The Highland Council

Agenda Item	12.
Report No	CP/32/24

Committee: Communities and Place

Date: 27 November 2024

Report Title: Play Park Strategy Update for 2024

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report updates Members on progress made during 2023/24 in relation to the Play Park Strategy that was approved by Communities and Place Committee in November 2023.
- 1.2 The strategy will be put on the internet, and community and child friendly versions have been developed to ensure full accessibility and inclusivity across a wide age range.
- 1.3 The Strategy and associated research are viewed as best practice among peers and presentations have been made to various interested groups and Councils.
- 1.4 Progress continues to be made with spending the Scottish Government funding to renew play parks. Decision making on play parks is delegated to Members, and officers and Members continue to work closely to prioritise the spend to ensure it will deliver best play value.
- 1.5 There has been no increase in capital or revenue budgets, so this paper proposes that when communities fundraise, 10% is ring fenced for future maintenance.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
 - i. **NOTE** the contents of the report
 - ii. **AGREE** the principle that 10% of funds raised by communities is ring fenced for future maintenance

3. Implications

3.1 **Resource** – The current revenue budget for play parks maintenance is circa £58 per year per park. For play parks to be financially sustainable, money needs to be set aside for ongoing repairs and maintenance. Members are asked to agree the

principle that 10% of funds raised by communities is ring fenced for future maintenance.

3.2 **Legal** – Play areas/ parks are not a statutory service; however, where they are provided, they must comply with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Occupiers Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 for employees and members of the public attending play areas.

The Council must also comply with duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Fairer Scotland Duty. 3.6 Article 31.1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. 2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity. The Council's earlier approach to support these rights was set out in the Play Strategy 2016-20. This also recognises the value of informal spaces.

- 3.3 **Risk** Inspecting and maintaining and/or replacing play park equipment will prevent injury to children and claims being made against the Council. The revenue budget will need to be considered when planning the replacement of play items and their expected maintenance requirements over their lifetime.
- 3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) There are no risks arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** New signage will comply with the Council's policy. Gaelic history, culture and language will be incorporated into play where we can. We will also look for opportunities for additional funding to enable this.

4. Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is a monitoring report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5. Legislative Compliance

On 16 July 2024, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 came into force, which means that children's rights, as set out in the UNCRC, are legally protected in Scotland. Along with our duties towards the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), the Council now have a legal duty to provide accessible, free, outdoor rest, leisure, play and relaxation for children.

6. Background

- 6.1 The Council agreed in January 2021 to devolve decision making for play parks to be devolved to Area Committees. Since then, Members and Officers have worked together to identify investment priorities for parks in their Wards.
- 6.2 Highland Council currently maintains 312 play parks and 2039 pieces of play equipment.
- 6.3 The Highland Council Play Park Strategy is viewed as an example of best practice and the Play Strategy Coordinator has been approached by other Councils, industry professionals, and funders to learn more about the academic research and community consultation elements. The Play Strategy Coordinator is also now a Board Member on the International Play Association Board and has been invited to contribute to other national forums on play.
- The categorisation of play parks into neighbourhood, settlement, and destination parks provides a framework for communities when considering fundraising and will bring equity for children across Highland, as well as the Council being able to reduce ongoing maintenance costs.
- 6.5 It is not uncommon for community groups to struggle with the complex process of upgrading their local play park. Previously some groups have taken more than five years to complete the process, and some groups start then stop because it has been too challenging. There are many things to consider apart from finances, including surfacing, safety, equipment type, environmental fund raising, installation and inspections. Environmental sustainability both in terms of manufacture and maintenance requirements must also be considered.
- The Play Strategy Coordinator is currently working with around 40 communities, supporting them to upgrade their play parks. They are all at different stages of the process. Over the last year alone, support has been provided to communities to raise an additional £587k to invest in their play parks.

7. Funding and Budget

- 7.1 There is currently no capital budget for play parks other than what has been awarded by the Scottish Government.
- 7.2 The revenue budget for 2024/25 is £18,300 which works out at £58 per play park. The cost to date of backlog maintenance to bring sites in compliance with the BS EN 1176 and BS EN 1177 standards is £1,585,383.
- 7.3 The table below details Scottish Government's allocation to The Highland Council funding for 2024/25 and 2025/26, when the funding ends. The overall total of Scottish Government Play Parks funding is £60m for the period 2021/22 to 2025/26, with £2.918m allocated to Highland Council.

7.4	Year	Highland Council Funding	Scottish Government Funding
	2024/25	£0.732m	£15m
	2025/26	£1.219m	£25m

7.5 Members approved the allocations set out in the table below at this committee on 23 February 2023, following the allocation formulae that Members agreed for 2021/22 and 2022/23. That is, a combination of backlog maintenance and Scottish Government (SG) criteria (93% based on the 0–14-year-old population and 7% on rurality). The table also includes total additional funds raised, which includes from community groups and match funders.

Area Committee	Carry Forward	2024/25 SG allocation	Additional Funds Raised	2025/26 SG allocation	TOTAL
Badenoch and Strathspey	£34,399	£27,620	£86,838	£47,200	£196,057
Black Isle	£14,816	£25,020	£0	£42,756	£82,592
Caithness	£94,293	£73,789	£0	£126,097	£294,179
City of Inverness	£215,614	£209,919	£125,124	£358,726	£909,383
Dingwall and Seaforth	£30,194	£23,860	£0	£40,773	£94,827
Easter Ross	£82,930	£69,313	£0	£118,448	£270,691
Isle of Skye and Raasay	£30,983	£24,281	£0	£41,493	£96,757
Lochaber	£94,916	£124,200	£21,658	£212,242	£453,016
Nairnshire	£19,544	£25,075	£29,446	£42,850	£116,915
Sutherland	£51,365	£40,516	£324,112	£69,236	£485,229
Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	£40,950	£43,409	£0	£74,180	£158,539
Total*	£710,004	£687,002	£587,178	£1,174,001	£3,158,185

^{*}excludes £45k per annum pertaining to Play Strategy Coordinator post

- 7.6 Tables below detail the life expectancy of the play equipment, by item, site and the number of parks which will close in the next five years due to condition.
- 7.7 A significant number of pieces of play equipment will reach their end of life over the next 3-years, currently 308 items are due for renewal, 15% of the total number of items. The following three tables detail this

Life Expectancy (yrs) items	No of items	%
<5	308	15
>5	1731	85
Total number of items	2039	100

Average Life Expectancy Sites	No of Play Parks	%
<1	5	2
1-3	20	6
3-5	69	22
5-10	136	44
>10	82	26
Total number of play parks	312	100

7.9

Number of sites per Ward to close in next five years		
Ward	Number of Sites	
1 – Northwest and Central Sutherland	4	
2 – Thurso and Northwest Caithness	11	
3 – Wick and East Caithness	15	
4 – East Sutherland and Edderton	5	
5 – Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	6	
6 – Cromarty Firth	6	
7 – Tain and Easter Ross	5	
8 – Dingwall and Seaforth	1	
9 – Black Isle	3	
10 – Eilean a' Cheo	3	
11 – Caol and Mallaig	5	
12 – Aird and Loch Ness	3	
13 – Inverness West	0	
14 – Inverness Central	0	
15 – Inverness Ness-Side	3	
16 – Inverness Millburn	0	
17 - Culloden and Ardersier	1	
18 – Nairn and Cawdor	5	
19 – Inverness South	3	
20 – Badenoch and Strathspey	7	
21 - Fort William and Ardnamurchan	8	
TOTAL	94	

8. Progress during 2023/24

8.1 Objective 1: Play parks to be financially sustainable

8.2 The revenue budget is extremely challenging for play parks and remains approximately £58 per park per year. When planning a refurbishment of a play park the application of the Strategy in relation to the category of park (neighbourhood, settlement or destination) will assist with the planning and costing of the initial purchase, install and ongoing maintenance and inspection. If further revenue funding is not available requesting support from the Wards to cover the costs for additional maintenance will continue.

8.3 Revenue expenditure required to stand still (recommended 7-10% per annum of total asset value) is detailed in the table below

Total Asset Value of all Parks	% Revenue per Yr	Total Revenue required Per Yr
£20,217,859	7%	£1,415,250
£20,217,859	10%	£2,021,785

- 8.4 The Play Strategy Coordinator is currently working with about 40 community groups and within the last year has supported communities to raise £587k in capital funding for the Council.
- 8.5 For example, in Golspie which has seen a long-standing project come to fruition. Initial designs did not meet the Play Strategy and with the support of the Amenity Officer and the Play Strategy Coordinator, a new design brief was agreed which is fully compliant with the strategy.
- In addition, the Amenity Officer has supported the community to problem solve some drainage issues, saving on the cost of these works. A common problem experienced is equipment suppliers convincing communities to remove all existing equipment from the site. However, in alignment with the strategy, it is recommended to only remove the end-of-life equipment and to add to the park for an upgrade. Instead of finding funding for eight items, the new design reduced the number of new items to four and meant the community group halved their fundraising target to £97k.
- 8.7 In Durness the initial designs received from the suppliers included one junior and one senior climbing frame. By implementing the approved play park strategy with the aim to avoid age segregated play and to reduce future maintenance costs, a redesigned proposal included one all age and ability inclusive climbing frame. Like many upgraded play parks, this play park includes a large selection of inclusive play items such as a large trampoline, ramps on the climbing frame, a basket swing, music, games, a nest swing, spinning, zip lines, a sand digger and spinning options the total amount of funding raised for this site was £115k.
- 8.8 Supplier costs will continue to be challenged to ensure best value for spend, especially for inclusive play equipment. This was demonstrated when carrying out engagement with the public for the Whin Park project. Through the consultation, engagement with parents whose children currently find it challenging to play in Whin Park, told us what would help. High and low climbing, fencing between the pond and the play area, wide slides and sensory play were identified.
- 8.9 Teenagers are another group which are often excluded from play parks, through consultation, teenagers became excited about having fun on most equipment but especially a big high slide to slide down together, a big climbing frame to climb upon, a ball area and a covered area to sit with friends. The approved design includes a high slide, a climbing frame to sit on, and a large flat spinning disc which teenagers can sit together on.
- 8.10 Once designs were submitted by suppliers two were chosen to be subject to community vote. The response of 2,817 people was one of the best responded to consultations the Council has done, and over 50% of the respondents were under 18-years old. The clear winner was the 'Nessie' design which supports the importance young people place on their cultural identity.

- 8.11 Plan Inclusive Play Areas (PIPA) are an organisation which awards different parks grades for inclusivity. The aim is to achieve a PIPA award for the highest level of inclusivity for Whin Park.
- 8.12 Where possible, and to minimise third party contractor installation costs, the Amenities play team will carry out small installations for the Council and on behalf of communities.
- 8.13 Work continues with the Planning department to influence the provision of play parks in private housing developments, in both quality and funding opportunities. A more holistic approach would benefit communities where one larger park with higher play value could be provided instead of several small parks within a new housing development.
- 8.14 To reduce spend, the play park team is committed to reducing, reusing, repairing and repurposing play equipment where at all possible. For example, in Redspur Gardens in Fearn, the team repurposed an old multi-unit, springy toys and a swing set that had been removed from elsewhere. Refurbishing both items and setting them back on to a site which was classed as having low play value.
- 8.15 For play parks to be financially sustainable, money needs to be set aside for ongoing repairs and maintenance. Current revenue budgets will not be adequate, so Members are asked to agree the principle that 10% of funds raised by communities is ring fenced for future maintenance.

9. Objective 2: Play parks to be environmentally sustainable

9.1 A priority of the Strategy is to continue to recycle, reuse and reduce. A focus on manufacturing processes, choosing long lasting materials, and consideration of ongoing maintenance will contribute toward this objective. By following the criteria for each type of park, not over procuring and capping costs as much as possible, a consistent Highland wide approach to environmental sustainability will be delivered.

10. Objective 3: Play parks to be inclusive, both in design and use

- 10.1 A cornerstone of the Strategy is inclusivity, the Play Strategy Coordinator arranges an initial meeting with each community group to discuss the strategy with them to ensure they understand the importance of its objectives.
- 10.2 To assist communities in what to consider when planning the equipment they are fund raising for, a community guide based on the Strategy is being developed. This explains the concept of inclusivity, child development and the theory of play as well as examples of inclusive design.
- 10.3 Play Sufficiency Assessments will be referred to when planning changes at a play park to ensure high play value inclusive equipment.
- 10.4 To date, no funding has been secured to install more wheeling paths for children to utilise scooters, bikes, or wheelchairs in play.

11. Objective 4: Play parks to be safe

- 11.1 Play parks are not a statutory service; however, where they are provided, they must comply with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Occupiers Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 for employees and members of the public attending play areas. In addition, equipment and surfacing must comply with BS EN 1176 and BS EN 1177 (the British and European Standard for playground equipment and surfacing). A programme of risk-based inspections is carried out to ensure equipment is safe and where it is deemed to be unsafe it is either repaired or replaced, if there is budget, or removed.
- 11.2 The current revenue budget is not sufficient to maintain all pieces of play equipment and Members are asked to support the principle that 10% of funds raised by a community will be ringfenced for maintenance of their park.

12. Objective 5: Increased collaboration with Children on the design of their play park

- 12.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has now been incorporated into Scots Law, and we are legally obliged to consult with children on their community development. Although not a legal requirement, evidence of child consultation will be required as part of the Council's process going forward and is a requirement of the Scottish Government grant.
- 12.2 A step-by-step guide for community members is being created for them to use as they navigate their way through the process of upgrading their play parks. Within this document there is a guide on how to consult with children, with clear expectations and simple questions. The Play Strategy Coordinator assists community groups in sending out a simple questionnaire to schools and nurseries. It focuses on types of play, such as swinging, or sliding as opposed to specific pieces of equipment. This help adults to understand children's favourite types of play and focus the funds where requested. For example, if the children's top play type is swinging, a focus to fund a wide selection of swings rather than an unnecessary climbing item would be prioritised.
- 12.3 The Educational Psychology Department have used this Strategy as an example of best practice on how to consult with children and how to analyse the information and how to create a strategy based on the child's voice.

13. Objective 6: Assessing our play estate (Play Sufficiency Assessments)

- 13.1 309 out of 312 play parks have been assessed. The remaining 3 will be assessed by 31 March 2025. The Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSAs) have highlighted a lack of inclusivity for young people, teenagers and young people with mobility needs. The strategy is clear in the ambition to install inclusive equipment when refurbishing a play park.
- The Council is now recognised as a leader in best practice, and the Play Strategy Coordinator has been asked to present the PSA Questionnaire to Greenspace Scotland and Play Scotland has liaised with us on the simple inclusivity questions within our PSA's. The PSA's are exceptionally thorough with 52 questions relating to types of play within each play park, inclusivity, surroundings, car parking, facilities, road crossings.

- 13.3 It is not currently a requirement of the Scottish Government, but the Play Strategy Coordinator is currently working with the planning department to maximise the GIS mapping technology so PSA's can be uploaded on an annual basis. This will enable future improvements to be compared and analysed.
- 13.4 The aim is to have information from the PSAs on the Council's website for people to check what aspects they are wanting to look at e.g. inclusivity and be able to see pictures of the park. Members will be able to see their Wards.

14. Success Stories

14.1 A recent project which the Play Strategy Coordinator worked with was the Burnside Community Group in Aviemore which from the outset has been a success story. From the first email from the community member, to raising sufficient funds and commencing installation, this has been achieved in just over one year. Full child consultation has occurred which enabled children to vote for their favourite design. The Play Strategy Coordinator together with the community fundraising team went into the local school to work with young people on what they thought was needed in the play park. Once designs were drawn up, they were taken back to a whole school assembly where every child got to vote for their favourite design. The winning design was the one which was installed.

Ward Members donated £30,000 from their SG allocation and the community group raised an additional £110,000. This play park will offer multiple choices of inclusive equipment.

14.2 Kiltarlity play park is currently undergoing refurbishment. Working with the community, it was identified that instead of upgrading the entire play park, half the equipment, four pieces were retained, and four highly inclusive pieces of all age, all ability, equipment were purchased.

15. Plans for 2024/25

15.1 Whin Park Upgrade

- 15.2 The finalised design has been agreed and the project is on target to deliver by Easter 2025.
- 15.3 The ambition is for play parks to become more like family spaces where all community members can contribute. Whin Park will be used to trial various types of play, which if successful could be rolled out across the play park estate.
- Some of the equipment which was removed from Whin Park has been stored and allocated to a different park which is being upgraded.
- 15.5 Liaison with Highlife Highland continues to offer regular 'Youth Friendship' days. An initial discussion with Nature-Scot took place to discuss incorporating more cultural play into the site and liaison with the Gaelic team regarding signage is ongoing.
- 15.6 Between community groups and the SG funding spend, the Play Strategy Coordinator will be working on projects in another 30 parks.
- 15.7 An example of this working well is in Rogart Park where the community were put in touch with the Play Coordinator in September, initial meetings have already been

held, consultation is currently in progress, and based on the child consultation we will get designs created shortly. In addition to this the community have already earmarked potential funders within their area.

15.8 Liaison with PIPA will continue for all play park upgrades to evidence the dedication to improving inclusivity.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

Date: 27 November 2024

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Appendices: Appendix 1 – Action Plan Update

Appendix 1 Action Plan Update

Outcome	What do we need to do?	Due/Review Date	Update
Objective 1 Play parks to be financially sustainable.	 Continue to work with stakeholders on plans to invest the Scottish Government funding, to 2026. Continue to support communities to seek external sources of funding, and support communities to fundraise to improve play parks. Discuss and agree approach to maintenance with Members and communities. Liaise with Planning Service to ensure best outcomes for play parks within new developments. Liaise with Education Service to establish supporting community play. Develop a plan to create an equitable provision of play parks across Highland that can be implemented as funding becomes available. 	Review April 2024	 Ongoing. Continue to support Members and communities with prioritising the play parks to invest in. Ongoing. Work has been ongoing with Members, young people, and communities, to identify funding sources and to continue planning how the Scottish Government play park allocation is spent to deliver maximum play value. Ongoing. The budget for maintenance has not been increased and remains at approx. £58 per park per year. Continue to work with the Planning Department on how to maximise the standard of play parks in private housing developments, in both quality and funding opportunities Ongoing. Complete. The Play Park Strategy was approved November 2023.
Objective 2 Play parks to be environmentally sustainable.	Support Net Zero Reduce Waste by: 1. Continue to repair, reuse, and recycle equipment. 2. When refurbishing a play park, apply the criteria for play equipment for that size and location of play park.	Review April 2024	 Ongoing. Ongoing. Ongoing. Continue to specify long lasting materials, reduce the amount of equipment which is being installed. Consider the environmental aspects of manufacturing, and future maintenance requirements.

	 3. When purchasing equipment, consider the whole life cost and net zero target. Increase biodiversity 4. Increasing natural play opportunities. 5. Create a Risk Benefit Management System. 		4. Ongoing. 5. Work is ongoing with Play Scotland and Highland Council's Legal and Insurance teams to create a Risk Benefit Management System of Best Practice to enable an increase of nature play in all Council play parks. Natural play is using the natural environment for play. Adding areas of wildflowers, using natural materials such as timber logs, boulders, to create play structures/areas.
Objective 3 Play parks to be inclusive – both in design and use	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.	Ongoing as and when parks are refurbished.	 A community version of the Strategy is being developed to assist communities with their understanding of inclusivity, child development and the theory of play. A community guide for upgrading a play park which ensures inclusive designs are prominent in requirements is also being developed. Ongoing. Play Sufficiency Assessments will be referred to when planning change at a play park. Ongoing. To date, no funding has been secured to install more wheeling paths for children to utilise scooters, bikes, or wheelchairs in play.
Objective 4 Play parks to be safe	 Ensure safety inspection and maintenance programme is implemented. Create a Risk Benefit Management System. 	Ongoing	 Ongoing. Following a risk-based programme of inspections, Highland Council Play Technicians are trained to carry out safety inspections and repairs. Work is ongoing with Play Scotland and Highland Council's Legal and Insurance teams to create a Risk Benefit Management System of Best Practice to enable an increase of nature play in all Council's play parks.

Objective 5 Increased collaboration with children on the design of their play parks	 Produce educational material to support stakeholders understanding of child collaboration. Develop an engagement toolkit for communities to use when engaging/collaborating with users of play parks. Continue to co-chair newly established Play Highland working group. 	Ongoing	 Ongoing. A community version of the Strategy is being developed to assist communities with their understanding of inclusivity, child development and the theory of play. This will ensure focus on the child and that inclusive designs are prominent in requirements. Complete. Closed. The Play Strategy Coordinator no longer cochairs the group but recently presented the Strategy to them and continues to support the aims of the group.
Objective 6 Assessing our Estate (Play Sufficiency Assessments)	 Create Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) Questionnaire. Complete PSAs. Analyse and Report to Members on PSAs. 	December 2023 June 2024 November 2024	 Complete. The 3 outstanding PSA will be carried out by 31 March 2025. Ongoing.