

Middlesbrough
Council



EXECUTIVE REPORT

PROVISION OF A BMX TRACK IN THE BEECHWOOD WARD

EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR COMMUNITY SAFETY AND LEISURE

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ENVIRONMENT

17th December 2004

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To consider the Council's position in relation to a bid to provide a BMX track adjacent to the community centre in the Beechwood Ward.

INTRODUCTION

2. In 2002 Groundwork Middlesbrough successfully assembled resources to carry out improvements to an area of Beechwood including the provision of a basketball court adjacent the Beechwood Community Centre and environmental improvements.
3. During implementation of the project an opportunity was taken to create three large mounds of earth for local youths to utilise as a "BMX track".
4. Following complaints from local residents in relation to the use or 'misuse' of the facility, extensive consultations have taken place to ascertain public opinion and to develop an acceptable solution. A constant problem, however, has been the inference drawn from such engagement. There has certainly been a huge commitment to determining community views but there remains a polarised perspective on the conclusions to be drawn from these consultations.
5. To a large extent issues of spatial dimension and time have contributed to this uncertainty. The geographical area considered i.e. the immediate locale or the wider ward area clearly influence the perspective of the community and the subsequent experience of other facilities in the vicinity have also impacted upon public opinion and must also now be taken into account.

6. It is fair to say that the quality of the 'Beechwood Park' project left a lot to be desired and generated significant public criticism. Anti-social behaviour associated with the new basketball facility has also created concern in some quarters. The views of local residents, articulated by the ward councillor, Councillor Joan McTigue, have clearly been influenced by those experiences and have fuelled concern at further developments such as the BMX track under consideration.
7. Conversely the other ward councillor for the area, Councillor Gary Clarke, takes a wider view of the advantage such a facility will have for the ward and supports the proposals. His view is strongly endorsed by the local Community Council for the area.

BACKGROUND

8. In 2002 Groundwork Middlesbrough (now Groundwork South Tees) carried out a consultation exercise with the local community in Beechwood in relation to an exciting environmental improvement project for the area. The Trust engaged with several Council services, the Beechwood Community Council and the Beechwood Youth and Community Centre to develop an extensive project providing £145,000 worth of improvements for the area.
9. During delivery of the landscaping element of the scheme, around April 2003, an opportunity was taken to enhance the project by creating three large mounds of earth for local youths to ride their bikes around, in essence creating a 'home made' BMX track.
10. In July 2003, following receipt of several complaints from residents living near to the track, Councillor McTigue wrote to the Executive Director Environment expressing concern that the mud hills were becoming a dumping ground and that children using the hills were at risk of injury because of debris both within the soil (concrete and bricks) and as a result of glass and lager cans which were being deposited by local youths and requested their removal.
11. A visit to the facility, on 16th July 2003, confirmed that there was indeed a safety hazard in relation to debris within the soil and action was taken to remove such hazards pending consideration of funding to remove the hills.
12. In late August 2003, the Chair of the Beechwood Community Council informed the Executive Director Environment that the community council saw the BMX track as a well used and popular facility and asked for discussions to take place with the local community before any decision was made to dismantle the facility. This view was endorsed by Councillor Gary Clarke.
13. The letter from the Community Council stated they were prepared to seek funding to alleviate the dumping problem and to address health and safety issues, and planned to set up a focus group to consider possible solutions to the problems identified.

14. The outcome of that focus group meeting was reported in the Beechwood Community Council minutes for the meeting held on Wednesday 10th September 2003 :-

“Brian Robinson (Chair) had been approached by a number of residents who had heard that the BMX track which was used by numerous children from Beechwood, Easterside and surrounding areas was to be removed on health and safety issues.

A Focus Group was called for to compose of representatives of Middlesbrough Council, the four councillors from Beechwood and Easterside, the chair and the manager of Beechwood Youth and Community Centre and a representative from Groundwork.

An initial meeting took place on 29th August 2003 when it was unanimously agreed by those present that the BMX track should remain and comply with Health and Safety Regulations. It was agreed that funding to be sought for CCTV, lighting and possibly fencing around it.”

15. Councillor McTigue expressed concern at the lack of resident involvement in the focus group and was critical of it being a ‘private meeting’. The validity of the ‘vote’ was therefore called into question, and although not present she had been informed that the vote was not that the track should remain but rather that the meeting ‘would like one but not the eyesore we have now.
16. Clearly the difference of opinion between Councillor McTigue and her local Community Council, the latter strongly supported by Councillor Clarke, created a difficult situation for Middlesbrough Council since the polarised objectives could not both be met – the hills could stay or go but not both.
17. For Middlesbrough Council the issue of whether the hills should stay or go was not simply a matter of public preference however. Potential health and safety liabilities and ongoing maintenance costs were additional crucial factors in such a decision. Strong public opinion against the hills would render such matters immaterial and the cost of removal would remain the only issue. Strong public support for the facility, however, would require the Council to consider whether it could afford to address the ongoing revenue implications before determining the future of the Hills.
18. Public opinion was a very important factor which needed to be further assessed but clearly in a way that avoided the impression of a referendum.
19. A letter from the Executive Director to the Chair of the Community Council, 14th October 2003, set out this position and suggested a way forward which included:
- 1 Recognition that a comprehensive consultation exercise with all affected residents was needed.
 - 2 That such an exercise should be assisted by and perhaps led by the Community Council.

- 3 That the Community Council should determine in an open meeting the nature and extent of the target audience.
 - 4 That Middlesbrough Council would fund a consultation exercise if it were endorsed by the Community Council and supported by all local elected members.
20. This letter was discussed at the next Community Council meeting on 22nd October. A letter to residents of the ward was agreed setting out the issues with a return slip to put forward their views along with an invitation to attend the public meeting of the Community Council on 13th November 2003 to put forward their views in person.
 21. At the meeting of the Community Council, on 13th November 2003, responses were considered and an excellent debate ensued. A number of youngsters had appointed a spokesman to put forward their views in support of the facility and a local school parent governor presented further views of local children following her own research. The views of the local police and wardens were also considered.
 22. The first principle unanimously agreed by the meeting was that the hills were too close to local residents.
 23. The wider issue of anti-social behaviour produced differing perspectives. Many believed removal would increase such behaviour (since youths had little else to do) with others believing retention of the hills would increase such behaviour by attracting more problems.
 24. Nevertheless a consensus of opinion on two issues did emerge from the debate, agreed by every single person attending, firstly that a local facility, even just mud-hills, was wanted and needed and secondly, that the current facility needed to be moved.
 25. Two strands of further work were agreed :
 - Middlesbrough Council would consider the costs and funding opportunities to move the hills nearer to the community centre, including ongoing maintenance and liabilities.
 - A formal bid was to be developed for a 'real' BMX facility taking advantage of the debate, particularly the structured youth involvement, including reference to the:-
 - Innovative influence over Groundwork to create the 'pilot' hills
 - Widespread support for the hills including youngsters, police and schools
 - Concept of new friends/old friends – both in bringing estates together and the common ground developed between older residents and youngsters
 - Lessons learned from the hills - proximity, access, warden support, bringing the community together

- Acknowledged support from community, police, street wardens, school, youth, residents, Community Council and Middlesbrough Council
26. As agreed a bid was developed with the support of the Council's Landscape Manager and submitted to the Government's Living Spaces Fund in January 2004.
 27. Unfortunately the experience of residents living close to the basketball court has raised concerns at the location of the BMX facility as planned. These concerns have been brought to the attention of the funder and doubt expressed as to the merit of such a facility in the area. The concerns of these residents have been channelled through the ward councillor and a petition is believed to have been sent to the funding body and other stakeholders.
 28. As a result the fundholder has requested that the Council clarifies its position in relation to this bid.
 29. A decision is therefore required which balances the residents views living close to the planned facility with the wider ward and town advantages to having such a facility in this location.
 30. The decision essentially rests on two judgements.
 1. Will the provision increase or decrease anti-social behaviour in the wider area? Officers are of the opinion that such facilities will have a positive impact.
 2. Would such a provision create unacceptable impacts in the immediate locale? Residents living near the ball park have experienced problems as a result of the basketball court, articulated very strongly on their behalf by Councillor McTigue. The area suffers from high levels of anti-social behaviour and clearly there is concern that this facility will worsen the situation. The issue here is whether the facility will simply add to the existing problem or whether it is seen as an essential part of any strategy to tackle the problems.
 31. Funding is currently available and the project deliverable although in jeopardy because of the delay. A clear Council view on whether or not to support the bid is necessary.

OPTION APPRAISAL/RISK ASSESSMENT

32. The options have been discussed during the public consultations and the resultant outcome was a bid to the Living Spaces fund. The option available today is only to support or not support that bid.

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS

33. The scheme has attracted grant funding from various sources including Living Spaces to the amount of £24,000 and £500 from Beechwood Community Council.

34. The facility will primarily benefit children in the Beechwood, Clairville and Ladgate wards.

SCRUTINY CONSULTATION

35. This report has not been considered by Scrutiny.

RECOMMENDATIONS

36. That the Executive Member determines whether or not the Council supports the Living Spaces bid.

REASONS

37. The funder needs to know whether or not the Council supports the bid before making a final recommendation.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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