

Options appraisal of the future management arrangements Adventure Play in Crawley

Draft Report

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1 Introduction

There are currently 4 outdoor Adventure Playgrounds across Crawley in Langley Green, Broadfield, Bewbush and Furnace Green.

They are open to 2-16 year olds and each have a different theme. Children under the age of 6 must be supervised by an adult.

They have restricted opening times during the winter term times; 2 days a week between 4pm – 8pm and on Saturday for 5 hours.

Each child that uses the facilities must register and can then use the centre for free except on Saturdays and during school holidays where the charge is £1.20. There are options for annual passes for families and there is a price differential between residents and non residents.

The overall aim of the service is 'To provide high quality and accessible play services which promote the values of play to a broad spectrum of children and families in Crawley.'

The objective within the Play Strategy and development plan Jan 2007 is that most relevant to the Venture play sites is that they are categorised as NEAP play grounds and that:

'Wherever possible we will ensure that these facilities pass the '3 frees test'

- Free of charge
- Children free to come and go
- Children free to do what they want'

2 Current service objectives

For the purposes of this study, the following aims and objectives have been identified. However, these have not been formally adopted by the Council.

Service Aim

To provide high quality and accessible play services which promote the values of play to a broad spectrum of children and families from Crawley.

Service Objectives

Utilisation

To encourage and promote utilisation from Crawley based children and families and ensure that barriers to accessing the Venture Play Service are recognised and addressed.

To welcome utilisation from non Crawley based Children and families recognising that such usage helps to offset operational deficits and helps to promote Crawley to a wider population.

Quality

To ensure the play activities provided by the Venture Play Service reflect the values of Play as highlighted in the Crawley Play Strategy, namely,

- Children are able to play freely in a secure context, their play will be personally directed and intrinsically motivated
- Children will be encouraged to express their views
- Children will be encouraged to develop a positive attitude to differences of religion, culture, language, social background, gender and ability.
- Play opportunities will be creative, stimulating, and challenge children's abilities but not their well being.
- Children will learn to assess, encounter and manage their own risks.
- Facilities will operate as open access play (Children are free to come and go as they please).
- Play workers will at all times adhere to legislation which will safeguard and promote the well being of children visiting the sites.

To ensure the activities provided by the Venture Play Service promote the wider strategic priorities of Crawley Borough Council, most notably, health and well being, community safety and community cohesion.

Financial

Without impacting upon quality, to ensure the Venture Play Service operates efficiently and effectively to minimise the cost to Crawley Borough Council of providing this service.

Human Resource

To ensure the staff and managers working within the Crawley Venture Play Service are empowered, motivated and suitably trained to deliver high quality and safe play opportunities in accordance with recognised best practice.

Equality

To ensure the Venture Play Service promotes equality of access and the staff and children and families using the service reflect the diverse nature of Crawley's population as a whole.

3 Analysis of current service performance

There have been a number of reviews of the service including the Best Value Review 2006 and the Play strategy was adopted by Members in 2007.

A summary of the financial position of the centre are provided in Table 3 below:

Table 3 Adventure Play subsidy

Current Financial subsidy £	Play	
	Actuals 2008/09	Budget 2009/10
EXPENDITURE:		
Employees	1,082,418	496,600
Premises excl NNDR	116,118	112,700
NNDR	27,992	30,180
Transport	7,512	4,090
Supplies and Services	59,201	17,770
Third Party Payments	2,590	
Support Services	82,701	91,650
Internal Recharges	44,013	64,900
Capital Charges	218,659	59,400
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	1,641,204	877,290
INCOME	44,006	37,000
Catering net profit		
Internal Charges		
TOTAL INCOME	44,006	37,000
SUBSIDY	1,597,198	840,290

2008/09 Employees includes 1 off redundancy and pension contribution costs of £523k

The most up to date usage information is shown in table 4 below:

Table 4 Adventure Play usage profiles

Venture Play Site	Usage 2008/09
Cherry Lane	5622
Creasys	4377
Millpond	3346
Waterlea	4723
TOTAL	18068

The current information suggests that over a third of users are from out of borough.

The approximate total subsidy (including central costs) per user in 2008/09, excluding the 'one off' staff costs, was £47. This cost is for each visit to the facilities and it is not known if a number of children use the centres regularly or whether many children use them less regularly. When requested, this information has not been available.

However, the re-launch of the service last year has led to an increase in users and it is understood that the cost per visit has reduced to approximately £32.

4 The key Issues arising from the consultation

Staffing – All facilities have 3 staff on duty during opening hours as the sites are OFSTED registered. They plan for more opening hours in the summer than winter and have reduced the overall opening hours significantly this year. A restructure took place in 2008/09 to introduce these changes.

Developmental work – There are good links with local schools and the staff are looking to widen these links, however it appeared that there were few formal links with positive activities group or other departments such as young people's services supporting at risk or excluded children.

Repairs and Maintenance – This is completed either by play leaders themselves or by the Community Halls team. There is no real plan for longer term capital improvements to the facilities apart from ad hoc external funding opportunities.

Usage – Every child has to register with a membership card although it is accepted that sometimes it is difficult to get all the information as younger children do not always know their address. There was evidence on site of leaders not being able to gain the correct information from the younger children.

The play leaders suggested that it was difficult to therefore ascertain information on total usage (i.e. number of children and how often they came) and total number of children that use the facilities (i.e. number of children on the active database).

5 Evaluation Model

It is believed that there are no external partners that the Council could sell or lease the facilities to and therefore this option has not been considered for the Adventure Play sites.

The management options considered are in house and transfer to a local trust.

(a) Cost of Future Operation / Investment Required – Both Revenue and Capital Implications

Revenue

In House

Continuation of the in house operation will result in a continued high subsidy. There are currently economies of scale in the day to day inspections and maintenance being undertaken by the community halls team.

It is believed that the facilities could be used by a wider range of groups, from business orientated team days etc to 'boot camp' type outdoor fitness classes that are becoming increasingly popular.

Whilst the hours within the winter months have been reduced, it may be worth assessing whether the facilities should be used for group bookings only and casual activities diverted to indoor centres including K2 and the community halls.

Leisure Trust

There may be minimal VAT and NNDR benefits from an existing or new trust managing the Venture play facilities.

The income generated in 2008/09 was £44k although the budget for 2009/10 reduced to £39k due to the reduction in opening hours. Therefore the potential VAT benefit could be in the region of £7k - £8k.

The NNDR costs are budgeted at £30k in 2009/10, therefore there would be a potential saving of £24k per annum through the 80% NNDR relief a trust could gain.

However a trust would need to have head office / central costs allocated to the service that are likely to offset these savings.

In addition there would be significant set up costs for a new trust for the operation of the services.

If an established trust like Freedom were to operate the venues there would be no set up costs.

Capital Costs

In house

The current service is dependent on existing staff buildings and maintaining the play areas and equipment, or applying for external funding. The Council has invested over £500k in the past 5 years in new play equipment. However, there is no long term capital / lifecycle cost plan in place for the long term sustainability of the sites.

Trust

There will be few tax based savings that could lever in further funding for capital requirements, a Trust may be in an enhanced position to attract external funding.

(b) Current service levels and quality standards

In House

The current day to day delivery is good and the centres are all OFSTED registered and score highly.

It is believed that the in house team should have annual service plans that detail specific Council objectives that the adventure play service deliver against. These should not be limited to just direct leisure or young people objectives, but against wider targets of improving health of young people, providing MEND programmes, improving community cohesion, providing training opportunities for young people and assisting with the positive

activity agenda. It is also felt that the Adventure play areas could be used for other target groups, for example 'older people' sessions (at different times to the young people).

The method of monitoring usage needs to be improved so that the output and outcomes of the service delivery can be monitored so that the service can effectively demonstrate how it is helping to meet wider council objectives.

Leisure Trust

It is not believed that there could be any added value in a trust operation.

(c) Staffing

The staffing has been recently restructured and currently there are 3 staff on at all times, given the type of facility and OFSTED requirements this appears appropriate.

In House

There would be no implications of remaining in house

Leisure Trust

If a trust were to manage the facilities all the staff that directly work for the service would transfer across as TUPE would apply. There may be some posts for example the repairs and maintenance staff that work at the community centres and other service areas, where the application of TUPE would not be as straight forward. The Council would also have to consider what strategic / monitoring role would be required within the Council under this option.

(d) Opportunities and control

In House

The Council retains direct control over the service area and changes can be made as required. This reflects both service delivery and finance so if changes to the budget have to be made this can be done relatively easily.

The in house team should be able to liaise with other council partners to develop partnerships to provide joined up working, for example with education and leisure services.

Leisure Trust

If the operation of the facilities were transferred to a trust, the Council as well as the trust would be bound by the specification and management agreement for the defined length of the contract. There would be termination clauses, but these would likely incur costs.

It is not anticipated that there would be any opportunities that a trust could deliver over and above the current in house service delivery.

(e) Central and support services

In House

The current central costs are in the region of £127k per annum, if the service stays in house – it is likely that these costs will remain.

Leisure Trust

If the service is transferred to a trust, these costs may reduce – if actual savings can be realised, or may simply be reallocated to other departments.

However, it is likely that trust would allocate an element of central costs to the management of the service.

(f) Legal / Procurement issues

In House

There would be no general legal / procurement issues with the service remaining in house.

Leisure Trust

If the Council were to consider transferring the management of the centres to an established trust, the current contract would have to be reviewed to ascertain whether there were opportunities to include the additional services within it. The Council would need to consider its own procurement guidance and also EU guidance as to whether an advertised OJEU process would have to be undertaken. At first sight, as it is likely that the service is a part B service, the formal OJEU process may not be required, however the procurement process would still be subject to EU treaty principles of transparency and non-discrimination.

(g) Market testing and benchmarking

In House

There are no issues with the service remaining in house.

Leisure Trust

Freedom has stated that is would be interested in developing partnerships with the Council, however they do not have experience in outdoor adventure play and there are no significant tax benefits that would accrue.

Sale or lease to a third party, commercial or voluntary sector organisation / community group.

There are no partners in the local authority provision market for this service. There are a number of private indoor play specialists, however none have the experience of operating a service of this nature.

Adventure Play Summary

The evaluation model for the Adventure Play Management Options is detailed in the table below.

	Criteria	Key Area	Importance to Council / Members	Overall Weighting	Actual Scores out of 5			Weighted Scores		
					In House	Local Trust	Sale / Lease / 3rd Party	In House	Local Trust	Sale / Lease / 3rd Party
1	Investment Required	Can Capital Investment be delivered into the Services? Condition Survey Maintenance, Building Improvement Investment. Costs of Investment	Medium - It is known that the facilities will need capital to be spent to ensure they continue to meet customer expectations	15.00%	2	2		6.0%	6.0%	
2	Revenue	Improved Revenue position, Increase in participation and income; NNDR savings, VAT benefits, Is revenue certainty provided for the Council?	High - Council wishes to have affordable and known revenue position	22.50%	3	4		13.5%	18.0%	
3	Current service levels and quality standards	How well will the services be delivered? Able to benchmark? Customer / client feedback, Day to day health and safety and maintenance issues, Marketing / Branding	High - facilities have an excellent reputation within the locality and industry, the Council wishes to maintain this	22.50%	4	4		18.0%	18.0%	
4	Staffing	Are there any Economies of Scale? Staffing terms and conditions protected, Opportunities for staff development?	Medium - Staff benefits and opportunities must also be balanced with a sustainable economic position	15.00%	3	2		9.0%	6.0%	
5	Opportunities and control	How easily will the Council be able to influence the Service Delivery and the budgets of the Services?	Medium - Council wishes to input into the strategic direction and change as per change in policies, however it is not important to be involved in day to day delivery	15.00%	5	3		15.0%	9.0%	

6	Central and support services	Are current client costs reduced? Are there any other potential savings in other areas of Council costs (recharges)?	Low - Council wishes to have affordable and known revenue position	5.00%	1	1		1.0%	1.0%	
7	Legal / Procurement issues	Any particular legal issues with each option?, Obliging the Council to spend monies / capital; Governance, Any additional risks?	Low - the Council wishes to minimise further risk	5.00%	5	3		5.0%	3.0%	
8	Market testing and benchmarking	Are there potential partners in the market place for the management options be discussed?	Medium - Council wishes to know that there are suitable partners in the market	15.00%	5	1		15.0%	3.0%	
				100.00%	28	20		83%	64%	

6 Recommendations

- Overall from the evaluation of Adventure Play, there are no obvious external partners that could manage the service for the Council. There are limited NNDR and VAT benefits that a local trust could accrue. It is therefore recommended that the service remains in house.
- Any changes to the service must take place following the introduction of a clear user identification process. We understand that this service is used by a number of “at risk” and/or excluded children. It is essential that the impact on users of any reduction of service delivery is identified, as many of these children will need support from other agencies/departments such as social services or other child support agencies.
- Further investigation should take place in relation to the identification of potential new users i.e. adults, older children and the potential to provide facilities as part of corporate team building days.
- It is important to set the service in context of the wider play offer delivered across the town. Further work is required to ensure that play opportunities across the borough are coherent and meet the overall corporate objectives of the Council. The role of adventure play needs to be clear.
- The reconfiguration of supervised play services in 2008 and the launch of a new Venture Service resulted in service rationalisation and reduction. It is important that any change to the current service delivery is set in the context of this ongoing work.