

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY 2 SEPTEMBER 2008

REPORT ON INSTALLATION OF PLAY AND LEISURE FACILITIES AT KINGS HEATH PARK

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To give Members a detailed understanding of the development of the King's Heath play site, as requested at the last meeting.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The design and installation of play areas on new sites and those where major refurbishment is taking place is the responsibility of the Leisure section of the Leisure & Museums Unit. The section consists of three teams: River and Canal, Countryside and Leisure Facilities, but all the play area work is carried out by the Leisure Manager himself, with the assistance of the Leisure Support Officer. Details of the play area work programme are attached as Appendix I.
- 2.2 The development of the King's Heath Park site has been ongoing for a number of years. The inability or reluctance of Persimmon Homes to transfer the site of the play areas to the City Council for adoption, as it was required to do by the Section 106 agreement, meant that the estate was built and occupied before work could begin on the installation of the play equipment.
- 2.3 Unusually the adoption of the King's Heath public open space took place in five stages, with the multi-use games area (MUGA) and the fenced play space the first two, on the 10 October 2007 and 16 November 2007 respectively. The remainder of the open space – making up the rest of the new park – was adopted in December of that year. The agreement specified that the developers would provide the MUGA and the fencing and the money for the play area, while the Council was to design, procure and install the play equipment itself.
- 2.4 It has been rare in recent years that whole new parks are acquired by the City Council, but the size of the King's Heath development meant that there was an opportunity to provide a substantial tract of public open space in the city, with a large play area.
- 2.5 In 2007 the Council adopted a play strategy that included a policy to make play areas more adventurous and to include naturalistic features where possible. However, equipment manufacturers are only just beginning to respond to local authorities' requests for such features, and there is not a great choice of suitable items that comply with the policy.

3. CONSULTATION

- 3.1 As is usual in the case of any new play area of more than one or two items, the Leisure Manager undertook consultation to gather ideas and gain support for the proposals. The key events were:

- The Leisure Manager attended My Neighbourhood Partnership Meeting on 4 October 2007 (pre adoption) to meet residents and discuss initial plans for the park and likely timescales.
- He attended another My Neighbourhood Partnership Meeting on 13 November 2007 to give residents an update on progress. By this time the Council had adopted the tarmac MUGA base, the play area space had been turfed and adoption was imminent. The Leisure Manager told the meeting that his aim was to complete the installation during the early summer, but that he was unable to guarantee that, given the quantity of other work he was dealing with.
- The main on-site consultation event took place on Saturday 17 November 2007 in the play area space. We had a small marquee and a display of equipment ideas and options. The event was well attended by residents who gave feedback on all areas of the Park facilities e.g. play equipment, teen shelters, teen facilities, options for the eastern end of the Park and the colour scheme for the MUGA. The feedback was in the form of voting for preferred options, filling in comment forms, and more general chats with the Leisure Manager and Leisure Support Officer.
- The Leisure Support Officer attended a further meeting with Residents on 11 March 2008 to update them on the project and display pictures of more or less the final scheme.

4. MULTI USE GAMES AREA

- 4.1 Lots of work went into the MUGA before adoption took place. This involved researching products, manufacturers, and installers, designing and specifying the facility and going through a tendering process. There was also significant work involved in getting the developer to bring the MUGA base up to a standard suitable for adoption. All this work allowed us to order the MUGA fencing (tarmac sub-base already installed) as soon as this area of the Park was adopted. The order was made on 15 October 2007, the manufacturers were informed on our choice of colour scheme on Monday 19 November - this allowed us to let residents have a say in this aspect at the consultation event. Installation of the MUGA began on 3 December 2007 and took approximately a week. We arranged for a separate contractor to lay the tarmac wearing course, which was done on 13 / 14 October 2007. By this stage the court was very much available for use and has been popular with residents ever since. The line painting (sports markings) was done on 3 July 2008. The delay on this aspect was because line painting is very much more cost effective when batched, and we were awaiting other line marking jobs to be ready. However the court could be and was used before line painting.
- 4.2 Floodlighting of the MUGA is imminent and we aim for this to be in place before the end of this summer. A separate planning application had to be made for the lights and was submitted in January 2008, with permission received on 8 April 2008. We ordered the supply and installation of the lighting scheme in Feb 2008 (subject to planning permission). There have been a few issues holding this installation up, the main one being that the floodlight ducting installed by the developers is not satisfactory and cannot be used - this has meant the contractor has had to re-design the power supply to the MUGA and to re-adjust the quote accordingly. However the main delay here is due to the contractor, who has proved reluctant to set a date and deliver the project – probably due to there being plenty of work to be had at the

moment. The lighting should be installed and functional by September, and we continue to chase the contractor.

5. PLAY AREA

- 5.1 The team went to the main consultation event with a number of ideas worked up, and these were largely confirmed by residents' opinions. We also held an in-house play design meeting in the early stage, with contributions from the officer responsible for the ongoing maintenance of the play area, a landscape architect and ECC's Play Development Manager.
- 5.2 Given the unusually large scope afforded by the rare opportunity to install a major project in a new park, the team decided early on, with the support of the Play Area Project Group, that an ambitious scheme incorporating aspects of adventurous and naturalistic play should be implemented at Digby. Recent research has shown that the constant "designing out" of risk in play areas has led to them becoming bland, boring and unable to deliver the real task of play – stimulating the mental and physical imagination of children or anyone else who uses the equipment, or setting. For the first time therefore the team ventured into the design of actual play installations, rather than making up an area from off-the-shelf components. Both of the large Digby features, and particularly the Digby Special, have been specially designed by us and have had to be refined many times and on many levels to ensure they are suitably safe, have good play value, will be robust enough, will be affordable and are buildable. Sourcing the right materials and getting this right has taken a long time, and a number of iterations of the process.
- 5.3 This in itself would not have caused the actual installation of the play area to be later than we would have liked, but it was in itself a significant use of time on the part of both the team members. At the same time however, and most unusually, they were dealing with the design and preparation of two other projects – the new parks at Summerway and at Wyvern Barracks. As members will know, the latter has also occupied an enormous amount of unplanned officer time. As highlighted above, one new major project is unusual, three represents real difficulty in time management. Leisure & Museums has little influence over when new parks and open spaces come on stream; the timetable is usually dictated by the developers, so there was nothing we could do about this logjam.
- 5.4 Furthermore, and most disruptive to the play area programme, it was announced in February that there would be a public inquiry for the Harbour Revision Order in July. This has required a large amount of essential research and the compilation of much documentation, and, partly due to the number and tenacity of formal objections, the scale of this has been huge. All of this work falls on the Leisure Manager, and there is no-one else who can do it. The inquiry date was re-set for the beginning of September, which was a rigid deadline that could not be ignored. Intensive work for the inquiry is still ongoing. In addition there is substantial work being carried out to prepare for the new swimming pool, also supervised by the Leisure Manager, although directly carried out by the Leisure Facilities Manager.
- 5.5 The programme therefore slipped across the winter and spring, to the extent that it was no longer possible to install the major items before the summer holidays.
- 5.6 There were of course other items in the project plan which were more traditional and could be obtained off the peg. We initially decided against ordering these separately, because this in itself adds to the total workload and cost, and it is always desirable to

do a whole site at one time. We did however change this decision at the request of the Residents' Association.

- 5.7 Installation of some of the play equipment commenced on Monday 21 July and was complete by 30 July. This leaves us to arrange a second installation (probably in Autumn 2008) when we will install the full complement of equipment for the Park.
- 5.8 There has been other work going on over this time, for example works to replace/amend the play area gates was arranged by us and carried out in February 2008. Also a sculptured piece of granite was installed in the Eastern end of the Park in May 2008 and is a striking aesthetic feature fitting with the naturalistic feel of that area of the Park, which can also be used as an informal play item – it has had safety surfacing installed.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 It is very clear that this project could not have been delivered any earlier, not at least without significant damage to other work in hand. It is unfortunate that it missed the summer holidays, and it is a matter of real regret for the team managing the project, who are dedicated to achieving good design, high play value, and real satisfaction on the part of the users, the children and young people for whom these projects are created.
- 6.2 We certainly should have spoken to the Residents' Association and Ward Councillors much earlier however, once we realised that we could not meet the timetable we hoped for ourselves, and agreed a course of action to mitigate the problem within the resources we did have available.

5. RECOMMENDED

- 1) That Scrutiny Committee Community receive the report.

HEAD OF LEISURE AND MUSEUMS

COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report: