



Space for Play

A Play Policy for Fingal

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Foreword

A message from the Mayor

I am delighted to be associated with the publication of Space for Play – A Play Policy for Fingal, Fingal County Council's first Play Policy. The publication of this Policy will ensure that the children of Fingal will enjoy the fundamental right of children to play and reap the many benefits that play affords them.

With this Play Policy, Fingal County Council has established design guidelines and a planning framework which will guide the equitable provision of natural play spaces throughout the County and place the provision of high-quality play environments at the heart of planning and development decisions.

It is welcome that a central tenet of the policy is that play spaces should be inclusive and accessible, thereby providing opportunities, from the local to the regional scale, for children and teenagers of diverse abilities to play together outdoors in environments that have been developed in response to

the end user's desires. To achieve this, the Policy emphasises that children must be given a voice and listened to through a process of consultation which will inform the provision of the play spaces.

On behalf of Fingal County Council, I wish to extend a sincere thank you to all of those who have contributed to the development of this policy. I look forward to the implementation of this policy and witnessing the enrichment of the lives of the children of Fingal for generations to come.

Cllr Seána Ó Rodaigh
Mayor of Fingal

A message from the Chief Executive

Fingal has the youngest population in the State and with Space for Play – A Play Policy for Fingal, we recognise that providing natural play spaces of the highest quality, for the children and teenagers of Fingal, is essential for their happy and healthy development.

Building on the existing play facilities throughout the County, this policy establishes clear guidelines and a planning framework as a reference for all stakeholders involved in the design, provision and maintenance of equitable, enduring and natural play

spaces. The framework is a four-tiered hierarchy which details the scale, type and intended users of play provision. Clear standards are established relating to the location of play spaces relative to residences and it is an objective of the policy that the provision of space for play should be paramount in planning

and development decisions concerning not only residential and parkland but the civic space in its entirety.

I would like to thank all the members of the public, elected members of Fingal County Council, Comhairle na nÓg and community councils who contributed to the development of this policy through the public consultation process.

AnnMarie Farrelly
Chief Executive



Executive Summary

Many of our fondest childhood memories are of playing freely in the natural environment; discovering the wonders of nature, building dens, climbing trees, overcoming challenges and forming friendships with no care for the holes in the knees of our trousers. Fingal County Council recognises its responsibility to facilitate its youngest residents in exercising their fundamental human right to play as established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) and that through playing, particularly in natural environments, children benefit physically, socially and emotionally, form enduring memories and friendships and acquire a lifelong affinity for nature.

Currently however, children are faced with a decreasing range of opportunity for unstructured free play in the modern environment due, in part, to changed perceptions of what is considered a safe environment and the urbanisation of the population. Consequently, society is faced with the public health challenge of increasing rates of obesity in children. The Irish Heart Foundation (2019) A Childhood Obesity Manifesto states that “Obesity represents the greatest single threat to the health and wellbeing of our children” and that, in tandem with the availability and aggressive marketing of nutrient poor food and beverages, “Sedentary lifestyles often due to high levels of screen time and inadequate opportunities for physical activity” is one of the four main drivers of the increasing rate of obesity in children in Ireland.

This policy provides, in the form of best practice guidelines, a reference point for all stakeholders concerned with providing the highest quality play

environments in Fingal. The paramount consideration of the guidelines is that all play spaces should be inclusive and accessible, enabling children of all abilities to play together. From this understanding, the guidelines address the issues of the aesthetics of play spaces; the age appropriate nature of provision; opportunities for play outside of the playground; the assessment of risk in terms of a risk benefit analysis and the benefits of including natural elements within play spaces.

A model of play provision is presented in the form of a hierarchy of play spaces which details the recommended nature of play provision in relation to the location and demography in which the play provision is to be located. The hierarchy consists of four tiers of provision:

- (i) The Local Area for Play (LAP), intended for use by the youngest children and their carers, should be situated within a 100 to 200 metres from the home;

- (ii) the Local Equipped Area for Play (LEAP) provides for children who are beginning to venture independently from the home, younger children accompanied by carers, and older children and should be 500 to 1000 metres from the home;
- (iii) The Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play (NEAP) should be 1000 to 1500 metres from the home and provide a broad range of play opportunity for older children and teenagers while being a focal point for the community at large;
- (iv) The Destination Playground within 15 kilometres of home and providing for young children to teenagers and carers on a larger scale and with a broad diversity of opportunities for play.

This policy forms the basis on which Fingal County Council will expand and maintain the space for play available to the children of Fingal by developing an equitable, county-wide play infrastructure that represents the needs of children as paramount in planning and development decisions. It will be a resource for all stakeholders involved in the delivery of play spaces for children and will facilitate the provision of spaces for play, of the highest quality, throughout the county. Fingal is committed to providing fun, safe, accessible, inclusive, natural and engaging spaces for all our children to enjoy.

**“Children need
the freedom to
play. Play is not a
luxury...Play is a
necessity.”**

Kay Redfield Jamison



The Benefits of Play in Childhood

Fundamentally, play as expressed in the UNCRC General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*, is undertaken by children “for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end”. Play is an autonomous activity which is limitless in its forms and evolves as children develop. Play is a “vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.”

Play is a way for children to make sense of the world – an educational activity that provides entertainment and challenge as well as promoting social and emotional development. Playing, throughout childhood, contributes to a child's quality of life and provides benefit to all facets of their growth as a person. Play is a testing ground where children practise their skills for adult life. *Looking at the Growing Up in Ireland* longitudinal study, Egan and Pope (2018) report that outdoor play specifically is of particular benefit for young people.

When children engage in active play it helps to develop their **physical skills and coordination**. The amount of time that children spend playing outdoors has declined in the past generation (Kemple et al., 2016). With an increase of childhood obesity in Ireland, the adoption of healthy levels of physical activity is becoming even more important. Physical activity has an obvious **benefit to overall health** and there are advantages to physical health that will be beneficial to children in later life.

Imaginative play encourages **cognitive development** – it helps children to problem solve and develop their language skills. Through imaginative play, children develop their memory and creativity and develop their own perspective on the world.

Playing in **nature** can improve a child's concentration and supports self-discipline. The development of self that comes through play helps a child to **deal with stress** as well as to express their emotions.

Group play promotes **social development**. Using play, children create and **build friendships** and feel part of a group. Playing with other children also prepares children for independence from family life.

Play invites a child to learn about **risk** and how to manage it. It challenges their boundaries, building the skills to understand risk in a safe and protected environment. It is a controlled way for a child to fulfil their wish to **experience excitement**.

If children are to experience the benefits from play, they need sufficient space to move around safely and freely in an environment that offers a wide variety of experiences. Common characteristics of play are that it is freely chosen and personally directed. The planning of local parks and open spaces can have a huge influence on the play experience.

Legislative/Policy Background

This policy on play has been developed with regard to the following legislative and policy background:



The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – Articles 31, 23 and 12.

In 1992 Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that: “The State recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in the cultural life and the arts.” Play is defined, within the General Comment 17 on Article 31 as “any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise”.

National Play Policy – Ready Steady Play

From Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Published on 15 April 2019. Last updated on 1 August 2019.

The Policy provides a framework for future development and looks at a range of issues, including:

- guiding principles
 - a partnership approach between the statutory, community, voluntary and private sectors
 - developing a play infrastructure
 - safety and public liability insurance
 - funding arrangements
- Actions assigned to local authorities include: The development of a play policy (18), the participation of children in decision making relevant to them (2), the use of creative landscape for play (13) and the standards and maintenance of playgrounds (38 & 39).

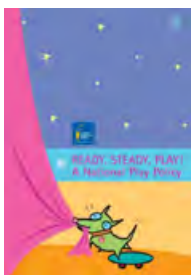


National Development Plan

The National Development Plan 2018–2027 (NDP) sets out the government’s investment priorities that will underpin the implementation of the National Planning Framework. “The Regional Operational Programmes of the National Development Plan will cater for the needs of disadvantaged children by initiating play and development opportunities for them”.

National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016

The most recent social inclusion strategy, identified a wide range of targeted actions and interventions to achieve the overall objective of reducing consistent poverty. “Every child should have access to quality play, sport, recreation and cultural activities to enrich their experience of childhood, and; Every child and young person will have access to appropriate participation in local and national decision-making.”



Fingal Development Plan 2017–2023 & Keeping it Green an Open Space Strategy For Fingal

Fingal has an existing commitment to providing quality play provision, both formal and informal, as stated within these planning and strategy documents.



To provide, throughout Fingal, an equitable network of safe, accessible, inclusive, natural and engaging spaces of the highest quality in which all our children will enjoy the profound range of benefits that play offers.



The establishment of best practice guidelines for the development of play spaces for children up to the age of 17 on Fingal County Council managed land.

The policy is focused on the provision of public play spaces on Council managed property including but not limited to designated playgrounds. From neighbourhood parks to regional parks, opportunities to provide space for play will be identified where feasible according to the guidelines established within this policy.

The policy recognises that there is a requirement for the provision of recreational space for teenagers and seeks to guide the provision, development and enhancement of opportunities for play for children up to the age of 17.

This policy will provide a reference framework for all stakeholders involved in the provision of spaces for play within Fingal. Within this policy, a set of guiding principles are established to inform the delivery of the highest quality play provision for the children of Fingal. Furthermore, this policy defines a hierarchy of play spaces corresponding to spatial planning and development classifications.

This policy will set out the parameters under which a survey and assessment of existing and proposed provision of play spaces throughout Fingal is to be carried out using a standardised assessment tool. The assessment will focus on the following:

- The **inclusivity** of play spaces for children of all abilities and their carers
- The **accessibility** of play spaces for children of all abilities and their carers
- The incorporation of the **natural** environment within play spaces
- The **quality** of existing provision measured against international best practice
- Identifying **opportunities to expand** and develop the current provision of space for play.

The assessment tool will form the basis of the ongoing assessment of play space provision, in recognition of the requirement to measure the successful implementation of this policy.



Guiding Principles of Best Practice for Play Space Development

Throughout this section of the policy, we outline guiding principles for the design and construction of play spaces within Fingal. All the following guiding principles should be considered from the initial requirement outlined below, that inclusivity and accessibility are paramount in the process of commissioning and developing all play spaces.



Inclusive, Accessible and Equitable Play for All

Central to this policy is the recognition that all children have a fundamental right to play and to enjoy an equitable quality of experience of play. From this understanding stem the guiding principles of best practice that all play spaces within Fingal should implement.

At the heart of Fingal's play policy is the recognition of the fundamental human right and desire of all children to play. Children have a diverse range of abilities and cultural and social backgrounds that should be provided for and reflected in the play spaces of Fingal. Article 12 of the UNCRC enshrines the right of children to be listened to and taken seriously. Consultation with children will therefore continue to be an integral part of the process of developing play spaces that respond to their expressed desires. Rather than catering to specific needs, Fingal will create play spaces throughout the county that are **accessible and attractive** to all and in doing so enhance the **play value** of the spaces for all users. Creating places that are truly **inclusive** is important for the understanding of diversity. Ensuring that children, young people and adults can all **socialise and play together** engenders a greater awareness, acceptance and understanding of the diversity of their community.

The play spaces created by Fingal will facilitate children of all abilities to **play together**. To achieve this, the diverse range of needs of all children must be considered. Designers and commissioners of play spaces should ensure that **equitable** opportunities to experience the stimuli of different types of play are provided. Whilst it is acknowledged that not all children will be able to use the same play equipment in the same way, an **equitable experience** should be provided in **close proximity**. Some examples of equitable provision are relatively straightforward to provide, such as the installation of support chair swings next to traditional swings or the provision of wide slides, which facilitate a carer to accompany a child on the slide. However, the provision of opportunities to climb for children with reduced mobility may require the provision of transfer points on the equipment to facilitate **equitable access** to the sensations of climbing. Measures such as locating car parking spaces in close

proximity to play spaces; minimising the physical barriers around and within play spaces; ensuring that surfaces are easily navigable by users with restricted mobility and that, within features such as sand play areas, easy access to sensory and constructive play is facilitated. It is therefore essential that designers of play spaces can demonstrate expertise in the incorporation of equitable opportunities through the application of the principles of Universal Design.

Play spaces should be **spatially diverse**, reflecting the diverse nature of the users. Provision of spaces that cater for moments of **tranquillity** and observation for both the children and their carers in conjunction with more dynamic, stimulating spaces will be required in play space designs. Materials must be chosen to offer a mix of interesting textures, shapes, solidity, weight, flexibility, sound and touch. In providing for those with **sensory** diversity, all visitors to the play spaces will benefit from an enriched environment.

Signage should be kept to a minimum and, where necessary, should be **welcoming** and easily interpreted by all users of the space. The use of braille, pictograms and aural messaging should be incorporated on signage and at information points to convey messaging to a diverse range of play space users. Furthermore, the signage should highlight the primary aims of the play space as opposed to the restrictive messages that signage often conveys. On entering play spaces and parks, rather than highlighting the activities that are not permitted, the signage should primarily set the tone for the space as being a fun place for all types of play and all members of the community. The thematic context of the space should be used to illuminate the signage and to communicate to the users of the space that they are, above all, welcome within it.





Child-Led Play

Non-prescriptive, child-led play is play that is conducted free from the influence of adult direction and consequently allows children to experience the environment on their own terms. The inclusion, within play spaces, of objects and materials that can be manipulated and interpreted, according to the interests and instincts of the children, stimulates the imagination of the child and leads to discoveries about themselves, their peers and their environment that can last a lifetime.

Children have an innate **curiosity**, and this should be catered for to enhance their play experience. Placing children in charge of their own play adventure has many benefits - they can explore their own ideas and let their imagination guide them. There is no pressure on the child, and they can play freely and confidently, the child can **investigate** and **experiment**. They can explore their environment and create their own world. The possibilities, open to children when adults do not instruct their play, are abundant. As adults and policymakers, we should support our children to enjoy unstructured child-led play (Hillary2005). **Non-prescriptive play opportunities** encourage creativity and provide a more dynamic play experience for children. The adventure of unstructured free play can be enjoyed by a child playing alone or with their peers.

Spatially diverse play settings encourage child-led, unstructured free play. Looking at a playground setting, materials and facilities such as sand, water, tunnels, hills and

hollows all create opportunities for non-prescriptive play. This principle applies equally to provision for older children and adolescents who desire space where **hanging out** and unstructured recreation is welcomed and encouraged. These facilities are very important for allowing children and adolescents to engage with the environment and each other and to help them to design the play to suit both their ability and their age. These play spaces are malleable and adaptable to children's varying capacity for play, meaning the child is in control (Lynch, 2012).

Fingal County Council will expand its play provision by implementing the principles of unstructured free play. It is the Council's objective to ensure that the designs of play spaces will incorporate this concept to ensure that children within the Fingal area will reap the benefits of child-led play.





Play in Natural Spaces

Providing access to the experience of natural environments through the incorporation of natural features within play spaces is a priority for Fingal. Planting schemes that change with the seasons including trees, perennial plants and grass which is allowed to grow naturally, provide a rich environment for wildlife and children alike. The benefits to children of such provision are manifold, fostering a lifelong affinity for nature, stimulating imaginations and encouraging prolonged play episodes.

Fingal County Council has the benefit of ample and rich green spaces within its boundaries. It is the Council's goal to maximise this benefit by incorporating natural play spaces for children within the Fingal area. Wilson (2018) explains that a children gain a greater appreciation and **understanding of nature** through play in natural spaces. This is advantageous for society as a whole and for the natural world.

By playing in a natural environment, children add a **new dynamic** to their play opportunities in the form of weather, seasons, flora and fauna. As well as play opportunities being created, these areas integrate well with their surroundings and are aesthetically pleasing. These settings are also more enjoyable for the child's parents or carer who may accompany children to the space. In one Norwegian study, children who attended natural environment early childhood settings, listed running, jumping and climbing as their favourite activities (Kaarby, 2005).

Natural play spaces provide an environment for both intentional and self-directed play. In his analysis of the outdoors, Fjortoft found that children

enjoy this environment because of rough surfaces and vegetation that provide affordances for movement challenges and for variety in play schemes (Fjortoft, 2004). Luchs and Fikus (2013) state that when children play in natural playgrounds it results in **prolonged play episodes**. The designs of natural play spaces are predominantly more robust due to the nature of materials that are used. They are more likely to withstand the rigors of a public environment and require less maintenance than formal play structures.

Key features of play spaces that incorporate natural elements are that they are **complex habitats**, diverse in topography and texture. Trees and planting schemes that evolve with the season and grassed areas that are managed to reveal the **rhythms of the natural environment** are essential. Natural elements provide loose play materials such as seeds, leaves and sticks while also providing habitats for wildlife with which the children can engage. The **topography** of the space should be such that it affords the child the opportunity to **explore** the space and the nature within it on their

own terms; considerably designed hideaways and snugs will provide the children with areas that they can **manipulate** to their own purpose and thereby claim **ownership** of the space.

It is Fingal County Council's objective to provide play spaces in natural environments to allow us to broaden play opportunities for our young people. This will encourage children to **connect with nature** and will foster an understanding of their dependence on the natural environment. Fingal County Council will aim to incorporate **natural features** and amenities within play spaces in **urban areas**. When considering these play spaces, Fingal County Council will aim to select designs and materials that complement the locale in which the play spaces are provided.





Aesthetics of play facilities/ Local heritage-themes/ Sustainable materials

Play spaces should enhance the parks and open spaces in which they are situated to the benefit of the whole community. The incorporation of natural elements within play spaces renders them pleasant spaces for children and their parents/carers to spend time in. Fingal County Council will advocate for an appreciation of the inherently wild appearance of natural elements as they develop through the seasons. Local history and stories should provide thematic linkages to the surrounding area, contribute to a sense of place and stimulate imaginations. Construction materials should be sustainable and sourced as locally as possible.

In planning and designing play spaces from the local to the regional scale it is Fingal County Council's aim that the resulting play space will **enhance the locale** in which it is situated. Spaces that are attractive and stimulating for children are also attractive to the carers of the children and pleasant places in which to spend time.

Through the **incorporation of natural elements** within play spaces, such as planting schemes which develop with the seasons and attract and **nurture wildlife**, and fallen tree trunks which stimulate child-led play and provide a biodiverse habitat, the visitors to the space enjoy a connection to nature similar to that which is gained in **beautiful gardens and landscapes**, thereby encouraging return and prolonged visits.

In consultation with the prospective users of a play space and the wider stakeholder network, Fingal will seek to create spaces with a **thematic connection** to the **heritage** of the

locality in which play spaces are situated. The reflection of local heritage within the design of play spaces contributes to the development of a **sense of place** of the play space, embedding it within the surrounding area and **inspiring the imaginations** of the visitors to the space.

"When designing play spaces for children there is one thing apart from economics, which is essential and that is genius loci, the spirit of the place, in other words the qualities and the atmosphere already present. This can be a part of a building, a tree with character, something that happened at the place, an old sculpture or something else. Genius loci is an important starting point and can be the approach to decide the design of a new space." Helle Nebelong

To integrate existing and new play spaces with the heritage of a locale and to achieve aesthetic cohesion between the play spaces and the environment in which they are located, it is desirable

that locally sourced materials are used to construct the play spaces. **Sustainable**, natural materials should be used to develop elements within play spaces that, while facilitating a wide range of child led play, are inherently resilient and will provide return on investment for as long as possible.

To provide for the range of ages for which this policy is formulated, play spaces such as Multi Use Games Areas (MUGA's), skate parks and hang-out zones will be developed in the larger parks where demand is identified. By their nature, these installations do not lend themselves to the incorporation of natural elements or the representation of local heritage. However, the settings and location of these types of play space should be carefully considered to integrate with the locale, be safely accessed and form part of a play space which does meet aesthetic goals.





Age Appropriate Play Spaces

It is essential that we provide a range of spaces for children that cater for their changing needs and desires as they develop through childhood. Many of the same activities, such as climbing, balancing and manipulating the environment through play with sand and/or water, are enjoyed throughout childhood and successful play spaces are designed at scales suited to their intended users. However, as children progress into adolescence, they require spaces in which they can simply hang out. Through engagement with this age group at the design stage, we can develop hang out zones in which older children feel welcomed and safe.

Fingal County Council is conscious that the design of play spaces must provide developmentally appropriate play **experiences** for young people. Playgrounds should be designed and located so as to meet the needs of the children they hope to serve. The needs of children change as they progress through childhood and by understanding these evolving requirements, we can provide better play facilities. Infants and younger toddlers may simply enjoy basic structures to climb under, over and around and this will encourage their physical **freedom** in a safe space.

Older preschool children engage in **associative play**. This type of play begins during toddlerhood and extends through preschool. With associative play there are no set rules. Although children may want to be playing with the same types of toys and may even trade toys, there is no formal organisation. The play facilities for this age group should be located close to home. Older preschool children need to be stimulated with size-appropriate play structures such as small slides or crawl tunnels.

Creative play spaces with moveable play materials such as sand and water stimulate this age group and engage their imagination while developing fine motor skills. Activities that encourage the development of children's gross motor skills are equally beneficial, for example negotiating ladders and steps or holding onto ropes or slides.

Play provision for middle age children (6-12 years) requires a range of activities and needs to be both **physically challenging** while also facilitating the child in learning how to manage risk. Many of the activities enjoyed by younger children are still enjoyed by older children but the scale of the space, objects and challenges must increase to maintain the engagement of this age group.

It is important to provide inclusive play spaces where older children and teenagers can "hang-out" and feel welcome to do so. The requirements of this age group in terms of public space are different to those of under 12's. Spaces, where they can congregate and socialise with their friends, connect to wi-fi and claim ownership of the

space, are especially important. Ball games areas and wheel parks are the most common forms of teenage provision, but these tend to cater less well for girls. The provision of **bespoke** seating around the edge of such areas creates a varied and valuable social space for everyone to use. **'Hang-out'** shelters are another example of social spaces that can be provided for teenagers. These work best when sensitively located close to other facilities rather than being placed in isolated or exposed positions. Engaging with teenagers in designing such areas will improve the success of the facility. Considerate design and **quality materials** communicate to young people that they are valued.

By using **non-prescriptive play facilities** at a local level, spaces can be more easily adapted to the **changing demographic** of their users. This is especially true in new housing estates. Natural play facilities are particularly suitable for this function. There is potential for change when we use a space with no predefined function, evolution of use is then encouraged.





Play Outside of the Playground

The provision of opportunities for play outside designated play spaces is proposed as a means to develop a more child friendly society. Facilitating play in the civic space results in collateral play opportunities and should be considered at the design stage of projects. Minimal interventions such as painted surfaces and the installations of natural features on heavily used routes, such as to and from school, can be planned for or indeed retrofitted, thereby legitimising play in shared spaces.

Children will play wherever the possibility arises. A shared play space is a civic space that offers play opportunities. It is our vision to incorporate playable outdoor spaces wherever it is appropriate. By designing **civic spaces with play value**, we can extend the play opportunity for children at little cost as well as promoting a more **child-friendly society**. The play value of a space can be measured by many factors such as physical attributes and social and cultural benefits. Playable spaces can greatly extend the range of opportunities offered to children in relation to play.

Playability is an important feature of parks, recreation grounds, natural areas and other types of public open space. The play landscape has many features, usually within the 'play area' designed to be an integral part of this landscape, however, we can also encourage children to play outside of this area. The most important locations for playable space are where children and young people would naturally want to play. Areas such as green spaces, trees, bushes and streams may

give children and young people the chance to invent their own play. Many public open spaces and parks have enormous potential for **collateral play**. By creating a landscape that stimulates children, they can experience the irregularity of life and stimulate their imaginations. When designing features within a park such as seating or water fountains, the play value of these items should be examined.

Accessible pedestrian and cycling routes as well as lightly trafficked areas present the opportunity to provide an extra play opportunity for children as they travel from one area to another. This is sometimes known as '**play along the way**'. There is no clear distinction between play and active travel in the eyes of a child. By adding play opportunities to these routes, they will become more attractive to children and will encourage them to walk to school, the park, shops or to visit friends. Artwork, paint on the path's surface or natural play features can offer excellent opportunities for **spontaneous** and **creative play** on such routes and can offer many play interpretations. It encourages children and young

people to use their imaginations and to enjoy the route itself as linear play space, enhancing their experience. Playgrounds that are accessible by greenways have added value.

Play in streets and housing estates is even more important now due to the reduction in the distance children travel independently in recent decades. By adjusting green or civic spaces, close to people's homes, to take account of the possibilities of creating auxiliary play spaces, huge benefits can be gained. This is especially true in areas not suitable for purpose-built playgrounds. The characteristics of child-friendly environments that are conducive to play are also the characteristics of a **successful public space**. The potential of collateral play should be considered during the design process of such spaces. By incorporating play features within the design, it will legitimise the use of these spaces as shared areas.

Fingal County Council has embarked on a collaboration with seven cities and towns throughout Ireland through the European Union European Regional Development Fund **URBACT Playful Paradigm initiative**. <https://urbact.eu/playful-paradigm-0>

The URBACT programme is the European Territorial Cooperation programme which aims to foster sustainable integrated urban development in cities across Europe. Through this collaboration we will gain knowledge and skills which will assist in identifying and implementing opportunities to develop playful spaces outside the traditional playground model.





Challenge and Risk

Children have an innate desire to challenge themselves through taking risks. This drive exists because through risky, challenging behaviour children learn about themselves, and the asymmetrical, challenging world in which they live. In considering play provision, there must be a recognition of the benefits of the experience of risk to the child which should be balanced against the likelihood of serious harm to the child.

A function of play in the development of children is that it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge about themselves, their peers and the environment in which they live. Sterile, uniform environments designed with an emphasis on risk aversion, without the balancing consideration of the benefits to children of the experience of challenge and risk, serve to mislead the child as to the unpredictable and sometimes unforgiving nature of the world in which they live.

*'If everything is not the same and predictable, a child's fantasy is sharpened...everything should not be explained, demystified beforehand'.
Helle Nebelong*

Children naturally seek out opportunities to **challenge** themselves and take **risks** which can lead them to **explore** environments that are objectively dangerous, unmanaged and unsupervised. This instinct can best be provided for in environments that are carefully designed and managed and offer challenges, the risks of which have been carefully considered in terms of the benefits which they offer.

Stringent application of regulations relating to the regularity of surfaces and steps for example, while appropriate in a workplace setting, reduce the cognitive learning value of play when applied in the play setting. The incorporation of irregularities within the design of play spaces requires the child to engage in a more considered way with the environment and stimulates their mind on a deeper level. Consequential to this enriched play experience is the child's acquisition of **knowledge** and **understanding** of the wider environment and **strategies** for negotiating it.

Fingal County Council will provide engaging, challenging play spaces throughout the county in which children can explore their limits and discover the consequences of taking risks with reduced likelihood of serious harm. Play spaces will be expertly designed and constructed, incorporating an approach which balances risks with benefits.



Promoting play within the community

There are many benefits of play which include positive impacts on areas of health such as physical, cognitive and social development of children. The benefits of play for our children as outlined in this policy would be further amplified if they were highlighted to the community.

The welfare of children living in the Fingal area could be improved by coordinating and arranging organised, visible activities within play spaces at a local level. Highlighting the positive impact and the developmental opportunity of play for young people to their parents/guardians/carers would improve the happiness and health of our children. The needs and rights of children to play, be safe and be listened to should be considered in order to enhance the value of our play spaces with the Fingal area.

Fingal County Council will consider the benefit of appointing a Play Officer to work as an advocate for and promote play within the community. The Play Officer would communicate up to date knowledge on the benefits of play and development of children by facilitating and promoting play opportunities that are inclusive to all. Organised play events and community activities could be arranged catering to various ages and focusing on creating a fun, friendly and accessible play space for children and their families. This role would also promote communication between Fingal County Council and other stakeholders and elevate the profile of play within the community.

“Children are a kind of indicator species, if we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for everyone”.

**Enrique Peñalosa
(Former Mayor of Bogota)**



Objectives

1. Ensure that all play spaces are inclusive and accessible for all.

Through the application of the principles of universal design Fingal will develop the provision of play spaces throughout the county. The spaces will be engaging for all users and will facilitate children of all abilities to benefit from playing together while being welcoming and attractive spaces for the children's carers. To achieve accessibility for all users, barriers and obstacles must be kept to a minimum especially within the designated play space.

2. Increase the provision of opportunities for Child-Led Play.

Fingal will enhance the provision of opportunities for children to exercise their imaginations by ensuring that, through the design process, ample play features and spaces within parks are non-prescriptive in nature. A balance will be achieved between traditional features such as swings and roundabouts that are loved by children and the facilitation of opportunities to explore the limits of their creative impulses.

3. Develop play spaces that are rich in natural elements.

Fingal will incorporate the natural environment in all play spaces to afford children the opportunity to engage with nature over prolonged periods of play, thereby fostering an appreciation of the wider natural environment. In doing so, the spaces will be robust, stimulating and attractive not only for the children but also for the wider community.

4. Implement a risk/benefit analysis of play spaces.

Fingal County Council recognises the desire of children and teenagers to partake in risky and challenging activities and the developmental benefits gained in pursuing this desire. In response to this, Fingal County Council will ensure that a risk benefit analysis of existing and proposed play spaces is conducted, with the aim of providing play spaces which facilitate the negotiation of appropriately risky and challenging activities in a managed environment.

5. Ensure that play spaces enhance the locale in which they are situated and reflect local heritage.

Fingal will develop a network of attractive play spaces to be enjoyed by children, young people and their carers. The play spaces will enhance the locales in which they are located through the use of sensitive design strategies reflecting the heritage of the locale and utilising locally sourced natural materials.

6. Engage with the community to provide age appropriate play spaces.

Fingal will undertake a process of engagement with communities in the application of the principles of child led and non-prescriptive play and the implementation of considered design employing high quality natural materials. In doing so, Fingal will develop a network of play spaces that are dynamic and capable of responding to the evolving desires and needs of children as they develop from toddlers to teens.

7. Promote the benefits of play in all open space initiatives.

Fingal County Council will promote the benefits of active outdoor play to counteract some of the undesirable consequences of modern lifestyles. The benefits of play for children and the wider community are manifold and profound: From the personal, emotional and cognitive to physical and societal, the benefits of play provision will be advocated for at every opportunity.

8. Ensure the equitable distribution of play opportunity throughout Fingal.

As part of the overall Fingal Development Plan 2017–2023 aim to “improve the quality of Fingal’s urban and rural environments and encourage a high standard of design in all new developments.” and the Keeping it Green, Open Space Strategy, 2015. aim to create high quality open spaces, Fingal County Council will ensure through auditing of existing and proposed development that play provision will be equitably distributed throughout the County. The results of this process will inform future council capital programmes regarding play provision subject to further analysis and resources as appropriate and funding.

9. Advocate for the Integration of play opportunities outside the traditional playground model.

Fingal County Council will encourage the consideration of play value in all decisions relating to the civic space. In developing a landscape that facilitates play and social gatherings, the children and young people will not only benefit from the intrinsic value of play itself but will also derive a sense of belonging within the community. This in turn will contribute to an increased sense of community cohesion.

10. Provide a hierarchical model of play provision to inform planning decisions.

To ensure that appropriate play space provision is incorporated in planning applications. Fingal County Council will apply a hierarchical model which provides a clear guide, for developers, designers and planners, to the scale and type of play provision required in relation to the demographics of proposed developments.

11. Develop a play space assessment tool to ensure that all existing and proposed play spaces conform to the principles set out in this policy.

Develop a play space assessment tool to ensure that all existing and proposed play spaces conform to the principles set out in this policy. To achieve the vision of the policy, it is essential that the principles and objectives outlined in this policy document are as far as feasible implemented in respect of existing and proposed play spaces. To assist in achieving this objective, Fingal will devise and test a tool for the standardised assessment of existing and proposed play space provision. The tool will provide valuable insights into the quality and adequacy of existing and proposed play spaces.

Planning Framework – Hierarchy & distribution play facilities

The selection of sites for children’s play environments must be an integral part of the design process for all new housing developments.

It is Fingal County Council's policy that Play facilities shall be provided at a rate of 4 sq. m per residential unit. All residential schemes in excess of 50 units shall incorporate play facilities clearly delineated on the planning application drawings and demarcated and built, where feasible and appropriate, in advance of the sale of any units.

Where there is a shortfall in the required provision of play facilities in relation to a new residential scheme (e.g. in high density developments) as part of the Development Management process, the Council may consider a financial contribution in lieu of this provision. This financial contribution shall be used towards the provision and upgrading of play facilities in the vicinity of this development. The value of this financial contribution

will be based on cost of provision of a range of play facilities from six to under 17 years.

Fingal will further develop existing provision of Play Space and provide future provision following a hierarchical model outlined in Table 1 below.

This table outlines the Public Open Space and Play Space hierarchy and accessibility standards. The standards allow the provision of a wide variety of accessible Public Open Spaces and associated Play Spaces to meet the diverse needs of the County's residents.

Table 1: Play Space Hierarchy and Accessibility Standards

Type of Public Open Space	Size of Park / Open Space	Distance from homes	Level of Play provision	Age group catered for	Description of Play Space
Pocket Parks (Class 2 as per Development Contribution Scheme) Facilities for smaller children, but not necessarily formal play facilities. Have an important visual and social function also. Pocket parks must not be to the side or back of houses and must be adequately overlooked.	Between 500 sq.m – 0.2 hectares	Within 100–200 metres walking distance of homes	LAP (Local Area for Play) Minimum 10m x 10m to approximately 20% of public open space depending on calculated provision	Intended primarily for children up to the age of 6, though it will be used by older children at different times of the day or evening	Accessible and inclusive landscaped areas for play Imaginatively designed and contoured, using as far as possible natural materials such as logs or boulders with associated planting which create an attractive setting for play.
Small Parks (Class 2 as per Development Contribution Scheme) Depending on their size, these will accommodate playground facilities, kick about areas, and passive recreation.	Between 0.2 – 2 hectares	Within 500–1000 metres walking distance of homes	LEAP (Local Equipped Area for Play) Minimum activity zone of 200 square metres	Intended, in the context of play, for use by children up to the age of 12.	Accessible and inclusive landscaped areas for play Imaginatively designed and contoured, using as far as possible natural materials such as logs or boulders in combination with traditional play equipment and associated planting. Where natural landscape such as woodland is in proximity to the play space, this should be incorporated and play opportunities dispersed throughout the available space as appropriate.

Type of Public Open Space	Size of Park / Open Space	Distance from homes	Level of Play provision	Age group catered for	Description of Play Space
<p>Local Parks (Class 1 as per Development Contribution Scheme) Accommodate playground facilities and a number of playing fields. Passive recreational and biodiversity areas will also be accommodated in these parks.</p>	Between 2 hectares – 20 hectares	Within 500–1000 metres walking distance of homes	<p>LEAP (Local Equipped Area for Play) Minimum activity zone of 400 square metres</p>	Intended, in the context of play, for use by young and older children.	<p>Accessible and inclusive landscaped areas for play</p> <p>Imaginatively designed and contoured, using as far as possible natural materials such as logs or boulders in combination with traditional play equipment and associated planting. Where natural landscape such as woodland is in proximity to the play space this should be incorporated and play opportunities dispersed throughout the available space as appropriate.</p> <p>Provision for older children up to 17 years old such as hangout zones with bespoke seating and wi-fi connectivity in combination with such features as a MUGA or skating elements.</p> <p>The play space should reflect local heritage or folklore by linking design to local theme.</p>
<p>Urban Neighbourhood Parks (Class 1. as per Development Contribution Scheme) A wide variety of facilities and uses can be provided here due to their size. Biodiversity areas will also be accommodated in these parks.</p>	Between 20 hectares – 50 hectares	Within 1000–1500 metres walking distance of homes	<p>NEAP (Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play) Minimum activity zone of 1,000 sq. metres comprising an area for play equipment and structures and a hard-surfaced area of at least 465 sq. metres (the minimum needed to play 5 aside football)</p>	Intended for use by accompanied young children and older children of relative independence, who have the freedom to range further from home.	<p>Accessible and inclusive landscaped areas for play</p> <p>Imaginatively designed and contoured, using as far as possible natural materials such as logs or boulders in combination with traditional play equipment with associated planting. Where natural landscape such as woodland is in proximity to the play space this should be incorporated and play opportunities dispersed throughout the available space.</p> <p>Provision for older children up to 17 years old such as hangout zones with bespoke seating and wi-fi connectivity. The larger space available in such provision should facilitate extended provision of MUGA and other informal, non-structured activity such as a skate park, BMX track or Callisthenics equipment.</p> <p>The play space should reflect local heritage, or folklore by linking design to a local theme.</p>
<p>Regional Parks (Class 1 as per Development Contribution Scheme) Provide for a large range of uses. Formal and informal play areas, passive recreation areas, biodiversity areas and often a distinct attraction will be available on site.</p>	Over 50 hectares	Within 15km	<p>'Destination' Playground Popular facilities include meeting areas and youth shelters within local open space, floodlit multi-games areas, skateboard parks and BMX track</p>	Intended as a destination where all ages will find a broad range of amenities to enjoy both as family units and independently.	<p>Within regional parks, all ages of the community can be catered for with the provision of the features of LAPs, LEAPs and NEAPs on a larger scale. The play spaces should reflect local heritage. The park landscape should also be evaluated for its potential to offer natural play and adventurous opportunities.</p>

General Characteristics for Proposed Children's play areas

- Appropriate to the needs of the local community
- Accessible for every child within the appropriate walking time for LAPs, LEAPs and NEAPs
- Accessible without having to cross main roads, railways or waterways
- Sited in open, welcoming locations facilitating good passive supervision, visible from nearby dwellings or well used pedestrian routes
- Separated from areas of major vehicle movements and accessible directly from pedestrian routes
- Sited on land of natural topography or on land capable of being landscaped for the type of play experiences intended
- Designed so that any high climbing structures are as far as possible from nearby dwellings and any potential visual intrusion is minimised. Appropriate set-backs from residences must be agreed with Fingal County Council. Where space is limited, topography and design features should be employed to provide adequate prevention of potential disturbance of proximate residences.
- Integrated, as far as possible, with other open spaces and areas of amenity planting to provide separation from nearby dwellings
- Accessible by footpaths with a firm surface
- Surfaced in a manner fitting to the intensity of use
- Provided with seating for accompanying adults, carers and siblings

Designed to provide a stimulating and challenging play experience that may include equipment and other features providing opportunities for balancing, rocking, climbing, overhead activity, sliding, swinging, jumping, crawling, rotating, imaginative play, social play, play with natural materials such as sand and water, ball games, wheeled-activity areas or other activities.

- Designed, manufactured, installed and maintained in accordance with European Standards EN1176 and EN1177 in respect of any play equipment provided.
- All equipped play areas should be subject to an independent post-installation inspection; details of certified inspectors can be obtained from the Register of Playground Inspectors International (RPII)
- Designed with appropriate physical features on the perimeter to enable recognition as a play area

General Characteristics for LAP (Local Area for Play)

- It is intended primarily for children up to the age of 6, though it will be used by older children at different times of the day or evening
- It is within 100–200 metres of the child's home
- It is best positioned beside a pedestrian route that is well used
- It occupies a well-drained, reasonably flat site surfaced with grass or a hard surface
- The recommended minimum activity zone is 100 m²
- It may contain demonstrative features that allow young children to identify and claim the space as theirs
- Similarly, depending on location, there may need to be a barrier limiting the speed of a child entering or leaving the LAP

General Characteristics for LEAP (Local Equipped Area for Play)

- General Characteristics for LEAP (Local Equipped Area for Play)
- It is intended primarily for children who are beginning to go out and play independently
- It is within 500–1000 metres of the child's home
- It is best positioned beside a pedestrian route that is well used
- It occupies a well-drained, reasonably flat site surfaced with grass or a hard surface
- The recommended minimum activity zone is 200 m². The total area will be based on calculated provision of 4m² per residential unit (in developments over 50 units).
- A minimum of 25 metres should normally be provided between the activity zone and the nearest dwelling. Where these minimum distances apply, careful consideration needs to be given to:
 - Passive observation
 - The design of any means of enclosure, planting scheme and/or other physical features on the boundary of the residential property
 - The siting of features including equipment within the activity zone, must preclude opportunities for overlooking nearby gardens or dwellings, potential loss of privacy and creation of nuisance. For high density developments – particularly on brownfield sites – the buffer zone may have to be reduced in order to provide play facilities for the children. However, a suitable set-back from residences must be maintained and agreed with the Parks and Green Infrastructure Division of Fingal County Council.

- Design is of key importance:
- The buffer zone includes varied planting to provide a mix of scent, colour and texture
- It is designed to provide a stimulating and challenging play experience that may include equipment providing opportunities for balancing, rocking, climbing, overhead activity, sliding, swinging, jumping, crawling, rotating, imaginative play, social play, and play with natural materials such as sand and water, or other activities.
- A minimum number of six play experiences is recommended
- There is adequate space within the area of the LEAP to allow children to be generally active and play 'chase' type games
- If the LEAP is enclosed there should be two, self-closing gates on opposite sides of the LEAP. Fencing should be used where appropriate and related to the open space management arrangements in place.
- Seating for accompanying adults and siblings should be provided, together with one or more litter bins
- The name and contact telephone number of the relevant Council section should be provided with an invitation to report any incident or damage to the LEAP or the play equipment.

General Characteristics for NEAP (Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play)

- Mainly for older children but with play opportunities for younger children too
- Within 1000–1500 metres from home
- Positioned by a pedestrian route that is well used
- Well-drained, reasonably flat site surfaced with grass or a hard surface, along with appropriate surfacing for play equipment or structures
- Recommended minimum activity zone is 1000 sq m, comprising an area for play equipment and a hard-surfaced area of at least 465 sq m
- Buffer zone of 30m minimum depth separates activity zone and the boundary of the nearest property
- Stimulating, challenging play experience with provision for a minimum number of nine play experiences is recommended
- Adequate space for active play
- Boundaries should be recognisable by landscaping, fencing, may be necessary if the site adjoins one or more roads
- Seating and litter bins provided
- Requires a sign indicating the area is for children's play and dogs are not welcome, contact details of facility operator and location of the nearest telephone
- Convenient and secure parking facilities for bicycles should be provided

Natural Playgrounds

- It is intended, in the context of play, for use by children and young people alike
- It is best positioned beside a pedestrian route that is well used
- It occupies a well-drained, imaginatively landscaped site suitable and used for play
- The area may have little or no equipment but is imaginatively designed and contoured, using as far as possible natural materials such as logs or boulders which create an attractive setting for play. Planting should be varied to provide a mix of scent, colour and texture

Policy Implementation and Continuous Play Provision Assessment

Quality of Play Environment: providers' assessment tool is designed for the providers and stakeholders to assess the Location, Accessibility, Features, Environmental Factors, Challenge/ Risk as well as Play Opportunities of existing and proposed play spaces.

The tool will be developed as a form which can be completed in-situ or as part of a desk-top study. Key objectives and principles outlined in this policy, such as the requirement that play spaces are inclusive and accessible to children and young people, will be assessed on a consistent basis using the tool.

By providing this tool to all stakeholders, the aim is that a broad consensus among stakeholders will be achieved providing the basis on which play opportunities can be developed within the county.

An example tool is included in annex 1.

“Play keeps us vital and alive. It gives us an enthusiasm for life that is irreplaceable. Without it, life just doesn't taste good”

Lucia Capacchione

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Appendix 1.

Playground Facility Management

Fingal County Council commits to achieving the highest standards of maintenance for its play facilities. This will be achieved by:

- Appropriate and timely maintenance regimes. Regular inspections will be carried out by inspectors with Register of Play Inspectors International (RPII) accredited training
- Inspections will be recorded by electronic means and retained in line with prevailing legal requirements
- Any problems highlighted in the inspection reports will be referred to a contractor and recorded through the CRM (Customer Relationship Management System) system
- All companies contracted by the Council to work on playgrounds will be specialists in this field
- This maintenance and repair works completed will be recorded using the CRM system which will allow for accountability and oversight over the process
- All equipment will be installed and maintained in line with current European and British Standards



**Comhairle Contae
Fhine Gall**
Fingal County
Council

