

PLAY POLICY

The play policy will guide Wicklow County Council's approach to play issues and will provide the strategic framework that will guide relevant agencies in the provision and development of play opportunities for the next ten years. Specifically it will:

- Recognise and acknowledge the importance of play
- Implement actions identified in 'Outlook', the Wicklow County Development Board Strategy for Economic Social and Cultural Development of Wicklow 2002 - 2012
- Respond to the need for play opportunities identified at Comhairle na nÓg 2002
- Support the implementation of the National Children's Strategy, 2000

What do we mean by play?

Wicklow County Council endorses the definition of play of the Children's Play Council:

"Play does not involve the pursuit of any external good or reward. The main characteristics of play, child or adult, are not its content, but its mode. Play is an approach to action, not a form of activity – a way of doing anything or nothing".¹

Play involves a wide variety of activities but the central defining feature is that the child sets the agenda in the play situation. It is they who define the rules, the procedures and goals. The role of the adult is not that of teacher or instructor, but of facilitator. Put simply play is what children do in their free time. To illustrate, playing ball informally in a kickabout situation is classed as play whereas playing football in a team situation, organised by adults, is sport.

Play is not just about the provision of facilities. It is also about creating the conditions that facilitate children's play not only in playgrounds but in the wider environment. In addition facilities for children's play do not always have to consist solely of the traditional playground equipment—they can be an interesting and natural environment with features such as a sensory garden, bushes, an interestingly placed tree trunk. Research has shown that for children, a playground is their base for play, somewhere from which to safely explore their neighbourhood.² This places

¹ (*Best Play*, Children's Play Council, NPFA, 2000)

² "The Children have nowhere to play – We need a playground", Sugradh, 2000

an emphasis on safe, enjoyable and attractive play environments. Neighbourhood spaces, estates, parks, streets, libraries, community centres and gardens are as important as dedicated playgrounds.

Benefits of Play

Wicklow County Council recognises the benefits of play both to children and to society in general. Play is the main method by which children learn to live. The enormous benefits of play in children's lives have been widely documented. The Children's Play Council³ has outlined the value of play in the development of children and young people:

- **Play promotes children's development, learning, creativity and independence.**
- **Play keeps children healthy and active – habits which may carry on into adulthood**
- **Play fosters social inclusion. It helps children to understand the people and places in their lives, learn about their environment and develop a sense of community. It helps socially excluded children interact with others**
- **Play helps reduce the involvement of children in anti-social behaviour**
- **Play allows children find out about themselves, their abilities their interests**
- **Play is therapeutic. It helps children to deal with difficult or painful circumstances such as emotional stress or medical treatment**
- **Play gives children the chance to let off steam and have fun**

In all of this children become empowered to make choices, take risks, discover solutions and lay claim to their surroundings, their space. This remains true right through later childhood and adolescence.

Why a Play Policy?

³ *The New Charter for Children's Play*, Children's Play Council, 1998)

The purpose of the policy is to change the culture of thinking on play and provide more opportunities for children to play. This play policy reflects the importance that Wicklow County Council places on the value of play in childhood and the importance of children in our society. It also recognises that changes in today's society are having an impact on children's opportunities to play. The policy makes a clear commitment to play as a right and to ensuring that children and their needs are considered when it comes to policy making and that provision is made to meet their needs.

Play is nothing new of course. The need for a policy on play stems from a number of features and changes to the way we live today. These include:

- The changing nature of working life and family life which has increased the number of children in a childcare situation and in more formal play settings
- The stronger emphasis on protection and safety and the perception of danger that restricts the movements of children
- The role of advertising and the marketing of toy companies. Their place in play has changed the way that play is presented.
- The impact of development and land use and increased traffic and the impact this has had on children's access to play areas.

Guiding Principles

The following set of principles underpin the Wicklow County Council Play Policy. This means that these principles will be adhered to in all aspects of work regarding play issues.

- **Sustainable Development - Local Agenda 21:** this involves the principle of participation in decision making for all relevant stakeholders, including children.
- **Community Development:** children are essential to community development, as often they are responsible for creating networks and links among people in an area. Community development needs to be brought to children's level so they can engage in it. Play is the means for us to do that.
- **Social Inclusion:** to proactively ensure that participation in play is available to all and that factors such as money, ethnicity, gender, location and ability do not act as barriers.
- **Access for all abilities,** as a first principle of design - being inclusive in providing play opportunities for all children
- **Clustering:** as far as is possible facilities should be clustered together to allow for maximum use of resources and 'informal' supervision of facilities

- **Co-ordination and Partnership:** to work in partnership with other agencies, communities and organisations to maximise opportunities for play needs.
- **Quality Standards:** providing the highest quality Play Standards in compliance with recommended National and European Union standards and relevant legislation.

A Rights Based Approach to Play

The policy is founded on the following rights of children:

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The right to play is stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 7 which states *"The child shall have full opportunity to play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education: society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right"*. Article 31 of the same UN Convention emphasises the *"rights 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. "*

The National and Local Context

National Children's Strategy

The National Children's Strategy was launched in November 2000. It is a 10 year plan to improve the quality of all children's lives and includes a range of proposed actions across such areas as ensuring every child has access to play and recreation facilities and that their development needs and views are considered in decisions that affect them. The Strategy includes major reform of how the government co-ordinates and delivers services for children. One of the main aims of the strategy is to give children a voice. Consultation with, and participation of, young people is an underlying principle of the strategy.

The need for more opportunities for community-based play and leisure activities was high on the list of issues raised by children during the consultation process. In response, objective D of the National Children's Strategy states:

"Children will have access to play, sport, recreation and cultural activities to enrich their experience of childhood"

The aim is to ensure that the response to the play, recreation and cultural needs of children is developed in a strategic way, which supports the achievement of positive developmental outcomes. To this end a National Play Policy will be launched in 2003.

“Outlook” – The Ten Year Strategic Plan for County Wicklow – Wicklow County Development Board

“Outlook” was launched in 2001 by Wicklow County Development Board (WCDB). It is a ten year plan, covering the main aspects of Social, Economic and Cultural development of the county. Children and young people are an important element of this strategy, which contains a commitment to making Wicklow a child friendly county, and to working to ensure that children and young people can participate fully in social, economic and cultural life.

The role of the County Development Board will be to encourage and facilitate a partnership approach to the provision of play opportunities and a co-ordinated approach to the play needs of children in the county

Profile of County Wicklow

“The population of Co. Wicklow is getting larger, it’s getting younger and it is concentrated in the Northeast”.⁴

The above quotation sums up the population profile of the county. Wicklow is one of the most rapidly growing counties in Ireland, mainly because of its proximity to Dublin. In 2002 there were 114,676 persons in the county – an increase of 11.7 percent which is higher than the 9.4 percent increase recorded for the province of Leinster. The County is divided into East and West by a granite mountain range.

Profile of young people in County Wicklow

⁴ “Outlook”, WCDB, 2002, available on www.wicklow.ie under Wicklow County Development Board

26,304 children aged 14 years and under were living in the Wicklow area in 2002.

Births for Co. Wicklow are rising a little each year (Table 2) and are continuing to rise at a greater rate than the national percentage.

The latest publication of Central Statistics Office's population projections (18 June 2001), projections for 2031 show that Dublin and the mid-East (Wicklow falls into this area) are the only regions projected to show an increase in the number of births between 1996 and 2031. These two regions combined will account for 52.2% of all births by the end of this projection period from 40.4% in 1996. This presents a major challenge for resources and services.

Table 2: Births recorded in Co. Wicklow (CSO, 2002)

Year	% per 1,000 population	Total
2001	17.9%	1,945
2000	17.1%	1,838
1999	17.1%	1,754
1998	15.9%	1,631
1997	15.44%	1,601

This play policy has been prepared following a consultation process involving: public meetings; consultation workshops; consultation with young people.

The main findings of the consultation:

- There is a recognition of the importance of play in the daily lives and the health and development of children and young people. There is also a recognition that the benefits of play extend to parents

experiencing isolation where play facilities offer an opportunity to combat isolation and network with the wider community

- Play is not just about facilities but is also about the broader and deeper issues of freedom, safety and the opportunity to take risks
- The lack of play facilities can be interpreted as a lack of commitment to children and young peoples needs
- There is a need for the co-ordination of major stakeholders in play provision and the development of child-friendly environments
- There is a need for greater integration of play and child-friendly policies in areas such as planning
- There is a perception of/reality of greater danger that restricts the movement of children
- Fear among adults regarding playgrounds - vandalism, insurance issues
- Children and young people themselves expressed considerable concerns:
 - about the lack of facilities for children;
 - that housing development would leave insufficient green spaces;
 - that adults didn't seem interested in children and not enough were involved in children's activities;
 - regarding safety regarding road safety and personal safety.

TRENDS WE ARE CONCERNED ABOUT

Building houses everywhere →
no green spaces left
BIGGER POPULATION →
BIGGER PROBLEM

Wicklow Comhairle na nÓg⁵

OBJECTIVE 1

⁵ Wicklow Comhairle na nÓg 2002, WCDB. Report available from the C&E Office, Wicklow County Council

A Child-centred policy

The Issue

Play is an integral part of children's lives and is essential to their holistic development. Therefore children's needs will be at the centre of all aspects of this play policy. In this regard:

- Every child will be entitled to respect for their own unique combination of qualities and capabilities.
- The perceptions of the child, their views and opinions will be listened to and respected.
- Play provision will reflect both the age and stage of development of the child.

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OBJECTIVE 2

A Child Friendly Environment

The Issue

The issue of play is not limited to the provision of play equipment. In fact studies compiled by Heseltine (1994) suggest that the provision of play equipment alone is not sufficient to meet the play needs of children.

Children interact with the whole neighbourhood. They are the most frequent users of the outdoors and spend approximately 40% of their playtime travelling from one place to another (Whewey & Millard, 1997).

Because of this two factors are important:

1. **Access/choice:** The diversity of environments within the neighbourhood and the available access to them are the most important factors for child development. "Children will play everywhere and with anything" (Colin Ward, 1978)
2. **Safety:** The safety of the environment for children.

Wicklow County Council recognise that the environment in which children live is an essential backdrop to play. In this regard Wicklow County Council will:

- Work towards the provision of a hierarchy of well maintained parks, urban woodlands, appropriate and adequate green areas/spaces
- Ensure the retention of the maximum possible features of the natural environment such as green spaces and woodlands including features such as trees and bushes
- Ensure the provision of a varied and interesting physical environment – different levels; spaces of different sizes; places to hide; trees and bushes; places that inspire mystery and imagination
- Ensure the following measures will be taken to ensure a safe environment: street calming; street closures; walls and driveways; grassy areas set back from the roads including small open spaces; a

footpath network around and through estates, linking into public open spaces; cul-de-sac layout

- Ensure parks and green spaces will welcome children and minimise prohibited/limited access areas
- Ensure that play/child planning input is made into new residential and commercial developments at concept stage
- Have regard to the fact that communities go through stages and their needs change over time

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OBJECTIVE 3

Playground Provision

The issue

The provision of equipped play areas is more of an issue now as the natural environment is becoming less accessible to children. There is a need for a greater focus on planning to meet the play needs of the rapidly expanding population and to ensure that access and play benefits are the main drivers of design. In this regard Wicklow County Council will:

- Ensure adequate resources and that these resources are used effectively
- Explore fully the potential for developing a number of skateboarding facilities within the county
- Aim to provide adequate and appropriate hierarchies of open spaces for play as recommended in National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) standards⁶
- Ensure all play facilities will be constructed and maintained to the appropriate European/Irish standard
- Ensure play areas will include enough space for equipment and general open space for games, tree planting and environmental enhancements.
- Ensure consultation will be carried out with children and community groups on the design, siting, layout and equipment selection of playgrounds.
- Ensure opportunities for environmental play in informal open spaces
- This policy will be incorporated within the County Development Plan, Local Area Plans,
- Facilitate the organisation of a range of events in council properties for children and young people to increase children's enjoyment of parks and open spaces and libraries.

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OBJECTIVE 4

Co-ordination and Partnership

⁶ "Six Acre Standard" National Playing Fields Association

The County Council will work with the Wicklow County Development Board towards the co-ordination of relevant stakeholders. In this regard Wicklow County Council will:

- Consult with children and their families
- Be proactive in working with communities and community groups, and all relevant stakeholders
- Encourage the development of partnerships between statutory providers and community groups in relation to the management of play facilities.
- Explore the possibility of maximising resources through the use of school premises and resources by the community outside school hours
- Work with the Wicklow County Childcare Committee to encourage and facilitate where possible the training of staff and volunteers working with children



OBJECTIVE 5

Social Inclusion and Play

The principle of social inclusion underpins this play policy. The policy will aim to promote equality of access and participation for all children. In this regard Wicklow County Council will:

- Ensure consideration will be given to rural issues regarding play provision in measures such as mobile play units
- Ensure consideration will be given to the needs of children with disabilities, from a minority ethnic background, or from a disadvantaged background
- Ensure all children will be respected and valued so that they can play free from exploitation, bullying, violence or discrimination.



This play policy will be incorporated into the County Development Plan 2004 – 2010. As the County Development Plan sets out the strategy for planning and sustainable development for the county, the principles and objectives contained within this policy will provide the required guidance on all issues regarding play provision and play opportunities for Wicklow County Council for the lifetime of the Development Plan.

APPENDIX 1

NATIONAL PLAYING FIELDS ASSOCIATION (NPFA)

CHILDREN'S PLAYING SPACE 0.8Ha/1000 population It is split between Equipped Children's Playspace (0.2Ha) and Casual Informal Playspace (0.6Ha)	
Equipped Play Space	An appropriately accessible, available and safe area designed and dedicated to facilitating the play, recreational and social interaction activities of children up to and including teenagers. All equipped playspaces are delineated by safety fencing and/or surfacing or some other means. Only the delineated areas count towards the standard.

	<p>The buffer zones surrounding equipped playspaces count towards the Informal Playspace standard</p> <p>Multi-use Games Areas (MUGA's) incorporating, for example, basketball and 5-a-side for informal use, that are normally associated with NEAP's, count towards the Equipped Children's Playspace Standard not Other Outdoor Sports Facilities</p>
<p>Informal Playspace</p> <p>0.6Ha/1000 population</p>	<p>Open space that is not laid out for defined, formal sport, recreation or playspace, but is accessible, available and safe for informal use by children and adults for such purposes. For example 'kick-about' areas and other informal open space within residential areas.</p> <p>The buffer zones surrounding equipped playspaces count toward this standard.</p> <p>It does not include land whose principal purpose is more passive recreation, for example, ornamental parks, and hence where frenetic activities are discouraged or prohibited.</p>

INSTALLATION, OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE STANDARD

All spaces should be installed, operated and maintained in accordance with the latest relevant European, NPFA and Irish Standards

The current standards are:
 European standards EN 1176 and EN 1177
 NPFA Six Acre Standard

The NPFA "Six Acre Standard 2001" suggests that 3 types of equipped Children's Playspace can be provided

LAPs (Local Areas for Play) are designed to provide low-key activities of children aged up to 6 close to their homes. These are small open spaces of approximately 0.04Ha (20mx20m) within housing areas and overlooked by nearby housing. However it is the Council's experience that it is very difficult to create usable spaces and at the same time avoid disturbance of nearby residents caused by the use of LAPs by children of all ages.

LEAPs (Local Equipped Areas for Play) are designed to provide equipment for children aged 4-8 or sometimes younger. LEAPs should be located such that they are easily and safely accessible to users. Ideally

this means that they should serve a catchment area within 5 minutes walk or 400m. They should be a minimum 400sq.m in size, include at least 5 pieces of equipment on safety surfacing and be surrounded by dog-proof safety open fencing. The distance between a LEAP and the nearest residential boundary should be a minimum 20m. Therefore a LEAP (0.04Ha) including buffer zone (0.46Ha) extends to a minimum 0.50Ha.

NEAPs (Neighbourhood Equipped Areas for Play) are designed to provide equipment mainly for children aged 8 upwards. NEAPs should be located such that they are easily and safely accessible to users. Ideally this means they should serve a catchment area within 15mins walk or 1km. They should be a minimum 1,000sq.m in size, include at least 8 pieces of equipment on safety surfacing (approx. 500sq.m) and a hard surfaced multi-purpose area (minimum 465sq.m) and surrounded by dog-proof, open safety fencing. The distance between the NEAP and the nearest residential boundary should be a minimum 30m. Therefore a NEAP (0.1Ha) including buffer zone (0.90Ha) extends to a minimum 1.00Ha.