

Oakham Town Council Skatepark Working Group Feedback Report

A few years ago a group was set up to look at the viability of a skatepark for Oakham, this group included representatives from Rutland County Council, Oakham Town Council and young people from the skate community. Like many things, this group lost momentum with covid and the difficulty of finding a suitable location. Due to a loss of council engagement this group folded and the mission was picked up by local resident Jon Dixon who was determined to push the project forward for the benefit of the community. Jon's aim was to find a site and funding for an outdoor, free to access, concrete skatepark within the Oakham boundaries.

Jon Dixon approached Oakham Town Council in November 2021 to ask if there was any possibility of a skatepark being sited at one of the four recreation areas within Oakham that are owned or managed by us. One of the main criticisms that council receives about Oakham is that there are insufficient facilities for teenagers and so, after discussion it was decided that a working group would be created in order to assess the possibility of siting a skatepark in one of these areas.

Skateparks provide a community for many young people and all wheel sports build a sense of resilience, work ethic and confidence. Often, skateparks provide a place for those who struggle to belong or thrive in more traditional settings. An outdoor, free to access skatepark would offer young people a chance to take part in a popular evolving sport with all the benefits that brings. Council were very aware however that siting a skate park in on of these four recreation grounds would have an impact on local residents and regular users of the space.

With this in mind the working group was tasked to assess whether a skatepark would be beneficial to the community, the viability of offering space in any of the four recreation grounds owned or managed by Oakham Town Council and whether there were any other ways that the council could help the skatepark project. The working group felt strongly that residents opinions needed to be heard in order to bring detailed feedback to full Council. This has not been a formal, legal, obligatory planning process, that will only happen if Council agree, in principle, to offer land to be used for a skatepark, the working group has merely been exploring the idea in as much detail as we can. The working group was not put in place to identify or find alternative sites, it was asked to just consider the four recreation areas that are owned or managed by Oakham Town Council.

Initially the working group considered the response that Jon's campaign had received up to that point. When considering the four recreation areas Cutts Close Park was unanimously ruled out as an option. Although this site offers space and local parking, due to it being a site of historical interest there are so many restrictions in place that mean building a new skate park or even rebuilding a skate park using the existing footprint is not possible. Willow Crescent play area was also ruled out as an option. Siting a skatepark here would mean either the existing play equipment would be lost, or it would take a large percentage of the existing open space and would be located too close to the nearest residents. The group then discussed Centenary Field and Royce Playing Field and it was decided that basing the decision on the amount of free space currently available, safety, how close to residents the skatepark would be, percentage of open space that would be used and feasibility of building that Centenary Field was the most suitable location.

Whilst Centenary Field is in discussion as a possible location for a skatepark the precise location of a skatepark within the site has not been decided, this would be done as part of the planning and formal consultation process that would take place if Council was to decide that in principle a skatepark could be sited on Centenary Field.

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In June 2022 a survey was launched to gather feedback from residents about their feelings surrounding a skatepark in Oakham and whether it was felt that Centenary Park could be a suitable location. The survey was circulated online, promoted in local media and paper copies were sent to those residents living closest to Centenary Field.

In total, the survey received 489 responses with 81% of respondents in support of building a skatepark in Oakham. A breakdown of the survey results can be found in Appendix 1.

Feedback from the survey identified that the questions asked did not cover all issues and there were concerns that paper copies were not received by all local residents and so they had not had chance to share their opinions. Therefore the next stage for the working group was to hold some open sessions where residents were invited to attend to meet the working group, hear more details about the skatepark project and share any opinions they had. It was decided to hold two sessions, one at a weekend and one on a weekday evening, to try to enable as many people as possible to attend. These sessions were advertised online, through local press and local residents were invited to attend via hand delivered letters.

The open sessions took place in Oakham Town Council Chambers on Saturday 15th October and Tuesday 2nd November, they were facilitated by Councillor Zoë Neelson and Jon Dixon and supported by most of the working group. Both sessions were well attended with lots of residents coming to share their views. On the 15th October over 50 people were present and on the 2nd November approximately 100 people were there.

The open sessions received a considerable amount of feedback, both positive and negative. There was a strong feeling of support for a skate park but local residents, particularly in the first session, expressed many concerns about Centenary Field being a suitable location. A breakdown of the responses shared in the open sessions along with emails and letters sent to the working group can be found in Appendix 2.

In order to make a recommendation to council the working group produced a matrix outlining the arguments for and against siting a skate park on Centenary Field. This can be found in Appendix 3. The working group spent a long time going through the feedback received and deliberating the issues outlined in the matrix, the purpose of these discussions were to decide whether the concerns raised could be mitigated in any way and therefore whether the group felt that was a reason to vote for or against a decision in principle to site a skatepark on Centenary Field.

Noise – The working group felt that mitigating factors can be put in place to combat noise but there is no denying there will be additional noise created which will have an impact particularly on local residents. It was decided therefore that this point would go against siting a skatepark on Centenary Field.

Visual - it was felt this went for the skate park as whilst there would undeniably be an impact on the site visually the project and Oakham Town Council could endeavour to make sure the impact is kept to a minimum, similar to the image below.



ASB/Crime - it was felt that the for and against concerns and feedback cancelled each other out. Evidence, research and reports that are available are conflicting as there is actually no firm evidence either way which states that skateparks either increase or decrease ASB and/or crime in the area. The working group acknowledged that there is already ASB around Centenary Field and that wherever a skatepark was sited a possible increase in ASB should be considered. It was felt that the council needs to continue to work with local agencies and residents to combat ASB wherever it occurs.

Memorial - it was felt this went for the skate park as the memorial status would not change or be removed, in fact the group felt the memorial could be enhanced by making it a proper garden of remembrance.

Litter & Graffiti - it was felt that this went for the skate park as whilst it is acknowledged litter will increase and graffiti may be an issue these can be mitigated and managed particularly because it will be managed and monitored by the town council. They group discussed the possibility of allowing local graffiti artists to put designs on one specific part of the skatepark, this is something that has been done in other areas and is thought to encourage local artists whilst protecting the site from further graffiti.

Lighting- it was felt this went against the skate park as residents complain both that there will be lighting and that there won't be lighting. There are other lighting issues that would need to be addressed at a planning and design stage but currently we can not mitigate any concerns about lighting.

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Site Safety - it was felt this went for the skate park as any safety concerns would be properly addressed at a planning and design stage, it was felt there were no immediate safety concerns that at this point would prevent us from saying yes in principle.

Why Skatepark? - it was felt this went for the skate park as there has been a clear show of support and a demonstrable need. Whilst it is acknowledged there are other facilities that residents would like to see, e.g. a swimming pool, these are, unfortunately, out of our remit.

In conclusion, the group decided to recommend to full Council that they vote to agree in principle that a skatepark can be sited on Centenary Field subject to any planning restrictions and formal consultation during the planning stage.