

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

TASK & FINISH GROUP ON PARKS **REPORT TO HEALTH WELLBEING & ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

15th September 2025

Report Title: Recommendations for Policy for Unsupervised Children's Playgrounds

Submitted by: Chair of the Task & Finish Group

Portfolios: Sustainable Environment

Ward(s) affected: All

<u>Purpose of the Report</u>	<u>Key Decision</u>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>To request Cabinet adopts a refreshed Policy for Unsupervised Children's Playgrounds, previously adopted in May 2013.</p> <p>To propose Cabinet approves a programme of repairs and replacement of play equipment associated within the independent annual reports, subject to financial provision, and also minimise any associated risks.</p> <p>To propose Cabinet approves a programme of playground painting and signage upgrades to improve usage, attractiveness and general maintenance of playgrounds, subject to financial provision.</p>			
<p><u>Recommendation</u></p> <p>That (Cabinet/Committee/Council):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposes Cabinet adopts a revised policy for unsupervised children's playgrounds. • Considers a more frequent review of facilities and their management say every 5 years • Proposes a programme of playground painting refurbishment is developed, and budget authority is delegated to the Service Director – Environmental Sustainability /Streetscene Business Manager. • Acknowledges the procurement of EzyAsset to enable the enhanced management of our playground facilities. • Future consideration is given for adult exercise equipment in a prime location as a pilot initiative. 			
<p><u>Reasons</u></p> <p>Much of our playground provision is more than 25 years old and has been managed on a risk basis, with worn or damaged playground items being replaced or removed when identified subject to limited financial resources.</p> <p>Most of our playgrounds have become faded with flaked paint and have become unattractive for local residents but largely remain physically robust.</p>			

1. **Background**

- 1.1 A cross-party Task and Finish Group was established in February 2025 as part of the Health Wellbeing and Environment Scrutiny Committees work plan to review the Boroughs parks and open spaces and the role these played in achieving National Standards for Play, reviewing Local Areas for Play (LAP's), Local Equipped Areas for Play (LEAP's) and Neighbourhood Equipped Areas for Play (NEAP's).
- 1.2 Members of the review were – Councillor Joan Whieldon (Chair) Councillor Jacqueline Brown, Councillor Rupert Adcock and Councillor Ian Wilkes.
- 1.3 As part of the review the group also considered the councils attainment in achieving Green Flag status for 7 of our parks, www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/borough-maintenance/parks-open-spaces/2 including a cemetery, crematorium and allotments in addition to other play / sports provision including sites for rugby, football, tennis and bowls. The importance of play was also considered in relation to the physical and mental health development of children and young people. The group also discussed the various funding streams for sporting bodies for sporting activities.
- 1.4 The Task and Finish Group acknowledges the considerable and wide reaching offer provided by the council via its parks, open space, sports and playground provision and decided to focus on the quality of playground provision, to consider the quality of provision, location, safety inspection regime, playground related insurance claims, data and intelligence in relation to repairs, maintenance and damage caused through antisocial behaviour, current budget allocations, external funding sources and community involvement.

Additionally, the existing sensory gardens sited in the Keele cemetery and the crematorium are valued by residents and inspected regularly.
- 1.5 The Councils policy for Unsupervised Children's Playgrounds was adopted in February 2006 and revised in May 2013. The policy set out the Councils approach to planning for, providing, managing and maintaining outdoor unsupervised play facilities for children and young people throughout the Borough.
- 1.6 There is currently a £60,000 allocation within the Councils Capital Programme which provides for play area refurbishment and an additional £30,000 allocation (total £90,000) for railings and structures repairs. There are 63 playgrounds in addition to several Multi Use Games Areas (MUGAs), skate parks and exercise equipment.
- 1.7 Playgrounds are inspected on a weekly basis by Streetscene playground engineers, in addition to a comprehensive annual independent inspection.

Through this process, the need for repair and replacement of play equipment, impact absorbing surfacing, fencing, hard surfaces and ancillary features are identified. This information is triaged and actioned according to risk priority.

2. Issues

2.1 The majority of our playground provision is in excess of 25 years old and has been managed on a risk basis, with worn or damaged playground items being replaced or removed when identified, subject to limited financial resources. The majority of our playgrounds have become faded with flaked paint and have become unattractive for local residents. However, they largely remain physically robust with moving parts being replaced where possible to sustain individual items and playground facilities.

2.2 Weekly inspections are carried out to all of our 63 playgrounds and additional MUGA's, skate parks and exercise equipment with repairs being undertaken or equipment being made safe. Where repairs are not possible individual pieces of equipment affected are removed or there is a temporary closure of a playground. The repairs are undertaken by Streetscene Playground Engineers.

The weekly inspection regime was undertaken via a paper-based system with information being catalogued and saved for a period of 21 years due to insurance requirements. This system did not allow for any easily accessible management reports to identify maintenance intensive locations, individual equipment that receive repeat repairs or removal locations or locations where there are repeat vandalism issues affecting the integrity or the safe use of a particular site. These difficulties have now been addressed, and the system of inspection made more effective by the installation of the EzyAsset system.

2.3 Staffordshire Police have undertaken a review of anti-social behaviour (ASB) across the Borough which includes areas of the Councils Parks and open spaces, including playgrounds. This information helps the Council in determining risk associated with specific sites.

2.4 As part of the review, the group considered an audit of existing signage and the implementation of more significant signage to assist in deterring ASB activities. This measure was considered by the Health Wellbeing & Environment Scrutiny Committee on the 12th June 2025.

2.5 Council officers have undertaken comprehensive market testing to identify and have procured a playground software application. EzyAsset, will enable accurate inspection, repairs and maintenance information gathering and retention. The data will enable accurate interrogation of issues arising to produce management reports to assist in identifying repair costs, trends by sustainability of equipment and location.

The information is anticipated to be developed over a period of several months, requiring each piece of playground equipment and ancillary features to be plotted, assessed and image captured to create baseline information, and the start point of an interactive audit trail. The software application is anticipated, via improved data collection and management, to reduce the number of injuries and litigation claims associated with these play areas.

2.6 The playground software application will also be able to capture information in relation to assessed damage in relation to vandalism or other anti-social

behaviour whether damage or graffiti to equipment or signs of anti-social behaviour such as broken glass, used syringes. Such information can be notified to the Neighbourhood Delivery Team for intelligence and purposes for sharing with the wider police family.

- 2.7** Over the past 2 years a process of targeted playground painting has developed in response to issues raised from a number of sources: negative comments from Green Flag judging events; customer complaints; concerns in relation to playgrounds. The playgrounds generally look to be in poor condition due to old, faded signage, faded, flaking paint and in some places missing equipment.

Since 2023, 15 playgrounds have been repainted through a variety of methods including the direct award of small-scale painting contracts, community or Parish Council co-ordinated painting initiatives (with materials being provided by us) or local business sponsorship. A further 5 playgrounds are scheduled to be painted prior to October 2025. Additionally, 11 playgrounds have been identified as in need of immediate refurbishment via repainting. A playground signage programme has been developed to compliment the painting initiative.

- 2.8** On identifying a painting refurbishment need, officers currently develop individual reports for consideration to the Capital Assets Resource Investment Group to seek permission to release funding to undertake painting refurbishment initiatives. This process prolongs and/or delays the award of contracts for the season, as it is a weather dependant-based activity. This also increases resident complaints.

Contract awards are aimed at small scale painter and decorators, to achieve enhanced value for money. The current authorised spending route reduces the speed of undertaking the volume of painting refurbishments. Delegated authority to the Service Director – Environmental Sustainability/Streetscene Business Manager, to spend against the Capital Programme budget, up to a value of £90,000 per annum, will enable a deliberate managed process of programming increased numbers of playgrounds painting refurbishments over an anticipated period of 3 – 4 years.

- 2.9** Prior to the completion of painting LEAP and NEAP playgrounds a programme of painting MUGA's, skate parks and exercise equipment will be developed to ensure the maintenance of these additional park assets.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1** Delegate authority to the Service Director – Environmental Sustainability/ Streetscene Business Manager for the play area refurbishment and railings and structures repairs budgets totalling £90,000 based on a proposed program of work reviewed annually as part of the Councils budget setting process.
- 3.2** Receive the information in relation to the procurement and planned implementation of EzyAsset to improve playground asset management.
- 3.3** To develop a programme of playground painting refurbishment, and equipment replacement, based on need and officer visual inspections to form a 3–4-year programme subject to budget provision.

4. Reasons

- 4.1** Our playgrounds facilities are important community use assets and are valued by residents and young families. It is important to ensure the safety and quality of provision is of a good standard to attract positive play and that we can manage all of these locations using easily accessible, reportable information. Such actions as suggested in this report are intended to minimise risk and avoid injury and potential litigation claims.

5. Options Considered

- 5.1** Do nothing. This would potentially lead to –
- Increased complaints
 - Significant and increased deterioration of sites and facilities
 - Increase in claims
 - Adverse impact on the community as a whole
- 5.2** To maintain all our existing playgrounds to a good standard utilising easier to access available budgets to be used in a timely programmed manner to accelerate a painting refurbishment programme.

6. Legal and Statutory Implications

- Health and Safety at Work Act (1974)
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Act 1992
- Occupiers Liability Act 1957, (revised 1984)
- Unfair Contract Terms Act (1977)
- Children Act (1989)
- Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulation (2013)
- Environmental Protection Act (1990)

7. Equality Impact Assessment

- 7.1** Provides the ability of the council to provide accessible play and recreational facilities for residents, children and young people.

8. Financial and Resource Implications

- 8.1** £90,000 of existing profiled Capital Programme for play area refurbishment and railings, structures repairs and new signage.

9. Major Risks & Mitigation

- 9.1** The major risks are the possibility of accidents occurring whilst playgrounds are in use, any ASB and the ability of the council to defend any subsequent action.
- 9.2** Continuing to maintain playgrounds to the requirements of applicable British Standards and implementing a robust inspection and repairs regime reduces the council's exposure to risk

10. UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG)



11. One Council

Please confirm that consideration has been given to the following programmes of work:

One Commercial Council ☐

One Digital Council ☒ Introduction of the EzyAsset system for monitoring and managing the Councils playground site and equipment along with other assets is a major step forward for the service and fully supports the Councils digital transition work.

One Green Council ☒ The Councils parks and open spaces are a key element of the Councils Sustainable Environment strategy (SES) and an important resource in the protection of nature, as well as being a positive influence on people's wellbeing and health.

12. Key Decision Information

12.1 The report does not constitute a key decision.

13. Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions

13.1 None

14. List of Appendices

14.1 None

15. Background Papers

15.1 None