



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	Management of Playgrounds
Date:	14 August 2008
Reporting Officer:	Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure
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Relevant Background Information

The Council manages and maintains 76 outdoor equipped playgrounds which include 2 purpose built multi-purpose sports areas (see Appendix 1).

The Committee is asked to note that since 2005/06 with the allocation of additional funding, a planned refurbishment programme has enabled the provision of high quality play facilities. However, this investment has further highlighted the need to review the inspection and maintenance regimes for the playgrounds. In 2007, the Parks Section commissioned a Play Safety Consultant from the Child Accident Prevention Trust (CAPT) to review current management practices to enable resources to be targeted more efficiently and effectively.

This report will examine the findings and make proposals which will improve the overall effectiveness of the play function.

Key Issues

The Committee is asked to note the following key points:

Playground Inspections

The playgrounds are currently inspected on a daily basis by seven Playground Teams comprising 24 staff who are required to:

- undertake visual and operational inspections of play equipment, surfacing and infrastructure
- remove litter and broken glass
- complete a daily inspection sheet for each playground which records

remedial tasks completed and identifies any defects and action required.

In essence, 76 sheets are created each day which are forwarded to the Parks Managers to generate work orders for repairs to be undertaken by Facilities Management. The Playground Teams are required to record on the daily inspection sheets when repairs have been completed and the Parks Managers are responsible for authorising payment to Facilities Management for completed works.

Proposed Changes to Current Practice

The CAPT report concluded that the system is too thorough to be achievable and had a tendency to generate paper rather than action. The Teams spend time completing forms and recording outstanding defects every day rather than concentrating on site cleanliness such as removal of broken glass etc. which is one of the major sources of public liability claims. The report recommended that inspections should be undertaken in accordance with the European Standard EN1176 which, although not mandatory, is in line with good health and safety work practice. It has the status of a British Standard and similar to the recommendations of BS 5696 which it replaced in 1999 (see Appendix 2 – excerpt from EN1176). The new inspection regime would entail:

- daily inspections reduced to visual inspections with priority given to identifying and remedying vandalism and broken glass;
- report forms simplified to record remedial action taken;
- report forms reduced to one per week on which there is a section for each day (help reduce administrative workload considerably);
- managers analysing the reports and classifying the playgrounds into three categories so that operational savings could be obtained:
 - 'high problem' – to be inspected every day
 - 'low problem' – to be inspected every week
 - 'intermediate problem' – to be inspected two or three times per week with possible targeting at problem days such as weekends;
- a system of operational inspections being instituted and undertaken by trained playground inspectors at three-monthly intervals except where significant deterioration is evident from the reports;
- the operational and the annual inspections would use a similar system of prioritisation so that they would both act as learning tools and control measures for each other.

To reduce the array of problems with the current playground repairs and to complement the above, it is proposed that regular meetings are undertaken with Facilities Management as a means of quality assurance.

Legal Opinion

To guide Officers as to the implications of changing the frequency of inspections, a meeting has taken place with Legal Services. The legal opinion would advocate that a system of daily inspections as recommended in the report should continue but the report form should also record that a visual inspection of each item of equipment etc has taken place. It was recommended that a risk assessment should be undertaken and documented for each playground as a means of determining if the inspection frequency needed to be increased.

A legal opinion has been sought on the authenticity of electronic data capture to replace the current paper based inspection recording system. It was felt that an electronic system was acceptable provided that the data was non-editable and documentary evidence of inspections could be produced for litigation purposes. It is proposed to introduce a play management database which will need to be developed and hand held computers will also be required to capture data on the playground inspections.

Resource Implications

Financial

The cost of design and development of a computerised Play Management System is estimated to be £35,000 (excluding training) and each hand held computer for recording inspections would cost £2,500. An accurate costing will be obtained when the requirements of the system have been fully identified and this will be reported to Committee at a later stage. There should however be efficiencies achieved in the targeting of resources more effectively at remedying vandalism, improving playground safety and thereby reducing litigation costs.

Human Resources

The introduction of a computerised Play Management System will reduce the administrative workload for officers and help streamline processing of work orders and retrieval of information for litigation purposes.

Asset and Other Implications

Through the implementation of a robust and rigorous playground inspection and maintenance system, the quality of play facilities will improve.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- note the content of the report and the attached appendices;
- approve the revised playground inspection regime as outlined above; and
- agree to the introduction of a Play Management System subject to further approval of the total cost.

Key to abbreviations

None.

Documents attached

Appendix 1: List of playgrounds. Appendix 2: Extract from European Standard EN1176
