



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	Falls Park Pitch Development
Date:	16 October 2014
Reporting Officer:	Rose Crozier, Assistant Director of Parks and Leisure
Contact Officer:	Stephen Walker, Departmental Portfolio and Programme Manager

1. Relevant Background Information

The Committee is reminded that at its meeting on 12th June 2014 it received a copy of a report regarding proposed construction of a 3rd generation artificial turf pitch at Falls Park as part of the implementation of the Pitches Strategy which was adopted in March 2012. The report, attached as Appendix A, highlighted the concerns of some residents regarding the implications of the new facility. To help address those concerns it was suggested that an engagement exercise be undertaken with residents to identify the issues and agree ways in which these might be mitigated. The Committee Minute stated that:

After discussion, during which the Committee expressed concern regarding the cost of hiring external consultants to undertake a consultation exercise on behalf of the Council, it was agreed that an invitation be extended to representatives of the residents' group to attend the August monthly meeting in order to outline their concerns in respect of the proposed development, after which the Committee would give consideration to the best manner in which to undertake future consultation.

The Committee decision was amended at Council on 1 July 2014 to provide that an enhanced engagement process be undertaken between the Council and local residents in advance of the Committee in August.

The residents were unfortunately unable to attend the August meeting and asked that a deputation be received at the September meeting. The Committee subsequently received a deputation at its September meeting. A copy of the Committee Report is attached as Appendix B.

At its meeting in September the Committee was advised of plans to hold a public meeting on 23rd September. This meeting has taken place and was attended by around 120 people made up of residents and park users, including those involved with sporting clubs.

A range of views were expressed at the meeting and a summary of the points made is attached at Appendix C.

Those who were opposed to the development broadly confirmed the points made by the 'Love Falls Park' group who presented to Parks and Leisure Committee in September 2014.

The views expressed by those in support of the development emphasised the need in the area. Some general park users welcomed the extension to the opening hours and the safer environment provided by floodlighting and increased activity in the park.

Since the public meeting in September the Love Falls Park group has conducted a survey of park users and has written to the Chair of Parks and Leisure requesting a further meeting with Committee. Information from the survey has been made available to committee members.

A significant number of letters of support of the development from clubs and individuals has also been received emphasising the need for the facility in the area. Copies of letters of support have been provided to committee members.

Summation of the meeting and key issues

In essence the debate can be summed up as follows:

- There is opposition to the proposal to install a 3G pitch and its associated structures in Falls Park; the objections relate primarily to lack of consultation and the irreversible impact that the construction of the pitch and its associated fencing and floodlighting would have on the park and on the views of the Belfast Hills;
- There is support for the proposal on the basis that there is inadequate accessible playing field provision and facilities for young people in West Belfast and a consequent need for the facility;
- There are those who support the proposal but who have concerns around management of the facility post completion;

There appear to be three main options:

1. Reaffirm the original decision to install a 3G artificial turf pitch and associated structures as agreed in Falls Park to meet the need identified within the Pitches Strategy;
2. Reverse the decision and do not proceed with the construction of the pitch and re-invest in another site, identified within the pitches strategy;
3. Agree to a comprehensive consultation exercise across the whole of West Belfast.

2.	Key Issues
	<p>In considering its position in respect of the above options, the committee may wish to reflect upon the following points:</p> <p><u>Need for the facility</u></p> <p>The pitches strategy has established a need for additional pitches across the city; in particular it identified a need for pitches to accommodate Gaelic Games. Whilst the pitches strategy was developed in part on the basis of a baseline survey from 2008, a recent review of this, whilst not yet complete, indicates that the situation has not improved.</p> <p>The assessment has been challenged by those opposed to the proposal in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) The existence of alternative provision;b) The under utilisation of existing provision. <p>The baseline survey incorporates Council and other provision. The survey concludes that even when total provision is assessed there remains a short fall. In addition, the short fall excludes provision for training and casual use; it also assumes that all provision is accessible, which is not always the case.</p> <p>The challenge has been made that usage is only 20-25% and therefore there is adequate spare capacity. However, this level of use must be viewed within the context of the opening times which are from 6:30 am through to 10 pm and peak and off peak usage.</p> <p><u>The need for further consultation</u></p> <p>It has been suggested that consultation and engagement has been inadequate and that further consultation is required across the whole of West Belfast.</p> <p>A list of consultation undertaken by the Council to date is set out at Appendix D.</p> <p>This level of consultation would not be sustainable by the Council on a project basis. Views have been sought and have resulted in amendments to the original proposal. Through the consultation that has taken place we have established a range of views on the proposal. In addition, the proposal remains the subject of a planning application, which is also subject to consultation, through which many of the issues have also been raised and will be considered in line with Planning Policy.</p> <p>It is difficult to see how further consultation would add further to the views already voiced.</p> <p>It is a matter for the Council to make a decision based on the information.</p> <p><u>The impact on the park</u></p> <p>There is little doubt that Falls Park stands out in an area which is densely populated and which has limited access to open space. Falls Park is intended to meet the needs of a range of people.</p>

	<p>Members will be aware that a large section of the Park is devoted to playing field provision. It currently has 2 soccer pitches, 2 Gaelic Pitches and a small pitch used for training. In order to minimise the impact on the Park the proposal is to replace one of the natural turf Gaelic pitches with an artificial surface. It is proposed to surround the pitch with a 2.4m fence; floodlighting and ball stop nets. Planning approval has not yet been granted.</p> <p>We believe that the proposal will have a minimal impact on the park and that it will still cater for the needs of a diverse user population.</p> <p>Following a deferral by the Town Planning Committee in May 2014 and a meeting with residents, Planning service has requested further information on the proposed floodlighting scheme. The survey has now been completed and has been submitted to the Planning service for consideration.</p> <p>Members are asked to note that any substantive change to the proposal at this time may result in the need for a new planning application and could result in a delay of up to 6 months. A change in location would essentially require the process to be recommenced with a delay of up to 18 months.</p> <p><u>Management issues</u></p> <p>Operationally the installation of the artificial pitch will increase use of the facility and will extend the opening hours of the park. Details around this will require further discussion with the operational managers.</p> <p>During discussions with residents who are opposed, a number of concerns were raised. Some pointed to the increased noise and lighting likely to result from the facility in the evening time. Floodlighting will be directed in such a way as to minimise impact on adjacent properties. Also a landscape plan to enhance tree cover can be prepared and implemented to further reduce the impact of the lighting and the noise. At this stage it is proposed that the facility will close at 10 pm.</p> <p>However, the main issue of concern was that of on street parking. This is already an issue for local residents and there is concern that the intensification of use resulting from the artificial pitch will increase the problem.</p> <p>Additional car parking will be provided as part of the Whiterock HUB project thus encouraging those with cars to access through Whiterock Close. However, it is evident that some users of the park whether those involved with using the playing pitches or indeed those who use the park for other passive recreation such as walking or jogging will still park in adjacent streets. It is proposed that this issue be addressed through a meeting with the Department for the Environment, the Council and residents from the adjacent streets the aim of which would be to establish options and then agree a set of measures to help mitigate this impact.</p>
3.	<p>Resource Implications</p>
	<p><u>Financial Implications</u></p> <p>There are no financial implications at this time.</p>

	<p><u>Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are no additional human resource implications at this time.</p>
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4.	Equality Implications
	There are no equality implications

5.	Recommendations
	<p>Committee is asked to consider the request from the Love Falls Park group to meet with Committee.</p> <p>The Committee is asked to consider the options set out in the report and to reaffirm its original decision to construct a 3rd generation artificial turf pitch with associated fencing, floodlighting and changing pavilion, subject to statutory approvals and to direct officers to engage with residents to address concerns around management of the facility post completion.</p>

6.	Decision Tracking
	Rose Crozier, Assistant Director of Parks and Leisure

7.	Key to Abbreviations
	None

8.	Documents Attached
	<p>Appendix A – Copy of previous report June 2014</p> <p>Appendix B – Copy of previous report September 2014</p> <p>Appendix C - Summary of points made at the public meeting in September 2014</p> <p>Appendix D - List of Consultations on Pitches</p>