

Crawley Borough Council

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Commission

1 February 2021

Cabinet

3 February 2021

Petition “Save Crawley’s Adventure Playgrounds”

Joint report of the Head of Community Services, and the Petitions Officer
HCS/26

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The Council’s Petitions Officer received and accepted petition of 959 valid signatures entitled ‘*Save Crawley’s Adventure Playgrounds*’ and as such is required to be debated at the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, before their views are passed to the Cabinet as the relevant decision maker for their consideration and response.
- 1.2 To help consider the petition in context, the report also provides evidence in response to Residents’ concerns about proposals to cease supervised play provision at the four adventure playgrounds (APGs), closing two sites permanently with two retained as unsupervised play areas to help.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To the Overview and Scrutiny Commission:

That the Commission consider, the petition, the statement of the petitioner and the background report and decide what comments, if any, it wishes to submit to the Cabinet for a decision and response to the Principal Petitioner.

- 2.2 To the Cabinet:

That the Cabinet considers the findings and any comments submitted by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, along with the petition, the statement of the petitioner and the background report, in making its decision.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations

- 3.1 To ensure the procedure for petitions as detailed in the Council’s Constitution is adhered to.

4. The Petition and the Procedure

- 4.1 The Council’s Petitions Officer received an e-petition entitled *Save Crawley’s Adventure Playgrounds* which had been ran on 3rd party petition site Change.org by the Principal Petitioner.

4.2 The petition states as follows “**Save Crawley’s Adventure Playgrounds**”

Crawley Council have just announced that they will be closing all 4 of our adventure playgrounds, 2 will close completely and 2 will become unsupervised play areas.

This will leave the children of Crawley with nowhere safe to play. The adventure playgrounds are a part of Crawley’s history, they have been around for 60 years! I grew up spending most of my childhood playing in them and so have my children. They are still well used by so many local families. We love having somewhere to go that provides a safe place to be outside, socialising and exercising with toilets, staff and refreshments available to all. Us parents can meet up and we can bring the little ones along and they play here all day, they make new friends, gain confidence, get fresh air and exercise without it costing a fortune. Where will we go without these? Where can you go knowing that the kids can roam free without the worry of safety and knowing there is always a safe adult to hand if needed. What type of people could these areas attract if unsupervised?

They also offer reasonably priced childcare services throughout school holidays for those of us that don't have the ability to pay private fees whilst we are at work. For some parents this is a life line and we will be lost without it.

Where will our children go to socialise now? Out on the streets, causing mischief and creating issues due to boredom or stop going out and rely on technology?! We don't have youth clubs anymore, so these are their only options? What good will either of these do for the mental health of the next generation? Please sign our petition to ask the council to look at the options again and review this decision!

4.3 On reviewing the petition and in line with the Council Petitions Scheme the petition was accepted with 959 valid signatures. As a result of the size of the petition it is sent to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for their consideration and review.

4.4 The petition along with view of the Commission is then submitted to the appropriate decision maker in this case the Cabinet for their consideration and responses.

4.5 At both meetings the Principal Petitioner is entitled to address the Councillors over their petitions. In line with Virtual Committee Procedure Rules for both meetings it will be in the form of a written statement that equates to 3 minutes in length which will be read to Councillors by a Democratic Services Officer.

4.6 The Cabinet is required to provide the Principal Petitioner with written confirmation of their decision. The confirmation will also be published on the Council’s website within the minutes.

5. Background behind the Petition

5.1 The petition requests that the Council reconsiders its intention to close the Adventure Playgrounds as supervised provision.

5.2 Under the backdrop of increasing financial pressures and the need to achieve a balanced budget for 2021/22, consultation took place from 8th October until 5th November 2020 which resulted in 1,212 external responses from residents who gave their views on potential service changes. This had the highest response rate for any Crawley Borough Council consultation. The results of the consultation are [available on the Council's website](#). Only 26 per cent of respondents to the budget consultation

disagreed with the proposal to review Play Service provision while 51 per cent agreed.

- 5.3 Members agreed in principle to a number of fundamental changes to the Play Service that affected the status of all four APGs and supported a move to a community based outreach play model.
- 5.4 Cherry Lane and Waterlea Adventure Playgrounds will be converted into unsupervised play areas while Creasys Drive Adventure Playground in Broadfield and Millpond Adventure Playground in Bewbush will be closed. The council will also investigate if it is possible to enhance any existing play provision in Broadfield and Bewbush.
- 5.5 It has also been recognised that the Council's approach to delivering its play offer required review, the last review taking place in 2011. With Crawley facing unprecedented economic challenges in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, there will be social challenges facing the town that require new approaches that create capacity to maximise impact.

6. Key Areas for Consideration

6.1 The key areas for the consideration are as follows:

- As part of the budget setting process for 2021/22, the Council has stated its intention to reduce the overall Play Service revenue budget by £210,000. This contributes to the Council achieving a balanced budget position as part of its [Budget Strategy 2021/22 - 2025/26 FIN/508](#).
- Additional capital resource, in the region of £500,000 - £750,000, would be required to invest in two of the outdated sites to meet necessary quality and safety standards. This is over and above the funds earmarked to redevelop Waterlea APG, these would have to come forward as new capital bids and bid against other priorities as agreed in the [Budget Strategy](#).
- The average cost per visit to the council across all four adventure playgrounds is high, at more than £30. This ranges from £4.11 to £85.22 across the different sites. This is very expensive when you consider that the annual amount that Crawley Borough Council receives for a band D council tax household is £208.89.
- There has been a 68% reduction in the total number of children attending activities provided by the play service over the past twenty years. In 2002/3 the total no of visits to the play service was 94,918 compared with 30,386 in 2019/20.
- The provision of a one-off 'Lower Tier Services' government grant allocation within [The Provisional local government finance settlement England 2021 to 2022](#) has afforded the Council the opportunity to make 2021/22 a transitional year in delivering its Play offer, allowing time for the future community outreach model to embed. This is outlined in report 2021/22 Budget and Council Tax FIN/514 elsewhere on this agenda in section 8.4.
- There are a wide variety of existing play facilities provided by the Council across the Town that are free of charge.

- The Council can provide a better, outcome focused, service for children and young people through the proposed Community Outreach play model, facilitated by our play team.
- The Council is working with West Sussex County Council and existing established holiday child care providers to support affordable access. It is possible that this will be delivered at one or more of the APG sites.
- The Play Service is primarily aimed at five to thirteen year olds. It is not intended as an alternative to youth provision. Youth Service provision falls within the remit of West Sussex County Council.

7 Information & Analysis

- 7.1 The Head of Community Services has consulted with the Head of Corporate Finance regarding the issues raised.
- 7.2 The adventure playgrounds have low usage and are outdated. It is acknowledged that some residents have a strong connection to the sites but children and families no longer visit them in the numbers they once did. The Head of Community Services has established that there has been a 68% reduction in the total number of children attending activities provided by the play service over the past twenty years. In 2002/3 the total no of visits to the play service was 94,918 compared with 30,386 in 2019/20. The Head of Corporate Finance confirmed that the service cost the council £376,000 in 2019/20, equating to an average cost per visit of more than £30, at a time where the Council needs to make significant savings to achieve a balanced budget. As part of the budget setting process for 2021/22, the Council has stated its intention to reduce the overall Play Service revenue budget by £210,000. This contributes to the Council achieving a balanced budget position as part of its [Budget Strategy](#).
- 7.3 The Council would need to make additional significant investment into three of the APG sites, far exceeding the £400,000 capital budget available, these would form future capital bids. This is at a time where traditional funding sources such as developer contributions through the Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy are less available.
- 7.4 The provision of a one-off 'Lower Tier Services' Government grant allocation within the recent provisional finance settlement has afforded the Council the opportunity to make 2021/22 a transitional year in delivering its Play offer. This will see two of the adventure playgrounds (Cherry Lane and Millpond) remain open until 31st October 2021 alongside the implementation of the community outreach model. During this period, a third APG site, Waterlea, would be refurbished and re-open in 2022 as an unsupervised play area.
- 7.5 Creasys Drive continues to be an unviable site, as highlighted in the most recent independent site inspection report. The location of the site does not support easy access to many local residents so is considered to be less favourable in terms of large capital investment. Plans for this site will be developed in time but this site is to remain closed as a play facility from April 2021.
- 7.6 There are a wide variety of existing play facilities provided by the Council across the Town that are free of charge, including our numerous parks and open spaces, 80+ unsupervised play areas and sport / recreation courts, Skate Park and BMX track.

We know that many of these facilities are well used and enjoyed by children and their families.

- 7.7 The Council has committed £400k capital funds to invest in Waterlea APG and improvements to existing play facilities in Broadfield and Bewbush.
- 7.8 The Council does not intend to remove supervised play provision entirely, simply it will be delivered in a different way through a community outreach model rather than focused at four fixed APG sites. This will provide the opportunity to take play out to our communities, engaging families and delivering informal and structured activities where they are most needed, offering better outcomes for our children and value for money. A team of experienced play staff will support the delivery of these community play activities, alongside other partners.
- 7.9 New proposed, play staff led sessions will provide reassurance to those parents and carers who are concerned about allowing their child to play independently in an unsupervised setting. It is important to acknowledge that the play staff do not currently act in loco parentis at any of our APG settings (the exception is the formal childcare provision) or community locations. Parents and Carers are responsible for their children at all times.
- 7.10 The Council's Community Warden service respond to incidents of antisocial behaviour at all of our unsupervised sites within core service hours (08:00 – 21:30, seven days a week), however any concerns relating to possible criminal activity should continue to be reported to the police.
- 7.11 We are working with existing established holiday child care providers to support affordable access and to build capacity for provision for Crawley children as part of the transitional delivery plan. It is possible that this will be delivered at one or more of the APG sites through one or more of the providers already operating preschool provision at our sites.
- 7.12 The Play Service is primarily aimed at five to thirteen year olds, albeit some younger and older children do access the service. It is not intended as an alternative to youth provision. Youth Service provision falls within the remit of West Sussex County Council.

8 Implications

- 8.1 Retention of the Adventure Playgrounds in their current form would create a £210,000 revenue budget shortfall. This would need to be addressed and alternative savings found to ensure that the Council meets its obligation to deliver a balanced budget.
- 8.2 Additional capital resource, in the region of £500,000 - £750,000, would be required to invest in two of the outdated sites to meet necessary quality and safety standards, these would form part of future bids and have to meet the criteria set out in the Budget Strategy.
- 8.3 Usage of the APG sites is likely to decline further without investment.
- 8.4 Sustaining the APG centred delivery model will limit the number of children and their families that we can effectively engage across the town. It will also limit how quickly and flexibly we can respond to the evolving needs of our residents and wider

community, in the context of historic issues and those emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic.

9 Background Papers

Consultation outcomes [available on the Council's website.](#)

Cabinet report 25 November 2020 [Budget Strategy 2021/22 - 2025/26 FIN/508](#)
2021/2022 Budget and Council Tax FIN/514 (elsewhere on this Agenda)

Report author and contact officer:

Kate Wilson, Head of Community Services

Chris Pedlow Petition Officer – Interim Monitoring Officer