

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Virtual Meeting held on Thursday, 26th November, 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Andrew Harding in the Chair;
Councillors Jim Blagden, Dale Grounds,
David Walters, Lee Waters and Caroline Wilkinson.

Apology for Absence: Councillor Phil Rostance.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy and Shane Wright.

OS.9 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

OS.10 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 24 September 2020, be received and approved as a correct record.

OS.11 Scrutiny Review: Play Park Accessibility

The Scrutiny Research Officer introduced the report and reminded Members that the Play Park Accessibility review was added to the Scrutiny Workplan 2020/21 at the July 2020 meeting with the Committee setting introductory terms of reference for the review at its 24 September 2020 meeting.

The Terms of Reference were set at follows:

Review Objectives

- Ensure that all parks and open spaces in Ashfield are accessible with appropriate adaptations and equipment
- Ensure that all consultation exercises undertaken by the Council regarding parks and open spaces are fully inclusive.

Methodology

- Reviewing Council policies/strategies relating to accessibility, particularly regarding parks and open spaces
- Exploring the Section 106 allocation process
- Gaining a full understanding of what facilities are already in place
- Potential for a site visit to a best practice example of an accessible and inclusive park/open space

Involvement

- Community Groups
- Planning/Community Engagement/Place and Wellbeing
- Portfolio Holder for Streets, Parks and Town Centres.

The report also outlined the importance of inclusive play and the right for all children and young people to have the freedom, time, space, permission, and opportunity to play throughout their childhood and teenage years.

To enable such play, most local authorities had ownership of many parks and open spaces that could be made accessible to everyone. Ashfield District Council, in particular, have many excellent, award winning parks that are a pleasure to visit and should be enjoyed by all its residents and children without hindrance.

Many notable, national charities offered a plethora of information and guidance regarding the types of equipment available to meet the needs of children with varying disabilities and differing types of playground layout and formats to ensure optimum accessibility, inclusivity and enjoyment.

The Chairman acknowledged the importance of play for all and suggested that local authorities most probably had access to informative data in relation to its numbers of children experiencing a range of disabilities and impairments that might benefit from an increase in accessible play equipment. This data, if available, could also be split down in towns to enable any new, accessible equipment to be located in areas of most need. It was agreed that the Committee could contact the Council's Health and Wellbeing Team to see if such information was being captured or could be accessed as a starting point for the review.

Members suggested that in addition to the Play England website, the Play Quest and Living Made Easy websites were also excellent and contained a wealth of information regarding the design, manufacture, installation and maintenance of accessible playground equipment and safer surfaces. All Members were encouraged to take a look at the information on offer from all the sites indicated.

At this point in the meeting, the Chairman asked Councillor Dale Grounds if he wished to talk about his experience of inclusivity within parks and open spaces being the father to a young son with Autism.

Councillor Grounds proceeded to speak as follows:-

“Children with special needs do not often have the same opportunities as other children to engage in physical play at the playground. More often than not, they have obstacles that prevent them from being able to participate. Inclusive play allows children with different needs the opportunity to play side-by-side on the same playground.

Inclusive play is beneficial for all children. It allows the opportunity for children with special needs to experience the positive impact that play has on their development and overall well-being. It allows typically developing children to view the world through a different, more diverse lens. Kids with a diverse

range of abilities playing together in the same space will develop a sense of equality and togetherness they will never experience if they remain separated in play. It allows them all to interact with one another, exposing their differences, but highlighting their similarities at the same time, helping them to develop an awareness, respect and understanding of people with all abilities.

However, the number one reason that inclusive play is important is that it allows children to have access to the play time that can help them develop into happy and healthy, functioning adults.

Communities are diverse. Playgrounds should be too. Active, independent play is critical for the development, health, well-being, and social opportunities of all children especially the disabled. However, the benefits of play are not limited solely to children, but reach across communities and throughout one's lifespan. Now more than ever, communities across the world are seeking innovative ways to unite children, families, and community through the power of play. Understanding the value and benefits of inclusive, multigenerational play will help communities advocate for and invest environments which support the diverse needs of society - ultimately resulting in positive community outcomes.

Inclusive play is not solely about physically accessing an environment, but also intensely focused on what happens once an individual gets there. By equipping children of all abilities with inclusive environments and the skills to play together more independently, children will feel nurtured, encouraged, respected, and active during play both physically and emotionally thereby creating a sense of community among all children.

Inclusive play is a passion and purpose. Together we can effectively promote inclusive play as a critical solution to enrich and enhance the quality of life for children, families, and communities across our nation. I hope you will join me as we continue to investigate, learn, and collaborate for broader social equity.”

Members of the Committee commended Councillor Grounds for his honesty and openness in respect of the difficulties children with disabilities and difficulties often face to access play opportunities alongside their peers and wholly supported his vision for a commitment towards inclusivity for all.

Members acknowledged that the Council was already committed to making its parks and playgrounds accessible and discussed the work already undertaken to improve accessibility for all. As evidence of the Council's ongoing commitment to invest and upgrade their parks and open spaces, the Scrutiny Research Officer commented that the Cabinet were due to consider a report at its meeting on 1 December 2020 regarding a further raft of investment into green spaces around the District.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services, added that many of the green space projects and initiatives that the Council facilitated were often match funded and ring-fenced with specific requirements for their completion.

However, he suggested that it might be beneficial for an Overview and Scrutiny Committee representative to attend the Cabinet meeting next week and introduce the new Play Park Accessibility review with the permission of the Chairman. Councillor Dale Grounds indicated that he would like to attend the Cabinet meeting and speak to the Members accordingly.

Having acknowledged the importance of the review, the Scrutiny Research Officer suggested that a possible site visit to a fully accessible local authority play area would be beneficial to the review process and a park in Bilborough, Nottingham was mooted as a good example of such a play area. It was also proposed that the visit could be recorded (in accordance with safeguarding regulations) to enable the equipment and layout of the play area to be shared with officers and other Members as required.

To conclude, it was agreed that some form of baseline data in relation to the levels of accessibility need within the Ashfield area would be extremely beneficial to form the basis of the review and to ensure that any further decisions taken by Members were informed and appropriate.

RESOLVED

that the Scrutiny Research Officer be requested to investigate the following in readiness for the next meeting of the Committee:

- a) the availability of any baseline data regarding the number of children (and age ranges) within Ashfield experiencing any form of physical or learning disability;
- b) suitable officers and/or charity representatives who could contribute to the review and be in attendance at a future meeting to answer questions and offer insight as required;
- c) to ascertain from the Leader his agreement for an Overview and Scrutiny Committee representative to attend the Cabinet meeting on 1 December 2020, to introduce the Play Park Accessibility review as part of the Green Space Investment Programme report deliberations.

OS.12 Scrutiny Workplan

The Scrutiny Research Officer advised Members that he had been asked to include a new topic onto the 2020/21 Scrutiny Workplan with regard to Homelessness and in particular the Council's current eviction procedures.

Many tenants were experiencing extreme stress at being served with an Eviction Notice with only minimal time being given to enable them to move out and find another place to live. It was felt that an intermediate process could be examined to give vulnerable tenants more time and notice to secure alternative accommodation and avoid being made homeless.

RESOLVED

that the Homelessness review be added to the Scrutiny Workplan for 2020/21 with draft terms of reference being presented to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration.

The meeting closed at 7.40 pm

Chairman.