

Parish councils and children's play

Community play briefing 7



This briefing is for parish councils who want to provide better opportunities for children's play. It provides information on taking a strategic approach to play and ensuring that provision balances the risk and the benefits of good play opportunities.

Introduction

Parish councils are the lowest or first tier of local government. They are elected bodies and have powers to raise tax (or precept) to support their operations and carry out local projects. Parish councils have limited powers but can provide facilities themselves or contribute towards their provision by others. This includes the provision of recreation grounds, playing fields, children's play areas and swimming baths.

They may also be responsible for other facilities that have an impact on the opportunities for children's play including the maintenance of footpaths and bridleways, control of litter and cleaning and drainage of ponds. They may also own or support village halls or other public spaces that are used for children's play activities by organised groups.

Parish councils also have representative powers that can impact on children's play. They must be notified of all planning applications in their area and are advised on contributions from developers in respect of new housing or building developments.

Although they may have limited powers, there are approximately 8,500 parish councils in England that represent 35 per cent of the population. The design, installation and maintenance of children's play areas are likely to be the most significant parts of the precept, outside the maintenance and upkeep of village halls and allotments.

'Parish councils have a vital role in supporting children's play in rural areas.'

Steve Chown, Play England



However, even in parishes with several play areas, it is rare that there will be a skilled or experienced play specialist as part of the parish council either as a member or an officer.

That said, there is a range of support available to help parish councils take on the mantle of play champions, and work to improve the play opportunities available to children in their area.

Developing a strategic approach

Most parish councils are in the enviable position of having deep roots within the community. Parish councillors are known to residents and have strong links to local businesses and landowners. Children are often at the heart of many communities through the local school, youth groups and activities in the village hall or community centre. Local parents and children may also be involved in campaigning or working towards improvements in their local play areas. Parishes are increasingly using websites and social media – to promote what they are doing to improve children's play and to involve children and parents.



Case Study: Hennock Parish Council

The friends of Chudleigh Knighton playpark group, supported by Hennock Parish Council, use a Facebook site created by a local parent to keep in touch with developments on the playground, make suggestions for improvements, report maintenance issues and advertise events. The Facebook site has 101 friends in a village with a population of just over 1,000 people. Children and parents are consulted on what they like and dislike about the playground, and encouraged to put forward ideas for improvements.

www.facebook.com/pages/Chudleigh-Knighton-Play-park/141177128177

One way to set out the priorities for a local community is through a parish plan. To date 3,000 parish plans have been produced across the country. Parish plans give everyone in the community an opportunity to influence the development of their surroundings. These are based on surveys of local people and can be used to influence local planning decisions, how services are provided and also form the basis of grant applications and proposals to funding bodies. Parish councils should use the parish planning process to consider how children play in their area, where they play, what the barriers may be, how these can be overcome and how to enable children to make suggestions for

improvements. Parish councils also need to know the play areas they provide are valued and supported locally. Play England has created a set of *Tools for Evaluating Play Provision* based on participation, access, quality and satisfaction.

The Parish Plan should also consider how the parish fits into the wider play strategy of the district or county council, or in other areas the unitary local authority. Most will have a written play strategy and a local play partnership. You should contact your local leisure, parks or play department to find out what support they provide for parishes. This may include advice and guidance on maintenance, insurance and other issues. They may also provide or have contacts with voluntary organisations supporting free play opportunities through play ranger schemes, play days or other organised events or activities.

Case Study: Wye with Hinxhill Parish Council

Ashford Borough Council in Kent takes a proactive role in supporting play in partnership with local communities, including parish and town councils. Wye with Hinxhill Parish Council in Ashford made a commitment to developing a play strategy as part of their bid for playbuilder funding. This was part of a longer term strategy to improve play spaces in the villages including different play and 'leisure and hangout' pockets around the village, using existing locations and creating new ones.

Children's play areas

Most parish councils rely on the clerk, supported by part-time maintenance staff, contractors or local volunteers to maintain children's play areas. They may also look to play equipment manufacturers or insurers for advice. However, this advice can focus on the technical aspects of the installation and maintenance of play equipment rather than a wider view of how to meet the play needs of children who live in the parish.

In recent years there has been a significant change in planning for play within the community. Parish councils engaging with designers and play equipment manufacturers through the play-builder programme have often led the way in creating innovative, imaginative play areas for children. There is also a great deal of independent advice available from national and local organisations such as Play England and county playing fields associations. There may also be a local play network, play association or play forum that operates at a district or county level. They will often organise play events but also provide training, information or advice for small local groups about children's play.

Case Study: Devon Playing Fields Association

Devon Playing Fields Association is an independent charity devoted to the promotion of outdoor play and sports facilities for communities in Devon. This includes advice, guidance and training for parish councils on the management and maintenance of children's play areas, including playground safety and insurance. Devon Playing Fields Association is part of the County Playing Fields Association that produces a quarterly newsletter with up to date information for parish and town councils. For further information visit:

www.cpfas.org.uk/member.asp?id=5&pid=1

Design for play

Children have less freedom to play independently than their parents and grandparents. Less than 10 per cent play in natural places (woodlands, countryside, heath land) compared to 40 per cent adults when they were young.¹ Therefore



well designed play spaces are an increasingly important part of children's lives.

Creating spaces where children can play freely requires careful thought and imaginative design. The challenge is to provide the best possible play opportunities, and to create play spaces that will be attractive for children, capture their imagination and give them scope to play in new and exciting ways. Too often in the past providers have relied on narrow stereotypes and assumptions, rather than thinking about what children need and how they will use a space for play. A playground that consists of only basic equipment, fencing and safety surfacing caters for only a narrow range of play experiences. Play providers need to think about creating spaces that offer all children opportunities for:

- Movement and physical activity
- Stimulation of the senses – sound and smell as well as sight and touch
- Social interaction with children of different ages and abilities
- Access to manipulate natural and fabricated materials
- Challenge and excitement

¹ Natural England (2009) Childhood and Nature: a survey on changing relationships with nature across generations

The Play England publication *Design for Play* offers guidance for parish councils and others to create more imaginative and exciting places for children to play. This includes advice on planning, design, care and maintenance and how to review what has been provided so it meets children's needs while considering the long-term environmental impact. *Design for Play* also shows how the community, children and parents, can be involved at every step of the design process.

Risk and safety

Responsibility for managing and maintaining children's play areas can seem quite daunting. Parish councils have a duty of care towards employees, contractors and the public who use the play facilities they own or manage. Play provision is governed by the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Occupiers Liability Acts of 1957 and 1984. Providers, including parish councils, have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure children's play areas in their control are in as safe condition as reasonably practicable. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require providers to carry out risk assessments. Play provision also has to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and other directives such as the Disability Equality Duty 2006.

A technical inspection of play equipment, fencing and surfacing should be carried out at least once a year by an external expert. Routine checks made throughout the year will be determined by the level of risk identified and to manage wear and tear, damage, maintenance and cleanliness. Parish councils should have a clear policy towards site inspection, with clearly defined responsibilities for the employees or contractors undertaking the inspections and good record keeping. The Register of Playground Inspectors International (RPII) examines, accredits and certifies technical inspectors and provides advice on where to find them.

When thinking about design, it is important to remember that all risks cannot be eliminated and some element of risk is beneficial to children. The Play England publication *Managing Risk in Play Provision* guide outlines a common sense approach to risk-benefit assessments. This should be underpinned by a play policy that outlines the values, understandings, principles and criteria on which judgements about risk benefit are made. This should take into account the features and local context of each play area not just the equipment it contains. This means children's play areas can be designed to provide risk and challenge. For instance, most adults know the value of children playing on rocky areas, beaches and with water. Because of the benefits boulders, sand and water can be included in a play space.

Insurance

The role of insurance is to provide a financial safety net for providers in the aftermath of accidents or other claims. It should not be the driver of risk management. The risk-benefit assessment should assist providers and insurers in dealing with claims if they are made.

Parish councils should seek insurance that meets their specific needs. Public liability insurance is essential, and providers with employees are required to have employers' liability insurance. It is worth seeking an insurance broker with a good understanding of children's play needs as well as technical expertise.



Parish councils may find it useful to share experiences with each other or talk to their county playing fields association. Some may have umbrella schemes that help spread the financial risks. It is worth reviewing your insurance arrangements regularly, making sure you notify your insurance broker of any changes to provision or risk-benefit policy.

Planning

Parish councils have to be notified of all planning applications in their area. It should be remembered that children have the same right as adults to use public space. Planning decisions about streets, green spaces, parks and new housing developments can have a significant impact on children's play and places where children can experience nature, explore the environment or meet friends. Parish councils, with their local knowledge, can act as advocates for children's play in planning decisions.

Case Study: Treloweth Estate, Pool

The residents of the Treloweth estate and Agar Road in Pool near Redruth campaigned to save a play area threatened by a housing development. They were supported by Carn Brea Parish Council. Despite objections from the Parish Council and Cornwall County Council the developer appealed to the Home Office Planning Inspectorate. The appeal was dismissed and the Parish Council have voted unanimously to take over ownership of the land from Cornwall County Council

Planning obligations under S106 or the future Community Interest Levy are a good source of investment for play spaces. This is where a commitment to play in the parish plan and a clear set of proposals for improvements is invaluable. Parish councils can recommend planning obligations be used to secure developer contributions for the provision of new or improved play opportunities 'off site' where it is inappropriate to seek provision within the development. Play provision is frequently accepted as qualifying 'infrastructure' in this regard, particularly in housing developments intended for families.

Case Study: East Devon District Council

East Devon District Council involves communities in its budgeting. This includes consulting children and local people on the allocation of S106 contributions from new housing developments to provide funding for play and sports facilities in the area. East Devon District Council is currently working with Exton Parish Council to improve a local playground. Consultation has been carried out with children who want something that spins, a zip wire slide and a replacement for the old train. For further information and case studies visit:

www.swresourcecentre.org.uk/swrc-index/swrc-sw-councils.htm

Recommendations

Parish councils should:

- Consider children's play in their parish plan
- Contact the local leisure, parks or play department to find out what support they can give to parish councils
- Find out about staffed play services that may be delivered in the area
- Organise an event or activity for Playday
- Join the county playing fields association
- Join the local play network, play association or play forum if one exists in their area
- Involve children, parents and the wider community in thinking about and planning for children's play.

Useful resources

Design for Play – A guide to creating successful play spaces

This Play England guide shows you how to design good play spaces and provides advice on how to engage and involve the community at all stages of the design process.

www.playengland.org.uk/designforplay

Better Places to Play through Planning

This Play England publication provides information on how opportunities for play can be maximised through the formal spatial planning process.

www.playengland.org.uk/betterplaces

Managing Risk in Play – implementation guide

This guide has been written for those responsible for managing play provision, and for those involved in designing and maintaining such provision. This guide is endorsed by RoSPA and the Health and Safety Executive.

www.playengland.org.uk/managingrisk

Tools for evaluating play provision

Play England provides a range of tools for assessing the quality of play spaces, including through surveys and consultation with children and young people.

www.playengland.org.uk/resources/tools-for-evaluating-play-provision

Playday

Playday is an annual celebration of the child's right to play. The website provides information and resources for community groups and others to organise local events on Playday, held on the first Wednesday in August.

www.playday.org.uk

Playful Communities

The Playful Communities website provides information, advice and resources for individuals, local community groups, third sector organisations and others who are developing play provision in their local neighbourhood. The website includes resources for local people involved in managing staffed play projects and volunteering, as well as for those supporting or maintaining play areas.

www.playfulcommunities.org.uk

Fields in Trust

FIT, formerly known as the National Playing Fields Association, is an independent organisation dedicated to protecting outdoor sports and play spaces. Their website includes campaign toolkits for community groups and links to county playing fields associations.

www.fieldsintrust.org

Register of Playground Inspectors International

The RPII provides a register of accredited play inspectors widely available to individuals and organisations who may require their services.

www.playinspectors.com

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For further information about the Engaging Communities in Play programme visit www.playengland.org.uk/our-work/engaging-communities-in-play

Play England promotes excellent free play opportunities for all children.

We believe that all children should have the freedom and space to play enjoyed by previous generations.

This involves more than just providing well-designed play areas; it requires the commitment of local and national decision makers to create more child-friendly communities.

By making play a priority we can create healthier and happier communities for all.



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