

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:	Cabinet Member for Culture and Tourism
2.	Date:	Tuesday 22nd April, 2014
3.	Title:	Public Petition regarding Play Provision at Horsefair Park, Swinton
4.	Directorate:	Environment and Development Services

5. Summary

A petition with 400 names was submitted to full Council in January 2014, requesting the provision of a new play area at Horsefair Park, Swinton to the rear of the Robin Hood pub car park. This has been considered, taking into consideration recent reductions in resources for maintenance of such facilities, and the availability of alternative play areas in the vicinity.

6. Recommendations

6.1 That the request to provide a new play area at Horsefair Park, Swinton is not supported due to the relatively good level of provision elsewhere in Swinton, and the need to target scarce resources in areas of greatest need across the borough.

6.2 That the lead petitioner is informed of the decision.

7. Proposals and Details

Petition

The receipt of a petition with 400 names requesting the provision of a new play area at Horsefair Park, Swinton was previously reported to Cabinet Member for Culture and Tourism on 18th February, 2014. Since then, contact has been made with the lead petitioner, Sharon Potts, who explained that the type of play area envisaged would be for pre-school children. She also suggested that this location is appropriate because a lot of children use Horsefair Park as a route to school (Queen Street and Brookfield). She believes that a new play area should include a bin, seating, fencing and safety surfacing.

The petition is supported by the Wentworth North Area Assembly (including Swinton Ward members), Area Housing Panel, and Swinton Sports & Health Group. It is understood that the Wentworth North Community Planning Officer would be able to support a funding application if a decision were made to proceed with the project.

The requested facility would replace an earlier play area which was removed over a number of years due to the age of the equipment and vandalism. There was a proposal in 2009 to replace the old play area through the government's Play Pathfinder funding programme. However, this proposal was withdrawn due to the presence on site of Japanese Knotweed meaning that the project could not be delivered within the available budget and timescale. Later, when the old play area had to be removed, Leisure and Community Services concluded that they could not justify its replacement because of reductions in budgets for play area maintenance from 2011, and the level of alternative play provision in the vicinity. Swinton Ward members were advised of this at the time.

Assessment

The service aims to ensure a balance of play provision across the borough. However, there are areas in Rotherham where access to play equipment is limited. Currently there are no adopted standards for play provision in Rotherham. Previously, recommended standards published by the National Playing Fields Association in their 'Six Acre Standard' were applied informally to guide decisions about investment in play areas, but these are no longer considered sustainable following reductions in budgets for play area maintenance. Leisure and Community Services now consider proposals to remove and/or install play areas on a case by case basis taking the following factors into account:-

1. The condition of the existing play area (if there is one)
2. Availability and quality of alternative play areas accessible to the community in question
3. The suitability of the site, including ground conditions, accessibility, level of surveillance, and possible nuisance to neighbouring properties
4. Local demand
5. The impact the proposal would have on the service's ability to maintain its entire stock of play areas in a safe and useable condition.

Whilst the capital cost of a new facility and the availability of external funding to cover this can also be an issue, an 'in principle' decision on whether to seek to

provide a new or replacement play area depends less on this than on the factors listed above.

Since 2011, just four new play areas have been installed by the Council. Two of these have been in Swinton Ward. Over the same period, six play areas have been removed across Rotherham, including Horsefair Park. Some other play areas have been reduced where selected equipment has had to be removed, mainly due to vandalism or difficulties maintaining certain products. Since 2011 between 15 and 20 items of equipment have been removed in this way, and none has been replaced.

Swinton Ward currently contains four play areas including:-

- Highfield Park, approx. 400 metres from Horsefair Park,
- Thomas Street, approx. 530 metres away
- Dun Street, approx. 800 metres away
- Albany Road, approx. 1,100 metres away

All four are in good condition, and those at Dun Street and Albany Road are amongst the newest play areas in the borough. Thus, the availability of alternative facilities in Swinton is good, and provision of a further area, whilst desirable, is not a high priority for the service.

Horsefair Park has suffered from relatively high levels of anti-social behaviour and vandalism, possibly due to restricted natural surveillance of some areas. The presence of a car park close to the proposed play area site increases the level of risk for children, although this could be mitigated by the installation of a boundary fence around a play area. A current bid to the HLF's Landscape Partnership fund include proposals designed to enhance the site's natural character and biodiversity; these might make Horsefair Park a less suitable setting for formal children's play than other green spaces in the vicinity containing play areas.

Based on this assessment, it is recommended that a decision be taken not to install a new play area at Horsefair Park.

8. Finance

The capital cost of the project would depend on its size and specification, and the cost of site preparation, but would probably exceed £50,000. WREN (Landfill tax) can support improvement of a public park at this location through their main grant scheme (between £15,001 and £75,000) as it is 8.62 miles from Scalebrook Landfill in South Emsall, near Doncaster. The community support suggested by the petition would be a consideration for WREN when assessing a funding bid. However, any grant would be subject to 'third party funding' being made available (at 11% of the total grant value). Rotherham MBC was previously able to make such contributions, but this facility was withdrawn in 2012. The WREN funding allocation to Rotherham is finite and if funding were to be awarded to this scheme then it might affect bids elsewhere in the Borough.

To date, the only capital funding pledged to the project is £1,500 from the local Area Housing Panel and £1,000 from Swinton Sports and Health Group.

The cost of inspecting and maintaining play areas has to be covered from service revenue budgets. Following significant reductions to these budgets since 2011, there have been efforts to reduce commitments to help sustain acceptable maintenance standards at remaining play areas. Therefore, a new play area here would have a negative impact on the Service's ability to maintain its entire stock of play areas adequately.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

The cost of dealing with Japanese Knotweed depends on the extent of rhizomes and is not known at this stage. It is highly unlikely that the costs of containment/removal can be built into any potential funding application; costs will probably be relatively high and a budget for this element adds to the cost of any potential scheme.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda

The recommendation not to develop a play area at Horsefair Park, Swinton will help Leisure and Community Services to sustain adequate levels of maintenance equitably across existing play areas, and thereby help to ensure better quality public places.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

Petition - submitted January 2014

Report to Cabinet Member for Culture and Tourism - 18th February 2014

Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

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