

**PROVISION OF PLAY FACILITIES IN HUNTINGDONSHIRE
(Report by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being))**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 At its meeting held on 3rd March 2009, the former Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) decided to establish a Working Group to examine the availability of play facilities in Huntingdonshire. The suggestion for the study emanated from a report prepared by the Service Development Manager on the Provision of Leisure Facilities for Young People across the District.
- 1.2 At the time, Councillors J D Ablewhite and P G Mitchell were appointed to the Working Group and asked to make recommendations on achieving an even distribution of play facilities across the District and on meeting the ongoing revenue costs associated with such facilities. Councillor J D Ablewhite contributed to the study up until June 2009 when Councillors Mrs P A Jordan and R J West were appointed to the Working Group. Councillor P G Mitchell was appointed as the Working Group's *rapporteur* and he has declared a personal interest in the study owing to his involvement with the Stilton Skate Park project. The Working Group has met on four occasions over the ensuing months.
- 1.3 Discussions have been held with the Head of Operations and the Service Development Manager, together with the Executive Councillor for Operational and Countryside Services, and the Working Group is grateful to them for the assistance and support they have provided in the course of their investigations.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The findings of the 2008 Place Survey reveal that Huntingdonshire residents consider the provision of activities for teenagers to be the highest priority area in need of improvement in the District and that 10.5% of respondents to the Survey perceive anti-social behaviour to be a problem across the District. Whilst this figure is relatively low, the Council will be challenged to reduce it further and the Working Group is of the view that making greater provision of facilities for teenagers will help to achieve this.
- 2.2 There are clear and demonstrable links between the potential benefits of providing facilities for young people and the Council's Corporate Plan, "Growing Success", through two of the Community Aims, namely "Developing Communities Sustainably" and "Safe, Vibrant and Inclusive Communities". Specific objectives include "enabling the provision of the social and strategic infrastructure to meet current and future needs" and "to reduce anti-social behaviour and ensure that people feel safe". Importantly, the Working Group has recognised the contribution that local facilities make to the achievement of the Council's Play Strategy.

3. REMIT OF THE WORKING GROUP

- 3.1 During the course of their discussions, it has become evident that, as there is a distinct differentiation between play, youth and leisure facilities, there is a need for the Working Group to clarify its precise remit. Members have, therefore, decided to focus on outdoor youth activity facilities catering predominantly for teenagers, which essentially are skateboard ramps and multi-use games areas. The latter, by definition, are used for more than one sport and must satisfy the conflicting demands of various activities.

4. FINDINGS

- 4.1 At present, the District Council does not provide any multi-use games areas within the District but the District Council currently contributes towards the maintenance of eight skate parks across the District, which are noted in the table below.

TOWN / VILLAGE	LAND RESPONSIBILITY	INSPECTION	MAINTAINANCE
St Neots	HDC	HDC	HDC
St Ives	HDC	HDC	HDC
Yaxley	Yaxley PC	HDC	HDC
Somersham	Somersham PC	HDC	HDC
Great Staughton	Staughton PC	HDC	HDC
Perry	Perry PC	HDC	HDC
Brampton	Brampton PC	HDC	HDC
Godmanchester	Godmanchester TC	HDC	HDC

- 4.2 A significant number of youth activity facilities have been funded through Section 106 agreements, which include provision for maintenance for a number of years. This provision goes to the relevant Town or Parish Council. The Working Group has established that, once the funding has been used up, Town or Parish Councils often cease to undertake maintenance, which means, by default, the District Council takes responsibility for meeting the revenue costs of these facilities. Furthermore, owing to the fact that Section 106 agreements are the primary way in which activity facilities are provided, significant differences exist between the level of provision in Towns and Parishes, not only in the availability of facilities for teenagers in Huntingdonshire, but also in terms of the support provided by the District Council.
- 4.3 It has become evident to the Working Group that rural parishes face difficulties in meeting the cost of maintaining activity facilities, particularly as opportunities for Section 106 funding are severely limited. To illustrate the point, the Working Group has been informed of issues that have arisen relating to the Stilton Skate Park. An independent community group, which has been established in the Village, has successfully raised capital funding to construct the Park. The Park has been constructed on land owned by the Parish Council, which is leased to the group at a cost of £1 per year. However, difficulties are now being experienced in attracting revenue funding to meet the ongoing running costs of the facility, which amount to an average of £2,000 per year.

- 4.4 The Working Group has been informed that capital grant aid is made available to Parishes on a match funding basis, but that the District Council does not, at present, have a scheme for assisting Parishes with running existing facilities. Exceptionally, the District Council has agreed to assist the group that runs the Stilton Skate Park over three years to meet the costs of insuring the facility, currently amounting to £1,600 per year. There are concerns about the future of the facility after this period has expired.

(a) Maintenance

- 4.5 The Working Group is concerned that similar situations to that in Stilton may exist in other villages in the District. Parishes rarely get assistance from the District Council, yet it has already been said that the Council maintains some facilities in Towns. The Working Group has concluded, therefore, the Council does not act evenly across the District. In addition, Members have made the point that, if the District Council were to maintain facilities in villages, the cost per facility to the District Council would be lower than for individual Parish Councils. However, it has been acknowledged that it would not be feasible for the District Council to take sole responsibility for all Parish facilities located within the District.
- 4.6 The Working Group has been reminded that the District Council has recently adopted a Sports Facilities Strategy. The Strategy suggests that there are sufficient facilities available in Huntingdonshire. This finding is based on nationally recognised standards. Whilst the Working Group is encouraged that there is adequate provision within the District, Members have commented, as before, that these facilities are largely located within the Towns and that they tend to cater for younger children rather than teenagers.
- 4.7 The Working Group has considered a suggestion that the District Council should open negotiations with Town Councils with a view to encouraging them to take greater responsibility for all facilities in their areas on a shared cost basis. The scheme could be extended to Parish Councils using the existing budget.
- 4.8 The costs of maintenance of facilities have been discussed and the Working Group has noted that funding primarily originates from two sources; that is, Section 106 funding and the District Council's maintenance budget for play equipment. Having regard to the first source, it has been reported that maintenance funding can only be obtained if the development is over a certain size. With regard to the second source, the Working Group has reiterated their view that this budget is not being utilised evenly across the District. The following paragraphs examine the ways in which this might be addressed according to the specific tasks that are required to run activity facilities.

(b) Insurance

- 4.9 A suggestion has been considered by the Working Group that the District Council could include local facilities on its insurance policy. In response, advice has been received from Officers that if facilities are not owned by the District Council, this is not possible. An alternative would be for Parish Councils to increase their precepts to meet this cost (and the cost of maintenance). **As an alternative, it is recommended that the District**

Council should investigate co-ordinating insurance for Parishes wishing to insure their facilities under a group scheme. The idea is that the Parishes would achieve a lower insurance premium.

(c) Inspection of Play Facilities for Maintenance Purposes

- 4.10 Another area that has been explored by the Working Group is the revenue cost associated with the inspection of play facilities for maintenance purposes. The Head of Operations has reported that, for a twice weekly inspection of facilities, on average, inspection costs amount to £40 per hour. At present, there is no capacity within the Operations Division to take on any additional inspections without there being service reductions elsewhere. To provide this service the District Council would have to employ an extra member of staff and purchase a vehicle. The estimated total cost of this is £45,000. Towns and Parishes would have to contribute towards this cost and this would only be viable if there is sufficient take-up from Parishes. **On the Stilton Example this has been provided by volunteer labour and is not therefore the main source of concern.**

(d) RoSPA Inspection of Play Facilities

- 4.11 In noting that a RoSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) inspection of District Council play facilities has to be undertaken on a routine basis, for insurance purpose and in discussing the cost of the inspection, a suggestion has been made by the Working Group that all sites within the District could be included within the District Council's inspection arrangements. Whilst Officers are currently investigating the feasibility of this suggestion, Members have been advised that the cost of the RoSPA inspection is dependant upon the size and purpose of the equipment being inspected and that the scale of charges for each of the Parishes would differ according to the level of provision available; they are currently however considerably less than individual applications. **It is therefore recommended that investigations should be undertaken into the feasibility and cost of providing ROSPA inspections for Town and Parish Councils.**

(e) Meeting the Revenue Costs of Facilities

- 4.12 The Working Group has been mindful of the resource implications of its proposals compared with the financial position of the authority and the existing pressures on the Council's budgets. In light of this, two alternative approaches have been considered by the Working Group both offering a 40-40-20% split in revenue costs between the District Council, Parish Council and users of the facilities respectively. Both options aim to encourage greater provision of outdoor youth activity facilities for teenagers in rural areas. The cost to the District Council will amount to an average of £800 per facility. The options proposed are detailed below:-

Option 1

- 4.13 A full insurance, inspection and maintenance service provided by the District Council's Operations Division would be offered to all Parishes. Only one facility per year would be added to the Operations Division's programme. Skateboard ramps and multi-use games areas would be the only types of facilities that would qualify under the scheme. It is, however, acknowledged

that at some point the Council will need to allocate more resources, both financial and operational to the scheme.

Option 2

- 4.14 The District Council would offer funding to Parishes to assist with their facilities' revenue costs. The expectation is that the offer would only be made available in rural areas, where there is currently no support. Parishes that already have an established facility could be brought into the system and hence make a considerable saving. Those that might wish to erect a facility in the future would be eligible. Only one facility would be permitted to join the scheme each year.
- 4.15 **The Working Group has expressed their support for Option 2 and this has subsequently been endorsed by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being).** Members have formed the view that, on the basis of the 40-40-20% split in revenue costs, the District Council's participation would encourage Parish Councils to contribute towards maintaining their facilities and also leave users of the facility with an achievable fundraising target for the year. **Members recommend that, should negotiations on Option 2 for existing and future Town facilities not be successful, then a bid for the District Council's portion of the costs to support Option 2 should be prepared for consideration as part of the Medium Term Plan process.**

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 The Working Group has recognised that Parish Councils are struggling to meet the costs of maintaining their activity facilities for teenagers. A number of suggestions to address this problem have been identified. They have been considered in terms of their ability to further the objectives of the Council's Corporate Plan and meet the challenges presented by the 2008 Place Survey. Members have been mindful of the financial position of the District Council but have, nevertheless, concluded that some priority should be accorded to providing activities for teenagers within the District as a whole. The Working Group's recommendations are designed to present a comprehensive package and have been supported by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The Executive Councillor for Operational and Countryside Services has been involved in all of the Working Group's deliberations. It is, therefore:

RECOMMENDED

- a) **that investigations be undertaken into co-ordinating insurance for Parishes wishing to insure their facilities under a group scheme;**
- b) **that investigations should be undertaken into the feasibility and cost of providing ROSPA inspections for all outdoor facilities in Town and Parish Councils;**
- c) **that the District Council establish an agreement with Towns and Parishes to cover the revenue costs of their youth activity facilities based on a 40-40-20% split between the District Council, Town/Parish Council and**

users of the facility respectively, as outlined in Option 2 (paragraph 4.14) of this report; and

- d) that, if negotiations on c) above not be successful, a bid be prepared for consideration as part of the Medium Term Plan process to meet the District Council's proportion of the costs associated with Option 2 (paragraph 4.14).**

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Notes of the meetings of the Working Group held on 30th April, 13th August, 28th October and 16th December 2009.

Report and Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 6th October 2009.

Report prepared by the Service Development Manager entitled Provision of Leisure Facilities for Young People Across the District – dated 3rd March 2009.

Contact Officer: Miss Habbiba Ali, Democratic Services Officer
(01480) 388006