

# Open Spaces and Play Area Strategy

2018-2022



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## Forward

I am pleased to present the revised Open Spaces and Play Strategy for the Borough of Swale.

The Strategy shows how the Council, with the support of partners and residents, will protect, enhance and maintain our fantastic open space assets over the next four years.

The Strategy is the culmination of a range of inspections and assessments undertaken over the last year. It provides an important evidence base and sets out how we will make decisions on our open spaces sites. It supports the Swale Local Plan: Bearing Fruits 2031 and helps to ensure we have enough spaces and that the quality is maintained.

Formal parks and gardens, informal residential open spaces, playgrounds, allotments, coast line and other natural habitats play an important role in a community and can greatly benefit the health and well-being of the population. They provide opportunities for formal sport, play or simply a place to meet with friends and neighbours.

I would like to send special thanks to the many people who volunteer in our open spaces to provide activities or to help keep them looking good.

**Councillor David Simmons.**

Cabinet Portfolio Holder Environmental and Rural Affairs

# Section 1: Introduction and Executive Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

The strategy is for the borough of Swale. It was prepared in 2017 and sets out how the Council plans to protect, manage and enhance its open spaces over a four year period.

The strategy will be reviewed annually and updated every four years to harmonise with Local Plan revisions and expected changes to the Swale housing allocations. The strategy has been prepared by Swale Borough Council with technical assistance from Knight, Kavanagh & Page Ltd in preparing the space audit and assessment.

## 1.2 Definition of Open Space

The principle of public access lies at the heart of this open space strategy. Therefore, for the purpose of this strategy, open space is defined as:

Public open space which provides:

- generally unlimited free public access;
- genuinely useable open space for people; and
- Accessibility over the great majority of the open space.

This strategy does not include open space which is provided as private or paid for provision, e.g. playing fields within school grounds, golf courses and private estate gardens. It also does not include incidental areas, such as verges or streets (unless defined as part of a civic open space or other typologies below) or areas of land with the sole purpose of protection of wildlife without public access.

## 1.3 Typologies of Open Space

The use of the term 'open space' is generic; in reality it covers a range of types. For the purpose of this strategy and for the completed audit of the existing Council owned open space, the following typologies have been defined by the primary use:

Typology	Description	Example
Parks and Gardens	Large areas of open space, the majority of which will be publically accessible, close to public transport links and provide a range of facilities and features offering recreational, ecological, landscape, cultural or green infrastructure benefits. These open spaces may also include areas for water recreation	King Georges Playing Field, Sittingbourne
Natural / Semi-natural Greenspace	Informal and natural green space provides the opportunity to promote meaningful and safe recreation. This open space typology covers a wide range of uses, including woodland areas, wetland areas, heath-land Meadow and water recreation spaces	Milton Creek Country Park
Green Corridors	Relatively continuous areas of 'The Green Open Spaces' leading through the Swale area which may include spaces of water recreation.	Mid Kent Downs
Outdoor Sports, Outdoor Gyms & Playing pitches	Outdoor sports space includes all formally laid out sport and playing pitches for a number of different sporting activities (including rugby, football, netball, hockey, tennis and basketball). This does not include indoor sports provision or facilities.	King Georges Playing Field, Faversham
General Amenity greenspace	Most commonly (but not exclusively) in residential areas including informal recreation spaces, green space in and around housing, village greens. This may also include areas for water recreation.	Village Green, Bapchild

Play areas	This covers provision for children and teenagers, and includes play areas, skateboard parks, MUGA's, and other more informal areas (for example teenage shelters, kick walls). This typology typically sits within other open space typologies such as General Amenity or Strategic Parks.	Thistle Hill Play Area
Cemeteries, closed church yards and other burial grounds	Publically accessible cemeteries, churchyards and closed churchyards /cemeteries.	Faversham Cemetery

These categories are not always mutually exclusive. For example, a Green Corridor can contain informal kick about and play space and most typologies can contain significant provision for wildlife.

## 1.4 Executive Summary

Open Spaces enrich the quality of our lives and contribute towards healthy living. They help define and add to the character of a place as well as provide vital green infrastructure for wildlife, biodiversity, water, tranquillity, recreation, play, food production and off road pedestrian and cycling routes.

Swale's stunning and distinctive environment is one of the Borough's greatest assets. It includes an outstanding range of internationally and nationally important landscapes, focusing on the extensive grazing marshes, mudflats and saltmarshes of the Swale estuary, but also including wetlands, chalk downland and ancient woodland.

Swale currently enjoys a wide range of Open Spaces across its urban, rural and coastal environment. It has the benefit of existing wildlife sites, protected landscapes and a network of accessible countryside. It also has the benefit of having many organisations and groups of people active in the community who take great interest in their current and future local environment.

This Strategy attempts to focus on what's important for Swale's Open Space provision for the next 4 years in consideration of previous studies and strategies, recent audits, consultation and the adopted Swale Borough Local Plan (2017) and current work to develop revisions to the Local Plan.

The draft strategy and technical assessment were posted on the Council's web site for an eight week public consultation period in Spring 2018 with an on line survey and comments section. This was publicised in the Council's 'Inside Swale' publication which is distributed to households in the Borough. An invitation was also issued to local stakeholder organisations such as local environmental agencies, Town and Parish Councils to submit their comments on the draft strategy.

The adopted strategy reflects the views and comments resulting from the consultation responses which led to changes in the Open Spaces management policies and additions to the action plan.

The key conclusions and proposals are:

- There is sufficient provision of Council owned and managed open spaces across the seven open space typologies for the current population, with the exception of cemetery capacity.
- The focus for the next four years is on enhancing the quality of existing open spaces that were assessed as low quality, with particular attention to play areas where 1 in 3 of all Council current play areas are of low quality.
- A £500,000 rolling programme to refurbish a number of play areas during the life of the strategy.
- To invest at least £100,000 per year for 5 years on existing open spaces through section 106 developer contributions held in reserves supplemented where possible by securing grant funding.
- A small number of sites that were subject to external assessment and as being low quality and low value should be considered as redundant and disposed of or repurposed, using the standard assessment, nationally recognised criteria and consultation with local ward councillors
- The provision of new spaces associated with development/housing sites as set out in the Local Plan will address the expected demand for the next four years.
- Additional public space provision associated with new developments across the Borough will not be adopted by the Council for ongoing maintenance and management, unless there is an overwhelming case to provide a strategic new open space or the protection of important natural habitat and biodiversity.
- Developers will be responsible for funding the required open space provision related to future new development and put in place arrangements for funding the ongoing maintenance of the open space and an approved model of a community based Management Company to provide a quality space.

## 1.5 Purpose

The strategy has been prepared to:

- Provide a sound body of evidence for supporting open space policies within the Local Plan;
- Identify key opportunities and strategic imperatives, plan for the delivery of improvements to existing open spaces and new open spaces triggered by development unless there is a strategic value in doing so; and
- Provide a working document that sets standards for open space provision in terms of quantity, quality and accessibility, and a process for regular and future review.

## 1.6 Vision

The strategy is seen as a continuation of the good work prepared and being implemented by many organisations and individuals across the Borough. It is aimed to give a strategic and policy direction in relation to Public Open Space provision against predicted population growth.

The overarching vision of the strategy and its recommendations follow 5 guiding principles:

1. Protect the Council's existing open space network
2. Provide spaces to encourage a healthy community
3. Focus on enhancing/improving the quality of key open spaces
4. Promote the benefits open space has for people living and visiting Swale and enriching the biodiversity for wildlife.
5. Support the development of facilities in open spaces to recognise the needs of users with disabilities and the benefits of emotional and holistic approaches that open spaces can bring.
6. Maximise the benefits of the open space and play facilities that comes with the increased housing development required under the Local Plan.



## 1.7 National Planning Policy for open spaces.

### The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2012

The NPPF set out the Government's planning policies for England, and how these are expected to be applied. In relation to the provision of public open space the NPPF states:

"...The planning system can play an important role in facilitating social interaction and creating healthy, inclusive communities..."<sup>1</sup> and that "Access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an important contribution to the health and well-being of communities."<sup>2</sup>

Planning policies and decisions should promote:

"Safe and accessible developments, containing clear and legible pedestrian routes, and high quality public space, which encourage the active and continual use of public areas."<sup>3</sup>

And the NPPF requires that:

"Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, sports and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision. The assessments should identify specific needs and quantitative or qualitative deficits or surpluses of open space, sports and recreational facilities in the local area. Information gained from the assessments should be used to determine what open space, sports and recreational provision are required."

Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless:

- an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or
- the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or
- the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the needs for which clearly outweigh the loss."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Planning Policy Framework – Promoting healthy communities, 69

<sup>2</sup> National Planning Policy Framework – Promoting healthy communities, 73

<sup>3</sup> National Planning Policy Framework – Promoting healthy communities, 69

<sup>4</sup> National Planning Policy Framework – Promoting healthy communities, 73-74

The NPPF also make specific reference to biodiversity and geodiversity:

“To minimise impacts on biodiversity and geodiversity, planning policies should:

- plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale across local authority boundaries;
- identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity, wildlife corridors and stepping stones that connect them and areas identified by local partnerships for habitat restoration or creation;
- promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species populations, linked to national and local targets, and identify suitable indicators for monitoring biodiversity in the plan;
- aim to prevent harm to geological conservation interests; and
- where Nature Improvement Areas are identified in Local Plans, consider specifying the types of development that may be appropriate in these Areas.”<sup>5</sup>

The NPPF also details “three dimensions to sustainable development: economic, social and environmental”<sup>6</sup>. These dimensions have provided a framework and shaped the approach to assessing public open space.

### **PPG17 Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation**

This document, which was current at the time of the preparation of the Swale Borough Council Local Plan 2000, has now been replaced by the NPPF. However, the specific requirement of PPG17 for an open space audit is considered good practice by the borough Council. A new open space audit has therefore been undertaken to accompany this strategy and to inform the planning of the Council’s priorities for management of its existing open spaces. The approach of the audit has considered guidelines and recommendations within PPG17.

<sup>5</sup> National Planning Policy Framework – Promoting healthy communities, 117

<sup>6</sup> National Planning Policy Framework – Promoting healthy communities, 7

## Accessible Natural Green Space Guidance NE265, Natural England 2011

NE265 is the latest review of work begun by Natural England in the early 1990s to establish standards for accessible natural green space. The Guidance retains Natural England's existing Accessible Natural Green Space Standards (ANGSt). The standards are non-statutory but are very widely accepted as representing an ideal quantitative and qualitative standard which should be used to inform the provision of natural open space in new developments and the management of existing open space.

The Strategy will have due regard for the guidance and will achieve access to natural green space in new residential areas through the provision of an extended green corridor network which will provide small natural areas close to homes and off-road connections to larger natural green spaces

## 1.8 Swale Strategic Context

This Strategy supports the aims of the Swale Corporate Plan 2015-2018 with links to each of the three priorities – A Borough to Be Proud of, A community to be Proud of and a Council to be Proud of.

The Strategy (and supporting technical assessment) will provide an evidence base for open space policy within the Swale Borough Local Plan 2031.

The Open Space and Play Strategy is informed by the Playing Pitch Strategy 2016 -2026 and previous Play Strategy of 2007-2012. There are two action plans addressing the local natural environment and biodiversity: Swale Green Grid Framework 2016<sup>1</sup>. and the Biodiversity Action Plan 2016.



<sup>1</sup> Green Grid is a strategic, joined up approach to land management. It focuses on the relationship between green spaces and the communities they serve and aims to maximise the potential multi-functional benefits of a well-designed public realm.

## 1.9 Local Plan

### Bearing Fruits 2031: The Swale Borough Local Plan 2017

Bearing Fruits 2031, The Swale Borough Local Plan 2017, is the most important planning document for the borough, setting out the vision and overall development strategy for the area and how it will be achieved for the period from 2014-2031. It identifies where development will take place and how the natural environment and built heritage of the borough will be protected and enhanced.

It allocates major sites and locations for housing and employment to meet the needs of our growing population and in accordance with national planning policy and practice. An early review of the Plan will emerge to take account of revised Government new housing allocations.

There are a number of policies which relate to the protection and future provision of sport and open space. These include Policy CP5: Health and Wellbeing, Policy CP7: Conserving and enhancing the natural environment - providing for green infrastructure, Policy DM17: Open Space, Sports and Recreation provision and Policy DM18: Local Green Spaces as set out below:

#### **Policy CP 7**

##### **Conserving and enhancing the natural environment - providing for green infrastructure**

The Council will work with partners and developers to ensure the protection, enhancement and delivery, as appropriate, of the Swale natural assets and green infrastructure network and its associated strategy

Development proposals will, as appropriate:

1. Recognise and value ecosystems for the wider services they provide, such as for food, water, flood mitigation, disease control, recreation, health and well-being;
2. Protect the integrity of the existing green infrastructure network as illustrated by the Natural Assets and Green Infrastructure Strategy Map, having regard to the status of those designated for their importance as set out by Policy DM25 and Policy DM29;
3. Where assessment indicates that it is necessary to enhance and extend the network (including when management, mitigation and/or compensatory actions are required to address adverse harm), be guided by the Green Infrastructure Network and Strategy Map, prioritising actions toward identified Biodiversity Opportunity Areas;

4. Ensure that there is no adverse effect on the integrity of a SAC, SPA or Ramsar site, alone or in combination with other plan and projects, as it would not be in accordance with the aims and objectives of this Local Plan;
5. Require the completion of project specific Habitats Regulations Assessment, in accordance with Policy DM28, to ensure there are no likely significant effects upon any European designated site.  
For residential sites within 6km of an access point to any of the North Kent Marshes, development must contribute to its Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Strategy;
6. Contribute to the objectives of the Nature Partnerships and Nature Improvement Areas in Kent;
7. Make the enhancement of biodiversity and landscape as their primary purpose;
8. Promote the expansion of Swale's natural assets and green infrastructure, including within new and existing developments, by:
  - a. delivering a high standard of design quality to maximise the social, economic, health and environmental benefits of green infrastructure;
  - b. providing a focus for social inclusion, community development and lifelong learning;
  - c. taking into account the guidelines and recommendations of relevant management plans and guidance, Biodiversity Action Plans and Supplementary Planning Documents;
  - d. contributing to the protection, conservation and management of historic landscapes, archaeological and built heritage assets;
  - e. achieving, where possible, a net gain of biodiversity;
  - f. providing new recreational facilities in accordance with Policy DM17, exploiting opportunities to link urban and countryside areas and to create new footpath and cycle links;
  - g. taking account of and integrating with natural processes, such as flood risk and utilising sustainable urban drainage; and
  - h. including proposals to 'green' existing and proposed developed areas by increasing opportunities for nature in domestic gardens, streets and buildings, including street trees and in and around formal open spaces and sports provision.

## **Policy DM 18**

### **Local green spaces**

Sites are designated as Local Green Spaces, as shown on the Proposals Map.

Within designated Local Green Spaces planning permission will not be granted other than for:

1. The construction of a new building for one of the following purposes: essential facilities for outdoor sport or recreation, cemeteries, allotment use, or other uses of land where preserving the openness of the Local Green Space and not conflicting with its purpose;
2. The re-use or replacement of an existing building, provided the re-use does not include any associated uses of land around the building which might conflict with the openness of the Local Green Space or the purposes of including land within it; and
3. The carrying out of an engineering or other operation or the making of any material change of use of land, provided that it maintains the openness and character of the Local Green Space.

### **Local Plan Review**

An early review for the Local Plan was acknowledged as necessary by the Inspector. This is partly as a result of Kent County Council Highways concerns over the local highway network capacity to accommodate growth to 2031. The timescale the Inspector has recommended for adoption of a review is April 2022. This would require a quick update to this Open Spaces Strategy to ensure any needs arising out of new housing allocations will be highlighted through the Local Plan review process.

### **BIRDS (Known as Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Strategy)**

Local Authorities across North Kent have joined Natural England and other agencies and organisations within the North Kent Environment Planning Group to identify the impacts of recreational disturbance on SPA birds. Designated European Wildlife Sites in North Kent include three Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar sites: the Thames Estuary and Marshes SPA and Ramsar site, the Medway Estuary and Marshes SPA and Ramsar Site, and the Swale SPA and Ramsar Site.

There has been a decline in the number of birds using these sites in recent years. Studies show that this could be due to people using the estuary and marshes for recreation purposes. The North Kent Bird Disturbance Report concludes that all new housing development within 6km of the North Kent Ramsar Sites or Special Protection Areas (including the Thames Estuary and Marshes) and larger housing development beyond 6km from the sites could have an adverse impact on them. This is because new housing development is likely to lead to further increases in recreational use of the sites which means that further declines in the bird population cannot be ruled out. Possible mitigation measures are set out

in the Thames, Medway and Swale Estuaries Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Strategy. Having considered a number of options, North Kent Planning Authorities have imposed a tariff on new housing development. The money raised will be used to pay for schemes to avoid the adverse impacts of new housing development on the birds.

### 1.10 Local Green Spaces

The National Planning Policy Framework states that Local Plans should be able to identify Local Green Spaces for special protection. By designating these spaces the Council will be able to protect them from development and ensure their retention for enjoyment by the local community. It explains that spaces to be designated will be of particular importance and demonstrably special to local communities because of, for instance, their recreational value and tranquillity, heritage or biodiversity value.

Local Green Space designations differ from Village Green registration which is handled by Kent County Council under separate legislation that is outside the remit of national planning policy and the Local Plan.

The Council has undertaken an assessment of potential Local Green Spaces against defined criteria and this is published separately in Local Plan Technical Paper No. 2. The 111 designated sites in question have, for the most part, been put forward by local communities themselves and have been the subject of specific consultation with landowners and occupiers. The areas represent a wide diversity of types, ranging from coastal cliff tops, allotments and recreation grounds through to private country parks, urban woodland and informally used urban fringe land.

The sites designated as Local Green Spaces are shown on the Proposal Maps. Policy DM18 can have no direct influence on the management of these sites, although clearly the Borough, Parish and Town Councils wish to see their current usage continue. However, Policy DM18 will be used to preserve these Local Green Spaces and proposals for development which would conflict with the purposes of designating the land will not be permitted, other than in very special circumstances.

The designated sites can all be viewed in chapter 9 of the Local Plan

**<http://services.swale.gov.uk/meetings/documents/s7987/FULL%20COUNCIL%2026%20JULY%20Local%20Plan%20Item%20Appdx%201%20Bearing%20Fruits%202031%20The%20Swale%20Borough%20Local%20Plan.pdf>**

## Section 2: The way forward

### 2.1 Technical Assessment Report summary

The technical assessment report of the Council's Open spaces was completed by the Council assisted by the detailed audit work of the appointed consultants, Knight, Kavanagh & Page Ltd.

The technical report has addressed what open space provision exists in the Borough, its condition, distribution and overall quality by using standard assessment methodology developed for Planning Policy Guidance 17(PPG17), aligned with the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

The audit and assessment of the existing open space in report is broadly focused on three primary considerations:

- Quantity
- Quality
- Value

There is also an audit of accessibility by applying national distance standards based on proximity of open space types to nearby conurbations.

The aggregated audit results summarised the information by typology, identifying deficiencies by quality and value to enable a grading assessment for each open space as high, adequate or low. It also considers previous audits, studies and reviews such as the Open Space Study 2008 and the Play Strategy 2007-2012.

The accumulated information led to the seven recommendations as set out below in section 2.4 'Open Space Assessment recommendations' and will also help the Council prioritise investment and provision over the next four years and the required revisions of the Local Plan.

### 2.2 Open space challenges

Improving the quality of the open space infrastructure has been, and remains, one of the Council's top priorities. However, stretched financial resources have led to increasing pressure to reduce Council spending generally.

This has brought about a need to re-assess the costs of maintaining these spaces and the way they may be managed in the future. This generates choices in whether the Council continues managing poor quality spaces that currently offer limited value to a local community.



There may well be some tough decisions to be made in order to achieve the high quality, safe, clean and sustainable open spaces that we aspire to. We will keep residents and ward councillors regularly informed so there is a shared understanding of the Council's intentions and objectives.

The evidence prepared for the Strategy helps steer where to apply these themes and how they may be implemented.

Recommendations in 2.4 provide more detail. The recommendations will be refined and rationalised following further consultation and testing against the evidence. There is a great potential to help strengthen Swale's Open Space provision by giving a series of interrelated actions that are all working towards the same goal.

## 2.3 Play Areas: Future Provision

One of the key open space typologies is play areas.

This section sets out future direction for play development and maintenance of play areas within SBC, taking into consideration national guidance and local provision based on the assessment work undertaken by the Council's consultants in assessing quantity, quality, access and type.

It also acknowledges the largest population increase for Swale when compared with all the Kent Council areas both in real and percentage terms, between 2015 and 2016 with further predicted growth, increasing by an additional 2,600 people (+1.8%), of which 24.6% are expected to be aged 0-15 years.

The previous strategy considered Children and Young People's play provision which focussed on informal and formal opportunities for 0-18 year olds. Since then there has been a wider focus on outdoor exercise provision for adults with the introduction of outdoor gyms in the borough's open spaces to help promote improved health and increasing fitness.

The strategy aimed amongst other things;

- To acknowledge the importance of play for children and young people both for themselves and for communities in general.
- To identify the work of all agencies involved in providing play opportunities children and young people to assist in developing a co-ordinated approach, identifying gaps in provision and reducing duplication.
- To make effective use of funding, including but not limited to that available through the Children's Play Initiative.

- To ensure that sustainability is built into children's play provision in the longer term.
- To improve children's access and accessibility to safe place to play and socialise.
- To provide more and better local and inclusive opportunities where they are most needed, evidenced by the results of audits and community engagement.
- To improve public open spaces as an environment to play.

This report suggests that the future strategy continues the ethos of the previous strategy whilst understanding the constraints of the current financial climate. National funding streams have dwindled and internal maintenance budgets are being stretched alongside contributions from developments.

The assessment audit identified 101 play sites across the Borough, of which the Council manages 79 sites, with the remaining 22 play sites in the borough managed by a range of organisations such as parish councils, housing associations and developer led management organisations. These sites all add to the offer but do not impact financially or on the resources of SBC.

In recognition of the need to improve play areas, the Council has introduced a £500,000 rolling programme to refurbish a number of play areas during the life of the strategy.

In addition the Council also manages a number of skate parks, multi-use games areas, 9 outdoor gyms and also coordinates the design and commissioning of new play areas, predominantly funded through developer contributions. The Council is funding a new £300,000 skate park as part of the Mill project in Sittingbourne.

Zurich Municipal inspects the Council managed play areas annually and give an independent assessment of quality and identify any risks that the Council need to consider. Throughout the remainder of the year the operational staff and the Council's Open Space contractor also carry out regular inspections.

Our intention is to provide quality facilities for play despite increasing financial difficulties. In order to ensure this, it is proposed there are two standards of playground:

**Flagship Play Sites (NEAPs<sup>1</sup>)** – that SBC provides a flagship play site in each of the main conurbations, Sittingbourne, Sheerness and Faversham. These will be top quality 'destination' facilities that people would travel further for and are aimed at providing variety for all age groups 0-18 years. The focus will not be solely be on children's play but look to new and innovative approaches to engaging teenagers/older youths. There will also be a focus on accessible facilities for disabled users and adult fitness equipment.

**Local Standard Play Areas (LEAPs<sup>1</sup>)** – the rest of the existing play areas have been assessed on quality and value, what elements are safe and fit for purpose and the quantity of sites within the standard walking catchments. They will be maintained to a safe standard suitable for the basic use of play e.g. swing, climb, and slide.

Appendix A sets out the criteria for these play area types

<sup>1</sup> LEAP play areas are a medium size facility of approx 500-1000m<sup>2</sup>. The main difference between a LEAP and NEAP playzones is that even though both are designed for children to play on, the NEAP park area also has an area for kickabout soccer which is usually designed to be a MUGA multi use games area.

**Youth sport and play sites** – where existing facilities remain in good condition; the intention would be to keep multi-use games areas, basketball hoops, football goal ends, outdoor gyms and skate parks in the current locations.

The total budget for playground repairs and the replacement of equipment for the council's 79 play sites, including vandalism costs, is £40k annually.

Major external funding programmes such as the Big Lottery Children's Play Initiative have disappeared and it is increasingly harder to get the amount of capital needed for full playground replacement.

While developer contributions provide for new play areas to be created and then adopted by the Council including a commuted sum for ten years of maintenance, the Council inherits the ongoing maintenance liabilities from year 11.

To address the need to improve the overall quality of play areas managed, the Council will explore:

- Disposal of redundant or low quality and low value sites.

There are a small number of play areas identified in the assessment as low quality and low value which need to be considered for disposal using the criteria set out in the technical assessment data, the catchment area and proximity to other play areas and national standards. Approving the disposal of a specific site will be authorised through a delegated decision to the Cabinet Portfolio Member Environment and Rural Affairs in consultation with local ward Councillors based on the technical report audit criteria and assessment: quality, community value and accessibility to alternative sites and usage

The annual strategy refresh will include analysis of the other identified low quality low value sites to consider a priority order for refurbishment or in a small amount of cases possible closure.

Poor maintenance of equipment or lack of money to replace ageing stock can lead to legal implications and/or insurance claims from members of the public. SBC has a responsibility for play areas in the same way as all public open spaces.

## 2.4 Open Spaces and Play Strategy Recommendations

The following section provides a summary on the key findings in the application of the quantity, quality and accessibility standards. It incorporates and recommends what the Council should be seeking to achieve in order to address the issues highlighted.

### Recommendation a)

- ◆ ***Ensure low quality sites with a high community value are prioritised for future enhancement***

The policy approach to these sites should be to enhance their quality to the applied standards (i.e. high quality). This is especially the case if the site is deemed to be of high value to the local community. Therefore, they should initially be protected, if they are not already so, in order for their quality to be improved.

The open spaces assessment document identifies those sites that should be given consideration for enhancement if possible.

### Recommendation b)

- ◆ ***Ensure all sites assessed as high for quality and value are protected***

Sites within this category should be viewed as being key forms of open space provision. The quality and value matrix in the Open Spaces assessment document identifies those sites rating high for quality and value.

### Recommendation c)

- ◆ ***Destination (Strategic) Sites should be recognised through protection and enhancement***

There are a number of sites across Swale with strategic multi-functional roles which serve a large part or whole of the Borough. These 'destination' sites provide a wide range of diverse opportunities associated with several different forms of open space which users are willing to travel greater distances in order to access. Sites considered as 'destinations' in Swale include:

- ◆ Bartons Point Coastal Park
- ◆ Leysdown Coastal Park
- ◆ Perry Wood
- ◆ Milton Creek Country
- ◆ Oare Gunpowder Works Country Park

Such sites currently help to meet the identified ‘catchment gaps’ in the provision for other open space typologies. The Council should seek to ensure the role and quality of these sites through continued enhancement so providing a diverse range of features. This is in order to provide a stronger secondary role and will also help to minimise the need for new provision when considering gaps in catchment areas.

#### **Recommendation d)**

- ◆ ***Recognise types of open space that are surplus to requirements and/or those of low quality and value and determine their future use using the criteria set out in the technical assessment data and national standards.***

For sites identified as having an oversupply for the current/future population or those being of low value and/or low quality (as shown in the open space assessment document), a decision on their future use needs to be made. If no improvements can be made, no shortfall in other open space typologies is noted, or it is not feasible to change the primary typology of the site, then the site may be redundant/‘surplus to requirements’. Options for disposal or repurposing should be considered and this will involve Ward members in the process.

#### **Recommendation e)**

- ◆ ***The need for additional cemetery provision should be led by demand rather than population calculations***

No standards have been set for the provision of cemeteries. Instead provision should be determined by future projected demand for burial space.

The Assessment Report highlights there are currently only 10 years of burial capacity across Swale and given the complexities of securing and preparing suitable land this policy seeks to set a policy of having 20 years burial capacity. The need for additional burial space is therefore a key objective for the Council to identify an appropriate new site.

#### **Recommendation f)**

- The Council will no longer adopt future open spaces from developers and organisations unless there is an overwhelming case to provide a strategic new open space or the protection of important natural habitat and biodiversity.***

The Local Plan identifies additional new open space provision requirements to support new housing developments, traditionally funded by developer contributions.

The Council will encourage developers to fund and create quality open spaces and also provide management arrangements for the ongoing upkeep and provision of the publicly accessible spaces. This can be through either direct developer management or legal transfer to a local community association or Trust supported by a commuted sum, funded by the Developer.

The Council will develop a process which will include:

- considering a range of options for future management of open spaces
- looking at national guidelines
- Explore reinforcing the terms of section 106 agreements with management companies
- consultation with ward members on the proposed process to be adopted.

The Council will also pursue the principle of sustainability in enhancing our existing open spaces by seeking developer contributions towards such existing facilities that are in close proximity to new developments as detailed in section 3.3 of the strategy

### **Recommendation g)**

#### **◆ *Promote alternative future management arrangements for open spaces***

The national review of Parks undertaken by the Government select committee in 2016/17 provided discussion around different types of management models for public open spaces. This recommendation encourages Swale Borough Council to look at sites and models that may work locally. This links strongly to our Community Asset Transfer policy which is outlined later in this document. Focus will be on more efficient ways of managing or attracting new income to reduce down the financial burden on public money.

## **2.5 Strategy Action Plan**

The development of an action plan provides a baseline of proposed outputs and targets that will be reviewed annually.

- a. To invest at least £100,000 capital spending per year for 5 years on existing open spaces through developer contributions, grants, capital works and disposals.
- b. To invest £500,000 in a rolling programme to refurbish a number of play areas during the life of the strategy.
- c. To achieve at least 3 Green Flag parks and open spaces in the next 5 years.

- d. To review our open space portfolio and identify relevant sites for investment, disposal or alternative uses by September 2018, linked to our successful programme of Community Asset Transfer and in consultation with the relevant Ward Members.
- e. To actively promote our open spaces in partnership with other agencies and voluntary groups as places to sustain and improve health and wellbeing.
- f. To increase the amount of open space under a wildlife management regime by 5 hectares and by December 2022.
- g. Seek improvement of horticulture in our open spaces to enrich the biodiversity
- h. To increase community involvement in open space management by providing support to new or existing community groups.
- i. To ensure actions in relation to Local Plan Policy DM 17 are put in place to protect existing open space and private playing fields , to help negotiate new open space in future housing developments and to continue the designation of Local Green Space across the Borough.
- j. Look at new methods of operation and potential commercial ventures to help meet the ongoing cost of maintaining open space facilities
- k. A Borough wide review of public conveniences to also consider an audit of existing Changing Places toilets provision.

## 3: Funding the improvements

### 3.1 Council funding

The Council does not have unlimited budgets for open space management and improvement. Careful consideration must be given to ensure that any works carried out to open spaces are affordable and sustainable in the long term.

The strategy acknowledges that even though funding is limited, there are still opportunities for the Council, working with partners and volunteers, to deliver safe, active, and well managed spaces. New methods of operation and potential commercial ventures will also be explored to help meet the ongoing cost of maintaining open space facilities.

As identified in section 2.3 'Play Areas: Future Provision', we have funded a £500,000 rolling programme over four years to upgrade play areas to help address the under investment in play areas and raise the quality and value.

To invest at least £100,000 per year for 5 years on existing open spaces through 'section 106' developer contributions held in reserves and securing external grant funding. A proportion of the funds will be allocated for enhancements to the Destination sites as listed in Recommendation 3.

The allocated sums will greatly assist officers in leveraging additional match funding or contributions from external bodies such as charities, town and parish councils and community groups.

### 3.2 Community Asset Transfer

Community Asset Transfer (CAT) is a shift in management and/or ownership of land or buildings from public bodies (most commonly local authorities) to communities (community and voluntary sector groups, community enterprises, social enterprises).

The Council recognises the value of enabling local community partners to take more responsibility for local assets, a process which can help to bring in external funding for its sites. With suitable safeguards in place, this can bring real benefits to both residents and the Council. The Council's CAT policy aims are:

- i. Sustain viability and improve service provision;
- ii. Deliver sustainable solutions that are accepted, agreed, 'owned' and driven by the local community;
- iii. Increase the number of local people helping to run or own local services or assets;
- iv. Realise wider community benefits such as increased levels of volunteering, social capital and civic participation; and
- v. Improve the leverage of external funding into the local area through increased funding opportunities, encouraging economic development, and social enterprise activity.
- vi. Transfer options can range from freehold, a long lease, a shorter lease or a licence to occupy. However, for most transfers, where grants or loans are sought for capital development, the length of tenure will need to be long enough to secure external investment. Therefore, community asset transfer is usually taken to mean a long lease of up to 125 years but in certain circumstances the period can be shorter.

The full policy can be viewed on the Council's website.



### 3.3 Open Spaces Contribution Costs

This strategy determines quantity and quality of provision not only of the existing facilities in each open space typology, but also the requirement for any provision provided as part of new development within the borough.

#### Commuted Sum for Maintenance

Recommendation F identifies that the Council will only seek to adopt new open space where it is of strategic importance or for the protection of important natural habitat and biodiversity. Where this is applicable, the Council will seek a 10 year commuted sum to manage and maintain the land as accessible public open space.

The commuted sum is calculated based on typical grounds maintenance costs and includes a calculation that takes estimated account of both inflation and bank interest. If a play area is required and included on site an additional supplemental sum will be sought to cover the additional costs incurred.

- The Commuted Sum - £235.00 per dwelling
- Supplemental Play Area Commuted Sum - £57.00 per dwelling

These figures will be reviewed annually in March to ensure they remain in line with industry costs and published on the Council website.

#### Off-Site Contributions

There are sites where although open space is provided as part of the development, it is not appropriate for facilities such as play or formal sports facilities to be incorporated. This could be due to the scale of the development not generating appropriate areas of land or because there are adjacent facilities that with enhancement and increase in capacity can adequately cater for the increased population generated by new development. The calculation formula will be subject to regular review.

While national information is not easily available to identify costs of all facilities, the contribution sums are calculated based on technical costs identified for example in Sport England's Facility Cost Guidance.

As such the Council will seek to collect appropriate contributions from developers where able, to increase capacity and quality to cater for the new communities.

- Contribution for off-site formal sports - £593.00 per dwelling
- Contribution for off-site play/fitness - £446.00 per dwelling.

These figures will be reviewed annually in March to ensure they remain in line with industry costs and published on the Council website.

# Appendix A. SBC PLAY AREA CRITERIA

## FLAGSHIP PLAY SITES:

A flagship play area should include the following items:

- Innovative headline piece of equipment i.e. Viking ship, zip wire, L climbing wall etc.
- Play centre for all ages; 3-7, 8-14, 15+, 15-17, + adults e.g. outdoor gym.
- Multi-gym equipment or Multi-use games area
- Roundabout
- Car Parking
- Slide
- Swings
- Basket swing
- Rocker
- Perimeter fencing
- Ample seating area
- Picnic benches
- Bins
- Signage
- Wet pour safety surface throughout (not bark pit or safety matting)
- High population area (high footfall within 20 minutes walking distance) \*
- DDA specific play equipment - designed, installed and maintained with specialist equipment to ensure that disabled children and their parents can enjoy playing in a safe and stimulating environment.

\* Consider possible changes to existing assessment criteria in line with nationally agreed standard guidelines

## LOCAL STANDARD PLAY AREA:

Adequate provision of equipment to provide play provision for lower usage which include:

- Swings (junior and baby)
- Slide
- Multi-frame climbing area
- Rocker
- Basic Seating
- Bins
- Signage
- Perimeter fencing where required (based on risk assessment)
- DDA compliant equipment where possible
- Equipment specific safety surfacing

Copies of this Swale Borough Council strategy are available on the Council website [www.swale.gov.uk](http://www.swale.gov.uk)  
If you would like further hard copies or alternative versions (e.g. large print, audio, different language)  
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