

# Play as Culture

Incorporating play in cultural strategies



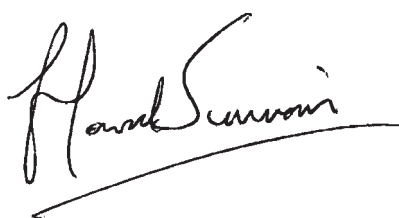
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## ***CPPF*** ***Children's Play Policy Forum***

*The Children's Play Policy Forum is a representative group, drawing Members from the voluntary, local authority and commercial sectors. Its purpose is to promote an exchange of views and expertise, to contribute to the co-ordination of policy and practice in relation to play and to maintain dialogue with relevant Government departments. The Forum has long been concerned that children's play is being unnecessarily restricted by a variety of factors and that there is an increasingly narrow interpretation of what counts as quality in play provision. It sees the creation of local cultural strategies as a major opportunity to set play within the broader context of quality of life issues addressed through such strategies and to respond to children's developmental and recreational needs and wishes through a wider range of imaginative and creative initiatives.*

*The Forum was pleased to commission PLAYLINK, one of its Member organisations experienced in work with local authorities on play policies, to carry out the research and writing of this guide. We are grateful to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for its contribution to funding this part of the work and for its sustained support for the project. We would also like to thank Richter Spielgeräte GmbH and Timberplay Ltd for their grant for production of the guide. We hope it will prove useful to local authorities as they go through the process of creating and implementing their cultural strategies. The fact that it has ministerial endorsement both from the lead Department for play and from other Departments with significant interests in provision for children in their own time will, we hope, encourage cross departmental working locally.*



Howard Simmons, Chair, CPPF

**Current Members of the Forum are:** Association of Play Industries, British Activity Holiday Association, Children's Play Council, Local Government Association, Institute of Leisure & Amenity Management, Institute of Sport & Recreation Management, Joint National Committee on Training for Playwork, Kidsactive, London Play, National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK, Sport & Recreation Training Organisation.



*Play is central to children's lives and an essential ingredient of a happy childhood. When so much of all our lives is spent working we all need space and time to have fun, children most of all.*

*Play is enjoyment, but it's also more than that. Through play, children learn how to get on with each other, how to run, jump, catch and climb, how to act, how to draw and paint and use materials around them to create imaginary worlds. Playing children are physically active, creative and sociable. All these aspects of play help lay the foundations for physical and mental health throughout childhood and into adult life.*

*Through play our most talented artists, actors and athletes take the first steps in developing their talents. Parents too benefit from good neighbourhood play provision. Children need to get out of the house to let off steam, and communities with good quality, accessible play provision are better and healthier places for families to live in.*

*Local Cultural Strategies will promote access to a rich, varied and inclusive cultural life for adults in our communities. We owe it to children to make sure that they are given the same opportunities. The culture of childhood has play at its heart. By recognising this, and fully incorporating play provision into Local Culture Strategies, Local Authorities will be extending the enhanced quality of life that the strategies are designed to achieve to children, whose voices too often go unheard in the planning and development of local services but who represent all our futures.*

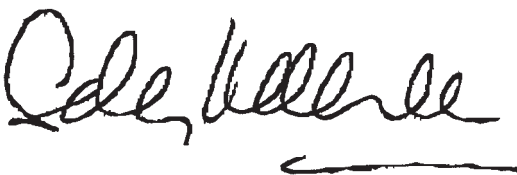
*Best wishes  
Richard Caborn,*

RT Hon Richard Caborn MP  
Minister for Sport

*The need to play is fundamental to children's mental and physical development. Understanding children's interests and wishes helps us to provide for their needs better. Play as Culture will help local authorities and their partners, when developing cultural strategies, to think about play in the widest context and consider how services can work in a joined up way to respond to what children need.*

*Cultural strategies focus on some of the things which can improve people's quality of life. In producing these and other strategies, local authorities are working with communities to identify their needs, their aspirations and ways of using new opportunities to build a sustainable future. We are looking at the same issues in the work of the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce which I Chair. I want to make sure we find out what those sections of the community that can be hard to reach, including children and young people, think about parks, play areas and green spaces. We recently published our interim report, Green Spaces, Better Places, and are working towards a full report in April 2002.*

*Transforming our green spaces will be a major challenge but it is one which we must tackle if we want to make urban life attractive. I am pleased to endorse this publication which illustrates how cultural strategies can also contribute to providing the quality of life people want for themselves and especially their children.*



Sally Keeble, Minister for Regeneration, Department for Transport,  
Local Government and the Regions

department for

## education and skills

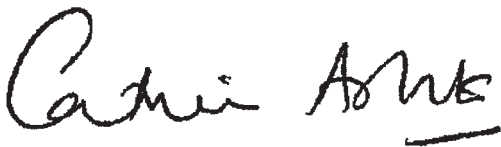
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

*Play is fundamental to how children and young people develop their emotional, physical and intellectual potential. Play encourages children to explore, practise, build up skills, take risks, make mistakes and learn how to think imaginatively and creatively. Children gain a real sense of achievement through play and learn how to co-operate with other children. Play is a way for children to discover the world around them and explore new means of expressing their ideas. Above all, play is fun and it makes learning fun.*

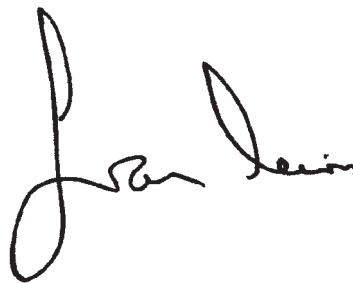
*The National Childcare Strategy, Sure Start and the Children's Fund all acknowledge the importance of play in helping children to learn and develop. These strategies are underpinned by a respect for children's right to play and to enjoy themselves.*

*Local cultural and play strategies will embrace these exciting new initiatives and offer significant opportunities to enhance and extend children's initiation into a wider cultural life through their right to play.*

*We are pleased to endorse "Play as Culture" as an aid to developing the role of play within local authority strategies.*



Baroness Ashton  
Minister for Early Years and  
School Standards  
Department for  
Education and Skills



Ivan Lewis  
Minister for Young  
People and Learning,  
Department for  
Education and Skills



# Introduction

This guide to how play can be incorporated into local authority cultural strategies is designed to assist Officers leading the process of cultural strategy development, Play Officers within local authorities, voluntary sector play providers and support organisations, and advocates for children's rights. It draws together the findings from a survey of authorities that piloted cultural strategy development with the views and experience of a number of other authorities and organisations.

It has been researched and written by PLAYLINK, commissioned by the Children's Play Policy Forum and funded by Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

'Creating Opportunities' the DCMS Guidance on developing local cultural strategies states that:

'Local authorities are strongly encouraged to develop and implement Local Cultural Strategies for their areas'.

A local authority Cultural Strategy is a Best Value National Performance Indicator (No. BV114). The Guidance explicitly mentions play as falling within the scope of cultural strategies.

## Structure of this guide

### **First section: culture, children and play**

Discusses children and play in the context of culture, and offers a model statement which could be used as a reference point and possibly incorporated into cultural strategies. The model statement draws out the connections between children, their play and the wider cultural sphere.

### **Second section: experience of play in cultural strategies**

Discusses the evidence provided by pilot authorities and others.

### **Third section: key issues**

Lists critical points for the effective inclusion of play in cultural strategies and the documents and policies which should inform play development within a cultural strategy.



# Culture, children and play

## Creating opportunities

A cultural strategy is the opportunity to respond to fundamental questions about children, families, communities and wider society. The process of developing a cultural strategy should prompt those fundamental questions. Local authorities have not, however, always seized the opportunity to start from the very beginning.

This reluctance to pose fundamental questions can result in children being thought of simply as actual or potential recipients of services or as a problem to be solved. In other words, they become trapped in unexamined ideas about children and childhood. The type of fundamental questions to be asked as a prerequisite to thinking about children, play and culture are, for example:

How do children experience their childhood?

How might they wish to experience their childhood?

How would we wish children to experience their childhood in our shared locality?

What do we mean by children playing freely?

If children play everywhere, how can this be accommodated appropriately in different spaces and at different times?

Posing these and other first order questions will help to establish how children can be fully woven into informal social and cultural life. A cultural strategy should secure children's rightful place in the wider social sphere. Play provision is only part of this wider picture.

This guide is based on the understanding that:

Play is an essential aspect of children's culture and quality of life

Children's play is an initiation into a wider cultural life

Play and culture share the characteristic of being intrinsically worthwhile.

## Defining the scope of a cultural strategy

Before embarking on cultural strategy development it is crucial to define what is meant by 'culture'.

Culture is understood as ways of life encompassing values, traditions, beliefs, conflict and coexistence, engagements born of free choice, and the meaning and values we ascribe to activities.

The concept 'culture' embraces that of inheritance. And this inheritance is not simply that of buildings, monuments, art works and artifacts but of values, meanings, customs and beliefs, protocols and behaviour. Inheriting a culture implies learning about it. This learning takes two distinct forms: that which can be taught, and that which can be learned only through experience. Michael Oakshott captures this point thus:

*"What every man is born heir to is an inheritance of human achievements; an inheritance of feelings, emotions, images, visions, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, understandings, intellectual and practical enterprises, languages, relationships, organisations, canons and maxims of conduct, procedures, rituals, skills, works of art, books, musical compositions, tools, artifacts and utensils...Now, this world can be entered, possessed and enjoyed only in the process of learning. A 'picture' may be purchased, but one cannot purchase an understanding of it. And I have called this world our common inheritance because to enter it is the only way of becoming a human being, and to inhabit it is to be a human being".*

Michael Oakshott, 'Learning and Teaching'



'Culture's everything you don't have to do'.

Brian Eno quoted in Leisure Manager article by Brian Kelly

A culture is always ways of life in transmission, both within and between generations and social groups. A cultural strategy should, therefore, draw attention to the necessary connection between adults and children and what this might mean in practice.

Play is one of the ways children learn through experience how values, beliefs and traditions are transformed into ways of life. This type of understanding cannot be taught. It is the difference between being able to recite a moral code, and learning to live by one.

When considering play and cultural strategy a useful distinction can be drawn between two forms of engagement. Those which:

- arise out of an element of compulsion
- are voluntary, rooted in free choice.

Leisure pursuits and play, whether undertaken by adults or children, share the common characteristics of being undertaken voluntarily, requiring no necessary outcome. It is central to our understanding of ourselves as individuals and as a society that we value such freely chosen engagements. These engagements are intrinsically worthwhile, and are distinct from those driven by necessity. They enrich and give meaning to our lives. In creating the space and time for play, adults:

- affirm the intrinsic value of play, and by implication cultural engagement generally
- create the context for initiating children into key societal values.

Children playing and adults participating in cultural activities have in common a distinctive relationship to time, space, themselves and others. From this perspective, play is not so much an activity as a way of 'being':

*'The main characteristic of play – child or adult – is not its content, but its mode. Play is an approach to action, not a form of activity.'*

Jerome Bruner, quoted in Moyles (1989)

## Understanding play

It is not possible to respond to children's rights, needs and wishes without a clear understanding about free play, both as cultural expression and in terms of children's development.

*'Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing, children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community.'*

New Charter for Children's Play (Children's Play Council)

*'Play often, though not always, implies a sense of fun for the child. But it can also be serious, in two senses. The child may feel serious while playing, and/or the content of the play may be serious, that is, not trivial or light hearted. Much free play is reflective... a way of doing anything or nothing.'*

Best Play

*' "For people to be able to operate within the market (of labour and goods and services), they have to understand society's customs and practices. That is what I mean by common knowledge and common knowledge does not come exclusively from the market place. Much of it comes at an early age from school and some of it will certainly come from play".'*

Graham (1998)

Play provision can also make a significant contribution to fostering a positive attitude to cultural diversity. The UK is a racially and culturally diverse society where understanding and tolerance of other people's ways of life, and other cultures and values, as well as confidence in and enjoyment of one's own culture, are essential attributes. Play provision offers children the opportunity to acquire and explore these attributes.

...Good play provision offers a welcoming space where children can meet on a more equal basis. For this reason play provision can be the starting point for tackling social exclusion, engaging with marginalized families and communities and working to build their capacity to improve their social, environmental and economic circumstances. (Hill-Tout and others 1995)'

**Best Play**

*'Through play children learn what cannot be taught: for example, self-confidence, the sense of themselves as autonomous agents capable of making choices'*

**Bath & North East Somerset Play Policy**

*'Some sociologists have gone so far as to equate play with the culture of childhood – that is, the arena in which children as social actors are most likely to express their values, their art, their music, their physical culture, and their language and humour (Prout and James 1997). It is, like its adult counterpart, a culture that can at times be creative or destructive, cruel as well as innocent.*

*Children play within their personal codes of behaviour, as well as those of their culture and society. At times, play tests those codes, and this gives rise to one of the community's key concerns about play and how adults manage it. Play is important to the child in providing an arena that is not overwhelmingly dominated by adults views and values. It is an important part of experience...'*

**'Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child'.**

Adapted from Bob Hughes and Frank King as referenced in Best Play

**Best Play**

These extracts illustrate the different yet complementary ways play can be understood. Children's play and its connection to the wider cultural sphere should be made explicit within cultural strategies. A succinct, clear statement about children, play and culture will form a useful reference point for formulating strategic cultural strategies and operational service strategies and plans. A model statement is given below. This statement is underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by the British Government and endorsed by many local authorities.

*'States Parties shall assure the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'* Article 12

*'States Parties recognise 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 cultural life and the arts.*

*States parties 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 activities.'* Article 31



## Model Statement for Inclusion in Cultural Strategies

To play is not only a right for all children but also an essential aspect of their development, culture and quality of life and their initiation into wider cultural and leisure experiences.

Children are entitled to special consideration in strategic planning because they rely on the advocacy of adults in the social, economic and political spheres. It is the responsibility of adults to ensure that children's views are heard and taken into account. This cultural strategy will show how children's play needs and wishes are to be interpreted and met in this authority.

Children and adults live in the same world and impact on each other both directly and indirectly. This cultural strategy is designed to ensure that children's play and free time needs and aspirations are met, as well as and in conjunction with those of adults. It aims to ensure that children and adults are given opportunities, both independently and together, to enjoy a range of play and leisure activities and the physical, emotional, cultural and social benefits these bring.



# Experience of play in cultural strategies

## Sources

This guide is based on cultural strategies developed by a sample of pilot authorities and others, interviews with Officers responsible for developing local cultural strategies and PLAYLINK's play policy and strategy development work with local authorities and play organisations. Those local authorities we have spoken to are at various stages of developing their cultural strategies. Some strategies have been formally endorsed, others are about to move to that stage; some are about to initiate a process of consultation, either as a precursor to formulating a strategy or as a further stage in its development.

The evidence, therefore, is patchy and variable. However, key issues and concerns are emerging that will affect how and to what extent children and their play are woven into the cultural life of their areas.

## Taking the broader view

A cultural strategy is an opportunity to counter a restricted view of children and their play. Its overriding aim should be to ensure that children are fully integrated into formal and informal urban and rural life. This will require local authorities to consider, among other issues, how to balance the need for local, easily accessible quality play opportunities with centralised schemes.

Experience of play policy and strategy development work with local authorities and others indicates that the causes of a limited and limiting view about children and their play are twofold:

- a reluctance to 'start at the beginning' by making explicit the defining features of children's play and its connection to culture, both children's culture and that of wider society
- a tendency instead to 'start with what we've got' for example, fixed equipment playgrounds or summer playschemes, so that the forms of provision currently extant within a local authority area act as a sort of proxy definition of play: 'play is what children do or want to do when they visit our provision'.

Reluctance to start at the beginning by defining play is, in some authorities at least, replicated in an unwillingness to examine what is meant by 'culture'. This can lead to an interpretation of culture that is restricted to the traditional capital 'C' Cultural Services – arts, museums, libraries. In such circumstances, the opportunity that a cultural strategy represents will be undermined in practice and play and sport, for example, will be marginalised as forms of culture.

'Building a Strategy for Children and Young People' (Children and Young People's Unit consultation document) sets out the Government's aspirations that children and young people should have the means to engage in constructive play and leisure pursuits for their own sake.

The impact of the Government's childcare strategy, and therefore the role of Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCP), is beginning to emerge as a significant issue, in part because that strategy is backed by considerable Government funds. However, the implementation of these initiatives raises important questions about children's control over, and use of, their free time. If cultural expression comes to life in our free time, there is a need to examine how out of school care settings should respond.



## It's not just about play provision

**'Children being seen and heard in public places is one of the hallmarks of a vital city'.**

Portsmouth City Council  
Play Policy

There are indications that the organisational structures set up to facilitate the development of cultural strategies can, unwittingly, reinforce an institutional forgetfulness about children's right to play in a shared, public domain. This is because, notwithstanding consultation exercises, children are too often thought of primarily as the recipients of services directly addressed to them or their carers, for example, out of school clubs, playgrounds, sport and art projects. Children, in other words, become invisible within the general social sphere perhaps to reappear as a problem 'hanging about the streets', highlighted in a community safety strategy.

It is important that local authorities avoid the temptation to bracket off children's play into one or more forms of provision, or to represent play simply through a parks or playgrounds service-based approach. Children are sophisticated judges of their surroundings and are naturally curious about the places they visit and use. Buildings that are primarily used by children can and should be designed in a way that enables them to have a variety of spatial experiences. The streets, canals and riversides, parks and open spaces – as distinct from designated playgrounds – are places where children must be seen, heard and given opportunities to play. This will require giving sensitive attention to, for example:

- street design and landscaping
- policing and traffic control
- public art, the possibility of physical engagement with it.

Cultural strategies are grouped around themes, for example, young people, sustainability, environmental enhancement, and so forth. Albeit in a limited survey, we have not found a theme explicitly focused on shared public space. Such a theme would be a useful focus for giving fuller consideration to adults' and children's actual and potential use of shared public space.

It is accepted that at this time there may be limited scope for amending formally agreed corporate priorities and cross-cutting themes. However, this should not prevent authorities examining a theme focused on shared public space. The results of this examination should be fed back into current policy and strategy development, including park and open space strategies.


Negotiations about shared use of public space should be informed by, and have an impact on, the local Unitary Development Plan and planning processes generally. Planning policies and decisions should be subject to a child impact assessment.

## Leadership and commitment

Discussions with a number of authorities suggest that the process of corporate policy and strategy development gains and maintains momentum if it is led by one or more committed and informed senior Members and Officers.

Both culture in general, and play in particular, are expressive of deep rooted values and understandings. The process of strategy development is aided when there is a personal commitment from individual Members and Officers. There are examples where a strong lead from senior Officers combined with political commitment pushes the process forward.

The London Borough of Newham's cultural strategy development was led by a Cabinet Member who chaired a cross-sectoral Policy Forum; the Forum was supported and informed by a separate Senior Officer's Group itself chaired by the Director of Leisure. Ron Robinson, Strategic Policy and Project's Manager makes the point that:



*“This level of political and Officer leadership played a vital role in creating a strategy which places culture centre stage. This commitment is now continuing through the implementation phase, maintaining impetus both within the Council and our partner organisations”.*

However, commitment does not always exist at senior levels. There is at least one example we have met where a determined individual Officer, not at a senior level, successfully promoted the development of a cultural strategy.

## Representing children’s interests

In general, play needs to be properly represented on all forums and groups where children are the focus. Where play is well represented within the process of developing a cultural strategy, children and their play can appear under a number of themes, operational strategies and service plans.

*Stevenage’s Cultural Strategy 1999 – 2002 refers to play or play services under the headings of Community Safety, Tackling Social Exclusion, Renewing Democracy, Facilities/Assets, Partnerships, and Culture.*

This is to be welcomed. However, expert representation of play is not enough to guarantee that the broader implications of play as one form of children’s cultural life are fully examined and reflected in the final strategy.

The process of thinking creatively and challenging assumptions is one that can be assisted by the involvement of a ‘critical friend’. Experience from similar processes of policy and strategy development suggest that this role is often best performed by independent individuals or organisations not caught up in the day to day concerns of local service delivery. However, where outside organisations or individuals participate in this way, care must be taken to ensure that the strategy development process is owned and led by key partners; these responsibilities cannot be off-loaded onto third parties.

## Out of school care, early years education and schools

Children spend significant amounts of their time in provision they are required to attend and where creating free play opportunities is only one of a number of service objectives if it is an objective at all. Though play may be valued, such provision will often operate within a number of constraints. These include:

- the time available for free play – for example in schools
- the nature of the physical environment – for example, out of school clubs in shared premises
- an absence of a rich, outdoor play environment
- where management practicalities are prioritised at the expense of children’s wishes.

These and other constraints can have the effect of limiting the scope of children’s play and restricting the development of children’s cultural expression. There is considerable scope for improving play environments available through out of school childcare, particularly with regard to outdoor play. Such services could provide a significant expansion of the scope for children’s play and for cultural expression relative to the constraints of both the public and private domains. Children’s rich and constantly evolving play traditions can flourish across the range of provision and at the same time support the principle of inclusion. This is amply demonstrated in a recent publication ‘Play today in the primary school playground’, edited by Julia C Bishop and Mavis Curtis. A paper, ‘It’s not all black or white’ by Kathryn Marsh, based on studies in a number of countries, concludes that:

*‘Participation in the games contributes to group solidarity and appears to assist with the attainment of individual acceptance. ... this is especially important for children who have language backgrounds other than English, or who have migrated into the playground either from other schools or other countries...’*

*Adults often have a tendency to underestimate the abilities of children. While teaching strategies which supported intercultural exchange had been actively implemented in the classroom, few teachers in this school were aware of their ongoing repercussions in the playground where children controlled the teaching and learning.*

Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships, education departments and schools must be represented in the cultural strategy development process. Fostering a positive attitude to cultural diversity, and encouraging a strong sense of self and self-confidence and the ability to make choices, are goals for children's learning with equal status to academic goals. Recent developments through Government initiatives are aimed at redressing constraints, encouraging more thought and consideration for play. Schools need to be clear about the scope and limitations of their provision in relation to free play objectives. One way of doing this is to develop a play policy.

## The role of the play policy

In order to ensure that children's interests are reflected, a cultural strategy should either explicitly incorporate the local authority's play policy or provide the impetus to develop one. A corporate play policy, underpinned by a process that engages with all the constituencies that have an interest in, or responsibility for, children and their play, is the document that resolves and clarifies an authority's understanding of play. An effective corporate play policy is founded on:

- clear articulation of what is meant by play
- commitment to respond to children's needs and wishes.

A play policy should be a practical working tool that addresses issues affecting children's play. A play policy will make explicit:

- the objectives of play provision and services
- the connection between acceptable levels of risk and play
- a presumption in favour of inclusive provision
- criteria for a quality play environment
- play as an aspect of children's cultural life
- the need to create play opportunities in the general environment.

**'Adults often have a tendency to underestimate the abilities of children'.**

Play Today in the  
Primary School Playground

### **Changing the balance: a city for children and adults alike**

*The health and vibrancy of the City depends to a significant degree on people's perception and use of its public spaces and thoroughfares. Urban planning, design and architecture, along with sensitive approaches to the oversight of public space, can create the conditions necessary for the development of a sociable City.*

*In order to fulfil Portsmouth City Council's commitment to enable people to live 'fulfilled and balanced' lives, the City wants to ensure that its 'common' spaces become places where individuals and communities have opportunities to come within sight of one another. Strategies need to be developed that will counter the tendency for some sections of the community – whether by virtue of age or background – to feel that their freedom to use public space is constrained.*

*No play policy can ignore the fact that children should be entitled to play safely in a wide range of public spaces, particularly those in proximity to their homes. Equally, parents and carers are right to expect that local open spaces should be free from hazard and available for children's play.*

**An extract from Portsmouth City Council's Play Policy**

The process of formulating a play policy is as significant as its content. The range of interests and organisations that have an impact on children's play is wide and all should be involved in the process of policy formation. These will include, for example, housing, transport, planning, EYDCP, education, voluntary sector and commercial organisations as appropriate in addition to Officers responsible for the different forms of play provision. The aim is to develop a common understanding and shared objectives in respect of children's play.

Bath and NE Somerset Council and the local EYDCP developed a corporate play policy that was formally endorsed by Council in 1999. Susan Wheeler, Lead Officer (EYDCP), makes the point that:

**'The play policy underpins and informs our work with children across all sectors and interests'.**

Susan Wheeler, Lead Officer,  
EYDCP.

*'The play policy underpins and informs our work with children across all sectors and interests. The process of developing the policy, which included Members, EYDCP, council departments, voluntary sector, initiated a process that led to a wider understanding of play and its significance in the lives of children and their communities. Play is now formally woven into our work with schools, after-school provision, parks and pre-schools to name but a few areas that the play policy has affected. We believe that we have created a stable, authoritative reference point that will ensure that play is properly represented in a Cultural Strategy.'*

## Partners and stakeholders

DCMS Guidance emphasises the importance of forming a strategy development team that strikes the correct balance in terms of size and interests represented – local authority and other – and the capacity to get the work done. The process should not become an end in itself.

As the strategy development process unfolds and broad statements of purpose evolve into focused action plans, ambiguous use of key terms, for example, 'partnership' and 'stakeholder', can undermine effective strategy implementation and relationships of trust. It is helpful to restrict the use of the term 'partners' to those individuals and organisations that share formal responsibility for agreed actions; to restrict the use of the term 'stakeholder' to those that have an interest in the area under view but are not bound by formal commitments to action.


Establishing positive connections between the different tiers of local government yields benefits.

*As part of Suffolk Coastal District Leisure Services Best Value Review one of the improvement programme projects is working in partnership with 117 Town/Parish Councils to improve local play areas. In some instances this means transferring sites at no (or nominal) cost to local ownership/management. In other cases it means sharing the cost of refurbishment or replacement. The District Council has established a rolling capital programme for play refurbishment.*

Peoples' sense of their own needs and wishes develops over time, often in response to specific project proposals. Flexibility within the planning process allows for unanticipated changes to be accommodated at a relatively late stage. Cherwell District Council initiated work on one project, and then saw that it could grow for the benefit of the community.

*The project involved converting an old youth centre into an arts centre with a primary purpose of youth arts but with secondary functions relating to generic youth work and wider public use particularly for creative activities.*





*There was previously on site a nursery run independently and as the nature of the project evolved, it became apparent that this would be a complementary and very beneficial activity particularly for young mothers attending the centre. It therefore became an integral part of the project and was a positive factor recognised by the Arts Council England in the Lottery application and 60% award for the £800,000 project. This initiative has demonstrated that a multi-disciplinary approach of several cultural sector activities is viewed favourably by Lottery distributors, is a principle endorsed in the production of Local Cultural Strategies and most important, offers benefits and improves access to cultural opportunities for the public.*

Where local authority functions are distributed across different tiers of authority, for example, county, district, town and parish councils, strategic oversight and coordinated action can be difficult to achieve but there are long-term benefits.

*Easington District Council formed one layer of a three tier local authority area. Historically it has not been active in supporting or providing for children's play. The cultural strategy development process highlighted the significance of play and the importance that people placed on good quality local play provision. The process also brought into sharp focus the scope and limitations of current provision and the range of different interests involved.*

*A Play Management Group was formed comprising County (Social Services), District, Town and Parish Councils, Play Networks and Sure Start. The Play Management Group evolved into the 'Helping Hands in Play' charitable organisation.*

Particular attention needs to be paid to the relationship with the not-for-profit sector, a key provider of play services to children. Concentrating on funding service delivery projects and ignoring core or baseline costs, weakens not-for-profit organisations and undermines their capacity to develop and offer long-term, consistent services. An absence of local infrastructure support similarly hinders the development of locally-based, community-rooted organisations and undermines their capacity to contribute to sustainable strategy and project implementation.

The Compact on Relations between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in England has issued Guidance, 'Funding: a code of good practice'. It makes clear that Government wants to encourage


*'non-Departmental Bodies and local government to adopt and adapt the Compact and its associated Codes of Good Practice'.*

In the good practice Guidance, Government undertakes to implement an effective funding framework that, for example:

- respects the sector's independence and its right to campaign, irrespective of the funding relationship that exists
- responds to the sector's need for greater financial responsibility to enable it to fulfil its strategic role
- improves sustainability and longer term planning, for example, by providing multi-year roll-forward funding
- recognises core costs
- invests in capacity of the sector's infrastructure.

## Best Value Reviews and Cultural Strategies

There is limited evidence on Best Value reviews in relation to cultural strategies, in part because those contacted for this guide have either not yet undertaken a Best Value review of play services or undertook the review prior to working on cultural strategies. There is some evidence that a weakness of at least some reviews of play services mirrors the limitations described above in relation to cultural strategy development whereby reviews are based:

- 
- on 'starting with what we've got' and not looking beyond, thereby effectively limiting the scope to challenge and compare existing services
  - an absence of definition of play as distinct from play services, reinforcing a restricted approach which fails to maximise opportunities for children.

With pressure on local authorities from the Audit Commission and Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions to undertake cross-cutting reviews rather than limited service-based ones, the need to agree a definition of play and the objectives of play provision is now even more pressing. In the absence of such clarity, children's need and wish to play will have no stable reference point within wide-ranging reviews of, for example, Children's or Leisure Services.

This reading of the situation coincides with that of the Audit Commission who recognise that Best Value presents both a challenge and an opportunity to assert the benefits of play. Without an agreed definition and objectives for play, it will be difficult for a local authority to demonstrate the coherence and quality of service that the public want and Best Value inspection requires.

## Budgets and planning for play

In the local authorities contacted, budgets for play were distributed across a number of different departments. A single authority might have play budgets located in parks and recreation, usually for non-staffed, fixed equipment playgrounds; in a play service, usually for staffed adventure playgrounds, play centres and holiday playschemes; housing departments responsible for council estates and where land or finance for play provision accrued through planning gain; voluntary sector grants' units allocating finance to groups for play purposes.

Typically, each distinct budget area works to its own criteria with no attempt made to develop corporate play criteria and play service objectives. This leads to inconsistency in service delivery resulting in random outcomes for children and public confusion about what constitutes a quality play environment. Development of an overarching cultural strategy presents the opportunity to counter this fragmentation of purpose. One way might be to aggregate play budgets, but this could be difficult in practice.

Training and qualification, particularly in playwork, are one key to developing quality in play opportunities. A firm commitment to training and qualifications at a strategic level can facilitate budget management. Common criteria across a range of funding sources including EYDCPs, further education colleges, local learning and skills councils, can ensure that unnecessary barriers to appropriate training and qualifications are removed.

Whether or not budgets for play can be aggregated, there should be a mechanism to ensure that decisions about play are made with reference to common criteria and objectives. That mechanism could be either a corporate play advisory group or a corporate lead play Officer with a specific remit to ensure that planning for, and expenditure on, play works to common objectives and criteria. The reference point for making decisions will be the corporate play policy described above.

## Consultation

DCMS Guidance emphasises the importance of 'meaningful active consultation with a wide range of organisations and local people – both users and non-users of services...'

Given the scope and complexity involved in developing a cultural strategy, children's needs and wishes can be overlooked. In consulting children particular care needs to be taken to ensure that all children, including disabled children, are consulted in ways that make sense to them.

A distinction needs to be drawn between consulting young people generally, and consulting children. At least one local authority found that its consultation with young people was inadvertently biased towards the older age range in part because both consultation methods and venues were oriented towards that age range. A further distinction needs to be made between consulting children about actual or desired play provision and about play opportunities in general, for instance in the park or local street.

All consultation is complex and it is likely that more than one method will be needed to achieve a meaningful picture. Involving adults that have pre-existing, trusted relationships with children is more likely to yield a rounded sense of their views. This is because children's thoughts will be more richly expressed in the flow of conversation than through the more constrained means of answering a questionnaire or drawing a picture. When seeking children's views, Stirling Council and Playplus staffed play programme does not rely on questionnaires.

*Children's feedback is also key, but the (play service) found forms to be problematic so it makes only limited use of surveys. In line with its imaginative approach to play, it prefers to seek children's views through discussion – often aided by maps, slides, videos or photos. Games and quizzes are used as are white boards and graffiti walls. According to James (14): 'The playworkers who came gave us loads of ideas. Making the Indian tent was brilliant!'*

### Serious Talk About Fun

Consultation always takes place against a background of assumptions, whether acknowledged or not. Because play can mean different things to different people, it is particularly important that both questioner and consultee agree about what they mean by the term. A corporate play policy and/or corporate play criteria will provide a useful common reference point. This need for clarity of definition applies whether one is engaging with children, their parents or carers, or specialist organisations.

Responses to consultations represent one type of evidence. They cannot of themselves determine what action should be undertaken. Children and adults should be informed about the role consultation plays in decision-making.

Two sources for gaining insight into children's play needs and wishes are easily forgotten. One is unobtrusive and informed observation of children at play, the other is remembering one's own experience as a child. With remarkable consistency, participants in PLAYLINK's risk assessment workshops report that when children engage in free play they build dens, play with water and enjoy quiet, private spaces as well as more boisterous activities. When workshop participants are asked what they enjoyed and did as children, they say being away from adults, building dens, playing by the local river or stream and climbing trees.

Whilst consultations may often do little more than confirm what is already known, responses can sometimes surprise and change the way issues are perceived.

A local authority consultation with local people drew out the following points that otherwise might not have been given prominence. People:

- welcomed flagship projects of excellence but not at the expense of local, neighbourhood-based provision
- expressed concern that use of provision would be restricted in practice in the light of people's anxieties about inadequate transport links and safety on the streets
- wanted locally-based organisations to deliver services.

Consultation always takes place against a background of assumptions whether acknowledged or not.

There is a growing recognition of the danger of consultation overload. This encompasses professionals, providers, interest groups, service users and non-users. It is of increasing importance to mesh together consultation exercises, not least because of the large areas of overlap and connection between different strategy streams. This can in part be achieved by developing, so far as is possible, an integrated corporate approach to consultation and by ensuring information already held is used effectively.

# Key Issues

**Creating opportunities:** a cultural strategy is the opportunity to respond to fundamental questions about children, families, communities and wider society. The process of developing a cultural strategy should prompt those fundamental questions.

**Defining the scope of a cultural strategy:** before embarking on the development of cultural strategy it is crucial to define what is meant by 'culture'.

Culture is understood as ways of life encompassing values, traditions, beliefs, conflict and coexistence, engagements born of free choice, and the meaning and values we ascribe to activities.

**Understanding play:** it is not possible to respond to children's rights, needs and wishes without a clear understanding about free play, both as cultural expression and in terms of children's development.

**Taking the broader view:** cultural strategies should cover all forms of play and all places where children play. There is a tendency to limit consideration of play to types of play provision.

Local authorities need to consider how to balance the need for local, easily accessible quality play opportunities with more high profile destination schemes.

**Its not just about play provision:** the organisational structures set up to facilitate strategy development should not unwittingly prevent the inclusion of all play opportunities for children within the cultural strategy.

A cultural strategy should address the question of how public space is to be negotiated and shared by children and adults alike. This should include issues such as street design, traffic control and public art. The concept of the shared use of public space is a useful tool for focusing on these issues.

Play needs to be understood as an important aspect of children's cultural life.

**Leadership and commitment:** the development of play in cultural strategies should be driven at a senior level in the authority and requires explicit political support.

**Representing children's interests:** play should be specifically represented throughout the process of cultural strategy development. Those representing play must have a clear understanding of play and its broader relationship to cultural life.

Care must be taken to ensure that the strategy development process is owned and led by key partners.

**Out of school care, early years education and schools:** these settings should be seen as offering opportunities for children's play within the cultural strategy and developed accordingly.


**The role of the play policy:** every local authority should develop a corporate play policy and incorporate it into their cultural strategy.

The process of formulating a play policy is as significant as its content. The range of interests and organisations that have an impact on children's play is wide and all should be involved in the process of policy formation. The aim is to develop a common understanding and shared objectives in respect of children's play.

**Partners and stakeholders:** It is important to establish a strategy development team that strikes the correct balance in terms of size and interests represented – local authority and other – and the capacity to get the work done. The process should not become an end in itself.

Sustainable participation by local not-for-profit organisations in developing and implementing cultural strategies requires infrastructure support, core funding, and multi-year, roll-over funding streams.

**Best Value reviews and cultural strategies:** the approach to play in the Best Value review needs to be consistent with that in the cultural strategy.



**Budgets and planning for play:** either a corporate play advisory group or a corporate lead play Officer should be appointed to ensure that planning for, and expenditure on, play works to common objectives and criteria and is effectively linked to other initiatives within the cultural strategy.

**Consultation:** consultation is one tool among others that can help determine an appropriate course of action. Whilst consultations may serve to confirm what is already known, responses can nevertheless surprise and change the way issues are perceived.

Consultation overload needs to be avoided. This can in part be achieved by developing an integrated approach to consultation and by ensuring information already held is used effectively

## Key documents and policies

In order to ensure that children's play is properly represented within a cultural strategy authorities will need to have regard to:

- Articles 12 and 31 of the The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Corporate policies and priorities, for example, quality of life, economic development, community plan, crime prevention and neighbourhood renewal.
- Non-statutory providers of services to children.
- The New Charter for Children's Play<sup>3</sup>.
- The local authority corporate play policy if there is one.
- DCMS Guidance on cultural strategies 'Creating Opportunities'.
- Funding streams: DCMS Guidance makes it clear that a local cultural strategy 'will have particular importance for the Lottery Distributing Bodies in their prioritising and decision-making processes...'
- '101 Ways to Develop a Local Cultural Strategy', Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM).
- 'Best Play: what play provision should do for children' a joint publication by Children's Play Council, National Playing Fields Association and PLAYLINK.

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<sup>3</sup> This and other work informing this Guidance is referenced on page 21.



# References & Further Reading

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## Further Reading

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22. **Providing good quality childcare and early learning experiences through Sure Start,** DfEE May 2000
23. **Sure Start: setting up and running a crèche, a guide to good practice** DfEE May 2000
24. **National Standards for Under Eights Day Care and Childminding,** ref: -DfES 0486/2001-Childminding; DfES 0487/2001-Creches; DfES 0488/ 2001-Full Day Care; DfES 0489/2001-Out of School Care; DfES 0490/2001-Sessional Care.

# Appendix

## Opportunities for promoting play in cultural strategies

Cultural Strategy Lead Officer	Play Services and Staff
<b>Preparation stage</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact local authority staff responsible for both supervised and unsupervised play provision. They may be located in parks, leisure, education and culture departments or EYDCPs.</li> <li>• Invite play staff to take an active part in the development of the strategy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure there is someone with a keen interest in play services, both supervised and unsupervised, on the Cultural Strategy Team and keep in close contact with them.</li> <li>• Know who else on the Team will support play and play services and make sure they are well informed about play services and opportunities for development.</li> <li>• Inform the Chair of the Team about play services and how you can support the development of the play section of the Strategy.</li> </ul>
<b>First consultation stage</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure the audit of leisure services includes both supervised and unsupervised play provision and projects.</li> <li>• Ensure children's play opportunities in the general environment are included.</li> <li>• Ask local play staff for advice and support in consulting with children as part of the community consultation process.</li> <li>• Invite local play staff to feed into the formal consultation process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure children are included in community consultations.</li> <li>• Offer your playwork expertise in consultations with children and parents.</li> <li>• Offer to be part of any professional consultation groups either by actively taking part or by commenting on drafts of key papers.</li> </ul>
<b>Analysis stage</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite play staff from both supervised and unsupervised provision to contribute to discussion during the analysis stage and in the development of key issues and priorities.</li> <li>• Bear in mind that much of children's free-time activity is spent playing in the street or journeying to their play spaces.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure that when key issues, priorities and review mechanisms are being agreed, you contribute to the decision making process, either directly or by keeping the play 'champions' on the Strategy Team well informed.</li> </ul>



Writing stage	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Invite play staff from both supervised and unsupervised provision to comment on draft documents.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask to be able to read and comment on drafts.</li><li>• Brief elected Members about the importance of play services. They have to give their approval to the draft proposals.</li></ul>
Second consultation stage	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Invite play staff to set up a consultation meeting of 'key players' in play services.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make sure the draft Strategy is circulated widely to your contacts in the public, voluntary and private play sectors and, if appropriate, offer to support people who want to comment.</li><li>• Offer to set up a consultation meeting of 'key players' in play services.</li></ul>
Completion stage	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure that a public summary of the Strategy refers to the development of both supervised and unsupervised play provision.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The final Strategy document will have a public summary. Check drafts of this to ensure play has its rightful place.</li></ul>

Adapted from Children's Play Council  
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