

Brighton & Hove City Council

Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee

Agenda Item 91

Subject: Playground Refurbishment Programme

Date of meeting: 15 March 2022

Report of: Executive Director: Economy, Environment & Culture

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Ward(s) affected: All

For general release

1. Purpose of the report and policy context

- 1.1 This report seeks to update the Committee on the:
- playground refurbishments programme.
 - creation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability forum.
 - playground petition, deputation and consultations.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Committee note the report.

3. Management Context and background information

- 3.1 The council has 55 playgrounds in the city, 38 of which are owned and maintained by City Parks, 15 are owned by the Housing Department but managed and maintained by City Parks. The seafront team maintain and manage 2 playgrounds and they are therefore not included in this programme.
- 3.2 Playgrounds are a well-used resource for families and important for health, wellbeing, and childhood development. The comprehensive consultation completed to develop the 2017 Open Spaces Strategy made it clear that the provision of playgrounds is a high priority for residents. The consultation found that playgrounds:
- ranked second highest for future investment in parks and open spaces.
 - were voted as one of the top three features in parks and open spaces.
 - are one of the most visited assets in parks and open spaces with more than 56% of respondents visiting once a month or more.
- 3.3 Sadly, during the first COVID lockdown playgrounds were closed from March to July 2020. When they reopened, the use by the public was substantially higher, due to other facilities normally open not being available for children and their families. This led to a significant amount of additional wear and tear on equipment and shortened the life of

some apparatus by several years. This factor in combination with the age of some equipment, led to over 100 play apparatus needing to be removed by March 2021.

- 3.4 It was the removal of so many items in one go, that became the catalyst for the play refurbishment programme. Therefore, the primary driver after this event was to a) identify funding to procure new playground equipment and b) replace the equipment as fast as possible recognising that a playground with significant items missing for several years, could have a detrimental effect on local children's development.

Committee Approval

- 3.5 On the 19th of January 2021 the Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee approved a refurbishment programme for 45 play sites and agreed to invest £3.0m towards a four-year programme. This was then ratified at the Policy and Resource committee on the 18th March 2021. To reduce the timeframe of replacing play equipment, City Parks borrowed £0.5m to shorten the implementation period from five years to four.
- 3.6 It is important to note that according to the play construction industry, what had been agreed at committees is the largest play refurbishment initiative by a local authority anywhere in the UK for decades. Since the approvals, Procurement and City Parks Officers have spent a considerable amount of time writing briefs, procuring, reviewing, scoring, awarding, and overseeing the multitude of tender packages that make up this initiative.
- 3.7 Very few playgrounds will be comprehensively restored, as this is a refurbishment programme i.e., only partially transformative. This point may reflect why some members of the public feel that certain age groups were missed out. In some instances, the refurbishments were focused on improving the equipment that was removed, which may have been for a particular age range. However, feedback overall has been very positive towards this initiative according to Friends of Parks Groups and members of the public City Parks has met.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Forum

- 3.8 At the ETS committee on January 19th 2021, an additional recommendation was agreed that: the refurbishment programme is informed by consultation with disability groups in order to improve disability access to local playgrounds. It was anticipated by City Parks that the forum would meet every six months.
- 3.9 Prior to this group being formed, City Parks had achieved an Inclusive Play Area accreditation (known as [PiPA](#)), for the accessibility and inclusivity play standards at the Level Park. This site also includes a 'changing places' toilet that contains a hoist to move people with limited mobility.

- 3.10 City Parks worked closely with the SEND community during the first COVID phase. They were able to identify three outdoor spaces across the city for children, which could be demarcated as quiet/safe spaces during certain times of the day.
- 3.11 The industry standard for playgrounds typically seeks to create spaces for all ages and all abilities. However, City Parks were encouraged to work with this SEND group to go beyond the current best practice to achieve something higher. Following the committee approval, the first SEND meeting was set up on the 8th March 2021. In attendance were representatives from inclusion groups including: Amaze Sussex, Extratime, PaCC Brighton and the Council's SEND Assistant Director. Furthermore, representatives from the community with related SEND experiences were also present, alongside the council's Play Development Officer and the Head of the Parks Projects and Strategy Team. Through discussion, the group identified the following opportunities to improve playgrounds for SEND children and their families:
- Design considerations that takes into account older children/young adults.
 - Sensory play equipment being increase in proposals.
 - Swings for wheelchairs to be considered noting the cost and maintenance limitations that would apply.
 - Surfaces providing a sensory experience.
 - Climbing facilities for all abilities and ages.
 - Changing places toilets to be considered.
 - Accessible wheelchair ramps to access more play equipment.
- 3.12 The steer provided from this forum influenced all future briefs for the refurbishment programme. Many of these actions were progressed or implemented in playgrounds within the next 12 months. Consultants and contractors on the council's Play Framework (ESPO), were all made aware of the greater accessibility aspirations and as a result, the following additional activities and outcomes have taken place:
- A more inclusive and accessible play site at Blakers Park, with the city's first wheelchair accessible jeep.
 - A new wheelchair accessible large play unit at Blakers Park.
 - The first wheelchair accessible seesaw in the UK at St Nicholas playground, which will be installed in March 2022.
 - [Universal design principles](#) used in all new tenders.
 - Inclusion and accessibility placed higher in the scores on all tenders.
 - 'Making space for girls' included as a high score question on tenders.
 - In addition to the above information, all of the 24 playgrounds completed in the first phase of the refurbishment programme have had some level of accessibility provision for physical and or sensory needs. It is anticipated that the future consultations planned with the wider community will continue to enhance this important area.

Furthermore, the following supporting activities also occurred:

- Directing feedback from the SEND group to play equipment suppliers and challenging them to create more inclusive apparatus.

- City Parks agreed to additional meetings on site to discuss concerns of any SEND forum members.
- City Parks accommodated additional SEND meetings as required.
- City Parks officers visited other sites and local authorities to widen their SEND knowledge, e.g. (Tower Hamlets – Weavers Field).
- Application sent to the government to fund seven ‘changing places’ toilets for the city of which six are to be located in parks.

Implementation update

- 3.13 City Park will have completed 24 out of 25 sites in the first phase by March 2022. This phase has invested £2.2m of play equipment for children all over the city (Appendix 1). Queens Park will be the last of the 2021/22 programme to be completed and, subject to consultation, will be procured in the spring of 2022 and installed in autumn/winter of 2022. A further 11 sites will have refurbishment works completed before May 2023. Officers have worked with the Housing department to assist in the procurement and delivery of three sites that share ownership with City Parks.
- 3.14 Officers have also been involved with several projects outside of this programme for the delivery of three significant Multiuse Games Areas and Outdoor Fitness sites at Stoneham Park, Carden Park & Wild Park. To date, the Playground refurbishment spend is on budget and on schedule with no unexpected overspend for the 2021/2022 programme.

Consultations, Petition and Deputation

- 3.15 Consultations undertaken prior to the SEND forum being established were:
- All Friends of Parks groups were contacted and involved in the consultation process.
 - The Play Development Officer would undertake informal pop-up consultations whilst on site assessing the space.
 - Ward councilors were informed of the process as it developed.
 - In addition, sites where stakeholders were more active, additional engagement took place. This occurred at: Wish Park, Carden, Whitehawk, Queens Park and East Brighton Park.
- 3.16 The success of the play refurbishment programme is best defined by how much the new apparatus is being used today by the community which is self-evident. Most of the Friends Groups have been delighted with the refurbishment programme and City Parks engagement with them. They recognise the financial limitations of the programme and have been pleased to be part of the process and see new equipment arrive in their area. City Parks are not aware of any playground which has seen reduced visitors following the refurbishment.
- 3.17 In 2021, a petition was created, requesting that the council engage more with the community and children. The author was cited in the local press, criticizing the choice of equipment and lack of consultation through the refurbishment programme. The petition ran for three months and attracted

278 signatories (0.1% of the population). The petition author was invited by members of the SEND group to join the forum.

3.18 In January 2022 , the petition author presented a deputation to the ETS committee calling [amongst other things], for further public consultations for the playground refurbishment programme and greater inclusion of children in this process. The committee identified the possibility of pausing the programme to accommodate further consultation where the time and resources were available.

3.19 Since then, City Parks have met with the SEND group and identified that: a Terms of Reference is to be created to clarify the focus of the forum, the play refurbishment consultation strategy should be shared with the group (Appendix 2) and the new online consultation for all future sites should be shared with the group for comment (Appendix 3). At the time of writing, the Terms of Reference had not been completed. City Parks will continue to work with the SEND group to support the development of the project, as they remain open to explore ways that could enhance the delivery of the refurbishment programme.

4. Analysis and consideration of alternative options

4.1 The overall play refurbishment programme has been a huge success given it was formed during pandemic and had no obvious funding pot to finance its realisation. Delivering so much infrastructure during a pandemic has additional pressures that officers and contractors could not have foreseen, such as staff and material shortages. Most other options to change this programme would have caused delays. It is important to remember that the initiative was borne out of a critical loss of playground equipment during a pandemic when play was essential to many children and their families.

4.2 When City Parks secured £2.0m from the Playbuilder programme 10 years ago, more comprehensive consultations took place as there was no impending emergency. However, what is also apparent is that more communication with the public is advisable to maximize support and cognition of future initiatives. With regards to deeper and wider consultations for the refurbishment programme for 2022 -2024, there is capacity for City Parks to hold more consistent online consultations for all remaining playgrounds. Additional resources to do more than this would be a challenge for the department.

5. Community engagement and consultation

5.1 The Consultation approach has been covered thoroughly in the report. Following the deputation and petition, City Parks are now seeking to implement consistent online consultations for all of the remaining playgrounds. A Consultation Strategy for the programme can be seen in (Appendix 3). Furthermore, the Parks Projects Team has identified that greater communications are needed to more proactively make the public aware of their past, present and future work programmes. Therefore, the

team will be hosting periodical events every four months to make the public, Councilors and officers more aware of their activity.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The scale of the City Parks playground refurbishment programme needs to be considered in terms of its national context, i.e., it is the largest local authority play refurbishment programme in the country. The programme was borne out of a desperate pandemic situation when over 100 items of apparatus were removed, and officers worked diligently to find and deliver a solution. The officers and industry in question were already experienced at delivering accessible playgrounds and supported the creation of a focus group for Special Education Needs and Disabled children as part of the initiative. A group was created, and evidence has been provided that much of the guidance from this forum was taken on board and implemented. The petition and deputation sought that more consistent consultation took place and ideally children should be involved. City Parks will be offering online consultation to all remaining sites which can be utilised by a wide range of audiences, as a minimum standard.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations of this report. As set out in the body of the report, the Playground Refurbishment Programme is on budget and schedule. With no significant budget variation to the programme the financial implications set out in the January 2021 ETS committee are still valid.
- 7.2 Officer time for online consultations as highlighted in the body of the report will be met from existing staffing resources. Any significant variations to budget will be reported as part of the council's monthly budget monitoring process.

Name of finance officer consulted: John Lack Date consulted: 14/02/2022

8. Legal implications

- 8.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from the report.

Name of lawyer consulted: Hilary Woodward Date consulted: 15/02/2022

9. Equalities implications

- 9.1 Equalities issues are addressed in the main body of the report.

10. Sustainability implications

- 10.1 This report relates to activity which will have limited impact on sustainability.

11. Public health implications

- 11.1 The Public Health implications have not altered from the ETS committee report made in January 2021.

Supporting Documentation

1. Background documents

1. [Open Spaces Strategy 2017](#)
2. [Report to Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee](#): 19th January 2021 – item 73
3. [Deputation presented to Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee](#): 18th January 2022 – item 66

2. Appendices

1. Delivered playgrounds programme 2021/2022
2. Draft Playground Consultation
3. Draft Consultation Strategy

