

PLAYLINK

Briefing Paper

As at 14 July 2010

This is a PLAYLINK working paper revised from time to time in the light of additional information

The maintenance of public parks, open spaces, playable spaces and designated play areas

Section One

Introduction

This paper seeks to address key general maintenance issues in respect of play provision, but which will have application more generally. The paper concludes with a snapshot of different authorities's inspection and maintenance regimes. There is also a 'cat poo' story that we will be following.

So far as the maintenance of play provision is concerned, the area is bedevilled by questionable assumptions, and the accretions of not necessarily helpful custom and practice. In addition, because many maintenance procedures are deemed to be matters of 'health and safety', it is thereby assumed that this renders them immune from critical appraisal. This cannot be the case, particularly when resources are ploughed into potentially wasteful practices. This has a bearing on how guidance from external bodies is viewed. 'Guidance' from various bodies must be judged against the play providers values and objectives and the degree to which - and whether - they support these.

The position in respect of the role and status of 'guidance' has been usefully clarified in the HSE endorsed, 'Managing Risk in Play Provision: implementation guide', jointly published by Play England, DCSF and DCMS. In addition, Counsel Opinion on what constitutes 'reasonableness' and its relationship to a play provider's duty of care can be found at www.playlink.org/articles/?p=8#summary

The aim of this paper is to initiate a move away from the creation of standardised - for example, to question the assumption that if there is a sand pit, whatever its location, it must be inspected and raked 'x' number of times - regimes to the creation of maintenance schedules that are responsive to local circumstances and are subject to regular review. Regular review is vital - this need not be onerous - for the simple reason that not everything can be known in advance; some things change over time in ways that cannot be predicted.

Key principles

That the function of a maintenance regime is to support the implementation of the overriding objectives of parks, open spaces, play areas and playable spaces.

That maintenance regimes for parks, open spaces and play areas are formulated on the basis of risk-benefit assessments.

That maintenance regimes are reviewed regularly.

That maintenance regimes are seasonally adjusted.

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This is not dissimilar to way an organisation's administrative functions are understood. Maintenance, like administration, is not an end in itself, but the means by which key values and overriding objectives are better fulfilled. Equally, in the absence of sensitive, responsive and adequately resourced maintenance, those key objectives cannot be realised.

That maintenance regimes for parks, open spaces and play areas are formulated on the basis of risk-benefit assessments.

In the first instance, this will mean making a critical appraisal of the assumptions upon which maintenance regimes are founded. This includes an appraisal of the appropriateness, in whole or in part, of third party guidance, for example, by RoSPA.

That maintenance regimes are reviewed regularly.

As suggested above, regular review is essential. This is linked to the principle that follows.

That maintenance regimes are seasonally adjusted.

'Seasonal' is not simply a reference to the seasons, but to the different levels and intensity of use at different times, for example, school holidays and weekends. The practical application of this principle might lead to an individual park litter pick regime varying quite significantly between school holidays and term time.

Wider experience

In what follows, we set out some examples of maintenance regimes for play areas that have sand, play grit or other loose fill material.

It is generally accepted that the quality of play opportunities, and therefore children's play experiences, is greatly enhanced if sand, play grit or other loose fill¹ form part of the play setting. This understanding is emphasised in Guidance, for example, 'Design for Play', jointly published by Play England, DCSF, DCMS, and endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive.

Whilst the merits of sand and play grit as play materials are widely acknowledged, concerns can be expressed about the potential consequences of using these materials. These concerns include those about dog mess, syringes, broken bottles and the impact on maintenance regimes.

The first point to note is that sand and grit are used successfully in an increasing number of public play areas, including those in urban inner city areas. See table 1 below. Indeed, there is no firm evidence that sand is a general cause of difficulty over and above problems a site might suffer whether or not it has sand or grit.

The second key point is that every site is different, the context in which each site operate varies. This means that even within the same borough, there will be a need for site-specific maintenance regimes. Factors that affect the level of maintenance required include: levels of usage, site location, seasonal usage and levels of informal over-looking of site.

¹ This does not mean that all loose fill is of equal play value.

The commitment by the provider to develop a suitable regime and make sure it is both implemented and, crucially, reviewed and adjusted when necessary is fundamental to the success of any project. Put simply, there needs to be a will to make the project succeed from the provider and other relevant groups.



Frampton Park Estate, Hackney. Before After. A PLAYLINK Scheme

Be persuasive, take risks, encourage experimentation

It is not unusual for there to be both local and professional reservations about using sand and other loose fill materials. As we demonstrate here, these reservations are not in general justified, as increasing numbers of providers are finding out for themselves. In terms of PLAYLINK commissions, where there is opposition, we suggest a period of experimentation with an undertaking to remove the loose fill material after a year (perhaps less) if it doesn't work. Technically, it is not in general problematic or expensive to turn what was a sand pit into something other use.

Finally, a point of logic that needs to be underscored: one cannot at wish to be innovative whilst at the same time being averse to experimentation. Sometimes one simply has to 'give it a go'.

Table 1: inspection and maintenance of loose fill/sand

Provider	Visual inspection	Maintenance activity	Topping up
Stirling Council	Inspected monthly	Not generally raked. Rotovated every 3 months or more frequently if required.	Topped up every 1-2 years.
Brighton and Hove Council	Daily Visual	Raked once a week and twice a week in summer school holidays (6)	Checked annually and topped up every 2 years. Sand replaced every 4-5 years.
Wyvis Street, LB Tower Hamlets	Daily	Raking between 5 – 7 times a week	3-4 times a year
Priory Town Park, Reigate (playground is part of wider park)	Daily	Raked daily	Not known
Jubilee Way, LB Kingston upon Thames	Probably daily as part of daily litter pick etc	Raked once a week	Once a year

Didcot Town Council	Visual inspection daily*	Rake once a fortnight minimum to weekly at peak times/holidays.	Top up 2 – 3 times a year.
LB Enfield	Daily visual	Raking as required	Not been required in first year
LB Redbridge	Daily visual	Raking as required	Topped-up after one year
South Somerset District Council	Daily visual	Two visits a week by council staff. Initially regular raking but now determined by level of usage	Once a year, more if required

**Additional comment made: 'We have not had any pet faeces/smashed glass or syringes'.*

A key point to note about Stirling Council's practice – where sand is routinely used in a variety of settings, including deprived urban areas – is that they have at each site signage with a contact phone number, and an encouragement to people to report problems or concerns.

Cat poo story

PLAYLINK has recently completed a small 'shared, playable space' project in Carterton, Oxfordshire. Our basic premise was that the site and its location lent itself to a low key intervention based on the idea that it was a space for children, teenagers and adults alike. Sand was designed into the space. The entire development was enthusiastically welcomed by Council and local residents.

The sand is checked and cleaned if necessary once a week. However, recently cat droppings have been found in the sand area and this has prompted one or two complaints. Children do continue to play there so presumably parents check and clear if necessary.

In considering how to respond, Council and PLAYLINK took the view that:

- the site should be monitored
- the 'cat problem' may be temporary since the sand may be particularly attractive to cats at this time because the rainless weather has meant that the ground around is hard (cats like to bury their droppings)
- investigate possibility of planting that will discourage cats from using the area
- consider further action in the light of continued monitoring.

The key point here is that the response should be considered and proportionate, not one driven by panic.

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