

***Summer Play Scheme
Scrutiny Review***

***Report of Findings and
Recommendations***



***Scrutiny Committee
10 December 2002***

1. Background to the Review

- 1.1 The Scrutiny Committee of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council has undertaken a review of its summer play scheme arrangements which operate in the Borough. The review was scoped at a meeting of Committee in September 2002 and was discussed in detail at its meeting in December 2002.
- 1.2 Scoping of the review highlighted the following issues that needed to be addressed:
 - whether the play scheme in its current form could be continued given the additional constraints imposed by OFSTED and the Criminal Records Bureau;
 - what alternative arrangements for play scheme provision might be achievable given the above constraints;
 - whether there was scope to extend support activities to an older age group of children as an alternative to an extensive play scheme;
 - what were the resource implications of any new scheme or activities which might be promoted and the charges that should be made for such services;
 - what alternative forms of service delivery might be considered including partnership arrangements with other agencies.
- 1.3 At the review meeting, evidence was presented from the following sources:
 - a verbal report from Jacqueline Bryden, Sports and Play Development Manager of Maidstone Borough Council concerning their own approach to play scheme provision
 - a verbal report from Angela Ford (District Manager – Youth and Community, KCC) and Katherine McManmon – Area Youth and Community Worker, KCC) on the Youth Together programme
 - a report from the Director of Leisure on future options for play scheme provision in the Borough.
- 1.4 Full details of the review are contained in the relevant Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet agenda papers. The purpose of this report is to set out the key issues, conclusions and recommendations resulting from the review process.

2. Review Conclusions

2.1 The review considered a wide range of issues relating to summer play scheme provision. The matters covered in this report are:

- The need for change
- OFSTED and CRB considerations
- The future number/location of play scheme centres
- Future forms of play scheme delivery
- Meeting the needs of 11-15 year olds
- Staffing, resources, costs and charges

(a) Need for change

2.2 The Council's Summer Play Scheme was operated in 17 venues around the Borough in 2002. All centres were run directly by the Council. Each centre ran for a four week period and catered for 5-11 year olds. The majority of the costs were met by the Borough Council although Parish Councils contributed to some costs for the fourth week of the Scheme and support funding was also attracted, for example, from the New Opportunities Fund. It was reported that the Scheme is probably the largest Council-run operation in Kent, if not the South East.

2.3 A significant amount of officer time has been taken up in planning and administering the scheme. To operate effectively, 130 temporary staff needed to be employed and in 2002, this task was made considerably more onerous by two significant changes to procedures. Firstly, responsibility for registration and inspection of play schemes now rests with OFSTED. This was formerly undertaken by Kent Social Services for Under 8s. Centres now need to comply with National Standards for Out of School Care. The review heard that, compared to previous years, the new standards were less flexible and imposed more onerous standards.

2.4 The second change relates to the responsibility for carrying out checks on play scheme staff for criminal records. This process has now been taken over by the Criminal Records Bureau, based centrally in Liverpool. Previously, this task was undertaken by local police. The significant delays and inefficiencies associated with the CRB have been well documented nationally. In 2002, this impacted considerably on the Summer Play Scheme as the CRB were unable to supply checks for play scheme staff within the quite short time scale available between recruiting staff and the play scheme commencing. Some staff checks were only received while the scheme was operating and some 20 had not received checks by the end of the scheme.

- 2.5 The Borough Council had already decided, prior to the commencement of the 2002 scheme, that a fundamental review was required given the significant change in circumstances that had arisen. Scrutiny Committee was therefore charged with the responsibility for undertaking such a review.
- 2.6 At the outset of the review, it was agreed that making no change to Summer Play Scheme arrangements was not an option for the Council. There was a need to re-assess both the scale and overall focus of the play scheme and support for young people's activities generally. There was no intention, however, on the part of Members to abandon the scheme entirely. Whilst some rationalisation was necessary, it was agreed that the play scheme in principle, should be retained given its overall popularity across the Borough, and its important role in meeting the needs of children and their parents.
- 2.7 To assist in the process of review, evidence was presented from Maidstone Borough Council concerning its approach to play scheme provision. MBC had recently carried out its own review of its scheme. There were significant differences between its approach and that adopted by Tonbridge and Malling. In summary these were:
- MBC provide only 6 sites directly, 4 for general play (5-12 year olds) and 2 for sports (9-14 year olds)
 - There has been a long history of summer play scheme provision by Parish Councils (15 sites) which are funded and supported by MBC
 - Parish run schemes benefit from local recruitment of staff and local flexibility concerning scheme design
 - Parish Councils have been proactive in developing their own play schemes and have been 'willing partners' with the Borough Council
 - Overall annual costs to the MBC are significantly lower than those for T&MBC
 - Similar problems with criminal checking in 2002 had been experienced – this caused a 30% reduction in overall provision
 - MBC are developing a wider approach to supporting activities for older children in the Borough.
- 2.8 Comparisons with Maidstone's approach were used in considering how Tonbridge and Malling should review its own Play Scheme. The detailed issues covered by the review are described below.

(b) OFSTED and CRB considerations

- 2.9 In considering any future changes to the Play Scheme, it was generally agreed by the review that child protection issues should be at the forefront of revised approach. Any centres which were directly run by the Council and which included children under 8 years of age would therefore need to comply in full with the national standards for Out of School Care as required by OFSTED.

- 2.10 Although a potentially daunting task, criminal checks for all play scheme staff should be secured. It was agreed that the Council should develop a Child Protection Policy to cover such issues. The Policy should require that all new staff joining the play scheme for the first time should have criminal records checks made. For existing staff, consideration was given to the frequency by which such checks should be refreshed. Whilst a 14 month period might provide some added flexibility, it was generally agreed that new checks on existing staff should be sought after 12 months.
- 2.11 OFSTED childcare standards mainly apply to the under 8s. The review considered that there may be scope for some play centres to be developed for over 8s only given the greater flexibility which exists to operate such activities. Maidstone BC, for example, had developed two sports activity programmes specifically for the over 8s that would not require OFSTED inspection. It was noted that, if such provision was made, particularly by the private sector, it may provide additional scope for the Council to operate more direct provision for the under 8s within available resources.
- 2.12 Members of Scrutiny Committee felt that there may be merit in looking at the needs of three age groups separately, the under 8s, 8-11 year olds and 12 and over, given the difficulties in devising activities suitable to wider age range groups. It was pointed out, however, that in smaller centres such as villages, it may not be possible to run a number of schemes to cater for all age groups separately. A general approach was preferred. It was agreed that, in devising play scheme programmes for future years, consideration could be given to running centres for more specific age groups in some locations, particularly having regard to the greater flexibility that applies to those involving the over 8s only. It was emphasised, however, that some provision for under 8s needed to be retained and not abandoned completely.
- 2.13 A specific concern was raised about the minimum age of 5 and the fact that this meant that some 4 year olds who were attending primary school were excluded from participating whilst their friends from the same class at school who were over five were not. Some flexibility in approach was required.
- 2.14 Considerable concern was expressed about the capacity of the CRB to cope with future demand for criminal checking to enable any revised play scheme to operate on time and effectively. Although invited to do so, both CRB or OFSTED representatives had declined to participate in the review. In their absence, and given the lack of any assurances about future play schemes, Scrutiny Committee felt it appropriate to draw the attention of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the Chief Executive of the CRB and local MPs to the conclusions of this review and, in particular, the increased bureaucracy imposed by Government on the play scheme.

2.15 Critical to the future was ensuring that the CRB were given adequate resources to enable them to respond to requests for criminal checking, sometimes at short notice. Without such resources and assurances in place, there was a danger that future play scheme provision would continue to be dogged by unnecessary delays, uncertainties and additional costs.

(c) Future number and location of play scheme centres

2.16 Members agreed that the current number of directly run play centres would need to be reduced in future years. There was, however, a need to strike a balance between meeting local needs as far as possible and the overall deliverability of the scheme.

2.17 In some cases, the amalgamation of certain smaller centres could be considered to reduce costs subject to those remaining centres being accessible to potential families particularly those who may need to rely on public transport. Whilst in general terms, responsibility for securing transport to and from play schemes should rest with parents, there may be instances where additional assistance was justified, particularly where areas were not well served by buses etc. Consideration could therefore be given in these limited instances to the provision of subsidised transport to the nearest play scheme to ensure that all had a fair opportunity to attend regardless of family circumstances. It was felt that there was more scope to operate provision for older children in centralised locations as older age groups were generally willing and able to travel further. Younger children required more local provision.

2.18 It was not considered appropriate for the review to indicate which centres might be selected for future play schemes and which might be discontinued. Such choices would need to be considered by Cabinet at a later stage after more detailed evaluation had been undertaken, particularly in relation to schemes which might be provided in the future by other providers – see Section (d) below.

2.19 Although the review is likely to result in a reduction of centres overall, it was concluded that there was a need to ensure that, as far as possible, play schemes are run within or in areas accessible to wards of particular social need/deprivation. In such areas, the need for a play scheme to operate is more of an imperative as they would result in wider social benefits to local families and children. In such wards, there is a need to link play scheme provision with activities undertaken by local community workers and to ensure that as many children as possible, particularly those from less affluent households, are encouraged to attend. For example, it was reported that the Family Liaison Officer at East Malling was particularly effective in encouraging attendance at the local play scheme in 2002 by organising pick ups etc.

2.20 Deprived wards in the Borough are defined in the Borough Council's Draft Community Strategy. This recognises that two wards: East Malling and Snodland East stand above most others when the Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation is applied. The Community Strategy also highlights a number of other wards in the Borough where there are social needs and suggests that agencies should concentrate support activities to assist families in need. These wards are in north Tonbridge (Trench), Aylesford, West Malling/West Peckham/Mereworth, and Hadlow.

(d) Future forms of play scheme delivery

2.21 Tonbridge and Malling is perhaps unique in respect of the number of play scheme centres it directly operates. As noted above, Maidstone BC had reduced its number of directly provided centres over a period of time and has been able to rely on a number of Parish Councils who have been keen to operate their own schemes.

2.22 It was agreed that there was a need to involve other operators in the running of play scheme centres in order to enable the Council to reduce the number of centres it itself operates. The review received evidence of initial consultations from local Parish Councils about the future of the scheme. Many were concerned about the resource implications of running schemes and the expertise required. Many Parish Councils stated that they would not wish to take on the organisation of local schemes and felt that the existing approach should be maintained.

2.23 There would appear to be a considerable task ahead in persuading Parishes to take on the role. It was concluded that it was unlikely that many would be prepared to take on such a role as early as 2003. However, over a longer time period, there was scope to encourage greater parish participation with the offer of Borough assistance. Although Maidstone has had a culture of Parish support for their play scheme for a number of years, they do provide considerable funding and administrative support for such locally run activities.

2.24 A number of other providers were identified during the review as potential partners to the Borough Council. These included existing private sector child care providers (with suitably qualified staff in place), local schools, church groups and voluntary sector play providers. It was also suggested that the Borough's sports centres, swimming pools and private sector activity centres and sport facilities (such as Buckmore Park and Cobdown) may be willing to operate summer activity programmes for older children.

2.25 It was acknowledged that resources would be required to identify and encourage future participation; it was not something which could be achieved in the short term. Indeed, ongoing support and funding from the Borough Council to such providers might be required to provide a smooth transition from direct provision. As a first priority, it was suggested that an audit of potential providers and venues be compiled to provide a basis for further evaluation.

(e) Meeting the needs of 11-15 year olds

2.26 The review heard evidence from Kent County Council Youth and Community concerning existing partnership working on a range of youth issues. Many of the initiatives were provided around the year and focused on the need to support teenagers in socially deprived neighbourhoods and those with family difficulties. Many of the initiatives provided an opportunity to mix within peer groups and involved developing linkages with other support services including the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme, the Adolescent Resource Centre and Grey Zebra (drugs advice).

2.27 The Youth Together summer activity programme for 11-15 year olds was described and details of the activities circulated. This operated in three centres (Snodland, East Malling and Trench) and offered a choice of organised activities and trips over a four week summer period which individual teenagers could pick and choose from. Substantial funding is already provided from the Crime and Disorder Reduction budget in partnership with the Kent Police and the Borough Council. Kent County Council organise events and provide qualified staffing. In 2002, 150 teenagers registered on the scheme and, on average, 20-25 participated in each event.

2.28 It was felt that a major opportunity existed to develop further the youth agenda in Tonbridge and Malling via greater partnership working between the Borough Council, the County Council and other agencies. The need for a new focus on youth was recognised in the Borough Council's own Community and Cultural Strategies. It was agreed that an expansion of current youth summer activity programmes should be explored and that any savings resulting from a reduction in the number of directly operated play scheme centres should be recycled into funding support activities for the 11-15 year old age groups. Such an approach was supported by representatives of the County Council present at the review meeting.

2.29 To provide a focus for new youth initiatives, it was suggested that the Borough Council should prepare, in partnership with other agencies, a corporate action plan to guide and co-ordinate joint working both in respect of organised activities and support provision for young people in the Borough. Crucial to its development would be consultation and the direct involvement of young people from the Borough. The Council's existing Youth Forum would be a useful starting point for such work.

- 2.30 It was agreed that more proactive promotion of the opportunities available for young people should be undertaken, not just to embrace those services provided by the Borough Council, but also to reflect those provided by partner organisations. This could be undertaken, for example, via published written material or via the youth website being developed.
- 2.31 In order to reflect the changing emphasis on supporting activities for older children and phased changes to the play scheme, the relevant aims and objectives set out in the Borough Leisure Strategy would require amendment. It was felt that the content of play scheme activities and youth activities could also be reconsidered, potentially with greater attention paid to issues of citizenship, social responsibility and environmental awareness.

(f) Staffing, resources, costs and charges

- 2.32 Given the need to seek reductions to the play scheme over time, linked to increased provision for 11-15 year olds, it was agreed that, where practicable, changes to support provision for children and teenagers should be achieved within existing revenue budgets for the play scheme.
- 2.33 Potential changes to the Play Scheme co-incide with the impending retirement of the Play Scheme Co-ordinator, Mrs Mary Smelt, who has been responsible for running the Tonbridge and Malling play scheme for over 30 years. Members of Scrutiny Committee paid tribute to the commitment and dedication which she has shown to supporting children in the Borough for many years.
- 2.34 An opportunity therefore exists to re-evaluate staffing resources required to refocus the summer play scheme and develop a new range of youth activities. In order to take forward this challenging new agenda, it was agreed that a new full-time officer needed to be appointed and this should be achieved without delay. Work was required to start on developing revised play scheme arrangements for 2003 early in the new year and appointing a suitably experienced person to the new post was crucial to securing those changes. The Chairman of Scrutiny Committee therefore wished that the appointment be subject to a fast-track procedure, to be considered by the Council's Management Team, with the support of all Group Leaders.
- 2.35 Successful recruitment of play scheme leaders and helpers depended on both staff availability and competitive rates of pay being offered. Evidence suggested that the current rates of pay for Tonbridge and Malling staff had fallen behind that offered by similar agencies and that a review was justified. As a benchmark, it was suggested that the current rates offered by Maidstone BC should be adopted as a minimum.

- 2.36 With regard to the current charges made for play scheme attendance, it was noted that these remained very low compared to the costs of similar schemes, including those operated in Maidstone and the costs of child care provision by private sector companies. For example, a weekly charge for the play scheme is £12.50 whereas private child care costs are, on average, between £25 and £30 per day. Even non profit-making pre-school providers charge in the region of £7 for a 4 hour day. On this basis, it was agreed that a review of current play scheme charges should be undertaken to ensure that these better reflected the costs of provision and were comparable to other play schemes operated by adjoining districts. Appropriate concessions should continue to be applied for financially disadvantaged families unable to afford the full rates.
- 2.37 One specific issue arising from consultation with parents using the 2002 scheme was the need to update and improve the equipment used. It was agreed that budgetary provision should be made to ensure that all equipment used in the future play schemes was of a good range and quality.
- 2.38 Overall costs of the play scheme were likely to increase in 2002 over previous years due largely to the added administrative burden imposed by OFSTED and the CRB. It was requested that a full analysis of costs for 2002 should be undertaken and compared with costs from previous years. If appropriate, it was felt that extra costs should be identified and brought to the attention of Government and local MPs.

3. Recommendations

3.1 That the Cabinet be recommended to:

1. **Retain** the summer play scheme for 5-11 year olds for 2003/4 and future years subject to:
 - reconsideration of the number of centres directly provided by the Borough Council, including consideration being given to the amalgamation of some centres with a view to ensuring an appropriate balance is struck between meeting local needs and overall deliverability of the scheme;
 - ensuring that all centres are operated in full compliance with the National Standards for Out of School Care for Under 8s as required by OFSTED
 - the development of a Child Protection Policy which includes CRB checks to be carried out for all new staff and that checks for existing staff should be refreshed after a 12 month period.
 - undertaking a review of existing pay rates for play scheme staff with a view to ensuring that these remain competitive and as a minimum, should be comparable with those offered by Maidstone BC.
 - reviewing of the current charges made for play scheme attendance be undertaken to ensure these are comparable with others but that appropriate subsidies are offered to those financially disadvantaged families unable to afford the full rates.
 - ensuring that, as far as possible, play schemes are run within or in areas accessible to wards of particular social need/deprivation (as defined in the Draft Community Strategy), links are made with relevant local community workers, and as many children as possible are encouraged to attend from such wards.
 - evaluation being given to providing transport opportunities to those areas affected by adverse changes to the play scheme where no local provision is made to ensure other remaining centres are accessible.
2. Consider which centres should be retained for the 2003/4 Play Scheme subject to the above matters.
3. Explore with other child care providers in the public, private and voluntary sectors the possibility of the Council grant aiding future summer play scheme locations run by third parties in partnership with the Borough Council.

4. Explore new partnership arrangements with KCC and other appropriate agencies to enhance current activity programmes for 11-15 year old groups.
5. Develop a Corporate Youth Action Plan to enable a more co-ordinated approach to the delivery of activities and support for young people in the Borough.
6. Appoint a new full-time Youth and Play Development Officer without delay to co-ordinate future work on the summer play scheme and to develop youth activities in the Borough in partnership with other agencies and in liaison with other Council services.
7. Promote opportunities for young people more proactively and better co-ordinated both within and outside the Council.
8. Allocate adequate budgetary provision to ensure that all equipment used by the play scheme is of a good range and quality.
9. Amend the aims and objectives for the summer play scheme as set out in the Borough Leisure Strategy to reflect the above recommendations.
10. Implement, if practicable, the above recommendations within existing revenue budgetary provision for 2003/4.
11. Send a copy of this final report to Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the Chief Executive of the CRB and Local MPs drawing attention to the adverse implications resulting from the increased bureaucracy imposed by Government on the Council's play scheme, and seeking their agreement to increasing resources available to the CRB to ensure that criminal checks are undertaken speedily so as not to cause any undue delays to the appointment of staff to future supervised summer activity schemes for young people in the Borough.
12. Undertake an analysis of the cost to the Summer Play Scheme of meeting new Government legislation in 2002 be undertaken and compared with costs of the Scheme in previous years.