

Council March 2022
Groombridge Playground Renewal

Please read the information contained carefully and any questions must be raised with the Clerk in advance of the meeting for information to be made available and a decision to be made at the meeting.

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Clerk's Recommendation

It is recommended that Withyham Parish Council (WPC) seek the approval of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to apply for a Public Works Loan Board loan of £50,000 towards the costs of the new Groombridge playground.

Highlight summary of important information:

- *There would be no need to increase Precept to cover these repayments*
- *The average annual loan repayments would be around £4,803.18 (figure calculated 9 Feb 2022) per year over 12 years (on a fixed term annuity basis)*
- *Should fundraising from grants and donations be more than expected after the application is made it would not be necessary to draw down the full amount of loan*
- The Playground Group is an informal working group of WPC. It was set up by WPC to ensure that the new playground was what the community wanted.
- The Playground Group have invested nearly 5 years in the development of the project with the support of WPC.
- The Playground is one of four top short-term priorities for the Parish Council as detailed in the Withyham Parish Council Community Parish Plan (2020 – 2024) which was agreed by Council.
- It is expected the current playground won't pass the Spring RoSPA inspection and this may require closure. To continue having a functional playground in the village, progression towards the new playground must be made.
- A lengthy closure of the Playground would cause significant reputational risk and damage to the good name and standing of WPC.
- 17% of the Parish's population is under 15.
- The playground design has been carefully created to provide a unique play experience for local children, with equipment unlike other local playgrounds providing a developmental and learning experience incorporating risk taking as well as fun
- A destination Playground (one of the aims of the design) would be of value to the local economy
- A scaled down playground would diminish the above 2 aims and could cause reputational damage to WPC
- *Funds secured and potentially achievable:
£28,350 EMRs (CiL and SPC grant) + £15,000 grants + £10,000 donations/sponsorship = £53,350.*

Proposal in more detail

The project requires approximately £103,661 of which £53,350 is already Earmarked from CiL/Speldhurst Parish Council or being sought from grants and donations.

This proposal is for the potential shortfall of around £50K to be covered by a Public Works Loan (PWL).

£50,000 borrowed over 12 years would equate to repayments of around £4,800 per year. The current lease runs to 2035, renewal of which is expected.

Repayments can be built into budget from 2023/24 without raising the Precept.

This is because in the financial year 2022/23 we have £15K allocated from budget/precept towards the Phoenix House refurb, which is a one off cost. In 2023/24 that £15K can be reallocated to other expenditure without raising the Precept. It is therefore recommended that part of this excess £15,000 covers the approx. £4,800 annual repayments required.

Should fundraising from grants and donations be more successful than expected it would not be necessary to draw down this full amount, or those monies could be put towards repayments if funds had already been drawn down.

Background

The current playground is in a very sad state:

- 2 pieces of equipment have been removed and their foundations covered with traffic cones
- Bark is 1-2ft too low (look at the exposed foundations for the table!)
- Seesaw too high even for an adult
- Both climbing frame foundations are barely covered.

Whilst this project is community-led, the Playground Group was set up by WPC as an informal working group in order to ensure that the new playground was what the community wanted rather than the community being 'done to'. This is therefore a WPC project and has only got to this point by WPC and the Playground Group working together – with the Playground bringing proposals to WPC for consideration and agreement and then the playground group progressing actions with the Chair and Clerk's support.

The below timeline shows progress on the project to date. Initially the Group intended the project to take 3 years but COVID restrictions caused delays to the timetable.

2017	WPC sets up a 'Playground Group' of residents (June) Meetings commence
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	Research undertaken into other new local playgrounds
2018	<p>Group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explores whether to be Charity as funding is more limited to Parish Councils (not felt to be feasible) • Understands the WPC Tender process • consults with residents on what they would like to see from a playground via different methods • Starts work with a local architect and develops a design
2019	<p>Further consultation undertaken on architect design Councillors consider and input into the architect design <u>Councillors agree to WPC submitting a Planning application</u> Planning application submitted (Oct) Work begins on Tender documents</p>
2020	<p>Planning permission granted (Feb 2020) First Tender opportunity advertised (March) – due to COVID site visits could not take place and no Tenders were received <u>F&A Committee agree reworked Tender documents</u></p>
2021	<p>Second Tender opportunity advertised (March) Group consider the Tenders and makes recommendation to Council <u>Council considers Tenders, agrees preferred Contractor and their design</u> (September) Group meets the Contractor to explore some tweaks Fundraiser engaged and Big Lottery grant application made for £100K</p>
2022	<p>January Big Lottery application unsuccessful Group reconsiders becoming a Charity as funding is more limited to Parish Councils - Groombridge based councillors discuss this and agree it remains unfeasible for the Group to be a Charity <u>Groombridge based councillors agree to propose to Council that a Public Works Loan is sought</u></p>

The Aims

The Playground group wished to develop a playground that provided the following:

- A unique play experience for local children, with equipment unlike other local playgrounds providing a developmental and learning experience incorporating risk taking as well as fun
- A destination playground to which people outside the parish would travel, utilising other local shops (including the Post Office) and tourist attractions

These aims were communicated with WPC throughout the process.

It has been intended that the playground will bring many health and social benefits:

- New exciting outdoor opportunities following the difficulties of COVID for families, individuals and children
- Developing community cohesion across the villages in our parish and surrounding it
- Support new friendships and recovery from the epidemic.
- Encourage families to enjoy outdoor spaces and exercise.
- Combining with other opportunities at the site (the village hall, youth groups, preschool and local shops nearby) makes it a multi-functional, accessible space for all ages and abilities.

Beneficiaries

- 17% of the Parish's population is under 15
- Children will benefit from physical exercise, imaginative play and problem solving, risk taking, building friendships
- Their parents and carers will have somewhere to meet as families and socialise
- Children and visitors from outside the village will be attracted by this destination playground and may also use the pub, shop, bakery and Post Office, as well as other local facilities and tourist attractions

The Design

The design is for a community playground with fit for purpose, stimulating and exciting play equipment that will ensure that children have the opportunity to have fun, safe but innovative play (a vital component to well-balanced happy children).

The fort design allows a variety of imaginative and practical play within it. It will help children of any age develop motor skills and cognitive skills like memory, problem solving, and visualisation. Each component has been carefully considered to provide a range of different play experiences.

Instead of a 360 fort as agreed at Tender stage by Council, the contractor has modified the design to 180. This removes duplication of components, allows parents to easily see their children playing from elsewhere on the recreation ground, and allows the addition of free standing equipment for all age ranges which complement the play experience provided by the fort.

Please see appendix 1 for the designs

Consultation

The Playground Group and WPC ensured that residents were updated and consulted throughout the process. This has been through WPC newsletters, engaging pupils at St Thomas' School, stalls at the May Fair and Community Cafes.

Following agreement by Council to proceed with a loan, a consultation will be made available to residents to seek support for WPC applying for a loan. The results of that survey would accompany the loan application.

Proposed Timetable

From point of order to site completion is likely to be 20 weeks: 12 weeks for delivery of equipment and components from supplier to our contractor, 6-8 weeks from delivery to completed installation to include a safety inspection.

The loan application process could start within a couple of weeks of the March Council meeting, as soon as a public consultation is complete. Drawdown of the loan monies is not required until a week before funds are needed

Grants which the Clerk is currently applying for can take up to 3 months for the decision (start of June).

At the start of June there could be a tally of grants and donations and, if the playground could be realised (with the grants and donations raised at that point + + the loan) then the works order could be put in for the playground. 20 weeks from start of June would mean project completion end of October (hopefully in time for half term).

Grants and donations/sponsorship could continue to be raised up to the playground being constructed. The loan could be drawn down during this period for the shortfall depending on the payment schedule, and if any further funds are raised after drawdown then these could be held in an EMR to be used towards the repayments.

Costs

The Contractor has provided the following costs (these include delivery, installation and surfacing):

Prelims	£ 3,000
ROSPA Inspection	£ 500
Fort	£ 66,875
Mini Play wall combi 3	£ 5,475
Speaking tube	£ 2,420
Mini Play wall combi 2	£ 5,010
Mini crawling tunnel	£ 7,530
Viking Tau Swing	£ 6,188
Swings	<u>£ 6,663</u>
	<u>£103,661</u>

VAT would be in addition, but is reclaimed by the Parish Council

Fundraising

The Group were limited in what fundraising they could undertake until there was a clear design and costing to fundraise with.

This clarity was only achieved after the Tender selection process in the autumn of 2021, when a preferred contractor and their design/cost was agreed by WPC.

Without the final design and costings it was not possible to make grant applications and excite local fundraising.

From research undertaken in 2017 into how other playgrounds fundraised, much of the funds for other local playgrounds came from substantial grants from the Big Lottery. The Playground Group had hoped for a large Lottery grant also, to supplement the EMRs from WPC. However the Big Lottery's focus is now on COVID-recovery projects and so the application was not successful.

Opportunities available to Parish Councils for fundraising

Parish Councils are more limited than other community groups and charities as to what grants they can apply to, presumably this is because Parish Councils are able to raise funds through Precept or Loans.

Exploration into forming a Charity

In January 2022 the Playground Group considered again becoming a Charity. This is because Parish Councils are more limited in what grant funding they are eligible for. However, this raises issues with land ownership (the Charity would require a Lease), length of time that they had been operational (eg Biffa funds require 2 years of bank statements), and ownership/maintenance of equipment. The Playground Group was set up by WPC to support the project through to it being installed, not to have ongoing responsibility or management of the facilities. A discussion with Groombridge based councillors therefore resulted in the recommendation that this is not taken forwards.

Funds available at February 2022

£28,350 from WPC EMRs (includes £25,350 Community Infrastructure Levy/CiL Funds received via WDC + £3K grant from Speldhurst Parish Council)

Other Funds that may be possible

WPC agreed to appoint a Fundraiser on a no win no fee basis, Earmarked Reserves would be used to pay her should her applications be successful. The Lottery grant, which the fundraiser applied for c£100K, has not been successful.

The fundraiser has suggested going for smaller grants and buying pieces of equipment at a time. Groombridge based Councillors agreed that a piecemeal approach would not be satisfactory as it could potentially result in an unfinished/piecemeal playground.

It had been hoped that the fundraiser would have a good list of funders WPC could apply to, but parish councils are limited in which funders will support them which is why she suggested the Group setting up as a Charity

Now that the Clerk has more capacity and we have a clear design and costings, the Clerk rather than the fundraiser could make applications for WPC to funders where we meet their criteria – Gatwick and Lottery Awards for All. The Clerk estimates raising £15,000 from these grants.

Now that we have a clear design and costings, the Group is keen to seek local donations from individuals and businesses towards the project. The Clerk estimates raising £10,000 from these sources.

A more exciting and innovative playground which provides a different play experience and which can attract people from a wider area is likely to be more attractive to funders, sponsors and local residents than a standard playground.

Previously Asked Questions

To follow are some questions that Councillors have raised, with answers from the Clerk...

Whose Playground is this?

The Parish Council will own the playground and be responsible for it. It is on Parish Council land. It will be on the Parish Council's asset register.

What is the relationship between WPC and the Playground Group?

The Playground Group is a group of residents set up by WPC to develop the design and spec for the new playground on behalf of WPC. This was done so that the playground would be what the community wanted, rather than the community being 'done to'.

What is the proposal?

That WPC applies for a Public Works loan up to £50,000. Should fundraising targets exceed expectations and less than £50,000 is needed then either a lower amount could be drawn down or the additional fundraising would be used for the loan repayments.

What decisions have WPC already taken?

WPC agreed the architect's design (2019) and WPC put in for the Planning Permission which was granted in 2020.

WPCs Finance and administration Committee agreed content of the Tender documents which included the specs for the new playground.

WPC unanimously agreed the preferred contractor and their design/costs on the basis that "all funding is in place before the Contract is formally signed and that it is possible to negotiate some amendments to the design" (2021).

Is WPC already contributing EMR's?

The composition of the Earmarked Reserves being used for this project are a £3,000 grant from Speldhurst Parish Council and £25,350 of Community Infrastructure Levy (CiL) monies which has been received from WDC for parish infrastructure projects.

Why hasn't any funding been secured yet beyond WPCs (CiL) and SPCs contributions?

The final design and costings were needed in order to fundraise. This is because people need a clear idea of what they are being asked to fund/donate to. This clarity wasn't achieved until the completion of the Tender process, late 2021.

What fundraising is happening now that the Tender process is complete?

- The Playground group is leading on local donations and sponsorship
- There is a 'coffee morning'/fund raiser at the playground on Saturday 12th March
- People can make donations to WPC via a QR code, which is now advertised on posters in Groombridge
- The Junction Inn is promoting this QR code and donating an amount from every meal sold

- The Clerk is in the process of submitting grant applications but Parish Councils are restricted in where they are eligible to apply, presumably because they have the opportunity to raise funds through Precept and Loans.

Can the Playground Group be a charity and apply for funds instead of WPC?

No. They would need a lease for that part of the recreation ground. They would need to own the equipment. This would tie members of the Playground Group to a longer term commitment than they signed up to.

Even if the Playground Group got a lease from WPC (paying Rosemary Newton Trust fees), it would still be ineligible for many grants as it would not have had a bank account/proven track record for long enough.

Can the project be scaled down to succeed without a PWL?

The final design has been designed in order to provide equipment that covers different types of imaginative and practical play which helps children of any age develop motor skills and cognitive skills like memory, problem solving, and visualisation. Each component has been carefully considered to provide a range of different play experiences

Scaling down the project would limit the play experiences that have been so carefully planned into the current design and so would restrict imaginative play, problem solving and risk taking opportunities.

Residents have already started contributing donations to the design. A scaled down version is not what they have contributed to and they may wish to have their money returned to make a different donation.

It is likely that WPC would have to start the Tender process again if a scaled down version meant a different brief/spec.

There would be a significant danger of reputational damage. Having worked with the Playground Group for nearly 5 years and supported their proposals, the Council would need to consider the impact of scaling down the scheme on the Playground Group and other residents.

Why has the project taken 4-5 years?

- Complexity of design – the aims of the project (to create an innovative playground and one which people would travel to, boosting the local economy) meant that the design phase took longer than a 'like for like' playground
- Covid impacted on the ability to meet and share ideas, also on people's time that they could give the project
- Community led projects often take longer - more consultation and discussion
- Parish Council meeting cycles and other WPC priorities
- Planning permission was obtained
- Tendering processes take months any way but in this case it had to be repeated for a second time as Covid restrictions meant that no tenders were received from the first expressions of interest

Appendix 1 – Playground designs

SLC: Groombridge



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Important: The red colour on the roofs is an option that is associated with a surcharge. Example only. By default: without red colour!

