

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest and Commons	9 September 2013
Subject: Natural Play structures on Epping Forest	Public
Report of: Superintendent of Epping Forest SEF 31/13	For Decision

Summary

The wooded areas of Epping Forest offer a rich diversity of opportunity for informal play by young people. Some areas of the Forest, notably the Flats, Plains and Greens offer less play potential, and may coincide with shortfalls of traditional playground facilities managed by local authorities. In such circumstances, your Committee has previously authorised the siting of traditional playgrounds on Epping Forest land.

This report seeks to formalise Epping Forest's approach to requests for additional play facilities on Forest Land. The report notes that traditional manufactured playgrounds can appear incongruous in the setting of Epping Forest, and may conflict with some of the objectives of the Epping Forest Acts. The report also promotes the notion of Natural Play facilities as a suitable alternative. Natural Play refers to installed structures made from timber and degradable materials offering an alternative to traditional playgrounds with manufactured structures.

Low key Natural play facilities have been installed at three trial sites in Epping Forest as part of the Branching Out Project and are proving popular with children with no reported incidents to date. The City of London has been approached by both local people and local authorities requesting natural play areas at two further areas of the Forest - Hollow Ponds at Leyton Flats and Woodford Green - where there is deemed to be both insufficient play provision and other locally available public land.

Natural Play structures offer a focus for play at honeypot sites and are in keeping with the surroundings, while also re-engaging children with the natural environment in a safe and approachable surrounding. Natural Play provides a bridge between traditional play and the exploration of the wilder parts of the Forest. This is especially significant for children from the urban community who can experience barriers to enjoying and appreciating the Forest.

Comparative to standard, metal and plastic playgrounds, natural play areas can be more cost effective. Where materials can be provided from the Forest, the only capital resource required is installation and landscaping by staff or contractors. Where costs are not met by a local authority, scheduled replacement, maintenance, safety inspections and insurance of users represent additional Local Risk costs.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- i. Delegate to the Superintendent of Epping Forest responsibility to review the current licences for existing formal play facilities on Epping Forest Land ensuring that investment; maintenance; inspection and insurance obligations are properly maintained.
- ii. Endorse the principal that Natural Play areas can be considered as an option to address the paucity of play facilities in some London Boroughs encompassing Epping Forest.
- iii. Authorise the Superintendent of Epping Forest to negotiate suitable natural play areas at Hollow Pond and Woodford Green with the relevant stakeholders
- iv. Instruct the Comptroller and City Solicitor to undertake such documentation as necessary.

Main Report

Background

1. Epping Forest offers a rich diversity of play opportunities for young people. While the climbing of living trees is contrary to byelaw 3(5), there are myriad possibilities for play in the wooded sections of the Forest, such as climbing on fallen trees; playing in root hollows and building dens with fallen branches. Conversely, some areas of the Forest, notably the Flats, Plains and Greens offer less play potential.
2. The term 'Natural Play' refers to the use of predominately natural and degradable materials to create constructed play environments and installations. Natural Play may include landscaping; the imaginative use of unprepared timber and/or partially prepared timbers such as sleepers; and, the use of existing natural features. Some natural play areas can incorporate elements of more formal playground structures such as slides and tunnels, often in an imaginative and novel way.
3. As the structures are formed from natural material, they are more in keeping with the Forest environment, imparting a more natural feel over time. In contrast, manufactured play structures can appear incongruous in the setting of Epping Forest

Natural Play areas are growing in popularity reflecting reduced construction costs and lower on-going maintenance when compared to traditional, manufactured playgrounds.
4. There is a wealth of literature published by national agencies expounding the value of natural play for social development. Studies by the Forestry Commission (Groves, McNish 2011) have shown that natural play areas provide benefits to both emotional and physical wellbeing, as well as improving opportunities for social interactions. Natural play areas can be seen as a stepping stone for children unfamiliar with the natural environment to develop the confidence to explore and enjoy the wilder parts of Epping Forest.

5. Currently, three trial natural play areas exist on Epping Forest at Connaught Water, Butler's Retreat and Jubilee Pond. All three have been installed over the last two years as part of the Heritage Lottery Funded Epping Forest Branching Out Project. At Jubilee Pond, the natural play area appears to be attracting children to the site, visibly encouraging them to be more adventurous and imaginative and is preferred by some to the adjacent traditional playground.
6. Your Committee has previously approved the installation of traditional formal fenced playground facilities on Forest Land at Wanstead Flats and Lords Bushes, Buckhurst Hill, where there is no other locally available public open space. Although local authorities are currently responsible for maintenance of these play areas on the Forest, issues associated with investment and maintenance of these playgrounds can impact on the image of the City of London. Over the past fifteen years, the Conservators have determined that formal play structures composed of coloured metals and plastics are not appropriate to the guiding principles of the Epping Forest Acts. In particular, the creation of formal fenced enclosures and play facilities to prevent young people straying and exclude dogs represents an enclosure which is contrary to the Epping Forest Acts.
7. While Natural Play areas also require maintenance, repair and replacement; costs will be minimal in comparison to traditional play structures. Inspections are currently carried out as part of routine Health and Safety checks on the three existing structures and alterations can be made Epping Forest staff. Insurance for users is covered by CoL Public Liability Insurance.
8. As with any dead wood in the Forest, there is the potential for arson, however, the large dimension timbers and range of ground contact minimises the opportunities for incineration. There have been no such issues so far with the three play areas currently on the Forest and all three are situated in areas with very high footfall.
9. Wild Play events run by Epping Forest District Council in partnership with CoL, introducing children to enjoy playing in the Forest on fallen logs, building dens etc. have been hugely successful, with nine events being held in the last two years, engaging 450 children.

Current Position

10. Two traditional playgrounds with synthetic structures currently exist on Epping Forest. These have been licensed in response to requests by local authorities due to the shortage of local authority open space provision in the residential areas surrounding parts of the south of the Forest. Appendix 1 summarises the history of these sites.
11. The current and previous formal playground structures on Epping Forest have created a number of issues for the Conservators, mostly regarding the level of local authority responsibility. There are also related issues around upholding byelaws, preventing vandalism, the lack of sufficient maintenance and misconceptions among the public regarding management responsibility for the sites. It is also apparent that replacing and repairing damaged fixtures and fittings is costly and is not always a priority for the councils concerned. Further

details about the history of playgrounds on Epping Forest and the associated issues can be found in Appendix 1.

12. We have been approached by the local community and Redbridge and Waltham Forest Borough Councils to create playgrounds at both Woodford Green and Hollow Pond. These more open areas of Forest offer lower play opportunity. There is a genuine need here because of a lack of playground options in these areas. Snaresbrook and Wanstead wards (near Hollow Pond) offer 0.26 playgrounds per 1000 children and Monkams ward has no playgrounds at all. This compares to 0.44 playgrounds per 1000 children for the rest of Redbridge..

Options

13. The City of London has three options with regard to the provision of playgrounds on Epping Forest.

Option 1: Reject all requests for playgrounds on Forest land. This would avoid some of the issues which have occurred on the one former and two existing sites, but would have the potential to generate negative publicity within the locality. This option would carry no further cost.

Option 2: Continue to consider granting licenses to install traditional, man-made playground structures where the proposal is appropriate and a working partnership with the responsible body is agreed. This could still generate the issues around the adequacy of investment and maintenance arising from an external organisation being responsible for structures on Forest land.

Option 3: Continue to consider play areas only where they will be natural rather than traditional man-made structures. The obligation would be for local councils/organisations to cover installation and on-going costs and taking on inspection duties. The same care and consideration should still be taken when assessing suitable sites for the playground, liaising with stakeholders, resources and issuing licences if applicable. This would address a genuine need in local areas to the south of the Forest, while avoiding the issues associated with traditional playgrounds. Public opposition on aesthetic grounds is also likely to be reduced.

Proposals

14. Option 3 is recommended. The installation of natural play areas on the Forest should be considered as more suitable than traditional play areas with synthetic structures, and the viability of natural play areas at Woodford Green and Hollow Pond should be assessed.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

15. There is power to provide apparatus for recreation under S.76(c) Public Health Acts Amendment Act 1907 (applied to Epping Forest by the City of London (Various Powers) Act 1933.)

16. The provision of natural play areas sits much more comfortably with the Conservators' responsibility to preserve the natural aspect of the Forest under the 1878 Epping Forest Act, than more traditional playground structures.
17. An inspection policy is already in place for the three existing natural play areas. This consists of a weekly visual check by staff for noticeable changes, deterioration or health and safety issues associated with the structures and the completion of a monthly checklist. This can be incorporated into existing site patrols.
18. A risk assessment covering the use of natural play structures by unsupervised children has already been produced.
19. The idea of natural play areas in the two proposed areas links to the Open Spaces Business Plan aims and objectives for inclusion by extending partnership-working with the community and developing closer links with local authorities while also promoting a more sustainable and biodiverse alternative to traditional structures.

Implications

20. Financial - The costs associated with installing the trial natural play areas on Epping Forest including landscaping and staff/contractor time for procuring, transporting, cutting and installing timbers and possible hire of specialist equipment/vehicles have been met from the Branching Out Project
21. Routine inspection and maintenance of the three trial areas has been added to the cyclical work programme, as with other items of Forest furniture and would be met from Local Risk budgets. As the structures are similar to existing natural play areas in Epping Forest, additional insurance cover is not required.
22. The London Borough of Waltham Forest has indicated a willingness to fund the capital and maintenance costs of a new natural play facility adjacent to Hollow Ponds, Leyton Flats. The City of London has already clearly indicated to the London Borough of Redbridge that it would expect the authority to fund and maintain a play facility on Forest Land at Woodford Green.
23. Property - Natural play materials are to be sourced from the Forest and installed by the Superintendent's staff or contractors and any necessary costs including maintenance met from the Superintendent's local risk budget. The installations therefore pose no corporate property implications or maintenance issues.
24. Play installations should have regard to any protected status of the Forest where they may be intended, or sourced from, and whether or not planning or other necessary consents are required.
25. The City will ensure that it has considered health & safety details.

Conclusion

26. We have received requests for play facilities from local groups and councillors in specific areas of the Forest, close to urban areas where play facilities are inadequate and suitable sites are limited.

27. Natural Play areas have a number of benefits over traditional, man-made structures including financial, staff resources, maintenance and public relations. By enjoying these areas, urban children are enjoying a much better experience of the Forest and natural environment than could be gained from generic play structures in a Forest setting.
28. Natural play installations are therefore recommended in selected locations as being in keeping with the natural aspect and satisfying local requests for more play facilities.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – History of play areas on Epping Forest and example of negative press coverage regarding Woodford Green play area

Appendix 2 – Quotes about natural play, examples of natural play structures and map of proposed and current sites

Reference

- **Natural Play:** Making a difference to children's learning and wellbeing. A longitudinal study of the Forestry Commission - Merrylee Primary School– Glasgow City Council partnership 2008-2011 (Groves, McNish 2011)
[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/NaturalPlayStudyfull.pdf/\\$file/NaturalPlayStudyfull.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/NaturalPlayStudyfull.pdf/$file/NaturalPlayStudyfull.pdf)

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Appendix 1

History of play areas on Epping Forest

Your Committee has previously approved the installation of formal playground facilities at Lords Bushes, Buckhurst Hill and Wanstead Flats.

In 1962, your Committee granted approval in principle to the siting of a playground in the vicinity of Kings Place, Buckhurst Hill to Chigwell Urban District Council, with installation taking place c1965. Epping Forest District Council assumed responsibility following local government re-organisation in 1974, followed by Buckhurst Hill Parish Council in 2000, who currently undertakes maintenance and care of the facility. An application to extend the site by one third in 2003 appears to have been rejected, but the site was renovated to replace deteriorating equipment in 2010.

Similarly, in 1963 a structured playground was established on Wanstead Flats adjacent to the Harrow Road changing rooms. The installation, maintenance and upkeep of the facility were the responsibility of Waltham Forest Borough Council, now the London Borough of Waltham Forest (LBWF). Numerous incidents of vandalism, including City of London (CoL) facilities and equipment at Harrow Road, occurred and impacted on CoL, who the general public assumed were responsible for the upkeep and security of the playground. As such CoL suffered both financial and reputational damage. The playground was removed in 1995 after a change in borough boundaries brought the site under the auspices of London Borough of Redbridge, who did not wish to continue its management.

In 1985, the LBWF was again licensed to install and oversee a playground on Forest land at Dames Road, Wanstead Flats, which it still manages. This site has recently been the target of thefts and vandalism and the current level of serviceable equipment is low with limited scope for LBWF to replace/repair facilities. LBWF have approached CoL in the last year for financial assistance for site maintenance, which was rejected.

Over the past 15 years, the Conservators have determined that formal play structures composed of coloured metals and plastics are not appropriate to some of the guiding principles of the Epping Forest Acts. In particular, the creation of formal fenced enclosures around play facilities is specifically prohibited by the Acts.

Subsequent applications for a playground near Aldersbrook Road in 1993 and 2005 were not granted. Similarly, a public youth vote via the Local authority 'Playbuilder' website recommended play facilities at Manor Flats, which were declined on behalf of your Committee.

Recent suggestions for a play area opposite Sir James Hawkey Hall on Woodford Green have been raised with pressure from local residents and some councillors resulting in negative publicity for CoL, an example of which is included below.

Dreams of play area scuppered by bylaws

By **MELANIE ATTLESEY**

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A LACK of funding and ancient bylaws could scupper hopes of addressing a shortage of children's play facilities.

A report by council officer Paul Umfreville, which was presented to a town hall committee on Tuesday, says there is a lack of playgrounds in the west of Redbridge, with Monkham in Woodford Green the only ward in the borough without one.

The authority has been negotiating for five years with landowners the City of London Corporation an attempt to find space for play facilities.

But it has been left frustrated as the corporation is bound by bylaws preventing development on green space.

Despite signs the corporation may have recently become more open to a proposal, the report warns external sources of funding for such projects are drying up due to government cuts.

It states: "Whilst the Corporation's position may be changing, the opportunity for external funding for such facilities has reduced – the cost to develop each facility would be approximately £60,000."

Robin Turbfield, cabinet member

for Leisure, confirmed the corporation appears to be softening its stance.

He said: "One of the things we think could work would be a natural play area with logs and things like that. The Corporation is warming to the idea as long it isn't a couple of red and yellow swings.

"There is definitely a need for children to have somewhere structured to play."

Mum-of-three Janet Oliver, 40, of Broomhill Walk, Woodford Green insists a play area in Monkham ward is needed.

She said: "If they had gone ahead a few years ago when the economy was much stronger, we might have our playground.

"It just seems such a shame to have that great big space in the centre of Woodford Green that can't be built on.

"It doesn't have to be a great big thing made of iron. Anything they do will be very popular with families in the area."



Janet Oliver with her son **Jacob**, who has nowhere to play