



Committee and Date

Environment and Services
Scrutiny Committee

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Item

6

Public

SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL'S PLAY AREA PROVISION

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1. Summary

- 1.1 Play is an essential component of growing up and helps children and young people in their physical, creative, emotional, social and intellectual development. Shropshire Council, through Outdoor Partnership's Parks & Greenspace Team manage and maintain 123 urban parks and public open spaces, including 52 play areas across the county.
- 1.2 Access to play areas and public open spaces is a key component in the mix of activities that help support children and young people to be physically active. Public Health England states that '*children become more active when they live closer to parks, playgrounds and recreation areas. It is the quality and not just the quantity of public parks and spaces that encourages people to be active and evidence shows just having ease of access to open space makes a crucial difference*'.
- 1.3 Shropshire Council is not the only play provider, with both Town and Parish Councils, and Schools providing play opportunities.
- 1.4 The 52 play areas managed by Shropshire Council, are in a fair to reasonable condition. Although some of the play equipment may be old, it is checked every two weeks to ensure it is in a safe condition to use. The Service has introduced 'natural play' areas that go beyond fixed play equipment to engage children & young people to develop their own play. Efficiencies across the service has led to challenges in balancing maintenance on these play areas alongside the wider focus on other parks and public open space maintenance.
- 1.5 The move from S106 to Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) has had an impact on funding towards new play provision. S106 funds generally had specific provision to provide play areas within new housing developments over a certain size, or a commuted sum provided in lieu. The introduction of CIL in 2012, widened the range of community infrastructure needs, as set out in the 18 Place Plans. The competing demand for the use of CIL has meant that to date no allocation has been made towards any new play facilities.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Shropshire Council recognise the value of play areas and public open space provision and the benefits they afford local communities.
- 2.2 That consideration is given in how Shropshire Council can best support local communities to use CIL monies to support investment in new play facilities identified within the 18 area Place Plans.

REPORT

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 3.1 The service operates a risk management approach on the maintenance of play areas. Those managed by Shropshire Council are in a fair to reasonable condition, although some of the play equipment may be old, it is checked every two weeks to ensure it is safe to use.
- 3.2 As the S106 money tapers down additional pressure will be put on the Service infrastructure & maintenance budgets to meet the current checks and maintenance standards.
- 3.3 There is a need for further investment in play and with no specific revenue budget or S106 monies likely to be available in the future, communities will need to prioritise CIL funding toward play provision.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 Shropshire Council is responsible for the management, maintenance, and community engagement of, 123 parks and green spaces, totalling some 577 hectares. The parks and green spaces are broadly categorised as follows:
- 4.2 2 Major Parks – The Mere at Ellesmere and Severn Valley Country Park, which between them have over 500,000 visitors making them one of the most visited attractions in the County.

18 Countryside Heritage Sites – these sites are typically located outside the towns and provide access to some of Shropshire unique landscape

103 Local parks and green spaces - These sites are generally urban green spaces used by the local community and include local wildlife sites, 52 play areas and 5 recreation grounds with football and cricket pitches.

- 4.3 The two major parks have their own identified budgets, but all the others sites are maintained via the Ringway grounds maintenance contract (£213k) and a repairs & infrastructure maintenance budget of £88k (15/16). Generally a third of the £88k is spent on tree safety works. The revenue funds available, therefore, do not allow a proactive approach for developing new play areas or to replace old equipment,

which is expensive to install. There is also small budget of £5k for the Play Inspector & Maintenance Officers to use on day to day maintenance & repairs.

- 4.4 There is S106 maintenance money associated with some play areas, however, this is a reducing amount as it is used up on an annual basis to cover maintenance works. As the S106 money tappers down additional pressure will be put on the Service infrastructure and maintenance budgets to meet the current checks and maintenance standards.
- 4.5 Funding for new play areas is only met through available S106 funds. The CIL funding, administered by Shropshire Council, has not yet been used towards any new play facilities. However, play improvements are identified within the 18 Place Plans and therefore there is potential for local communities to use some of their Neighbourhood CIL funds to facilitate new or updated play area provision.

5. Background

5.1 Introduction

The importance of play for children is well documented. It helps in their physical, creative, emotional, social and intellectual development. Play helps children understand themselves and the world around them, it is an essential component of growing up. A child's capacity for positive development may be constrained if they are denied the opportunity to play. Well designed and maintained play grounds and play equipment provides an additional stimulus for children and gives them an opportunity to improve their motor skills and test their physical abilities in a controlled environment.

5.2 Legislation

The general requirements of the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 extend to the provision of playgrounds and play equipment. European Standards BS EN1176 (Playground Equipment) and BS EN 1177 (Impact absorbing playground surfacing) are guides to good practice. The Occupiers Liability Act 1957 and 1984 impose a 'duty of care' on the occupier of the premises to people visiting and using them. The 1957 Act imposes this duty in respect of lawful visitors. Section 2(3)(a) of the Act states that greater care is required where children are concerned and is therefore of particular importance in respect of play areas. The 1984 Act extends a limited duty of care over trespassers by applying a 'test of liability'.

Shropshire Council has adopted a standard of checking all its play areas on a 2 weekly cycle to meet its 'duty of care' towards children.

5.3 Being Healthy

Physical activity in energetic play provides children and young people with regular exercise. Good play opportunities give the chance to try out and experience a range of emotions in a safe environment, promoting resilience and fostering self-esteem. Active play uses more calories than many organised sports, as well as developing essential skills such as teamwork and co-ordination, providing a basis for participation in organised sports for those who enjoy such activity.

The Chief Medical Officer, in a recent paper from Public Health England – 'Everybody Active, Every Day' provides the following guidance on physical activity for children and young people:

5.4 For early years (under fives)

1. Physical activity should be encouraged from birth, particularly through floor-based play and water-based activities in safe environments.
2. Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (three hours), spread throughout the day.
3. All under-fives should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (being restrained or sitting) for extended periods (except time spent sleeping).

These guidelines are relevant to all children under five, irrespective of gender, race or socio-economic status, but should be interpreted with consideration for individual physical and mental capabilities.

5.5 For children and young people (five to 18 years):

1. All children and young people should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours every day.
2. Vigorous intensity activities, including those that strengthen muscle and bone, should be incorporated at least three days a week.
3. All children and young people should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (sitting) for extended periods.

The 'Everybody Active, Every Day' report goes on to say '*children become more active when they live closer to parks, playgrounds and recreation areas. The impact is most significant among the least well off. Building more physical activity into daily routines – the commute, walking the dog, the journey to the shops, school or workplace – involves creating the kinds of environments that support active living*'.

'The way land is used in communities has an immense impact on the public's health. Although it is the quality and not just the quantity of public parks and spaces that encourages people to be active, evidence shows just having ease of access to open space makes a crucial difference. One study showed that respondents living closest to parks were more likely to achieve recommended physical activity levels and less likely to be overweight or obese. Those with close access to green space live longer than those without it, even adjusting for factors such as social class, employment and smoking'.

5.6 Shropshire Council Play Areas

Access to the provision of play areas and public open space within local communities is a key component to supporting physical activity for children & young people. The majority of publicly accessible play areas and public open space have come about as part of new housing developments and the Planning Policy requirement for community infrastructure needs.

Outdoor Partnerships manages and maintains 52 play areas across the county, the details of which are provided in **Appendix 1**.

The Team has 3 Parks & Greenspace Officers who cover geographic areas within the North, Centre & South. There are 1.3 F/T Play Inspection & Maintenance Officers who check all the play areas on a 2 weekly cycle. The Officers undertake small repairs on site and order in contract work for larger play repairs. Each play area is also annually inspected by The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) who provide a detailed report on the condition of each site and the play equipment. To date there have been no successful claims made against the Council due to faulty equipment.

The Play Inspection & Maintenance Officers also undertake play inspections for sites owned by some Parish Councils and Schools. This generates small amount of income for the Service and it is an area we are trying to grow.

Since 2009 when Shropshire Council took on the responsibility for looking after play areas, it adopted the guidelines of Play England, the then Government's advisor on play, who advocated a more innovative approach to play and included the principles of natural play, using the contours of the land, boulders and logs to supplement the traditional fixed play equipment of swings and slides.

The Team are very experienced in this field having undertaken numerous community consultations, engaging children, young people, as well as adults, to help design and create specific age range play areas, which incorporate natural play principles both on a small and large scale. **Appendix 2**, shows pictures of the natural play areas at Arundel Close, Ruyton XI Towns; Milars Field, Oswestry; Birchmeadow, Broseley and The Severn Valley Country Park, Alveley, to name a few.

To help us monitor and understand the usage of our play areas, we are piloting new visitor counter technology and installing 8 units that will enable us to capture usage data. For the first time during 2015 we will have data on how many children and adults use our play areas and at what times.

5.7 Sustainability

The play areas are maintained through a small revenue budget of £5,000 p.a. This is used for tools and equipment and replacement parts such as seats, bearings, shackles & chains etc. Some play areas have S106 maintenance funds available to make improvements as and when required.

The end Columns on **Appendix 1** show what is currently spent with regards to grounds and play maintenance at each site, as well as costs for tree assessments. Where there is S106 maintenance money available, then the site maintenance costs are deducted per annum from each S106 amount. If there is no S106 money then the costs are met through the grounds maintenance and general parks & sites revenue budget.

The final column provides a traffic light assessment of the pressures that will affect future revenue budgets, as the S106 maintenance money is used up.

Red - indicates that the S106 money will be used up within 0-3 years

Amber - indicates that the S106 money will be used up within 4-8 years

Green - indicates that the S106 money will be used up after 9+ years

The Appendix 1 table shows that in 2015-16 the Service will need to find £12,136 to cover play area maintenance costs and within the next 2 years another £12,365. This will have an impact on the other sites across the county as priority will be given to ensure that play area maintenance and current standard checks are carried out.

5.8 Play Strategy

Following the BIG Lottery Play Funding 2009 -11, Shropshire Council set up a 'Shropshire Play Partnership' made up of various stakeholder organisations, to oversee the BIG lottery spend and then to help develop a county wide play strategy. Some initial survey and GIS mapping work was undertaken in 2012, but unfortunately, due to lack of resources at the time, this was not taken forward. Therefore, there is currently no adopted Play Strategy for Shropshire.

However, the response from the initial survey did provide a snap shot of the number of play areas and their quality. The survey identified 262 equipped play areas across the county. The county town of Shrewsbury has over 50 play areas with the remaining majority distributed across Shropshire's market Towns. There are various owners and managers of the play areas including Shropshire Council, Town/Parish Councils, Housing Associations, Schools, Village Halls and the Voluntary Community Sector. The determination of quality was left to the various organisations that manage the play facilities. The quality criterion was simply to identify if it was in very good, good, average, poor and very poor condition.

The result mapped in **Appendix 3**, showed that 90% of play areas were in very good to average condition with the remaining 10% in poor to very poor condition. The majority of the poor play areas were in the south of the county. Since the survey in 2012, Outdoor Partnership has responded by making a number of play area improvements to reduce the identified poor to very poor play areas. The following major improvements have taken place at:

- Newington Crescent, Craven Arms - New play area (community grant)
- Whitmeadow Play Area, Craven Arms – Play equipment repainted and safety surfacing cleaned (Service budget)
- Fishmore Road Play Area, Ludlow – Play equipment refurbished and painted (Service budget)
- Tollgate Road Play Area, Ludlow – Play equipment made safe and safety surfacing improved (S106 maintenance)
- Friars Field Play Area, Ludlow, - New slide and safety surfacing (S106 maintenance)
- Parry Road Play Area, Ludlow, - Safety surface repairs (Service Budget)
- Dahn Drive 2, Ludlow - Safety surface repairs (Service Budget)
- Dahn Drive 1, Ludlow - Safety surface repairs and remove broken equipment (Service Budget)
- Normandie Close, Ludlow – Repair flooding and re-turf site (S106 maintenance)
- St Johns Road Play Area, Ludlow – All equipment repainted (Service budget)
- Chestnut Meadows Play Area, Bucknell – New safety surface (S106 maintenance)
- Turndale Play Area, Stoke on Turn - Refurbished play area and cleaned site (PC funded with contribution from Service budget)
- Ash Road Play Park, Oswestry – New play area (S106 capital)

- Llwyn Coppice Play Area, Oswestry – Play refurbished, cleaned and equipment painted (Service budget)
- Maes Alwyn Play Area, Weston Rhyn – New play area (S106 capital)
- Milars Field Play Area, Morda – New play area (S106 capital)
- Mill Park Play Area, Whitchurch – New play area (S106 capital)
- Whispering Oaks Play Area, West Felton – Play area refurbished and painted, tree works (Service budget)
- Chirk Bank Play Area, Weston Rhyn – Safety surfacing repairs (Service budget)
- Birch Grove Play Area, Ruyton XI Towns - Play equipment repainted (Service budget)

The following work is planned for 2015-16

- Church Street, St Martins – New play area (S106 capital)
- Birchmeadow Park, Broseley – New BMX and exercise equipment (S106 Capital)
- Repair gaps in wetpour safety surfacing & pressure wash to clean on all sites
- Any major repairs required following the annual ROSPA play inspections reports

5.9 Planning Policy & Play Standards

The National Planning Policy Framework states that ‘Access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an important contribution to the health and well-being of communities. Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, sports and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision.

A comprehensive local assessment of all types of open space provision by consultants PMP (2009) brought together a series of surveys which were completed between 2005 and 2008, on behalf of Shropshire Council. The assessment (based on Planning Policy Guidance 17) provided a robust evidence base for determining local needs and has informed the development of new locally derived accessibility standards which will apply to Shrewsbury, the market towns and other settlements respectively.

The standards were set following an extensive programme of consultation and the key issues arising from consultation feed directly into the standards that have been set.

Typology	Quantity Standard	Accessibility Standard
Provision for Children	0.035 ha per 1000 population (Shrewsbury) 0.105 hectares per 1000 population (Market Towns) and 0.105 hectares (Smaller Settlements)	10 minute walk time

The table above, summarises the local standards that have been set for the provision of children’s play. This standard provides a guide as to the appropriate amount of play in each area of the county. As well as facilitating a proactive approach to improving the overall provision of open space and recreation facilities

in line with local needs, this standard was also to be used to determine the additional demand that new developments generated.

The current play and open space standards, last assessed 2005-08 (above), need to be re-evaluated to ensure the amount of play area and public open space provision still meets the needs of Shropshire's local communities.

5.10 S106 Capital & CIL

Shropshire Council also has some pre unitary legacy S106 capital funds available. Discussions with Town & Parish Council and local members are ongoing as to how this is best spent. Where Town and Parish Councils have the means to deliver Open Space and Play improvements, the S106 money is forwarded on to the respective Councils, subject to them providing a declaration of how the money will be spent to meet the terms of the S106. A list of S106 monies not yet committed is included in **Appendix 4**

If the Town or Parish Council's feel that the S106 funds are best delivered by Shropshire Council the Parks & Greenspace officer will go out to local consultation, tender and appoint play area contractors, arrange and oversee the works as well as arranging a celebration opening event. A project management fee of 10 - 12% is made for the project administration.

Since the introduction of CIL in 2012, there has been no further S106 agreements for the development of play. The Planning Policy supporting CIL now requires any development of 20 or more homes to provide 30m² of Public Open Space (POS) per bed space, thus providing a meaningful amount of land - approx 0.20ha. (Half a football pitch).

The POS provision is part of the design requirement of the development, but no play infrastructure is provided. Should a play area be required then this would be met through the CIL money. To date, there has been no CIL funding specifically allocated toward developing new play areas, even though all the Place Plans reference play as a 'Priority' requirement, and the need for new and improved play facilities.

6. Additional Information

6.1 Town and Parish Councils

In September 2012, Outdoor Partnerships was part of the business planning process that looked at its land assets with regards to public green space and play areas within the Market Towns, and the costs associated with managing them. Within the review 99 public green space sites, including 52 play areas were identified as being in the Market Towns providing play and recreational opportunities for local communities.

As a result of the Business Planning process it was agreed that discussions with Town and Parish Councils should be undertaken to see if they had any interest in taking on local Public Open Spaces and play areas within their localities and whether they had the capacity to undertake the work. Discussions with Shrewsbury Town Council have already agreed that 19 POS sites, including 2 play areas are to be transferred, subject to Secretary of State Approval. Bridgnorth Town Council

have also agreed to the transfer of 5 POS sites, including one play area, subject to 'due diligence' by Shropshire Council before the final handover is undertaken. Further discussions with, Oswestry, Oswestry Rural, St Martins, Shifnal & Broseley Councils will take place in 2015-16, this is subject to an agreement being reached for the removal of sites from the Ringway Grounds Maintenance contract.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 All children have the right to quality play opportunities. The rural nature of Shropshire can mean that access to such opportunities can be difficult, especially for those in remote areas, or for the disadvantaged. However, it has to be remembered that Shropshire Council is not the only play provider, with both Town and Parish Councils, and Schools providing play opportunities.
- 7.2 Shropshire Council does however, have a significant role to play, as a key policy maker with regulatory/statutory frameworks, such as Planning & Transport, to create the right environment to promote opportunities for play and recreation.
- 7.3 The play areas managed by Shropshire Council are in a fair to reasonable condition, although some of the play equipment may be old, it is checked every two weeks to ensure it is safe to use. A programme of work to improve play areas identified as poor has been undertaken and discussions are ongoing with Town & Parish Council's to agree S106 spend on new or improved facilities.
- 7.4 There is still a need for further investment in play and with no specific revenue budget or S106 monies likely to be available in the future, communities and local members will need to prioritise CIL funding toward play provision. Communities also have the opportunity to use some of the Neighbourhood CIL money towards play improvements and may well be able match this with small community grants.

<p>List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)</p> <p>Councillor Steve Charmley</p>
<p>Local Member</p> <p>All</p>

Appendices

Appendix 1 – List of Shropshire Council managed Play areas, maintenance costs and S106

Appendix 2 – Examples of natural play provision

Appendix 3 – Shropshire Play areas quality assessment Map 2012

Appendix 4 - List of S106 monies not yet committed