

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday 29 March 2021

**On Monday 29 March Mid Sussex District Council have committed to reopen all of its 123 playgrounds. Did they need to be kept shut in the first place, and was £44,000 wasted on extra cleaning costs?**

Freedom of Information requests submitted to Mid Sussex District Council and Horsham District Council have revealed two starkly different approaches to ensuring children's playgrounds were 'covid secure' when Government advice allowed them to be reopened following the end of the first lockdown in July 2020.

Horsham District Council reopened all fifty-two of its play areas last summer, spent no money on additional cleaning, and just £100 on signage.<sup>a</sup> Other councils have taken a similar approach.

Mid Sussex District Council decided upon a very different course of action. In the response to the Freedom of Information request they say, "We undertook an initial cleanse prior to opening each facility in July 2020, and since then have carried out a weekly cleanse of all play areas and outdoor gyms that have re-opened. In addition, we have purchased and installed permanent A3-sized signage at each entrance point, providing guidance on social distancing, hand hygiene and the safe use of the facilities."<sup>b</sup> The cost of this up to the week commencing 25 January 2021 was £44,152. When asked how those costs were arrived at, Mid Sussex District Council responded, "The costs were obtained from the Council's existing cleansing contractor, so were based on a commercial assessment of the operational requirements associated with a weekly deep clean."<sup>b</sup>

However, Mid Sussex District Council only opened 57 of its 123 play areas last summer despite Liberal Democrats raising concerns about the impact of keeping so many closed, and stated on its website that it would be too expensive to open them all stating that it would cost more than £220,000 a year to clean them regularly to ensure that they are COVID safe. A weekly cleaning regime was not required, as demonstrated by the approach of Horsham District Council and other local authorities. In addition there is no evidence that this is more effective in reducing coronavirus transmission than no cleaning regime given the number of people who would use the playgrounds between cleans.

Play Charity, Play England wrote to all local authorities in England in January 2021 asked that all playgrounds remain open "to reduce the catastrophic impact of COVID and lockdown on children's physical and mental health and wellbeing".<sup>c</sup> Their letter also highlighted the impact of playground closures on the most disadvantaged children - those with limited space at home, no access to a garden or disabled children - to which access to these playgrounds are "often a lifeline". Mid Sussex District Council failed to carry out an equality impact assessment to understand the impact of their decision to close play areas on the children in our community.

Residents in Burgess Hill have been especially hard hit by Mid Sussex District Council's decision to keep over half of its playgrounds closed. When the location of the closed playgrounds is plotted on to a map<sup>d</sup>, it is clear that the playgrounds in Burgess Hill were much more likely to be kept shut with 79% shut in Burgess Hill, 50% shut Haywards Heath, 36% shut in East Grinstead and 19% shut in the outlying villages.

District Councillor for Burgess Hill Leylands, Simon Hicks commented, "It's excellent news to hear that all our playgrounds will be open once again but why did Mid Sussex District Council interpret government guidelines so differently to their colleagues in Horsham? Does cleaning playgrounds once a week really make them Covid secure? Despite the best intentions they seem to have wasted £44,000 of our taxes."

County Council Candidate Richard Cherry also remarked that; "Once again we see Conservative Councillors here behind-the-curve and slow to pick up on the needs of local families. The children of Burgess Hill are being treated badly by the Conservatives. Not only have they been content to keep children out of their own playgrounds for the last year, but their plans to close Burgess Hill's two Children and Family Centres will be another blow to local families. I wonder if they are aware of the damage they are doing?"

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**ENDS**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:**

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**NOTES TO EDITOR:**

**a) FOI Response from Horsham District Council**

1. *Very briefly please can you outline what Covid-19 related additional measures/cleaning Horsham District Council is undertaking so that children's play areas can remain safely open.*

**We are not doing any additional cleaning of our children's playgrounds. Our view is that parents / carers must take responsibility for personal hygiene of their children. Signs on all playgrounds to remind people about importance of social distancing**

2. *What is the actual year to date costs of additional Covid-19 cleaning/other measures for the children's play areas for 2020/21? Please state which month the year to date costs run to.*

**No additional costs for cleaning but we have an approximate cost for signage of £100 during the year with no specific month.**

3. *How much Grant does the council expect to receive from Government for 2020/21 to offset additional Covid-19 costs and how much of this Grant has been allocated to offset the cost of additional cleaning costs/other measures needed to keep children's play areas open for 2020/21?*

**A total of £3.09m is expected to be received. This has not been allocated to cost centres to offset costs but it is being used at whole council level; there is no allocation to play areas.**

**b) FOI Response from Mid Sussex District Council**

1. On your website (<https://www.midsussex.gov.uk/coronavirus-community-business-support/coronavirus-community-business-support/#parks-label>) Mid Sussex District Council states that it would cost "£220,000 per year to regularly clean the equipment in every playground and make each area safe."

- Please can you explain how this figure was estimated and any assumptions made in the calculation? **The costs were obtained from the Council's existing cleansing contractor, so were based on a commercial assessment of the operational requirements associated with a weekly deep clean.**
  - What does this £220,000 cost represent i.e. is this the additional Covid-19 related cost of cleaning all 123 children's play areas or just the ones which are closed? **It is the additional Covid-19 related cost of cleaning all of the children's play areas.**
  - If this £220K is the annual Covid-19 related cost of cleaning all of the Council's 123 children's play areas then what is the annual additional Covid-19 related cost of cleaning the closed children's play areas? **£116k**
2. Very briefly please can you outline what Covid-19 related additional measures/cleaning Mid Sussex District Council is undertaking so that children's play areas can remain safely open. **We undertook an initial cleanse prior to opening each facility in July 2020, and since then have carried out a weekly cleanse of all play areas and outdoor gyms that have re-opened. In addition, we have purchased and installed permanent A3-sized signage at each entrance point, providing guidance on social distancing, hand hygiene and the safe use of the facilities.**

Please can have I have 2019/20 revenue costs for all of Mid Sussex's 123 children's play areas (if possible split out between grounds maintenance, equipment maintenance/inspection, cleaning etc or other relevant headings used in the general ledger) and comparative year to date costs for 2020/21. Please state which month the year to date 2020/21 costs run to and whether these costs include any additional costs associated with Covid-19 cleaning/other measures. **We do not have a separate children's play area budget for grounds maintenance as it is all included in the overall contract costs. However, other playground costs are identified separately as follows:.**

<b>2019-20</b>		
Playground Repairs	£93,307.00	
Playground Inspections	£13,228.00	
Playground Alterations	£11,702.00	
Playground Malicious Damage	£3,926.00	
	<b>£122,163</b>	
<b>2020-21</b>		
Playground Repairs	£99,979.00	
Playground Inspections	£31,194.00	Includes commitment on system for £11,952
Playground Malicious Damage	£1,340.00	

Covid (Cleaning and signage)	£44,152.00	
	<b>£176,665</b>	

3. What is the actual year to date costs of additional Covid-19 cleaning/other measures for the children's play areas for 2020/21? Please state which month the year to date costs run to. **A year to date cost of £44,152 which covers up to w/c 25/01/21**
4. How much Grant does the council expect to receive from Government for 2020/21 to offset additional Covid-19 costs and how much has been allocated to offset the cost of additional cleaning costs/other measures needed to keep children's play areas open? **The Covid grant we receive is not specifically allocated to any service but to contribute to Council Covid pressures overall, so it is not possible to attribute a sum to playground cleansing costs. We have received Emergency Covid-19 non-ringfenced grant from MHCLG to date of £1,808,353.**
5. I would like to understand what criteria was used when deciding which children play areas would be opened and which would remain closed after the first lockdown. Please can I have copies of relevant documents or minutes which explain the rationale. **When identifying which play facilities to recommend for reopening and which to keep closed the Council took a strategic approach based on the following considerations:**
  - **Considering which are the Council's high profile play spaces**
  - **Ensuring coverage in each of our towns and villages (where not covered by a high profile play facility)**
  - **Looking at a distance buffer of over 1,000 metres (a twenty minute walk) from other play spaces**
6. Please can I have a list of all of Mid Sussex's children's play areas including address information. If the Council has a map showing the location of all of the children's play areas that would be very helpful. **The Council does not have an up-to-date map showing all its play areas, but they are all listed, with location details, on the attached spreadsheet. Please note the list also shows skateparks and adult fitness equipment sites, as these were treated in the same way.**

c) **Play England Letter to Local Authorities Website:**

<https://www.playengland.org.uk/letter-to-local-authorities-on-playgrounds/>

d) **Map of MSDC Playgrounds**

[https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1xHmDa\\_PE3fclmrY20A1QtJ2fZiLkkQI&ll=51.018450533400475%2C-0.0929302999999813&z=11](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1xHmDa_PE3fclmrY20A1QtJ2fZiLkkQI&ll=51.018450533400475%2C-0.0929302999999813&z=11)

e) **MSDC Playground List**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SSDnStC8DvGNpgyFYepQLN8pQPaua8xR/view?usp=sharing>