1. Introduction

1.1 Following a number of complaints the cabinet on 6th November 2001 asked the overview and scrutiny committee to review the issue of skateboarding in the town. This report sets out the findings of the working group along with a number of recommendations for the overview and scrutiny committee to consider and to forward to the cabinet. The working group would like to thank all those individuals who took time to come along to the working group meetings and the assistance they gave in drawing up this report.

2. Conclusions and recommendations

2.1 Skateboarding is a sport which should receive proper recognition. The majority of young people who partake in the sport are well behaved and have no criminal intent. It is recognised that skateboarding in the town centre is disruptive but young people are attracted to the town scene landscape. Skateboards are also a means of transport for some people which can also bring them into conflict with pedestrians.

2.2 The working group recommend the following actions:

2.2.1 The council recognises skateboarding as a mainstream sport and considers supporting its development as it would any other sport eg football, cricket etc.

2.2.2 The skateboard park in Pittville Park should be refurbished. Plans have already been produced and approved although currently there is a shortfall in the budget. Sponsorship should be sought from local businesses to improve the facilities which may include street furniture.

2.2.3 Periodically the police should use the mobile CCTV facility to monitor Pittville Park skateboarding park to discourage nuisance from non skateboarders. Parks officers also need to be able to respond to incidents or be aware that there may be conflict from time to time. Litter and especially glass needs to be cleared promptly.

2.2.4 During school holidays a skateboard development worker should be employed to work at Pittville Park to encourage young people to skate responsibly and to discourage other young people from causing a nuisance. They could also look at “hotspots” in the town centre that may be causing concern to the police, pedestrians and businesses. Funding for the post should be sought from either sponsorship or from grant funding.

2.2.5 A Skateboarders charter should be developed with the co-operation of skateboarders which will encourage young people to skate responsibly, setting out both their rights and the rights of others. It should also outline what commitments CBC are prepared to make to develop the sport and keep the facilities maintained and updated. There is already a voluntary skate code at Pittville Park.
2.2.6 Young people want to have an area close to the town centre where they can show off their skills. The council should explore the potential of some form of facility on either the Whitbread/St Margaret’s site or Montpelier Gardens. The former could be linked to shops and other lifestyle activities associated with extreme sports, in the latter case it could be a simple skateboard friendly zone.

2.2.7 The council should look favourably on any proposal for an indoor skateboard / extreme sports facility within the town, and should encourage potential developers to come forward.

2.2.8 Smaller skateboard facilities should be provided in other parts of the town and as sites are developed the potential for a skateboard facility should be explored eg Sandy Lane. These sites should be developed in conjunction with skateboarders, their parents and residents.

2.2.9 Byelaws for skateboarding should be used as a last resort and only once adequate facilities have been provided in the town. However it is recognised that there is potential for a serious incident to occur should a skateboarder collide with a pedestrian. It may be considered necessary for a nominated officer(s) to approach skateboarders who pose a risk to the safety of themselves and others.

2.2.10 The council should continue to support the Ramp Users Group, which brings together officers and skaters to consider skateboarding, rollerblading and biking issues.

3. Remit of the working group

3.1 The working group was set up following a request by the cabinet for the overview and scrutiny committee to look at the problems of skateboarding within the town. The group comprised Cllrs. Prince, D. Hale, Moreton and Pennell. In addition a number of witnesses were called which included skateboarders, the police, the legal department, youth affairs officer, community parks officer, and property owners.

3.2 The group met on several occasions and the minutes are attached to this report. In addition officers have been contacted outside of the working group by skateboarders and parents.

4. Background

4.1 Skateboarding in the town centre has increased over the last few years and recently has become disruptive in that the police have received a number of complaints from the public, and owners of premises within the town centre. The problem increases during school holidays but activity does take place after schools as well.

4.2 Skateboarding is not a new phenomenon and has been a growing past time since the 70s. Extreme sports, such as skateboarding, attract a huge following of individuals and the associated lifestyle is now a multi-million pound business. Marketing and advertising executives now use skateboarding and other extreme sports to sell mainstream products. The number of purpose built indoor facilities in the country is increasing and people will travel to use such facilities.

5. Main findings

5.1 Young people enjoy skateboarding in the town centre because it provides new and exciting challenges. As the sport develops the skateboarders require different obstacles which enable them to enhance their skills. The pedestrian area of the town centre has flat paving slabs which provide an excellent base for skateboarding and steps provide a challenge.
5.2 The police confirm that most of the young people who are skateboarding in the town centre are well behaved individuals who have no previous history of trouble. Most if talked to are polite and will move on if requested to do so.

5.3 There are a number of young people who watch the skateboarders which gives the impression of a far greater problem. This combined with inline skaters and mountain bikers can give rise to the perception that there are a huge number of skateboarders, when in fact there may be far fewer.

5.4 The skateboarders have complained to the police that they do not like using Pittville Park because they have been intimidated and that there is broken glass on the skateboard park. The park is not covered by CCTV nor is it easily accessible for the police (a patrol car cannot just drive past - the officer needs to leave the vehicle as the skateboard park is not clearly visible from the main road). There is no evidence to substantiate the allegations but anecdotal evidence would suggest that there are problems for young people using the skateboard facility in Pittville Park.

5.5 Since the working group met the police have taken a far more proactive approach to patrolling skateboarding within the town centre and have indicated that they will prosecute. Previously it had been indicated that skateboarding in the town centre was not a high priority. If a complaint was made then the CCTV cameras would be used to monitor the situation. If a police officer did attend and ascertained allegations of intimidation at Pittville Park it is unlikely these would have been followed up because it is within a different Inspector Neighbourhood Area.

5.6 Byelaws are available but it is felt by both the police and the council’s legal department that if they are to be effective they must be enforced. This raises an issue of resources. (See Appendix 2 with details regarding byelaws).

5.7 Since the crackdown down by the police a number of parents have contacted officers setting out their concerns. They have indicated that they do not want their children to get into trouble and that they have stopped them coming into town. However they are concerned about the lack of facilities across the town and would be willing to support and assist any scheme to improve skateboarding facilities.

5.8 Since the working group met, officers have been working with a local skateboard shop to sponsor and improve facilities in Pittville Park. Parks and Landscape have arranged meetings with a local store manager with a view to sponsoring some of the changes being proposed at Pittville Park. At the time of this report no commitment has been made. There is a shortfall of about £5000 in the budget for redeveloping the site. £5000 has already been raised through the Young People’s Council, Parks and landscape and from the skaters themselves.

5.9 The Ramp User Group was first set up 4 years ago and re-established itself in 2001. It can help to get the messages to ramp users and gather feedback but it has no budget and relies on the goodwill of participants. This group has helped to deliver questionnaires to ramp users and residents and can recommend which facilities are most suitable. One of the group has designed the ramps proposed for Charlton Kings and Pittville.
6. Implications

6.1 Financial
There will be financial implications with some of the proposals as set out in the report but the working group are recommending that the council seeks sponsorship. If the cabinet choose to pursue the recommendations then they may need to submit a revenue budget next year before the work can be done if resources cannot be secured from other sources.

6.2 Legal
The council has a legal duty under s17 of the Crime and Disorder Act to address crime and the fear of crime.

The legal duties relating to byelaws are set out in the report

6.3 Personnel
There are personnel implications in that the working group are recommending a skateboard worker during the school holidays. There are currently no resources to undertake this task.

6.4 Equal opportunities, social justice and anti-poverty
The recommendations would address issues of social justice and equal opportunities

6.5 Environmental
The recommendations would aim to protect the built fabric of the town

Background Papers

Contact Officer
Jane Grunert, Head of Policy & Performance, 01242 264189, JaneGr@cheltenham.gov.uk
Following an introduction on the purpose of the group, Bret and Peter gave the members a brief history of skateboarding and the reasons for some of the problems.

Skateboarding has been around for about 25 years. Went through a low in 80s but regained popularity about 10 years ago with young people taking up street scene skateboarding. At that time shops were closed on a Sunday so young people could skate without interference.

Skateboarding is now viewed as trendy and has a lifestyle and culture associated with it. Mass media and business interest in extreme sports, skateboarding now used to sell products, television channels associated with extreme sports and huge industry selling clothing and associated products.

Skateboarding is still growing but will eventually reach its peak. It is an evolving sport, boarders always looking for new challenges which is why street-scene skating is popular.

The young people who participate tend to come from social groups A - C, as it is an expensive pastime. The majority are not rebellious or rude. They skate in town because it offers something different to the skateboard park and offers a challenge. Boarders can be intimidated by the people who sometimes “hang round” the skateboard park in Pittville. There is a perception problem with its location, and can some individuals/groups can be intimidating to an 11-12 year old who encounters a problem the first time they visit the site.

The young people who use the centre of town are of an age when their parents will let them come into town on their own. There are many more who will be skating in their own neighbourhood. People also use their boards as a means of transport.

Some people will travel to Cheltenham to skate as the centre of town, with its paving is ideal - very smooth and fast, and the facilities in the park are good. People are more than willing to travel to good skateboarding parks.
Real problem is the young people who associate with the skateboarders and want to be part of the culture. Only 7 or 8 actually skate in the quadrangle. It is the other 10 to 13 who are perceived as a nuisance, and on occasion will be drinking. (However the businesses may say that it is skaters who cause the problem if staff are concerned they may be hit by someone travelling on a board)

Skateboarders want a dialogue with the council, to discuss how to address skateboarding in general. They are keen for the council to view skateboarding as a mainstream sport - it is not a fad that will go away. Many skateboarders have been participating in the sport for over ten years and there is a growing number of those who are in their 20s and 30s and still skate. They cannot represent all skaters who tell other skaters what to do but they can advise and send out message to skating fraternities that certain behaviour may go against them in the long term

The ideal solution will be to have a covered area which will allow for flexibility in design of ramps and usage. Needs to be suitable for those of all ages and experience. Participants would pay (providing not too expensive) for a good facility. It was recognised that there is probably further research to be done ie on numbers of participants, and on what facilities boarders require, location and cost.

It was agreed that Bret and Peter would provide the working group with the following information:

Examples of skateboard parks with attendance figures, catchment areas and admission costs

Meeting closed 6.30

Date of next working group - Monday 14th (Police and legal services to attend)
PC Andy Cooke circulated copies of nuisance reports for the last 12 months and a paper outlining some of the issues from a police perspective.

It was noted that the incidence of nuisance rises in school holiday periods but the police perceive it is a growing problem.

Concern was expressed that if there is an incident and someone is injured they may make a claim under Section 17 Crime & Disorder Act, stating that the police and local authority were not doing enough to address disorder.

Need to look at alternatives - safe location covered by CCTV. Need to open a dialogue with young people.

Pittville Park is not an ideal site as it is difficult to police. The patrol cars cannot simply drive past as the site is away from the road.

Calls of nuisance are not treated as high priority by the police. The town centre and Pittville are covered by different police areas. If a young person skateboarding in the town indicates that they have been threatened by youths at Pittville Park, it is unlikely this will be followed up because of the different police areas.

The Police have a mobile CCTV unit. They could station it in Pittville Park for a period of time.

Karen Doyle explained that there are problems with litter and damage in Imperial Gardens near the end where the quadrangle is used for skateboarding.

Peter Lewis explained that the council can issue bye-laws. (Report to working group circulated previously). However, he was concerned as to how such bye-laws can be enforced. There was some discussion abut the introduction of a voluntary code of conduct similar to the schemes introduced for buskers.

It was agreed that Jane/Peter would find out from other local authorities whether they had managed to successfully deal with skateboarding in a town centre either by bye-laws or other solutions.
It was agreed that a visit would be arranged for the working group to visit the CCTV control centre.

Action: Jane/Peter

It was agreed that Jane would contact the developers of the Whitbread site with a view to their interest in providing facilities on the site.

Action: Jane (Trevor Gladding)

It was agreed to speak to Sonia Phillips about the possibility of a holiday scheme / competition / festival for skateboarders.

Action: Jane (Sonia)

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Present:

Councillors - D. Hale, Moreton, Pennel and Prince

John Ryde Commercial - Timothy Smith

Officers - K. Doyle and J. Grunert

Cllr. Prince advised Mr Smith of the purpose of the meeting, and indicated that the working group had already met with users, the police and the council's own legal section. He said that the working group had listened to the views of the users and had a better understanding of why the young people were using the town centre. The working group are keen to hear the views of a business directly affected by skateboarding being undertaken close to the premises.

Mr. Smith said that he was speaking on behalf of the companies that occupied the offices in the Quadrangle, 95 Promenade and St James Square. He advised that the problems have grown during 2001, and that it came to a height during the autumn half term which was when he had officially complained to the council. He recognised that the flat slabs provide an excellent skateboard area but that the noise is intrusive particularly for those offices facing onto the street.

He indicated that the office workers were not anti skateboarding but that they are concerned about the noise and the possibility of someone being hurt. Mr. Smith said that he had a duty to the tenants and therefore the company have decided to take action by pulling up the slabs. They are looking at different options which will provide a surface which is not suitable for skateboarders. He recognised however that this only moved the problem elsewhere but that he had a business to run and could not afford the risk of companies relocating.

Mr. Smith said that he had contacted the police but as it was private land they were unable to take action unless there was criminal damage. During school holidays he gets about 10 calls per day complaining about the skateboarders.

He recognised that the ramps provided for disabled access were an attraction to the skateboarders but any action to put a gate or other obstacle would also be an obstacle for disabled visitors and this was unacceptable.

He recognised that the skateboarders needed a facility and that they would like somewhere in the town centre.

Cllr. Prince thanked Mr. Smith for attending. He advised that all the information gathered would be brought together into a report and that it would be presented to the overview and scrutiny committee in March.