

THE STATE OF PLAY

How can local councils ensure they have the right policies in place to guarantee children the ability to play in a sustainable, safe and stimulating environment? Jan Cosgrove, national secretary at Fair Play for Children, has some answers



A just-published survey by Fair Play for Children into expenditure by principal local authorities in England (217 responded out of 354) details the extent to which children's play provision has been hit by cuts. It is well above the extent of general cuts, with grants to third sector bodies slashed to 65% of the level of the previous year, for example. See: www.fairplayforchildren.net/councils.htm for more on this.

We also published, a short while back, results of a survey of playground provision in England. There are 16,135 playgrounds provided by principal authorities and these authorities knew of a further 5,265 mainly provided by parish-level councils. Go to: www.fairplayforchildren.net/survey1.htm.

The policies of the coalition government have also led to a reversal of the trend towards national play policies in favour of localism approaches, one consequence of

this being that the previous Labour government's Fair Play project (no relation) will not be repeated.

In this context, local (parish and town) councils have both a special place and opportunity to listen to children and young people's needs, and to make good quality provision. I am not aware of the numbers of local councils which may have adopted a Play Policy for children in their areas, but this seems to me to be a good way of adopting an approach to this issue.

Consulting with children

Such policies surely need to be invested with information as to need, and ascertaining this should involve ways of directly consulting children. These might be councillor enquiries, surveys (maybe in conjunction with schools) and some form of children's panels. From Fair Play's perspective, forming a Parish Play Partnership where children are on an equal footing with, for example, parents, councils, schools and so on, and where the children are the main agents for deciding what should be provided, is a sound and long-term basis for progress.

Such partnerships would be a form of civic education as well, showing children what engagement in local affairs means in their daily lives. Also, a way of their experiencing what can be done and what cannot and why. Such approaches can look at existing provision also and how it relates to

need. Questions such as the use of existing resources will be addressed, so, is the local school able to accommodate any part of play-needs outside of the school day?

Well-maintained playgrounds are a traditional way of local council involvement, often in partnership with principal authorities. The current economic situation suggests the need for local councils to maintain and even take on more of that role.

There is one other major area where Fair Play would urge local councils to consider involvement, and that is in provision of play activities, be they holiday-based or year-round. Some councils will give grants for such work to local groups and associations – hopefully this will continue and not be subject to the sort of adverse discrimination showed by the principal councils. There is no justification we can

see for more burdensome levels of cuts imposed on play than, for example, on adult leisure. And if the child population is 20% in a parish, why should it suffer poorer provision for that age range than merited by that proportion?

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is aspirational but it does impose on public bodies an obligation: "...shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity." This is part of the Right to Play and it covers not only rights as between children but what they may expect, in terms of age and development, concerning such above defined activities. Grant to the local arts club? Then what of local children's arts needs?

Establishing playschemes

With many adults finding they are working longer hours and having less time to devote in their spare time to organising things such as playschemes, local councils could look at running their own schemes in holiday and half-term periods – maybe with paid staff and also adult volunteers, all suitably Criminal Records Bureau-checked of course.

Issues such as premises, insurances and health and safety policies will be easier for local councils to sort out than a small voluntary committee. We would suggest a playschemes working group or sub-committee be convened if this route is taken, and Fair Play and other bodies are there to help.

Whatever local councils do, we

urge you to keep these issues on your agendas. Children may these days form a slightly smaller proportion of the population, but their numbers are as great as before, and growing. There is also the need to maintain exciting and accessible informal open spaces and to ensure new developments are properly scoped for children's play needs. ■