

<b>Community Committee Meeting</b>	
<b>Meeting Date</b>	10 January 2023
<b>Report Title</b>	Open Spaces and Play Strategy – A Review
<b>EMT Lead</b>	Emma Wiggins, Director of Regeneration & Neighbourhoods
<b>Head of Service</b>	Martyn Cassell, Head of Environment & Leisure
<b>Lead Officer</b>	Graeme Tuff, Greenspaces Manager
<b>Classification</b>	<b>Open</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	1. To consider the initial views and contributions of Members in the development of the new Open Spaces and Play Area Strategy.

## **1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report provides the basis for starting the process and consideration of a reviewed and updated Open Spaces and Play Area Strategy for Swale. It seeks Member thoughts, ideas and ultimate agreement to a process that will provide the necessary strategy for the period 2023-2028. As play areas come under the oversight of the Community Committee it is expected that this discussion will focus on play areas, with the open space element considered by Environment Committee.
- 1.2 The Open Spaces and Play Area Strategy is a key document used not only for the strategic direction of the service but also an evidence base for the Local Plan. The current version was developed in 2017 and now requires updating with an initial technical assessment which will provide detailed evidence of quantity, quality, accessibility and need. The report identifies the specific Local Plan requirements and relevant corporate policies.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 The current Open Spaces and Play Strategy 2018-2022 was developed in 2017 and sought to define, the Council's plans to protect, manage, and enhance its open spaces and play areas over the period of the plan. A copy is enclosed as Appendix I.
- 2.2 The strategy's purpose is to provide a sound body of evidence for supporting open space policies within the local plan, identify key opportunities and strategic imperatives, plan for delivery improvements to new and existing spaces and set standards for provision, quality and accessibility.
- 2.3 The current document provides background to the strategy such as a vision and context, summarises the technical assessment, identifies the challenges,

provides recommendations and action plan and also identifies the need and source for funding.

- 2.4 Open Space is defined as those spaces that generally provide unlimited free public access to usable open space, with access over the majority of the open space for people.

Open space is a generic term and encompasses a range of types:

- Parks & Gardens
- Natural/Semi/Natural Greenspace
- Green Corridors
- Outdoor Sports, Gyms and Playing Pitches
- General Amenity Greenspace
- Play Areas
- Cemeteries, Closed Churchyards and other burial grounds

### **National Planning Policy**

- 2.5 The National Planning Policy Framework recognises the importance of having access to a network of high-quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and physical activity to the health and well-being of our communities. As such, planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision. Information from these assessments should be used to determine what open space, sport and recreational provision is needed, which plans should then seek to accommodate, linking this provision with nature-based strategies such as green and blue infrastructure.

- 2.6 Officers currently use Policy DM 17 of the adopted Local Plan to consider the needs arising from new development and how best to meet them, which itself was guided by the Council's Open Spaces and Play Area Strategy (2018-2022). The Local Plan Review will need to revise this policy using an updated evidence base led by the Planning Practice Guidance. A new Open Spaces and Play Area Strategy along with any others deemed necessary, will be used to inform a robust policy for future needs and where they should be located, in the Local Plan Review.

### **Corporate Plan**

- 2.7 The Corporate Plan is the overarching statement of the Council's strategic priorities and is arranged into 4 broad priorities:
- Priority 1 - Building the right homes in the right places and supporting quality jobs
  - Priority 2 - Investing in our environment and responding positively to global challenges
  - Priority 3 - Tackling deprivation and creating equal opportunities for everyone
  - Priority 4 - Renewing local democracy and making the Council fit for the future

While open space has a role to play in several of the Corporate Plan priorities given its link to homes through new development and equal opportunities through community engagement, its key strand is Priority 2 and the value placed on the environment and its ability to respond to climate change and increase biodiversity through various initiatives.

### **3 Proposals**

- 3.1 It is proposed to review and develop a new strategy over the coming months. This involves several stages and key pieces of work including production of an up to date and robust technical assessment that will identify and guide the specific recommendations for the new strategy. This will then be fully considered by Members along with external consultation on the draft strategy.

#### **Key Principals**

- 3.3 Key principals in the current strategy include the following:
- Protect the Council's existing open space network
  - Provide spaces to encourage a healthy community
  - Focus on enhancing/improving the quality of key open spaces
  - Promote the benefits open space has for people living and visiting Swale and enriching the biodiversity for wildlife
  - Support the development of facilities in open space to recognise the needs of users with disabilities and benefits of emotional and holistic approaches that open spaces can bring.
  - Maximise the benefits of the open space and play facilities that comes with increased housing development required under the local plan
- 3.4 The play area section of the strategy focuses on the following principals:
- Provision of a flagship play area in each of the major conurbations, Sittingbourne, Sheerness and Faversham.
  - Provision of other play areas to a LEAP standard assessed on quality, play value and accessibility.
  - Provision of youth sport & play sites – intention to keep good quality multi-use games areas, basketball hoops, goal ends and outdoor gyms.
  - Address the need to improve the overall quality of play areas managed, by exploring the removal of redundant or low quality, low value sites.
  - New development required play areas (along with the open space) to be managed and maintained by management company or other organisation rather than the Council.
  - To invest in a rolling programme of Council play area refurbishments. The current programme is attached at Appendix II.
- 3.5 Members are asked to consider the current strategy at Appendix I and principals above to suggest any changes or increased emphasis for the new strategy. Questions such as;
- Should the Council continue to consider removal of redundant, poor quality play areas.

- What/where should be the focus of the Council’s future play area refurbishment programme – currently use a RAG (Red, Amber, Green) rating that takes account of criteria such as age, condition, play value, risk, maintenance cost etc. along with opportunities for external funding such as Section 106 developer contributions.

## 4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

- 4.1 Keep the existing strategy as it is or not have a strategy at all. The strategy is a key component as evidence base for the Local Plan and to guide the principals of the Council’s management of current and future open space.
- 4.2 If the evidence base and strategy were not to be reviewed and updated, there is significant risk that the Local Plan would not be found as sound and that the service would not have the appropriate strategic guidance required to fulfil its potential in relation to the Corporate Plan.

## 5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 This is the first stage of developing the new strategy and we are seeking both Community and Environment Committee Members initial thoughts and guidance on the principals for a new strategy.
- 5.2 The new draft strategy will go through a process of Member consideration and external consultation before final agreement.

## 6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The reviewed Open Space and Play Area Strategy would align specifically and directly to Priority 2 of the Corporate Plan - Investing in our environment and responding positively to global challenges. In addition, it links to Priority 1 through its association with the Local Plan by providing the evidence base and showing need for appropriate development.
Financial, Resource and Property	None identified at this stage. However, the technical assessment will require funding which will be determined following the meeting and whilst we research the scope of the work. Major changes in policy may result in increased costs and would therefore need to be assessed against the budget framework. The current Playground Improvement Programme is funded from Special Projects Fund. As this is now all allocated to specific playground projects, future improvements will need to rely on section 106 funding from developers or alternative capital funding being allocated.

Legal, Statutory and Procurement	None identified at this stage.
Crime and Disorder	None identified at this stage.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	The new strategy has a significant part to play in the future strategic direction for the service, the requirements placed upon new development via the Local Plan and how the Council responds effectively to the climate and ecological emergency.
Health and Wellbeing	Open spaces and play areas can contribute significantly to health and well-being as evidenced by the usage and value placed upon them by the community during the Covid crises. The strategy will link with the Health and Care Partnership and can positively contribute to obesity work through the Population Health Management Group. The strategy will provide the basis and evidence for need and accessibility in both existing and new communities.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	None identified at this stage.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	None identified at this stage.
Equality and Diversity	There are no differential equality issues raised by the proposals in this report at this time, although one of the key strands of the strategy review is to identify appropriate accessibility standards to open space and play areas for the whole community.
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified at this stage.

## 7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Open Spaces and Play Area Strategy 2018-2022
- Appendix II: Play Area Refurbishment-Improvement Plan 2021-25

## 8 Background Papers

- None