

## **Meeting of the Environment and Leisure Committee**

**Monday 27<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

### **Agenda Item 8.2**

#### **TO REVIEW CURRENT PROCEDURES AND OPTIONS FOR REOPENING THE TOWN COUNCIL'S PLAY AREAS**

##### **1.0 Background**

- 1.1 During Covid-19 restrictions, the UK Government announced that on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2020, play areas could be reopened, but with the caveat that stringent cleaning regimes be put in place to ensure the safety of play area users. The government advised that children and parents must not interfere with closure measures where a playground remained closed, that social distancing should be maintained and if a playground was too busy, for users to wait or return later.
- 1.2 In addition to safety inspections which are routinely carried out on the safety of equipment, the UK government imposed strict cleaning regimes. This included the recommendation that all touch points on equipment be frequently cleaned, with heavily used equipment being cleaned after use (or at least frequently during the morning and afternoon).
- 1.3 Uckfield Town Council owns seven play areas with equipment across the town. It was estimated to take one member of staff 3.5 hours per day to thoroughly sanitise the play areas at a time, and this would not be at the frequency that the UK Government, and local Environmental Health departments required.
- 1.4 It would not be fair to residents across the town to close some play areas and open others and managing volunteers and their safety, would add to the liability of the Town Council, and risk undertaken.
- 1.5 It should also be noted that in addition to having sufficient resource to carry out frequent cleaning, concerns had also been raised by insurance companies with regard to public liability. Uckfield Town Council's Insurance company was one of the companies who had taken a stricter line with regard to liability and the importance of ensuring the safety of play area users.
- 1.6 Installing permanent hand sanitiser units at the play areas would be a costly exercise, with some companies quoting in the hundreds and thousands. There was also concern that such units would be vandalised, with incidents of vandalism already occurring in a number of play areas to equipment, to signage and broken glass.
- 1.7 With much more detailed research being required, Uckfield Town Council, along with many other parishes in Wealden District, and other larger district councils kept play areas closed until further work had been undertaken to consider the options available, and meetings held to take a decision.
- 1.8 It must also be stressed that whatever method or decision is taken forward that appropriate signage be placed at each play area, and for users of the play areas to refrain from removing these.

## 2.0 Urgent Consultation Panel

2.1 On 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020, the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Chairmen of Committees were consulted under the remit of the Urgent Consultation Panel, to consider their views on the investigations carried out by the Estates & Facilities Manager.

2.2 The Estates & Facilities Manager has been carrying out a great deal of work approaching the various companies who supply high strength sanitiser/disinfectant, to understand whether it works at the same level in outdoor environments, and safe to use. This provided additional options for members to consider:

### **Alternative options:**

*(i) Grounds staff use 'a very high strength' sanitiser once per month on all play and adult gym equipment. This has now been confirmed to be suitable outside in all weather conditions and stays on surfaces for 30 days. However it costs £155 per 5litre bottle. We would also need a 'fogging machine' at a cost of between £200-£1k depending on the style of sprayer:*

*Pro's - good safety coverage;*

- provides some element of cover in terms of liability with cleaning regimes;*
- the product is used by a number of public transport providers at present*

*Cons – option is expensive;*

- still requires the use of existing resources/manpower on a currently reduced team*
- full liability on Town Council;*

*(ii) The company that sanitises play areas with the above product has also since come back with a quote of £795+vat per month to carry out sanitising of all play areas. They would supply a certificate as proof and swan test the surface to ensure coverage.*

*Pro's – very good safety coverage, particularly with the swan surface test;*

- meets government guidance with requirements for regular cleaning regime;*
- certificate provides evidence of cleaning undertaken;*
- doesn't require use of existing manpower/resource out of already stretched team;*

*Cons – option is expensive*

It could be funded out of our Playing Fields and Pitches revenue budget for the time being, but having not been budgeted for, officers may have to approach members for further funds at a later date, should funds be required for other works or priorities/repairs.

2.3 With the uncertainty of how long these procedures may be required and how much cleaning product would be required, members provided a polarised response, and thus a split decision with no clear direction on the best way forward. For that reason, this report is now being presented to Environment & Leisure Committee for a decision.

### **3.0 Since then**

3.1 Since early July 2020, the National Association of Local Councils has been working behind the scenes to raise the concerns of parish and town councils on the reopening of play areas and most importantly stress the pressure that has been placed on local authorities, to take full liability for safety, when an element of risk should be taken by the play area user themselves. These high level conversations have helped to change the tone and content of the guidance and make it more practical and easy to interpret, with an updated version being provided on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2020:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-playgrounds-and-outdoor-gyms/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-playgrounds-and-outdoor-gyms>

### **4.0 Recommendation**

4.1 In light of the options available and current requirements of the UK Government, members are asked to consider in detail the options outlined in paragraph 2.2, the latest guidance and advise the Clerk accordingly.

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