

Strategy for the Provision of Playgrounds¹ by the Parish Council.

Boxley Parish Council recognises that play is an important part of the development of children and play grounds are an investment in play for future generations.

1 Introduction

The parish council currently provides a toddler playground² at Weaving Diamond Jubilee Orchard³ and as part of the lease it is required to continue this provision.

In the provision of services a parish council has to act:

- Within the law. *Note: The Parish Council has the legal power to provide playgrounds*
- Prudently. *Note: It must have the finances to a) meet the initial cost and b) any long-term ongoing costs*
- Reasonably. *Note: Any decision it takes should be able to be judged, by a reasonably minded person as reasonable*

To meet the last two bullet points the parish council should be prepared to prove, by a clear administrative trail, that it has acted in an open and accountable way and that there is an identified need for the expenditure and it is commensurate with potential use.

2 Maidstone Borough Council Blue and Green Structure Plan

The consultation on this document identified major changes in how MBC supplies and assesses need for playgrounds which will result in the removal of Shepherds Gate Drive playground with expansion and improvement of the existing provision at Grovewood Drive North⁴.

3 Playground Provision within Boxley Parish Council

Grove Green – currently has 4 playgrounds (reduced to 3 under the Blue and Green infrastructure strategy – which this report will work to):

- Shepherds Gate Drive (under ten year olds)
- Weaving Heath (sports wall)
- Weaving Diamond Jubilee Orchard (BPC run toddler equipment)
- Grovewood Drive North (toddler equipment)

and Lordswood has one

- Timber Tops (toddler equipment)

¹ In this case meaning an area with static play equipment.

² Toddler Play Equipment or Areas – play equipment and areas suitable for children under 6 years old.

³ the land being on a long term lease From Maidstone Borough Council.

⁴ There are no further details on this but it was indicated by a MBC officer that it would be a mixed age usage and Grovewood Drive North was chosen as there was enough space to put a large play ground in and there is also room to expand in the future.

Groveswood Drive North is to be replaced with a larger multi-aged playground with Shepherds Gate Drive being closed.

Timber Tops playground is marked within the MBC strategy as needing improvement.

Areas that are deficient of any playground and in the cases of Sandling and Boxley villages any substantial informal recreation areas, are:

- Boxley Village
- Sandling Village
- Walderslade

4 Playground Supply Strategy

If the Parish Council wishes to proactively take on responsibility for the provision of playgrounds then the 'expenditure is commensurate with gain' issue must be considered. It must also decide what age range or ranges it wishes to target etc.

MBC has a strategy, within an urban area, of a 12 minute walk to the nearest playground. It has no strategy to proactively provide playgrounds in any area that is deficient of such provision. Playgrounds and play areas will have to be provided using other sources of funding (section 106, Parish Councils etc.).

Note: Without large scale development, provision of land or funding from the Parish Council it is unlikely that playgrounds in Boxley, Sandling or Walderslade will be provided.

5 Financial cost of operating a playground

These include:

- Cost of set up or refurbishment. Example of potential cost Weaving Diamond Jubilee Orchard (2012) circa £10,000.
- Cost of safety training or employment of company to undertake regular safety checks.
- Office management e.g staff time and mileage – if they are responsible for the tests.
- Cost of annual safety check. The cost is calculated on a per play item etc. 2014 cost for 5 small pieces £65.
- Insurance. Weaving Diamond Jubilee Orchard playground cost £160 per annum for the equipment and fencing.
- Ongoing liability for maintenance, repairs and replacement equipment.

6 How to progress

Prior to considering taking on or creating a play area/s the following should be used:

- Any investigation should be impartial.

- A decision tree or flow chart⁵, where practical, shall be produced by the Council to help it identify need and consequences in an open and accountable way.
- A similar survey to that undertaken by MBC in the production of the Blue and Green Strategy, on where play provision is, what it is and where it serves should be completed.
- If taking on an existing site a condition survey for the site being considered for adoption must also be completed. Forward maintenance plans must be provided, in summary a business plan for each site will need to be completed.
- An analysis of commensurate gain in community wellbeing against expenditure should be produced.

At the relevant time, but very early on in the process, to aid the production of a decision tree or flow chart the parish council will:

- (a) Ask and answer why the parish council wants to do this and what it wants to achieve.
- (b) Decide on the strategy for identifying whether there is or is not sufficient need.
- (c) Having decided on (b) paper investigate where there is need. What type of need (toddler or youth?). Can something be done? Is there a clear priority for playground development?
- (d) Having undertaken (c) test the conclusions of the paper investigation by putting articles in the Downs Mail, Facebook, website etc. asking for residents' views⁶.

⁵ A graph that uses a branching or flowing method to illustrate possible outcomes of a decision allowing the user to come to a logical conclusion.

⁶ If the Parish Council does (d) then it is raising expectations so it needs to be very careful.