and Open Spaces Manager gave a presentation highlighting the outcomes of the Play Area Review and options going forward. He outlined the current situation:

- 119 Play Areas in Maidstone Borough;
- 69 belonging to MBC, 40 Parish Councils;
- Green Spaces Strategy investment in 2005;
- Replacement budget reduced to £100k;
- Current budget will take 40 years to replace all of the MBC Play Areas; and
- Play Areas last on average 15 years.

It was explained that the scoring system used to evaluate play areas addressed quality, accessibility and usage. Play Areas were then colour coded green, amber and red according to their condition. The number of green play areas had declined from 32 to 23 from April 2009 to January 2013 and the number of red play areas had risen from 19 to 27.

The objectives of the Play Area Review were:

- To take a strategic look at play areas;
- Ongoing scoring of play areas in the borough;
- To look at the distribution of play areas;
- To come up with recommendations and standards for future play provision;
- To consider costs? and
- To identify funding sources.

The findings of the review were:

- That 51 out of 69 MBC Play Areas need or will need work within 5 years to reach/maintain green or amber standard.
- That there is currently no set standard for play provision, i.e. "residents should live within X miles of a good play area".
- There are some areas of potential over provision.

As a result of these findings 3 options were put forward:

1. No change in policy – maintain MBC Play Areas to current level- £250k year
2. Prioritise on 5 main play areas only - £100k year
3. Agree a borough wide strategic play provision standard - based on the majority of residents being a maximum of 12 minutes walk from an amber or green play area

Further work had been undertaken to develop Option 3 which included the following:

- Adopt 12 minute standard across the borough;
- £1.8 million would be needed to get all MBC Strategically Important Play Areas to Green Standard;
- 20 MBC Non Strategically Important Play Areas would not be invested in;
- Non Strategically Important Play Areas would be offered to Community Groups, Parish Councils;
- MBC would offer support to these groups; and
- If these play areas are not taken on, equipment would be removed when it needs repair and all equipment removed within 5 years.

Costings were provided for a 1 year and 5 year programme. Members felt that further information was needed on this in order to consider which option was preferential and to fully understand the economies of scale. The Committee also felt that it was unclear how much of the £1.8 million proposed would come from the Council's Revenue Budget and what proportion would come from the Capital Budget.

The Committee were informed that the following action would be taken with regards to 'non-strategic' sites:

- Some Strategically important play areas belong to Parish Councils.
- A Parish Play Grant of £10k will be available as match funding to any Parish that does not have an MBC Play Area;
- £200k will be set aside for 5 years to fund this; and
- Provision has been made in the Parish Services Scheme for revenue funding of these play areas.

In response to Members questions Mr Taylor explained that play areas would remain as an 'open space' if equipment was removed. Non- strategic play areas that were not taken on by community groups or parishes would have equipment removed within 5 years.

The Committee considered the ownership of play areas build as a result of future development and as a result of arrangements with Parishes and Community Groups.

It was explained that with regards to future developments it would be helpful to have a strategy in place as it would give the ability to identify if a play area was required. With regards to ownership models it was agreed that further information was required.

Mr Taylor summarised the findings of the Play Area Review and the preferred option going forward.

- The new adopted standard for play would be "that most residents across the borough will be a maximum of 12 minutes walk from a good play area;"

- The available resources would be targeted at strategically important play areas;
- Non strategic play areas would be offered to the community and MBC will help with this; and
- In order to achieve this; **over the next 5 years Maidstone Borough Council will invest over £1.7 million on Children's Play Areas.**

Members raised questions about the 12 minute walk standard. Mr Taylor explained a mapping exercise had been undertaken and rivers and road crossings had been considered. The Committee felt that it was important to understand the evidence base that had been used to determine this standard.

The Committee questioned the number of Play Areas that would be discontinued as a result of the standard being adopted. It was informed that it would be between 15 and 25 of Maidstone Borough Council's Play Areas.

It was recommended that the Committee agrees that the Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services continue to investigate Option 3 and report back to the Committee with further details which should include the following:

- Detailed costings about the proposals including potential savings relating to the economies of scale that may be achieved;
- Information on ownership and different ownership models for play areas, this should include Parish ownership and the support through the Parish Service Scheme;
- Further information on the 12 minute standard for most residents; and
- Clarity on which payments are from the Capital Budget and which monies are from the Revenue Budget.

85. Duration of Meeting.

6.36 p.m. to 8.15 p.m.