



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	Transfer of land at Belmont Park to Strathearn School
Date:	14 April 2011
Reporting Officer:	Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure
Contact Officer:	Stephen Stockman, City Park Manager (Area East)

1.0	Relevant Background Information
1.1	At its meeting on 27 November 2006, the former Community and Recreation (Parks and Cemeteries Services) Sub-Committee received a presentation from representatives of Strathearn School, at which the school's representatives outlined proposals to redevelop an area of 2.66 acres of parkland at Belmont Park to provide sporting facilities as part of a large re-development project at the school. The sub-committee agreed in principle to the transfer of the land to Strathearn School.
1.2	The final conditions as well as the price (£350,000) for the land disposal was subsequently reported to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 24 September 2010. The land transferred to Strathearn School on 25 February 2011 and the accompanying public use agreement provides for ensured use of the new sports facilities by the wider community. Whilst the council was not legally required to engage in public consultation regarding the disposal of the land, the planning application made by the school would have been open to consultation.
1.3	Following the land acquisition, approximately 250 trees were felled by contractors appointed by the school within the transferred parkland area, resulting in concern amongst local residents and park users regarding the loss of trees and wet wildflower meadow habitats and the possible disturbance of wildlife. As far as the council has been made aware, no prior consultation was undertaken by the school with residents and park users regarding the felling of trees and a number of complaints have been directed towards the council in this regard.

2.0	Key Issues
2.1	The area of parkland has been fenced off however the temporary perimeter fence currently extends into land remaining in the council's possession for health and safety reasons. The council has sought assurances from the school's contractor that an outlying (and dormant) badger sett will remain undisturbed, and that the NI Environment Agency is requested to oversee any work in this area. A small number of trees have been felled beyond the agreed boundary in Belmont Park.
2.2	Arising from the issues surrounding the land transfer, local residents have formed a new Friends Group (Friends of Belmont Park), and are now working positively with departmental officers to become formally constituted in line with the department's Friends Group policy.
2.3	The council has agreed to facilitate an open meeting on Monday 23 May 2011 so that all interested parties have an opportunity to involve themselves in the work of the new group, and so that new committee members may be elected and a draft constitution agreed and adopted.
2.4	Departmental officers will be working with the new group to develop a plan which will mitigate the impact of the transfer of land to the school. This may include the examination of the other areas in the park where a wildflower meadow or wetland could be re-established and also sympathetic tree planting. This will be discussed actively with the friends group prior to agreement on any proposals. Officers will also be working with the group to identify opportunities for new events in Belmont Park.

3.0	Resource Implications
3.1	<u>Financial</u> A small financial outlay may be required to enhance the remaining park environment to compensate for some of the features that have been lost, and this will be allocated from within the existing park maintenance budget. The new Friends Group, once constituted, will receive financial support from the Council in line with the Friends Group policy.
3.2	<u>Human Resources</u> Further input from departmental officers will be required to provide the new Friends Group with adequate support on an ongoing basis.
3.3	<u>Asset and other implications</u> The development of additional playing pitch provision, arising from the potential development of a hockey pitch on the transferred land, will impact on community facility usage and will be considered within the context of the council's emerging Playing Pitch Strategy.

4.0	Equality and Good Relations Implications
4.1	No equality or good relations implications are anticipated.

5.0	Recommendations
5.1	The Committee is requested to note the content of the report.

6.0	Decision Tracking
6.1	Officer responsible: Head of Parks and Leisure. Further reports regarding the progress of the developing Friends Group at Belmont Park will be brought before the committee as required.

7.0	Key to Abbreviations
	None.

8.0	Documents Attached
	None.