

Playground options report

Background

The background to the report is intended to give some context, while not being intended to have much impact on the recommendations. If anyone has any factual additions or corrections please let me know.

The playground equipment was gifted to the village by Lady Temple, via the Parish Council, about 15 years ago. The playground land is part of the leased land (that includes the whole recreation ground) from the Duchy of Cornwall.

The roundabout was condemned & removed about 2 years ago, following a safety inspection. It has not been replaced.

There was a complaint received from a visitor about the slide/ scramble equipment in April 2023. One of the monkey rings was corroded. The playground was closed for about 7 days, the corroded ring was removed, the playground was reopened.

A complaint was received from a visitor on the 4th August 2023 that the scramble net was broken & had torn their son's top.

There was a report last week that the swing cradles needed replacing.

The discussions about the potential future of the playground are taking place with this background.

Following discussions at the Annual Parish meeting & ordinary PC meetings I was tasked to produce an options paper for the September. I have met with parish councillors as well as local residents to hear different views. I have also consulted with play professionals, the PC's insurers as well as BaNES Council & others to seek professional opinions on some aspects of these options.

As it appears that a majority of children using the playground are visiting the village, it is right to remind councillors & residents that Section 137 of the Local Government Act (LGA) 1972 authorises a local council to spend money ... for the direct benefit of its area, or part of its area, or all or some of its inhabitants. While that does not exclude funding a facility that is also used by non-residents the focus on 'direct benefit' should be noted.

Options:

(1) Do Nothing

This is the 'default' option, the decision is too difficult & too complicated. As the play equipment is reaching the end of its useful life at some point safety inspections will insist on closure. This option however comes with a high risk of an accident or incident occurring. Liability Insurance may not cover an event that was avoidable with remedial action.

(2) Replace & maintain

The Parish Council looks to replace the equipment that has become out of date (presumably including the roundabout) & continues to maintain the playground in its current form (or similar).

Equipment replacement is very expensive, a single complex piece similar to the slide/scramble/rings will cost in excess of £35K when removal, safety matting, installation etc are included.

The equipment in place at the moment was 'gifted' rather than funded directly by the PC. It is very unlikely that the PC will ever have the capital funds to completely fund a new scheme.
Most major grant funders will not consider support to a branch of government, even at the bottom tier.

The majority of use appears to have come from outside the village, again a demographic barrier to securing funding. There are very few children using the playground who are permanent village residents.

There has been the suggestion to repair the current equipment, to extend its working life. After consulting the PC insurers this would have to be done by a professional company with appropriate skills & liability cover, to meet inspection requirements. There are a number of additional problems. This is an older piece of equipment & improved safety regulations have changed since it was installed. This means that it is no longer manufactured, & spare parts are unavailable as it no longer safety compliant to current standards. While it has insurance cover as an historic piece of equipment, it is not clear how long that cover lasts for. I have asked for quotes for insurance compliant repairs as well as an inspection opinion on the longevity of repairs. I have also brought the end of year inspection forward from November to September.

(3) Gradual closure

This is, in effect, the current situation. One piece of equipment (the roundabout) has already been removed & not replaced. The other major piece of equipment (slide/rings/ scramble net) is very close to being unsafe. The swings are in need of repairs. The equipment has been well used, with all the wear & tear that involves, but is coming to the end of its working life, however repairs (certainly to the swings) may be an option.

(4) Immediate closure

Rather than a gradual decline, with a decrease in the available equipment, the decision is for an immediate managed closure. This removes any risk from increasingly aging equipment & saves ongoing maintenance, inspection & insurance costs.

(5) Independent management (Community Asset Transfer)

The major barrier to replacement of equipment is the capital costs, which are prohibitive. Major potential funders may not consider a Parish Council (as a branch of government) for application & funding. However a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) to a group of local residents may be a way to secure financial support.

The potential benefits are:

Ability to apply for local & national funding, both capital as well as ongoing revenue.

A focus solely on the playground by an interested group of local residents.

The potential drawbacks are:

An ability to apply does not guarantee funding

No indication that there is a sustainable number of local residents interested in long term involvement.

Village demographics, particularly the low number of resident children, do not support priority funding.

If a CAT is an option then the PC could provide some 'dowry' funding for 12 months, for example insurance & inspection.

I would suggest that options (1) & (2) are not practical, but should be included in a consultation process

Process for decision making

The current stage is the 12/9/2023 – PC meeting to discuss this options paper

From mid September to December there should be a community consultation, including house to house leaflets. This should outline the current 5 options as well as ask for volunteers for a CAT. There should be a closing date the end of November.

21 December – PC meeting to discuss final decision

Robin Moss

September 2023