

Draft – V6. 23/01/2014

‘Maidstone Play Strategy’
A Strategy for Outdoor Equipped
Play Areas
2014 - 2024

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1. Foreword

To be completed following consultation.

2. Introduction

The provision of free outdoor play and sport opportunities is seen as a vital ingredient in ensuring the all-round, healthy development of children and young people in an era of declining levels of physical and social interaction and activity. Stimulating and challenging play and sport activity will enable young people to develop their physical, mental and social skills, find out more about themselves and their environment, and provide a form of therapy to help overcome emotional problems and the effects of other distressing pressures in modern day living.

In the Chief Medical Officer of England's report of 2012 'Our Children Deserve Better: Prevention Pays', published in August 2013, there are key messages for organisations forming strategies and policy that focus on providing facilities and services to young people that help to prevent physical, mental, educational and social health problems in later life.

In summary the report recommends approaches toward promoting and providing opportunities to access formal and informal physical activity in the local community. Children and young people should be enabled to build resilience and positive capacities through play and exercise. By specifically equipping children and young people with these opportunities they can fully explore their own personal and social behaviours. Furthermore the benefits of a healthy diet will be fully realised when complimented with physical activity and go a long way towards tackling long term obesity.

Additionally providing the environment for children and young people to build self-esteem, self-confidence, skills, physical and social experience and knowledge gives them the tools for coping with demands at home and school, and later on at work, whilst making the transition into adulthood.

This document sets out the background and basis from which the Maidstone Borough Council seeks to further review, develop and shape the Play Strategy and associated action plans, first proposed in 2004, for the future provision and maintenance of equipped play areas and teen areas. Thus forming the basis on which future play provision will be provided across the Maidstone Borough to ensure all children and young people are enabled to access freely available informal play and youth facilities. These facilities will offer the opportunity for children and young people to fully explore and play in their outside environments complementing the work of partners in the more formal health, community and education sectors.

Since the production of the MBC Play for Today document in 2004 major changes have taken place. 23 MBC play areas have been improved across the borough; Play England was formed to strengthen Play in the wider national context and the economic crisis has seriously harmed available resources.

The Maidstone Play Strategy 2014 addresses the impact of these developments and looks at taking the service forward to ensure future play provision covers the needs of the local community. The issues the strategy will focus on are:

- The volume of play provision for all age groups across the borough to identify those areas of under and over provision.
- Raising the overall quality and standard of MBC and Parish play area facilities within the borough including areas aimed at teenagers.

- Consider the financial position of providing play areas with currently available resources.
- Choosing a standard of provision to take forward alongside setting key objectives.

This strategy is aimed at local communities, residents, teenagers and children, who will benefit from MBC meeting the key objectives and outcomes set out in this strategy.

The strategy is linked to the corporate priority and outcome of 'For Maidstone to be a decent place to live, continuing to be a clean and attractive environment for people who live and visit the borough'.

3. The national, regional and local context

The National Context

In undertaking this fundamental review of children's equipped play spaces recognition needs to be taken of any existing national guidance and whether these impose any statutory obligations.

Most significantly, although there are a variety of standards applicable to the manufacture, installation and maintenance of play equipment, there are no statutory obligations regarding the amount of children's play space which the Council must provide; be it formal or informal play space.

In terms of the level of provision, the most relevant guidance comes in the form of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) published by Government on 27 March 2012. This requires that each local planning authority takes account of the needs of its community for recreational activity and to identify where there may be deficiencies in such provision.

'Access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an important contribution to the health and well-being of communities. Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, sports and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision. The assessments should identify specific needs and quantitative or qualitative deficits or surpluses of open space, sports and recreational facilities in the local area. Information gained from the assessments should be used to determine what open space, sports and recreational provision is required.' (National Planning Policy Framework, 2012)

Further to the NPPF is the international legally binding instrument known as the 'Convention of the Rights of the Child' which sets out to protect the full rights of all people under 18, which is committed to by the British Government through international law. Article 31 of the Convention states 'Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities'.

Additionally Play England sets out the definition of Play in their charter as: 'what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons.' Play England further expands on this by expressing that organisations should ensure children have time and space to play. 'Having time and space to play gives children the opportunity to meet and socialise with their friends, keeps them physically active, and gives the freedom to choose what they want to do'.

The Local Context

Maidstone is an exceptionally green Borough with a number of parks, the largest of which is Mote Park, which is Grade II on the English Heritage Register of Historic Parks. There are numerous smaller parks and squares across the borough including those in other towns and villages which have benefited from a major playground and sports facility investment programme in recent years.

Recent successes for the Parks and Leisure team include the regeneration of Mote Park through the lottery's Parks for People fund resulting in an increased footfall of 13.2% to over a million visits a year. Gaining the highest possible score for Green Flag status for Mote Park on the first time of applying. Mote Park being voted as the UK's third favourite park in the Green Flag People's Choice awards for 2013. Cobtree Manor Park has been regenerated through the addition of new play equipment, pathways and planned new visitor centre to become the latest destination park in Kent. This work is to be further supported by the advancement of commercial activities within Mote Park and introducing new parks services.

Maidstone's Local Strategic Partnership has carried out work in 2010 looking at how public money is spent locally. They have identified that £602 million has been spent in Maidstone in 2010 by various bodies including Kent County Council, Maidstone Borough Council, the Police and the local Primary Care Trust. Just over 35% of the money is spent on health and social well-being, nearly 17% is spent on education and 15% on housing.

Destination, district and local neighbourhood play areas

The previous Play for Today Play Strategy in 2004 classified play areas in terms of 'LAP's' (Local Area of Play), 'LEAP's' (Locally equipped area of Play) and 'NEAP's' (Neighbourhood Equipped Area of Play).

These terms were based on regulation through Planning Policy Guidance 17 which referenced the use of national guidelines by The National Playing Fields Association. The use of Planning Policy Guidance notes has since been superseded by the development of the NPPF, as detailed above in the national context, which requires local authorities to develop their own definitions, based on local knowledge and experience.

Defining the scope and reach MBC play areas have across the borough is important to understand the context within which play areas provide opportunities for local communities to explore parks and open spaces further. The Council's play areas are defined by the following three categories.

- **Destination Play Areas** – These play areas are visited not only by the local community but by park users from outside the borough. They provide a much wider range of play activities to engage in, are located in heavily used open spaces and act as a brand for the Council. Park users identify with these areas for a family day out and are supported by other facilities such as car parking, toilets, café/food facilities and good walking routes. These parks also feature strong events calendars and volunteering. Mote Park and Cobtree Manor Park are classified as destination play areas.
- **District Play Areas** – these are larger locally placed play areas mainly used by their local communities and some passing visitors to the borough. Characterised by a large number of play activities aimed at a wide age range and supported by a large footfall. Some of these areas also have other supporting facilities such as car parks, toilets and other sporting facilities (tennis courts, bowling greens and multi use games areas). Examples include South Park, Penenden Heath and Whatman Park.

- Local Neighbourhood Play Areas** – These are play areas used by the immediate local community. Will feature a limited range of dynamic play equipment such as slides, swings and climbing frames. The open space acts as a green lung within the urban landscape allowing local families an area to partake in leisure and play activities, especially in high population density areas. These play areas are also found in local villages and parish areas. These areas are further subdivided into Larger and Smaller Local Neighbourhood Play Areas. Larger examples include Shepway Green, Barming Heath and Nettlestead Village Hall. Smaller examples include Albert Reed Gardens, Camden Street and Lime Trees at Staplehurst.

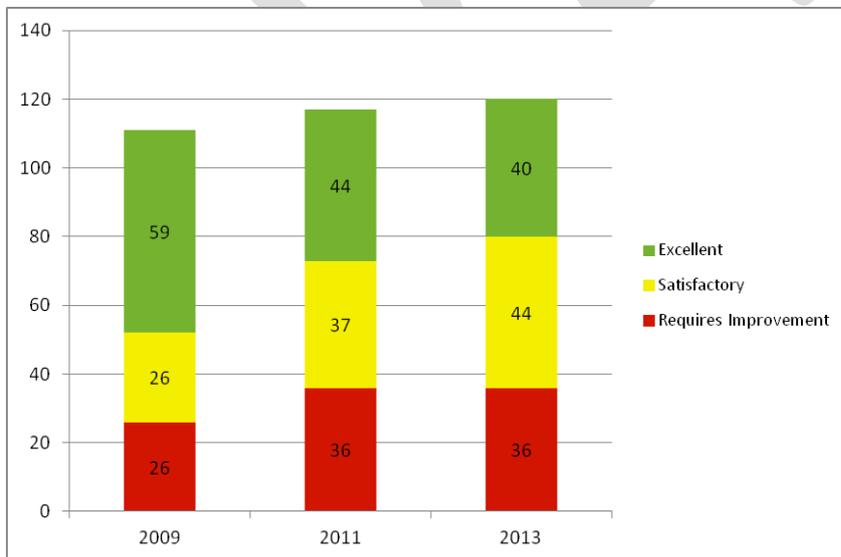
Each play area’s designation is highlighted in the Play Area Scoring Matrix in **Appendix 1** referred to below.

Quality

Play areas across the borough are gauged using the Play Area Scoring Matrix (PASM) introduced in 2009 which critically assesses the quality, accessibility and use of each area. This allows officers to robustly compare play areas against each other grading them as either Excellent/Green ($\geq 70\%$), Satisfactory/Yellow (56%-69%) or Requires Improvement/Red ($\leq 55\%$). **Appendix 1** shows the matrix scoring for 2013.

The PASM is applied bi-annually providing an overall picture of quality of play areas across the borough, the diagram below shows a reduction in quality across all sites since 2009 as the level of available capital funding has reduced and more sites are graded as requiring improvement.

All Play Area Scoring Levels (including MBC, parishes, housing association, trusts and KCC)



Current Position

A costing analysis was undertaken to understand the true cost of ensuring play equipment in all current play areas is kept to a minimum standard. This standard being an Excellent/Green rating as per PASM scoring. The figures in the following table shows the required costs over the next 5 year period.

Financial assessment of required play area improvements

Current MBC play areas requiring work to become Green Standard	50 out of 74 (total no of 120 play areas in borough)
Cost of MBC improvements (up to Green Standard)	£2,726,000 over 5 years
Cost to maintain all play areas per annum	£45,540
Total cost over 5 years	£2,953,700

From 2009 the amount of capital funding available to play area improvements has been reduced on a sliding scale to a total of £50,000 per annum in 2011/12. Creating or refurbishing a play area requires substantial funding; on average a medium sized play area requires upwards of £65,000 - £80,000 to be completely renewed.

On this basis officers are currently carrying over capital to the following year to roll funds up so that one play area improvement scheme can take place every two years. Improvements are further supported by S106 developer contributions.

However there are 74 MBC play areas and with each area requiring refurbishment or renewal every 7 to 25 years depending on usage, many more areas will fall into disrepair. Consequently the current number of play areas is unsustainable based on existing capital support.

Setting Local Standards - 2013

Considering existing play provision in the context of the limited resources available to the council, the Community, Leisure Services and Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee conducted a review in the Summer of 2013 of current policy and the service to shape future policy arrangements. This took a more comprehensive overview of the local picture taking into account resources, the quality of play equipment and the quantity of all public play areas in the borough.

Green and Blue Infrastructure

The MBC Green and Blue Infrastructure is currently at draft stage and is being consulted on with stakeholders. Green and Blue infrastructure is the green space and water environment essential to the quality of our lives. It is referred to as 'infrastructure' as it is as important as other types of infrastructure such as roads, schools and hospitals. It is taken to mean as green space and water of public value.

The types of green infrastructure included in this strategy are Natural and semi-natural urban green spaces, green corridors, outdoor sports space, parks and gardens, amenity green space, provision for children and teenagers - including play areas, skateboard parks, cemeteries and churchyards and accessible countryside and nature reserves.

The purpose of the Strategy is to promote, guide and co-ordinate investment in Maidstone Borough's green and blue infrastructure over the next 20 years. With the following specific aims:

- Mitigating and adapting to climate change Integrating sustainable movement and access for all
- Promoting a distinctive townscape and landscape. Maintaining and enhancing biodiversity, water and air quality.
- Providing opportunities for sport, recreation, quiet enjoyment and health
- Achieving a quality environment for investment and development
- Providing community involvement and opportunities for education

The Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy will be completed by Summer 2014.

Distribution and Mapping

To understand the distribution of play area provision for different age ranges in terms of quality, a mapping exercise was carried out in 2013 to identify the range of provision available. This showed where there were areas of over and under provision across different areas and which areas suffered from a lack of quality as recognised through the PASM. Maps from this exercise can be found in **Appendix 2**.

Setting a local standard – That the majority of households will be within a maximum of 12 minutes walk of a ‘good’ play area – many will live closer than 12 minutes walk.

A walking time of 12 minutes from home was proposed to the Community, Leisure Services and Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee in April 2013 as reasonable provision within easy reach for all age groups, with the large majority of households in the borough being within this range. Physical barriers such as the River Medway, main roads and railway were taken into account in the mapping process.

To ensure play area conditions are kept to a good standard it was proposed to Committee that a network of key sites be designated as ‘Strategically Important Play Areas’ (SIPAs) to ensure funding be driven towards these areas. Equally those areas not considered to be part of this network will be known as Non-Strategic Play Areas (NSPA). **Appendix 3** outlines the SIPA network.

Those MBC Play Areas considered to be NSPA, of which there are 20, highlighted in **Appendix 4**, will be offered to the Parishes, Housing Trusts and other Community Groups for one year to look at possible asset transfer of sites. If after one year no interested parties come forward, play equipment will be removed from these sites and the ground returned back to open space.

Through the mapping exercise it must be acknowledged the lack in provision of youth facilities in the areas of Headcorn, Detling, Lordswood, Harrietsham, Teston and Yalding; and the lack of children’s play facilities in Detling. The majority of open spaces in these areas are Parish owned. The priorities outlined later in this document emphasize the provision of suitable play and teen equipment opportunities.

Thus planning outdoor facilities for children and youth should be prioritised in the parish areas identified, through Parish or Neighbourhood Plans developed by local communities.

Improvement Programme

Through analysis of quality, quantity of provision and financial position it is understood that to halt the decline of current provision further an improvement programme is required. The programme will bring the quality standards of equipped play areas back up to an Excellent/Green level as measured through the PASM. It was proposed to the

Community, Leisure Services and Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee that the capital programme will run for one year.

Adopting the improvement programme would safeguard the future quality of MBC play areas and ensure the play offer to the community is kept to an adequate level, providing opportunity for better child and youth development and improving levels of physical activity and wellbeing.

Parishes

31 parish play areas form an important part of the SIPA network providing child and youth play opportunities to residents in rural areas not covered by MBC provision. In turn these areas also need to be maintained to an acceptable standard by the Parish Council's and as such are scored in the PASM. To support the SIPA network outside the scope of MBC play areas it is proposed £200,000 be made available from capital receipts for a Parish Play Area Grants Scheme over a five year period.

Providing support - Parish Council's will be able to apply for a grant of up to £10,000 to match fund with other funding sources to enable them to improve standards at play areas that are part of the SIPA network.

By applying the new SIPA network to the costing analysis the following table shows new revised figures for required play area improvements over the next year alongside running Parish Play Area Grants scheme for five years. This also includes an allowance in year 2 for removals of those non-strategic play areas not taken on by other organisations. The scale of work would require a temporary post of a new member of staff for one year to project manage these works.

Play Area Improvement Programme Costs

	Play area improvements (capital)	Management costs (capital)	Parish grants (capital)	Play area maintenance (revenue)	Play area removals (capital)	Totals
Year 1	£1,377,000	£25,000	£40,000	£31,600		£1,473,600
Year 2			£40,000	£31,600	£65,000	£136,600
Year 3			£40,000	£31,600		£71,600
Year 4			£40,000	£31,600		£71,600
Year 5			£40,000	£31,600		£71,600
Totals	£1,377,000	£25,000	£200,000	£158,000	£65,000	£1,825,000

4. The Corporate priorities

The Council is committed to and shares the vision for Maidstone, identified in the Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-2020:

"We want Maidstone Borough to be a vibrant, prosperous 21st century urban and rural community at the heart of Kent, where its distinctive character is enhanced to create a safe, healthy, excellent environment with high quality education and employment where all people can realise their aspirations."

The Council has identified the following three priorities and seven outcomes for Maidstone over the next four years.

Priorities

1. For Maidstone to have a growing economy

Maidstone will have a growing economy, with a range of employment and business opportunities. In essence, Maidstone is a good place to work and do business.

Outcomes by 2015

- A transport network that supports the local economy.
- A growing economy with rising employment, catering for a range of skill sets to meet the demands of the local economy.

2. For Maidstone to be a decent place to live

Maidstone's urban and rural parts continue to be a clean, attractive and well designed and built environment, with proper respect paid to its diverse and valuable assets; a place where people want to live.

Outcomes by 2015

- Decent, affordable housing in the right places across a range of tenures.
- Continues to be a clean and attractive environment for people who live in and visit the Borough.
- Residents are not disadvantaged because of where they live or who they are, vulnerable people are assisted and the level of deprivation is reduced.

3. Corporate and Customer Excellence

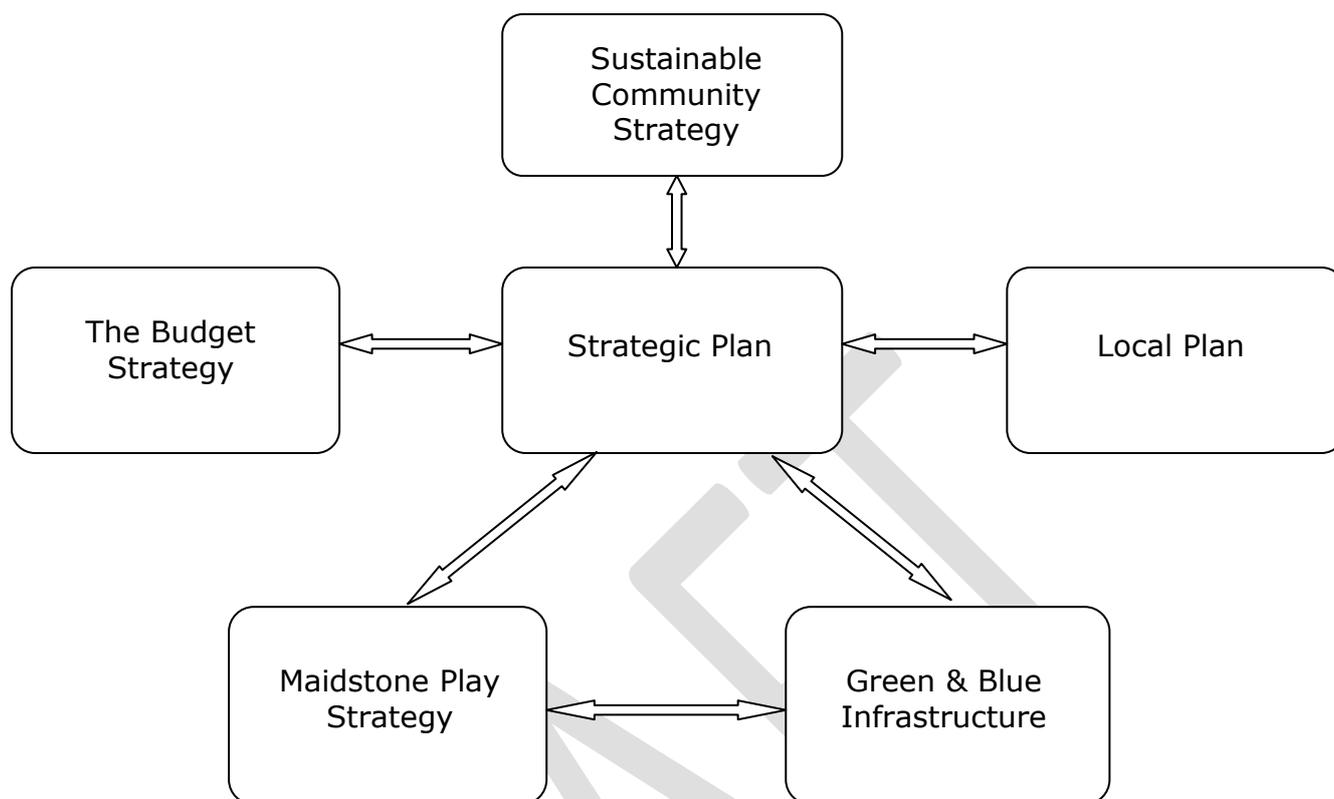
The Council will have a productive workforce with people in the right place at the right time, delivering cost effective services. Services will be affordable, delivered on time and to agreed standards in an accessible way. We will continue to support our most vulnerable residents and seek to reduce the different forms of deprivation across the Borough in both urban and rural areas.

Outcomes by 2015

- Services are customer focused and residents are satisfied with them.
- Effective, cost efficient services are delivered across the borough.

The Play Area Strategy fits into the corporate priorities by detailing the future plan for improving current play area provision and specifying the play area improvement programme in order to meet the aspirations of priorities 2 and 3.

5. Strategy map



6. Priorities and outcomes for this strategy

Priority One – To seek to provide an appropriate number of play areas throughout the borough.

Outcomes – what we plan to achieve

- A network of Strategically Important Play Areas (SIPAs) will be developed based on a 12 minute walking time across the borough that meets the needs of residents.
- Working alongside Planning colleagues we will embed the principles of the SIPA network into new development plans additional to the application of the NPFA standard. This in turn will determine the scope of on-site and off-site S106 contribution requests.
- Where there is an identified lack of provision through gaps in the SIPA network the creation of additional play sites will be undertaken, wherever possible, in partnership with others.
- The Non-Strategic Play Areas identified will be offered out to the community and partners for asset transfer, and where this isn't possible will be returned to open space.

Priority Two – improving the quality of play and outdoor activity facilities for all age groups.

Outcomes – what we plan to achieve

- When an area is being renewed or refurbished that, where possible, equipment aimed at all age groups are included in the design.
- Users and residents will be included in consultation to promote positive community participation in local projects.
- We will support the Parish Councils in their endeavour to improve their play areas in the SIPA network by implementing the Parish Play Area Grants Scheme for five years. **This will require Parishes to provide match funding from other sources.**
- We will upgrade the inspection and reporting process for the ongoing maintenance programme by proposing the introduction of hand held monitoring devices to make more effective use of resources.

Priority Three – maximising funding opportunities available

Outcomes – what we plan to achieve

- Use of the PASM identifying those play areas that require improvement to drive funding to these areas.
- Determining the capital receipts available to support the improvement programme proposed to improve standards and quality.
- That S106 off-site developer contributions will be recommended for the improvement of SIPAs where available.
- That all procurement options will be explored to obtain Best Value.

These priorities and outcomes are important to Maidstone as they support the outcomes laid out in the Strategic Plan, by planning to maximise our leisure and cultural offer to enhance the quality of life for our residents whilst attracting visitors, new residents and businesses.

Action Plan

Link to Sustainable Community Strategy	Link to Corporate Priorities	Task	Comments	Target Completion	Resources
Maidstone Borough to be a vibrant, prosperous 21st century urban and rural community at the heart of Kent, where its distinctive character is enhanced to create a safe, healthy, excellent environment with high quality education and employment where all people can realise their aspirations	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Publish the SIPA network map	Strategy and map on website and out to Cllrs, Parishes, Colleagues and other stakeholders	Quarter 4 2013/14	Officer time
	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Procurement options	To ensure Best Value is obtained	Quarter 4 2013/14	Officer time
	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Presentation to Planning colleagues on the new strategy	Session to be arranged	Quarter 1 2014/15	Officer time
	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Determine the improvement works management option	To be determined by capital receipts	Quarter 1 2014/15	Cabinet Member and Finance Officer
	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Inspection and monitoring upgrade Scheme	Requires input from MBS colleagues	Quarter 2 2014/15	Officer time and agreed budget
	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Play Area Improvements Programme	Based on proposed management option	Quarter 2 2015/16	Officer time and agreed budget
	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Consultation of non-strategic play areas for asset transfer options	Potential stakeholders invited to presentation sessions	Quarter 2 2015/16	Officer time
	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Return of non-strategic play areas back to open space	Those areas not asset transferred to external stakeholders	Quarter 4 2015/16	Officer time and budget of £65,000

	For Maidstone to be a decent place to live	Parish Play Area Grants Scheme	To run for five years	Quarter 4 2018/19	Officer time and £200,000 budget
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7. Implementation and monitoring arrangements

The Play Area Programme is to be run as a corporate project as detailed in the MBC Project Management Toolkit.

- Monthly meetings will take place to evaluate and monitor progression against the project plan between the Play Facilities Development Officer and the Parks and Leisure Manager

The Play Strategy will be reported on and managed through the following channels:

- Quarterly reporting on covalent by the Play Facilities Development Officer
- Half yearly review of strategy by the Play Facilities Development Officer and the Parks and Leisure Manager
- Half yearly review of the strategy by the Community, Leisure Services and Environment O&S Committee

8. Glossary

'Good', 'Excellent' or 'Green' Play Areas – These are the play areas measured through the use of the Play Area Scoring Matrix with a score of 70% or over of the total available score.

'Satisfactory' or 'Yellow' Play Areas – these are the play areas measured through the use of the Play Area Scoring Matrix with a score of between 56% - 69%.

'Poor', 'Requires Improvement' or 'Red' Play Areas – these are the play areas measured through the use of the Play Area Scoring Matrix with a score of 55% or under.

Toddler Play Equipment or Areas – play equipment and areas suitable for children under 6 years old.

Junior Play Equipment or Areas – play and sports equipment and areas suitable for children between the ages of 7 to 11.

Youth Play Equipment or Areas – play and sports equipment and areas suitable for anyone over the age of 12 years old. It must be noted that younger children will also use this equipment from time to time.

Play Area Scoring Matrix (PASM) – The method by which the quality, accessibility and usage of each play area is assessed and scored, providing a system to compare the overall standard of each play area

Strategically Important Play Areas (SIPA's) – Those play areas that form the network of important play areas that ensures a walking distance of 12 minutes from the majority of households

Non-strategic Play Areas (NSPA's) – Those play areas not part of the strategically important network of play areas

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