

The Good Childhood Inquiry

**Evidence submitted by
Play England**

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Summary

What does a good childhood mean to you?

Play England believes that a good childhood involves all children and young people being able to find places, near their homes, where they can play and meet their friends free of charge. Play is intrinsic to children's quality of life: it is how they enjoy themselves. If children and young people are to stay healthy, be safe, enjoy their childhood, achieve their potential, contribute to society and achieve economic wellbeing they must have opportunities for free play and informal recreation throughout their childhood.

Conditions for a good childhood

Families

All families need space, places and facilities to spend time together. Research shows that play offers families a wonderful opportunity to engage with their children and to communicate more effectively.

Health

Play is crucial to children's health and development and has an important role in addressing concerns about increases in obesity and mental health. Evidence suggests one of the best way for children to get exercise is through outdoor play. Targeted play provision works at different levels of need. Some projects have used play in order to support children to:

- develop self-esteem and feel empowered and included
- learn how to resolve conflicts in a non-aggressive way
- become more resilient in coping with difficult situations in their families have fun and be children.

Friends

Play opportunities are essential for children and young people to have opportunities to practise making and consolidating friendships and to deal with conflict – the basic skills needed in order to become 'emotionally literate'.

Values

Time, space and opportunity for free play is essential for learning and development of children's individual values. For example, through play children can develop respect for the environment, social skills and successful personal relationships.

Lifestyle

Children and young people want more play and leisure activities but evidence shows that there are increasing barriers. Current estimates are that today's children enjoy, on average, just a ninth of the space in which to freely roam, compared to the previous generations.

Learning

It is widely accepted that, in early childhood, most of children's learning is acquired through free play. As they get older free play continues to be an important part children's lives and contributes to their social, physical, cultural, emotional, spiritual as well as cognitive learning.

What obstacles exist to these conditions today?

Family

Working patterns mean that families can often find it hard to spend time together. The UK has the longest working hours in Europe with nearly one in five full time employees working over 48 hours a week. If parents are in full-time work other must provide the close consistent relationships children need and develop through play, especially in early childhood.

Lifestyle

One of the main reasons children give for not playing outdoors more is that they and their parents are afraid for their safety. Fear of strangers, traffic and bullying by other children combine to keep children in their own homes. Evidence also indicates that there has been a steady reduction in play space including playing fields, open spaces and playgrounds, over the last 20 years. In addition, today's children are increasingly being recognised as either victims or troublemakers in public space. For example, the British Crime Survey regards teenagers hanging around on the streets as a form of anti social behaviour comparable to dealing drugs or vandalism.

Learning

The Core Offer for Extended Schools set out in the DfES Prospectus makes no mention of play opportunities despite the fact that children might spent a large proportion of their free time using these services.

Government

If the range of play opportunities needed is to be available to all children and young people, Play England believes that there must be a strong lead from central government, backed by resources. At present, however, government policy relating to children's play appears to be uncoordinated, piecemeal and low priority.

What changes could be made?

If children and young people, are to benefit from the variety of play opportunities, there must be a more strategic approach to provision, led by a cohesive national policy offering coordinated guidance, standards and direction from central government.

The good childhood Inquiry

1. What does a good childhood mean to you?

When playing, children define their own goals and interests, decide what is success or failure and pursue those goals in their own way. Children's enjoyment through play is linked to the control and choice they are able to exercise. At the same time play enables children to take risks, to think through decisions and gain increased self-confidence and greater resilience. Children should feel confident and safe to play freely, both indoors and out and in a manner that is appropriate to their needs and interests.

Play allows children and young people to explore boundaries, be fully absorbed in what they are doing and feel satisfied with what they have achieved. Giving children the chance for free, uninhibited play allows them a psychologically safe space in which to try out new roles and experiences. It also offers them the opportunity to get involved in tasks in a sustained and rewarding way. Children who have been deprived of good play opportunities may lose the chance to acquire self-management skills such as being able to see projects through to their completion. If adults intervene too much in children's play they take the risk of stunting creativity and personal achievement. A good play environment and those who understand the importance of free play offer children and young people a rich, stimulating menu of choices from which an interest, enjoyment and achievement can grow.

Evidence shows that there are increasing barriers to children's play, especially outdoors where it is particularly beneficial. Traffic, crime (and the fear of crime), decreasing open space and changing pressures on children and families have all conspired to restrict children's freedom. Current estimates are that today's children enjoy, on average, just a ninth of the space in which to freely roam, compared to the previous generations¹.

Children require a variety of provision to meet their need to play. This includes supervised provision, staffed by qualified play-workers, outdoor spaces designed or equipped specifically for play, welcoming, well designed public open spaces and safe residential streets. Young children need to be able to play safely near their homes and in their childcare, as well as having places for their parents to take them to play. Older children and young people need space away from their homes where they can socialise and spend time with their peers. In some areas, fully staffed adventure playgrounds are open all year round, free of charge to all local children. Elsewhere, outreach play workers or play rangers ensure that children can play safely in local open spaces. In other areas mobile play provision, including play buses and mobile skate parks visit areas with little or no other provision.

Parks, street corners, playgrounds, football pitches, pavements and open spaces provide room for children to meet and play, to establish a world for themselves independent of their parents and to explore the natural and built

¹ Hillman, M., Adams, J. and Whitelegg, J. (1990) One false move: a study of children's independent mobility. London: Policy Studies Institute

environment. For many children, their local environment is their main experience of the outside world².

2. What are the conditions for a good childhood?

2.1. Family

All families need space, places and facilities to spend time together with their children and other family members. When parents observe their children in play or join with them in child-driven play, they are given a unique opportunity to see the world through their children's eyes. The interaction that occurs through play, tells children that parents are fully paying attention to them and helps to build enduring relationships. Through play parents learn to communicate more effectively with their children and are given another setting to offer gentle and nurturing guidance. Quite simply, play offers parents a wonderful opportunity to engage fully with their children³.

Families also recognise and value the importance of the activities and facilities for children and young people. A MORI⁴ survey of adults commissioned by the Audit Commission in 2001, found that, of 20 factors which might improve their area, 'activities for teenagers' was the most important and 'facilities for young children' was in the top five.

Children's involvement in play activities is often influenced by their parents' views of the play facilities available. Parents appear to play a central role in determining the levels of physical activity among their children and a lack of facilities and play areas can have a direct effect on the levels of physical activities engaged in by their children.⁵ Parents also have influence over the amount of physical activity children participate in. Professor Neil Armstrong undertook an assessment of children's habitual physical activity⁶. Armstrong concludes that attitudes towards physical activity are established at an early age; parents therefore have a prime responsibility to encourage their children to engage in active play.

Research evaluating the Big Lottery Fund (formerly New Opportunities Fund) *Better Play*⁷ funding programme has demonstrated the value of staffed play provision to children and young people. Through studying, in detail, six very different approaches to providing supervised play opportunities and activities for school-aged children, the *Better Play* evaluation illustrated how the programme touched and improved the lives of many children and how staffed play provision can do much. In relation to family, staffed play provision could:

² CAFE Space (2004) Involving Young People in the Design and Care of Urban Spaces – What would you do with this space? London CAFE Space

³ Ginsburg (2006) The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds.

⁴ MORI (2001) Teenagers 'need more to do'
www.mori.com/polls/2001/auditcommission.shtml

⁵ 'The value of children's play and play provision', C Street, in *Making the case for play, gathering the evidence*, National Children's Bureau, London (2002)

⁶ Professor Neil Armstrong, 'Independent mobility and children's physical development', paper delivered to the Children, Transport and the Quality of Life Conference.

⁷ Youlden P, and Harrison, S (2006) The Better Play programme: An evaluation, Children's Play Council

- Offer children and their families' opportunities for social interaction with children and adults they would not normally meet.
- Provide play places where their parents feel confident children are safe and enjoying themselves.
- Provide parents and other family members with opportunities to understand and support their children better, both in the projects and at home.
- Contribute to social cohesion and friendship networks in communities by providing spaces where parents can meet and socialise with other people.
- Offer voluntary work and employment opportunities to local young people and adults.

Good play provision also enables parents to work and train and allows them to feel that their children are happy, safe and enjoying themselves.

2.2. Health

Play is crucial to children's health and development and has an important role in addressing concerns about increases in obesity and mental health problems.

In making recommendations to combat obesity, the Department for Health advises that children and young people achieve at least sixty minutes of moderate intensity physical activity each day (Department for Health 2004). However, research shows that only a third of boys and girls aged 2-11 achieve the recommended level of activity to benefit their health⁸. Research has shown that outdoor play is one of the best forms of exercise for children⁹. Children spend more time playing out than they do in clubs and formal sports activities. Play is therefore an important part of the government's strategy to increase physical activity and halting "the year on year increase in obesity". The Public Health White Papers *Choosing Health* (2004), *Delivering Health and Choosing Activity* (2005) all identified the contributions that play can make to improving children's fitness, health and well-being.

There is also evidence of a widespread desire among children for more physically active play and out-of-school provision.¹⁰ In many areas well run, supervised play spaces like adventure playgrounds can be the only places where parents and children know they are safe, and where children can get plenty of exercise while playing. The combination of outdoors space, trees and bushes, large structures, swings and freedom make them great places for children to get exercise.

Good play opportunities can also enhance the mental health of children and young people. This is particularly important given the current rise in rates of mental health problems among young people. It is estimated that one in five

⁸ Sproston K, Primates P. 2003. *Health Survey for England 2002. The health of children and young people.* London: The Stationery Office.

⁹ Prof R Mackett (2004), *Making children's lives more active*, Centre for Transport Studies, University of Central London

¹⁰ 'Something good and fun', I Cole-Hamilton, in *Making the case for play, gathering the evidence*, National Children's Bureau, London (2002)

children and adolescents suffer from a mental health problem¹¹. The Mental Health Foundation (1999)¹² has reported that the increasingly limited amount of time children have to play outside, or to attend supervised play projects was a causative factor in the rise of mental ill health in young people.

Research evaluating the Big Lottery Fund (formerly New Opportunities Fund) *Better Play*¹³ funding programme has demonstrated that supervised play provision can:

- support the development of children's self-esteem and social skills
- contribute to children's physical health and social and emotional well-being.

Targeted play provision

Targeted play provision and specialist intervention works at different levels of need and vulnerability. In some areas, play projects and playwork skills are specifically designed and used to support children who are having major social problems and are currently unable to use mainstream services.

For example, a London Borough of Camden play project, specifically for children and families living in temporary accommodation (hotels, hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation), recognises the impact of difficult housing conditions on children's opportunities to play and develop. The project also works with a large number of children in refugee and asylum-seeking families, who need specific support to enable them to learn about and join mainstream services.

Similar projects in Swindon have tried to be as creative and supportive of the needs of vulnerable children offering a play service in a hostel for homeless families, a toddler group for hearing impaired toddlers and their hearing siblings, and an out of school worker in a mainstream group supporting the inclusion of a variety of different children with additional needs. They also offer funding to support working parents using full day care with inclusion support so childcare is no more expensive for them. The training team has organised extended childcare courses in Sure Start and Children's Centre areas to support parents and attached childcare.

In addition, the London Borough of Camden operates *Building Bridges*, a specialist play project, managed by the council's play service, for children aged from 4 to 15 years old. The service is for children whose challenging behaviour makes it difficult for them to access mainstream services, including school and out of school provision, or who are rejecting or 'shutting down' in mainstream services and not getting a positive experience. All of the children are from families with a range of problems including alcohol or drug misuse, mental health issues and domestic violence.

The project uses play in order to support children to:

¹¹ The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in Great Britain (2005), Office of National Statistics

¹² Mental Health Foundation (1999) *Brighter Futures Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health*, Mental Health Foundation

¹³ Youlden P, and Harrison, S (2006) *The Better Play programme: An evaluation*, Children's Play Council

- develop self-esteem and feel empowered and included
- learn how to resolve conflicts in a non-aggressive way
- become more resilient in coping with difficult situations in their families
- have fun and be children.

The children are supported by experienced playworkers who generally have complimentary experience and training in other fields such as education or social work. The work is a mixture of individual sessions with a dedicated member of staff or small group work sessions. The sessions incorporate structured play activities such as arts, crafts, drama, photography and video and sports. The project has clear boundaries and expectations around behaviour and playworkers use circle time to give a safe space for children to talk and share their thoughts and feelings.

Work with individual children is assessed against planned objectives and reported back to commissioning agencies, such as Children's Safeguarding and Social Care (formerly Social Services) and Schools. One particular strength of the project is how, based on close partnership working, its work complements and supports the work of Pupil Referral Units.

2.3. Friends

Research suggests that play opportunities are essential for children and young people to have opportunities to practise making and consolidating friendships and to deal with conflict. Children themselves also identify the opportunity to meet and spend time with their friends as one of the most important opportunities offered by play and play provision¹⁴

All children need places to play, make friends and meet with other children. However, disabled children need this space more than others in surroundings that stimulate their imagination and challenge them to face and overcome risk and socialise with other children. A study of play services for disabled children found that mothers and their children regarded play services as extremely important for providing friends and companionship¹⁵.

Research evaluating the Big Lottery Fund (formerly New Opportunities Fund) *Better Play*¹⁶ funding programme has demonstrated that supervised play provision can offers opportunities for social interaction with children and adults they would not normally meet and the chance to make friends within the provision and the wider community.

2.4. Values

Time, space and opportunity for free play is essential for learning and development of children's individual values. For example, through play children can develop respect for the environment, social skills and successful personal relationships. Play can help children come to terms with the external world. Play has an ego building function, which encourages children to

¹⁴ *Playday survey 2003*, Children's Play Council and The Children's Society

¹⁵ Farrer, F (2000) A Growing Taste for Adventure, TES Curriculum Special: Special Needs, 14 July 2000, Times Educational Supplement

¹⁶ Youlden P, and Harrison, S (2006) *The Better Play programme: An evaluation*, Children's Play Council

discover and explore their social world, including their cultural and social values.

Involving children and young people in the design, delivery and sustainability of play spaces, outdoor spaces and informal recreational facilities like youth shelters is essential to increase the value children and young people attribute to a space. However, we need to raise children and young peoples expectations. Play provision and play spaces need to be impressive. If the design of a play space is impressive, the user may be inspired and attachments will increase.

From 2002 to 2005, the Housing Corporation and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) funded the Children's Play Council to work with five community groups to develop local play provision. The primary purpose of the project was to develop and test materials for a *Neighbourhood Play Toolkit*¹⁷ for use by other community groups. The evaluation of the project¹⁸ demonstrated how the process of working together to develop local play areas benefited the parents families and communities involved. For example:

- Taking part in developing the toolkit was a valuable, enriching experience for most of those involved. Many gained confidence, increased their skills and knowledge, and were proud to be part of something that made a difference in their community.
- The tangible, achievable vision – to develop safe places for their children to play – was important in galvanising those involved. Having a vision for their children, and therefore the future, gave those who took part energy, enthusiasm, a problem-solving attitude and determination. The clarity of this vision enabled them to negotiate with partners more effectively.
- Participating in a play development project built networks within the community, increased opportunities for children and adults to come together, expanded partnerships and thus increased social capital.
- The pilot projects attracted additional financial resources to achieve their objectives. They also attracted in-kind support such as volunteers, access to community buildings, expert advice and information.
- Participation in developing the Neighbourhood Play Toolkit led to opportunities for personal development. Individuals carried out new tasks, undertook responsible positions, and some progressed to qualification courses and higher education.

An important thread running throughout the pilots was the need for opportunities for affirmation. Celebrations, press coverage, achieving training qualifications, and prizes for children helped to maintain momentum and increase confidence.

¹⁷ *Neighbourhood Play Toolkit*, Children's Play Council, National Children's Bureau, London 2006

¹⁸ *Neighbourhood play and community action*, Haki Kapasi, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, pending publication –November 2006

2.5. Lifestyle

Children and young people want more opportunities for play and leisure activities. In 2002, a review of over 100 local consultations, with children and young people, by the Children's Play Council showed that, in many areas, children and young people had asked for more play facilities and free-time activities¹⁹. Government research carried out in 2002, by the Children and Young People's Unit, found that children under 12 rated more activities and parks as the most important thing the Government could do for them. Nearly 60 per cent of 13 to 19 year-olds said that if they were minister for the day they would provide more places for young people to go²⁰.

Buildings and facilities used by play services are frequently seen as a focal point for communities and play provision offers opportunities for social interaction for the wider community and supports the development of a greater sense of community spirit.

Community-based evaluations show that play projects lead to improvements in connections and trust in the local community. 'Prove it!', an approach to evaluation developed by the New Economics Foundation, Barclays plc and Groundwork UK, has been piloted in outside play and recreation spaces and showed a measurable impact on local interaction, new friendships, community know-how and community safety.²¹

2.6. Learning

It is widely accepted that, in early childhood, most of children's learning is acquired through free play. As they get older free play continues to be an important part children's lives and contributes to their social, physical, cultural, emotional, spiritual as well as cognitive learning. For children to get the maximum developmental and experiential benefit from their play they need to play in a variety of ways and be involved in different and distinctive types of play. Children's involvement in the development of their own play is fundamental. Children learn from the way others and the environment reacts to their play, the effects of their actions and value others place on them. When there are no adults present children will create and make their own choices. Play is also vital to the development of children's imaginations and creative interests and abilities.

Play has also been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children's readiness to learn, learning behaviours, and problem solving skills²². Early activities, such as drawing and playing with letters, numbers and shapes, encourage children to develop intellectually and socially. Children's play provision enables children to develop the imaginative, creative and problem solving skills that are increasingly important in a less hierarchical, global economy that needs a responsive and flexible workforce.

¹⁹ Cole-Hamilton, I and Gill, T (2002) Making the case for Play: Building policies and strategies for school aged children. London: National Children's Bureau

²⁰ DfES (2002) Children's Consultation Report, Children and Young people's Unit

²¹ *Prove it: measuring impacts of renewal*, New Economics Foundation, London (2001)

²² Ginsburg (2006) The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds.

Play can help children to do better at school and can ultimately lead to greater employment opportunities²³.

Children want and need to take risks when they play and good play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. Giving children and young people opportunities to play, challenge themselves and take personal risks, in their own time and at their own pace, gives them the skills and knowledge to build their confidence and contribute to their own personal safety as they grow up.

3. What obstacles exist to these conditions today?

3.1. Family

Working patterns mean that families can often find it hard to spend time together. The UK has the longest working hours in Europe with nearly one in five fulltime employees working over 48 hours a week²⁴. The UK also has the fewest number of national holidays. There has also been an increase in single head of household or two working parents and fewer multigenerational households. Therefore, fewer families have available adult supervision in the home during the working day, making it necessary for children to be in supervised childcare. Childcare and structured after school activities are often driven by targeted outcomes and therefore reduce free, child-driven creative play opportunity. In fact the government's core offer to children using extended school services does not include opportunities for play.

Research has noted that parents are receiving carefully marketed messages that good parents expose their children to every opportunity to excel and ensure that they participate in a wide range of activities. As a result, much of parent-child time is spent arranging special activities or transporting children between those activities²⁵. Hocking and Thomas (2003) comment on the increasing 'colonisation' of children's lives: the constant need to ensure that children are accompanied by adults. They highlight to significant consequences:

- Firstly it is increased organisation of children's time, with associated programme pressures and decreases in children's self-directed time, the time when children exercise their imagination, curiosity and creativity²⁶.
- Secondly, increasing control of children's time and movements by parents leads to 'censorship' of possible behaviour. Parents are more likely to foster, promote and organise those activities they deem to be appropriate for their children²⁷.

²³ DCMS (2006) Time for Play Encouraging greater play opportunities for children and young people London, Department for Culture, Media and Sport

²⁴ National Statistics 'Social Trends 36: 2006 Edition' p58

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends36/Social_Trends_36.pdf

²⁵ Ginsburg (2006) The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds.

²⁶ Christensen, P. (2002) Why More 'Quality Time' is not on the Top of Children's Lists: The quality of time for children. In Children and society, Vol. 16, (2): 77-88

²⁷ Mayall B. (2002) Towards a Sociology of Childhood. Buckingham: Open University Press.

3.2. Lifestyle

Unlike previous generations of children and young people, for whom opportunities for play and informal recreation were widely and freely available, today's children are severely restricted. Evidence suggests that children do not play out as much as they would like to. Space in which children can play is rapidly being eroded. Research for the Home Office and Department for Education and Skills in 2003²⁸ showed that 67 per cent or 8 to 10 year-olds never went to the park or shops on their own; and 33 per cent never played out with their friends without an adult being present. Amongst 11 to 15 year-olds, one in 10 never met their friends outside the home without an adult being present and nearly a quarter (24 per cent) never went to the park or local shops on their own.

In the Playday 2005 survey, 39 per cent of the 671, 7 to 14 year-old children interviewed said they did not play out as much as they would like to²⁹. The survey found that when asked, 'About how many hours a week do you play outside with your friends after school and at weekends?' only 52 per cent of the respondents said they played out more than four hours a week, with 20 per cent playing out for less than one hour a week during term-time. During the school holidays, 77 per cent said they played out for more than four hours a week but 10 per cent still played out for less than one hour a week.

One of the main reasons children give for not playing outdoors more is that they and their parents are afraid for their safety. Fear of strangers, traffic and bullying by other children combine to keep children in their own homes. Evidence also indicates that there has been a steady reduction in play space including playing fields, open spaces and playgrounds, over the last 20 years. This reduction in outdoor play activity has occurred at the same time as children and young people in the UK have become more sedentary and when among primary school children in particular, levels of physical activity are declining³⁰.

At the same time, there are concerns that within the education system, children are under more and more pressure, with opportunities for free play being increasingly squeezed out or down-graded in learning value³¹. Overall, as society becomes more and more complex and competitive, there is concern that spontaneous play is being replaced with structured activities both at home and within school³².

Today's children are increasingly represented as either victims in need of protection or as troublemakers.

²⁸ 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey: Top level findings from the children and young people's survey Home Office and DfES (2005)

²⁹ Playday 2005 Survey for the Children's Play Council and The Children's Society, British Market Research Bureau, (2005)

³⁰ Street, C 'The value of children's play and play provision: a systematic review of the literature' in Cole-Hamilton, I, Harrop, A and Street, C (2002) Making the Case for Play: Gathering the evidence. National Children's Bureau

³¹ Macintyre, C (2001) Enhancing Learning through Play. David Fulton.

³² Ginsburg (2006) The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds.

However, it is impossible to design public space that allows children to explore, experiment and tryout various physical and emotional possibilities if based on the view that all users need protecting from one another. In some parts of Britain there is a tendency to regard children and young people in and around the public spaces as suspect, even criminal. Society needs to stop demonising young people and allow them the time, space and opportunity for free play and recreation.

The British Crime Survey, research conducted for the Home Office, investigates crime levels and fear of crime in England and Wales by interviewing a random sample of people. The interviewees are asked about seven categories of perceived anti-social behaviour. The categories include 'teenagers hanging around on the street' along side other categories like 'people using or dealing drugs', 'vandalism', 'graffiti' and 'other deliberate damage to property'. This implies that teenagers hanging around on the street, is a form of anti social behaviour equivalent to that of dealing drugs and vandalism whether or not they are behaving in an unacceptable manor.

Reports such as, *The Value of Urban Design*, by CABE and the DETR, fail to mention the significance of good urban design for children and young people. As Worpole³³ notes 'one reason why the cause of play and informal recreation – and the quality of the open spaces it takes place in does not get the policy attention it deserves, is because its lacks a clear administrative locus: its is neither a matter for arts policy, nor sport, neither crime prevention, nor either public health. It is all of these things. At present play gets lost between too many current administrative and funding programmes even though it is at the core of healthy child development and successful socialisation'.

3.3. Learning

Provision for play and informal recreation is part of the broad outcomes framework of the Change for Children programme implementing Every Child Matters. Yet the Core Offer for Extended Schools set out in the DfES Prospectus makes no mention of play opportunities, a function of after school provision that extended schools could otherwise expand. In the event they are dominated by study support services.

3.4. Government

If the range of play opportunities needed are to be available to all children and young people, Play England believes that there must be a strong lead from central government, backed by resources, to ensure all children, have access to play as a universal service. At present, however, government policy relating to children's play appears to be uncoordinated, piecemeal and low priority.

For example:

- The recent review published by DCMS, *Time for Play*³⁴, firmly places the future of play provision in the hands of local authorities and the play sector.

³³ Worpole, K (2003) No particular place to go? Children, Young people and Public Space: Birmingham Groundwork UK

³⁴ *Time for Play: encouraging greater play opportunities for children and young people*, Department for Culture Media and Sport (August 2006)

However, research by the Children's Play Council for DCMS³⁵ has shown clearly that this approach to provision, with little guidance or direction from central government, leads to a patchwork of provision with many children's needs not being met and parents and children in many areas feeling it is too unsafe for their children to play out.

- The Public Health White Paper, *Choosing Health*, and its subsequent Physical Activity Action Plan, *Choosing Activity*, identified barriers to outdoor play as a factor in the growing childhood obesity epidemic. Action to address the problem was limited however to a reference to a developing 'strategic approach to play policy' by DCMS. However, the recent review published by DCMS, *Time for Play*³⁶, fails to set out such a strategic policy, placing the future of play provision in the hands of local authorities and the play sector.
- DCMS, the lead department for play, spends a mere £500,000 a year on information, research and policy development for play compared with hundreds of millions of pounds on its other interests of sport, art and culture. This appears to be the only dedicated budget line for play across government.
- *Time for Play* highlights the valuable contribution to children's play currently being made through the Big Lottery Fund's £155m Children's Play initiative. The intention is that the new services and structures being created through this initiative should form the basis of a refreshed commitment to play provision in the future. It is becoming increasingly clear however that, without direction from central government, the problems outlined by CPC in 2002, of local authorities not taking the play services seriously, are still in existence.
- The Childcare Act 2006 and Ofsted Childcare Register (OCR) make no mention of provision for children's play opportunities. This is a backwards step for children and young people as the National Daycare Standards, being replaced by the OCR required all those registered to provide childcare to ensure there were good opportunities for children's indoor and outdoor play.
- Planning Policy Guidance note 3 from DCLG, referring to housing development, and DfES guidance on the new school buildings programme both pay scant regard to the need for space for play and informal recreation.

³⁵ *Making the Case for Play: building policies and strategies for school-aged children*, Children's Play Council (2002)

³⁶ *Time for Play: encouraging greater play opportunities for children and young people*, Department for Culture Media and Sport (August 2006)

**What changes could be made that would be likely to improve things?
These may be changes in the behaviour of parents, teachers,
government, faith organisations or society at large.**

4. Change in society at large

Today's children frequently prefer to play in places where adults are present to offer informal oversight and where they and their parents feel they are safer. Universal play provision therefore needs to offer a variety of spaces and facilities including supervised, semi-supervised, dedicated and non-dedicated provision.

4.1. National government

If children and young people, are to benefit from the variety of play opportunities needed to promote their healthy development and prevent social problems, there must be a more strategic approach to provision, led by a cohesive national policy offering coordinated guidance, standards and direction from central government. This should:

- articulate the vision for children and young people's play and informal recreation
- provide a set of values and principles to underpin a national implementation plan
- clarify the government's priorities and commitments
- describe how providing good play opportunities supports children, families and communities
- describe the role to be played by each government department and agency
- describe the contribution expected of others
- discuss the resource implications of implementing the strategy and ensure adequate resourcing.

Such a policy would need a national implementation or action plan to support and guide local authorities, Primary Care Trusts, Regional Development Agencies, voluntary organisations, community groups and other local agencies in providing a comprehensive range of spaces and opportunities for play and informal recreation.

Leadership and coordination would be essential: government departments and agencies would need to work closely together to underpin and support the development of local provision. This would be most effective if:

- At a senior level, government departments whose activities affect children's play opportunities recognise and understand their role and potential impact on children's play.
- Relevant government departments work together to develop a strategic approach to development, funding, support and standards for local provision of children's play opportunities within a framework of agreed values, principles and outcomes for children and young people.

- Relevant government departments and agencies routinely assess the impact of new programmes on the availability of different types of play provision for children, including especially open access, free provision in low income areas.

(For more detail of play sector proposals for a more coordinated approach to play across government see appendix 1).

Evidence gathered by Children's Play Council for DCMS and published in 2002 and 2006³⁷, and cited above, shows clearly that obstacles to development and sustainability of local play provision are lack of secure, long-term funding and the fact that there is no strong lead or direction from government.

In addition, over the past few years, whilst some initiatives have helped play provision other government policy and initiatives have inadvertently undermined local provision. One example of this has been the National Childcare Strategy – an unintended consequence of which has been the closure of free open access play provision, primarily used by children from low income and socially deprived families. This has been replaced in many areas by childcare provision for children of working parents. A typical situation, frequently cited by playworkers, is that the children who used to use their play-centre free of charge now stand by the fences looking in as the children of parents who have paid for the childcare service use the provision.

Major improvements to the outcomes for children and young people could be achieved through a small number of Public Sector Agreements with different government departments. For example:

Department for Education and Skills

- Ensuring all new and refurbished schools under the *Building Schools for the Future Programme* provide adequate, good quality open space to allow for children and young people's play and informal recreation both within and outside of schools hours.
- Actively promoting links between schools and local open-access play providers to ensure that good play opportunities are available to all children and young people using extended services.
- Ensuring all children's centres have good quality open space to allow for children's outdoor play.
- Supporting the development of staffed play provision such as adventure playgrounds and play-centres in every local authorities area.

³⁷ Cole-Hamilton, I and Gill, T (2002) Making the case for Play: Building policies and strategies for school aged children. London: National Children's Bureau
Cole-Hamilton (2006) Playing on, Sustaining play provision in changing times. London: National Children's Bureau

Department for Education and Skills and Department for Communities and Local Government

- Supporting the development of teams of playwork trained play-rangers or outreach playworkers to open up parks, open spaces and local neighbourhoods for children's play.

Department for Communities and Local Government

- Developing standards for the design of open space to ensure it offers excellent opportunities for children's play.
- Reviewing Planning Policy Guidance to ensure there is adequate space for children and young people's play and informal recreation, in good locations, in all new and redeveloped housing areas.
- Ensuring that children's play and informal recreation is seen (making links with the Children and Young People's Plan) as a key component of the Sustainable Community Strategy, the Local Development Framework and, hence, Local Area Agreements.

Department for Transport

- Increasing the numbers of children playing safely in the streets near their homes.
- Expanding the development of home zones and similar areas offering traffic controlled residential streets.

Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

- Increasing the number of safe cycle and walking routes and play areas in rural areas.

Department for Health and DCLG

- Increasing the frequency and duration of children's outdoor play in and around their homes and neighbourhoods.

Department for Culture Media and Sport

- Increase and sustain the commitment to developing a national and regional infrastructure for play and informal recreation.
- through developing joint indicators and agreements with other government departments.
- supporting research, policy development, information and advocacy in the play and related sectors.

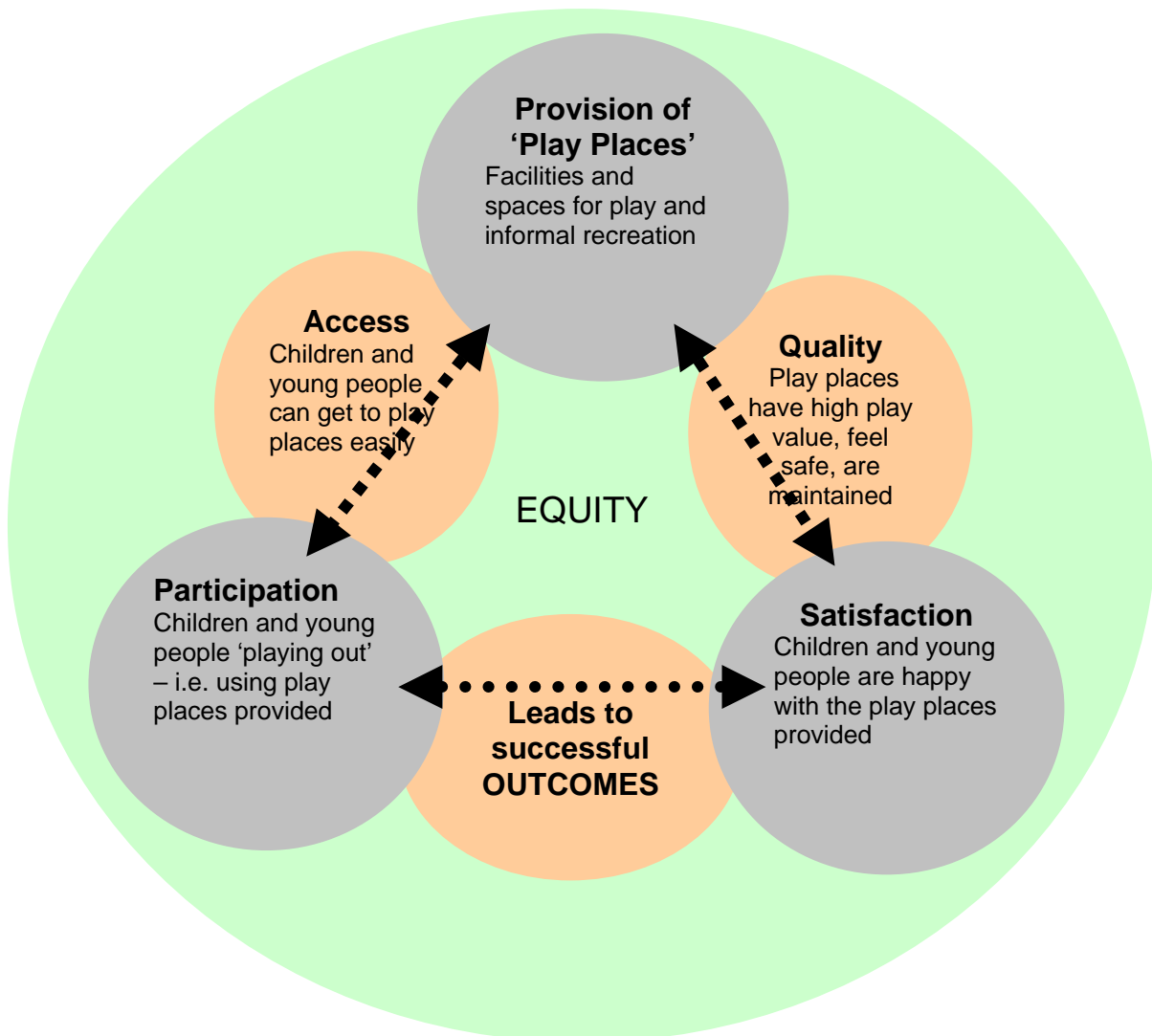
Appendix 2, *Children and Young People's Space? A discussion paper on the role of planning in outcomes for children and young people* 2005 (attached) sets out further evidence and proposals for the important role of Planning Policy and "Place Making" in achieving outcomes for Children and Young People.

4.2. Local government

Universal services: The Play Offer

If children and young people are to get the full benefit from play and informal recreation they must have access to a variety of high quality, suitable facilities and spaces in their neighbourhood. Local authorities, therefore, should be responsible for ensuring the delivery of the comprehensive play offer as part of universal services to children and young people. The key elements of the play offer are described in Diagram 1 below.

Diagram 1: The 'Play Offer':



Play places

Given time, space and opportunity children and young people will play in most places. These places may or may not be specifically designed for play or informal recreation (dedicated or non-dedicated) and may or may not be supervised by staff trained in playwork or other skills.

The `Play Place Grid' (below) gives examples of the types of facility and space which can offer children and young people the best opportunities for play and informal recreation and which should form the basis of provision where children and young people can play and meet their friends in their own neighbourhoods. All these spaces and facilities should be accessible, welcoming and engaging for all, including those who are disabled or have specific needs and wishes and, between them, should allow for the differing needs people of different ages and with different interests and abilities.

The Play Place grid

	Supervised and semi-supervised, for example	No formal supervision, for example
Dedicated places for play and informal recreation*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adventure playgrounds • Open access play centres • Play ranger and out-reach play projects • Mobile play facilities • School playgrounds and premises (open out of schools hours) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playgrounds / play areas, • Bike, skate and skateboard facilities, • Ball courts, • Multi Use Games Areas, • Hangout/youth shelters
Other provision where play takes place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School playgrounds and premises during the school day • Extended school and childcare provision • Children's Centres 	
Non-dedicated places for play and informal recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parks with rangers and gardeners • Streets with wardens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residential streets • Neighbourhood open spaces • Parks and green spaces • Beaches, rivers and lakes • Woodlands and natural open spaces • Safe routes to school and play areas • Playing fields and recreation grounds

* Places for children and young people, where they are **free** to come and go and **free** to choose what they do whilst there and which they can use **free** of charge. (There may be some exceptions to the 'free to come and go' criteria for young children and for children who have specific needs which make independent mobility impossible for them.)

Supervised and semi-supervised play provision

For many children the security offered by the presence of trained adults is paramount in their choice of play places. Play centres, adventure playgrounds, playschemes and other open-access provision, free to use and staffed by playworkers, can offer a wide range of indoor and out door play opportunities, offering children freedom and choice, excitement and challenge. Outreach playworkers, like play rangers, environmental and open-space play workers and those offering mobile play provision, are becoming increasingly popular.

Dedicated, unsupervised play provision

In most areas there are equipped playgrounds and other types of dedicated play areas, but to be successful they must feel safe and be well-located, attractive, engaging, accessible and well-maintained.

This type of provision is often aimed at children and young people of specific ages and interest and, in addition to playgrounds, might include skate parks, bike tracks, ball game areas, hangout shelters, fun-trails, and activity courses.

Parks and open spaces

If local parks and open spaces are well-maintained accessible and designed with play in mind – and children and young people are encouraged to use them – they can make the best play spaces. Good ‘natural’ play spaces offer varied, interesting and challenging physical environments where children can experience nature, can have space and freedom for movement and physical exertion, and can meet and socialise with their friends.

Safer streets and neighbourhoods

The most common outdoor play place for children and young people are the streets and neighbourhoods where they live. A recent survey found that 85 per cent of adults agreed that children should be able to play safely in the street where they live³⁸. Routes for children to get to other spaces must also be safe and easy for them to access on their own or with their friends. Local authority transport departments can have as much influence on children’s play opportunities as parks, leisure and children’s services departments.

Supporting local providers

Play associations and networks

Play associations and networks support the development of local play provision through the provision of information, training, fundraising advice, quality assurance and shaping good practice. Crucially, they also act as independent advocates for children’s play. Play associations are usually voluntary organisations, some of which have service level agreements or grant arrangements with local authorities. Support for this type of infrastructure can bring many benefits including new sources of funding, improving quality, developing sustainability and engaging with the community.

Training organisations

SkillsActive, the Sector Skills Council for active leisure and learning, is responsible for the strategic development of playwork education and training across the UK. It coordinates a network of regional Centres for Playwork

³⁸ *Attitudes to streetscapes and street uses*, Department for Transport, (2005)

Education and Training, which are responsible for regional development and dissemination of information about local training programmes. Play associations also have information about local playwork training and education.

4.3. How funding can be freed up to spend on preventative services

It is our view that the savings made through the preventive benefits of local play provision as children grow up far outweigh the costs of providing for good quality play opportunities for all children and young people. These benefits include healthier children and young people, both physically and emotionally; safe, stronger communities; less disruptive and anti-social behaviour from children and young people, and children growing up with self-confidence and greater respect for others and the environments.

5. Conclusion

In this submission we have addressed the role of universal play services for children and young people, from birth to 19 years or age. We at Play England support the evidence submitted by SkillsActive as it is immensely important to have qualified and trained play practitioners. In addition, we support the evidence submitted on behalf on the National Children's Bureau who have put forward general information on what makes a good childhood.

The evidence above submitted by Play England describes how play provision for children and young people's play and informal recreation is essential to a good childhood. Play and informal recreation should be a central element of any government policy and children's services. It also demonstrates the value of play provision to parents, families and communities.

Promoting, developing and sustaining good, universal, local opportunities for children and young people's play and informal recreation depends on commitment from both central and local government. Whilst requiring some additional public expenditure much could be achieved with stronger direction and guidance from government departments and agencies to local authorities and their partners. Major improvements to the outcomes for children and young people could be achieved through a small number of Public Sector Agreements with different government departments.

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Appendix 1

Articulating the vision for play

Vision

The national policy and implementation plan for children's play should be based on the vision that strong, vibrant communities have at their heart a variety of places for children to play. All children and young people should be able to find places, near their homes, where they can play and meet their friends free of charge. They should feel confident and safe to play freely, both indoors and out and in a manner that is appropriate to their needs, interests and abilities.

This can be only achieved by ensuring that in every residential area:

- there is a variety of places for play including supervised and unsupervised dedicated play provision
- streets and neighbourhoods feel like safe, interesting places to play
- children and young people feel accepted whilst playing in their local streets and neighbourhoods
- parks and open spaces are attractive and welcoming to children and young people, are well maintained and generally well used
- children and young people and their families always have the opportunity to take an active role in the development of local play spaces and provision
- play places and general provision are always inclusive and attractive, welcoming and engaging for all local children and young people including those who are disabled or have other specific needs.

National policy

The realisation of this for every community needs a cohesive national policy to:

- articulate the vision
- clarify the government's priorities and commitments
- describe how providing good play opportunities supports children, families and communities
- describe the role to be played by government and others
- discuss the resource implications of implementing the strategy
- provide a set of values and principles to underpin a national implementation plan.

Action plan

The policy will need a national implementation or action plan to support and guide local authorities, Primary Care Trusts, Regional Development Agencies, voluntary organisations, community groups and other local agencies in providing a comprehensive range of spaces and opportunities for children's play.

Leadership and coordination will be essential: government departments and agencies will need to work closely together to underpin and support the development of local provision. This will be most effective if:

- Government departments whose activities affect children's play opportunities recognise and understand their role and potential impact on children's play.
- Relevant government departments work together to develop a strategic approach to development, funding, support and standards for local provision of children's play opportunities within a framework of agreed values, principles and outcomes for children and young people.
- Relevant government departments and agencies routinely assess the impact of new programmes on the availability of different types of play provision for children, including especially open access, free provision in low income areas.

Aims

The plan should aim to achieve the following:

- In every locality there will be a range of free, well maintained, good quality, culturally appropriate supervised, semi-supervised and unsupervised play provision which meets the expressed needs of the vast majority of local children and young people.
- All this provision will be accessible, welcoming and engaging for children and young people who are disabled or have specific needs.
- Where they wish, children and young people and their families will be active participants in the development and management of this provision.
- All those working in play provision, whether paid or as volunteers, are valued and able to get the training and support they need to provide for the children and young people's play needs.
- Local parks and open spaces will provide well maintained, welcoming play environments offering children and young people space and variety.
- Children and parents will feel confident their children are safe in their local streets and neighbourhoods.
- All schools, including those providing extended services, will recognise the role of play in education, development and leisure, by ensuring that children have the time, resources, environments and supervision necessary to provide good play opportunities.
- Good play provision will be protected, maintained and developed to ensure it continues to meet local need.

- Parents and carers will be supported through the knowledge that their children have somewhere to go where they are enjoying themselves and extending their skills, knowledge and social contact.
- Local communities will be stronger, more cohesive and enjoy a better quality of life through the development and provision of successful community play spaces.
- There will be a range of services and initiatives aiming to meet the particular play needs of children in exceptional circumstances.

Priorities

Initial priorities for action:

- The development of a national action plan, working across government departments and agencies to provide local authorities and other providers with advice and guidance, in line with agreed values and principles about play, on how to ensure that new and existing plans and initiatives take account of the need for all children and young people to access appropriate play and recreation spaces and facilities.
- The Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play programme is promoting the development of play strategies within second tier and unitary authorities. Government action is needed to ensure that every top tier authority has an effective play policy in order to ensure links between the local play strategy and the Children and Young People's Plan.
- The extended schools development programme offers the best opportunity for expansion of supervised play services as well as the transformation of school grounds into quality play environments. School grounds into quality play environments. The DfES should produce a clear policy directive that play provision is part of the core offer of the extended schools prospectus, followed up by good practice guidance on providing supervised play services and developing quality play environments within extended schools. Ofsted should inspect schools on the quality and status of their play policies and play environments.
- The play spaces and opportunities delivered through the extended schools programme should be affordable and accessible to all local children; schemes should be piloted to explore the benefits of supervised open-access play provision running alongside the wrap-around care and learning support that is the core offer.
- A national review by the Department of Communities and Local Government on the question of standards for local play space and the adequacy of current planning policy guidance.

Improved provision

Improved provision should be promoted through the following steps:

- Clear direction from government on how children's centres, extended schools, children's fund, crime prevention, physical activity initiatives,

neighbourhood renewal and other regeneration schemes, can take account of the local play policy and strategy and the identified play and recreation needs of children and young people

- Guidance to extended schools and Children's Trusts should promote good practice in play provision and in:
 - inclusion
 - accessibility
 - cultural sensitivity
 - outreach work for minority communities and children at risk of social exclusion.
- All schools involved in the government's planned nationwide modernisation programme, *Building Schools for the Future*, should provide good, year round, supervised and unsupervised outdoor play opportunities for children and young people in the school and in the local neighbourhood.
- The government should develop a policy to counter the prevailing risk aversion in public play provision, looking at examples from Europe of how challenging and stimulating play areas can be developed without compromising safety standards
- All new childcare provision should meet minimum standards for the quantity and quality of outdoor space, designed for children's physically active play.
- Legislation to ensure that all new housing developments adopt child friendly home zone design principles and meet minimum standards for the quantity and quality of outdoor space, along with a pilot programme to create flexible spaces whose use can change over time in response to changes in local needs and wishes.
- 'Things to do and places to go' for young people should include space and facilities for unstructured, free-time leisure and recreation: e.g. hangout spaces, all-purpose games areas and skate parks. Guidance should be developed to successfully engage children and young people in the development and maintenance of quality public space.

Specific funding streams

Specific funding streams are needed to create:

- A pilot programme of 100 inclusive, supervised settings offering school aged children and young people places to meet, with a range of indoor and outdoor activities, which are free of charge. The centres, developed with local children, young people and communities would be community resources offering a range of adventurous and challenging structured and unstructured activities and be staffed by skilled playworkers.
- The development of teams of 'play rangers' in parks and open spaces in every town and city – appropriately trained, child-friendly staff who get

involved in activities and events as well as helping to safeguard the parks and play areas in their area.

- A rolling 10-year investment programme to upgrade England's estimated 25,000 local play areas at a rate of 2,500 per year so they are welcoming, inclusive and, most important of all, enjoyable.
- A renewed Home Zones Challenge Fund and the development by Department of Transport and Department for Communities and Local Government of good practice guidance for Home Zones.

Investment

Although there is funding for play available through a range of government funding programmes including the Big Lottery Fund, the Children's Fund and Neighbourhood Renewal Funds, this money is usually short-term, linked to new initiatives and frequently for capital expenditure only.

If children's play opportunities are to be sustained, there must be a commitment to long-term, revenue funding as well as capital and 'start-up' money. The potential for children's play provision to become income generating is low, especially in the economically deprived areas where they are most needed³⁹.

To support the development of sustained funding for play provision the government should:

- Establish an on-going national Children's Play Fund as part of its wider commitment to non-statutory services for children and young people.
- Require Children's Services Authorities, Children's Trusts and where appropriate District Councils to form partnerships with other local play providers and organisations, along the lines of those recommended in *Getting Serious about Play*.⁴⁰ These partnerships should develop funding strategies for children's play that ensure the long-term maintenance, development and sustainability of local play opportunities which meet the needs of all children and young people.

Investigate different possibilities for funding play provision including the development of social enterprise and cross-subsidisation from local revenue generating projects. The necessary investment should be secured through:

- The establishment of clear indicators for area wide children's play provision to be part of national public service agreements for outcomes for children and young people
- The inclusion of strategic indicators for area-wide play provision, currently being piloted by the Children's Play Council, within the framework for Local Area Agreements.

³⁹ Playing On, Cole-Hamilton I, CPC/NCB (2006)

⁴⁰ *Getting Serious about Play: a review of children's play*, Department for Culture Media and Sport (2005)

- Guidance on the use of relevant government funding streams for improving play provision.
- Specific consideration of the capital investment needs for sustainable, quality play environments within a review of the use and allocation of the proposed Planning Gain Supplement and funds raised under Section 106 of the Local Government Act 1972.
- The development and expansion of social enterprise and cross subsidising income generation based on adequate capital expenditure.

Workforce reform

Workforce reform is needed with a view to:

- Ensuring that every top and second tier local authority has a senior officer responsible for the strategic development of play opportunities.
- Increasing the number of trained playworkers to ensure the growth in demand is met.
- Requiring all staff whose work involves direct contact with children and young people have some training that gives them an understanding of the role of play in children's lives.
- Play workers must also be trained in working with disabled children and children with specific needs.
- Ensuring parity of playworkers' pay and conditions of employment with workers in similar professions working with children and young people. Provision of training to improve the competence of designers of all types of play facilities to deliver improved play value and best practice.
- Provision of training to ensure the competence of inspectors of all types of play equipment and facilities to underwrite safety at play and consistency in the application of standards, within an understanding of the need to balance risk management with the provision of stimulating and challenging play space, as recommended by the national Play Safety Forum.⁴¹

Developing standards

Both qualitative and quantitative standards are relevant to the provision of play opportunities. Although agreed standards and quality assurance tools for play provision are in use these are voluntary and their use is largely dependent on local commitment to play and quality. The result is that the extent and quality of good play opportunities in any locality is almost entirely dependent on the interest of local authorities and other providers. At present, the Children's Play Council and Play England are piloting a series of performance indicators for local authorities to use in Local Area Agreements.

⁴¹ Managing Risk in Play Provision: position statement of the Play Safety Forum, NCB (2004)

If nationally agreed standards and quality assurance tools are to contribute to the ongoing development of good quality play opportunities for children and young people, wherever they live, their needs to be:

- A commitment to ensure indicators for play are required within the joint inspection frameworks for children's services to assess play value and opportunities against agreed criteria.
- A greater commitment within Comprehensive Performance Assessment or its successor to monitor and assess the success of provision for play in meeting the needs of children and young people, their families and their communities.
- A thorough evaluation of existing quality assurance tools including used by play providers.

Children's Play Council