

Agenda Item	5
Report No	CIA/30/23

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: City of Inverness Area Committee

Date: 20/11/2023

Report Title: Whin Park Redevelopment Update

Report By: Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the proposed redevelopment of Whin Park in Inverness. The report details that many features of the current park are reaching end of life and therefore plans are in place to consider how best to redevelop and transform the site into a sustainable, inclusive, and accessible feature that complements the wider developments being undertaken in that part of the city.
- 1.2 The report details the achievements so far and the outcome of the feasibility study, as well as outlining results of the engagement programme that have taken place. Based on the public engagement and feasibility study funded by the 5 City Wards, the report sets out a Vision for Whin Park for the future.
- 1.3 To support the delivery of the Vision and transform Whin Park, a programme of works is proposed, and this is expected to commence in 2024 and will be led by the Communities and Place Service.

The report also outlines the proposed funding streams, to be approved, and required to progress the project and allow for a full procurement exercise to be undertaken.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. **AGREE** the vision for the park;
- ii. **AGREE** the Scottish Government Play Park funding allocation for this Project as detailed in the report;
- iii. **NOTE** the completed work to revitalise the boating pond;

- iv. **NOTE** the toilets are to be redeveloped in winter 2023 and funding already secured for this;
- v. **NOTE** the feasibility study outcomes and costs for a full park redevelopment to be undertaken as per the scope of works detailed in the report to CIAC on 24 November 2023; and
- vi. **NOTE** that funding opportunities will continue to be explored.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource implications: The resource implications are set out in the report. A redevelopment plan has been produced but progression of this is dependent upon the identification and approval of funding as there is no existing capital budget to support this development. The project team will work with progressing the project through procurement with a view to finalising the plan for the play park based on the agreed budget.

The procurement activity aims to enable the Council to achieve its strategic objectives and meaningfully contribute to national priorities through innovative, compliant, and collaborative market solutions demonstrating value for money and genuine return on investment.

The project will continue to seek and find suitable external funding where staffing resource permits, as the project progresses.

- 3.2 Legal implications: The provision of play parks is not a statutory service; however, where they are provided, the Council must comply with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Occupiers Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 to ensure the safety and wellbeing of employees and members of the public attending and making use of the play areas. The Council must also comply with our duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Fairer Scotland Duty.

Article 31 of the United Nation Convention Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Duty states that all children have the right to relax and play, and participate in a wide range of cultural, artistic, and cultural activities. A Play Park Strategy is current being finalised and will be considered at the Communities and Place Committee on 29 November 2023. This will include recognising the value of informal spaces for play as well as play areas with dedicated equipment.

- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island) impact: The Council has focused on creating positive experiences for children and young people who use play parks across Highland and that provision is made to ensure access for all and meets the needs the equality duties placed on the Council. This is in line with the Scottish Government's requirement that there remains an emphasis on play parks being as inclusive and valuable to children as possible, and with the UNCRC Duty.

The Vision of any redevelopment will ensure that the space is inclusive and accessible for all users. The park's vision will ensure that it will promote free play which is an essential component of mental health and well-being, providing numerous benefits for individuals of all age. While ensuring that the vision provides a sustainable, carbon neutral, and high play value destination park for people across Inverness and beyond.

- 3.4 Climate Change/Carbon Clever implications: In line with the Council's net zero targets, consideration will be given to the environmental impact of any new pieces of play equipment, with natural play being considered where appropriate.
- 3.5 Risk implications: Inspecting and maintaining and/or replacing play park equipment will prevent injury to children and claims being made against the Council. The approach to engaging locally on play area options with Members, other community bodies, and children will enable honest conversations about prioritising resources.

There is a significant risk that unless a package of funding can be agreed to support the immediate redevelopment of the play park element of the site, then some pieces of equipment will be removed through winter 2023/24. The proposals also include enhancing natural play to reduce the reliance on physical equipment that has a specific lifespan. This will help to support sustainability of the space.

- 3.6 Gaelic implications: There are Gaelic implications for any new signage, ensuring it has bi-lingual content, in keeping with the Gaelic language plan commitments.
- 3.7 Health and Safety: The play equipment is regularly inspected, by a suitably qualified Play Technician on a weekly basis. Items of equipment which have been recently removed include; a log roll, a metal seesaw, the spider net climbing frame, and three items of outdoor gym equipment.

4. Introduction

- 4.1 Whin Park has been a long-standing play park situated within the Bught area of Inverness. It is an important area of play park/green space which traditionally has been well used and offers a positive impact on the social and mental health benefits for families, children, and young people across the whole City and beyond.

The vision for the future of Whin Park will be in line with the objectives outlined in the Council's Play Strategy (which is due to be considered at the Communities and Place Committee in November) and will also seek to deliver free play. Free play contributes significantly to mental health and well-being by promoting emotional regulation, reducing stress levels, enhancing cognitive development, and social skills, boosting resilience, bridging socio-economic gaps, encouraging creativity, providing relief from poverty-related stressors, and fostering community connections.

- 4.2 Currently Whin Park offers a snack bar (run by an independent trader), on-site toilets, Highland Hospice run miniature railway and the recently re-opened boating pond for visitors. Some play features have however been removed as they were no longer safe for use and some of the remaining pieces of equipment will be removed over winter 2023/24.
- 4.3 With a number of features within the play park coming to end of life, over recent years, a major improvement project has been costed for the park. The purpose of the development is to restore and enhance this City asset. This would restore Whin Park to its status as a key destination park within the City of Inverness, one that is sustainable, inclusive for all users, and with improved facilities. This is a strategic site given the connection to other City assets within its proximity and link with the other Inverness development plans for the area.
- 4.4 The latest data collected shows that the park has had high volume of visitors over the summer season. They are as follows:

May 2023	8439
June 2023	9967
July 2023	7860
August 2023	7750
September 2023	6945
October 2023	3320*

*Data affected by one faulty data collection sensor and severe flooding through October

- 4.5 By planning and confirming costs of the project it allows the programme to be spread over financial years alleviating any pressure on any sourcing funds once secured

5. Completed Improvement Works

- 5.1 The Council commissioned work during last winter, commencing in November 2022, to enable management and control of an invasive non-native weed species that was found to be present in the pond. At the same time the pond was fully cleaned with all debris removed and responsibly disposed of. Once cleaned, repaired, and refilled, the popular Whin Park boating pond was leased out and resumed its well-loved summer seasonal service.
- 5.2 The Whin Park toilet refurbishment project was approved in June 2023 with a budget of £110k, drawings and specification were completed in July 2023. The project has been out to tender with an approved contractor awarded in October 2023. Work is due to commence later this month with completion by end of March 2024 in time for the 2024 season. This internal refurbishment will improve the toilet block to a new modernised amenity that will enhance the offering at the park but also add value to the active travel network through the Riverside Way Development Project.
- 5.3 Both of these elements have been progressed alongside the engagement and feasibility study work to develop a long-term vision for the park on the understanding that both are critical components of any vision for the park.

6. Engagement

- 6.1 A programme of engagement on the future of Whin Park commenced in February 2023. An online survey was undertaken, targeted through schools within the local area but also through social media channels, along with separate engagement directly with young people.
- 6.2 The online survey generated a high level of interest, with responses from 804 people – 69% of respondents were from the Inverness area and a third from out with Inverness. This highlights the importance of Whin Park as a destination location. Of the respondents:
- 94% of respondents had used the facilities at Whin Park.
 - 64% visited the park more than once a month.
 - 87% used the park to take children to.
 - The highest age group which the park is used for is between 2 and 12 years of age.

The main message drawn from the survey feedback was that play park equipment was viewed as the most important asset of Whin Park.

- 85% of people stated their reason to visit Whin Park was the play park.

- The public wanted better play opportunities, with 90% requesting better play equipment.,
- Holistic play and natural play were also considered important.

The survey also asked about wider and alternative uses of Whin Park and wheeling paths, in addition the retention of the boating pond and toilet facilities were also considered important. The least important elements for respondents were signage and gym equipment.

Respondents to the survey were found to be mainly adults, with only 3% of respondents being under 18. The survey was complemented by 6 direct engagements with 134 children from Drummond School, Millburn Academy, St Joseph's Primary, Central Primary, Kinmylies Primary, and Merkinch Primary. All the children involved had been to Whin Park at some point and made comment on having attended this site with their parents/carers, not as a site they go to by themselves, like their local parks. The young people were asked to pick their three favourite pieces of equipment in the Park and show on the map of the site where they would like it situated.

- 6.3 The main feedback from the young people was that the park should be accessible and open for all to use, regardless of ability. Feedback included:
- Support for the existing equipment, in particular the large climbing frame, a choice of slides, including one on the embankment and a tunnel, spiders web, zip line.
 - There was support for some new types of equipment with suggestions including basket swings, double embankment slide for multiple users, double zip line, hamster wheel, sensory 'doing' play, a maze and ball area.
 - There was specific feedback from teenagers on covered space for teenagers to hang out but overall, they too were supportive of the existing climbing frame equipment, a double slide and space for ball games.
 - The final main piece of feedback regarding the future of the park was support for natural landscaping play including trees to climb in, up, or on, bug hotels, cycle paths, mounds, and statues to climb building on the experience from the hippos.

7. Feasibility Study

- 7.1 As reported to and agreed by Members in November 2022 at CIAC, a feasibility study funded by the 5 City wards (13,14,15,16 &19) and ICGF was undertaken in January to March 2023 to support developing a Vision for the park and assess the necessary works and associated costs of refurbishing the Whin Park play park including other associated areas within the site to ensure that it remains a park of choice for all users of the park.

The scope of the feasibility study includes the following:

- Refurbishment of existing public toilet block
- Improvements to the shop area
- Replacement of play equipment
- Improvements to footpaths
- New way-finding signage
- Covered outdoor area
- Increased car parking

- 7.2 All improvements to the Boating Pond were undertaken during winter 2022/23.

- 7.3 On completion of the feasibility study, it was concluded that the indicative costs to undertake a full redevelopment of the park would be in the region of £2.2 million. Given the significant scale of the costs and the current financial climate this is beyond financial affordability.
- 7.4 Given this, the project team have reviewed the current position and the potential funding opportunities that are available and developed a future Vision for the park that is deliverable financially and achieves and addresses the priorities identified for children, young people, and the wider community.

8. Vision

- 8.1 The proposed Vision for Whin Park is as follows:

To provide a high- quality play offering for children and young people in Inverness and beyond that serves the needs of all young people, regardless of ability and age.

A varied range of sustainable play equipment will be supported by core facilities at the park, including toilet provision and the boating pond.

As funding allows, the future for the park will include the development of a natural play offering, alongside space for wheeling opportunities.

- 8.2 The proposed Vision for the Park recognises the feedback from adults and young people on the importance of the play equipment element of the park. This is prioritised, alongside core facilities to underpin this offering, namely toilet provision and the boating pond area. It is considered that a funding package can be developed which would support a phased approach to delivering the Vision, with the play equipment element prioritised. If and when alternative funds become available, the Vision for the site can be progressed with exploring natural play/wheeling opportunity solutions, as identified as an ask through the engagement process.

9. Funding

- 9.1 The proposed funding package to deliver the initial part of the Vision for the park, is from a variety of sources.

1. Scottish Government Play Area funding
2. Highland Council Community Regeneration Funds
3. Inverness Common Good Fund

9.2 Scottish Government Play Area Funds

It was agreed at a meeting of the Communities and Place on 23 February 2023 the allocation of the Scottish Government funding would be divided up by Ward.

Following discussion with local Members, it is proposed that the Scottish Government funding allocation of £51,247 for each of the Inverness West (Ward 13), Inverness Central (Ward 14), Inverness Ness-side (Ward 15), Inverness Millburn (Ward 16), and Inverness West (Ward 19) Wards is allocated to support the Whin Park redevelopment project. This would contribute a total of £256,235 to the budget for the works and still leave £49,326 per ward to allocate to other local play area projects. This reflects the importance of Whin Park in Inverness as a destination location, as identified and evidenced during the public engagement phase of the project.

9.3 Inverness Common Good Fund

A £150,000 funding bid has been submitted to the Inverness Common Good Fund (ICGF) for Members to consider, which will contribute to the delivery and implementation of the park's vision.

This has been considered, and is supported, by the ICGF Sub- Committee and is included on the agenda for today's Committee for Member's consideration.

9.4 Inverness Community Regeneration Fund

In March 2023, the CIAC considered a bid to support the development of Whin Park as part of the 2022/23 Community Regeneration Funds for Inverness. This bid was supported in part, to enable the work on the toilets for the park to progress but also to enable other funding bids to be supported. It was indicated that a future bid would come forward for the 2023/24 funds to support the wider development of the park.

It is intended that a bid to the Inverness Community Regeneration Fund will be developed and submitted in November for consideration initially by the ICGF Sub Committee and then consideration by Members at a Special Meeting of the CIAC in January 2024. At the time of writing, the estimated figure for the application will be £100k.

Other Funding Streams Explored

9.5 The Council's capital programme is currently under review and any funding contributions in future years towards the vision of the overall project would have to be considered as part of the review process.

9.6 External funding applications have been explored and an initial expression of interest to the National Lottery Heritage fund was submitted along with an application to the Scottish Government's Regeneration Capital Grant Fund. While the applications at this point were unsuccessful, we have been encouraged to reapply in 2024. The project team will use the learning and feedback from the process to help shape future applications made to obtain funding to the project. In line with the play park strategy, the project team will seek funding through Local Business and sponsorship opportunities.

If all considered funding streams were successful, this would provide a funding pot of £506,235 to deliver phase 1 of the Vision for Whin Park:

Scottish Government Play Area funding (£51,247 *5 wards)	£256,235
Inverness Common Good Fund	£150,000
Inverness Community Regeneration Fund	£100,000
Total	£506,235

10. Planned Programme

10.1 With the information from the feasibility study and to deliver the Vision for the park, it has been proposed that the project is progressed in stages. This supports delivery of an offering within financial affordability.

The phased approach focuses on the replacement of equipment and the facilities that underpin and support the park, namely the toilet block and boating pond. The focus on the play equipment offering delivers against the main priority for respondents from the engagement phase and mitigates the risk of removal, given that much of the current equipment is approaching end of life. As reported at section 7.2, the boating pond was restored in 2022/23 and work is about to commence on developing the toilet provision.

As time progresses, and future funding opportunities arise, this would enable further phases of development of the park to be delivered.

10.2 Phase One – Funding has been secured

Boating Pond

- Boating pond works £20k from Nature Restoration Fund, works completed.

Toilet Block Refurbishment

- Funding secured through Amenities Capital Budget and Community Regeneration Funding (CRF)

Communities & Place Amenities - £50,000 Capital Funding

Community Regeneration Fund (CRF) - £68,162

Total £118,162

- These works are due to be completed by April 2024.

10.3 Phase Two – Replacement of play equipment installations

This part of the project will focus on improving the play offering at the park and deliver the top priority as highlighted by children, young people, and adults. The play park brief will be to supply and install sustainable, high play value, inclusive, and accessible equipment, to ensure the site is the main destination park for Inverness City, wider Highland region users, and tourists. The feedback directly from children and young people will inform the type of equipment to be installed, within the potential budget identified.

For the replacement/upgrade of the play equipment it is estimated on current costs that the works would be £500k. This could be delivered within the financial package identified at section 9. Should any element of this funding package not be achievable, the scope of equipment will require to be reduced or programme delayed.

10.4 Phase 3 – Future Development

At this point in time that are no firm funding routes to enable proposals for further elements of the park's Vision to be realised. This could potentially include a greater natural play offering and wheeling opportunities. Until such times that alternative funding avenues emerge, this next phase will remain a development opportunity.

11. Next Steps

11.1 Should Members agree to recommendations of this report, works will commence immediately and the Communities and Place team will progress this development of Whin Park.

Designation:

Date: 09/11/2023

Author: Mark Greig, Ward Manager (Inverness), Debbie Sutton, Amenities Manager (South) David Haas, City Manager, Inverness

Appendix 1

Whin Park Engagement Feedback – August 2023

Consultation took place with 134 children from Drummond School, Millburn Academy, St Joseph's Primary, Central Primary, Kinmylies Primary and Merkinch Primary. Data collection was taken by a show of hands and enthusiasm levels (shouting out with excitement).

Facilities and Getting There

Nearly half the children utilised 'wheels' in some shape or form when using the park. They utilised all aspects of the park and in the immediate vicinity e.g., boating pond, crazy golf, skatepark etc.

Inclusivity

All 134 children wanted the park to have equal opportunities for others. Primarily parents from Drummond School didn't use Whin Park due to a lack of fencing (pond and road), paths not working for them, and the lack of large changing tables in the bathroom. It is worth noting, it may be relatively easy to fence off the pond and road by joining fencing together. Minor comments were a lack of inclusive equipment. Parents wanted more sensory, holistic, and easier equipment such as trampolines, wide slides, a maze, quiet spaces, music etc.

Type of Play

Children liked Whin Park when all the basic equipment is working. In particular: one large climbing frame, a choice of slides (embankment, steep, twisty tunnel one coming from the climbing frame), spiders web, zip line, swings, plane, hippos and the little red bicycle roundabout.

A few 'new' pieces of equipment which were suggested such as; basket swings, big double embankment slide to go down with friends, double zip line, hamster wheel, sensory 'doing' play, a maze, ball area, teenage hanging out space and some form of water play.

Natural landscaping play preferences were trees to climb in, up, or on, bug hotels, cycle paths, mounds, and statues to climb on such as the hippos. Many children spoke about their disappointment and frustration with the equipment being broken and not being fixed regularly (especially the little red bikes). One child suggested putting a donation box at the entrance to help raise money for additional equipment.

Secondary School Children

The UNCRC defines children as being under 18 years of age. Teenagers showed the same high amount of high enthusiasm as the primary children displayed. They could see themselves having fun on most of the play park equipment with a few tweaks being made. Preferences were a big climbing frame to climb on top of, a big wide slide for them all to slide down together, drinking fountains, a hangout pad, and a covered area to sit and chat with friends, whilst also playing ball games.

Summary

All children had been to Whin Park and they appeared to view the site as being a destination site. The location is ideal to have as our major Flagship Park due to the surrounding facilities, natural play environment and wheeling paths. Children were humble in what they were asking for. They would like to be fully involved in the design process and be allowed to vote on final designs.

To have suitable design established for phased implementation it is highly recommended a tender for the complete renewal of the playpark is done. The phased project can then be clear in its aims and the overall design for the future. Equipment can then be replaced methodically as and when funds become available.

Lynn MacGillivray, Play Strategist and Coordinator