

Thame Town Council

Play Area Strategy

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Play is vitally important to children's development, learning and health. Play contributes to the emotional, intellectual, social, cultural, psychological and physical development of children and this ultimately benefits the community in which children and young people live.
- 1.2 Children play in a variety of ways, not all of them at first apparent to on-looking adults. It can vary from physical activities that are already on offer, i.e. playing on a climbing frame – to much more subtle things such as made-up stories and inventive play that need not involve anything other than the child and their imagination.
- 1.3 Children therefore need their own space in which to enjoy these activities. These spaces come in various forms, from the back garden to the playground at school, to public spaces and parks. Where these spaces concern the Council it aims to make them as inviting, challenging and exciting as possible.
- 1.4 This play area strategy will give focus to the needs of children and young people throughout Thame. This in itself should bring about change, innovation and the further development of play in the town.

2. Purpose

2.1 *The purpose of this Play Area Strategy is to:*

- Deliver a more even distribution of play areas which offer a qualitative play experience across Thame.
- To ensure that children living in and visiting the town will experience a stimulating, challenging and improved environment for play in the future.
- To find alternative ways of funding play area provision and attract additional resources.

3. Benefits

3.1 This strategy will deliver the following benefits to children and young people 3 – 17 years:

- More choice in better play provision within walking distance of home.
- Users feeling safe in the local play environment.
- An enjoyable leisure experience in an improved local environment.
- Easily accessible play areas for local residents to walk to.
- Better access for the disabled and people from other disadvantaged sections of the community.

4. Context

4.1 The Council has provided children's play equipment in Thame for many years. These facilities can be found in the town's parks and open spaces.

- 4.2 Pressure on the future maintenance of these facilities comes from a number of factors and is increasing. The age of some of the equipment is so old that parts are increasingly difficult to get hold of. The British and European Safety Standards have required investment to be made in surfacing and there is some safer surfacing that will soon need to be replaced because it will not meet the required standard.
- 4.3 Clearly major renovation has implications for the Council's spending decisions. Investment in relation to play equipment has to be taken within the context of the overall Council budget. The possibility of attracting external funding through partnership working, or sponsorship, will be a significant factor in any future provision.
- 4.4 There are currently 7 sites with children's play equipment in the town:
- i) Elms Park
 - ii) South Pole
 - iii) Pickenfield
 - iv) Pearce Way
 - v) Queen Elizabeth Circle
 - vi) Skate Park
 - vii) Churchill Crescent

5. National Standards

- 5.1 The National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) has produced minimum standards for the provision of children's play facilities. These standards are recognised as being a yardstick against which local authorities can judge the distribution and content of play areas.
- 5.2 The NPFA identify 3 categories of play area:
- **Local Area for Play (LAP)** - a low key games area. Aimed at 4 – 6 year olds and younger children form play activities close to home. Catchment area = 1 minutes walking time for an accompanied child or approximately 100m walking distance.
 - **Local Equipment Area of Play (LEAP)** – a small play area with about 5 types of equipment. Aimed at 4 – 8 year olds. Consider needs of under 4s and slightly over 8s. Catchment area = 5 minutes walking time for an accompanied child, or approximately 400m walking distance.
 - **Neighbourhood Equipment Play Area (NEAP)** – a larger play area with about 8 types of equipment. Aimed at 8 – 14 age group. Facilities for wheeled and ball play should be provided. Catchment area = 15 minutes walking time for either accompanied or unaccompanied children, which is about 1000m walking distance.
- 5.3 The NPFA categories relate to Thame's play areas as detailed:

Play Area	Class
Elms Park	LEAP/Other
South Pole	LEAP/NEAP
Pickenfield	LAP
Pearce Way	LAP
Queen Elizabeth Circle	LEAP/NEAP
Skate Park	Other
Churchill Crescent	LEAP/Other

5.4 Using the NFPA criteria there is an insufficient number of large equipped play facilities in Thame and there are some areas without adequate further provision.

6. Safety Standards

6.1 A challenge is presented by ever more demanding safety standards. In the case of swings it is now a requirement that toddler and junior equipment be separated.

6.2 With the introduction of the European Safety Standards for Outdoor Playground Equipment (EN1176 and EN1177) in January 1999, came ever more demanding safety standards. The main difference between these standards and the previous British standards are primarily in relation to impact absorbing surfacing, the space between play structures and the height at which there is a need to provide barriers with guard rails to prevent falls.

6.3 There are a number of areas where existing equipment fails the new standard. This does not mean that equipment has suddenly become dangerous or that remedial action is required. The new standard is not retrospective or mandatory.

6.4 However, there is a clear need to plan for replacement equipment to ensure that compliance is met within a realistic timescale through a policy of removal or replacement. There is a clear implication of increased costs based upon the need for a development programme of play area improvements linked to compliance with the new European Safety Standards and this will be met through the Council's capital replacement programme.

7. The Future

7.1 The basis for future provision has to be based on the premise of providing high quality play provision accessible across the town that can be funded adequately by the Council without putting an excessive burden on the Council's finances or the tax payer. It is proposed that the priority listing, following the refurbishment of Churchill Crescent, Southern Road and Queen Elizabeth Circle should be:

- Elms Park
- Skate Park - User action / fund raising partnership group in place
- Southern Road recreation area changing rooms

7.2 It is also proposed that a consultation be undertaken with local resident associations on the future play provision required. An independent audit of the current play provision and anticipated future needs in Thame may also be required to be undertaken by a specialist in leisure and recreation such as Torkildsen Barclay.

7.3 It is important to consider teenage provision separately, as not catering for the needs of young people between the ages of 13-17 years can give rise to problems. Less suitable places are found to congregate, such as street corners or children's play equipment. This can lead to the use and sometimes abuse of equipment not intended for them. Nuisance and anti-social behaviour has been identified as one of the main areas of concern in the Neighbourhood Action Group survey and great reliance is given to diversionary activities.

7.4 The Council has limited provision for young people in this respect, most notably the Skate Park, the new play equipment in the South Pole play area, and the multi-games area in Elms Park.

8. Finance

8.1 The Council has already spent approximately £48,000 on the refurbishment of Churchill Crescent, £150,000 on Queen Elizabeth Circle and £186,000 on Southern Road. It also provides an annual maintenance budget for day to day repairs for all of the sites. It may be that an annual figure of (£50,000) per annum be allocated to the Capital Replacement budget for the next four years with the view that such monies could be used as match funding to attract external grants.

8.2 In 2006-07 the District Council awarded £24,000 from the Community Investment Fund towards the renovation of Churchill Crescent and in 2007-08 an award of £86,000 was granted towards the redevelopment of the Southern Road play area – now called South Pole.

8.3 Other funding through Central Government or the Big Lottery Fund is available on a periodic basis.

8.4 Many Councils have used sponsorship in other areas, such as the provision of floral displays on roundabouts. This involves the erection of a small plaque to acknowledge the sponsor. Items of play equipment could be sponsored in a similar way. Children and accompanying adults can spend a long time within a play area so they can be a captive audience to companies /organisations who might wish to promote their names or products. This would bring added revenue that could be spent in supporting the aims of this strategy. The Council would need to decide where it strikes the balance between subtle advertising of a sponsor's name and the louder product advertising seen on our streets today.

8.5 Developers of larger housing sites normally make a contribution towards local infrastructure improvements. Contributions can include road improvements, public open space and educational facilities. It would be desirable to seek contributions arising from developers, where gaps in play provision exist.

8.6 Both principal authorities suggest that further monies will not be available outside of the existing grant schemes and even these have recently been significantly reduced due to the current economic constraints.

8.7 Some local fund-raising could be undertaken by a pro-active local community group for one particular play area, such as the Friends of Elms Park. However, based on the support over the past two years, it would be unrealistic to expect a major contribution from this source.

8.8 Ultimately, therefore, much of the re-development needs to be based around the assumption that the core funding will be through the Council itself, with other funding agencies approached on an 'as and when' basis if an appropriate funding stream becomes available. At the same time, encouragement should be given to local community groups to actively fund raise for their local play area so it can be advanced in priority order.

9. Future Aims

9.1 Based on the information available about future play area provision, the Council should be aiming for:

- A more equal distribution of play areas across the town
- A large play area within the south east area of Thame providing LEAP and NEAP facilities.
- Safe playing environments for children of all age groups in Thame, where sites are clearly visible from public places and the problems of anti-social behaviour and other crimes are minimised.
- The needs of young people (age 13 – 17) are taken into account by providing separate areas for them to meet and facilities for ball games including multi use game areas.
- Young people to help shape the design of the facilities.
- More residents enjoying easy access to play areas across the town.
- Better access to play facilities for the disabled and people from other disadvantaged sections of the community.
- Attractive play areas where both children and adults want to stay.

10. Implementation

10.1 A comprehensive action plan will develop a range of actions to achieve each of the respective objectives of the strategy whilst demonstrating who will be responsible for the implementation of each of the actions, what the intended targets will be, and what the measures of success/expected outcomes will be.

10.2 Like all strategies, success depends on the ongoing monitoring and review to ensure the intended outcomes are achieved and that the strategy is regularly reviewed and adjusted in the light of changing developments and needs.

10.3 The strategy is intended as a 'living document'. This means that at key points in its life, the Community, Leisure & Recreation Committee (CLR) will review and evaluate its scope, effectiveness, outcomes and relevance to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

10.4 In order to achieve this, it is recommended an Open Spaces Working Group should be set up and then meet on a regular basis throughout the period of the strategy to undertake the following:

- Produce and review an action plan to implement the actions contained in the Play Area Strategy.
- Assess applications for funding and develop schemes.
- Constantly review and revise the strategy and action plan and report its findings to the CLR Committee.
- Report on and celebrate its success.