

Kirklees Council

Playable Spaces Strategy

1. Introduction by Cllr Mather and Cllr Khan

Kirklees Council is committed to ensuring that every child has the best start in life, that people live as well as possible for as long as possible and that we all have the opportunity to enjoy a clean and green environment. The experience of positive and creative play is an essential element of enabling our communities to achieve these outcomes.

Children play in many different ways and at many different times and places. For children and young people, play is more than just 'letting off steam'; it is what they do in their own time, for their own reasons. Through play, children are able to explore the world around them and learn to take responsibility for their own choices.

Play in the outdoors has the potential to have a large and important role in a child's physical, social and cognitive development. Active play helps to build physical strength, increase fitness and teach children vital life skills such as planning, negotiating, being creative and managing risk. It also provides opportunities for children to socialise with friends and their parents and carers, which can help to ensure secure bonding and strong attachments. Play is not reserved solely for children and young people - it should be encouraged at all stages of life - with many additional benefits experienced by individuals and communities from intergenerational play.

Our Council is passionate about enabling equitable access to play in Kirklees. This ambitious Strategy is our first step towards achieving this. By building on the great and diverse assets and opportunities to play we already have in Kirklees we can ensure that our communities are able to enjoy the fantastic opportunities which play can bring.

2. Vision and Aims

Our vision is a district where all are able and encouraged to access a range of opportunities to play outdoors, benefitting their physical and mental health and well-being as well as encouraging intergenerational interaction and community cohesion.

To achieve this vision the Playable Spaces Strategy aims to:

- provide a diverse range of high quality play spaces for people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds to access challenging opportunities for play, physical activity, contact with nature and social development close to home;
- encourage active play to help build physical strength, increase fitness and teach children vital life skills such as planning, negotiating, being creative and managing risk;
- improve the overall quality of the play offer throughout Kirklees, and the financial sustainability of the network, by reducing the number of equipped play areas with poor play value while maintaining the number of playable public open spaces; and
- provide a more effective approach to ongoing maintenance and management both within the Council and by fostering greater citizen involvement.

In order to achieve this we need to:

- Understand local inequalities in play;

- Identify physical and social barriers to accessing playable spaces;
- Enable communities to gain the maximum opportunity to access these spaces and to benefit from the wellbeing benefits delivered by active, imaginative and environmentally engaged play.

The Strategy seeks to instill lifelong habits of physical activity through play amongst the Council's citizens, recognising that this is generational change rather than short term intervention, with a commitment to co-producing and supporting communities and individuals in this programme.

The Playable Spaces Strategy is underpinned by the three key principles of Kirklees Council's Corporate Plan:

- **Working *with* people not doing *to* them:** Citizens and communities will be engaged as part of the delivery of the programme to ensure that both equipped play areas and non-equipped playable spaces meet their needs and to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility over their play spaces. Ongoing play engagement programmes will help us to understand local inequalities in play, local barriers to accessing playable spaces, and to address these issues in conjunction with communities.
- **Working with partners:** The Playable Spaces Strategy has been produced as a partnership between Parks and Greenspace and Public Health. Delivery of the Operational Plan will build on this partnership and link with other Council services such as Communities. Relationships with external voluntary and community sector partnerships will be built up through site-based engagement as well as through the delivery of an ongoing play engagement programme.
- **Place-based working:** Sites will be refurbished on a case-by-case basis, in conjunction with the local community, rather than applying a "one size fits all" solution, taking into consideration areas of deprivation, housing density, health inequalities and other local factors. The Playable Spaces Strategy is not just about providing physical places to play but also about gaining a better understanding of what physical and social factors influence the ability to access play, and how the Council can enable equitable access to play throughout Kirklees.

The Strategy will contribute to the delivery of a number of the shared outcomes in the Corporate Plan, including:

- ***Best start:*** Providing neighborhood environments and facilities that nurture children, offering them opportunities to explore their abilities, develop their skills and socialise both with their peers and intergenerationally.
- ***Well:*** Encouraging people of all ages to engage in physical activity and enjoy contact with the natural environment, contributing to good physical and mental health and well-being amongst our citizens.
- ***Sustainable economy:*** Improving the physical attractiveness of neighbourhoods by creating high quality green spaces, improving local property values and attracting events and other community activity and associated investment.
- ***Safe and cohesive:*** Ensuring all communities have access to safe places to play, providing spaces where communities can come together, and encouraging community stewardship over their play spaces.
- ***Clean and green:*** Ensuring all citizens have access to high quality, well maintained green spaces.
- ***Efficient and effective:*** Improving the efficiency of play area management within the Parks and Greenspace Service to ensure a future network of high quality equipped play areas and playable spaces which is financially sustainable.

3. Why is play important?

3.1 Benefits of play

Outdoor play has many benefits for children, families and the wider community. This subject area has been explored thoroughly in academic research, as detailed in Appendix A.

The benefits of outdoor play include:

- the opportunity to access and participate in physical activity for both children and adults;
- the opportunity to enjoy good mental health for both children and adults;
- opportunities for children to develop their creativity and to build resilience through risk taking, challenge and problem solving;
- the opportunity for children to enjoy social interaction with peers and adults;
- the opportunity to develop bonds and attachments between children and parents/carers;
- physical and mental health benefits of contact with nature; and
- providing a focal point for communities thereby contributing towards community cohesion.

The challenge:

- Across England, 24% of girls and 32% of boys aged between 2 years old and 15 years old are meeting national recommendations of at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day.
- 56% of the Kirklees population are overweight/obese.
- 22% of Reception age children in Kirklees are overweight/obese.
- 36% of Year 6 children in Kirklees are overweight/obese.
- There is a clear correlation between deprivation and use of local green spaces - more deprived areas are less likely to utilise their local green spaces.

Regular moderate physical activity, including walking and active play, can help prevent and reduce the risk of a number of chronic conditions including coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, obesity, mental health problems and musculoskeletal conditions; this can be achieved in many different forms, most of which can be provided through the provision of play opportunities. Active play is the most common type of physical activity that children take part in outside school. Unstructured play may be one of the best 'pop' forms of physical activity for children (British Heart Foundation 2009, *Couch Kids: The Nation's Future*).

UKActive's report *Turning the Tide of Inactivity* (2014) also suggests that reducing physical inactivity by just 1% a year over a 5 year period would save local authorities £1.2 billion. With Kirklees ranked 114th out of 150, with nearly 32% of people considered inactive, the associated cost of inactivity to Kirklees is £20,750.

3.2 Barriers to play

There are a number common barriers to outdoor play. These include:

- Traffic – the growing dominance of cars in residential streets restricts the space and opportunity for children and young people to engage in active outdoor play close to home.
- Negative attitudes towards children and young people playing in public spaces, with other members of the community finding this threatening or equating it with antisocial behaviour.
- Outcomes focused play provision - the replacement of free, self-directed play, with an increase in prescribed educational activities or childcare.
- Reduction in free time.
- Parental anxiety - perceived dangers, parental fear and lack of confidence can reduce the amount of time children spend in outdoor open space.

It is important to recognise that a child or family's ability to access and use play areas is influenced by a wide range of factors. This includes their relationship with their local environment or place -

how attractive it is, how safe people feel, the ease of walking or cycling – as well as perceptions of the meaning and value of play and local social norms. This can be broadly defined as the ‘wider determinants of play’ and is demonstrated below:



Kirklees Council therefore recognises that this Strategy is not only about providing physical resources but also about clearly understanding what physical and social factors influence the ability to access play – and how we can help break down barriers to enable equitable access to play throughout Kirklees.

3.3 National policy and guidance

Reference has been made to relevant national policy and guidance in the development of this Strategy. This includes:

- Fields in Trust's *Guidance for Outdoor Sport and Play* (2015)
- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG)
- Play England's guidance document *Design for Play* (2008)
- The Disability Discrimination Act (1995)
- The Equality Act (2010)
- Bob Hughes' *A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types* (1996)

3.4 Kirklees policy context

This Strategy links to a number of existing Kirklees Council policy documents:

- The *Kirklees Joint Health and Wellbeing Plan* (2018-2023)
- Kirklees Local Plan
- The *Kirklees Open Space Study* 2015 (revised 2016)
- *Kirklees Open Space Demand Assessment* (2015)
- *Kirklees Economic Strategy* 2014-2020
- *Everybody Active: Kirklees Physical Activity and Sport Strategy* (2015)
- *Kirklees Playing Pitch Strategy* (2015, under revision)
- *Kirklees Rights of Way Improvement Plan* 2010-2020
- *Walking and Cycling Strategic Framework* 2018-2030

4. Community Engagement and Desktop Study

To inform the development of the Playable Spaces Strategy a district-wide engagement exercise was undertaken to engage communities and other stakeholders in meaningful conversations about play in order to better understand their feelings about existing provision and their needs for the future play site network. A full report on this engagement and information gathering exercise is presented in Appendix C. This data was seen alongside the desktop work looking at current play provisions within the Council's ownership focusing on, among other factors, the current quality, compliance and play value.

The overall consensus was that the play site network should provide a balanced mix of traditional play equipment as well as alternative wild play and there should be more provisions for teenagers and older children.

In addition to the community engagement, a desktop study was undertaken comprising both data analysis and a mapping exercise to analyse current play provisions within the Council's ownership focusing on, among other factors, the current quality, compliance and play value. The full methodologies for these desktop exercises are presented in Appendix D, summarised below.

Playable Spaces engagement: key findings

- Lack of **teenage provisions** was the most common issue raised at the public engagement sessions by both teens and adults: in particular the need for sheltered areas, which are one of the main sources of complaints currently, and age-specific equipment. On only a couple of occasions were concerns about anti-social behaviour raised in relation to teen provisions, and these were usually from the teenagers themselves with regard to other teens.
- The need for **clarity and guidance on how and where people can play** was the next most frequently discussed topic at the engagement sessions. Within these discussions the issues of access to playable spaces in schools and forest schools were frequently raised.
- Respondents to the questionnaires agreed that the current play offer is limited in terms of opportunity for **varied types of play**. Only 25% believed that there were enough opportunities for different types of play.
- 60% of questionnaire respondents wanted to see **more natural play equipment** such as mounds, boulders, logs, tunnels etc. within the district along with more places that would facilitate imaginative and wild play including opportunities for den building, exploring, make-believe and adventure play.
- While there was strong support for a more diverse play offer that encouraged more types of play, it is recognised that there is still a desire for **equipped play areas** within the district as 50% of respondents wanted to see more manufactured equipment.
- Spenborough Trust Youth Parliament unanimously agreed that the play areas in the district are generally too small and 7 of the 8 members believed them to be too basic; **signposts to sites** were also suggested to enable people to find them.
- 6 out of 8 members of Spenborough Youth Parliament expressed an interest in the **wildlife** found in parks and a desire for learning and discovery opportunities. Linked to this was den making which was also a popular request.
- Amongst the primary age children in the lunchtime sticker survey voting trends suggested that the **most popular play features were not always manufactured pieces of play equipment**. Images of a traditional metal framed swing set received only 6% of the votes whilst the highest scoring play feature was a cluster of tall upstanding tree trunks, scoring 22%.

5. Strategy Recommendations

5.1 Site classification

The research undertaken in the development of this Playable Spaces Strategy, highlighted the need for a new **classification of existing play sites** which can be used to ensure a more diverse play offer across the district creating a strategic play network linked by playable routes. The following classification for sites is proposed together with their comparative Fields in Trust classifications:

- **Destination Parks** (Neighbourhood Equipped Areas of Play - NEAPs): *Characteristically large playable spaces. They offer a high play value through diverse and through-age play opportunities, include a wide variety of both manufactured and natural play features, and may also include additional facilities such as formally planted areas, skate parks/wheelparks, bandstands, toilets, cafes or picnic areas.*
- **Community Play Areas** (Local Equipped Areas of Play - LEAPs): *Offer a high play value with through-age and inclusive play equipment, whilst also maximising use of the whole site and aiming to encourage and facilitate wild and imaginative play for all ages and abilities by incorporating a range of natural features and materials.*
- **Doorstep Playable Spaces** (Local Areas of Play - LAPs): *Pleasant smaller spaces that are designed to be flexible and adaptable, generally located within close proximity to residential properties to encourage independent travel. These sites will not include manufactured equipment but will encourage and facilitate informal play in the context of their surroundings.*

5.2 Kirklees Play Standard

A **Kirklees Play Standard** is proposed to guide both internal (Council led) site development and for use in planning decision-making, in conjunction with the Fields in Trust Guidelines. The Standard, presented in full in Appendix H, takes into account both the community engagement findings and national guidelines. It incorporates the themes in *Design for Play* as its core principles but takes these further, with a commitment to provide playable spaces which are:

- designed for all user groups and all ages (not just for children);
- designed within the context of their environment;
- well connected with the wider community;
- encouraged to be smoke free;
- designed to complement other local play spaces, such as to offer a diverse range of play opportunities across the whole of the district.

The Standard also offers guidance on other key design considerations when refurbishing or designing new play spaces, including issues relating to risk, boundaries, equipment choice, accessibility, natural features and playable routes.

5.3 Improvement programme

Full details of the proposed improvement programme are provided in the accompanying Operational Plan. This covers the locations and actions on the existing play network to enable it to deliver the Strategy.

5.4 Play engagement programme

To enable the infrastructure to meet its full potential an engagement programme will be delivered at selected play area or playable space sites in conjunction with their redevelopment. These projects will aim to:

- work towards gaining an in-depth understanding of barriers to play in each local area and addressing these in a bespoke manner at each site, and

- embed positive and creative use of whole sites, offering a range of activities as part of each project to encourage the whole community, including hard to reach groups, to engage with a site.

In addition to the activity programme on offer, each project will aim to recruit local volunteers as Play Area Guardians - as local community 'champions' for sites - in order to foster a culture of local stewardship. Play Area Guardians will be offered ongoing support once the projects are complete from existing volunteer networks such as Friends groups and Kirklees Council Volunteer Officers.

5.5 Ongoing risk management and maintenance

Alongside the implementation of the improvement programme an improved and rationalised playground inspection and maintenance regime will be introduced. This will ensure a compliant and robust risk management framework is in place and that the new network of high-quality play areas is well maintained into the future. Full details of the proposed new Playground Inspection Policy are set out in Appendix I.

6. Strategy Monitoring and Review

Ongoing monitoring of the Playable Spaces Strategy process and outputs will be undertaken to ensure continual refinement of the improvement programme and capturing of lessons learnt to inform future work. Findings from this review and monitoring process will be disseminated within the organisation, including to elected members.

It is intended that an operational plan is put into place to enable the realisation of the recommendations and to enable Kirklees to achieve the aims and objectives as set out in this strategy.