

**CABINET**  
**10 July 2012**  
  
AGENDA ITEM 8

<b>Subject</b>	REVIEW OF EQUIPPED PLAY AREAS
<b>Report by</b>	CABINET MEMBER FOR PARKS AND HERITAGE

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**Purpose**  
The report sets out the policy and standards for the provision of equipped play areas, together with a draft development plan. The development plan outlines the proposed approach for rationalising and improving equipped play areas throughout the Borough in order that the spatial, catchment and quality standards set out in the policy can, as far as possible, be met.

- Options**  
The options include:
- To adopt the policy and standards and implement the development plan on a phased basis
  - Not to adopt the policy and standards for the provision of equipped play areas
  - To adopt the policy and standards, but not to rationalise equipped play provision accordingly
  - To adopt the policy and standards, but only implement part of the development plan

- Recommendation**  
It is recommended that Cabinet:
- [a] Adopt the policy and standards for the provision of equipped play areas in the Borough
  - [b] Approve the phased implementation of the development plan for equipped play areas to rationalise and improve provision
  - [c] Review progress of the implementation of the rationalisation and improvement programme on an annual basis
  - [d] Encourage local town and parish councils to take direct responsibility for provision and maintenance of equipped play areas in their area where they do not already do so

<b>Corporate Implications</b>	
Legal:	There are no particular legal implications
Financial:	Resources are already allocated to a refurbishment programme for

	equipped play areas. This programme will involve some rationalisation of existing provision, including removing some sites and improving others. Priorities for investment are identified in the development plan
Personnel:	None
Risk Management:	There are no additional risk management implications as these services are already provided
Equalities and Diversity:	The intention is to ensure that equipped play areas are as accessible as possible
Health and Safety:	There are no additional health and safety implications as these services are already provided
IT:	None
Other:	None

<b>Consultees</b>	<p>Cllr J Deakin – Overview and Scrutiny Committee Working Group Member  Cllr J Maybrick – Overview and Scrutiny Committee Working Group Member  Cllr M Moulds – Overview and Scrutiny Committee Working Group Member  Cllr C Kingsley – Former Cabinet Member for Parks and Heritage  Jo Whiting – Financial Services Accountancy Officer  Sue Jones – Financial Services Senior Accountant</p> <p>The report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee presented at the meeting on 23 April 2012 was circulated to all Councillors and all Parish Councils</p>
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<p><b>Policies and Strategies</b></p> <p>The Corporate Plan and '<i>Chelmsford Tomorrow</i>' includes an objective for people to have access to a high quality public environment, helping to create a welcoming, pleasant and vibrant place, with public spaces that are well designed and well managed.</p> <p>The most relevant priorities for action included in the Corporate Plan are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining high quality public places and a clean and safe environment</li> <li>• Reducing the incidence of anti-social behaviour</li> </ul>
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<p><b>Corporate Plan Strategic Themes</b></p> <p>The report relates to the following strategic theme/themes in the Corporate Plan:</p> <table> <tr> <td>Excellent Customer Services</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Renaissance</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Social Inclusion</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Environment</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Value for Money</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table>	Excellent Customer Services	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Renaissance	<input type="checkbox"/>	Social Inclusion	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Environment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Value for Money	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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## 1. Introduction and background

- 1.1 During 2011 and early 2012 a comprehensive review of the provision of equipped play areas in the Borough was undertaken.
- 1.2 As part of this review the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a series of reports examining the policy and standards for equipped play areas, how existing provision compared to those standards and the possible approach that could be adopted to rationalise and improve equipped play areas in order that the spatial, catchment and quality standards set out in the policy could be more consistently met. Reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 28 November 2011, 6 February 2012 and 23 April 2012 refer.
- 1.3 At the meeting on 23 April 2012 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee unanimously supported the draft policy and proposed development plan for equipped play areas in the Borough [Minute 14].
- 1.4 The provision of equipped play areas is a so-called 'concurrent function', with local town and parish councils having responsibilities for their management and maintenance as well as the City Council. At present town and parish councils provide 27 equipped play areas.
- 1.5 Subsequent to this the draft policy and development plan for equipped play areas has been circulated to all members of the Council and to all local town and parish councils for further comment and, in respect of the latter, inviting them to consider taking on responsibility for equipped play areas in their areas, where they do not already do so.
- 1.6 The only feedback received of particular note identified two equipped play areas provided by Parish Councils at Edney Common and the Chase, Boreham that were omitted from the original schedule and some inaccuracies in the descriptions of two play areas at South Woodham Ferrers. These have now been incorporated and the development plan updated accordingly.
- 1.7 The absence of any significant challenges suggests that the policy and overall approach is generally welcomed and supported. Similar feedback was received from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee during the review.
- 1.8 However, it is recognised that any rationalisation of equipped play area provision is likely to be locally sensitive and, therefore, it is anticipated that more detailed comments may be forthcoming at the implementation stage. The implementation of changes to equipped play provision in particular areas will be accompanied by a clear communication plan to ensure adequate local engagement to help identify and influence specific solutions. This will be incorporated into the detailed planning for the development of each site.
- 1.9 The work to date has also already informed discussions with planning officers regarding equipped play provision in new areas of residential development.

## 2. Policy for the provision of equipped play areas

- 2.1 The policy and standards for the provision of equipped play areas is largely based on the agreed spatial standards already embodied in the Local Development Framework, but with the designation of play areas simplified into two categories;

'local play areas' [previously pre-school and infant play areas] and 'neighbourhood play areas' [previously junior play areas].

- 2.2 The targets which are embodied in the Local Development Framework, in the main, relate only to size and catchment criteria. It is proposed that these spatial criteria are complemented by a more qualitative standard for provision, which incorporates play value, opportunities to interact with the surrounding environment and consideration of the security, safety and standard of maintenance of the sites.
- 2.3 Following a quality assessment for all equipped play areas, two distinct 'quality thresholds' are proposed; one for neighbourhood play areas set at 70% and one for local play areas set at 60%. This reflects the different nature of provision and consequently the play value that it is possible to achieve on sites of different scale.
- 2.4 The draft policy for the provision of equipped play areas is set out at Appendix A.

The Appendices to this report are lengthy documents and have not been widely copied in paper form. However, they have been published on the website with the agenda for this meeting and copies have been placed in the Group Rooms.

### 3. Development plan for equipped play areas

- 3.1 The draft development plan sets out the overall approach for rationalising and improving play areas on an area and site by site basis, in order that the spatial, catchment and quality standards set out in the policy can, as far as possible, be met.
- 3.2 There are currently 113 equipped play areas provided by Chelmsford City Council, with a further 27 play areas provided by local town and parish councils.
- 3.3 However, the distribution of play areas is not uniform, with some residential areas outside the 'catchment area' of existing play areas. Also, as highlighted in the quality assessment, the standards and play value of different equipped play areas varies significantly.
- 3.4 The draft development plan includes proposals to rationalise and improve existing play provision including:
  - The creation of a better defined hierarchy of equipped play areas, with larger '*neighbourhood*' locations serving multiple age ranges and a wider catchment complemented by a network of '*local play areas*' adopting a common standard with less differentiation between pre-school and infant play areas to improve flexibility of provision
  - The removal of equipment from some substandard or inappropriately sited play areas. The presumption will be that the area will be retained as open / green space, but in some circumstances it may be more appropriate to use it for other purposes, subject to the provisions of policy DC39 of the Core Strategy of the Local Development Framework. This may be particularly attractive if disposal secures resources to reinvest in the improvement of other play areas
  - A programme of targeted improvements to a number of retained sites to improve access and quality of provision
  - The provision of a small number of additional equipped play areas in locations where there is currently a deficit
  - The provision of a network of social meeting points and multi-use games areas or 'ball courts' to complement equipped play areas, to accommodate the needs of older children and help discourage the inappropriate use of equipped play areas

- 3.5 The proposed approach and outline development plan for the rationalisation and improvement of equipped play provision is set out at Appendix B. This also includes reference to equipped play provision in the larger village and more rural settlements so a comprehensive position can be seen.
- 3.6 Overall it is anticipated that the total number of equipped play areas provided across the Borough will reduce by 20 in number, but the structure, play value and quality of those remaining will be considerably improved in accordance with the catchment, distribution and quality criteria set out in the policy. It is felt that this will more than compensate for the removal of sub-standard sites.
- 3.7 If fully implemented as proposed this development plan would result in 120 play areas being provided in total across the Borough, of which 27 play areas would be the responsibility of local town or parish councils.

4. Resources and financial implications

- 4.1 There is already provision in the capital programme for a phased refurbishment programme for equipped play areas. The balance of funding available is £1.9m. This refurbishment programme has been temporarily suspended pending this review. The priorities identified in the development plan will allow this programme to be re-phased and re-scheduled accordingly. It would be reasonable to set a target for the majority of the development programme to be implemented over a six year period and certainly to try to achieve the ‘A priorities’ with three years.
- 4.2 Overall the provisional estimated cost of the programme for rationalising and improving equipped play areas totals £2.15m, which slightly exceeds the provision currently included in the capital programme. However, this does not allow for any externally sourced funding or planning contributions that may offset some of these costs. It may be that in later years consideration will need to be given to ‘topping up’ the allocation in the capital programme slightly. Currently it is anticipated that the revised profile of expenditure will be as follows:

2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
£525,000	£525,000	£350,000	£350,000	£200,000	£200,000

- 4.3 In some circumstances, it may be possible to incorporate additional equipped play provision into new residential development. Planning obligations arising from new residential development and the proposed community infrastructure levy should also deliver new or upgraded equipped play areas in some areas at no direct cost to the Council.
- 4.4 In the past the Council has been successful in levering in external funding for investment in equipped play areas. Despite the difficult financial circumstances, opportunities may still arise to secure external investment to support the proposed development plan. The most recent example is the funding secured from Sport England which is supporting the installation of two multi-use games areas, as part of the so-called ‘Adizones’ programme. However, external sources cannot be relied upon for the crucial rationalisation and improvement works for equipped play areas that are necessary.
- 4.5 It is anticipated that the revenue consequences of a phased rationalisation plan for equipped play areas will be cost neutral, with any additional inspection and maintenance costs incurred on new or upgraded sites being offset by reductions arising from those sites that will be removed.

## 5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The principle is generally accepted that it is better to have a smaller number of good quality equipped play areas that meet the expected spatial and quality standards, planned in accordance with a well-defined hierarchy of provision, which are suitably located and distributed so as serve realistic catchment areas.
- 5.2 Achieving this will require rationalisation of existing provision involving the removal of some substandard or inappropriately sited play areas, complemented by a programme of targeted improvements to a number of retained sites and the provision of a small number of additional equipped play areas in places where there is currently a deficit.
- 5.3 It should be recognised that any rationalisation of equipped play area provision is likely to be locally sensitive and therefore will need to be achieved in a measured way, carefully planned and phased and with a clear communication plan that achieves adequate local engagement to help identify and influence local solutions. This will be incorporated into the detailed planning for the development of each site.

### List of Appendices

- Appendix A: Policy for the provision of equipped play areas
- Appendix B: Development plan for equipped play areas

*These appendices have been published on the website and copies have been made available in the Members rooms*

### Background Papers

- Report: Equipped Play Areas – Draft Development Plan [Overview and Scrutiny Committee 23 April 2012]
- Report: Equipped Play Areas – Draft Policy and Strategy [Overview and Scrutiny Committee 6 February 2012]
- Report: Equipped Play Areas – Review of Current Provision [Overview and Scrutiny Committee 28 November 2011]