

AGENDA ITEM 4

PETITIONS

1. Lead Petitioner: Jodie Rees
Save the ERAPA Play Area

In the next 12 months, the Council intends to remove the ERAPA (London Road side) play area in Palmer Park when it reaches its end of life.

This play equipment is hugely well-used and well-loved by families and children from all across East Reading. The play equipment was designed to be accessed by disabled children meaning everyone can play.

Please, Reading Council, when the equipment is no longer usable - replace it and let children continue to play ?!

RESPONSE by Councillor Hacker (Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation):

The play equipment that was formerly within the ERAPA site consists of a multi-unit with walkways and bridges, a wheelchair roundabout, swings and a small ballcourt. The age of the multi-unit is not known as it was not purchased or installed by the Council's Parks Team, but by staff from the former ERAPA group. Since the closure of ERAPA the equipment has been maintained by the Parks Team. As various parts become worn and fail, it is not possible to replace them, as the company that supplied the unit were based in the USA and are no longer in business. Other playground manufacturers have stated that they will not make replacement parts for another company's equipment, particularly as the unit does not conform to current European safety standards. Recently the Council's Playground Officer had to remove a faulty slide from the unit. As a consequence, the entry point to access the slide has had to be boarded up, limiting the overall play value of the unit. Other play elements are showing signs of wear. As they become unsafe to use, the Council has no option but to remove them.

The removal of the equipment at the former ERAPA site is therefore a H&S requirement.

A decision was made to invest significantly in the Palmer Park play area adjacent to Wokingham Road and the café, only 270m away from the former ERAPA site, with greater provision for children with special needs. In 2009 the play area was enlarged to allow for more free play; basket swings were dotted around the site, on grass, which is accessible by wheelchair; a large new rope swinger, on which parents can play with (and therefore hold) children with mobility problems, was installed; and trampolines were introduced, where disabled children can be bounced by an adult. Other equipment aimed at children with a range of challenges was installed. Some of the play equipment was installed in more remote locations, to accommodate the needs of children who prefer to play away from the melee of the main play area. This was intended as a significant improvement on the old ERAPA playground, which effectively segregated disabled children from other children.

Not only is a single larger play facility far more inclusive than separating out disabled play, but one larger play facility better serves community needs than two small playgrounds with less equipment and a degree of duplication of play items. The cost of maintaining separate areas is also greater. The advantage of expanding the Wokingham Road location rather than the old ERAPA is that it is overlooked, and not suffering from ASB and graffiti. This play area is very popular, drawing people from a considerable area to use it.

The same principles were pursued in investing in the day-out play location at Christchurch Meadows for families who have children with various challenges. Advice was sought from charities concerned with days out for disabled children. All new play equipment can be used by children of all abilities, so that disabled children can play with those who are able-bodied. As at Palmer Park, some equipment is designed for a parent to be able to play with children, and items of equipment are located away from the main play area to accommodate children with mental health issues.

The Council is aware that many play areas in Reading have access problems for children with mobility problems and other disabilities. This is true not only of children in wheelchairs, but of children with a range of physical and mental challenges. The Council has been seeking consciously to address this over the past two decades.

The play infrastructure is historic, and it is not possible to make overnight changes to every site to make it fully accessible to people of all abilities. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and subsequent amendments, explicitly recognises the investment burden involved in transforming all infrastructure, and the requirements of the Act are that all future changes need to account for the accessibility requirements of all users. All new investment made in play areas in Reading is DDA-compliant. Major advances were made in 2008-10 with the injection of government funding under the Playbuilder scheme. The Council used the resources to invest significantly in accessible play equipment and natural play facilities at various locations across the Borough.

In June 2016, local parents of disabled children were requested by the Play Team to complete questionnaires assessing six of the Council's major play areas for access issues. The results are being used to guide further investment in these sites.

In September 2017, the Council's Playground Officer met with the Access Forum specifically to discuss problems that parents are having with access, and to discuss improvements being made. This is an ongoing dialogue, with an annual report to the Forum on progress that is being made. One of the most important of these is the ongoing replacement of loose-fill safety surfacing with a rubber bonded product. This is very expensive, and one or two sites are being converted each year.

In 2018, a full review of all playgrounds was carried out, highlighting all investment needs, and in December 2018, a capital bid for £2.8million over five years was submitted to fund the current investment gap. £1.6m has been approved for 2019-22. Much of this funding is specifically intended to improve further access for all to the Council's playgrounds, a point that was emphasised in the bid. Sites earmarked for new investment in fully-inclusive play equipment over this 3-year period include Palmer Park.

The Play Review will be presented to members during 2019. Public consultation will follow before the final scheme is agreed.