

Title: Mill Gardens and Castle Farm Play Area Upgrade
 Lead Officer: Sally Watts sally.watts@warwickdc.gov.uk 01925 456210
 Portfolio Holder: Councillor Will Roberts
 Wards of the District directly affected: Leamington Willes Kenilworth
 Abbey and Arden Ward

Approvals required	Date	Name
Portfolio Holder	14/11/24	Councillor Will Roberts
Finance	18/11/2024	Andrew Rollins
Legal Services	08/11/24	Kathryn Tebbey
Chief Executive	10/11/24	Chris Elliott
Director of Climate Change	18/11/2024	Dave Barber
Head of Service(s)	13/11/24	Marianne Rolfe
Section 151 Officer	18/11/2024	Andrew Rollins
Monitoring Officer	08/11/24	Graham Leach
Leadership Co-ordination Group		
Final decision by this Committee or rec to another Cttee / Council?	Yes	
Contrary to Policy / Budget framework?	No	
Does this report contain exempt info/Confidential? If so, which paragraph(s)?	Yes, Appendix item 3	
Does this report relate to a key decision (referred to in the Cabinet Forward Plan)?	No	
Accessibility Checked?	Yes	

Summary

With funding in place for the replacement and improvement of the play areas in Mill Gardens and Castle Farm, we are seeking authority to proceed with the project.

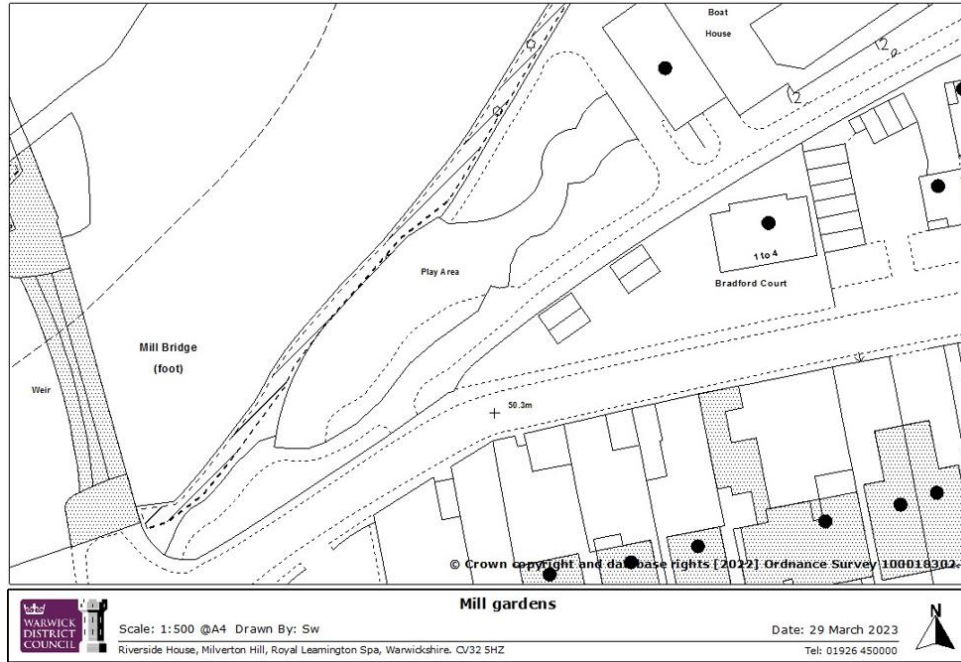
Recommendation(s)

- (1)** That Cabinet agree to the replacement of the play equipment and surfacing of the play areas at Mill Gardens and Castle Farm parks, subject to a maximum budget (the amount is provided in confidential Appendix 1) for all costs for the construction of the project,
- (2)** The final design, within the agreed budget, being delegated to the Head of Safer Communities, Leisure and Environment in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood.
- (3)** The Cabinet approves the procurement of suitable play equipment providers, in line with Council's Code of Procurement Practice, and delegates Authority to the Head of Safer Communities, Leisure and Environment authority to apply for all necessary permissions, consents and licences to enable these works.

1 Reasons for the Recommendation

- 1.1 We are seeking to improve the quality of its Green Spaces throughout Warwick District. This is to ensure that everyone has access to high quality public open spaces within 15-minutes' walk of their home that are defined as 'good' by the Green Flag self-assessment criteria.
- 1.2 This Cabinet report relates to two sites shown in image and. It is intended that Mill Gardens play area will be delivered first – once the procurement process has been followed, and then Castle Farm play area will follow once improvement works to the drainage on the site have been undertaken which is anticipated to be in May 2025.
- 1.3 Where relevant the report will deal with the sites in order with Mill Gardens first, however the Equality Impact Assessments have been assessed separately to reflect the site differences and opportunities.

Mill Gardens

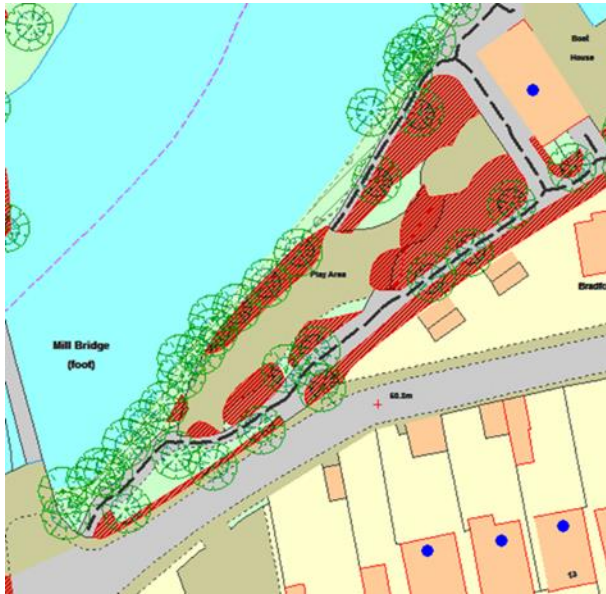


a. Map of Mill Gardens



b. Photograph of the site as is.

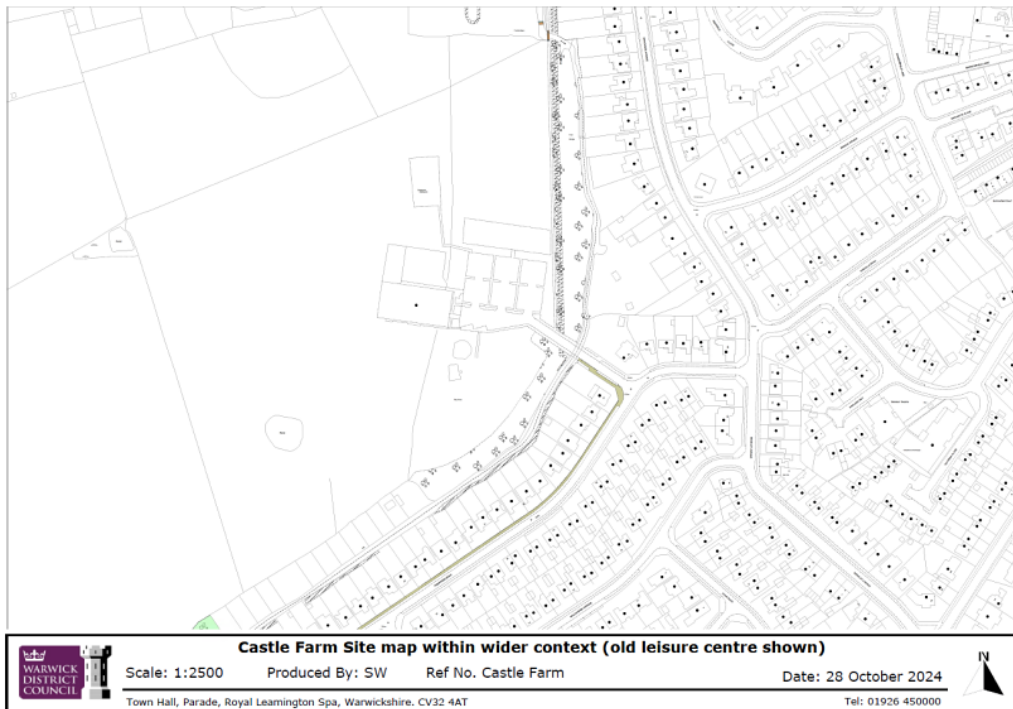
- 1.4 In the area under the extensive tree canopies from the mature and well-established trees there are large areas of shrubs. These are mature but there is a significant issue with rodents in this area and they can invite litter to collect also. Part of the design of the area will be to remove the dense shrubs (shown on map below in red) in the northeast area of the site to reduce vermin and to open the site up in this area as well as provide shade within the play area.



c. Map of Mill Gardens play area showing the extent of the shrubs and tree canopy.

Castle Farm

- 1.5 Castle Farm site is located between the edge of the suburban area in Kenilworth and the area relating to the Castle and the surrounding area including the fishponds and the footpath link to Abbey Fields. To the west of the site is Inchbrook Brook tributary which runs to the west of the site. To the west of the hedge adjacent to the play area is the Kenilworth Moss Local Wildlife Site.



d. Site plan of Castle Farm

1.6 The park is an area that surrounds the leisure centre and focuses on leisure activities and nature. The character of the site has been significantly altered and extended with the new leisure centre which has increased the number of visitors to the site. It also introduces a clean modern aesthetic with the introduction of new materials and a colour palette. Additionally, there are improved activities introduced to the site beyond the built form with pétanque and the outside area for the scout/ guide centre. The car park of the leisure centre has also been extensively extended to allow for capacity on days where the sports pitches are in use and people travel from the leisure centre across to the sports pitches.



e. Photograph of play area with new leisure centre in background



- f. Photograph on right taken on 3rd April 2024 following construction of the leisure centre
- 1.7 The area surrounding new leisure centre, including the play area, has had little investment over the past few years and is starting to show signs of age that the new building highlight and contradict. Castle Farm, along with other destination park play areas has some of the oldest play equipment across the district compared to the other 59 sites, and they are showing their age. Other destination parks including St. Nicholas Park and Newbold Comyn also have some of the oldest play equipment and are also key sites for upgrading which is likely to be reflected in the Play Area Improvement Programme.
- 1.8 A recent questionnaire undertaken with parents of children at Evergreen School clearly set out the importance of facilities to afford an ease of access in terms of the parking, toilets, dropped kerbs, level thresholds etc. that mean the site is more able meet the needs of accessible users than other sites in the local area. The play equipment as is does not reflect an accessible environment and will be a key focus of the design both in terms of consultation and play equipment and surfacing.
- 1.9 The replacement of the play area including equipment and surfacing is proposed to improve the play area as part of the ongoing commitment to improving green spaces including play areas in the district. The Green Space Strategy has focused its investment over the last 12 years on neighbourhood parks and play areas and the focus is now on the destination parks such as Mill Gardens and Castle Farm. There is an annual inspection of all play area sites in the district undertaken by The Play Inspection Company. Within the site-specific risk assessment undertaken in March 2024, the annual inspection highlighted the need for need for investment at both sites.
- 1.10 Play equipment requires a vigilant and cyclical maintenance program for both repair and replacement to ensure it is not outdated or no longer functions through wet and tear, weathering or anti-social behaviour. The maintenance program ensures the play equipment is safe to use for the community.
- 1.11 A revised Play Area Improvement Programme is estimated to be provided to Cabinet in May 2025, which will list year by year a programme of all the

districts' play areas that need upgrading and the investment needs. This programme will be based on the latest annual inspection/condition survey as well as other factors discussed further below.

- 1.12 Officers have reflected on the last annual inspection outcomes and believe that there is an opportunity to have the installation of new play areas at Mill Gardens and Castle Farm well underway prior to the formalisation of the updated Play area Improvement programme.
- 1.13 The Green Space Team regularly consider the need to repair, revitalize and replace play equipment and the play environment to provide a good play experience for children and families in the district but also in terms of play value, that the item of play equipment provides interest and grows skills and physical challenge to aid growth.
- 1.14 In addition to regular inspections by Council officers and idverde play team, the Council also commissions an annual audit by a specialist consultancy to undertake a detailed and comprehensive inspection of all public play facilities to ensure they are fully aware of the current condition and anticipated life expectancy of play equipment.
- 1.15 This information feeds back into the commissioning and specification of play equipment on new sites as well as the ongoing maintenance for play equipment undertaken within the Green Space team.

Factors in the need to replace play equipment

- 1.16 Currently the play area fails to fully meet Play England's 10 principles for designing successful play spaces, which are:
 - 'bespoke'
 - well located
 - make use of natural elements
 - provide a wide range of play experiences
 - are accessible to both disabled and non-disabled children
 - meet community needs
 - allow children of different ages to play together
 - build in opportunities to experience risk and challenge
 - are sustainable and appropriately maintained
 - allow for change and evolution
- 1.17 The evaluation regarding the need to replace play equipment is based on several factors these include:

Quality of play apparatus



g. Photographs of play equipment at Castle Farm

- 1.18 The play equipment in Mill Gardens lacks key components which would be included in the replacement play equipment, such as there is no swing provision and there is limited equipment for people with accessibility issues and equipment such as the shelter has been removed and there is a void area in this prominent part of the park.
- 1.19 Within Castle Farm, the site there is a variety of play equipment to provide a range of play activities such as swinging, climbing, sliding, rotating, sand play, rocking etc. However the play experience is lacking, and it does not provide a coherent play experience for example there is a sand area with limited play equipment near a rope climber pyramid. The incremental development of the play area is let down by the older pieces of play equipment such as the swings and the multi play unit which are in disrepair with moss and algae on them.

Life expectancy report and Number of repairs

- 1.20 An independent play area inspection is undertaken annually by The Play Inspection Company who inspect the individual pieces of equipment for repair and issues that need rectifying.
- 1.21 Both sites have shorter life expectancies compared to other play areas that have been upgraded over the last 15 years.
- 1.22 The number of repairs needed to the equipment per site can be an indicator of the remainder of life cycle left in the play equipment and will increase as items become worn.

Current condition of surfacing

- 1.23 Surfacing beneath play equipment has altered over time with different preferences emerging. In Mill Gardens due to the location and the length of time it has been down, the bitumen surface is worn or damaged which need addressing and the safety surfacing is in poor condition. Additionally, there is algae, silt or moss growth on the surface which can be slippery.
- 1.24 Current surfacing preference is for a rubber bonded mulch which allows for water to permeate to prevent standing water, it is soft if there are falls and trips and provides a firm surface which allows for an ease of use for wheelchair users and pushchairs. The surfacing both in terms of condition and type can be a factor in considering whether play equipment needs replacing.

- 1.25 In Castle Farm, the older play equipment has grass mat surfacing however over time the surfacing has disappeared as the soil has come to the surface making them less absorbent. Underneath the newer equipment there are contained areas of loose bark chippings. This can present a challenge to those with mobility issues where the step can be a barrier and the bark a challenge to wheelchairs users to overcome.

Sustainable Drainage System

- 1.26 In Castle Farm, the existing play area is sited beyond the extent of the flood zone however the ground is frequently saturated and struggles to dry out during wet weather. Part of the plans for Castle Farm is to include a shallow Sustainable Drainage System (SuDS), beyond the play area with drainage across the area proposed for the play area. This will help ensure the play area can be used throughout the year and provide a drainage pond designed with planting and materials to encourage wildlife and links to the wider goals for the site not only to improve biodiversity, but also provide an opportunity to improve knowledge of existing habitats onsite through onsite education.

Accessibility requirements

- 1.27 The report by The Play Inspection Company states there are 'some accessible features; an area that presents difficulties to the majority of people with disabilities but in favourable circumstances and certainly in partnership can be accessed.' This is less than ideal in terms of the level of play provision we would like to achieve in such a high profile and well used sites for the community.

2 Alternative Options

- 2.1 The alternative option would be to retain the existing equipment to the point of failure and its removal -either incremental or wholesale, and at some point, closure.
- 2.2 A further option would be to repair the pieces of play equipment piece by piece as they fail, however this option would be significantly more expensive to undertake and is likely to generate a play environment which lacks a cohesiveness in design. We have done some major repairs successfully to a few play items in this play area, such as the ship, and this has been far more cost effective than replacement. For other items of play equipment such as the smaller pieces it would not be cost effective.
- 2.3 Alternatively, it could be to reduce the number and variety of play equipment but that wouldn't meet the high standards required for these sites that are high profile destination play areas.

3 Legal Implications

- 3.1 The Council will ensure legal advice is obtained throughout the plan's delivery including anything applicable to procurement laws, planning, legal agreements, and consents.
- 3.2 The appendix to the report is considered to be confidential under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 by reason of the likely disclosure of exempt information within the paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local

Government Act 1972, following the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006. Paragraph 3 is that the Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information), in this instance this is because it includes information that could give a competitive advantage in the tender process.

4 Financial Services

- 4.1 The value of both the services and works required to implement the project above below the relevant UK thresholds of the Public Contract Regulations; however, all procurements will be undertaking in accordance with the Council's Code of procurement Practice.
- 4.2 There is also the possibility of including some of the Accessibility in Parks fund to provide more accessible play equipment which will be a key component of the development and design of the play area. Additionally, there is S106 funds available that can be utilised to improve the sites.
- 4.3 The existing Public Amenity Reserves budget combined with the Accessibility in Parks budget and s106 funding ensure there is sufficient funds ready to cover the cost of both play areas and will be used.

5 Corporate Strategy

- 5.1 Warwick District Council has adopted a Corporate Strategy which sets three strategic aims for the organisation.

Delivering valued, sustainable services

- 5.2 The need to improve the play area is evident when the play value and quality of the play provision on the site is considered. The play area is an important contributor in the success and vibrancy of the parks and meeting the public needs and aspirations within the park setting. The approach provided is costly in terms of upfront project costs but would reduce the cost of repairs and ongoing maintenance required in the alternative options provided.

Mill Gardens

- 5.3 The need to repair the play area is evident given the maintenance issues with the play equipment and the opportunity to improve the existing facilities to make it less resource intensive in terms of play equipment maintenance as well as landscaping maintenance is welcomed.

Castle Farm

- 5.4 The current quality of the play area does not accord with the improvements to the wider site, including the leisure centre and the car parking area as well as improvements planned with the Biodiversity Action Plan.

- 5.5 In order that the Council can continue to focus its efforts and activities on the needs of its residents, communities and businesses, this priority will be underpinned by ensuring continued demonstration of financial sustainability with continued investment in areas such as play provision in key areas of the district.

Low cost, low carbon energy across the district

- 5.6 The Council is committed to find ways to reduce the carbon footprint across the district. The parks will include a child's scooter rack and there is an existing cycle shelter to encourage sustainable travel to the site.
- 5.7 At Mill Gardens the play area is in a town centre location allowing for trips to the park to be integrated into visits to the centre by foot rather than specific journey to the site.

Creating vibrant, safe, and healthy communities of the future

- 5.8 The play areas are a key factor in the experience of families using parks in the district. They afford the opportunity for active play in a safe controlled environment, they allow for social interaction within the district as well as opportunity to become stronger, fitter, and healthier community through play.

Environmental/Climate Change Implications

Mill Gardens

- 5.9 The inclusion of shade to protect against summer temperatures as the climate changes is often promoted as a positive aspect for customers in current park design. More locally, feedback within the Victoria Park survey undertaken in 2023 demonstrated that the inclusion of shade in a park setting is an area that the public felt was a priority, particularly within the play area of a park setting.
- 5.10 This formed part of the decision making of reducing the area of shrubs to allow for more use of the area of the site in shade from the mature tree canopy within the defined area.

Castle Farm

- 5.11 As a whole, the site is benefitting from significant improvement in terms of biodiversity improvement and the inclusion of the drainage feature and natural play forms part of the ambition of the site to educate and value the local habitats within the site.
- 5.12 The use of drainage will allow for more water to be stored and collected in the site and slowly released into the brook when water levels allow and will control the retention of water on the site in a more controlled manner.

6 Analysis of the effects on Equality

- 6.1 Play areas are key opportunities for all members of the community to enjoy and enjoy recreation as well as provide a unique play for persons of all abilities and skills to interact. In order to achieve this objective successfully there needs to be a robust and considered approach to the design and specification to be as inclusive as possible as a key part of the project, particularly to provide a level of equality in terms of play value and play experience for all children.
- 6.2 For both sites, an Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken which recognised the challenges in providing play areas for all given the range of needs within the communities they serve. However, public spaces such as play areas provide a unique way of being able to address some of the key

areas of inequality experienced by the public with no barriers to entry and an opportunity to provide an inclusive environment.

7 Data Protection

7.1 There are no Data Protection implications arising from this report.

8 Health and Wellbeing

- 8.1 Parks and green spaces are supported by Warwick District Council as being a key contributor in ensuring health and wellbeing for their residents. The facilities in the park impact the frequency and duration of visit to the open space. There are wider benefits in terms of children learning and enhancing key skills including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills within play settings.
- 8.2 There are links between the quality of open space and active lifestyles and sports participation which link to the core tenets of wellbeing and living a healthy life which underpin the value in the variety and quality of the facilities in the park.
- 8.3 At Castle Farm there is an additional benefit of the integration of play and activity is key in helping younger residents to feel comfortable being in and around sport facilities and encouraging health and wellbeing in a wider remit in the site.

9 Risk Assessment

- 9.1 The parks, and in turn the play areas within the park, represent WDC supporting the wellbeing and quality of life for residents. The failure to invest in replacing play areas could spread a perception that there is a lack of support for public facilities despite recent investment in play, sport and activities in the district.
- 9.2 There are no deadlines in terms of delivery in relation to the project, however the duration that the play area is unavailable to the public should be limited as much as possible to avoid disappointment at the lack of facilities provided on site, and busy times of year for the play area will be avoided.
- 9.3 Weather could also be issue in terms of the construction process due to many of the processes needing dry weather- especially surfacing.
- 9.4 Officers would need a clear communication strategy to keep members of the public and Councillors updated throughout the project to manage expectations and to avoid or mitigate criticism.
- 9.5 The Green Spaces Team are experienced at replacing and upgrading play areas and understand the potential issues that can be faced during construction as well as the necessary safety inspections to be undertaken before it can be opened to the public.

10 Consultation for both sites

- 10.1 Consultation we undertook with parents at Evergreen School will form a key part of the specification decisions to ensure the play area meets the accessible objectives and includes play equipment preferences expressed

within the questionnaire results.

- 10.2 Additionally, if planning is required it will also be gained as part of the planning process.
- 10.3 If considered beneficial to the outcome there will be consultation with the public regarding the play equipment choices and preferences. A consultation plan will be discussed with ward Councillors.
- 10.4 In terms of the projects, it will involve engaging with stakeholders in terms of managing the work and any impacts of the development on operations in the parks such as car parking, assets, leisure services and operations in the park.