

## Playground and recreation ground management special feature

### **Let's play! Play area management and project planning**

How St Stephen Parish Council's planning and teamwork help us deliver brilliant play areas for our community.

The council serves the villages of Bricket Wood, Chiswell Green and Park Street which lie on the outskirts of St Albans, Hertfordshire. Our main responsibility is the management and maintenance of green spaces. We have 6 play areas, two large parks, two woodlands, two cricket squares, three allotment sites and 8 football pitches. In all, we are responsible for around 100 acres. Our green spaces are very important to our residents and are at the heart of our community.

We manage all this with a Grounds Team of 2 people. Investing in tools and machinery has allowed us to streamline the workload, increase efficiency and do work that was previously undertaken by five people. Senior Grounds Person, Matt has responsibility for day to day play area management and project planning and works with Grounds Person Mick. Together, they carry out the daily maintenance and repair work and call in contractors when necessary or when more hands are needed for example, cleaning ditches, major tree work and hedge laying.

### **Overall Strategy**

Our overall goal, outlined in our Strategic Plan is to promote diverse and inclusive leisure provision to meet the needs of the community as whole.

Matt submits a work schedule to councillors covering the whole year and works with the clerk in October to agree budget spending for the next financial year. The annual play area maintenance budget is used to target the findings from the annual play inspection reports and any remaining budget is used to make improvements to one play area a year or goes into earmarked reserves to build up a fund that can be used for bigger projects. Matt says, "One of my main goals is to do the best that we can for the money we have."

Matt and I have worked together to plan, structure and organise grounds management. We have put in place 10 year spending and development plans for play areas and plant and machinery that have been approved by council. We are just finalising a 10 year woodland and hedgerow plan. These are working documents and can be updated and amended in response to changes in priorities or funding such as additional S106 contributions.

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### **Day to Day Management**

The Grounds Team use a task board for each specific site which lists daily and weekly checks, inspections, repairs and updates. This is the main communication tool: the team can easily see what needs to be done.

Of utmost importance is the safety of our play areas. The team check equipment and play surfaces weekly for faults and wear and tear to identify and rectify potential hazards and action repairs or replacements promptly.

Emptying litter and dog waste bins is the main daily task to make sure that we maintain a clean and welcoming environment for children and families.

### **Project Planning**

Future and potential play area projects are part of our play area 10 year plan. We want each play area to offer different opportunities for play and reflect the different character of each of the villages. The team's knowledge of each site means that we can consider the best way to make each play area welcoming, appealing and fun and by engaging with residents we can find out what our community would like and cater to different age groups, abilities and interests.

An important consideration for us is to develop projects that are inclusive and allow all children to participate and enjoy the spaces. In addition we want to focus on sustainability by using environmentally friendly materials where possible and to ensure that projects align with council spending decisions.

### **Woodbury Field Improvement Project**

To give a specific example, we are just starting the final phase of improving Woodbury Field play area. This is a large project funded by S106 contributions, allocated to our parish in 2019 to be used by 2024. The site had a small toddler play area and a few pieces of outdated equipment for older children with no provision for teenagers or adults.

### **Initial Challenges**

- Resolving the drainage issue and clearing the ditches. The site was originally a meadow and frequently waterlogged
- Applying for planning permission to obtain legal access onto the site

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- Delays in allocation of S106 funds to the District Council which depended on the sale of the 100<sup>th</sup> house in the nearby development
- Increasing prices of equipment from suppliers over long term projects

#### **Preparing the site**

In January 2023, we employed external contractors to aerate the field and once we had found out who owned the ditches, we were able to obtain permission to clear them. The team carried out extensive ditch clearance during a really cold, wet winter and reinstated some of the old land drains to resolve the drainage issues. This work was successful and enabled us to proceed with phase one, the toddler play area.

#### **Community Engagement**

In May 2023, we carried out an online community engagement survey for the next phase, using Survey Monkey and held a consultation workshop at the site. The workshop entailed bringing along renderings of options and ideas to share with the community and to give them an opportunity to speak with staff and councillors and make their own suggestions. We held the workshop in May half term and gave free ice cream tokens to children who participated, which was a great way to get lots of people to come along. The online survey and workshop were promoted via our website, social media and to local schools and community groups. In addition, for our residents closest to the play area we hand delivered leaflets informing them of their chance to have their say. The community engagement part of the project worked really well, we had 260 responses from the survey and over 100 people attended our workshop.

#### **Tender process**

After analysing the data from the community engagement we submitted a S106 proposal to our District Council. After the proposal was approved, we were able to put together the tender specification. Writing a tender document and publishing it on Contracts Finder was a big challenge and a new skill for me to develop. If you haven't done this before, my advice would be to work with someone who has experience of writing tenders or attend some training sessions as there's a lot involved and it needs to be right. For our older children and teen area, the ninja warrior obstacle course was chosen and the council

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decided to suspend standing orders as there was only one company who could offer the equipment.

### **Installation**

Once the tenders were scored and contracts awarded, Matt worked with all the suppliers to coordinate delivery and installation dates to save approximately £10,000 on preliminary costs which we were then able to use towards additional equipment and seating.

We planned a phased installation, starting in September 2023 with the ninja warrior course and ball games area. Installation for the final phase, double cable way, keep fit/ stay fit equipment for adults and a small pump track started at the beginning of April.

Delivering this project has involved the coordinated work of the whole parish team, we've learnt that community consultation via surveys and consultation workshops are a really effective way to find out what the community would like and to communicate the work the parish council does. A challenge with all projects and particularly with this one has been the long term thinking, patience and drive required to oversee projects over several years from the planning stage to completion.

Overall feedback from the community has been really positive; we will now have a play area that serves the whole community and has been designed with their needs in mind.

### **Conclusion**

As you can see, managing our play areas is a massive undertaking and a bit like juggling, there are lots of balls to keep in the air. From daily maintenance and upkeep to long term projects involving obtaining grants, using S106 funds or building up reserves over a number of years. We've learnt that communication with residents is vital to ensure that the council delivers what residents want.

For our future projects, we are actively looking into obtaining more grant funding to improve the smaller play areas, exploring a full size astro turf pitch in collaboration with partners and developing a woodland trail for children designed in co-production with a local primary school.