

## Cabinet

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4 July 2016

### Present:

Mayor Dorothy Thornhill	(Strategic partnerships/external relationships and community safety)
Cllr Peter Taylor	(Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Client Services)
Cllr Karen Collett	(Portfolio Holder for Community)
Cllr Stephen Johnson	(Portfolio Holder for Property and Housing)
Cllr Iain Sharpe	(Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Development)
Cllr Mark Watkin	(Portfolio Holder for Resources and Customer Service)

### Also present:

Councillor Nigel Bell (Labour)  
Councillor Kareen Hastrick (Liberal Democrat)  
Councillor Sohail Bashir (Labour)  
Councillor Jagtar Singh Dhindsa (Labour)  
Councillor Asif Khan (Labour)  
Councillor Rabi Martins (Liberal Democrat)  
Councillor Matt Turmaine (Labour)  
Mr Ansar (to speak on item 7)  
Ms Wilson (to speak on item 7)

### Officers:

Managing Director  
Shared Director of Finance  
Head of Democracy and Governance  
Head of Regeneration and Development  
Head of Community and Customer Services  
Communications Section Head  
Partnerships and Performance Section Head

Property and Regeneration Section Head  
Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets)  
Culture and Play Section Head  
Democratic Services Manager

**18. Investment in Watford's Adventure Playgrounds**

A report was received from the Head of Community and Customer Services. The report highlighted the investment the Council was making in the two Adventure Playgrounds (APGs) at Harwoods and Harebreaks. Funding of up to £1.25 million had been made available by the Council for the new facilities which would be open to all at all times.

Two members of the public, Mr Ansar and Ms Wilson, attended to speak to the committee.

Councillor Collett introduced the report and explained that it highlighted investment in two APGs to create high quality play facilities. The proposed change was about two things: to extend the opportunities for children aged 5-15 to access high quality play facilities everyday throughout the year. Secondly, the need to respond to the challenging financial situation of the council which meant there were difficult decisions to be taken requiring a transformational approach. The proposal would deliver the council's objective to protect areas for play and bring equipment up to a modern standard. There would be play activities commissioned for the Easter and summer breaks.

The Mayor invited Ms Wilson to speak.

Ms Wilson explained that she was giving a point of view from the parents of children who used the facility. She explained that APGs enabled children to have creative play and learn vital skills. The children would go to the playworkers for emotional support and learnt social skills at the APG. Money was being saved in the wrong place and instead was being spent on the town centre. The parents wanted to keep the staff and considered that the facilities had been run down. There were children who had been upset when they heard about the decision and who had made the banners which were brought to the meeting. She had reported anti social behaviour regarding the activities of older children in the young children's play areas to the police.

Ms Wilson continued that the reinvestment would mean that the current facilities were replaced with a sterile playground which could be subject to more antisocial behaviour. Once the decision had been made the current facility would be lost and there would be no going back.

Ms Wilson presented a petition to the Mayor and explained that in a week they had

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collected 2,500 signatures in support of the petition.

The Mayor invited Mr Ansar to speak.

Mr Ansar explained that he was born and grew up in Watford, he had attended Watford Grammar School for Boys and worked for Watford Borough Council on the play bus and APG. His family were still residents and his previous colleagues still worked for the youth services. There had been a lack of public consultation over the issue and he wanted to see more local democracy and representation. There should be a six month period to offer an opportunity to talk to residents as there was a great strength of feeling. The council was good at putting up buildings and there were very few green spaces left. The last public consultations regarding play had made a strong recommendation which was that APGs were a vital public asset. There was a budget of up to £1.25m but he was not sure if it was ringfenced. The council would be making savings, cutting staff and outsourcing to Veolia. There would be the cost of providing supervision on those sites for two weeks in Easter and six weeks in summer. There were concerns on the long term impacts on crime.

The Mayor responded that local government had been particularly affected by government austerity measures. The council had managed to protect the front line services and had kept council tax down.

Councillor Bell commented that more notice could have been given to staff. There was strong support for the playground. Despite figures on investment in playgrounds there was no history of investment in the APG site. The APG had provided supervised care for young people over so many years and this was not reflected in the report. He encouraged the Mayor to take up the offer of working with the community to find another solution.

Councillor Bell commented that the current facilities provided a place where parents could trust that their children were safe. The two new modern playgrounds were not what people were looking for. He continued that there had been a lack of consultation and that the proposed events were for information.

The Mayor responded that many councils did not have a staffed APG facility and similar ones had been closed across London. There would still be play facilities. She continued that she knew that people who used it valued the service. However, the council had to find another £3m of cuts between now and 2018. She explained that each service had been looked at for what they provided. There were other people in the town who did not use the APGs who were not heard at the meeting.

Councillor Watkin explained the difference between the council's capital budget, to be spent on capital projects such as the works to the top of the town and on new

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equipment for play areas. However, the revenue budget was being cut which meant that day to day expenditure had to be cut.

Councillor Collett commented that it was a very emotional situation and due to government cuts the council was being forced to make a decision it did not like. However, the APGs were staying open unlike in other areas of London. Play facilities were one of the top priorities in the citizen's survey and the current APG equipment was old and tired. The APG would be kept and would be open with new equipment which would fit into the natural environment; it would not be built on.

The Managing Director highlighted that financially over the last five years the council had had to produce efficiency savings of £4.5m. This process had led to the council reviewing every type of service it provided and assessing how it could be delivered differently to save money. There were no longer any decisions the council could make that did not involve difficult choices. In relation to APGs, if they were not part of reducing costs at this point, the council would have to look at other services e.g., housing, leisure centres, environmental health inspection. There was a way of preserving the service through the report's recommendations for the next 20 years.

The Mayor concluded that the council would provide new facilities as well as continuing to offer free swim and gym and play activities in the holidays. These services were not provided by other councils. A public consultation would not change the reality; there was not a compromise on the way forward.

RESOLVED

That Cabinet:

1. approves the outline design plans for the investment of up to £1.25 million into the two Adventure Playgrounds
2. approves the outline timetable for the investment at Appendix B
3. notes the plans to communicate the investment and proposals to inform the Watford community of the plans for the future of the Adventure Playgrounds