

FOR PUBLICATION

Progress Report on Review of Decision to Leave Previously Secured Parks Unlocked at Night

MEETING: COMMUNITY, CUSTOMER AND ORGANISATIONAL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 24 NOVEMBER, 2015

FOR PUBLICATION YES

BACKGROUND PAPERS: Previous report to FPG, and records held by Environmental Services ASB Parks Assessment (completed by Enforcement Officer)

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1. To provide background context and options to sustain the security of our parks and reduce anti-social behaviour

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1. **That the contents of the report be noted and views recorded in order for them to be incorporated into a future Cabinet report for decision**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. Our parks and open spaces are by their very nature open and generally accessible. Due to this and the issues of anti-social behaviour generally in the community, they are therefore intrinsically vulnerable.

3.2. The following measures are taken to mitigate this risk:

- Close working with the community and in particular Friends Groups to gain ownership of our parks and open spaces
- Diversionary activities and events
- Partnership working with the Police to record and respond to incidents
- The locking of some gates over night

3.3. It should be noted that the locking of gates is only one mechanism in our efforts to protect our parks and open spaces

3.4. A review of these mechanisms was undertaken in June 2014. In particular the effectiveness of the locking of gates was reviewed. The following issues were considered :

- The effectiveness of locking sites where all of the boundaries are not secure and access can easily be gained even when gates are locked
- The needs of park users and local residents
- The ability of emergency services to access a locked park to respond quickly when required
- The financial costs of locking and unlocking parks in the context of significant reductions in funding to local authorities and the need to ensure spend is prioritised and effective
- The experience from other local authorities in terms of the impact of stopping the locking of parks
- The environment that is created behind locked gates where there is no casual supervision and access is restricted to emergency services, thereby allowing anti-social behaviour in some instances to go unchecked
- The risk of increased anti- social behaviour and vandalism

3.5. Taking these into account and acknowledging that locking gates is only one of a number of mechanisms to secure our parks and open spaces the Financial Planning Group decided to reduce the locking of our parks to the following sites only:

- Pools Brook Country Park (Vehicular gates only - due to the risk of related ASB and commitments with the caravan park)

- Queens Park (Vehicular gates only -, due to its proximity to the town centre and potential damage to the cricket wicket)
- Boythorpe Cemetery (due to the newly completed SANDS memorial garden and that this service is paid for from the bereavement services budget)

3.6. At the time of making this decision, FPG determined that the situation be reviewed after a full summer season. Given that these changes were implemented part way through the summer of 2014, this full season has only just concluded.

3.7. As this decision meant that Stand Road Park (lower parking area) and Holmebrook Valley Park vehicle gates would no longer be locked, the Friends Group at both sites decided to implement a community locking scheme. Whilst this has been successful, the Holmebrook group are considering withdrawing the service due to difficulties sustaining sufficient volunteer efforts.

3.8. The review of the decision to change the locking regime has considered the following issues:

- The general success of the changes, however with issues identified particularly at Eastwood Park and to a lesser degree at Queens Park
- The fact that anti-social behaviour (ASB) has trends that cannot be accurately predicted
- The relatively low level of ASB in the first summer season (partial season and possibly affected by unseasonably poor weather)
- More specifically at Eastwood Park
 - The rise in ASB in the second summer season
 - The potential for this to have occurred as a result of the displacement of ASB from another local site
 - The current inability of the Friends Group to implement a community locking scheme notwithstanding their willingness to consider this

- The increased costs of ASB in the second summer season
- The lack of a benchmark to effectively compare previous levels and costs of ASB prior to the changes and the fact that ASB trends thus making it impossible to determine if the increase in ASB is due to the changes, disbursal from another site or other factors
- The reluctance of the Police/partnership to consider a dispersal order
- Some Police resistance to provide additional resources to support the local community to reduce ASB on site, unless this was done at the same time as a reinstatement of the locking of the gates
- The potential that increased Community and Police involvement since the re-instatement of the locking of the pedestrian gates on a trial basis will have had a very significant impact upon ASB
- The flood lighting in the park whilst it allows those visiting to feel more secure has the disadvantage of attracting youths and making ASB easier

3.9. Whilst a comparison of costs has been requested by this Committee, a true comparison is not possible due to the lack of benchmarking information prior to the changes and the trends that always occur in ASB. It would be accurate to say that this past summer costs have increased on the average from the information we do have, however as stated these trends have always existed and cannot simply be apportioned to the changes made.

3.10. Whilst the original rationale for the decision to change the locking regime is still considered relevant, it would be inappropriate to ignore the issues from the last summer both at Eastwood and as stated to a lesser degree at Queens Park

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Notwithstanding what decision is made regarding the locking of gates the efforts to increase partnership working demonstrated by Agency Liaison Group set up for Eastwood Park and Queen's Park needs to continue and increase. Other ways of reducing ASB must be properly considered including the use

Public Place Protection orders, more targeted enforcement, diversionary activities and the potential for a community locking scheme.

- 4.2. With regards to the locking of parks, an options appraisal is provided at **Appendix A**

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 **That the contents of the report are noted and views recorded in order for them to be incorporated into a future Cabinet report for decision.**