

Report on Ditchling Recreation Ground Consultation – March 2019

In January the Council held 2 consultation days at the Village Hall and The Pavilion where we displayed our proposals for improving the recreation ground in Ditchling.

The feedback we received was very illuminating and we are extremely grateful to the 133 people and their families who took the time and trouble to attend and complete the questionnaires provided. We received a total of 306 responses to our recreation ground proposals and 504 responses to the proposed equipment for the children's play area - an average of over 2 responses per person and nearly 4 responses per person respectively for the 2 questionnaires.

In answer to the 17 Council proposals on the recreation ground, the highest level of response with 73 comments, regarded the extension and upgrading of the children's play area. The responses were generally positive and tended to confirm the earlier research we undertook during the Neighbourhood Plan consultation which I reported on in previous editions of the magazine. There were concerns over the scale and siting of the facilities which I will come to later.

The second highest response with 50 comments was for "a new all-weather sports pitch". As we indicated, this is likely to involve significant works and costs and there is clearly concern over any floodlighting. This facility will take longer to implement but the Council feels there is now sufficient support for this project to take to the stage of a feasibility and option study.

The third highest response with 39 comments regarded the creation of "new wildflower and grassland meadow areas" on the northern former rugby pitch. The Council is aiming to come forward with detailed plans later this year on this.

The fourth highest response with 33 comments regarded "upgrading and extending the Pavilion". Again, this will take more time and money to achieve and there are concerns about adding another storey but we will be looking at the feasibility and options for achieving this in the coming months.

There were 27 comments - the 5th largest response - on "enhancing access to the children's play area from the Farm Lane entrance".

These were your top 5 choices which will receive our priority but there was also significant support for some of the other proposals which, subject to resources, the Council plans to take forward in one form or another at a later stage and which of course will be subject to further public consultation.

Proposals to install a new drainage scheme on the northern field (the archery area) and to improve vehicular access to the grounds via the burial ground track received little support (9 comments and 2 comments respectively) and will not be taken forward by the Council.

There is clearly continuing support for the tennis court and the Council will be working closely with the tennis club to ensure its future use.

The level of support for outside adult gym equipment was small and so we don't intend to take this proposal forward at this stage.

The response to improving existing public rights of way by introducing harder permeable footpaths (not tarmac or concrete and certainly not 5 meters wide) met with a positive response from those people wanting better access to the grounds for the disabled, their carers and parents with push chairs. Neighbouring residents whose back gardens abut the grounds expressed concern that such a path from Lewes Road would compromise their privacy and would be too close to the cricket pitch boundary to the detriment of the cricket fielders. The Council does recognise these concerns and will look at the possibility of alternative routes. However, we also need to appreciate that, in this day and age, the disabled and parents with push chairs can rightfully expect to use many ancient or other public rights of way along with the able bodied. Accessibility for all will therefore be the Council's aim.

It is only fair to point out that we had a number of responses from people stating they wanted no change at all to the recreation grounds. Between 15 and 20 out of the 306 responses could be described as wholly or largely negative towards the Council's proposals giving diverse reasons including: they will encourage more criminal or anti-social behaviour; why spend £80,000 on a few teenagers? ; the money could be spent on more worthwhile projects such as alleviating poverty; they will lead to the urbanisation of a rural area and the grounds are fine as they are.

There were a few interesting ideas suggested which were not listed by the Council. These included a pétanque (boules) area which the Council would like to pursue. This facility could be accommodated in a relatively small area, possibly at the eastern end of the car park, at relatively low cost. Please look out for further details on this.

Other ideas people suggested included a skate park or BMX track. As exciting as these can be, especially for older children, the Council believes that these facilities would take up extensive areas of land and would dramatically detract from the essential rural character of the grounds. In addition, they would go against the Council's policy of excluding cycling on the grounds.

A rehearsal facility for the Ditchling Morris Dancers, a badminton court were also mentioned which may be possible to incorporate in an expanded Pavilion.

The play area

There was strong support for the upgrading and expansion of the existing play area. We presented 43 items of play equipment at the consultation. The following 10 were given 20 or more votes:

- Table tennis (55 all options)
- Climbing wall (43)
- Steel cableway or zip wire (37)
- Titan carousel (32)
- Kinderland ropeway (29)
- Ball court (26)
- Rock (24)
- Basket seat swing (20)
- Rope and dome frame (20)
- Eight frame (20)

There is quite a lot of overlap between some of your preferences and therefore, in order to avoid duplication, the Council intends to go ahead with the climbing wall rather than the climbing rock on the basis that it scored more votes, it will take up much less space and it is around some £10,000 less expensive; the steel cableway rather than the kinderland ropeway as it scored higher; and the eight frame rather than the rope and dome frame as it is significantly cheaper although they both scored the same. We also have removed the ball court because this is very similar to the all-weather sports pitch which we plan to make separate provision for given your high level of support for this. The 6 selected items are shown on the opposite page.

The total costs of these 6 facilities of between £50,000 and £60,000 based on our indicative costs. This is within the Council's budget of £80,000 although this does not include the additional site costs, the pathway from Farm Lane and upgrading of the existing facilities.

A number of respondents were concerned about the risk of intimidation of younger children by older children and cricket club supporters did not want any incursion of the play area into the cricket pitch. Neighbouring residents living adjacent to the grounds were also worried about the increase in noise from older children.

We therefore believe it would be desirable to limit the expansion of the existing play area so that it is well short of the cricket boundary; to provide within the play area an internal fence segregating the younger from the older children's equipment; and to install some of the larger play equipment for older children, particularly the zipwire and possibly the current basketball stand, in the south east corner of the northern or former rugby pitch subject to discussions with the archery club.

At the Parish Council meeting held on the 25th March 2019 the Council agreed to progress with obtaining quotations on a design and build contract for the improvement/enlargement of the children's play area subject to funding. Further details will follow and while this design work proceeds, the Council will be making grant applications to national and local organisations and charities in order to match

the Council's own funding. This will help conserve the Council's budget and enable the Council to press ahead with other improvements sooner rather than later.

The Council will also keep open the public consultation process on the recreation grounds and the play area. There will be regular discussions at our Council meetings which take place twice a month at the Village Hall. If you would like to attend any of these meetings and contribute, we would be very pleased to see you. And of course the invitation to those of you who are interested in playing a more active role working with the Council in the future of the play area and the recreation ground is always open.

Councillor Phil Smith