

# **The Leeds Play Strategy**

Playing our Part: *Creating the Play Friendly City*

**EVERY CHILD MATTERS**

**Children Leeds**

## **Foreword**

We are pleased to present the Leeds Play Strategy. This document sets out our commitments for play that are part of our ambition to make Leeds the 'best place in the country to live', a place where every child is happy healthy, safe, successful and free from the effects of poverty.

Improving play in Leeds is vital if we want to improve the lives of children and young people. Children and young people tell us that more places to go and more things to do in the city is very important for them and we need to work to meet their expectations. Play is so important because opportunities for good, free play help children and young people to thrive – helping them to be happier, healthier, safer and to develop new skills, new confidence and new friendships. Above all, play allows children to enjoy life.

Whilst play is important for all children and young people, not all of them enjoy the same opportunities. Many of our children and young people have more limited opportunities for play because of their own circumstances or because there are fewer facilities and choices in their neighbourhood. We want to narrow the gap to make sure that all children and young people in Leeds have the chance to play.

This is why we have made play a key aim in the Leeds Children and Young People's Plan, and why we have developed this Strategy. We have used the development of this document as a chance to bring together children and young people, their parents, carers and communities as well as the organisations that serve them, to agree new ways of working together to improve play. We will continue to use this partnership approach to deliver this strategy, as we know that only by working together will we achieve our aims, and create the kind of city that our children want and deserve.

Cllr. Richard Brett,  
Lead Executive Member for Children's Services

Rosemary Archer,  
Director of Children's Services

## **A Partnership Strategy**

This strategy has been developed, agreed and approved by all key local partners. This strategy sets out our shared commitment to ensuring that Leeds becomes a 'play friendly city'.

In February 2007 all the partners of the local children's trust signed up to working together to deliver this Strategy.

[Logos of partners to be added to publication version]

- Director of Children's Services Unit
- Education Leeds
- Learning and Skills Council
- Leeds Children's Fund
- Leeds Play Network
- Leeds Primary Care Trust
- Leeds City Council Early Years
- Leeds City Council Neighbourhoods and Housing
- Leeds City Council Parks and Countryside
- Leeds City Council Social Services
- Leeds Voice
- West Yorkshire Connexions
- West Yorkshire Police
- Youth Offending Service

# INTRODUCTION

'Play' is one of few things that almost all of us have experienced in our lives, and many adults look back on their own childhood with fond memories. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century many adults have become concerned about the *loss of childhood* and the possibility that children have *forgotten how to play*. They need not be concerned,

"The truth is that, unless they are seriously undernourished or in a state of fear, children will always play when they are on their own, unsupervised, in the freedom of open space." (Peter and Iona Opie, 1997)

What children and young people of all ages still choose to do today during their freely chosen time is play. However, the amount of time they have available in which to make their own choices may be less than it was for us and the places that they have available to meet and spend time with their friends may be restricted – especially outdoor places. These problems are not usually created by children and young people – they are generally adult creations that in the main require adult solutions.

This *Play Strategy* for the city of Leeds calls on all of us to *play our part* in providing those solutions and to involve children and young people themselves in doing this so that we can create a place to live where childhood can be as creative and as happy a time for our children now as it was for many of us in the past.

## **The importance of Play**

Play is intrinsic to children's quality of life; it is how they enjoy themselves and is essential to their development. Research increasingly shows that for children and young people to stay healthy, be safe, enjoy their childhood, achieve their potential, contribute to society and achieve economic well-being they must have opportunities for free play and informal recreation, throughout their childhood.

Children at play embody the essence of childhood and much that is healthy and vibrant in a society. Regular enjoyment of time, space and opportunity to play is fundamental to children's happiness and essential to their healthy development. Children out playing – in public spaces and in dedicated play areas – also signify a healthy community and a public realm that is meeting the needs of its people.

The provision of Public Playgrounds, open spaces, and staffed provision whose primary purpose is play for its own sake is one of the very few ways in which society provides resources directly to children without expecting some kind of directly measurable outcome in return.

## **Barriers to play**

Modern living has thrown up a range of barriers to children playing. More traffic, less open space, real and perceived dangers from crime, changes in family life and new patterns of work have all conspired to deny more and more children the opportunities that previous generations took for granted. The consequences are profound. Increasing childhood obesity, 'anti-social behaviour' and mental health problems have each been at least partly attributed to young lifestyles that are more sedentary and restricted than at any time in our recent history.

## **Defining Play**

'Play' is not easy to define, and a detailed attempt to do so has not been made in the Play Strategy, however we can say that play is a natural process that almost all of us have experienced in our lives. In line with the *Department for Culture Media and Sports*, 'National Review of Children's Play (2004)' – *The Dobson Report* – is considered to be '*what children and young people do when they themselves choose what to do*'. This means that such already well catered for forms of play such as directed play in a learning context, for example, is not covered in the Play Strategy but play at school playtime is.

Young people, particularly teenagers, would not use the word 'play' themselves to describe what they do. However, in the context of the above definition what they do in the company of their friends and in their own time fits, and so 'play' is used to cover provision for them too. This is also in line with the Dobson Report.

The Play Strategy recognises that children and young people play in both supervised settings where adults are present and non-supervised contexts and places where adults are not usually present. This includes such places as playgrounds, waste and wild places, and the wider neighbourhood environment. Both supervised and non-supervised forms of play are important to children and young people, but we should remember that,

"Play is something that children [and young people] engage in of their own free will. In no way is it essential for adults to be part of children's play and, often, children's play goes on to the total exclusion of adults. However, for play to take place in a free and spontaneous way the conditions have to be right." (Paul Bonel & Jennie Lindon, 1996)

The Play Strategy challenges us adults to *play our part* in contributing to *making the conditions right* for the children and young people of Leeds to be able to get the most out of their play whether it is in a supervised or non-supervised setting.

## **The purpose and scope of the Play Strategy**

The purpose of this strategy is to help to engage local services, organisations and communities in playing their part in improving opportunities for play in Leeds. We need this new approach because play has historically been too divided between organisations and too much considered as an unimportant afterthought or as the responsibility of others. A key aim of this Strategy is to create a common culture in the city where everyone recognises the importance of play in their work and for children, young people and their families.

The strategy provides a framework for joint working, a common agenda for services, and clear aims and targets for the future. The strategy sets out the key objectives for change to improve play for all across the city, but also creates a focus on those children, young people and communities where more effort and more resources are needed to ensure that they are included and enjoy the same opportunities.

However, this strategy should be seen as a beginning rather than as an end in itself. The strategy sets out the broad aspirations and direction, the framework for change. The next

step is to use this foundation to develop clear action plans, and new ways for commissioning and delivering play services across the city.

## **CONTEXT**

This section provides a brief explanation of the wider context for this strategy and the factors that have shaped and informed the priorities we have chosen. This section includes: a consideration of how play links to wider national and local developments; key information about children and young people; a summary of the views of key stakeholders and lastly a review of current provision for play in Leeds.

### **Play in context**

There are strong links between this Play Strategy and wider national and local developments, plans and policies. These are both drivers for change in play and, in turn, supported by our agenda for play.

#### **The National Context**

The importance of *play* and the contribution that making space and provision for play makes to the lives of children and young people on many levels has been the subject of campaigning and awareness raising at a national level for a number of years. Local authorities have had available an increasing number of significant documents that have been aimed at informing and advising them in making quality play provision.

The Children's Play Council, the national organisation for children's play in England, for example, has produced a number of significant documents in recent years including Best Play: what play provision should do for children – a document sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2000); The Local Government Association detailed briefing paper Realising the potential of cultural services: the case for play (2001); and the national play organisation PLAYLINK document Play as Culture: incorporating play in cultural strategies (2002), supported by the DCMS, Department for Transport, Local Governments and the Regions, and Department for Education and Skills are just three of the more significant.

In 2003, central commissioned the MP Frank Dobson to conduct a major national review of children's play provision around the whole of the United Kingdom with the aim of producing a series of recommendations for central government in how best to support the provision of play services. The report, Getting Serious about Play: a review of children's play was published by the DCMS in 2004 and has proved to be significant in persuading central government to make significant funding available to develop and support new and existing play provision including the announcement in March 2005 of a new £155 million fund available to support play from the Big Lottery Fund.

The introduction of the Children Act as the legislative framework of the governments Every Child Matters programme has also added new commitment and vision to providing a more coordinated approach to children's services in general at local authority level. Play has

been a given a significant part in this process with Tessa Jowell stating recently (April 2005),

“Both my department [Department of Culture, Media and Sport] and the Department for Education and Skills believe that play, recreation and leisure outcomes sit equally alongside the others that authorities and their partners need to consider when making decisions about the provision of coordinated children and young peoples services.”

Other national initiatives that are proving relevant for the near future in terms of play, including the current Public Health White Paper and the National Childcare Workforce Review, both of which are likely to result in significant new funding opportunities being made available. But of equal significance to the welcome additional resources and potential resources must be the level of prominence that central government is giving to the issue of play and which in turn is being taken up by local government.

The challenge inherent in these initiatives is for local authorities to approach the issue of play provision in a strategic way.

### *The Local Context*

The draft Play Strategy is one of a number of significant documents that supports the Leeds Cultural Strategy as part of Leeds Initiatives Vision for Leeds. The Play Strategy also supports and underpins the Leeds Children’s Services Plan. The following summarizes some of the links that exist with the draft Play Strategy.

#### *Cultural Strategy*

The Leeds Cultural Strategy points out that Leeds has the highest concentration of children and young people in the Yorkshire region (over 20% under 17) and notes that children’s play and play activities are justifiable in the definition of ‘culture’, stating that ‘for children play is a key expression of their culture; and that ‘the importance of play for children and their families cannot be underestimated’ (p12). This sits well with the draft Play Strategy Action Points on promoting the value and importance of play in the lives of children of all ages.

The Cultural Strategy also recognizes the importance of good neighbourhoods for children as well as adults, particularly those with restricted mobility which links with the draft Play Strategy Action Points on inclusion and on providing provision close to home.

#### *Parks and Green Spaces Strategy*

There are a number of significant links between this strategy and the Play Strategy, particularly the way public spaces are planned and organised. Consultation carried out

with children and young people in the development of a new Parks and Green Spaces Strategy complements that done for the draft Play Strategy.

Access of children and young people to local parks and on the development of a network of different types of play space are further relevant links between the two strategies.

#### *Leeds Forest Strategy*

This strategy is in the early stages of development but given the value that children and young people place on being able to play in the natural environment there are clear links to be made. It is helpful that the Forestry Commission have recently produced their own Play strategy from which lessons can usefully be drawn.

#### *Fixed Play Equipment Strategy*

Leeds City Council Fixed Equipment Play Strategy relates specifically to the provision of playgrounds and youth zone type provision. The strategy calls for a significant change in the way that such spaces are currently managed, particularly in the defining of a new hierarchy of playgrounds and other forms of space.

Links between this strategy and the draft Play Strategy Action Points on creating a network of different types of community based play spaces is particularly relevant.

#### *Active Leeds: Sporting City – a sport and active recreation strategy for Leeds*

Although catering more for adult led, supervised activities than the Play Strategy, the current Sport Leeds Strategy recognizes the important role that sport and active recreation plays in people's lives (p1) and has amongst its principle aims: 'Prioritising young people'; 'Investing in people and places' and also 'Contributing to neighborhood renewal' – all of which relate closely to Action Points within the draft Play Strategy.

The strategy also stresses the need for a partnership approach to delivering strategy developments and provides practical experience in doing so with the creation of Sport Leeds. A second, supporting strategy to the above has been proposed that will look more closely at informal recreation and the promotion of healthy lifestyles, which will be of further relevance to the draft Play Strategy.

#### *Leeds Preventative Strategy*

The Leeds Preventative Strategy begins from a similar starting position to the draft Play Strategy in that it considers that, "The children and young people of Leeds [are] regarded as individuals but they are also Leeds' future." (p5). The overall Values and Principles of the strategy are also very compatible.

More directly, the strategy links the needs for children to be at the centre of a process that reduces risk by making preventative interventions that raise 'resilience'. The measures



stated in the strategy are particularly relevant for the Action Points in the draft Play Strategy relating to the involvement and value placed on young people, on being safe from harm and also in the development of a network of adventure playgrounds.

In addition, there will be links between the two strategies in promoting the requirement for prevention services to be within broader universal services and making such services accessible. The need for partnership working is also stressed in both.

#### *Safer Leeds Community Safety Strategy 2005 - 2008*

The community Safety Strategy aims to tackle both 'Crime prevention' and 'the fear of crime' (p2) and states that in doing so dealing with 'perceptions of crime' is an important element in providing 'reassurance' to local residents. This links particularly well with Action Points in the draft Play Strategy relating to young people and feeling safe.

Other initiatives, such as the appointment of an architectural liaison officer 'to advise on the community safety aspects of building design'; and the 'use of neighborhood and street warden schemes' also link well to the draft Play Strategy Action Points on creating the play friendly city, neighborhood design, and stewardship and involvement of the local community.

#### *Leeds Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy*

The Renewal Strategy points out that "People do not live in isolation but within the complex structures and arrangements of our communities." (p2) and bases the strategy in the context of neighborhood renewal and the tackling of social exclusion in the overall development of Leeds as a city.

Despite the fact that the strategy does not directly relate to children and young people in a play context, the importance of improving the environment as an important factor in neighborhood renewal is stressed. The Play Strategy also raises this point in Action Points relating to neighborhood design and in developing the network of playgrounds and other play spaces. The Play Strategy also points out that providing play facilities in a local community can often be a method of promoting community involvement in the broader context of renewal.

#### *Every Child Matters and the Leeds Children and Young People's Plan*

Play is an element of the Every Child Matters agenda and contributes to each of the five 'ECM outcomes'. Play has a particularly strong role in 'Enjoy and achieve' but has an often important wider role, for example in raising activity or in promoting confidence, resilience and self-esteem.

In addition, partnership working and the development of new forms of accountability, commissioning and integrated delivery are key themes of Every Child Matters and also

central to the approach of this strategy. Leeds children’s trust arrangements will be central to the delivery of the Play Strategy.

These linkages are best explained through showing how the Play Strategy links to the aims of the Leeds Children and Young People’s Plan, as shown in the table below.

<b>CYPP Aim</b>	<b>Linkages to play</b>
Healthy Start and Healthy Lifestyles	Play has a key role in raising activity and reducing obesity as it has been shown to raise activity levels far more than more structured activities such as PE or sport. Play can also contribute to the wider agenda in creating desirable and positive alternatives to unhealthy lifestyle choices such as alcohol use.
Mental and Emotional Wellbeing	Play can contribute to promoting mental well being as it has been shown to be beneficial to raising self-esteem and reducing stress.
Safe, secure and cared for	Play contributes to developing ‘resilience’ in children and young people - an awareness of, and ability to mitigate, risk. This can be done through play by encouraging learning and confidence through controlling challenge and risk in play.
Safe in their community	The Play Strategy has strong links to this section of the CYPP through its aims to reduce accidents in play, to develop safer and more accessible play provision and to promote feelings of safety.
Achieve their personal learning goals	The Play Strategy links to this aim through the drive to create ‘brilliant learning places’, which include high quality provision for play during and outside the school day, a key action point of this strategy
Enjoy life and learn through play, sports and arts	This is the key link between the Play Strategy and the CYPP. This is one of the ten key aims of the CYPP, and was chosen as part of the plan because consultation with local children, young people and parents, as well as local services, emphasised the importance for young people of play, and places to go and things to do.
Are valued by their communities	The Play Strategy links with the CYPP here in the shared concern to address the often negative perception of children and young people in communities, and through the strong emphasis on involving children and young people through play.
Value their communities	The Play Strategy is an important part of developing a wider range of positive activities for young people. Improved play opportunities have been shown to have a marked impact on reducing offending and improvements in social skills and interactions.
Develop the skills and confidence for work and adult life	Play contributes to this aim through its role developing children’s confidence and social skills, important elements of this agenda.
Thriving families, thriving communities	The Play Strategy has linkages here in the proposals to ensure that play is built into the design and regeneration of neighbourhoods and housing across the city, and the role that play has in raising quality of life for families and the wider community.
Transforming services	The Play Strategy links to this section of the plan via the development of opportunities for play in extended schools and children’s centres. In addition the Play Strategy’s section on play workers links to wider developments in the Children’s workforce. Lastly the new forms of partnership and integrated working proposed in this strategy link closely to the wider children’s trust development.

## Key data

This strategy needs to be informed by a good understanding of the children, young people, families and communities it aims to serve. To achieve this we have reviewed local information on identified the following key points that will inform the development and implementation of the strategy:

- **Children and young people make up just over a quarter (25.5%) of population of Leeds.** There are 183,000 children and young people between the ages of 0 and 19 in Leeds. Falling birth rates and demographic change meant the number of young people fell in the recent past. However, more recently this has stabilised and the number of young people is growing in some parts of the city, particularly in the inner city and in black and minority ethnic communities.
- **More than one in eight children and young people are from Black and Minority Ethnic groups.** 23,000, or 13.6%, of children and young people in Leeds are of Black and Minority Ethnic heritage. According to the 2001 Census the largest groups are Asian or Asian British Pakistani (7,050), Asian or Asian British Indian (3,704) Mixed: Black Caribbean and White (3,196). In the Census 2.3% (3693) of dependent children in Leeds were born outside the UK and 10.3% were judged to be in households that used languages other than English. Approximately 500 children and young people in Leeds are Travellers
- **A significant number of children and young people in Leeds live in local authority care.** In March 2005 there were 1,332 children and young people under 18 who are 'looked after' by the local authority and evidence of significantly lower achievement and multiple needs amongst these young people. Leeds has a higher than average 'Looked After' population.
- **A significant number of children and young people in Leeds have learning difficulties or disabilities.** There are various measures that suggest the numbers with additional needs. In August 2006 just under 3000 under-16s were eligible for Disability Living Allowance. Over 600 Leeds pupils have a formal 'statement' of Special Educational Needs, indicating that they have needs that require intensive support. In addition over 150 pupils receive extra support for physical and mobility needs and 149 for sensory needs.
- **Children and young people in Leeds live in a wide variety of family types.** Whilst over 60% of dependent children live in married couple families, 26.3% live in lone parent households, 12.2% in cohabiting couples families, and 1.3% (nearly 2,000 children) are not in a family.
- **A large number of children and young people in Leeds live in poor housing with limited facilities.** According to the census approximately 20,000 dependent children and young people (about 1 in 8) live in overcrowded households. Over 32,000 dependent children and young people (about 1 in 5) live in housing without central heating. These indicators can be used as a proxy for limited access to play provision in their home.
- **A large number of children and young people live in households with limited income and limited access to transport.** Nearly 1 in 5 (29,540) dependent children in Leeds live in households where there are no adults in employment. Over 37,000 dependent children and young people (nearly 1 in 4) live in households without access to a car or van.
- **A significant number of neighbourhoods in Leeds rate amongst the most deprived in the country.** Around 150,000 people in Leeds (almost 20% of the population) live in areas officially rated as among the most deprived in the

country. Many of these are in the inner-city areas, but there are also pockets of deprived neighbourhoods in the wealthier outer areas. Within this there are areas of very high deprivation - thirty-one neighbourhoods in Leeds rate amongst the 3% most deprived in the country.

### **Key messages from stakeholders**

If this strategy is to make a difference then it is vital that it is shaped by the interests and views of those who are most involved – principally children and young people, but also their families and communities as well as the organisations that serve them. Therefore many people and organisations have been closely involved in developing this strategy. Consultation and engagement has included:

- A Breeze survey of over 1000 children and young people
- Household survey of 30,000 residents by Parks and Countryside
- Similar survey of 2,500 children and young people by Parks and countryside
- Qualitative assessment of a sample of provision involving Questionnaires from 27 supervised play settings, 27 schools, 130 parents, 245 children, and a focus group of 24 children between 4 and 14 over a period of 3 months.
- Additionally a desk based review of the findings of the following consultations was conducted:
  - Talking Play – 240 children and young people
  - Talking Rights – installation
  - Young Delegate Events 2003 – 2005
  - National Playday consultations 2003 – 2006
- Focused conversations with 19 professionals from Local Authority department, Other Statutory agencies and the Voluntary and Community Sector.
- Early Drafts of this document were sent to in excess of 350 named individuals and were made available on the web.

The following section sets out the main messages from each of the main groups of stakeholders.

#### *The views of children and young people*

The following are key messages from consultation with children and young people:

- **Reasons for visiting a park or open space:** Visiting the playground, bike riding, walking and football were the most important reasons for going to a park or open space
- **Safety and accessibility:** a recurring concern from children and young people was in safety for play. Concerns included getting to the play space safely due to traffic etc., as well as concerns about bullies, gangs and 'stranger danger'. Children and young people wanted more places to play near their home or on their street and commonly raised the issue of transport to more distant play spaces and provision. Most children and young people wanted access to school playgrounds outside of the school day.
- **Choice, variety and quality:** Children and young people have a variety of views on the sorts of spaces for play they prefer but all emphasised that they wanted more choice and more exciting options to choose from. They would like: hard surfaces for bikes and games; open, wilder spaces for their own games; more

exciting equipment to use and lastly more adventure playgrounds in the city. Many children and young people expressed concerns about the quality of some play provision in their area. Frequent issues raised including: maintenance, security, and cleanliness.

- **Different views of different age groups:** Younger children prefer playgrounds and parks whereas older children want wilder open spaces for free play, as well as places where ball games are possible.
- **Differing needs of different groups:** different groups of children and young people had particular concerns and issues. Asian and Black heritage children and young people were the most concerned of any group about access to areas for play and meeting their friends. Asylum seekers and refugees had very limited opportunities for play. Lastly young carers had very little time and opportunity for play and leisure.

### *The views of parents, carers and communities*

The key messages from parents, carers and the wider community were:

- **More places to go and things to do:** all adults agreed that children and young people needed more options and activities. In general parents and carers saw this more positively whilst the wider community often saw this mostly as a way of discouraging anti-social behaviour and too many young people 'hanging around'.
- **Safety:** parents and carers were particularly concerned about the safety of play for their children. Common concerns included traffic, gangs and 'stranger danger'. To address this, parents wanted more staffed provision and more facilities close to home.
- **'Not in my backyard':** whilst many adults wanted more opportunities for play for children and young people there was a widespread and consistent reluctance for new facilities to be sited too near to their own home.

### *The views of partners*

Consultation with the organisations involved in play in Leeds sought to identify their main concerns. From these discussions four main themes emerged:

- **Need for Focus.** Providing a clear focus to achieve a common approach to play provision can prove problematic simply because of the diversity of provision. Leeds, in common with other local authority areas, suffers from a lack of clear focus in terms of play that is cross department, cross agency, and cross sector.
- **Older Children and Young People** In line with central government targets and initiatives, Leeds has been particularly successful in gaining resources to greatly extend and develop the services for younger children (particularly pre-schoolers) throughout the city. Older children and young people have also benefited from new and extended opportunities locally, but not to the same extent. However, extending provision for older children and young people has been recognised as a valuable contribution to tackling obesity and promoting healthy lifestyles as well as a diversion to perceived anti-social behaviour.
- **Open Access Provision.** Despite significant increases in childcare places for pre-school and school age children, a majority of children still spend a majority of their time outside of structured, adult organised settings. The resources available to establish and maintain supervised, mainly indoor play settings has improved

greatly in recent years, increasing the number of places available to children and young people in the city. However, at the same time there has been a marked reduction in the number of supervised, open access play opportunities.

- **Supporting Playworkers:** Having a single point of contact where parents, organisations and individual playworkers can turn to for advice and support can be invaluable in developing new and existing play provision and a number of the

## **A review of current provision for play**

### The contribution of partners

In terms of providing for children's play, Leeds City Council and its partners currently provide a significant number of services that could be described as 'play services' that are being delivered through various departments. These include:

The *Early Years Service*, for example, provides support to play in-directly via funding Voluntary Sector *Playschemes*, and through various elements of existing and proposed *Children and Family Centres* and through the *Children's Information Service*. More directly, the Early Years Service provides and supports a wide range of childcare provision across the city.

The *Youth Service* provides directly via its *youth clubs* and citywide involvement projects, but particularly through its *detached workers* who make contact with young people in their own neighbourhoods.

*Parks and Countryside*, provides directly and indirectly via its *parks and open spaces* and provides for a wide age range through its *fixed equipment playgrounds* and *Youth Zones*. Future initiatives such as the *Green Spaces Strategy* and the *Fixed Equipment Play Strategy* will broaden this provision further.

*Sport Development* does not currently provide directly in strictly 'play' terms, but does support direct sport projects that children and young people access. However, a future proposed '*informal activity*' strategy will create an opportunity for more indirect involvement in play provision, particularly in the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

*Education Leeds*, provides directly for younger children through a play based approach to the *Foundation Stage Curriculum*; and more indirectly via *playtimes* in primary schools and *lunchtimes* and *break times* in secondary schools, as well as access to outside spaces for these periods and for after school use.

The *Voluntary, community and faith sector* provide a wide range of play related services and opportunities. These include Community based *Playschemes* in the holidays, Mobile Street based play teams, targeted provision aimed at specific groups or localities, various one off or time limited Fun days and events.

Other council departments such as *Planning, Community Safety, Regeneration, and Housing* among others also have links with providing forms of play provision. As do other sectors, with the non-statutory, voluntary and the private sector all providing access to play.

In short there are many examples of play provision being provided in Leeds and, as is the case in other local authority areas, this provision is being met diversely by a wide range of departments, agencies and sectors.

The 'State of Play' – an audit of current provision

As the section above makes clear, there are many agencies and organisations involved in play in Leeds. The range, quality and accessibility of existing play infrastructure and services in the city has been audited in detail to inform this strategy. The key findings of this audit are:

**The range of provision:**

*Unstaffed provision*

Leeds City Council *Parks and Countryside Service* currently (2006) provides 147 playgrounds, 12 Teenzones, 18 Skate Parks and 29 MUGAs (Multi Use Games Areas).

*Staffed Provision*

The current budget for funding holiday playschemes, which is managed by the *Early Years Service* within Learning and Leisure, is in the region of £135,000 per year and supports 33 community playschemes and 11 Special Needs Schemes.

*Other provision*

Leeds Children's Fund currently supports three voluntary sector play projects with funding of £173,060 (07/08), down from a peak of £250k (05/06).

In addition there are many short term, small-scale play schemes and events run by the community and voluntary sectors that respond creatively to children's play needs.

**The quality of provision:**

A qualitative survey of a representative sample of 25% of playgrounds was carried out by both an adult play specialist and a group of children and young people (supercheckers). The sites were assessed for play value and for damage and informal supervision.

Play Value	*****	****	***	**	*
Supercheckers score	9%	14%	28%	14%	28%
Adult Score	1%	16.6%	61.4%	18.7%	3.1%

The major differences between the adult and children's views related to damage (children interpreted some normal wear and tear as damage and scored low when the adult saw it as evidence of play value and scored high. The table below shows a high correlation between levels of supervision and damage.

	Very Good	Good	Reasonable	Poor	Very Poor
Damage	2 (6%)	5 (16%)	5 (16%)	6 (19%)	14 (44%)
Informal Sup	6 (19%)	4 (12%)	4 (12%)	11 (34%)	7 (22%)

Consistent qualitative data for staffed provision is not currently available and should be a priority for collection for the next report. However the information that is available shows that 98% of provision has qualified staff, and 71% of all staff and volunteers in the settings surveyed had some form of qualification for working with children and young people although only 36% held a specific Playwork qualification. This in part reflects the fact that many staff also work in other children's services and in part the fact that other qualifications are more readily available.

### **The accessibility of provision:**

The audit identified the children and young people from the following groups faced particular challenges in accessing play provision:

#### *Looked After Children*

Leeds has one of the highest percentages of looked after children in the country and play provision for this particularly vulnerable group is particularly challenging. Often the children will not know the area in which they are placed, in which case accessing the open informal play spaces that we know most children value is difficult and in addition their freedom to come and go is often more constrained than children in more stable domestic arrangements. Children in the care system are rarely able to acquire the same quantity of toys and other possessions that can stimulate play and in particular, Health and safety constraints often prevent access to garden play equipment such as trampolines and climbing frames. The paperwork involved in trips out often inhibits care staff from allowing such activities and can stifle the spontaneous response to a day out in the park. Such staff rarely receive training in the play needs of their charges.

#### *Disabled children and those with other support needs. –*

There are a significant number of children in the city who need some form of additional support to access services and facilities. Such children are often educated some distance from where they live for example, which limits their opportunities to make friends in their neighbourhood and thus to engage in social play. For those with mobility difficulties play areas can be difficult to access and the demands on their already stretched parents and carers limits their freedom to come and go. In school, those in need of medical or personal support are likely to receive it during break times further limiting their opportunities to interact with their peers.

#### *Semi-rural fringes of the authority*

Smaller concentrations of children and young people in these areas makes play provision proportionately more expensive, and despite the appearance of a rural idyll, the green spaces around them are often intensively farmed limiting their access to them. For older



young people the cost and frequency of independent transport is often cited as a major limitation on their freedom of movement, as is the dominance of the motorcar. In addition, schools are likely to be small with limited outdoor space for play.

### *Inner city areas*

These areas house our highest concentrations of children and young people living in economic difficulties and therefore those least likely to be able to pay to access play provision. The high value of land and competition for the use of spaces makes dedicated provision expensive and the higher concentration of children and young people means that their presence in open spaces is more likely to be seen as problematic. However, the concentration of housing allows for the sort of informal supervision that is most likely to make places feel safe to children and young people providing a balance can be struck between proximity to housing and sightlines for supervision.

The City Centre is particularly attractive to children and young people, offering a range of social and leisure opportunities. However unaccompanied young people are often viewed with suspicion and their use of open spaces seen as inappropriate.

High-density housing offers particular challenges. High-rise accommodation is often surrounded with open space that is easy to maintain but offers a limited range of play opportunities. Space close to home is often dominated by parking and play spaces sited further away are vulnerable to vandalism.

Houses without gardens such as the terraces in Harehills for example, offer particularly poor spaces for play. The dominance of the motorcar coupled with perceptions of stranger danger mean that children are rarely free to play out. Some attempts to improve things have been made but more progress is needed. For example, Leeds provided one of the first Home Zones in the country in the Methleys area but little seems to have been done to build on this. In addition some Community Safety improvements have had the perverse effect of making some spaces less safe in children's terms. As an example, some Alleygating schemes have created spaces from which children have limited opportunities to escape bullying or to move away from those engaged in genuinely anti social behaviour.

### *Mobile and transient families*

A small but significant number of children and young people in Leeds live in transient accommodation. They may be seeking asylum, fleeing domestic violence or having been made homeless. The urgent (and quite proper) focus on issues such as accommodation, clothing and schooling is often at the expense of their opportunity to play. Such children are then doubly disadvantaged, since they lose the opportunity to explore and resolve some of the emotional issues of their situation through their play. In addition they are less likely to know and be able to access the local neighbourhood spaces.

### *Black and minority ethnic groups*

For some children there are issues related to their culture and or ethnicity that universal provision fails to address. For example, older Bangladeshi heritage girls are often discouraged from attending provision that is open to males. Other cultural groups such as traveller children are viewed with hostility by their host communities and are unlikely to be welcomed at universal provision

## **Conclusion and emerging themes**

Children generally and young people in particular are seen as problematic when they are unsupervised in the general environment and action needs to be taken to address this by:

- Challenging public perceptions
- Promoting the value of play for its own sake

Children and young people most value being able to play in spaces that are close to their homes and not always specifically designated for play. We need to address this by:

- Ensuring play needs are considered in the design and layout of the wider environment and other service that affect them directly or indirectly
- Promoting the greater involvement of children and young people in the design of services and their neighbourhoods.

Some groups of children and young people face particular disadvantage in accessing play provision. We will address this by:

- Ensuring that universal services take account of the particular needs of these groups
- Specifically targeting resources

Real and perceived danger to children and young people has a significant effect on their play, as does the fear of litigation. We will address this by:

- Promoting a greater understanding of the issues of risk and play
- Greater involvement of children and their communities in the location and design of play provision
- Addressing genuine dangers through better informal supervision and more local provision that is safer to access.

Although there is a considerable amount of information held within the authority regarding children's play individual services and departments hold much of it and there is little consistency in the types of information held or the formats in which it is stored. There is also limited consistency in how often it is collected or refreshed. There is little agreement on what indicators of quality should be applied. We will address this by:

- Better coordination of the collection and sharing of data, minimising duplication and repetition
- Agreeing high-level and more detailed indicators of quality (involving children in the process) and ensuring our data collection and monitoring systems capture this.

## **Our Strategy for Play**

This section sets out our strategy for improvement, informed by the factors and context set out above.

The strategy contains a range of objectives that are grouped into three sections and six themes.

### **The ‘Play Friendly City’**

The first section focuses on the aim of the ‘Play Friendly City’, the first four of which present broad, aspirational Action Points that are aimed at providing a ‘way of working’. These cover:

- the *Child and Play Friendly City*;
- the *Involvement and Participation of Children and Young People*;
- *Inclusion and Equality*; and
- *Being Healthy, Being Safe, and Feeling Safe*.

The bulk of the Action Points are contained in the fifth heading:

### **Building the Play Friendly City.**

This second section includes actions and objectives that are more specific and are the means by which the partnership will put the Play Strategy into action.

Not all of these Action Points call for completely new initiatives – a number of agencies in the city, including *Leeds City Council*, have a successful history of providing play opportunities for children and young people of all ages and have initiatives in place or planned for the near future that will significantly contribute to making Leeds a *Play Friendly City*. What the Play Strategy does is bring those initiatives together with newly proposed ideas in a single, citywide strategy for children’s play.

### **Delivering the Strategy**

This last section deals with how the strategy will be delivered and the new governance, leadership and management systems that will be put in place to assure success. The main theme here is:

- *Implementation and Monitoring*

## **THE PLAY FRIENDLY CITY**

To help create a play friendly city we will:

1.1 Promote positive images of children and young people. We will promote positive images of children and young people, celebrate their achievements and encourage the view that children and young people are a vital element in the life of the city, and are valuable members of their local communities, both in the future and in the present.

1.2: Promote free play We will promote the value and importance of freely chosen, self directed play in the lives of children and young people of all ages as an essential element in the way in which they learn, grow, develop healthily and come to make sense of the world in which they live - physically, socially and culturally.

1.3: Promote play in the built environment We will promote a city in which the built environment meets the needs of children and young people in general and their freely chosen play needs in particular: at home, in their local neighbourhood, institutional settings, recreational and leisure facilities.

1.4: Adopt Children and Young People's Impact Analysis and Audits We recognise that children and young people are sometimes unintentionally affected in negative ways by changes to services, physical developments and building projects that may have been avoidable if a prior analysis of impact had been made. The Leeds Play Partnership will work closely with planning authorities to ensure that adopting a Children and Young People's Impact Analysis is considered when changes to services and physical developments are at the planning stage.

## **2: Involvement and Participation**

Delivering this strategy and creating a play friendly city requires the participation and involvement of children and young people. We will actively seek, listen to and act upon the views and opinions of children and young people; provide them with an opportunity to influence the development of Leeds as a Child friendly and Play friendly city; and shape solutions to issues that affect them, particularly regarding the built environment and play provision. To achieve this we will:

2.1: Involve children and young people in decision making, evaluation and monitoring. We will ensure that children and young people are involved in the decision making and planning processes, the evaluation and the monitoring of projects, initiatives and service provision where issues are involved that affect them on both a city wide and local basis.

## **3: Inclusion and Equality**

We are committed to ensuring all children and young people in Leeds have the best opportunities for play, and will target effort to ensure those vulnerable to social exclusion. We will promote strategies of social inclusion and equality of access that ensure that Leeds is a Child friendly and Play friendly city for all children and young people who live here permanently, temporarily, and those who are visiting the city. To do this we will:

3.1: Ensure equal access to participation in making decisions We will ensure the involvement of hard to reach and under represented groups of children and young people in initiatives that are aimed at promoting the participation of children and young people in decision making, planning, and the evaluation and monitoring of play projects, initiatives and service provision.

3.2: Develop provision that is close to home and accessible We will ensure that all children and young people have access to opportunities for freely chosen play in their own neighbourhoods; and that facilities such as local parks, open spaces, playgrounds and the wider outdoor environment are accessible to all children and young people, particularly those who are disabled.

3.3: Target resources for the children and communities with greatest need We will target resources and establish specific strategies to prioritise the development of new service provision and facilities in those communities and for those groups of children and young people that currently have the poorest access to freely chosen play opportunities. An emphasis will be placed on children living in densely built areas, disabled children, teenagers, children in emergency accommodation, the children of refugees and asylum seekers, and of gipsy and traveller children.

#### **4: Health, Safety and Feelings of safety**

The Leeds Play Partnership will provide a Child friendly and Play friendly city that contributes to children and young people's health and happiness; ensures that their places for freely chosen play and the wider environment that they use are free from unacceptable hazards and free from the threat of bullying. To achieve this we will:

4.1: Develop play provision that promotes feelings of safety We will actively engage with local communities to provide neighbourhoods and particularly places for freely chosen play that are not only safe but FEEL safe, through such things as street play initiatives, awareness raising, stewardship schemes and greater 'on the street contact' between professionals such as park rangers, youth workers, and playworkers with local residents and children and young people in their own communities.

4.2: Develop play provision that is safe to access and use We will work towards providing neighbourhood areas in which children and young people are protected while at play from the dangers of traffic by such initiatives as homezones, traffic calming, and safe routes schemes – but principally by providing parks, open spaces and playgrounds close to children's homes and within their own neighbourhoods in such a way that children and young people can get to them without the need to cross busy roads.

4.3: Develop stewardship and community involvement for play We will promote a greater involvement of the local community in the planning, establishment and stewardship of local parks, open spaces, playgrounds, school grounds and the wider neighbourhood environment as a contribution towards protecting the physical environment from unacceptable damage, and ensuring the safety and feeling of safety of local children, young people and their parents and carers and greater contact with professionals.

## **BUILDING THE PLAY FRIENDLY CITY**

The first four themes in the Play Strategy call for the creation of a Play Friendly City as a direct contribution to Leeds becoming a broader Child Friendly City. The following Action Points in this section relate directly to that aim and are more practical in nature.

### *5.1: The local neighbourhood and Places for Freely Chosen Play*

The first focus for building a Play Friendly City will be in local neighbourhoods and other local spaces for play. To achieve this we will:

5.1.1: Promote Play Friendly Neighbourhoods We will work towards creating child and play friendly neighbourhoods, particularly in consultation with private and social housing providers. The Leeds Play Partnership will promote the latest in play friendly design, landscaping and traffic management techniques, to support the creation of clearly designated, good quality places for children to play. In doing this, Leeds will aim to become regarded as a leading European city and an innovator in child and play friendly design.

5.1.2: Promote high quality places for freely chosen play. We will influence the quality of spaces provided for children and young peoples freely chosen play in such places as their local neighbourhood, parks and playgrounds, childcare settings, play settings, schools, recreational and leisure facilities through, for example, the adoption of minimum standards requirement and the creation of a 'good playspace award'.

### *5.2: Parks, Open Spaces and Playgrounds*

Improving the range, quality and accessibility of parks, open spaces and playgrounds is a vital element of the Play Friendly City. To achieve this we will:

5.2.1: Develop small neighbourhood play spaces. We will establish a network of small, easily accessible neighbourhood playspaces aimed at middle years and younger children in particular, that will provide flexible environmental and physical play opportunities in places that have 'informal oversight', are close to their own homes, and which do not require the crossing of busy roads to reach them.

5.2.2: Develop small neighbourhood youth zones. We will establish a network of small, easily accessible neighbourhood 'youth zones' that are aimed at older children and young people in particular. These declared youth zones will provide a sheltered and communal place to sit and talk, and physical play opportunities that are designed for their needs in well lit areas places that have 'informal oversight' and are not isolated from their local neighbourhood.

5.2.3: Develop Community Playgrounds We will establish a network of larger playgrounds that cater for children and young people of all ages in separate 'zoned' spaces, which support the smaller neighbourhood playspaces and youth zones. These declared playgrounds will provide a wide range of environmental and physical play opportunities including space for ball games, wheeled play, landscaping and planting to play in and with, and sheltered communal seating places to sit and talk in.

5.2.4: Make Parks and open spaces child and play friendly. We will ensure that public parks, wildlife areas and open spaces are child and play friendly, and provide an environment and a community resource in which children and young people feel welcomed and wanted.

### *5.3 Adventure Playgrounds*

Adventure playgrounds offer a range of wider and more adventurous opportunities for play in a supervised but accessible setting. At present there is limited provision for this sort of play in Leeds. To address this we will:

5.3.1: Develop Community Adventure playgrounds We will provide a network of accessible, staffed, open access neighbourhood Adventure Playgrounds that provide a range of environmental, physical and adventurous play opportunities in locations that are linked to a definable community.

### *5.4: Playschemes*

Playschemes are an often valuable opportunity for play and learning for children and young people and a vital support for families outside school hours. However, at present, many playschemes may provide only limited opportunities for free play. To change this we will:

5.4.1: Support the development of open access playschemes. We will support a program of accessible, pre-booked and open access playschemes and mobile playschemes in rural and urban parts of the city during the school holidays, particularly during the summer holidays.

### *5.5: Play at School and Hospitals*

Improving opportunities for play in school and hospital are important for delivering the strategy. Children and young people spend much time in schools and better play has been shown to help them learn better and feel better. In addition the schools estate is a significant, if sometimes underused, resource and space for play, particularly in the context of the current multimillion-pound investment in schools. Lastly improving play provision in hospitals and

other healthcare settings has been raised as an important issue by both children and professionals as an important element of improving the well being of children.

To improve play in schools and hospitals we will:

5.5.1: Support schools in improving the range and quality of play opportunities in school We will work with schools to try to ensure that all schools provide time, a supportive physical environment and a school ethos that allows children and young people to be able to make the best use of their playtimes, breaktimes and lunchtime for play, to be physically active and to meet their friends and engage in social activities. The Leeds Play Partnership will engage with partners to work towards the adoption of a series of quality indicators for freely chosen play at school within the current Education Leeds Quality Standards Framework.

5.5.2: Improve access to quality outdoor play environments in school. We will ensure that the design of new schools and the re-development of existing schools take the outdoor freely chosen play and recreation needs of children and young people into account. Spaces and facilities will be provided for children and young people to be able to be physically active, to able to sit communally and in shelter, and to play at playtimes, break times and at lunchtime.

5.5.3: Extend community use of school grounds We will explore methods of allowing greater community access to school grounds after school hours, especially for children and young people as a place for freely chosen play, while still protecting school buildings from abuse through physical security measures and stewardship schemes.

5.5.4: Support hospitals and other medical settings We will engage with the local health authorities, hospitals and clinics to provide support and an appropriate indoor and outdoor play environment for children of all ages who are attending hospital and other medical settings as an aid to their health, happiness and recovery from injury or illness.”

### *5.6: Supporting Playworkers*

Playworkers are vital to delivering this strategy. Despite their role the sector at present faces significant challenges due to common problems of limited support, professional development as well as casual and/or low pay. We are determined to address this through our common strategy. Our main objectives in support playworkers are:

5.6.1: Improving Continuous Professional Development We will support a programme of play specific seminars, training days, and short courses to provide continuous professional development for adults who work both directly and indirectly with children and young people. This is in addition to supporting longer, accredited training courses that are supported by the National Play Endorsement System.

5.6.2: Providing Training on Safety and Challenge in Play We will support the establishment of a specific training module for adults who work both directly and indirectly with children and young people that raises the importance of ‘challenge’ in freely chosen play, and seeks to define the concepts of ‘hazard’ and ‘risk’ in a play context.



5.6.3: Improving Information and Support We will support a central advice and support point that provides parents, individual workers, organisations, and settings with a source of information, specialist advice and research evidence, and access to training information and resources which are aimed particularly at those working with school age children.

5.6.4: Develop Support Networks We will provide support to networks of professionals involved in providing and supporting children and young people's freely chosen play, particularly playworkers, childminders and childcare workers.

5.6.5: Set up citywide quality assurance systems We will encourage all settings that cater for children and young people, particularly schools, care settings, play settings, youth settings, community and leisure centres, to examine their own work practice and physical environment through the adoption and working through of an appropriate Quality Assurance System.

5.6.6: Improve the use of research and evidence We will support the commissioning of relevant local and regional research on the lives of children and young people, and assist in transmitting the results and conclusions of research in support of developing evidence based and innovative practice.

5.6.7: Support National Play Day We will continue to act as host to National Play Day and other special events, using the day as an opportunity to promote positive images of children and young people, the value and importance of freely chosen play for children and young people of all ages, and the role of adults in supporting play.

## **DELIVERING THE STRATEGY**

This section of the strategy deals with how we will make sure that the Strategy is delivered effectively through new arrangements for the leadership, governance and management of play in Leeds.

### *6: Implementation and Monitoring*

6.1: Implementation – a Partnership for Play Leeds City Council and Children Leeds will establish a new partnership for play – a cross-departmental, cross sector, and cross agency group that will co-ordinate the delivery of the Play Strategy, identify and actively seek resources, and provide a strategic overview for developing new opportunities for children and young people's access to freely chosen play.

6.2: Implementation – Appointment of a senior Children's Play Officer We will appoint a senior Children's Play Officer who will support and administer the Leeds Play Partnership and provide a single point of focus for freely chosen play issues, including providing specialist advice and up-to-date best practice.

6.3: Implementation – A Champion for Play We will appoint an independent 'Champion for Play' who will act as an independent advocate for children, young people and their freely

chosen play. The Champion for Play will also independently monitor the work of the Leeds Play Partnership and the progress of the Play Strategy.

6.4: Implementation – Action, Resources and Commissioning plans We will develop regular plans that will clearly set out the actions, resources and commissioning required to deliver the Play Strategy.

6.5: Implementation – State of play review We will complete a regular ‘State of Play Review’ that audits local play provision and infrastructure, assesses attendance and usage, audits opportunities for play specific training and education, and evaluates the Play Strategy and Action Plans.

6.6: Implementation – Monitoring and Evaluation We will establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the partnership, the progress and the achievement of outcomes in the Play Strategy that involves children and young people.

6.7: Implementation – Performance measures and targets  
The Leeds Play Partnership will establish clear measures and targets to assess progress and impact.

DRAFT

## **ANNEX 1: DISCUSSION AND SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

This annex provides additional material that supports and explains the rationale for each section of the strategy. It is available in the full version of this strategy.

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## **ANNEX 2: PLAY AND RISK POLICY**

Leeds City Council and the Children Leeds Partnership fully endorse the Children's Play Council's statement on risk in play. The Council and its partners have adopted this statement as their own.

### **SUMMARY STATEMENT**

**Children need and want to take risks when they play. Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. In doing this, play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury.**

### **FULL STATEMENT**

#### **Acceptable and unacceptable risk**

In any human activity, there is an element of risk. Three factors are central to determining whether or not the level of risk is acceptable or tolerable:

- the likelihood of coming to harm
- the severity of that harm
- the benefits, rewards or outcomes of the activity.

Judgements about the acceptability of risk are made on the basis of a risk assessment. Risk assessment and management are not mechanistic processes. They crucially involve making judgements about acceptability based on an understanding of the balance between risks and benefits. Even where there is a risk of fatal or permanent disabling injury, this risk may sometimes be tolerable. For instance, going paddling at the seaside involves an unavoidable risk of fatal injury, but this risk is tolerable for most people because in most circumstances the likelihood of coming to harm is very low and there are obvious benefits. Social and psychological factors are also important in risk assessment. Risks that are acceptable in one community may be unacceptable in another, and policies should take this into account.

Almost any environment contains hazards or sources of harm. In many cases the existence of hazards can be justified, perhaps because they are impossible to remove or perhaps because their removal would have undesirable consequences or be too costly. Where the existence of a hazard can be justified, measures should be in place to manage it. In a controlled environment such as a workplace or a playground, those responsible are required by law to identify, and make informed judgements about, the hazards to which people are exposed. They must take steps to ensure that the risks are managed and controlled so far as is reasonably practicable while allowing the potential benefits to be delivered.

#### **Children and risk**

All children both need and want to take risks in order to explore limits, venture into new experiences and develop their capacities, from a very young age and from their earliest play experiences. Children would never learn to walk, climb stairs or ride a bicycle unless they were strongly motivated to respond to challenges involving a risk of injury. Children with disabilities have an equal if not greater need for opportunities to take risks, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers.

It is the job of all those responsible for children at play to assess and manage the level of risk, so that children are given the chance to stretch themselves, test and develop their abilities without exposing them to unacceptable risks.

This is part of a wider adult social responsibility to children. If we do not provide controlled opportunities for children to encounter and manage risk then they may be denied the chance to learn these skills. They may also be more likely to choose to play in uncontrolled environments where the risks are greater. Any injury is distressing for children and those who care for them, but exposure to the risk of injury, and experience of actual minor injuries, is a universal part of childhood. Such experiences also have a positive role in child development. When children sustain or witness injuries they gain direct experience of the consequences of their actions and choices, and through this an understanding of the extent of their abilities and competences.

However, children deserve protection against fatal or permanently disabling injuries, to a greater degree than adults. Children have a range of physical competences and abilities, including a growing ability to assess and manage risk which adults arguably tend to underestimate. However, children typically have less experience than adults of assessing the broad range of risks and hazards that they may encounter. So it is important to give them appropriate controlled environments in which they can learn about risk.

## **Play provision and risk**

Risk-taking is an essential feature of play provision, and of all environments in which children legitimately spend time at play. Play provision aims to offer children the chance to encounter acceptable risks as part of a stimulating, challenging and controlled learning environment. In the words of the play sector publication *Best Play*, play provision should aim to 'manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm'. 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.

Therefore it is acceptable that in play provision children may be exposed to the risk of minor and easily-healed injuries such as bruises, grazes or sprains. On the other hand, play provision should not expose children to significant likelihood of permanent disability or life-threatening injuries. However, it may on occasions be unavoidable that play provision exposes children to the risk – the very low risk – of serious injury or even death. But this would only be tolerable in the following conditions:

- . the likelihood were extremely low
- . the hazards were clear to users
- . there were obvious benefits
- . further reduction of the risk would remove the benefits
- . there were no reasonably practicable ways to manage the risk.

For example a paddling pool, even if shallow, involves a very low but irremovable risk of drowning (even with parental supervision), but this is normally tolerable. The likelihood is typically extremely low; the hazard is readily apparent; children benefit through their enjoyment and through the learning experience of water play; and finally, further reduction or management of the risk is not practicable without taking away the benefits.

Providers should strike a balance between the risks and the benefits. This should be done on the basis of a risk assessment. Crucially, this risk assessment should involve a risk/benefit tradeoff between safety and other goals, which should be spelt out in the provider's policy. Given children's appetite for risk-taking, one of the factors that should be considered is the likelihood that children will seek out risks elsewhere, in environments that are not controlled or designed for them, if play provision is not challenging enough. Another factor is the learning that can take place when children are exposed to, and have to learn to deal with, environmental hazards. Play provision is uniquely placed to offer children the chance to learn about risk in an environment designed for that purpose, and thus to help children equip themselves to deal with similar hazards in the wider world.

## **Good practice**

Clear, wellunderstood policies, together with procedures that put these policies into practice, are the key to good practice in risk management in play provision. Policies should state clearly the overall objectives. Procedures, including risk assessment, should state how these policies are put into practice, giving guidance but also recognising the need for professional judgement in setting the balance between safety and other goals. Such judgements are clearly multidisciplinary in nature. For example, while they may contain an engineering dimension, of equal or greater importance is likely to be a knowledge of child development and play itself. The Children's Play Information Service (see References below) has information on sources of authoritative, relevant guidance on good practice.

One valuable approach to risk management in play provision is to make the risks as apparent as possible to children. This means designing spaces where the risk of injury arises from hazards that children can readily appreciate (such as heights), and where hazards that children may not appreciate (such as equipment that can trap heads) are absent. This is particularly useful in unsupervised settings, where the design of the equipment and the overall space has to do most of the work in achieving a balanced approach to risk.

## **Conclusion**

Safety in play provision is not absolute and cannot be addressed in isolation. Play provision is first and foremost for children, and if it is not exciting and attractive to them, then it will fail, no matter how 'safe' it is. Designers, managers and providers will need to reach compromises in meeting these sometimes conflicting goals. These compromises are a matter of judgement, not of mechanistic assessment. The judgements should be based on both social attitudes and on broadlybased expert opinion informed by current best practice. They should be firmly rooted in objectives concerned with children's enjoyment and benefit. And they should take into account the concerns of parents. Ultimately the basis of these judgements should be made clear in the policies of the play provider as written down in policy documents. These policies should in turn be understood and embodied in practice by all the key stakeholders.