

Play Opportunities Scrutiny Review –Final Report

Background to Scrutiny Topic

1. At a decision session in June 2016 the Executive Member for Economic Development & Community Engagement (inc. Play) agreed:
 - i. The play policy should be updated to provide a clear steer to direct resources for the development of future play opportunities
 - ii. Criteria for the release of the Council’s capital programme for playground improvement
 - iii. Allocation of £30k of the capital funding as match funding for the Rowntree Park skate park scheme
 - iv. A new playground inspection regime to reflect best practice and local experience
2. Ahead of the Executive Member’s decision session, a discussion took place at a Scrutiny Committee pre decision call-in, at which councillors agreed with the general principles of the paper and expressed hope the policy would clearly support the different play needs of both children and young people, and provide effective play areas to support children’s natural inclination to play.
3. However, the discussion included a number of scenarios relating to the difficulties of developing play in community settings and the different perspectives that exist within communities.
4. Those conversations between officers and councillors indicated the need for this agenda to be taken up as a scrutiny topic, which in turn led to a scoping report being considered by the full Learning & Culture Policy & Scrutiny Committee in July 2016. The Committee agreed to proceed with the review with the aim of developing improved play opportunities across the city and identifying ways of enabling communities to bring forward potential schemes. The Committee agreed to form this Task Group to carry out the review on its behalf and set the following review objectives:

- i. Examine national best practice and methodology and consider examples of recent good practice locally from engagement through to delivery of a project
- ii. Identify future positive ways to engage with children, young people and families in order to evidence local need and inform the development of play opportunities at a neighbourhood level.
- iii. Examine how best to allay resident's concerns and improve buy in from the whole community, thereby improving community/ward cohesion
- iv. Identify best ways (methodology) to bring forward/ develop potential new schemes.
- v. Identify where lack of community capacity makes identifying need more challenging

Consultation

5. The review was supported throughout by the Head of Communities & Equalities. In addition, the Council's Public Realm Operations Manager (Strategy & Contracts) provided maps of the city showing current play sites for young children and teenagers, and a presentation giving a detailed overview of a number of recently completed play area improvement schemes.

Information Gathered

6. Background to the Play Agenda
The Children's Plan 2007 introduced by the Government of the time and subsequent play strategy consultation 'Fair Play' in 2008 placed children's play at the centre of one of the great challenges of our time i.e. how better to recognise and respond to children and young people as stakeholders and users of public space.
7. Play England (national charity) aims for all children and young people in England to have regular access and opportunity for free, inclusive, local play provision and play space. It provides advice and support to promote good practice and works to ensure that the importance of play is recognised by policy makers, planners and the public.

8. It is recognised that children's well-being, safety, learning and social development, as well as their essential enjoyment of childhood, are affected by the extent and the quality of their opportunities to play. This requires the cooperation of many different professionals and roles to ensure a cohesive and effective approach. Councillors, children's services professionals, planners, developers, architects, housing managers, landscape architects and designers, play equipment suppliers, parks and recreation managers, community groups, health professionals and, of course, play practitioners, are just some of the people who have, or should have, an interest in promoting enjoyable play spaces that feel safe for children and young people.
9. Play space needs to be of high quality and good design to attract children and families and become a valued part of the local environment. Poor quality unimaginative space will not be attractive to children, will not be valued by the local community and will fall in to disuse and disrepair. Good design is therefore a good investment.

Objective (i) – Examine national best practice and methodology and consider examples of recent good practice locally from engagement through to delivery of a project

10. At the first meeting of the Task Group in August 2016, Members considered information on national best practice and received information on local good practice from the Head of Communities & Equalities.
11. National Best Practice
Play England's guide to creating successful play spaces (Design for Play 2008) explains how good play spaces can give children and young people the freedom to play creatively, while allowing them to experience risk, challenge and excitement. The Task Group viewed the guide containing advice on how play spaces can be affordably maintained, and considered a number of case studies provided within the guide as national examples of good practice – see a sample of those case studies at Annex A.
12. In 2009, as part of their commitment to the play agenda, the then Government invested £235 million nationally in a national Playbuilder Scheme. Its aim was to develop public open access to outdoor play spaces close to where children live that were safe, exciting, stimulating and accessible to all, and promote active, imaginative and adventurous play targeting predominately the 8-13 years age range. In York the

Playbuilder Scheme was overseen by a multi agency steering group and resulted in major investment in 19 play areas across the city – for further information and a list of those schemes, see Annex B.

13. Local Good Practice

The Task Group received information on a previous scrutiny review carried out in 2010 through which scrutiny members were consulted on revisions to the Council's Play Policy (2010-2013), together with an update previously provided to the Learning & Culture Committee in September 2011, on the implementation of the recommendations arising from that earlier review. The Task Group noted that as part of that review, a comparison was undertaken of the play opportunities for 5-13 year olds across a range of different types of local residential areas/wards and consideration was given to the National Playbuilder Scheme ongoing at that time – see paragraph 13 above.

14. Recent Successful Schemes in York

Since 2010 there have been four successful play provision refurbishment projects in York, each requiring major investment between £25k and £55k:

- Acomb Green – lottery funded. Community lead with Communities and Public Realm support
- Arran Place – Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Section 106 funds (Planning Gain). Public Realm with significant Residents Association input
- Cornlands Road – HRA and 106 funds. Public Realm with support from the local Residents Association and York High School via a public consultation process.
- Clarence Gardens – 106 funds. Public Realm with support from Haxby Road Primary School.

15. In September 2016 the Task Group received a detailed presentation on each of the schemes listed above. This highlighted the application of a strategic approach to developing play opportunities as outlined in the latest version of City of York Council's Play Policy (Taking Play Forward 2016-19) which states that the development of play opportunities should be guided by 5 key principles, i.e. that they:

- Meet a clearly identified need

- Are developed through inclusive involvement and participation that empowers and encourages the community to take a lead
- Are based on the right of the child to access inclusive, quality and locally based play opportunities
- Promote and recognise the benefits of play and its impact on health and development of the child
- Are reflective of best practice

16. Those principles were evidenced by the processes followed for each of the schemes listed above i.e.:

Step 1 - Interested parties, local groups, schools in the vicinity etc were consulted on what they did and did not want, and a standard contract specification was adapted to meet those local community aspirations

Step 2 - The community signed off the tender documents

Step 3 - City of York Council (CYC) ran the tender process which included an opportunity for play equipment companies to meet representatives from the local community

Step 4 - CYC gave consideration to which of the designs met the specification and addressed CYC's needs and aspirations best e.g.:

- Renovation as specified
- There was at least one significant feature item.
- There was new and varied seating included
- The predominant material used was metal; for longevity and to match the immediate surrounding equipment.
- Appropriate safety surfacing was to be provided; with a bias towards grass matting
- The design offered value for money

Step 5 - CYC shortlisted 3-4 submissions and carried out post tender consultation with the local community to choose the winning design.

Step 6 - CYC oversaw the installation

17. Funding

The current policy (Taking Play Forward 2016-19) recognises the importance of play within communities. This administration's commitment to invest has been demonstrated through a capital

programme, which provides a clear focus to respond in a targeted way and to direct funding to identify need.

18. The Task Group learnt that within the capital programme for 2017/18 there is £320k for play area improvements. This is split into two - £150k towards the Rowntree Park skate park scheme (there is also a £120k legacy donation available for that scheme) and £170k for play area improvements across the city that are either in the Council, Town or Parish Council control. The 5 key principles listed at paragraph 16 form the-criteria for allocation of that element of the capital programme. Outside of this, Ward Councillors may also choose to allocate monies from their ward budgets to fund improvements to play areas in their wards.

Objective (ii) - Identify future positive ways to engage with children, young people and families in order to evidence local need and inform the development of play opportunities at a neighbourhood level

19. Recent Examples of Engagement with Children, Young People & Families in York

In support of objective (ii) the Task Group considered the consultation feedback contained within the council's 2016-19 Play Policy gathered from children and young people across the city, as part of the consultation process to develop the 2016–2019 Children and Young People's plan.

20. The Task Group also considered information on the arrangements for the current capital programme which had been launched through Shine¹ and noted that applications for play schemes would only be considered if the location:

- Had been identified within the Open Space and Green Infrastructure Final Report September 2014, as being deficient in play provision.
- Had not previously been in receipt of Playbuilder, or significant lottery or section 106 funds since 2008

21. It was confirmed that completed applications for future play schemes were due to be considered alongside feedback from children and young people, and that to support that process a consultation exercise had been undertaken by Shine, going out to all schools and libraries as well as appearing on associated websites and social media pages.

¹ Shine - A multi agency panel consisting of representatives from the Council, Parish Councils, play organisations and young people's forums

22. The Task Group noted that at the end of the process, taking account of the consultation feedback, the Shine panel would be recommending a final list of schemes to the Executive member for formal approval, to ensure that money is allocated to those play areas with most need.
23. In considering the recent successful schemes here in York listed at paragraph 15 and the processes followed to achieve them detailed in paragraph 17 above, the Task Group received a detailed example of the stage 1 consultation/engagement undertaken for the refurbishment of Clarence Gardens play area, which involved children at the local school being consulted on:
- what age range and ability the new equipment should be for
 - what type of play activities were wanted e.g. swinging, climbing, spinning
 - whether several pieces of equipment or a few larger ones should be installed
 - if the equipment should have a theme e.g. trains or boats
 - should the equipment be mostly wood or metal
 - what other things would make the play area better – more seats for example
 - how we can improve the entrance to the play area
24. In addition the Task Group considered a number of best practice guides on engaging with children and young people:
- *Save the Children's DIY Guide to improving your community – getting children and young people involved.* Based on practical experience, it provides tried and tested methods of working for adults interested in encouraging young people to become actively involved in their local community and its regeneration.
 - *So you want to consult with children – a toolkit of good practice.* Produced by Save the Children to facilitate children's meaningful participation in discussions about issues that affect them.
 - *Engaging Young People – Councillor Workbook.* Produced by the Local Government Association as a learning aid for elected members who want to understand more about how to involve young people in their wards.

25. The Task Group was also made aware of the work of YorOK² who have produced a range of literature that supports and encourages the engagement of children and young people i.e.:
- *York's Involvement Strategy for 2014-17*. Setting out the city's commitment to ensuring that children and young people have a voice and are involved in decision making, planning, commissioning, design and delivery of services.
 - Involvement Toolkit of Resources containing:
 - A series of 'Listen to Me' booklets providing practical and innovative examples of how children can be encouraged to express their views,
 - A booklet aimed at parents and carers who are eager to help their children participate.
 - A range of factsheets on different methods of engagement
 - Guidance notes for involving disabled children and young people in participation and decision making activities.
26. Finally, the Task Group learnt that as part of the previous play scrutiny review (see paragraph 14), parents were consulted on what they considered to be barriers to play, which highlighted their concerns around safety, busy traffic and bullying. At that time in response, the authority produced a leaflet 'Playing Out: A Guide for Parents' containing information for parents on the benefits of free play and a myth busting section – see copy of leaflet at Annex C.

Objective (iii) - Examine how best to allay resident's concerns and improve buy in from the whole community, thereby improving community/ward cohesion

27. As part of this review and in support of Objective (iii), the Task Group considered again, the recently successful refurbishment schemes listed at paragraph 15, who was consulted for each and at what stage in those schemes the consultation took place. They recognised that in the main, the consultation focused on the users of those play spaces and that there was little or no evidence of direct engagement of non-users living in the vicinity of those play spaces. They were also made aware of the types of concerns raised by residents living in those neighbourhoods e.g.

² YorOK is the name of York's Children Trust arrangements. Children's Trusts are local partnerships that bring together all partners and organisations responsible for providing services for children, young people and families.

Cornlands Road, and the steps taken to alleviate those concerns e.g. the repositioning of play equipment to prevent users from being able to see into the windows of nearby houses.

Objective (iv) - *Identify best ways (methodology) to bring forward/develop potential new schemes.*

28. In support of this objective, the Task Group received information on the 5 key principles used to guide the development of play opportunities (see paragraph 16) and the methodology (processes) followed by CYC officers as part of the four recent successful schemes (see paragraph 17).

Objective (v) – *Identify where lack of community capacity makes identifying needs more challenging.*

29. In support of this objective, the Task Group considered the role of ward councillors in wards where there were little or no community groups engaged in championing the needs of children and young people, and the spread of facilities across the city for the various age groups.

Analysis

30. Having considered the maps showing existing plays areas across the city, the Task Group recognised the limited opportunities available for teenagers and that they have very different needs from younger children. They noted that a proposed skate park for teenagers at Rawcliffe Country Park had been withdrawn following feedback from ward members regarding the scale of the proposals. Elsewhere, the Task Group were pleased to note that the council is carrying out an upgrade of the skate park at Rowntree Park. However, whilst they welcomed that upgrade, they recognised it would not improve the limited provision for teenagers across the city or improve the geographical spread of facilities across the city.
31. The Task Group recognised that the active involvement of children and young people was essential in the development of play opportunities, and that it works best when there is a visible commitment to their involvement, and their involvement is valued. Having looked in detail at the recently successful schemes listed at paragraph 15, the Task Group acknowledged that the processes followed as detailed at paragraph 17 had resulted in the full and proper engagement of local children's groups, schools in the vicinity and individual users on what they did and did not

want for those schemes, and therefore agreed those processes were fit for that purpose.

32. However, the Task Group recognised that residents without children may often disassociate themselves from the process of developing/ refurbishing a play space, even though many may later find that the plans have the potential to affect them. For example, the Task Group noted there was evidence of late revisions being required to the four recently completed schemes listed at paragraph 15, as a result of negative feedback from some local residents. This suggests that the methodology (processes shown at paragraph 17) implemented at the early stages of developing those schemes had not been successful in either engaging with and/or allaying the concerns of non users living nearby, or generating greater community buy in to those schemes.
33. Therefore, whilst acknowledging the difficulties of encouraging all residents in a neighbourhood to engage in the process early enough, to ensure their concerns can be designed out, the Task Group agreed that the approach currently in place where only potential users are being consulted on what they want and do not want (see paragraph 17) had the potential to dis-enfranchise half the residents in a neighbourhood, leading to negative engagement later.
34. Moving forward, the Task Group recognised that in response to the changes in managing ward budgets, Councillors will be an integral part of the process for bringing forward / developing potential new play schemes, and noted that a number of wards across the city have identified a ward priority related to children and young people.
35. However, they acknowledged that many ward councillors may find it difficult engaging with the younger residents in their wards. Having questioned what would be the most appropriate way to engage potential users of a play space, the Task Group were pleased to note the very many engagement tools detailed in YorOK's toolkit of resources. That said, they questioned whether all councillors would feel confident carrying out some of those techniques and therefore agreed that in order for Councillors to participate successfully in the process they may need further support/skills training to do so.
36. In regard to barriers to play, the Task Group noted that some of the issues identified as part of the earlier scrutiny review of 'Play' detailed in paragraph 14 were the same as those they were trying to address as part of this review i.e. that in some areas of the city there was zero

tolerance towards children playing near homes, and that other perceived barriers to play still needed addressing. They noted that as a result of the previous review, it was recommended that Ward Committees, Parish Councils and Residents Associations reach out to their local communities and work with them to encourage a more positive attitude. It was also recommended that a pilot scheme be undertaken involving all the relevant agencies to:

- Work with children and parents through schools in the identified areas to identify what they perceive to be barriers to play
- Gather the views of other residents, local businesses and other interested parties
- Create a 'Safe Routes to Play' document for the pilot area
- Identify any improvements required to road crossings/markings to reduce the danger of traffic

37. The Task Group were therefore keen to learn of the findings from the planned pilot scheme as they agreed it could inform their consideration of this review's objective (iii) i.e. '*To examine how best to allay residents concerns and improve buy in from the whole community*'. However, having considered the implementation update of the recommendations arising from that earlier Play scrutiny review, the Task Group were disappointed to note that due to the way the work had been aligned into a pilot introducing a new method for communities to bring forward schemes within their wards, there was no clear evidence that Ward Committees, Parish Councils and Residents Associations had successfully reached out to their local communities to encourage a more positive attitude to play.

38. Finally, in regard to objective (v) and the question of ensuring that facilities are provided for all who need them. The Task Group noted the requirement in the council's play policy that new developments must meet a 'clearly identified need' (see paragraph 16). They agreed that seemed sensible, but questioned how it was being interpreted in practice. For example, residents in some areas may be better at engaging and articulating their needs than residents in other areas, perhaps because some are too busy working several jobs/paying the mortgage/looking after children etc. Others may not engage because they have low expectations of what is possible. The Task Group agreed that a lack of engagement should not be a barrier to getting facilities in an area, as it could be argued those areas need them more than others. If the local community does not take the lead that does not mean there is not a need in the area. The Task Group therefore suggested that

wherever there were families with children and young people living in an area, those areas should be considered as having a need. This also reiterated the role of ward councillors working as advocates for their communities, and suggested that councillors in some areas may need additional support to promote engagement and local 'ownership'.

Conclusions

39. The Task Group concluded that:

- i) Ward Councillors need access to specific training on engaging with children and young people to provide them with the necessary skills to better support the process for developing new/refurbishing existing play schemes. This training would also be beneficial for Councillors needing to engage with children and young people on other local issues including their ward priorities.
- ii) To assist Councillors in progressing play schemes, the Task Group agreed a best practice guide containing a range of information would also be really helpful e.g. (*not intended to be an exclusive list*):
 - Up to date practical information about who to contact in the Council to get started
 - What support is available from whom both to facilitate engagement and consultation and to facilitate the design and procurement process
 - Examples of best practice both locally and nationally
 - Reading lists including from national organisations and links to the YorOK documents on engagement with children and young people referenced at para. 26 above
 - General advice on the community engagement process - how to engage the wider community as well as children and young people specifically;
 - Up-to-date information about training available to members to support the above, which of course links to our third recommendation that a members training package should be produced particularly relating to engagement with children and young people – which is not a skill all members will necessarily have.

- iii) As their review had focussed on play areas specifically, the Task Group recognised that further work could be done on recreational facilities for teenagers, and agreed that further inquiry into improving the geographical spread of facilities for teenagers across the city, would be useful. They also agreed that quite a lot of the advice in the good practice guide proposed above could apply to ward members seeking to provide facilities for teenagers.
- iv) The methodology used to develop the four most recent schemes, as shown at paragraph 17 of this report, was successful in engaging with users of those play spaces but did not:
- Encourage engagement and buy in of all residents living in the vicinity of a play area, not just those who would use it;
 - Allay residents concerns and improve tolerance towards children playing;
 - Improve community cohesion and community ownership of play/open spaces
- v) To encourage and better support community cohesion and community ownership of open spaces, a more holistic and inclusive approach is required, with the aim of developing spaces where play provision and the provision of community space for all ages are interwoven. This will help to improve tolerance towards children playing and help alleviate some of the perceived barriers to play previously identified by parents. Ward Councillors should be seeking this approach as part of sponsoring a scheme, and before a play scheme is progressed thought should be given to how it will fit into the wider community space, how best to access the play space and what should be adjacent to it etc. information on the more holistic and inclusive approach to open space development – as a community space for all ages – should be included in the best practice guide for councillors suggested at paragraph 39 (ii).
- vi) Finally, the Task Group noted that as a result of the previous decision of the Exec Member for Economic Development & Community Engagement (inc. Play) in June 2016 (see background to scrutiny topic at paragraphs 2-5) and the subsequent applications received over the summer, there will be a number of capital investment applications for play schemes coming forward for approval in the new year. The Task Group recognised the

implementation of those successful applications would provide an opportunity for their review findings and recommendations to be tested and developed.

Council Plan 2015-19

40. This scrutiny review supports the following council priorities:

- All York's residents live and thrive in a city which allows them to contribute fully to their communities and neighbourhoods
- All children and adults are listened to, and their opinions considered
- Every child has the opportunity to get the best possible start in life
- Residents are encouraged and supported to live healthily
- Focus on the delivery of frontline services for residents and the protection of community facilities.
- Focus on cost and efficiency to make the right decisions in a challenging financial environment.

Review Recommendations

41. Having considered the findings from this review the Learning & Culture Policy & Scrutiny Committee agreed to endorse the Task Group's draft recommendations listed below for the Executive's consideration:

- i) A Best Practice Guide to be introduced for Members containing a range of information (including those detailed in paragraph 40ii), to be used when committing ward funds to the future development of community spaces schemes which incorporate play provision
- ii) The Best Practice Guide to be used to support Members when new open spaces improvement schemes come forward. For example the proposed playground capital investment schemes in 2017 (see paragraph 40vi)
- iii) An appropriate member training package should be introduced to provide members with the necessary skills to effectively engage with children and young people in their local wards

Associated Implications

42. Financial – The costs associated with the recommendations are minimal and can be contained within existing service budgets. Work is ongoing to source an appropriate provider and training package.

- 43 HR – As ‘Play’ sits across a number of functions within the authority, a resource commitment from those teams will be required to produce a Best Practice Guide for Councillors (Recommendation i). However, the information needed is already held within those teams so it would be possible if a project team were formed.
44. There are no significant Legal or other implications associated with the recommendations in this report.

Risk Management

45. There is a risk that without the appropriate support and training to councillors, it will not be possible to sufficiently increase the levels of engagement required to effectively develop local schemes (not just play schemes), in support of the council’s neighbourhood working model, or increase community provision. Specifically in regard to play and the development of open spaces for community use across the city, without quality engagement of all residents there is less chance of increasing community ownership and buy-in of those spaces or allaying the concerns of non users living nearby.

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Wards Affected: List wards or tick box to indicate all **All**

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers: None

Annexes:

Annex A – Sample of National Examples of Best Practice

Annex B – Information on Implementation of Previous National Playbuilder Scheme in York

Annex C – ‘Playing Out: A Guide for Parents’ Leaflet

Report Abbreviations:

CYC – City of York Council

HRA – Housing Revenue Account