

Oxford City Council

Play Policy

Rationale for a play policy

Consistency of principles: a play policy identifies an agreed set of principles and definitions about play and its value for children's enjoyment, well-being and development.

Focus on children and young people: a play policy provides the context in which the focus can be shifted from existing institutions and practice to the needs of children, creating the possibility of change innovation and long-term development.

Transparency: a play policy clarifies the purposes of provision for providers, service users, funders and regulators.

Local commitment: the process of creating a policy unlocks local interest and energy and creates commitment to services; children, parents and local communities get involved.

A necessary first step: a play policy is the essential prerequisite for identifying service objectives and planning strategies.

A basis for quality: a policy enables us to determine specified purposes of services and provision; the purposes are themselves justified in the terms of the policy.

A foundation for risk mitigation: the framework of a policy, and practice which is derived from it, will assist in determining what is appropriate risk mitigation and in demonstrating that providers have acted properly where negligence becomes an issue¹.

A framework for the allocation of resources: a play policy provides the rationale for an allocation of resources which can be explained and justified both in relation to competing claims from other services and to the public. Children and young people benefit from expenditure being more accurately targeted on their needs and wishes.

Consistency between training and practice: the commitment to common principles specified in the play policy provides the link between service and practice development locally and the national standards for playwork education and training and the professional development of playworkers.

The Play Policy

Aim

The overarching aim of this play policy is to ensure that Oxford's children and young people have easy access to a range of quality play opportunities within a practical walking distance from their homes.

Commitment

Oxford City Council will take this play policy into account whenever decision's need to be made that could or should affect children's play opportunities. This means, for example, that planning guidance and decisions, renewal and maintenance programmes, transport policy, parks and open space strategies, cultural and community strategies will work to the values, objectives and criteria of this policy.

Oxford City Council will encourage voluntary sector organisations, community groups and other agencies to adopt this play policy. Many valued services are delivered by non-council bodies, for example, out-of-school clubs, nurseries, youth clubs, holiday play schemes, schools and play centres. The widespread adoption of this policy will help ensure the development of a city-wide cohesive approach to children and young people's play.

Understanding play

Play is one essential way children and young people come to understand themselves and the world around them. Play is a vital component of a child's life. A child's capacity for positive development will be inhibited or constrained if denied access to a range of stimulating play opportunities. Play is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, for intellectual and educational development.

Through play children and young people explore the physical and social environment, ideas and concepts and learn how to deal with situations that trouble or frighten them. Through play they develop self-confidence, a sense of themselves as individuals able to make choices, learn the connection between choice and consequence. In this they learn what cannot be explicitly taught.

The best play provision is designed to offer children and young people access to this wide range of experience in settings, which support the taking of acceptable level of risk.

Oxford City Council wants to ensure that play opportunities are created that allow children and young people to explore, manipulate, experience and affect their environment within challenging settings, free from unacceptable levels of risk². Importance must always be given to the child's choice and control over their own experience.

Oxford City Council believe that all children and young people want and need opportunities to play. Play provision should be welcoming and accessible to every child, irrespective of gender, economic or social circumstances, ethnic or cultural background or origin, or individual abilities.

A key factor in making places for play good for all children is that they are *designed* rather than simply equipped.

Subject to local discretion and conditions, there should be no presumption against children, young people and adults of all ages having access to quality play opportunities.

Values and principles

The following values and principles will inform all Oxford City Councils' decisions about play provision. Children and young people:

- are entitled to respect for their own unique combination of qualities and capabilities
- should have their opinions and reactions taken into account
- are part of, and contribute to, the cultural life of their communities
- have a right to be seen, heard and provided for in shared public space to the same degree as adults
- have a right to play environments that offer challenge, stimulation and delight but are free from unacceptable levels of risk
- have the right to expect consistency and clarity in adult values. Children and young people must see the connection between stated policy and what actually happens. They need to feel part of a community of trust and co-operation.
- children and young people should be able to control their own play activity. This is a crucial factor in enriching their experience and enhancing their development
- in play there need be no task or product, though the child or young person may decide differently from time to time.

Play and culture

Play is one of the ways children and young people learn how values, beliefs and traditions come to life through their actions and engagements with other people. This type of understanding cannot be taught. It is the difference between being able to quote a moral code, and learning to live by one.

Play and health

Play is critical to children and young people's physical and emotional health. There is growing concern about the rise in childhood obesity and related disorders, along with evidence showing a growth in mental illness. The Mental Health Bright Futures report states that opportunities for risk taking in unsupervised play helps children build self-confidence and resilience.

Shared public space

Children and young people being seen, heard and respected in public spaces is one of the hallmarks of a vital society.

Oxford City Council wants to ensure that its public spaces - e.g. thoroughfares, shopping areas, housing estates, parks, - are places where individuals and communities can be at ease with each other.

Children are entitled to play safely in a wide range of public spaces, including those in proximity to their homes. It is likely that where parents and carers feel confident about their children's ability to use shared public space, so too will others.

Parents and carers of young children in particular are right to expect that facilities are available that allow them to congregate in comfort whilst they supervise and enjoy their children's play.

It is accepted that perceptions of crime and community safety affect individual and family decisions about whether and where children can go out to play. This is a complex area where, for example, perceptions of crime levels are often higher than the reality. We will work with others to ensure that perceptions of crime levels more accurately reflect reality.

Oxford City Council recognises that global environmental issues such as transport, waste and pollution affect the quality of local environments where children play. In developing play opportunities, Oxford City Council will always aim to minimise the negative environmental impact of its activities and enhance the environmental benefits.

We recognise that play environments, whether designated play space or part of the wider public realm, must be properly maintained. Proper maintenance contributes to the sustainability of play environments and forms a necessary part of a positive approach to what CAFE Space has described as 'place making'.

'CAFE Space believes that the use of target hardening as a first response to anti-social behaviour is resulting in the fortification of our urban environment. There is a better solution: invest in place making, improving public spaces, to prevent the onset and escalation of these problems. Evidence from CAFE Space's study shows that well designed, well maintained public spaces can contribute to reducing the incidence of vandalism and anti-social behaviour, and result in long term cost savings.'

CAFE Space Policy Note: preventing anti-social behaviour in public spaces³

Play, planning and procurement

Planning guidelines, Section 106 (planning gain) agreements, and procurement procedures have major, and long term, impact on play provision. It is critical that planning and procurement guidelines and processes support and reinforce the strategic purpose of this play policy.

Oxford City Council will ensure that the Local Development Framework and Supplementary Planning Document supports and reinforces the aim and objectives of this play policy.

Quality play provision and questions of risk

Oxford City Council will fail in their responsibility if they do not create opportunities that allow children to explore and experience themselves and their world through the medium of play. This is done by offering children opportunities to take **acceptable risks** (that is, to freely undertake actions and involve themselves in situations that push against the boundaries of their own capacities) in environments that are challenging and stimulating.

This process fosters the development of skills and is broadly educative in that it allows children to learn through experience what cannot be taught, what they have to find out for themselves.

'Children need and want to take risks when they play. Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children and young people stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities.'

Play Safety Forum Position Statement on Managing Risk in Play Provision⁴

Without opportunities to take acceptable levels of risk children's development is inhibited, undermining their capacity to deal with the wider - unsupervised - world.

While the same principles of safety management can be applied both to workplaces generally and play provision, the balance between safety and benefits is likely to be different in the two environments. In play provision exposure to some risk is actually a benefit: it satisfies a basic human need and gives children the chance to learn about the real consequences of risk taking.

Play Safety Forum Position Statement⁴

If play provision fails to offer children varied and interesting experiences, it is **reasonable** to be concerned that children may seek challenge and stimulation elsewhere, in areas that may contain **unacceptable** levels of risk. Equally, if children are denied opportunities to assess some risks for themselves in a variety of settings and situations, then it is **reasonable** to be concerned that they will lack the experience and skills to distinguish between levels of risk in the wider world. Oxford City Council **adopts** the Play Safety Forum's Position Statement on Managing Risk in Play Provision.

Consultation: with parents, carers and children

Children and young people's views will be taken into account when making decisions about their play opportunities.

The process of finding out, and responding to, children's needs and wishes is more likely to occur where a culture of dialogue and conversation is nurtured. Conversation and dialogue presuppose a multiplicity of voices and the possibility of more than one point of view. A culture of conversation respects not only the child's voice, but also that of adults. We will work to ensure that a culture of conversation with children and young people is promoted.

Significant amounts of information already exist about children and young people's play wants and needs. Sources of information include local surveys and national research. Oxford City Council want to ensure that it makes best use of existing information and **not engage in unnecessary consultation exercises.**

The seven play provision objectives

The objectives that follow are broad statements, which are intended to set out how the definition of play and the underpinning values and principles should be put into practice. They form the basis against which play provision can be evaluated.

The objectives take account of those published in 'Best Play: what play provision should do for children', the outcome of a partnership between PLAYLINK, Children's Play Council and the National Playing Fields Association.

Oxford City Council affirms that its play provision, and that which it supports, will work to the seven 'Best Play' objectives. These are set out below.

Objective One: The provision extends the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.

Objective Two: The provision recognises the child's need to test boundaries and responds positively to that need.

Objective Three: The provision manages the balance between children and young people's need and want to play and the need to keep them from being exposed to unacceptable risks of life threatening or permanently disabling injury.

Objective Four: The provision maximises the range of play opportunities.

Objective Five: The provision fosters independence and self-esteem.

Objective Six: The provision fosters children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction.

Objective Seven: The provision fosters the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.

Criteria for an enriched play environment

Oxford City Council wants to ensure that the enriched play environment criteria are taken into account when planning, designing and maintaining places where children and young people should be able to play. This will require a new emphasis on the natural environment, natural materials and play friendly art works and structures.

The enriched play environment criteria⁵ below appear in 'Best Play: what play provision should do for children.' The examples given in each section are in no sense exhaustive, merely indicative.

- **A varied and interesting environment.** Examples: things at different levels, spaces of different sizes, places to hide, trees and bushes, open spaces, made things, places to inspire mystery and imagination.
- **Challenge in relation to the physical environment.** Examples: activities which test the limits of capabilities, rough and tumble, sports and games, chase.
- **Experiencing the natural elements - earth, water, fire, air.** Examples: campfires, digging, playing snowballs, flying kites.

- **Movement - e.g. running, jumping, rolling, climbing, balancing.** Examples: beams and ropes, soft mats, bike riding, juggling equipment, ladders, space.
- **Manipulating natural and fabricated materials.** Examples: materials for art, cooking, making and mending of all kinds; building dens; making concoctions; using tools; access to bits and pieces of all kinds.
- **Stimulation of the five senses.** Examples: music making, places where shouting is fine, quiet places, different colours and shapes, dark and bright places, cooking on a campfire, rotting leaves, a range of food and drink, objects that are soft, prickly, flexible, large and small.
- **Experiencing change in the natural and built environment.** Examples: experiencing the seasons through access to the outdoor environment; opportunities to take part in building, demolishing, or transforming the environment.
- **Social interactions.** Examples: being able to choose whether and when to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, compete and resolve conflicts. Being able to interact with individuals and groups of different ages, abilities, interests, gender, ethnicity and culture.
- **Exploring identity.** Examples: dressing up, role-play, performing, taking on different kinds of responsibility.
- **Experiencing a range of emotions.** Examples: opportunities to be powerful/powerless, scared/confident, like/disliked, in/out of control, brave/cowardly.

Decisions about what constitutes a quality play environment too often assume, as a starting point that play equipment is synonymous with the creation of quality play opportunities. The enriched play environment criteria and related aspects of this policy will help to counter this restrictive approach.

Those responsible for provision that aims to offer children and young people play opportunities are, to a greater or lesser extent, working to playworker principles. The playworker's role has a dual focus:

All children and young people should have access to quality play environments

To achieve the overarching aim of this play policy, Oxford City Council will need to assess, for itself and in partnership with other agencies and interests, how play opportunities can be secured and enhanced, for example, in parks and open spaces, in residential areas and estates, in thoroughfares and commercial areas, as well as school grounds and designated play provision. Changes in speed restrictions, by-laws and regulations, and the management of these spaces, will be made where necessary to ensure that they become accessible to children and young people for play and informal recreation.

Not words alone

This play policy, and the strategy on which it is based, aims to change radically the way we think about and provide for children and young people's play. Oxford City Council recognise that this policy challenges both itself and those organisations, agencies and groups that believe in the value of play and children's entitlement to quality play and leisure opportunities.

This policy is rooted in a collaboration between Members and Officers and the voluntary sector. It represents, in other words, a broad based consensus. The responsibility now is to bring this policy to life on the ground. This will require that the tradition of collaboration now established is maintained and extended.

Notes, References and Contacts

The following notes and references informed the formulation of this play policy document.

1. Charter For Children's Play. Published by the National Voluntary Council for Children's Play (now the Play Council).
2. United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.
3. A Review of Playgrounds And Related Studies by P. J. Heseltine (Play Safety Advisor, RoSPA). Published by the National Play Information Centre. Review based on 165 studies and surveys. "Studies of accidents are numerous - out of all proportion to their frequency and severity in the overall pattern of childhood accidents. This indicates the necessity for playground safety to be kept in perspective."
4. One False Move (1992) & Children, Transport and Quality of Life (1993) by Meyer Hillman, Senior Fellow Emeritus, Policy Studies Institute.
5. Open Access Play And The Children Act. Published by PLAYLINK.
6. 'Risk & Safety in Play: The Law and Practice for Adventure Playgrounds' published by SPON for PLAYLINK.
7. Article 'Risks on Playground' by David Ball, Director of the Centre for Environmental and Risk Management, University of East Anglia. Published in HAPA Journal No. 13, (1994).
8. Ball D (2002) *Playgrounds - risks, benefits and choices*, Contract Research Report No. 426/2002, Health and Safety Executive.
9. Children's Play Council: www.ncb.org.uk/cpc.htm
10. PLAYLINK: www.playlink.org.uk
11. Free Play Network: www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk