

Cabinet – 9 February 2022

Green Space Strategy

Portfolio: Councillor Butler- Clean and Green portfolio

Related portfolios: Councillor Perry- Leisure, Councillor Craddock- Health and Wellbeing

Service: Healthy Spaces

Wards: All

Key decision: yes

Forward plan: Yes

1. Aim

1.1. The importance of parks and green spaces to everyone has been demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Visitor numbers dramatically increased over the lockdown period. The health and wellbeing of the residents of the Borough is of prime importance to the Council and through a process of improving the quality of play and fitness provision the Council will encourage more young people and adults to use their local open spaces for play, sport and exercise.

2. Summary

2.1. This report sets out options for how the Council can enhance the quality of play and adult fitness equipment in our open spaces. This will increase opportunities for children and adults to use green spaces more effectively for physical activity.

2.2. The cost of the preferred option is £1,644,000 for the 13 play areas and 6 outdoor gyms shown on the map in **Appendix 2**.

3. Recommendations

3.1. That Cabinet approve the installation of 6 new outdoor gyms and the improvement of 13 main play sites at a total cost of £1,644,000.

3.2. That Cabinet approves consultation with stakeholders, including play area users, residents and Ward Members, to inform the design process.

4. Report detail - know

Context

- 4.1. Walsall Council has provided equipped play areas for decades and developed play strategies to improve the provision of play areas in 2009 and 2012. In 2009 a significant government programme called Play Builder was delivered in partnership with children's services, which prioritised adventure play and moved away from the more traditional plastic coated metal equipment, fencing and safety carpet/surfacing. Approximately 24 (37%) of the 68 play areas were improved as part of this Government programme in 2009/10. These adventure play areas which were installed are now in need of investment, many of the play features were made of logs and organic structures, which have now rotted and have not been replaced since their original installation.
- 4.2. In 2017, during the development of the Green Space Strategy an analysis of the quality of green spaces was carried out by consultants, it was identified that spaces for children and young people were the lowest quality scoring type of space along with outdoor sports facilities. It has become very apparent that whilst savings have had to be made across the whole of leisure provision, parks and open spaces and in particular children's play and sports provision have suffered significantly. The average quality score for play spaces was 32%. Parks and countryside spaces scored 49% and 41% respectively in comparison to play spaces.
- 4.3. The highest scoring parks such as Palfrey Park (77%), Willenhall Park (66%) and the Arboretum (74%), have all been the subject of Heritage Lottery fund projects and have had considerable investment in their infrastructure. However, the Lottery fund did not prioritise play and health programmes, being more focussed on education and volunteering activity, so even play spaces in these parks are in need of investment.
- 4.4. As part of the Green Space Strategy production, a household survey was carried out in 2018, which recorded the views of a representative sample of residents (1500 responses). There is a definite downward trend (34%) from the 2011 to the 2018 survey of perceived declining quality, with 25% of respondents stating their local green space had got worse. The Council has tended to focus on spaces, which have access to external funding such as lottery, landfill communities or section 106 to improve provision and that has not been equally distributed across the borough.
- 4.5. The 2018 household survey also asked respondents why they used green spaces, the top 5 reasons for using green spaces were for positive health benefits, as follows.
- Fresh air 64%
 - Walking/jogging 63%
 - Health/exercise 47%
 - Relaxation/peace and quiet 43%
 - Wildlife and nature 33%
- 4.6. The 2018 strategy also defined a hierarchy of play provision with accessibility standards proposed which helps to identify areas of deficiency. The map of the borough (**Appendix 1**) shows the current play provision with distance to travel to

these spaces, the gaps between the circles show areas of play deficiency where new play spaces should be installed if the resources and land were available.

Category	Definition	Minimum provision	Distance
Play Hub	Destination sites located on strategic green spaces which include items for children, teenagers and adults	5 types of play Wheeled sports/ ball courts /goal ends 12 types outdoor exercise equipment.	1200m
Neighbourhood play	Includes children's and teenagers provision	5 types of play Wheeled sport/ ball court	800m
Local play	Includes children's or teenagers play	Below 3 types of play or Wheeled sport/ball court	400m

- 4.7. As part of the programme of research for the Black Country Plan, an open spaces audit was commissioned in 2020/21 provided by consultants Knight Kavanagh & Page. The Council's playground inspectors have also assessed the quality of play equipment, based on their regular inspections. These assessments have been rated 1-5, with 1 being 'requires attention' and 5 being 'excellent'. There are some slight differences between the open space audit consultants and the inspector's views of quality, but generally they are similar. The proposal to improve the top 13 sites has come from an analysis of these quality reports (see **Appendix 3**).
- 4.8. The total population of under 19 year olds (from the 2011 census) is 70,277. Walsall south and Bloxwich Birchills have the highest population of young people, with Aldridge and Streetly coming third (**Appendix 3** lists population of young people per area).
- 4.9. From the Council's inspection quality audits 4 play areas and 5 youth play sites and poor quality (scoring 1) and will be reviewed. There are 13 play area sites that need new equipment and some requiring better surfacing (scoring 2) at a cost of £1,130,000. A further 29 sites need some work on them (scoring 3). This would be either replacing some pieces of equipment or installing new equipment, this work could be delivered in the future as part of a phased programme.
- 4.10. When new sites are being improved accessible play equipment should be included into the scheme. With the improvement of the proposed sites new accessible equipment will be installed which can provide play opportunities for children and young people with additional needs.
- 4.11. Outdoor gyms have become more common place in green spaces across the country and they are becoming much better used as people become more familiar with the equipment and how to use it. People are also becoming less self-conscious about exercising outdoors on this type of equipment. In Walsall there are a total of twelve outdoor gyms, and seven trim trails. Most of these pieces of equipment are between 10-15 years old. They are robust and able to withstand considerable use with most of them still in reasonable repair. The surface on which these pieces of

equipment sit needs redesigning as the current process of putting equipment on grass or using rubber matting or carpet has not been successful.

- 4.12. The Green Space Strategy proposes that 19 strategic sites across the Borough should be better equipped than smaller spaces. This list includes 11 parks and 8 countryside sites, some of which have either a gym or a trim trail. There are some sites which do not have either. It would be beneficial if all 11 of these strategic parks sites contain an outdoor gym, so that residents would have reasonable access to these new facilities (**Appendix 2**). It is therefore proposed that new outdoor gyms are installed at the following six sites at a cost of £60k per gym, total £360k.

- Pleck Park
- Holland Park – replace equipment
- King George 5th Park
- Walsall Arboretum
- Pelsall Common
- Aldridge Airport

- 4.13. If the service expands the current provision of outdoor gyms there will be a requirement to increase the revenue for the maintenance of the gyms by £5k per year for each new gym. This proposal would require a total of £30k per year to maintain these new facilities.

Council Corporate Plan priorities

- 4.14. The 2021-22 corporate plan identifies the importance of physical activity during the pandemic and how Walsall services such as the borough's parks and green spaces contribute to this objective. The play and outdoor gyms proposals identified in this report will lead to greater opportunities for people who want to improve their physical and mental health. There is also a specific need to provide quality provision for children who require improved facilities for education and self- development.

Risk management

- 4.15. The greatest risks to the project of improving or removing play and outdoor gym provision will be concerned local residents. For example, some residents believe that improved provisions for children and young people will lead to an increase in anti-social behaviour leading to a reduced value of their properties.. The importance of provision for young people must be maintained as services for young people have been reduced over the last decade. A consultation and information provision exercise for siting new outdoor gyms will be carried out, and a consultation with children and young people on the types of equipment should also be implemented, to prevent the type of antisocial behaviour which sometimes occurs when people have not been involved in the process.

Financial implications

- 4.16. In order to improve the play space and outdoor gym offer across the borough a considerable amount of capital investment is required. There are currently no capital resources to improve and upgrade play spaces other than those arising from Section 106 agreements associated with developments. It has been estimated that a total of £229,000 is available from Section 106.

- 4.17. There may also be an opportunity for play improvements through regeneration funding in the Bloxwich area for Leamore Park. Through the Green projects in the Towns Fund if the Business case being put forward to Government is successful of approximately £140,000. A further £200,000 external funding is also being sought from Landfill Communities' Fund.
- 4.18. Improving the 13 most poorly equipped sites with new equipment and safety surfacing and 6 outdoor gyms would be £1,644k. Please see the table as shown below:

Expenditure types	Expenditure	Funding		
Play areas : 13 with new equipment @ £80k each	£1,040,000	S106	External	Council capital
Outdoor gyms : 6 @60k each	£360,000			
Contingency and professional services	£244,000			
Total	£1,644,000	(£229,000)	(£340,000)	(£1,075,000)

- 4.19. Any Council funded expenditure will be met from the pipeline investment funding including any expenditure where the Council is not able to realise the external funding assumed in this report.
- 4.20. On the basis of a Council funding element of £1,075k, the capital financing cost has been estimated at £1,234k over the life of the project. This would rise to £1,623k if the £340k external funding is not realised.

	With External funding	Without External Funding
	£'000	£'000
Total Financing cost		
Minimum Revenue Provision	1,075	1,415
Interest Cost	160	208
Total	1,235	1,623

Note: (Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) is payable on capital expenditure that is not financed from available resources such as capital receipts, capital grants and contributions or contributions from revenue. MRP is charged to revenue over a period that is considered to be broadly commensurate to the life of the asset to which the expenditure relates)

- 4.21. The revenue implications for maintaining 6 new outdoor gyms will be £30,000.

Legal implications

- 4.22. The installation of play equipment and outdoor gyms on land within the ownership of the Council can be carried out provided that there are no other land designations which require consents to be obtained. Where proposals affect common land, Secretary of State consent will be needed before any works can be carried out. Similarly, where proposals affect trust land, proposals must be in keeping with the purposes of the trust as required by the relevant trust deed, and consent of the trust and the charity commission may be required. Officers within the healthy spaces team will require advice from legal services or external providers.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.23. Procurement of contractors to provide play equipment will follow the usual local government procurement procedure. The tender process will also request contractors to improve the social value of the contract for the residents of the borough.

Property implications

- 4.24. The property implications arising from this report relate to the maintenance of the Council's green space assets. This report does not propose the disposal of any Council assets, nor the acquisition of additional assets.

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.25. This proposal will contribute toward the Marmot principals of
- Giving every child the best start in life
 - Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
 - Ensure a healthy standard of living for all
 - Create and develop healthy and sustainable communities
 - Strengthen the role and impact of ill-health prevention

Staffing implications

- 4.26. The project work will be delivered by the healthy spaces team as part of their project management programme. The Council will engage the service of external landscape design consultants through play providers to deliver the scheme.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.27. The project will provide the improvement of play and sports provision for children and young people with additional needs by providing more accessible play equipment as part of the programme.

Climate Change

- 4.28. The improvement of play and sport provision across the wider borough provides the opportunity to reduce car journeys to central facilities, increasing the ability of local residents to walk and cycle rather than take the car on short journeys.
- 4.29. The Council is aware of the availability of play equipment which has been produced from recycled materials. Further investigations are required to ascertain whether recycled equipment is suitable, sustainable and robust enough to be used in green spaces and is cost effective.

Consultation

- 4.30. There has been consultation with residents about the perceived quality of green spaces provision as part of the Green Space Strategy, which provides some background on the problems which the service is currently facing regarding investment.

- 4.31. A consultation has also been carried out with the Council maintenance teams to understand the quality of play provision on site currently.
- 4.32. As part of the design process wider consultation will be carried out with play area users, residents and Ward Members.

5. Decide

- 5.1. The option to do nothing will result in the play areas of the borough deteriorating further and this will result in further vandalism and anti-social behaviour. This is likely to have a knock on effect of reducing pride in areas which look neglected and may result in further decline.
- 5.2. The option of improving the worst 13 play areas and reviewing 9 areas in need of urgent attention will cost over £1m but should be considered alongside the delivery of 6 outdoor gyms to increase the opportunities for people to exercise in a cheap and effective manner at their local strategic park.

6. Respond

- 6.1. If the recommendation is approved a programme for improvement will be developed and a consultation process can be carried out to ensure that the project risks are managed effectively.
- 6.2. The improvement of these play areas will take approximately 18 months to implement, with consultation and project development in the first 6 months then project delivery over the next 12 months. The Council will engage the service of external Landscape Design consultants to deliver this scheme.

7. Review

- 7.1. As part of the programme regular reviews of progress will be carried out and reported to senior management and portfolio holder for Clean and Green.

Background papers

Walsall Green Spaces Strategy 2018- 2022
Draft Walsall open spaces audit 2021, KKP.
Draft Walsall Play Strategy 2015 Area Partnership reports
Draft Walsall Play Strategy 2012-2017

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Play spaces, access standards, and areas of deficiency
Appendix 2 - Proposed changes to play provision
Appendix 3 - Parks play areas quality audit

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