


Play Park Strategy & Action Plan



Ro-innleachd &
Plana-gnìomha
Phàircean-cluiche

2023-2033



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Executive Summary

Geàrr-chunntas Gnìomhach

The importance of children being able to access play parks and meet their friends was brought into focus during the COVID-19 periods of lockdown. Various pieces of research are now concluding on how the impact of this has affected the development of children and in particular the effects on their mental wellbeing.

The strategy is underpinned by the findings from a recent survey “Let’s Talk About Play Parks” (**Appendix 1**) which involved seeking the views of all ages of the community throughout Highland, from nursery aged children to adults.

This strategy addresses many different factors and is framed around the approach set out below.

The vision for the future of play parks is child-centric and community minded but also set out in the context of financial challenges, and the importance of securing funding out with the Council to deliver the vision.

Our philosophy is:

Play parks are a place where all children can intrinsically learn about their own abilities and how to progress those abilities independently, at their own pace, free from benchmarks and competitive pressures.

Our vision is:

To provide children and communities with the opportunity to design their own sustainable and inclusive play parks, within the constraints of ongoing financial pressures.

Our mission is:

To increase children’s health and wellbeing through playing in the outdoors.

Our guiding principles are:

1. Inclusiveness
2. Creative, progressive, and independent play
3. Holistic play – supporting the senses, play is the work of a child
4. Creating sustainable play parks

Our children’s guiding principles are:

(Taken from community questionnaire results)

1. Working equipment
2. Varied all age/ability equipment
3. Safe
4. Well maintained
5. Close to home

Our family’s guiding principles are:

(Taken from questionnaires)

1. Working equipment
2. Varied all age/ability equipment
3. Safe
4. Well maintained
5. Close to home

Our opportunities are:

1. Our natural and varied landscape
2. Additional one-off funding from government
3. Our extensive community organisations
4. Our extensive business organisations
5. Upcoming business and housing developments
6. Upcoming council initiatives

Our strengths are:

1. Friendly and passionate communities
2. Resilient communities
3. Communities investment attitude towards our children’s health and learning
4. Highland children want to play outdoors more

Our challenges are:

1. Wide spanning area and remoteness
2. Weather
3. Play equipment is reaching end of life
4. Council Maintenance budgets do not cover costs



Introduction

Ro-radh

The Highland Council actively supports children and youth by valuing, protecting, and developing their individual and unique skills as they journey towards learning the skills of adult life and the workforce.

During COVID-19 youth socialisation and play park play were restricted. Children were encouraged to stay indoors to keep safe. We are only now beginning to see the effects this lack of socialisation and 'learning through play' has had on children's physical, social and mental health development. The Highland Children's Services Plan 2023-2026 identifies

that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) have been under pressure since COVID-19. In Highland, 1 in 5 children are affected by poverty, 30% of young people did not feel they were achieving their potential and 43% of children were identified as having additional support for learning needs.

www.forhighlandschildren.org/index_76_3582374046.pdf

One thing that all children know what to do well, and is totally self-directed and free, is to play.

Play parks and schools are the main locations of play for children of all ages. The Council's 319 free play parks (**Appendix 2**) are an important environment to support children's physical and emotional learning. They are easy to get to, safe, free to access and easy to meet friends in. "Play is the highest form of research" (Albert Einstein). Play parks support children in learning to develop adult and workforce skills such as negotiating, communication,

building positive relationships, creativity, teamwork, problem solving, resilience, knowing how to have fun, and community belonging. Such skills help create young intrinsic learners, many who will remain in our communities through their innate sense of belonging to our amazing region. Interestingly, The World Economic Forum list those skills amongst the 10 most important skills for future jobs.

www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/future-of-jobs-2023-skills

By carefully designing play parks for all children, with children, we can support important educational, social, psychological, and emotional life skills which children and youth need to acquire to successfully transition into adulthood and the workforce. Due to COVID-19, our current youth may have gaps in their progressive adult skills, and we acknowledge that it is important to help bridge those gaps and ensure future youth have continual, regular play opportunities through using our play parks. **Appendix 3** "Bringing it back to the child" explains the benefits to children of providing local play parks as well as explaining how children learn through the art of playing in play parks.

The information overleaf provides some background on our Play Parks.



Table 1:
Life Expectancy of Play Equipment

Life expectancy	Number of pieces	%
<12 months	59	3
1-3 years	168	8
3-5 years	496	24
5-10 years	837	40
>10 years	523	25
Total pieces of Equipment	2083	100%

Table 2:
Life Expectancy of sites with Play Equipment (based on most of the equipment at a site)

Life expectancy	Number of Play Parks	%
3 years	30	9
5 years	70	22
5-10 years	149	47
>10 years	70	22
Total number of Play Parks	319	100%

The key objectives for this Strategy are:

- Play areas to be safe;
- Play areas to be inclusive – both in design and use;
- Play areas to be environmentally sustainable;
- Play areas to be financially sustainable;
- Increased collaboration with children and youth on the design of their play parks; and
- Complete Play Sufficiency Assessments.

Part 1

Pàirt 1

Intergration with Local, National
and International Guidance

Amalachas le Stiùireadh Ionadail,
Nàiseanta agus Eadar-nàiseanta

The following strategies have been referred to when developing the Play Park Strategy:



Integration with National and International Guiding Documents

The Scottish Government's Manifesto

In 2021 The Scottish Government (SG) made a manifesto commitment to renew play parks across Scotland, so all children could have access to quality play in their own communities. The SG allocated £60m across Scotland over 5 years, £2,918,000 to Highland Council from 2021-2026 (**Appendix 4**, allocation of funding). Funding is required to be used to improve play park and play area opportunities (equipment, access, ground covering, toilets, nature play etc); it cannot be used towards maintenance costs. We are also required to follow the SG "National Principles for Play Park Renewal" (**Appendix 5**). The Scottish Government have extended the importance and requirements for local authorities to provide quality play, for all children, by being one of the first countries in the world to consider incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots Law.

www.gov.scot/news/renewing-scotlands-play-parks-1

Scotland's Play Strategy

In conjunction with the SG manifesto funding, the SG and Play Scotland produced a strategic document called 'Scotland's Play Strategy' along with an Action Plan. The strategy has been written to support local authorities to improve play opportunities within their regions for all children under the age of 18. Scotland's Play Strategy protects a child's right to play within their community and identifies and acknowledges that "Children's play is crucial to Scotland's wellbeing; socially, economically, and environmentally for Scotland as a whole. Our people are our greatest resource and the early years of life set the pattern for children's future development". This correlates with our first objective of improving health and wellbeing outcomes for all children and youths through the provision of sustainable play parks.

www.playscotland.org/policy/play-strategy

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The Scotland Play Strategy has been written in alignment with many national and international guiding documents including the Equalities Act, Disability Discrimination Act and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued recommendations to the UK and Scottish Government following a recent review. The Scottish Government (SG) adheres to those recommendations of:

- Develop a strategy, with sufficient resources, aimed at ensuring children's right to rest, leisure and recreation, including free outdoor play;
- Strengthen measures to ensure that all children, including children with disabilities, young children, children in rural areas and children with disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, have access to accessible and safe public outdoor play spaces;
- Involve children in decisions regarding urban-planning processes, including public transportation, and the development of spaces for children to play (No. 48 Full Report);
- A summary of the UNCRC Articles and how they can relate to play park provision is provided in [Appendix 6](#).

National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)

The majority of SG and Highland Council's Strategies and Frameworks focus on the need to create better health and well-being outcomes to communities through creating aesthetically pleasing recreational green spaces where people can exercise, relax, and congregate in. When discussing forward planning cities, towns, and villages, we note play park and leisure provision is mentioned in most of our leading documents. Play Parks are one of our most major and largest assets regarding recreational spaces, family play spaces and health and wellbeing outcomes which is why now is the time to invest in them. Evidence suggests children living within one kilometre of a play park were 5 times likelier to be a healthy weight than children who lived further away from play parks. Subsequently, this Play Park Strategy has been designed around Health and Wellbeing Outcomes.

In doing so, it will support 10 out of 14 themes identified within the Place Standard, thereby supporting the Six Qualities of Successful Places outlined in NPF4 Policy 14 (Design, quality and place), Policy 15 (Local Living and 20 minute neighbourhoods) and Policy 21 (Play, recreation and sport).

[Appendix 7](#) describes how our newly designed play parks will actively support those themes.



Strategy Development Leasachadh Ro-innleachd

Community Engagement

Extensive professional and community engagement has contributed to this strategy.

Play Highland

The play strategist co-chairs this working group. The purpose of the group is to work collaboratively to improve play opportunities across all sectors using Scotland's Play Strategy as the focus. Members include Planning Department, Education, NHS, Third Sector, Disability Groups.

Planning Department

Creating close ties with the Planning Department has been instrumental in the extensive work required for the PSA's. A joint approach with Planning will support the shared goal of ensuring new housing developments are equipping play parks to the required standards, amongst other goals.

Others

Other Council Departments which collaborated closely and have influenced this strategy have been numerous but include Education, Educational Psychology, Play Technicians, Landscapes for Play, Community Food Growing, HighLife Highland Rangers, Play Scotland, Third Sector Groups and numerous Play park professional groups. Consultation has taken place with over 100 children when discussing Whin Park and various other individual re-developments.

Play Equipment Suppliers

We have liaised closely with various play equipment suppliers. Sharing the basic concepts of Net Zero and Inclusivity with them. Positive changes in the designs being presented.

Professional Sharing of Best Practice

The play strategist will continue to share and present to other Councils on newly developed PSA's at the Open Space Strategy Workshop and the Park Managers Forum.

Children and Youth School Surveys

We have consulted with over 100 children when discussing Whin Park and various other individual re-developments. A simple PowerPoint presentation has been created to inspire children to really think about what they want to see in their play parks. Children and youth appear to be annoyed by equipment breaking/not getting fixed and vandalism. They wish for simple equipment and more holistic equipment.

Site Visits and Community Members

The play strategist has begun supporting communities with choosing appropriate equipment and managing equipment suppliers. This has been done through onsite visits with community members.

Net Zero

Working alongside Highland Council's Climate Change and Energy Team to ensure planning, designing, and purchasing of the best equipment to support net zero. Liaising with industry experts from the Institute for Infrastructure and Environment for their recommendations on equipment that will support Net Zero most efficiently.

Literature Review and Questionnaire

We expect our Literature review and questionnaire to become part of a worldwide sharing of informative Research.

Literature Review

An evidenced based approach to our Strategy

Play is fundamental to the healthy development of children, partly because it enables them to learn how to engage with and interact with their environment (Veitch et al., 2020). One primary way that children engage in play is through the use of play parks. It has been established that play parks hold significant value for children providing an essential space where they can encounter challenges, engage in sensory experiences, social interactions, and imaginative play (Prellwitz and Skar, 2007). Play parks also have many positive secondary benefits on children's health, wellbeing, and development (Seltenrich, 2015). Using an evidence-based approach, we outline how play parks enhance children's health and wellbeing by promoting physical activity, development and cognition, social skills, and how they form social connectiveness amongst communities. For the full literature analysis, please refer to [Appendix 9](#) and [10](#).

Table 3: Summary of Main Findings

Physical activity	Play parks increase the level of physical activity in children, which results in: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lower levels of obesity• Lower levels of mental health conditions
Cognition and development	Cognition and development are supported using play parks.
Social skills	Play parks promote a various range of social skills, which leads to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning skills such as teamwork, conflict resolution, empathy, and emotional understanding• Decreased levels of racism and prejudiced attitudes
Inclusive play parks	Inclusive play parks help: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Non-disabled children learn empathy, acceptance, and social understanding• Disabled children to be included and form social networks
Social and community networks	Social networks for both children and parents can flourish through play parks, which is essential in our rapidly changing world.
Socioeconomic health gradient	Play parks can help to reduce the socioeconomic health gradient between low SES (socio-economic status) and high SES children, resulting in better health outcomes.
Features of play parks	Children enjoy play features which have: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• An element of risk and adventure• Nature based play

Table 4: Developing Workplace Skills, at every child’s individual pace

Cooperation	Many playground activities require children to work together, such as pushing a swing, playing team games, or pushing each other on a roundabout together. Through cooperative play, children learn to share ideas, learn from each other, achieve common goals, and work in teams.
Shared spaces	Play parks are communal spaces where children from different backgrounds come together to play. This diversity encourages children to interact with peers they might not encounter in other settings, promoting inclusivity and social awareness. This is a prominent example of the application of Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis, where contact between various groups of people reduces prejudiced and discrimination.
Conflict resolution	Play parks are not immune to conflicts and disagreements between children. Learning to navigate conflicts and find peaceful solutions is an essential social skill which children develop through interactions with others in the playground.
Empathy and emotional understanding	Interacting with peers in the playground exposes children to a wide range of emotions in themselves and others. Empathy and emotional understanding grow as they respond to the feelings and needs of their playmates.
Inclusivity	Inclusive play parks, designed to accommodate children with various abilities, promote interaction between children with and without disabilities. For typically developing children, this encourages empathy, acceptance, and social understanding (Brown et al, 1956). Additionally, for children with disabilities, play parks promote social network inclusion. For example, one study revealed an association between social network inclusion and playground engagement in children with autism spectrum disorder (Santillan et al., 2019). In a similar vein, it is important to emphasise that every child, including children with disabilities, has the right to actively participate in community life (United Nations, 1989). Nevertheless, research has revealed that children with disabilities face obstacles concerning the accessibility and usability of play parks, as well as difficulties in social interactions with other children (Lynch et al, 2020). This underscores the importance of designing play parks that cater to the diverse needs and abilities of children (Dunn and Moore, 2005).



Strategic Vision for the future
Lèirsinn Ro-innleachdail airson
an Ama ri Teachd

Our research tells us that when people have easy access to local play parks it supports community cohesion and collaboration. In turn this supports adults and children to create local friendships and support networks so everyone can look out for each other and care for each other.

Continuing to work with an evidenced based approach, our vision is to create 3 different types of play parks – neighbourhood, settlement, and destination. This will begin over an initial 10-year period and will provide a framework for communities to consider and adopt as play parks are identified for renewal and when further funding becomes available.



Destination Park

- Within each Committee Area, it is proposed there will be one Destination Park
- Approximately 12 pieces of equipment
- Larger climbing frame which should have step/ramp access included
- At least 4 pieces of quality equipment which could be used by wheelchair users
- Increase of biodiversity, natural boundaries, natural play, quiet spaces and wheeling paths
- Community groups to contribute towards maintenance if they want extensive pieces of equipment
- Cost up to £250,000 (at time of writing and to be reviewed annually).



Settlement Park

- One in each settlement
- Approximately 10 pieces of equipment
- Larger climbing frame which should have step access included
- At least 3 pieces of quality equipment which could be used by wheelchair users
- Increase of biodiversity, natural boundaries, natural play, quiet spaces and wheeling paths
- Community groups to contribute towards maintenance if they wish for extensive pieces of equipment in regional town parks
- Cost up to £150,000 (at time of writing and to be reviewed annually).



Neighbourhood Park

- Sustain small neighbourhood play parks
- Replacing like for like
- Approximately 6 pieces of equipment
- Doesn't need to have a climbing frame but if it does it should be one to cater for all ages and abilities
- At least 2 pieces of quality equipment which could be used by wheelchair users
- Increase of biodiversity, natural boundaries, natural play, quiet spaces and wheeling paths
- Community groups to contribute towards maintenance if they want more equipment
- Cost up to £80,000 (at time of writing and to be reviewed annually).

There will be a place-based approach with Members agreeing which play parks fall into each category. Using an evidenced based approach from our literature research and engagements activities, and by involving communities and children in the design of play parks, we will aim to provide safe and inclusive sites that are environmentally and financially sustainable and increase all-age and ability play.

Transition to a sustainable future Eadar-ghluasad gu Àm ri Teachd Seasmhach



Table 5: Transition to a Sustainable Future

Play parks to be safe

A founding principle of the play park strategy is the provision of safe and accessible play parks, and we will continue our routine inspections of play parks.

Our equipment is continuously reviewed to meet Health and Safety Standards.

Sustainable Future:

We will seek funding opportunities and support communities to fundraise towards the replacement of play equipment. We will seek to recycle play items between play parks and 'repair over replace', where it is appropriate to do so.

Play parks to be inclusive – both in design and use

The Highland Council fully support all children's learning, health and development, no matter who they are or where they live.

The strategy will support a holistic approach to equipment provision so all children can develop their skills, at their own pace according to their own individual abilities. We will ensure the type of equipment, so as far as practicably possible, is inclusive; it will be physically accessible as well as accommodating children who are neurodiverse.

We are required to provide play for children up to the age of 18. We will review the way teenage play is provided. As play parks are redesigned there will be fewer segregated age play spaces which limits younger children's views of their capabilities and limits older children's ability to care for younger children. Younger children must have the opportunity to learn skills from older children by watching them and being helped by them. Equally older children need to learn adult skills of compassion, manners, kindness, and integrity to develop into a strong workforce.

Sustainable Future:

We will create a template for what constitutes the 3 different types of play park discussed above. This will outline equipment for all age, all ability local play parks. We will consider all aspects of inclusivity, close to home, pathways and surfaces, accessible equipment, natural play and collaborative play. We will engage with children in the design of play parks. We will aim that play parks meet the criteria for inclusivity and learning.

Play parks to be environmentally sustainable

This strategy supports the Council's Net Zero Strategy and the Performance Plan to reduce our environmental footprint. Classifying play parks to three different types (Neighbourhood, Settlement and Destination) will enable us to focus on reducing equipment, increasing natural play, increasing biodiversity, reducing plastic ground covering, recycling equipment between play parks, and repairing and extending the lifetime of our equipment so reducing what is sent to landfill. When procuring play equipment, we will consider the whole life cost and environmental impact of what we purchase.

Increasing natural play supports children in many learning outcomes which focus on children's senses, imagination and creativity. Natural play elements include sand, water, trees, flowers, bushes, pathing, grass, leaves, boulders, planting etc. Natural play is fantastic for enabling children to develop skills at their own pace, free from benchmarks and competitive pressures. An increase in natural play will require a Benefit Risk Assessment approach to play. We will create a Risk Assessment Management

System to support natural play. Increasing natural play will also support cost effective play parks by decreasing maintenance and renewal costs of fixed equipment.

Sustainable Future:

A 'whole life' approach will be taken when selecting play equipment and materials. Our strategy focuses on increasing biodiversity and natural play. Ground covering around play equipment will be of natural material where appropriate.

Play Parks to be financially sustainable

We have a duty to provide basic outdoor play and leisure. Our play parks are all different so require an individual approach which considers affordability and funding opportunities. This will differ depending on location, size, condition of play equipment and usage.

Budgets:

The strategy sets out the vision for a 10 year period. Capital funding of £2.9m is provided by the Scottish Government. It is important that additional capital and revenue funding opportunities are identified, and maintenance costs minimised.

Standardising Equipment:

Developing the principle of 3 types of play parks with guidance on the number and type of play equipment will contribute towards this. Research tells us children need local play and simple equipment. We will install fewer pieces of equipment with a focus on all-age, all ability equipment, and equipment which children will want to use again and again.

Sustainable Future:

We will support, encourage and work with communities that wish to fundraise to upgrade and enhance their park. We will look to increase sponsorship and advertising opportunities. We will investigate additional funding channels:

- **Cultural, Gaelic, Nature and Historical Funding** – enhance depth of play opportunities and learning to our parks.
- **Biodiversity** – increasing natural landscaping and natural aesthetics.
- **Planning Service** – working together to ensure new housing development play parks meet this strategy. Additionally, we will investigate potential greenspace play areas which we can promote.
- **Tourism** – investigate potential funding opportunities.
- **Professional Partnerships** – we will investigate ways of working together to enhance increased play opportunities through Highland e.g. High Life Highland, third sector, and other departments.

We will create templates for what constitutes a neighbourhood park, a settlement park, and a destination park. We will discuss and agree an approach to maintenance with Members and communities.

Increased collaboration with children on the design of their play parks

The success of the strategy depends on continuing to involve all stakeholders and children. We are required by the UNCRC and the Scottish Government to involve children in decision making regarding the communities in which they live in, and their thoughts on future developments.

Our literature search has told us that children's health and social outcomes can improve if they have access and can utilise a play park, near to where they live. It emphasises that parks don't need to have a lot of equipment, more just a safe place to hang out with friends. Play is not restricted to swings and chutes, having greenspaces that encourage children to run around is also important.

All our leading documentation discusses the need for accessible and equitable play. To improve accessibility and equity of play, we want to keep as many existing small local play parks as possible. This is consistent with the Planning Service's Department's National Planning Framework 4 and 20-minute neighbourhood.

Sustainable Future:

The strategy will help ensure collaboration with children as well as community groups. We will present information about budgets and sustainability to children in such a way they understand it and can have their voices heard on what they think is useful for their own play, in their own communities. We will develop a flowchart and model engagement tools to support consultation with children and community groups. This will ensure high play value equipment is installed. We will focus on Progressive Play by providing play environments where children can learn new skills, when they gradually develop in both the confidence and ability. A good example is an all-age and ability climbing frame. A toddler will be able to climb the steps and go down a low slide, but in time, many of them will be able to get to the highest point of the climbing frame and climb along a net or jump off a high point. There are lots of ways we can provide progressive play through equipment and creating natural play. A by-product of offering multi-age equipment is that younger children get to observe older children and older children need to use their manners to be mindful of younger children.

A web page has already been set up to assist communities:

www.highland.gov.uk/info/283/community_life_and_leisure/987/play_areas

Assessing our Estate (Play park Sufficiency Assessments)

The Council is required to provide Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSAs) to the Scottish Government. The Play Strategist and colleagues in the Planning Service have already developed an innovative, useable tool to assess each play park and its play quality and inclusiveness. The Highland Children's Services Plan states that 1 in 3 children under the age of 18 live in remote and rural areas and 1 in 5 children are living in poverty. Children living in poverty may not always have access to after school activities such as swimming, football, music lessons etc.

Sustainable Future:

We will continue to roll out the Play Sufficiency Assessment Tool (PSAs) so we can map all play areas and equipment and report on improvements in the quality of play provision. This will improve our ability to report on the condition of our play equipment as well as the play value each park delivers. We will continue the Member led review to prioritise play parks for retention and investment. Existing parks will, over time, be equipped with core equipment which can be supplemented by alternative funding opportunities from sources such as biodiversity, and tourism fund or businesses the way of sponsorship and advertising.



“Free the
child’s
potential
and you will
transform him
into the world”

Dr Maria Montessori

Conclusion and Action Plan

Co-dhùradh agus Plana-gnìomha

Through significant engagement, we conclude that:

- 1. Living close to a play park reduces disease and increases health, social and well-being outcomes.**
- 2. Along with schools, play parks are a major aspect of children's 'learning through play'.**
- 3. Children need simple and local play opportunities, not hugely fancy play parks, a long way from where they can't travel to independently.**
- 4. Children want more natural play, ball play and wheel play.**

Through the strategy 2023–2033, a long-term plan will be developed for all play parks for when funding is identified. The guiding principles are:

- **Play areas will be safe;**
- **Play areas will be inclusive – both in design and use;**
- **Play areas will be environmentally sustainable; and**
- **Play areas to be financially sustainable;**
- **There will be Increased collaboration with children and youths on the design of their play parks; and**
- **Completed Play Sufficiency Assessments will be prepared for the Scottish Government funding.**

This Play Strategy has been built and fully supports Natalie Don's (Minister of Children's Affairs) speech at the International Play Conference 2023:

"We must embrace and deliver radical change so we can tackle and adapt to climate change, restore biodiversity loss, improve health and wellbeing, build a wellbeing economy and create great places."

We have done this by presenting a vision of what play parks could look like in the future. Supporting future funding models for maintaining neighbourhood, settlement and destination parks, which allow children to learn the life skills they need to become adults with transferrable skills for our future workplace.



Play Park Action Plan 2023-2033

Plana-gnìomha Phàircean-cluiche 2023-2033

Table 6: Action Plan

Objective 1 - Play parks to be financially sustainable

What do we need to do?

1. Continue to work with stakeholders on plans to invest the Scottish Government funding, to 2026.
2. Continue to support communities to seek external sources of funding, and support communities to fundraise to improve play parks.
3. Discuss and agree approach to maintenance with Members and communities.
4. Liaise with Planning Service to ensure best outcomes for play parks within new developments.
5. Liaise with Education Service to establish supporting community play.
6. Develop a plan to create an equitable provision of play parks across Highland that can be implemented as funding becomes available.

Due/Review Date: Review April 2024

Responsibility: Amenities Managers

Objective 2 - Play parks to be environmentally sustainable

What do we need to do?

Support Net Zero

Reduce Waste by:

1. Continuing to repair, reuse, and recycle equipment.
2. When refurbishing a play park, apply the criteria for the classifications for that size and location of play park.
3. When purchasing equipment, consider the whole life cost and net zero target.

Increase biodiversity

4. Increasing natural play opportunities.
5. Create a Benefit Risk Management System.

Due/Review Date: Review April 2024

Responsibility: Amenities Managers

Objective 3 - Play parks to be inclusive, both in design and use

What do we need to do?

Develop a process to follow when planning to refurbish a play park:

1. Develop a tool kit for stakeholders on child development and the theory of play regarding play parks;
2. Refer to the Play Sufficiency Assessment to identify and address current gaps in inclusivity; and
3. Consider Active Travel Wheeling Paths for all wheel users.

Due/Review Date: Ongoing as and when parks are refurbished.

Responsibility: Play strategist

Objective 4 - Play parks to be safe

What do we need to do?

1. Ensure safety inspection and maintenance programme is implemented.
2. Create a Benefit Risk Management System.

Due/Review Date: Ongoing

Responsibility: Amenities Managers

Objective 5 - Increased collaboration with children on the design of their play parks

What do we need to do?

1. Produce educational material to support stakeholders understanding of child collaboration.
2. Develop an engagement toolkit for communities to use when engaging/collaborating with users of play parks.
3. Continue to co-chair newly established Play Highland working group.

Due/Review Date: Ongoing

Responsibility: Play strategist

Objective 6 - Assessing our Estate (Play park Sufficiency Assessments)

What do we need to do?

1. Create Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) Questionnaire.
2. Complete PSAs.
3. Analyse and Report to Members on PSAs.

Due/Review Date: December 2023, June 2024, November 2024

Responsibility: Play strategist

Appendices

Eàrr-ràdhan



Photo by Lynn MacGillivray, The Highland Council

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Appendix 1

Community Questionnaire

Let's talk about play parks – Analysis of community questionnaire

(November 2023)

Introduction

The questionnaire was developed to inform The Highland Council Play Strategy to support recommendations within the strategy. It was designed for all age groups to be able to complete, as they were able to. Photos were used for all school aged children to create conversations about what they liked playing on at play parks. Nursery aged children were asked fewer questions to retain interest. As well as photos, different coloured questions were used to support teachers and caregivers to guide beginning readers to complete the questions independently with their own thoughts and opinions. Teenage questionnaires intentionally had less questions but more open questions so as that age group could express their individual thoughts and solutions towards play parks. Adult feedback was equally important because we identify many children need adults to accompany them to the play park!

The distribution of the questionnaire was sent with a covering letter through all primary and secondary schools within Highland, as well as, Council Nursery's, CALA nurseries and Council contacts. We had a high return rate of 1151 responses. 49% were from primary school aged children, followed by 30% of over 18's (adults), 14% nursery aged and 7% secondary school aged children. By the amount of extensive additional comments from all age groups, we know the community are passionate about play parks as well as being keen for Council to hear what they have to say about their own communities.

The Play Coordinator and the Educational Psychology Department have analysed both the qualitative and quantitative data. The initial section in this analysis reports on quantitative data, followed by qualitative data. The quantitative analysis has been created with different colours and photos so it can be easily understood by most children and adults, with the qualitative analysis presented more formally leading to overall recommendations.

The full analysis will be shared as an annex within the Play park Strategy 2023-2033. The analysis will be sent out to all schools and CALA for teachers and carers to share with children and young people. In addition, will also be placed onto our website for public viewing and will be shared amongst professional colleagues.

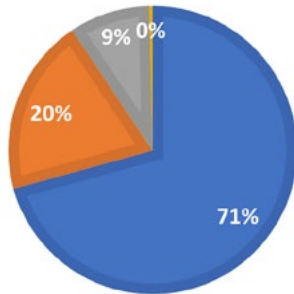
Lynn MacGillivray (Play strategist)

James McTaggart (Educational Psychology)

Interesting Highlights

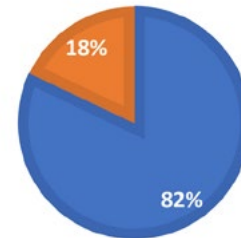
71% of children are playing outside daily

■ Daily ■ Weekly ■ Not much ■ Doesn't like playing outside



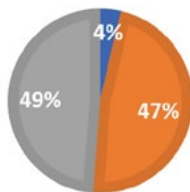
82% of people want more outdoor play opportunities

■ Teenagers and Adults



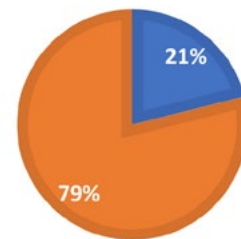
Only 3% of teenagers would like more indoor play opportunities, pending weather

■ Indoors ■ Outdoors ■ Depends on weather



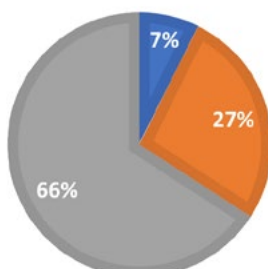
More parents than teenagers would prefer more indoor play

■ Indoor ■ Outdoor



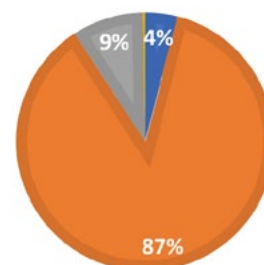
54% of teenagers think play in their village or town is 'boring'

■ Good ■ Ok ■ Boring with not much to do

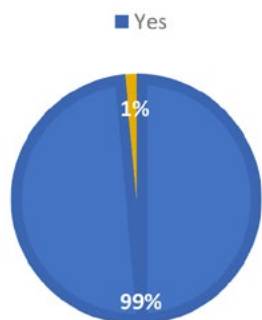


More adults than teenagers think there are not enough teenager play opportunities

■ No ■ Yes ■ Don't know



99% of people want more inclusive play opportunities so everyone can play together

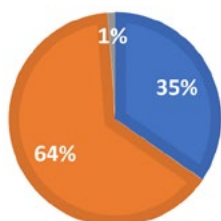


Prefer local play parks

- 59% - Nursery Age
- 45% - Primary
- 76% - Secondary
- 58% - Adults

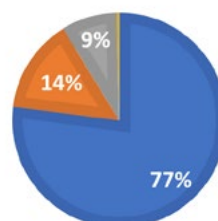
64% of people are using active travel to get to local play parks e.g. small wheels or feet

■ Car ■ Active Travel ■ Public Transport



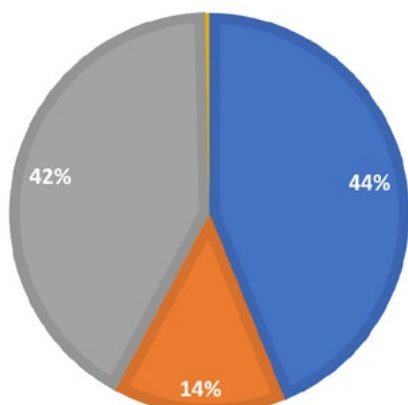
91% of parents would visit shops, community sites and visitor attractions if they offered free play

■ Yes ■ Maybe ■ No

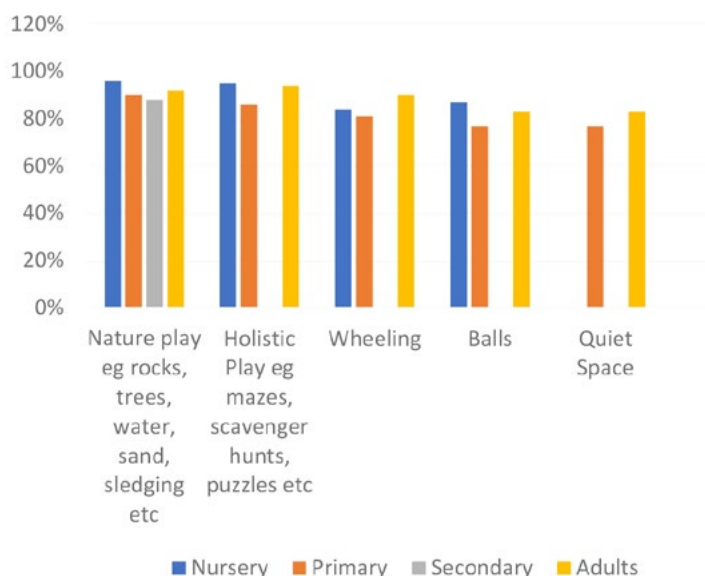


86% of parents said they would or may be keen to fundraise to improve play parks

■ Yes ■ No ■ Maybe



It's not just about swings and slides, children also like playing on:



Teenagers would like our help to have:

- all age and all ability equipment
- standard equipment e.g. slides, swings, spinning things etc...
- shelters and seating
- safe parks with cctv and lighting
- bike/skate stuff without it needing to be specific and extensive areas
- multi-purpose ball areas
- assault courses
- natural play e.g. trees, logs, boulders, water etc...
- fun stuff e.g. zip lines
- cool artwork – street art.

Parents with children who have difficulty playing in play parks would like our help to:

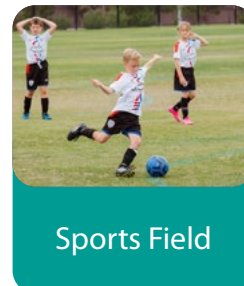
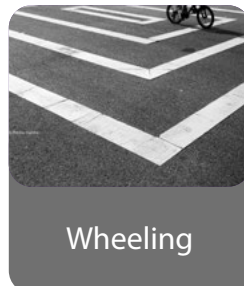
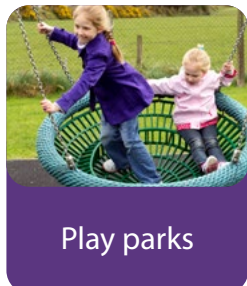
- generally improve play parks
- maintain play parks – repair equipment, clean rubbish etc
- create quiet spaces
- have fenced areas
- have sensory play
- create pathing
- include all-age and all ability equipment
- have wheelchair accessible equipment
- have more stimulating equipment e.g. puzzles etc...
- create local play parks which are easy to get to (and get home to)
- have lower climbing equipment (safety)
- have challenging climbing equipment
- be less focused on climbing equipment
- maintaining equipment
- keeping dogs on leads
- see more social interaction opportunities
- make allergy friendly signs not to allow food on play equipment
- assist communities fundraising for inclusive equipment
- have provision for adults (shelter, seating etc).

Section 1 - Quantitative Results

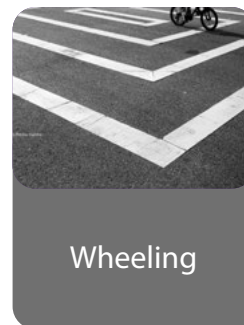
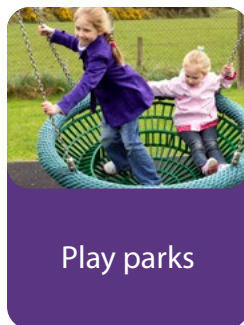
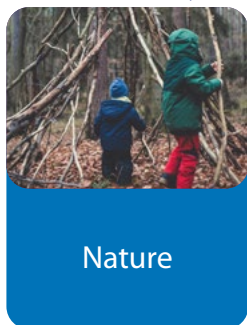
Favourite places to play

(Scale = 1st-5th favourite with most favourite starting first)

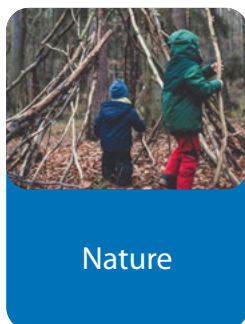
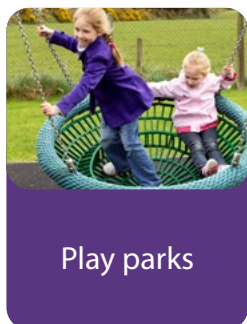
Primary Age



Secondary Age



Adults



Favourite stuff to play on

(Scale = 1st-5th favourite with most favourite starting first)

Nursery



Slides



Swings & Hammocks



Nature Play



Holistic Play
e.g. music, puzzles,
scavenger hunts etc...



Tunnels

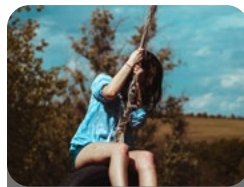
Primary Age



Swings & Hammocks



Climbing



Zip Lines



Slides



Nature Play

Secondary Age



Wheeling



Ball Sports



Shelters



Teenage
play stuff



Lights

Adults



Slides



Swings



Climbing



Holistic Play



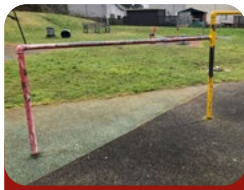
Tunnels

What people don't like about going to the play park

(Scale = 1st-5th favourite with most favourite starting first)



Broken Equipment



Equipment being taken away and not replaced



Rubbish and Vandalism



Older children being unkind



Local parks closing down

What people want play parks to look like

(Scale = 1st-5th favourite with most favourite starting first)

Primary Age



Colourful



Lots of different types of play



Safe and well kept



Inclusive



Nature Play

Secondary Age



Colourful artworks



Lots of different types of play



Shelter and privacy



Balls

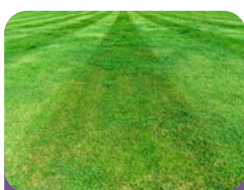


Inclusive

Adults



Investment needed



Safe and well maintained



Different types of play



Local



Inclusive

Interesting Facts about nursery aged children

- Play parks are their favourite play place
- Despite all children “loving” going to the play park, 63% of nursery aged children wanted to tell us about things that they didn’t like about going to the play park. Common themes were broken equipment, equipment not being replaced, vandalism etc. See section on qualitative data for further analysis
- Other enjoyable outdoor play ideas were wheels, building dens, water, sand and mud
- 44% children wanted to tell us more about their favourite outdoor play ideas. This means very young children think or hope their voices will be listened to.

What can we do about it?

- Have funds available to repair or replace equipment efficiently
- Support teenagers to be proud of their local play parks
- Create all age wheeling paths within play parks.

Interesting Facts about primary aged children

- Play parks are their favourite play place
- Despite 82% stating they “liked” playing in play parks, 72% of children had comments about what they didn’t like about going to the play park. They were similar themes to the nursery aged children of broken equipment, parks closing down, not enough equipment and vandalism
- Their vision of what play parks should look like is colourful, fun, natural, different types of equipment, accessible to all, planting.

What can we do about it?

- Have funds available to repair or replace equipment efficiently
- Ensure we have a mixture of local and destination parks
- Increase natural play opportunities with planting, boulders, trees, pathing etc
- Repaint old equipment to make it look inviting.

Interesting facts about teenagers

- 66% of teenagers thought their local play opportunities were ‘Boring with not much to do’ and 87% of parents thought there was not enough teenage play available
- 76% of teenagers wanted to play more at play parks
- 76% of teenagers told us they would get more use out of local play parks, close to home
- When asked what indoor or outdoor stuff teenagers would like, only one child gave an example of an indoor play idea. All other ideas were specifically outdoor ideas
- Teenagers want more wheeling, ball games, shelter, safety and age appropriate play park equipment.

What can we do about it?

- Create ways for teenagers to feel involved in the design and subsequently the ownership of play parks
- Increase teenage play opportunities within play parks with wheels, balls, shelter, cooler equipment and collaborative and competitive play.

Interesting Facts about Adults

- 98% of adults thought children enjoyed playing indoors, whereas only 3% of teenagers wanted to hangout with friends indoors
- Inclusive play percentages became higher the older and perhaps more socially aware people became
- Parents of children who had difficulty playing in play parks want more fencing and accessible and holistic play opportunities
- Similar to all age groups, parents in general want more natural play (boulders, logs etc) and educational and holistic play (scavenger hunts, puzzles, wheeling paths, mazes, nature boards etc...)
- 91% said they would visit businesses and tourist attractions if they offered free play opportunities to the local community
- 86% said they would consider fundraising to improve their local play parks.

What can we do about it?

- Increase accessible and inclusive play opportunities
- Increase natural, educational and holistic play opportunities
- Meet with business and tourist organisations to share this survey and support them in increasing play opportunities within the community
- Establish a way to connect with parents to support them in initiating fundraising opportunities.

Section 2 - Quantitative Results

Discussion of qualitative information received

Each age group from nursery age to adult was asked open-ended questions about their experiences of play parks and suggestions for improvement. This section shows the main themes that are found in responses, with illustrative quotations. Most themes were shared across age groups – where there are differences, these are highlighted.

The majority of all users preferred to have a play park, close to home where they could walk to. It must be noted, this supports Council with Net Zero by reducing car emissions. Only 3% of teenagers prefer to hang out indoors.

Theme 1 – Space to move

Children, young people, and adults all spoke of the importance of space to move about and do things in. For younger children this had a sense of adventure, including exploring, hiding and climbing, with many respondents enjoying building dens. Primary and secondary aged children and young people valued spaces in which to ride bikes, play ball and other games. A strong subtheme for primary and secondary aged people was that of active bodies – looking for scooter, bike or skateboard parks, multi-purpose areas for team games, as well as slides, climbing walls, zip lines and even fireman poles.

“I want somewhere to ride my bikes with bumps and fun things”
(Primary aged respondent)

Theme 2 – Things to do

Subtheme - age appropriateness

All age groups offered complaints that their local provision of play spaces did not have enough for their own needs. Younger respondents pointed to a lack of nursery aged equipment, reducing the scope for independence and suitable risk taking:

“Some of the play things are too big for me”

“Can’t climb the slides”

“I don’t like things that go too fast”

“the monkey bars are too high because i [sic] almost broke my neck”
(Primary aged respondent)

Some younger children experience difficulties accessing spaces when they are shared with older and larger young people. As one primary aged respondent commented:

“Big kids can be a bit rough and take all the play things”

Adults expressed a similar concern, with a degree of fear of teenagers on behalf of their children:

“Older kids/ teens are ruining the parks, putting the swings around so kids cannot get on them, horrid graffiti on kids play equipment, laughing at kids when they are playing ...”

Teenage respondents were, interestingly, aware of the needs of younger children:

“need separate area for young kids/learners so they don’t get hurt”

But they also, along with primary aged children, pointed out that they needed equipment suitable and big enough for them, as well as highlighting the developmental need mentioned under Theme 1 for larger spaces to move about in. Children overall balanced a desire for equipment and opportunities that matched their age and stage with a valuing of spaces where all ages could be together. One respondent highlighted a:

“lovely play park in Perth that has every[thing] for all ages”.

Subtheme – Enough to do

Putting these perspectives together chimes with a subtheme of there being enough things to do, both for the basic quality of the experience and to promote shared play without frustration or conflict as everyone has something interesting to do. This was a particularly strong theme for primary aged respondents:

“Most parks don’t have enough swings etc. Always only a couple and when busy during holiday periods. Your [sic] there waiting forever”
(Primary age respondent)

A nursery aged respondent told us that they had abandoned their play park:

“We just play on the hill because there’s nothing in the park to play on”

Theme 3 – Being together

All age groups valued play spaces, or would value them, as places to be together with friends and families. One primary age respondent said it should be:

“friendly for all kids and happy with lots of things to do, it makes my happiness bucket full to play with my friends”

Another remarked that:

“It’s about the other people who are there. If there are no people there the play park is boring.”

Secondary age respondents showed a balance of wanting space for teenagers to go and hang out, including with shelters for bad weather, with a desire for other spaces where ages and generations could be together, with “stuff that young and old can do”. Along with this, respondents called for benches and seating areas for families. Lack of these impact on the children’s experience of play:

“Sometimes there’s no bench or seats for my mum and baby sister to sit on while I play”
(Nursery age respondent)

This is not a need only for the adults, as children also highlighted a desire for,

“some benches so we can sit and chat if we want a break”,
underling the social aspect of play for all ages.

Adult respondents highlighted play parks and spaces as places to meet up, and that they should be

designed as:

“interactive spaces where all ages want to come together.”

Respondents also showed a desire for spaces to be inclusive. As one primary aged respondent remarked:

“not everyone can use all the stuff if they are disable or have disabilitys [sic] so not fun for everyone”

“I [sic] think it should be suitable for all ages and disabilities so everybody can have fun together.”

“I think play parks should have things for people that find it a bit hard to walk so they can play on the thing that other people can play on”.

(Primary aged respondents)

Another expressed the vision of a:

“a fun place that shod eve lots of stuff for kids and kids with disability’s [sic]”.

Theme 4 – Maintenance

Whatever is provided or available, the theme with the most related responses is this one – the need for it to be maintained. Adults pointed to a lack of investment, or a failure to allow for maintenance costs when making plans:

“Lack of investment has left our local play park with minimal equipment with most being phased out over the years. It’s boring, lacking interest with dangerous fencing. It’s not drained and the gates don’t close properly. A disaster.”

Parents are highly aware of the lack of safety of local spaces, whether through worn equipment or a lack of cleaning or care:

“I would love to be able to walk around the corner to go there with my toddler but the last time we went there was a bin tipped over, condom wrappers and condoms everywhere, fence planks with rusty nails all over the ground and all the play equipment is very the worse for wear. It’s gutting that this doesn’t feel like a safe place to take my child.”

Similar points are made by younger respondents, “I don’t like rubbish, broken bits” (nursery age), with glass, graffiti, weeds and very long grass also being mentioned, as well as unsafe equipment:

“I don’t like to fall off if the sea-saw handle is broken”

(nursery age respondent)

“I would [sic] like if play parks have clean areas to play in like no glass or dog poo”

(primary aged respondent)

Children also noticed that the effect of broken equipment tends to be that is it removed rather than replaced so that there is only “half a park left”. A secondary age respondent put it more starkly –

“our good park got taken away”.

Perhaps the clearest summary of the theme comes from a primary aged respondent:

“We would like all equipment to be fixed, more bins, more space for babies, more slides, more seats for people to sit on, and softer ground for a soft landing if we fall.”

Theme 5 – Natural spaces

This was a particularly strong theme for younger children, but also expressed by secondary aged respondents in a different way.

Young children talked often about nature, the enjoyment of being in woods and fields, and the affordances these provide for activities such as den building, seeing wildlife, watching or feeding ducks, picking fruit, having adventure walks - as well as all the things trees offer such as climbing, bouncing on branches, collecting leaves and making tunnels. It is not just a matter of having some natural spaces over against built parks – respondents also pointed to the need for play parks to be natural spaces with, for example:

“more trees for climbing”
(primary aged respondent).

Other aspects are basic features of the outdoors. One primary respondent simply wanted:

“A Hill to roll down in summer and sledge down in winter”.

For others, just being outside was what was wanted:

“for people to go out side more [than] play games on screens”
(primary aged respondent).

If we re-express the theme as ‘found spaces’ in the sense that they are not built or provided play parks, but just places such as fields, woods, beaches, etc, then the theme is common to all age groups. For teenagers the spaces also become a place to be, to be together, and to be out of the house. They also therefore needed to be safe spaces – as well as the need for shelter mentioned already, some respondents pointed to the need for lighting.

Theme 6 – Creativity

This is a double edged theme. For nursery and primary aged children and their adults it has a negative aspect, as concerns are expressed about graffiti, or older children repurposing equipment and thus breaking it.

Secondary aged respondents pointed in contrast to the need for their play to include creativity. This means opportunities for, among other things, graffiti and other forms of street art.

Theme 7 – Local efforts

This was a relatively thin but still important theme expressed by adult respondents, including points such as concern that the local authority had retreated from supporting play parks. Respondents highlighted the willingness of local groups to try and make improvements to play spaces, but also their limited capacity and knowledge:

“A local group has been formed to repair and reinvigorate the park but assistance from HC is non-existent”

“Community group is trying but will probably fail”.

Recommendations

The qualitative data is consistent with the messages that can be gained from the statistical analysis, and recommendations that can be made include:

- Design spaces with children and young people. We did not have room in this report for the hundreds of constructive suggestions that were offered for what should be in play spaces and how to structure them, none of which was outrageous, silly or actually that expensive
- Create materials to support local groups to audit and plan play spaces and parks, including guidance on consulting with children and young people, planning, costing, and maintenance
- Consider the value of already existing natural or open spaces, including physical features such as hills and trees, paths or tracks and how these can be enhanced to become play spaces
- Think beyond putting equipment in a park to creating shared family and social spaces with things for all ages to do separately and together
- Pay attention to the needs of all age groups, be this for smaller and easier equipment for young children, or safe and dry hanging-out spaces for teenagers
- Plan and budget for maintenance when any new spaces are creating or existing ones improved. This needs to be over the expected lifespan of the space
- With new developments, planning requirements should think beyond requiring a minimal “park” and consider play spaces across a development for different ages, including spaces for biking, skateboarding and other demands.

Recommendations for specific nursery age children’s responses

- Have funds available to repair or replace equipment efficiently
- Create all age wheeling paths within play parks.

Recommendations for specific primary age children’s responses

- Have funds available to repair or replace equipment efficiently
- Ensure we have a mixture of local and destination parks
- Increase natural play opportunities with planting, boulders, trees, pathing etc
- Repaint old equipment to make it look inviting.

Recommendations for specific secondary age children’s responses

- Create ways for teenagers to feel involved in the design and subsequently the ownership of play parks
- Increase teenage play opportunities within play parks with wheels, balls, shelter, cooler equipment and collaborative and competitive play
- Support teenagers to be proud of their local play parks.

Recommendations for specific adult responses

- Increase accessible and inclusive play opportunities
- Increase natural, educational and holistic play opportunities
- Meet with business organisations to share this survey and support them in increasing play opportunities within the community
- Meet with Education Department to discuss feasibility of accessing school play parks out of hours
- Establish a way to connect with parents to support them in initiating fundraising opportunities.

The Community Vision for the Highland Council Play Parks

Plant and create nature play

Easy accessible local play parks

Have some larger play parks

Replace or fix broken equipment

Be kind to each other

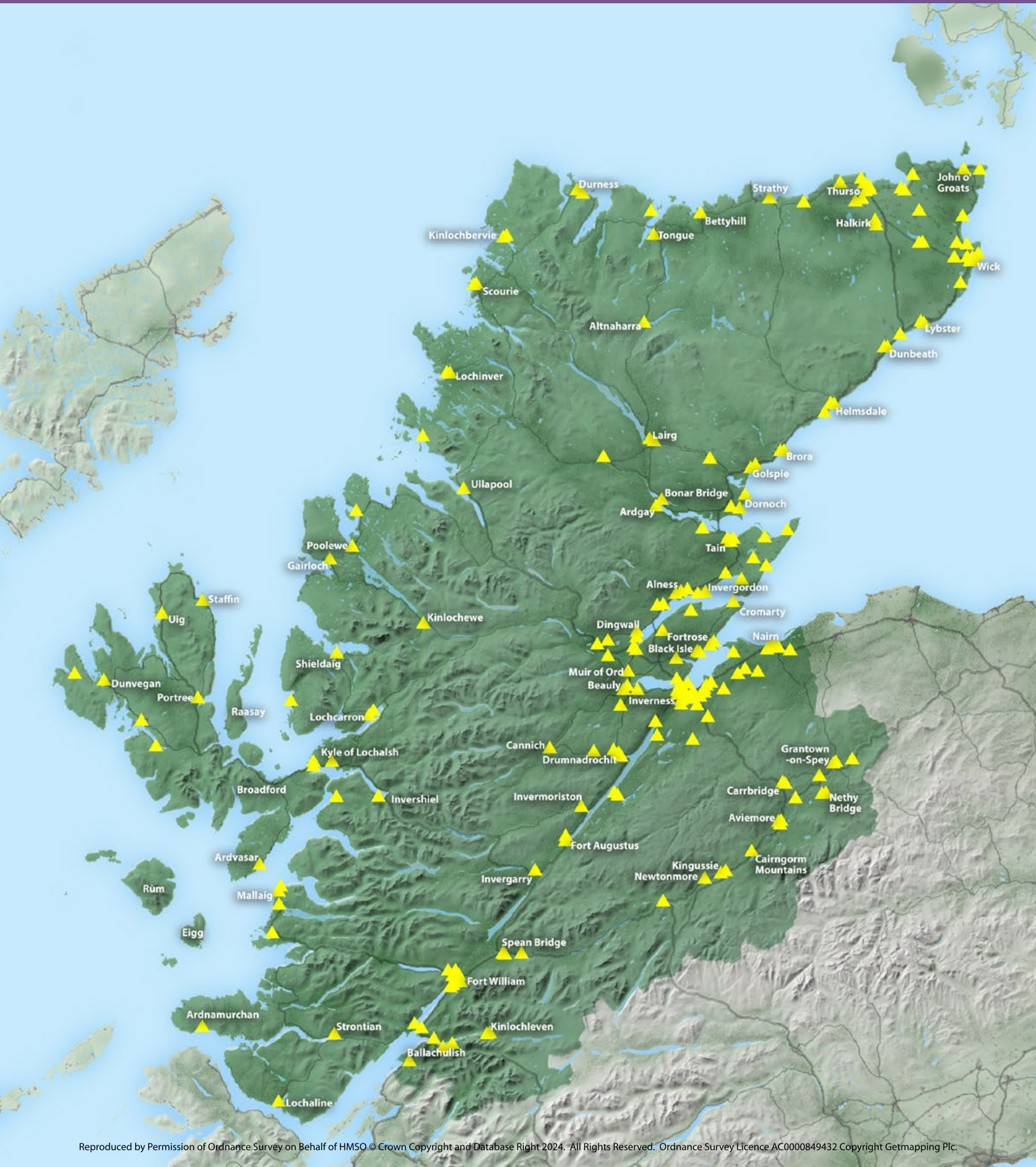
Have all age and all ability play

More outdoor play opportunities

Community Voice

Appendix 2

Map of Highland Council Play Parks



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Appendix 3

Bringing it Back to the Child

We know that children are becoming more insular with an increased dependency on technology. This can result in a loss of family and community connections as well as an increase of mental health and unhealthy physical habits. Our strategy focusses on giving children the progressive opportunity to learn, through active play, as they develop in age. It is about enabling all children to have a choice of different play opportunities whether they are experiencing social, physical, developmental, or mental health challenges, or just merely wanting to have fun playing.

A consistent focus on the UNCRC, Scotland's Play Strategy and this strategy is on protecting vulnerable groups of children's rights to play, alongside other less vulnerable children. A place where every child can learn, in their own time, at their own pace, free from competition and competitive pressures. The most effective way of doing this is by moving away from static or fixed equipment to providing holistic, progressive, and educational equipment. In addition, we need to be introducing natural environments into our play parks for all children to be able to learn important life skills through natural play.

How do children learn life skills through play parks?

Creating a community of creative thinkers and lifelong learners

Stop and have a think about your most fun times as a child. Was it playing on a piece of play equipment by yourself, or was it being around other people, interacting, taking risks, and having fun? What did you learn through those experiences? Navigating yourself out of potential trouble (problem solving), making friends (building relationships), being silly (developing humour), taking risks (risk benefit assessment)? Now think about your family and your job and how those skills which you learnt as a child have shaped your future. Play hasn't changed over the years. Children continue to yearn for social connection and a sense of belonging to their community and their country.

Play parks are a great way to learn lots of necessary life skills if the equipment is educationally driven. An example of static or fixed play would be a climbing structure. Most children master the skill of climbing by age 7. After that, they are merely learning how to climb higher and faster (risk and physical agility). Some children can never learn the skill of climbing which means if a play park only has a steep climbing frame, there is nothing for them to learn; apart from the frustration of watching more physically abled children climb.

People learn by watching, experiencing, and trying. It may be a child is selling their imaginary ice-creams to an unknown child and subsequently creating a new friendship with a less confident child. Because it was such fun, the less confident child, who may never have thought of this type of new friendship play, may try it themselves, the next time they are at the play park. It may not be as fun as the more confident child but in time, and with practice, they will grow in confidence (creativity, communication, resilience, and reflective learning). This is a direct learning experience. The more positive examples of creating better play value pieces of equipment, highlights the progressive learning skills of inner confidence, intrinsic learning, developing friendships, problem solving, resilience, risk taking and imagination over merely the skill of risk, with just a climbing frame.

Investing in good quality, holistic, progressive, inclusive play is investing in developing our youths' skills as they learn how to develop into adults.

Appendix 4

Play Park Funding 2021-2026

Play Park Funding 2021-2026 from the Scottish Government – allocation per Ward (as agreed at Communities and Place Committee in February 2023)

Area Committee	No. of play parks	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	Total
Badenoch and Strathspey	20	£9,474	£8,945	£17,810	£27,620	£47,200	£111,050
Black Isle	11	£8,394	£8,103	£16,134	£25,020	£42,756	£100,407
Caithness	50	£22,813	£23,898	£47,582	£73,789	£126,097	£294,179
City of Inverness	83	£66,167	£67,987	£135,363	£209,919	£358,726	£838,161
Dingwall and Seaforth	13	£8,343	£7,727	£15,385	£23,860	£40,773	£96,088
Easter Ross	32	£22,946	£22,449	£44,695	£69,313	£118,448	£277,851
Isle of Skye and Raasay	9	£7,462	£7,864	£15,657	£24,281	£41,493	£96,756
Lochaber	33	£37,919	£40,225	£80,088	£124,200	£212,242	£494,674
Nairnshire	9	£7,926	£8,121	£16,169	£25,075	£42,850	£100,140
Sutherland	38	£12,591	£13,122	£26,126	£40,516	£69,236	£161,590
Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	21	£14,968	£14,059	£27,991	£43,409	£74,180	£174,607
Retained for play park officer post		£15,000	22,500	45,000	45,000	45,000	172,500
Highland	319	£234,000	£245,000	£488,000	£732,000	£1,219,000	£2,918,000

Appendix 5

National Principles for Play Park Renewal Programme

Principle 1:

Children, young people, and families are best placed to inform what quality play looks like to them, and should therefore be involved throughout the process, from the review of parks through to helping design the renewal of individual play parks. This is in line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which sets out that every child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely. The views of children, young people and families provide valuable insight into how they interact with parks and facilities.

Principle 2:

All children have the right to play under the UNCRC Article 31. Access to play should be as wide-reaching and inclusive as possible, ensuring that children, young people, and families have easy local access to play spaces where they feel safe and comfortable to use them. Inclusiveness looks different for everyone, so meaningful engagement with the children who will be using your play parks is fundamental.

Principle 3:

Play parks and spaces should seek to bring together local communities, children and young people of all ages and abilities, creating a greater sense of place and cohesion. The design and renewal of play parks should be done in a way that best meets the social and environmental needs of communities and its children and young people.

Principle 4:

The renewal programme will be strengthened by sharing and learning from best practice and making use of existing national resources. There are several other tools that can help local authorities to take a strategic and evidence-based approach to the design and renewal of their local play parks. Tools such as Play Value Assessments, an internal audit and inventory of play parks, and existing legislation and standards can provide a helpful basis for prioritising work.

Appendix 6

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); and how they can apply to Play Provision

The Scotland Play Strategy has been written in alignment with many national and international guiding documents including the Equalities Act, Disability Discrimination Act and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Many of the UNCRC agreed Articles apply to protecting every child's right to learn through play. Play parks are an important part of play. A summary of the relevant articles and how they can relate to play park provision is provided below.

Article 1	All children under 18.
Article 2	No child should be discriminated against whatever their family background is, or their abilities are.
Article 3	Best interests of the child regarding decisions and actions which affect children.
Article 4	Governments creating systems to promote and protect every child's right to the UNCRC.
Article 5	Providing opportunities for children to increase their capacity to learn to develop their abilities to their own choices, safely.
Article 6	Ensuring children develop to their full potential.
Article 12, 13	All children have their views taken seriously.
Article 15	Every child's right to meet other children and to join groups of other children.
Article 18	Creating supportive environments for parents to raise their children.
Article 19	Providing environments which are free from abuse from carers.
Article 23	Supporting disabled children's rights to play an active part in their community through living a dignified life and as much of an independent life as they can.
Article 24	Improving health and well-being for every child.
Article 27	Every child's right to have a standard of living which is good enough to meet their physical and social needs to support their development. Governments must help families who cannot afford to provide this.
Article 28	The right to education.
Article 29	Through the environment, education must develop every child's different ability to their full potential.
Article 30	Protecting indigenous groups – the right to learn about the language, culture, and heritage of the country where they are living.
Article 31	Leisure, play and culture – all children's right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.

Appendix 7

Investing in play and leisure

Investing in play and leisure - Linking National Planning Framework 4, the Place Standard and Place and Wellbeing Outcomes to Play parks

“The principles of equality, net-zero emissions and sustainability underpin all of these themes, and all themes should be embedded in policy and action”.

Place & Wellbeing outcomes

Movement

Active Travel

Wheel, walk and cycle through routes that connect homes, destinations...

Play parks

Play parks are a major destination in every community. By installing paths for wheeling (walking with prams, scootering, biking, wheelchairs), we will be encouraging Active Travel. By using wheels, children experience the sensation of speed and the skills of judgement, risk, balance, and coordination.

Spaces

Streets and Spaces

Everyone can access public spaces that create an attractive place to use, enjoy and interact with others and streets and spaces that are well-connected, well-designed and maintained, providing multiple function and amenities to meet the varying needs of different population groups.

Play parks

Our model for play parks will exceed this outcome. Play parks are free for everyone to use and with our design will be accessible and inclusive.

Natural Spaces

Everyone can access good-quality natural spaces that support biodiversity and are well-connected, well-designed, safe, and maintained, providing multiple functions and amenities to meet the varying needs of different population groups. Access community food growing opportunities and prime quality agricultural land is protected.

Play parks

Incorporating natural play will result in a natural, attractive place for communities to meet. Natural and static all-inclusive play will meet the varying needs of different population groups. By growing trees for shelter, shrubs to hide behind, wildflowers to pick and fruit trees to gather fruit from we will be supporting biodiversity and providing an element of holistic learning and free fruit. Picnic benches and shelter will encourage people to congregate to socialise with each other.

Play and Recreation

Everyone can access a range of high quality, safe, well-maintained, accessible places with opportunities for play and recreation to meet the varying needs of different population groups and the community itself.

Resources

Services and Support

Health enhancing, accessible, affordable and well-maintained services, facilities and amenities. These are informed by community engagement. A range of spaces and opportunities for communities to meet indoors and outdoors.

Work and Economy

Access to assets and resources that enable people to participate in the economy such as good health and education. The resources that enable people to participate in the economy such as good health and education.

Play parks

Our play parks will be educationally driven so children can learn the life skills they require for a future workforce – collaboration, team work, resilience, patience, creativity, problem solving. Providing local play parks has been directly evidenced to create increased and better health outcomes.

Civic

Identity and Belonging

Everyone can benefit from a place that has a positive identity, culture and history, where people feel like they belong and are able to participate and interact positively with others.

Feeling Safe

Everyone feels safe in their local community.

Play parks

Play parks are a primary example of identity and belonging and help children experience a sense of identity and belonging from a young age. Parks are a place where children play regularly and can meet each other time and time again. Whilst parents watch their children play, they can form friendships with other parents which can last for life. This gives increased support for children into their teenage years and beyond because more people are looking out for them. Parks are safe because of the wide range of ages and abilities which use them. Often, they are close to housing with regards to additional safety.

Stewardship

Care and Maintenance

Everyone has access to spaces that are well cared for in a way that is responsive to the needs and priorities of local communities.

Influence and Control

Local outcomes are improved by effective collaborations between communities, community organisations and public bodies. Decision making processes are designed to involve communities as equal partners, community organisations co-produce local solutions, communities have increased influence over decisions.

Play parks

People become disgruntled when play parks close or items of play equipment are removed for safety reasons. From our engagement exercises we know people want play parks in their communities. Identifying sources of funding to replace and support, care and maintain of our play park is vital.

Play parks

We will provide a framework to support and assist communities to provide evidence of community collaboration with children.

Appendix 8

Highland Council Performance Plan 2022-2027



A Fair and Caring Highland – Working together to improve quality of life and opportunities for Highland people.

1.1	Improve outcomes including attainment, achievement and positive destinations for all children, and our most vulnerable learners	Through our literature search, we know play parks are the building blocks of children learning the life skills they require for future employment and general adult wellbeing.
1.2	Tackling child poverty	Providing play parks within all local communities will mean we are providing equity to our most vulnerable learners.
1.3	Secure positive destinations	Play parks are a place of happiness and communities coming to together to get to know each other.
1.4	Suicide Prevention	Play parks can create communities of support: adult to adult, child to child, adult to child. By encouraging families to look out for each other's children, we create a network of support. Play can allow children to learn how to fail and to become resilient in failing and subsequently being able to pick themselves up.
1.5	Encourage a diverse range of traditional and emerging sporting activities and active lifestyles	Play is one of our oldest traditional physical activities for children, families, and communities. Play parks are places where children can test their abilities, at their own pace.
1.6	Promote fair access	As we renew play parks we will remove bark and create wheeling paths to support fair access to play parks.
1.7	Improve the levels of Mental Health and Wellbeing	Our literature study evidences how play parks improve mental and health and wellbeing goals.
1.8	Develop whole family support	Our literature study explains the high priority play parks take for encouraging family and community cohesion.
1.9	Early Intervention for drug and alcohol reduction	By encouraging communities to care for each other using play parks, we create communities where people learn to know each other and look out for each other. This outcome is prior to early intervention.
1.10	Facilitate strategic sports and cultural planning	'Play' is the most common children's sport there is.
1.11	Promote Gaelic language and cultural development	By creating natural play into our play parks, we can also create cultural play such as native planting, local scavenger boards, standing stones, cairns, and carvings.
1.12	Promote and enhance the Highland's rich heritage and culture	As above.



Resilient and Sustainable Communities – Help our communities to be prosperous, sustainable and resilient, making a positive difference to the lives of people

2.1-2.3	Transport and Roding	By incorporating paths into our parks, we will be encouraging more families to walk or wheel amongst their local neighbourhoods. We can create play park road safety awareness through creating wheeling paths with painted road safety/code signs for children to practice on.
2.4	Develop place-based plans that focus on quality neighbourhoods and direct local funding	We will be working alongside Planning Department to support PSA's and the development on play parks.
2.5	Support communities to help each other live well and independently	In alignment with our literature search, by sustaining local play parks, we will be encouraging community cohesion where people look out for each other.
2.6	Work with partners to promote visitor management	The Play Strategy will work with Planning Department to enhance play through tourism. Many families with children travel to the Highlands and post photos on social media.
2.7	Work with communities and partners to keep public spaces clean and safe	Community involvement with play parks will increase the sense of ownership and belonging, and help keep the parks clean and safe.
2.9	Work with the SG on the delivery of improved transport infrastructure through the Highlands	By creating wheeling paths, we are activity supporting transport infrastructure whilst also increasing health outcome opportunities.
2.10	Inward Investment	Through tourists creating great social media play postings on social media, more families will consider coming to the Highlands for a holiday (perhaps even to stay).



Accessible and Sustainable Highland Homes – Build houses to support communities and economic growth.

3.7	Work to ensure a fair balance of residential, recreational and commercial use of properties to sustain vibrant local communities	Working with Planning Service to formalise future play opportunities through new housing developments. This will create enjoyable and supportive recreational spaces.
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A Sustainable Highland Environment and Global Centre for Renewable Energy – Accelerate our response to the climate and ecological emergency. Make the most of the financial and environmental opportunities arising from the huge renewable energy potential in the Highlands.

4.1-4.2	Promote Active Travel Infrastructure	The play strategy fully supports active travel through creating wheeling paths to encourage active travel within communities.
4.3	Work with communities to find local solutions and lever funding	Communities will not only be supported but encouraged to lever funding for play park equipment and landscaping. An emphasis will be on inclusivity and environmental sustainability. In addition, we will require all communities to provide evidence of good quality collaboration with children and young people when planning renewal of play parks.
4.4	Encourage greater use of land and seas being well managed for nature and adaptation	We will work alongside organisations to increase biodiversity and nature within and around play parks.
4.6	Reduce residual waste and increase re-use, repair, recycling and upcycling	By primarily using steel for our new play parks we will be actively reducing unnecessary landfill. We currently re-use equipment where and when we can.
4.7	Achieve our Net Zero targets	We will be reducing consumption through installing less equipment and less maintenance whilst also increasing biodiversity.



www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/4620/performance_plan_2022-27



A Resilient and Sustainable Council – Work with partners to address service delivery challenges with a positive approach to change

5.1	Grow and retain our own talent	Our literature search evidences how important play is regarding creating a strong and resilient workforce. Play is about practising future life skills. In addition, the literature search lists many of the skills the World Economic Forum states are needed in 2023. Access to local play parks has shown to increase health and wellbeing outcomes. Through creating caring communities whilst enhancing cultural learning, will help children to feel a sense of pride and belonging in their villages, towns, and cities.
5.4	Actively redesign service delivery in response to constrained budgets to ensure the sustainability of the Council	The strategy sets out how we will redesign play park provision to meet our obligations. We will be utilising alternative funds to provide a sustainable play park estate.
5.5	Work together with communities and partners to produce local plans which meet communities' needs	This will be done through working closely with Planning Service and the use of Play Sufficiency Assessments. In addition, we will be actively collaborating with children and youths to determine what their needs are.
5.6	Develop place-based partnership strategies to coordinate investment and rural repopulation	We are currently working closely with Planning Service on place-based partnership strategies. Through sustaining our local play parks, we will be supporting rural play opportunities to attract families.
5.8	Accelerate the delivery of our Asset Management approach to increase efficiency and reduce overheads and carbon impact	By supporting communities to apply for windfarm funds, play parks will become more sustainable. Support will be given to communities to reduce our carbon footprint through play park development
5.10	Broaden the Council's income base through taxation and delivering more commercial Value for Money services	Our financial package written within the strategy is based on Value for Money through providing basic play parks with high play value equipment. We will seek additional funding sources and other income opportunities such as sponsorship.
5.11	Implement the tourism levy as an enabler to a vibrant attractive visitor experience	This could provide benefit for leveraging income to invest in play parks for tourist destinations.

Appendix 9

Literature Review: An evidenced based approach to our strategy

Why we are choosing to prioritise funding for our play parks

Like all Councils, Highland Council have limited funds which need to be spent wisely. We have established:

- our legal obligations to provide varied outdoor play opportunities to children under 18 years of age;
- Play parks and schools are a fundamental place of play within our communities; and
- Highland Council are committed to increasing health and wellbeing outcomes for children and youth.

The Highland Council prioritise children and young people's health and wellbeing because we know that by doing this, we are investing in preventative health. This strategy has been developed and based on increasing health and wellbeing outcomes through an evidence-based approach.

Background and Purpose

Play is fundamental to the healthy development of children, partly because it enables them to learn how to engage with and interact with their environment (Veitch et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises that every child has the right to play (OHCHR, 2023). One primary way that children engage in play is through the use of play parks. It has been established that play parks hold significant value for children due to providing an essential space where they can encounter challenges, engage in sensory experiences, social interactions, and imaginative play (Prellwitz and Skar, 2007). However, play parks also have many positive secondary benefits on children's health, wellbeing, and development (Seltenrich, 2015). Using an evidence-based approach, we outline how playground enhance children's health and wellbeing by promoting physical activity, development and cognition, social skills, and form social connectiveness amongst communities.

Physical Activity

Inevitably, the amount of time that children spend playing in parks is associated with increased levels of physical activity. Nevertheless, many children worldwide are facing reduced opportunities for outdoor play and are not meeting physical activity guidelines (Tandon et al., 2012). It has been well established that regular physical activity contributes to beneficial health related outcomes, such as decreased levels of obesity, type II diabetes, chronic illnesses, depression, and anxiety (Cohen et al., 2015).

2.1. Obesity

A large body of literature has found that children who engage in physical activity are less likely to be overweight or obese. For example, a study conducted in Canada found that children who lived within a kilometre from a play park were five times likelier to be a healthier weight (calculated in BMI) than children who lived further away from play parks (Clayton, 2012). Interestingly, the researchers controlled for variables such as type of neighbourhood, parents BMI, age, and gender; meaning that the effect size was maintained when these variables were taken into consideration. This finding is particularly important because obesity levels are rising, with almost 1/5 children in Scotland being at risk of obesity (Scottish Health Survey, 2021). Not only

does obesity negatively impact individuals (by causing cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease), but is also a massive burden on the Scottish economy (Lockyer & Spiro, 2019). Specifically, between £363 million to £600 million is spent annually treating obesity related conditions in Scotland (SPICe Briefing, 2015). In this light, it is essential that children have access to play parks to increase levels of physical activity and therefore reduce health and economic burdens on society.

2.2 Mental Health

In a similar vein, physical activity is also associated with positive mental health outcomes in children and adolescences. For example, in a large systematic review, authors analysed data published from 2010 onwards which examined the relationship between physical activity with anxiety, depression, and self-esteem in children (Dale et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, the authors found that increased levels of physical activity was associated with lower levels of both depression and anxiety, and higher levels of self-esteem and physical self-concept (Dale et al., 2019). It has been indicated that at least 10% of children living in Scotland have a mental health problem that could be clinically diagnosed by a practitioner, with this number rising due to the impact of COVID19 on mental health (Pierce et al., 2020; Mental Health Foundation). Further, research has suggested that mental health issues costs at least £8.8 billion annually to the Scottish economy (Mental Health Foundation and London School of Economics and Political Science). It is of utmost importance that we invest in prevention (such as empowering children to engage in physical activity) rather than waiting to treat people who become unwell.

Development and Cognition

Play is essential to development and cognition in children for a variety of reasons (Nijhof et al, 2018). It is not just a frivolous activity; rather, it serves as a fundamental and natural way for children to learn, explore their world, and develop critical skills for workforce succession (Youngman et al, 2018). Play parks promote the development of a wide range of competencies such as cognitive skills, resilience, problem solving, confidence, and imagination (Youngman et al, 2018). Evidence supporting this can be drawn from multiple studies, such as one conducted by Mather and Anderson (Mather and Anderson 1999) which found that creativity and multitasking skills were superior in children who actively played for one hour per day, compared to those who did not. Similarly, results from a randomised controlled trial where children aged 7 to 9 revealed that children who participated in physical play for nine months had greater cognitive flexibility, executive control, and attentional inhibition than children who were in the control group (Hillman et al., 2014). Nurturing these abilities in children equips them with the tools that they need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, leading to healthier and more successful lives in the long run (Youngman et al, 2018).

Children's Social Skills

Play parks create a dynamic social environment where children can practice and refine their social skills. These interactions contribute to the development of social competence, emotional intelligence, and the ability to build and maintain positive relationships with others. To be specific, play parks enhance social skills in children by:

Cooperative play

Many playground activities require children to work together, such as pushing a swing, playing team games, or pushing each other on a roundabout together. Through cooperative play, children learn to share ideas, learn from each other, achieve common goals, and work in teams.

Shared play spaces

Play parks are communal spaces where children from different backgrounds come together to play. This diversity encourages children to interact with peers they might not encounter in other settings, promoting inclusivity and social awareness. This is a prominent example of the application of Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, where contact between various groups of people reduces prejudiced and discrimination.

Conflict resolution

Play parks are not immune to conflicts and disagreements between children. Learning to navigate conflicts and find peaceful solutions is an essential social skills that children develop through interactions with others on the playground.

Empathy and Emotional Understanding

Interacting with peers in the playground exposes children to a wide range of emotions in themselves and others. Empathy and emotional understanding grow as they respond to the feelings and needs of their playmates.

Inclusive Play

Inclusive play parks, designed to accommodate children with various abilities promote interaction between children with and without disabilities. For typically developing children, this encourages empathy, acceptance, and social understanding (Brown et al, 1956). Additionally, for children with disabilities, playground promote social network inclusion. For example, one study revealed an association between social network inclusion and playground engagement in children with autism spectrum disorder (Santillan et al., 2019). In a similar vein, it is important to emphasize that every child, including children with disabilities, has the right to actively participate in community life (United Nations, 1989). Nevertheless, research has revealed that children with disabilities face obstacles concerning the accessibility and usability of play parks, as well as difficulties in social interactions with other children (Lynch et al, 2020). This underscores the importance of designing play parks that cater to the diverse needs and abilities of children (Dunn and Moore, 2005).

The impact of COVID-19 on children's social connections was significant and multifaceted, which will likely have long lasting effects. To buffer these potential effects, it is essential that children are given safe spaces to develop their informal social skills.

Parents Social Networks

Parks can also provide an environment for parents and family members to form social networks. For example, a study conducted in the United Kingdom found an association between visits to local parks and social networks communication (Kaźmierczak, 2013). This is thought to be because the readily available and cost-free nature of green spaces offers possibilities for interpersonal interactions among individuals (Peters et al., 2010). It is particularly important that we work towards fostering social networks because social connections among urban neighbourhood residents are decreasing as a result of shifting work patterns, greater mobility, and advancements in communication (Kaźmierczak, 2013). It seems important to note that loneliness has been defined as the next public health epidemic in the 21st century, because of its serious health implications. Specifically, a 2010 metanalyses revealed that people with social relationships had a 50% increase in odds of survival as a function of social relationships (Holt-Lundstedt et al., 2010). To put this into context, the impact of loneliness on health is comparable with risk factors for mortality such as smoking and drinking and exceed physical inactivity and obesity (Holt-Lundstedt et al., 2010). This compelling evidence depicts the importance of providing parks where members of the community can form social networks.

Socioeconomic Status

Interestingly, researchers have established that children from lower socioeconomic status (SES) have lower access to outdoor play equipment and have a decreased odds of spending over two hours outside during the weekend than children who belong to a higher SES (Dumuid et al, 2016; Tandon et al, 2012). Unfairly, children from lower SES already experience many inequalities which can lead to serious ongoing social, cognitive, and health challenges. To be specific, the socioeconomic health gradient can be applied, where for every decrease in SES, there is a larger decrease in health (for example, children raised in households with a lower SES face a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, as well as a higher all-cause mortality, compared to their counterparts from higher SES households). Put simply, ensuring children who belong to a low SES have access to play parks may help to close the gap between SES and health by:

1. Increase physical activity in children from lower SES:

A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that children from lower SES neighborhoods participated in less physical activity than those from higher SES neighborhoods (Gorely et al., 2009). Thus, it is unsurprising that in the UK, child weight follows a distinct SES pattern, with children from lower SES being disproportionately overweight or obese (Lockyer & Spiro, 2019).

2. Decreasing stress related hormones:

Children from lower SES statuses tend to have higher levels of stress related hormones (i.e., cortisol). For example, one study revealed that by aged 10, children from a low SES had almost double the number of circulating glucocorticoids than high SES children (Sapolsky, 2007). High levels of stress related hormones mediate a most of the SES health gradient and can lead to a wide range of serious consequences such as depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, dementia, inflammatory bowel disease, as well as cognitive and developmental impairments. Importantly, it has been found that access to parks can reduce levels of stress related hormones. Specifically, the results of one study revealed that cortisol levels decreased after a visit to the park, with a visit of a higher duration being significantly associated with a lower reduction (Gao et al., 2021).

With a 2016 report revealed that the knock-on effects of child poverty costing the UK £6 billion, it is essential that mechanisms are put in place to try and reduce this cost (Bramley et al, 2016).

Types of Playground Features

Playground features can vary significantly across play parks. In an attempt to understand what playground features were important to children, Veitch et al (2020) interviewed a sample of children. Two main themes were identified:

(1) Risk and Adventure:

Children preferred playground equipment which involved an element of risk, such as large swings, slides, and flying foxes.

(2) Nature Based Play:

The children participating in this study mentioned liking activities like rolling down hills, playing hide-and-seek behind trees, playing with water, and climbing on rocks. They also expressed a preference for spacious areas where they could ride bikes, engage in fun games, and participate in sports. These findings align with earlier research, which demonstrated that the implementation of nature-based playground substantially boosted children's visits to parks and their engagement in physical activities (Cohen et al., 2015).

Summary of Main Findings

Physical Activity

Play parks increase the level of physical activity in children, which results in:

- Lower levels of obesity
- Lower levels mental health conditions.

Cognition and development

Cognition and development are supported through the use of play parks.

Social skills

Play parks promote a various range of social skills, which leads to:

- Learning skills such as teamwork, conflict resolution, empathy, and emotional understanding
- Decreased levels of racism and prejudiced attitudes.

Inclusive play parks

Inclusive play parks help:

- Nondisabled children learn empathy, acceptance, and social understanding
- Disabled children to be included and form social networks.

Social and Community Networks

Social networks for both children and parents can be flourished through play parks, which is essential in our rapidly changing world.

Socioeconomic Health Gradient

Play parks can help to reduce the socioeconomic health gradient between low SES and high SES children, resulting in better health outcomes.

Features of Play parks

Children enjoy play features which have:

- An element of risk and adventure
- Nature based play.

Appendix 10

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