

<b>Housing, Health and Communities Committee</b>	
<b>Meeting Date</b>	3 July 2025
<b>Report Title</b>	Play Strategy Update
<b>EMT Lead</b>	Emma Wiggins, Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
<b>Head of Service</b>	Martyn Cassell, Head of Environment and Leisure
<b>Lead Officer</b>	Graeme Tuff, Greenspaces Manager
<b>Classification</b>	<b>Open</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To note the update report.</li> <li>2. Agree to the principles set out in 2.11 for undertaking the Play Area Review</li> </ol>

## **1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary**

- 1.1 Following agreement by Policy and Resources committee last year, the Council started work on a Strategy that encapsulates all the information required to enable the Borough Council to make informed decisions on the provision, management and development of the Borough's Open Spaces. The previous strategy also included a specific section on the provision and management of children's play areas across the Borough. This report updates on the work to date.
- 1.2 The objective of this is to ensure the Borough Council is furnished with an evidence base and resulting strategy document that is compliant with the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 1.3 The Strategy is being developed with the assistance of independent consultants Knight, Kavanagh & Page (KKP) and uses the recommended guidance and methodology to ensure it provides robust evidence to support the Local Plan process.
- 1.4 A report to Environmental Services and Climate Change committee considers the current position regarding the Open Spaces Strategy and the different typologies. This report focuses on Provision for Children and Young People (Play Provision) which is in the remit of the Housing, Health and Communities Committee. Given the differences between play area typology and open spaces, a separate play area strategy is being developed.

## **2 Background**

### **Technical Audit Data**

- 2.1 The new strategy is planned to meet the emerging Local Plan evidence timetable. New updated National Planning Policy Framework and the associated standard

method for calculating housing need, has been incorporated to ensure that the strategy will be compliant with this new guidance.

2.2 KKP have completed the initial audit having gathered evidence of existing provision and have presented the initial report. However, with the unknown spatial allocations resulting from the Highsted enquiry, a decision has been made to pause the second stage of the strategy development pending the outcome and clarity on where future housing development may be located and how much will be required.

2.3 A total of 144 sites are identified and included in the evidence as shown in the table below.

<b>Typology</b>	<b>Number of sites</b>	<b>Hectares</b>
Play	144	7.8

2.4 Quantity Evaluation – The table below shows that due to population increases since the last study, the current provision levels (hectares per 1000 population) have decreased slightly.

<b>Typology</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2025</b>
Provision for children and young people	0.06	0.05

2.5 Quality Evaluation - The table below summarises the results of the quality assessment (where applicable) for open spaces across Swale.

- There is a generally a positive quality of open space across all typologies. This is reflected in over half (60%) of assessed sites scoring above their set threshold for quality.

<b>Typology</b>	<b>Lowest score</b>	<b>Average score</b>	<b>Highest score</b>	<b>Sites below typology threshold</b>	<b>Sites above typology threshold</b>
Provision for children & young people	24%	50%	80%	61	82

2.6 Summary Findings:

- There are 144 sites identified as play provision. An equivalent to nearly 8 hectares.
- Swale has a current provision level of 0.05 ha per 1,000 population. This is well below the Fields in Trust suggested standard of 0.25 ha per 1,000 population. However, if surrounding amenity land (which can be used for informal play) is factored in, a current provision level of 0.32 ha per 1,000 population is noted.

- Minor gaps in catchment mapping are highlighted. There are however opportunities to explore the role of existing play sites nearby and the potential for them to accommodate additional play provision.
- Quality of assessed sites is mixed however value is generally positive. Lower scoring sites tends to reflect either a lack of ancillary facilities at a site and/or equipment appearing dated.

2.7 The provision standards used to determine deficiencies and surpluses for open space are set in terms of quality, accessibility, and quantity. The table below sets out the figures for existing quantity standards, current provision levels identified and national benchmarks.

Typology	Current provision	National benchmarks	Previous standards
Provision for children & young people	0.05	0.25	0.06

## Developing the Strategy

2.8 Report Initial Recommendations - The following provides a summary of what the consultant's feel the Council should be seeking to achieve to help address the issues identified on the key findings and through the application of the standards. These need to be further developed over the next few months with input from Swale officers and Members, followed by public consultation.

1. Sites helping, or with the potential to help, serve areas identified as having gaps in catchment mapping should be prioritised as opportunities for enhancement.
2. Ensure low quality/value sites helping to serve potential gaps in accessibility catchments are prioritised for enhancement.
3. Review areas with sufficient provision in open space and consider how they may be able to meet other areas of need.
4. Keep data, reports and supporting evidence base up to date to reflect changes.
5. Recommended standards to inform future growth requirements.

2.9 The final strategy document will summarise some of the existing elements such as fully setting the standards of provision (to help the local plan) and identified shortfalls at the front end. It will also explore the play area requirements based on housing numbers and the allocation locations, providing what the provision requirement is for each and exploring if there are any potential options around offsite contributions/enhancements (if for example there is an existing site/shortfall in the area). It will also set policy for how we will manage, maintain and develop our play areas in future.

- 2.10 As soon as the Highsted enquiry is complete and a decision made on future location of development allocations, the second stage of the process can be developed, essentially expanding upon Recommendation 5 to produce the actual strategy.

### **Reviewing the provision**

- 2.11 The original budget setting report for 25/26 included a saving, proposed by Members, to be achieved by a reduction in playgrounds. Reductions could come from asset transfers or complete removals. Whilst this was amended on the night to remove from 25/26, it remains for 26/27 onwards. This committee is therefore asked to consider the principles on which the play area review will be undertaken. Officers recommend it utilises;
- our own play area RAG rating which takes into consideration age, proximity to others, identified defects, maintenance costs, health and safety and play value.
  - Fields in Trust national benchmarking data,
  - health and social deprivation data analysed by our community team to really make sure we have provision in the areas that need it most.

## **3 Proposals**

- 3.1 To note the update report.
- 3.2 Agree to the principles set out in 2.11 for undertaking the Play Area Review.

## **4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected**

- 4.1 Failure to adopt a Play Area Strategy is not a recommended option given the evidence base that this robust assessment will give to the developing Local Plan.
- 4.2 Proceed with the next stage without considering the implications of Highsted enquiry. This is not recommended as it will mean a number of assumptions on location and demand for play areas.

## **5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed**

- 5.1 Consultation will be undertaken with stakeholders following approval of the initial draft of the full strategy.

## 6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	<p>Community: To enable our residents to live, work and enjoy their leisure time safely in our borough and to support community resilience.</p> <p>Environment: To provide a cleaner, healthier, more sustainable and enjoyable environment and to prepare our Borough for the challenges ahead.</p>
Financial, Resource and Property	<p>This Strategy will ensure that the Council is providing cost-effective services and are making best use of the appropriate resources and property.</p> <p>By adopting a robust Play Area Strategy, the authority will stand a better chance of being successful with external grants and developer contributions to assist in delivery of the action plan.</p> <p>At this stage, no additional costs to the Council have been identified. However, there may be requests for contributory funding for individual projects as they are developed, and which will go through the usual budget request process.</p> <p>The medium-term financial plan contained a £100k reduction in revenue spending on playgrounds (total budget estimated at £312k per annum). This can only be achieved by reducing provision, which in turn reduces spend on maintenance and inspection.</p>
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	<p>The Strategy will underpin key sections of the Local Plan relating to Play. This is a required element of the Local Plan process, providing a robust evidence base for decisions. It will therefore assist in the Planning Inspectorate process.</p> <p>By providing a robust strategy that is compliant with National Planning Policy Framework, the Council will be better placed to defend any challenges which may be presented by developers.</p>
Crime and Disorder	<p>The provision and good management of a broad range of playing pitches and changing rooms can make a positive contribution to managing issues of crime and disorder by providing diversionary activities and encouraging community cohesion.</p>
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	<p>The strategy will guide and influence the future provision and management of valuable open space facilities and promote sensitive quality management to support biodiversity. In addition, it has a role supporting sustainable urban drainage and carbon reduction through the provision of grassland and planting.</p>

Health and Wellbeing	By providing and supporting a broad range of quality open space and facilities across Swale, there will be greater opportunities for people to participate in healthy activities.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	None identified
Risk Management and Health and Safety	Without a strategy that is compliant, the Borough will be at risk of not having the Local Plan agreed, missing funding opportunities, losing challenges to planning applications by developers, and not providing high quality facilities for its residents. By maintaining and inspecting its own facilities to agreed standards, the Council will ensure their facilities are safe and fit for purpose.
Equality and Diversity	Issues of equal opportunity will be addressed through applications for any changes to existing or new developments, ensuring that all open space and such facilities are compliant and fit for purpose.
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified

## **7 Appendices**

7.1 None.

## **8 Background Documents**

8.1 None.