

To: Council
Date: 25 November 2024
Report of: Executive Director (Development)
Title of Report: Petition submitted in accordance with Council procedure rules - Establish a Children's Playground in Oxford City Centre

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To set before Council response to the petition for establishing a Children's Playground in Oxford City Centre
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Louise Upton, for Planning & Cycling Champion Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for A Healthy Oxford
Corporate Priority:	Not applicable
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2024-28
Recommendation(s): That Council resolves to:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Note the contents of the report; 2. Hears the debate by the petition organiser; Debate the proposal contained within the petition and any relevant motions/recommendations submitted by Members by the deadline; 3. Agree the action it wishes to take. 	

The Petition

1. An ePetition titled 'Establish' a Children's Playground in Oxford City Centre' was submitted in accordance with the Council's Petition Scheme.
2. The petition is available to view on the Change.Org website [here](#) and states in full:

I am a resident of Oxford concerned about the lack of play areas for children in our city centre. Our wonderful city, bustling with culture and history, sadly does not cater enough to families wanting to spend quality time in the heart of Oxford. The absence of playgrounds means that children do not have a safe and engaging space to play, which is a barrier to families spending time in the city centre.

There is not only a community impetus to do this, while Oxford is [outperforming the national average](#), nationally the retail sector is struggling with [footfall to city centres nationally falling](#) in favour of online shopping *. Providing a city centre play space would make it easier for young families to shop, dine and visit city centre attractions.

Other cities with similar heritage status have achieved this. Paris has a municipal playground at the foot of the Sacre Coeur, and playspaces small and large scattered across the city centre. Oslo has a play space outside the central station, Svendborg has turned their city square into a play space for children and families. In the UK, new retail developments like Westfield and Battersea have playspaces baked in to their design, usable by small and big kids.

The closest play areas to the city centre are Friars Wharf and Jericho, which are too far to be viable for a city centre trip.

To address this, we are asking Oxford City Council to consider establishing a children's playground or series of small playspaces in the city centre. This initiative will not only make Oxford even more welcoming for families but also promote a more vibrant, inclusive, and diverse city centre.

Join us now to make our city a better place for everyone. Sign this petition and call on both Oxford's City Council to establish a children's playground in the city centre and also Oxfordshire County Council to provide some road space to enable this to happen.

3. 1,760 people signed the ePetition.
4. In accordance with the Council's Constitution (Part 11.15) and the Council's petitions scheme (Part 11, Annex 1 of the Council's Constitution), a petition containing at least 1,500 signatures will be debated at Full Council if the petition organiser makes a request for a debate in writing directly to the Head of Law and Governance at least three weeks prior to the Council meeting.
5. The petition organiser may address Council upon the petition for up to five minutes before the debate upon the petition at the meeting.

Constitution rules and procedure

6. The Council's petitions scheme outlines the procedure for handling petitions and is set out in the Constitution. The scheme specifies that a petition containing at least 1,500 signatures will be debated at full Council if the petition organiser makes a request for a debate in writing directly to the Head of Law and Governance.
7. The Constitution states that the petition organiser may address Council upon the petition for up to five minutes before the debate upon the petition at the meeting.
8. The motion for debate is set out above in paragraph 2.
9. An alternative substantive motion/recommendation must be proposed if councillors wish to take any action other than adopting the action in the petition,

not adopting the action in the petition, or deferring, referring or noting the issues raised by the petition.

10. If a Member wishes to put a substantive motion/recommendation on a petition they must let the Head of Law and Governance have that motion/recommendation by 10am on Friday 22 November 2024 (the working day before the Council meeting). These would then be published in the Council briefing note. Any amendments to these would have to be with Committee and Members' Services by 11am on Monday 25 November 2024 (the day of the meeting).

Introduction

11. Oxford City Council provides an excellent level of play provision across the city, comprising 80 play areas, 20 multi-use games areas, various other sports facilities and two splash parks.
12. Within a constrained budget, we invest £250k a year in managing and maintaining our existing play and street sports portfolio, alongside additional capital investment for major refurbishments, as required.
13. We know that the first few years of a child's life are **critical** for healthy social, emotional and physical development. Living in a city is stressful, looking after young children is stressful, so opportunities for very small children and their care-givers - whether that's parents, grandparents, foster parents or step-parents - to spend time playing is important.
14. The City Council recognises there is an opportunity to look at new play space in the city centre and while we do not have funds for the installation, management and on-going maintenance of new additional facilities, we do have a number of levers available to explore future opportunities.

Formal play space in the city centre

15. The City Council recognises the benefits play space could bring to the city centre, in terms of child development, place-making, activation & animation, and footfall.
16. If we are to provide play space in the city centre, the location, design, and management plan will though need to ensure it considers and mitigates issues associated with anti-social behaviour connected with the nighttime economy, the likely higher costs maintenance and daily locking/unlocking, and any increased safeguarding risks.
17. While these are undoubtedly challenges, they are clearly ones that can be overcome in the right locations and with the right funding and plan in place, with the new [Mayfield Play Park](#) in the centre of Manchester is a great example of what is possible.

The Central Oxfordshire Movement and Place Framework (COMPF)

18. Building on the City Council's City Centre Action Plan, a joint County and City Council project is now underway in the city centre called Central Oxfordshire Movement and Place Framework (COMPF). COMPF is looking comprehensively at what could be done to improve the public realm in the city centre, including reprioritising road space (after the trial traffic filters are implemented). Additional play provision is being considered as part of a range of options for improvements to the public realm.
19. The project is a strategy document, and funding is not at this stage available to deliver all the projects it identifies. However, it will show how and where space can be made available considering a range of factors. COMPF will also consider long term stewardship because creating more public realm, play and spaces to dwell all have long term costs for both councils that need proper consideration. The project is due to report back in spring 2025.

Urban95 Academy

20. A team of three including an Oxford City councillor and an officer from both City and County Councils attended the Urban95 Academy in July 2024. The purpose of the week-long residential course at the LSE was to emphasise the importance of early childhood in the physical, emotional and social development of children, and how this is challenging in an urban environment. As a result, this team have been working on identifying a location in the city centre and designing a play space to feed into the COMPF work.

Engaging existing landowners in the city centre

21. City Council officers are engaging with other landowners in the city centre to explore opportunities for the provision of play equipment in existing developments and open space. This would not only require a commitment of land by the relevant third-party, but also funds for installation and on-going management and maintenance. However, the hope is that there are also benefits, such as the animation and activation of space, and associated footfall.

New city centre developments

22. In term of new developments coming forward, the Local Plan includes policies to ensure new public open space on all larger housing or mixed-use developments.
23. The policy approach is deliberately flexible to allow for open space to come forward in an appropriate way, which responds to the context of the specific development opportunity, and which may or may not include play space. The policies also recognise that play can be accommodated into the built environment in various, and often informal ways.
24. As such, the City Council will work with developers coming forward with city centre residential and mixed-use proposals to consider opportunities for play

facilities where it is right for the context and location. Proposals will also need a clear strategy for on-going management and maintenance.

25. As an example, the proposals set out in the Oxpens application currently under consideration by the Local Planning Authority include plans for a minimum of 750sqm of publicly accessible play provision in the proposed new amphitheatre, next to Oxpens Meadow.

City Council's ability to fund new and existing play space

26. Unfortunately, given constrained budgets there are no additional funds within the City Council's budget to install and maintain new play equipment even if land in the centre could be found. This is in part because the City Council must focus its limited funds on its existing extensive play and sports portfolio.
27. This existing portfolio requires a rolling programme of maintenance and replacement of equipment and safety surfaces. Day to day maintenance and repairs, inspections and the rolling programme of equipment and safety surface replacement currently costs around £250,000 per year.
28. This sum does not include the cost of major play area refurbishments or replacement of the larger outdoor, all-weather sports facilities that we own. These costs also need to be covered on an ad hoc basis, for example the upcoming £390k investment in the [Hinkey Splash Park](#), which will take place in time for next summer. This is funded from the Council's capital programme, alongside securing external grant.

Conclusions

29. The City Council welcomes the petition and thanks those who instigated it and signed it for supporting this issue.
30. While the City Council itself does not have any additional funds beyond those needed to maintain its existing extensive play and outdoor sports portfolio, we will continue to work with partners to explore opportunities. This includes the County Council and major landowners & developers.

Financial implications

31. The implications of this report will depend on Council's recommendations, if any, and Council should be mindful of the possible costs in formulating its recommendations.

Legal issues

32. The implications will depend on Council's recommendations, if any. Any recommendations will be considered in detail by the Cabinet, before returning to Council should this be necessary.

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