

**(i) Mr K Gowans**

**To the Chair of the Communities & Place Committee**

**‘At a time when we should be encouraging children to engage in outdoor play against the constraints of the pandemic, play areas are being closed due to lack of funding for basic maintenance.**

**This is unacceptable.**

**With all the other challenges that children and families are facing as a result of the pandemic, the re-opening of play parks needs to be a priority to support health, well-being and exercise opportunities for everyone in our communities.**

**I have asked that these play parks are made available to children and families as a priority, unfortunately the responses I have received have indicated there is no budget that has been allocated to undertake the remedial work necessary to allow this Council to open these play areas.**

**It is clear that our play parks are being closed because of a long-term lack of investment in maintenance, despite the enormous benefit these provide throughout our communities, and further, there is no indication that this funding issue has been addressed going forward.**

**Would you agree with me that this situation is completely unacceptable for our communities, unfair on Officers and reflects adversely on the Council, therefore core funding now must be made available to bring our play parks up to an acceptable operational level to support our communities through the pandemic and a new strategy needs to be developed by the Redesign Board?’**

We recognise the positive effects playparks and their social benefits have on children’s mental health and well-being. This has been particularly highlighted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

Ongoing inspections have raised a number of safety concerns at some sites, which has resulted in play equipment being removed or, as a last resort, the park being temporarily closed until it can be made safe to reopen. As agreed by the Council in January 2021, Officers are attending all Ward/Area Business meeting during March and are working closely with Members to develop strategies for the play parks in their areas.

Highland Council recently made decisions that will help direct more money towards playparks:

- the Council agreed in January this year that local area committees could allocate any unspent COVID ward funding towards playparks and invested a further £240k to make sure each Ward had the same amount of Covid ward funding available
- a further £100K is earmarked for play areas and is still to be allocated and we can consider this once all the local meetings have taken place
- other local sources of funding were reported to the Council in January 2021 and include e.g. coastal communities funding, Common Good funds, any appropriate national funding streams as well as local donations
- the Council also agreed in March 2021 to allocate a further £110K for each of its 21 wards for discretionary spending (£2.31m) which could also be invested in playparks

These funding options can all be considered. Play areas are in scope within the amenities review and this reports to the Redesign Board. An update on that review will be considered at the next Board meeting.