



SCRUTINY FORUM EXECUTIVE

Report of the

LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL (AD HOC)

into

**PLAY FACILITIES IN PARKS
AND RECREATION GROUNDS**

JANUARY 2001

LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL (AD HOC)

1. Background

Scrutiny of this topic was undertaken in response to the public consultation exercise to identify issues for Scrutiny.

Public responses were received, one expressing concern about the use of a local park for motor cycling, together with skateboarding in streets, and the other seeking the upgrading of local play facilities.

The Panel, comprising of Councillors Briggs (Chair), Allonby, Hillas, May, A Smith and Woodhead, met informally on 3 November 2000 to receive a presentation from the Outdoor Activities Manager, Leisure and Recreation Services, and again on 15 November 2000 to receive a presentation from other agencies which had contributed to play facilities' provision, namely Colne Valley Trust and Meltham Town Council, together with a presentation to that meeting on provision through Section 106 Agreements. A formal meeting of the Panel on 4 December 2000 reviewed its findings, and determined recommendations.

2. Documentary Submissions

The Panel received a report of the Outdoor Activities Manager, Leisure and Recreation Services, giving the background to the development of formal children's play areas nationally, and within Kirklees since 1974, and incorporating additional papers namely:-

- information on the location of children's play areas throughout the Authority
- the outcome of a Scrutiny Review into playground servicing
- information on the Play Area Improvements Programme 2000/2001, and the programme for the previous year for comparison
- details of the approved selection criteria for determining priorities for upgrading of sites
- document comparing the various attributes of different absorbing play surfaces
- an Audit Commission performance summary of Metropolitan Authorities
- statistical information compiled by the Association of Public Service Excellence, comparing Kirklees' position with other Authorities.

3. Terms of Reference

The Panel agreed that its scrutiny should concentrate on children's play facilities in parks and recreation grounds, excluding sports fields, having regard to how the Leisure and Recreation Services responds to demand.

4. Report and Findings

4.1 Current Provision Strategy

The Council, on its inception in 1974, inherited approximately 220 sites of similar age and design, and is today responsible for 259 equipped play areas located throughout the Authority, and is the main provider of formal play sites. Other play areas could be found in schools and children's care centres within the public sector, whereas the private sector rarely provides such facilities in association with other leisure facilities or within specialised indoor attractions.

The current play provision strategy seeks to accommodate an almost impossible task of improving all the sites into safe and attractive play areas through the Play Area Improvements Programme, within a policy seeking to logically address the demands of the task against a constraint of available resources, effectively amounting to a 25 year programme. The Service continues to explore all possible means for accelerating the programme through partnership, grant, and public sponsorship, and has benefited from increased revenue resources over the past five years.

For the current year, financial provision was:-

- a capital injection of £100,000
- revenue provision of £200,000 for play development, covering the cost of about ten areas
- a maintenance budget of £92,000 to accommodate a monthly visit to all 259 sites to undertake general maintenance and replacement of equipment

Parish Councils have played an important role in attracting funding, and various voluntary organisations have successfully applied to the Charities Board of the National Lottery to secure additional play provision. Councils are precluded from making direct application to the Lottery for play area funding. With regard to sponsorship, a few schemes have been supported, but the private sector are generally put off by the high cost e.g. £500 to sponsor a litter bin.

Developers can often be required, through a Section 106 Agreement, to provide play facilities within the area of a housing development, particularly where there are no alternative facilities within a reasonable distance.

4.2 Criteria Applied for Determination of Priority Sites

The Panel noted that the criteria applied for determination of priorities (agreed in 1998) within the annually agreed Play Area Improvements Programme, involves:-

- assessment of the age and condition of the existing equipment
- type of surface underneath the equipment
- the number of play stations provided
- Council priorities for regeneration e.g. Single Regeneration Budget

- extent of local demand and proximity to other improved facilities.

Although no weighting is given to Ward provision a fairly even spread of provision has emerged in any event. Consideration such as the length of time on the waiting list and the state of the site are taken into account. The main determining factor is to comply with Health and Safety obligations to provide safe equipment on currently established sites.

Members have an important role to play in the formulation of new sites and in approving the annual schedule. Members are involved from the outset as they are a sounding board used by the public in demanding facilities, so they have a high involvement in bringing issues of "need" to the Service's attention. Members also contribute through their work on Parish Councils and with Tenants and Residents Associations in developing plans for facilities and in securing external funding.

4.3 Evidence Taken From Other Agencies, Planning Services, and Through Member Site Visits, and from a Research Project.

4.3.1 Colne Valley Trust

The Panel was informed of an initiative instigated by Colne Valley Trust to secure funding from the National Lottery Charities Board to establish play facilities in the Colne Valley Area. The Panel took evidence from the Project Officer at the Trust.

An initial approach to the Trust in 1995 by a Local Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) for help with the provision of play facilities, engendered further interest from the other TRAs. As a result it was agreed to establish a consortium of the interested parties, including a local firm of architects. The consortium put in an overall bid the National Lottery Charities Board - Improving People's Living Environment, so as to avoid a situation whereby the individual TRAs were competing with each other for provision. Each of the TRAs prepared individual feasibility studies, and there followed consultations with local schools and residents and young people. Assistance with the bid was provided by Kirklees Leisure and Recreation Services and Housing Services, resulting in a grant of £62,578, with additional funding from Leisure and Recreation Services, KMC Housing, Pennine Rural Development Area, and from individual fund raising activities by the TRAs involved. The funding was used to establish three play areas for the TRAs at Woods in Marsden, Ridgeways in Linthwaite, and Leymoor in Golcar.

The Panel noted that the initiative had developed a feeling of ownership of the facilities by the communities involved. The consortium had now expanded to include other TRAs and was moving forward on a further bid for Lottery funding.

4.3.2 Planning Services

The Panel took evidence from the Area Planning Officer, noting that developers could be required, through a Section 106 Agreement, to provide play facilities within the area of a housing development, particularly where there are no alternative facilities within a reasonable distance. Developers may be required to maintain the open space site where this is not to be handed over to the control of the Council immediately, and the Council will require a payment of a bond to safeguard against the developer going bust. The likely requirements of incoming residents to the development have to be gauged by Leisure and Recreation Services, in consultation

with the developer, to finalise the terms of the Section 106 Agreement, as developers require to know at the earliest stage their final costs of development and that they have an approved planning permission.

4.3.3 Meltham Town Council

The Panel took evidence from a Meltham Town Councillor on a partnership initiative between the Meltham Town Council and Kirklees Metropolitan Council to improve play facilities at Broadlands Recreation Ground, Meltham. Consultations were undertaken with local schools and with the Council's Community Development Services to establish requirements, following which the dilapidated equipment on the site was dismantled and part of the tarmaced surfacing removed, and replaced with new facilities, including play equipment, a basketball pod, and a perspex shelter.

The Panel was also informed that upgrading of the site at Meltham Pleasure Grounds had been accelerated with funding assistance from the Town Council.

4.3.4 Member Site Visits

Panel members undertook visits to inspect facilities at South Way Island, Norristhorpe, and Foxroyd Drive, Mirfield (both refurbished sites), and at Knowl Park, Mirfield, and Leeds Road Playing Fields (both awaiting refurbishment). Again, discussions with local residents had revealed the feeling of ownership which local residents felt for play facilities established within their locality, and on which the Authority had canvassed their views.

4.3.5 Independent Research Project

The Panel also had regard to a research project undertaken by an Officer seconded to Leisure Services into the wider development of children through play, and took account of the findings of that research insofar as these related specifically to children's play facilities.

5. Recommendations

Following a considerations of its findings the Panel put forward the following recommendations/comments:-

- (i) a formal and clear policy on prioritisation of renovations should be produced, including all relevant factors and possibly incorporating a "scoring" system.
- (ii) alongside the established policy there should be a development plan which does not just rely on resource availability, but which is designed to act as a catalyst to encourage local groups to apply to the National Lottery to both supplement Council provision and encourage local ownership of play schemes.
- (iii) as far as possible, play facility sites should accommodate a cross-section of age groups, a factor to be taken into account at the planning stage in new developments; consultation with young people (teenagers) as to their recreational needs is important; it is also apparent to the Panel that there is insufficient provision for the 10/14 age group, which needs addressing e.g. facilities such as basketball pods and skateboarding areas.

- (iv) upgrading of sites should pay particular attention to suitable access in all weathers; the Panel witnessed several examples of muddy tracks to the entrance to play sites, which serves to discourage their use. The accessibility needs of people with disabilities, e.g. wheelchair users, should also be taken account of.
- (v) Whilst not a formal recommendation, the Panel hopes that the Political Groups, when drawing up their budgets, will choose to maintain the capital injection made last year, to supplement the maintenance programme.

Contact Officer
on behalf of the Panel:-

Adrian Johnson 01484 221712
Background Papers - Documentation referred to in Section 2 of this report.