

## **AGENDA 12, Enc vii) Paddock Wood Play Area Development**

### **1. Purpose**

This proposal sets out the Council's intention to commit Paddock Wood Play Area as the next priority site for capital investment in play provision. It identifies the rationale for prioritisation, notes site-specific constraints including drainage and access, and sets out a Council-led consultation approach that will inform a clear budget-based brief ahead of going out to tender.

### **2. Background and Rationale**

Ashington Town Council maintains seven play areas across the town, managing these assets in line with our Assets Register, play area inspections, and Reserves Policy.

- Aintree Close (transferred from Dunelm Homes in May 2024; redeveloped 2023)
- Alexandra Road (formally leased from NCC from May 2025; redeveloped 2022)
- Epsom Drive (transferred from Dunelm Homes in May 2024; redeveloped 2023)
- North Seaton Colliery (formally leased from NCC from May 2025; redeveloped 2026)
- **Paddock Wood (formally leased from NCC from May 2025)**
- Peoples Park (formally leased from NCC from May 2025; redeveloped 2019)
- Seaton Vale (transferred from Persimmon Homes in January 2024)

A lifespan of assets has been carried out to inform future investment. This analysis, alongside regular inspection findings, indicates that Paddock Wood Play Area has reached a stage where meaningful investment is required to ensure the site continues to offer safe, stimulating, and high-quality play provision for local children and families. The site is identified as the next in the planned programme of investment, consistent with the Council's asset management approach and the funding held in earmarked reserves for this purpose.

### **3. Site Conditions and Constraints**

#### **3.1 Drainage**

The site currently uses wood chippings as its surfacing material. Wood chip has proven a persistent maintenance issue in this location and, given the drainage challenges, is not considered a suitable long-term solution. Any investment in the play area must address the underlying drainage adequately, as this will directly influence surfacing options and long-term maintenance requirements. An early assessment of the drainage position should be carried out before the tender specification is finalised.

#### **3.2 Working with the Landscape**

Rather than working against the natural characteristics of the site, we could explore whether the landscape itself can be used as a positive feature of any redesign. The topography, existing vegetation, and natural contours of Paddock Wood offer potential opportunities for integrating play into the environment in a way that feels organic and appropriate to the setting. Tenderers could be asked to demonstrate how their designs respond to and complement the existing landscape rather than simply imposing a standard equipment layout onto it.

#### **3.3 Site Access for Works**

Access to the Paddock Wood site for construction and installation purposes is restricted and will need to be carefully considered by any appointed contractor. Tenderers should be made aware of the access constraints at the earliest stage, as these may have implications for the choice of equipment, the method of installation, and programme planning. This must be clearly communicated within the tender documentation.

### **4. Approach to Consultation**

It is preferred that we manage the pre-tender consultation process, rather than delegating this to an appointed play provider. This approach gives the Council direct ownership of the community engagement, ensures that the resulting brief is genuinely shaped by local views, and avoids any risk of the consultation being influenced by a supplier's interests.

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Ward councillors will be involved in the consultation process from the outset, prior to any findings being reported back to committee. Their local knowledge and relationships within the community will be a valuable asset in reaching residents effectively and ensuring the engagement is well-targeted.

Consultation activities may include on-site engagement sessions, a survey promoted through the Council's communication channels, the community centre, and outreach to schools, community groups, and local families. The findings will be compiled into a summary report and considered by the relevant committee before the specification is developed into a tender brief.

### **5. Procurement Approach**

#### **5.1 Budget-Led Tender**

Rather than inviting tenderers to propose open-ended schemes, the Council is minded to set a defined budget and invite play providers to demonstrate what they can deliver within that envelope. This approach is likely to produce more comparable, realistic proposals and will give the Council greater control over the scope of works. It also affords the opportunity to assess the quality and creativity of responses within a known financial constraint, which represents good value for money management.

The budget figure will be determined by the Council following consideration of the reserves position and any external funding that may be pursued. This figure will be confirmed before the tender is issued.

#### **5.2 Retention of Existing Equipment**

The Council may wish to retain some of the existing equipment on site if it remains serviceable and continues to have play value. Any decision to retain items should be informed by the most recent inspection findings and, where relevant, the views gathered during the consultation. Tenderers should be asked to account for the presence of any retained equipment within their proposals and to design around it appropriately.

### **6. Procurement Integrity — Important Note**

It is important that the Council and its officers do not engage with play providers or contractors in relation to this project prior to the formal procurement process being commenced. Any pre-tender engagement with potential suppliers — including informal conversations about design ideas, costs, or approaches — risks compromising the integrity of the procurement process, potentially creating an uneven playing field between tenderers, and rendering the Council's position vulnerable to challenge.

Officers and members should be mindful of this obligation. Any approaches received from suppliers prior to the tender being issued should be noted and not acted upon. The Council's Financial Regulations and procurement obligations under the relevant Regulations apply in full.

### **7. Key Questions for Consultation**

The following areas are proposed as the framework for community consultation. They are designed to produce a meaningful brief that genuinely reflects local need while giving the Council sufficient steer on priorities before the tender specification is written.

#### **7.1 Age Range and User Groups**

Who should the play area serve?

- Toddlers and under-5s (accessible, sensory-rich, enclosed)
- Primary school age children (5–11 — varied challenge, imaginative play)
- Older children and young teenagers (physical challenge, social spaces)
- Mixed provision across all age ranges
- Inclusive play catering for children with disabilities and additional needs

#### **7.2 Play Style and Character**

Should the play area lean towards a particular style?

- Traditional play equipment — swings, slides, roundabouts; familiar and well-used

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- Adventure play — natural materials, balance features, rope elements, embankment slides; encourages challenge and imagination
- Nature-integrated play — using the existing landscape, landforms, and planting as play features in their own right
- A blend, incorporating both traditional and more exploratory elements

### **7.3 Working with the Landscape**

Given the natural setting, we are particularly interested in exploring:

- Whether existing topography (slopes, mounds, natural contours) could be incorporated into the play design rather than levelled
- Whether existing trees and vegetation could form part of the play environment
- Whether the overall character of the area should feel like a natural play landscape rather than a traditional equipped play space
- Whether log trails, stepping stones, balancing features, or earth mounds would be welcomed as landscape-integrated play elements

### **7.4 Materials and Aesthetics**

- Timber and natural materials — visually warm, fits the setting; requires periodic maintenance
- Powder-coated steel and modern composites — durable, lower maintenance; more contemporary appearance
- A blend of both, which many suppliers now offer as a standard approach
- Colour palette — natural tones to complement the landscape versus bright, bold colours

### **7.5 Surfacing**

Given the drainage issues and the problems experienced with wood chippings, surfacing will require careful consideration:

- Wet pour rubber — seamless, accessible, strong drainage performance if correctly installed; widely used in modern play areas
- Rubber safety tiles — modular, replaceable in sections, good for accessibility, potentially problematic with ASB
- Artificial grass with shock-absorbent underlay — natural appearance; drainage quality is installation-dependent
- Natural surfacing integrated with drainage improvements — to be explored depending on the outcome of the drainage assessment
- Wood chip may not be recommended as a replacement surface given the existing maintenance difficulties and drainage concerns on this site

### **7.6 Additional Features**

- Seating and picnic benches for accompanying adults
- Shade structures or natural canopy features
- Improved fencing and gating
- Accessible pathways and level access throughout the site
- Outdoor fitness equipment alongside the children's play area
- Improved signage and wayfinding

## **8. Learning from the North Seaton Colliery Process**

The Council's most recent experience of procuring a play area development at North Seaton Colliery involved a two-stage process including the appointment of a preferred supplier to lead community engagement prior to detailed design. Whilst this produced a sound result, it is considered that for Paddock Wood the Council is well-placed to manage the pre-tender consultation itself, thereby retaining control of the brief and reducing the risk of the design process being led by a supplier's own product range or commercial priorities.

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Going out to tender with a clear, community-informed brief and a defined budget is expected to produce stronger, more comparable responses and to give the Council a better basis for decision-making at the award stage. The North Seaton Colliery documentation remains a useful reference for the legal, technical, and insurance requirements that will need to be replicated in the Paddock Wood tender, including compliance with BS EN 1176:2017, BS EN 1177:2018, CDM Regulations, and the insurance thresholds previously applied.

### **9. Next Steps**

Subject to approval of this proposal, the recommended sequence is:

- Formally designate Paddock Wood Play Area as the next capital investment priority
- Commission an assessment of the drainage issues and report findings to committee
- Ward councillors to be briefed and involved in shaping the consultation approach
- Plan and deliver a Council-led community consultation programme
- Compile consultation findings and bring a summary report back to committee
- Council to agree a defined budget for the project
- Develop a tender specification based on the consultation brief and budget
- Issue tender in accordance with the Council's procurement obligations and Financial Regulations

### **10. Recommendation**

The Council is asked to:

- Agree that Paddock Wood Play Area is the next priority site for capital investment, consistent with the assets register and lifespan analysis
- Note the drainage concerns and the problems associated with the existing wood chip surfacing, and agree that a drainage assessment is commissioned
- Note the site access constraints and agree these are documented for inclusion in the tender
- Agree that a Council-led consultation programme is undertaken, with ward councillors involved throughout, prior to a tender being issued
- Note that no engagement with play providers or contractors should take place prior to the formal procurement process
- Agree in principle that the tender will be issued on a budget-led basis, with the budget figure to be confirmed following the consultation phase and consideration of available reserves and external funding opportunities