

The future of St Bede's Play Space



A report by Phil Back

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1 Objectives and methodology

The objectives of the research were:

- To explore current perceptions of the space on the part of local people and elected representatives
- To examine community priorities and social needs in relation to this space
- To explore residents' and stakeholders' ideas and reactions to suggested improvements to the site
- To use these to determine what section 106 resource might be deployed, and in what way, to improve the site to meet residents' and representatives' priorities.

Our approach to this has been multi-faceted. We have

- Discussed the site with community representatives and stakeholders, including elected members for the ward in question; representatives of the local residents association; the police; and others whose views are relevant;
- Through the Cambridge Federation, carried out a door to door survey of around 285 local residents canvassing their levels of use and their views of the site and its future;
- Set up an email response address for those who cannot, or prefer not to complete the questionnaire, to enable them to contribute their views into the mix of opinion;

A total of around 115 people have participated in this consultation, including

- 10 stakeholders who gave us their views in conversation and discussion;

- 99 people who completed questionnaires either at their door or subsequently by post;
- 2 people who used the e-mail address to contribute comments
- 4 local residents who contacted us by phone or by letter

We are particularly grateful to Cam Fed for their support in carrying out this consultation, and for promoting it informally.



2 Description of the site

St Bede's Play Area is a very small site, roughly elliptical in shape, and approximately 70m long and 25m wide at maximum. It is located at the far end of a small housing estate, and adjacent to a well-used cycle path and, on the other side of the path, a small brook. However the site is very well screened by unmanaged tree and ground cover growth and is probably not well known beyond its immediate surroundings. Even cyclists passing on the cycle path are probably unaware that what they are passing is a recreational space, as it appears from the outside to be simply waste ground. It gives the impression of being space left over after the estate was constructed.

At one time a children's play area occupied the site, including a bridge and tunnel arrangement (which was apparently used for "unspeakable" activities), and a climbing structure. However, over time most of this equipment has been removed as it became damaged or non-functional. The only remaining equipment at the time of visiting was a large slide embedded into a slope at one end of the site, accessed by concrete steps at either side of the slide, and a swing frame. The slide construction is not especially safe and there is no safety rail either on the steps or at the platform at the top, making this quite a precarious place to be.





The remainder of the site is a mixture of left-over hard surface, falling into severe disrepair, and vegetation. The site is surrounded by trees but most are of a spindly nature, offering little in amenity terms but serving to shade the area almost completely and creating an atmosphere that is both dark and dank. There are some mature Italian Alders and there may also be other trees worth preserving, but the trees need thinning and other attention. Growth of small bushes, weeds and other vegetation is uncontrolled and unchecked and this adds to an air of considerable neglect. This is not a pleasant place and is to all extents and purposes a space which detracts from the locality rather than one which aids liveability.

The location of the site is shown here:



St Bede's Play Space

St Thomas's Square

Cherry Hinton Hall
Playground

There are alternative play spaces in the vicinity, which are also indicated on the map. These are a comparatively new play space at St Thomas' Square, which is essentially an equipped play space for younger children, and the extensive play and park space at Cherry Hinton Hall, which includes open space as well as a range of equipment for children and young people of all ages.

Feedback from some local residents suggests that a church group has recently initiated a clean up on the site, but we have been unable to find out more about this. We have attempted to ascertain the tree quality on the site but without success.

The site was examined during the land audit undertaken by the Council – there was a suggestion that it might be suitable for some forms of development – but we understand from officers that the site is unsuitable for any development of housing or other buildings.

3 Feedback and suggestions from consultation

A questionnaire survey was carried out with local residents and this showed three possible suggestions for the site, based on the discussions we had already had with stakeholders and others. These were a play area, a skatepark/BMX area, or a grassed area; residents were also able to say that they didn't like any of these ideas.

Residents in the questionnaire and in informal feedback have quite mixed views of the site. The preferences stated in the questionnaire are

- 45 people would prefer a grassed area
- 27 people would prefer a play space
- 12 people would prefer a BMX or skatepark
- 12 people say they don't like any of these ideas, and three further people offer no view

The majority view is thus that a grassed area is what is needed here, but there is a substantial minority who would like a play space. There is little support for a BMX/Skatepark, however.

Other information of interest emerging from the questionnaire includes:

- People with younger children tend to prefer the idea of a play area. However, people with young families are a minority of those responding to the questionnaire. There are also people with no children who support the idea of a play area.

- People who have no children, who are a majority of the respondents to the questionnaire, tend to prefer the grassed area.
- Dog owners tend to prefer the grassed area.

At present, the estate's play and dog walking needs are primarily met by the facilities at Cherry Hinton Hall. There are therefore very good facilities for both play and dog walking within a reasonably short walk of this site which currently meet local needs. Although other sites are used by individuals, very few people use the St Bede's site for anything at the moment, and nobody at all uses the St Thomas' play area.

Stakeholders generally take the view that this is not a site worth developing or improving as a play space. The site is poorly located for play, in an area which has little informal oversight, and is not an area where parents would be confident about allowing children to play without supervision. There are other, better sites within easy walking distance that would be much more attractive as play spaces and which can offer more than even an improved site could.

Some residents want to see the site developed for housing or special needs housing such as older people's accommodation. The Council has assessed the site for possible building purposes as part of the land audit and has concluded that it is not suited for development.

People who have contacted us outside the questionnaire have identified themselves as living in close proximity to the site. These people are vigorously opposed to the reinstatement of the play area and are also adamant that they intensely dislike the idea of a skatepark/BMX. Their views are strongly communicated, and they are concerned about misuse of the site, anti-social behaviour, or noise. Those expressing a view on the future use of the site are in favour of leaving it alone as a derelict area.

The site has been discussed extensively at local residents' meetings. Those who have spoken to the local residents immediately backing on to the site (their back gardens are across the road from it) report that residents in the immediate vicinity do not want to see the area restored as play space. They are concerned about its misuse in the past, and the possibilities a new play space would create for antisocial behaviour and noise, as well as for more serious misdemeanours. The site's neighbours have up to this point said that they would like the space to be cleared and made into a dog walking site, or alternatively used to site a building of some sort. A continuation of its life as a play space is not wanted or needed. This view has been strongly reinforced during the consultation, which has actually created anxiety that the site might be restored – there are neighbours who are quite content to leave it exactly as it is.

The site as it stands is, unsurprisingly, treated as though it has been abandoned. It is overgrown and badly lit, and has become (to some extent at least) a haven for moderate anti-social activity, including substance abuse, drinking, noise and rowdiness, which are part of a more general problem in the Walpole Road area and which also extends to Cherry Hinton Hall. Police are working with the housing and asb teams at the Council to try and tackle these issues but no short-term solutions are emerging.



4 Conclusions and recommendations

1. The general predisposition towards this site locally and on the part of stakeholders suggests that a restored and improved play space is not required here. Whilst this will disappoint some residents, we believe there are adequate facilities in the vicinity of this site to meet the need for play space; St Bede's lies within the effective catchment of the play area at Cherry Hinton Hall, which is itself likely to be improved in the near future.
2. There is little support for a BMX/Skatepark type facility, and strong opposition from neighbours to this idea. We do not believe such an approach can be justified and it would be likely to provoke significant controversy.
3. The preference is for an amenity green space where dog walking could take place. This has been expressed at residents' association meetings and also receives the strongest support in the questionnaire.
4. We therefore recommend that the space be made into an amenity green with dog bins provided to encourage responsible dog ownership. Whilst this approach might be opposed by some residents who want to see the site left derelict, the consultation and the feedback from the residents' association would support this approach to improvement. We also recommend that the ground be cleared and the trees thinned out to make this a more even, and more open, open space with good lines of sight and access for sunlight. Shrubs should be provided but should not be around the perimeter as we feel it important to maintain sight lines through the site to minimise anti-social activity.

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