

THE NATURE OF PLAY

South Dublin County Council
Play Policy 2025-2030



South Dublin County Council - Play Policy

September 2025

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MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR OF SDCC
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MESSAGE TO FOLLOW

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MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF SDCC
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MESSAGE TO FOLLOW

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Play is a fundamental human right and a vital part of childhood, essential to children's health, development, and well-being. In recent years, outdoor play among urban children has declined, driven by increased screen time and concerns around traffic and safety. This has contributed to reduced physical activity, rising childhood obesity, anxiety, and limited opportunities for social development. Reversing this trend requires deliberate planning and investment in accessible, inclusive, and engaging outdoor play environments. This Play Policy outlines SDCC's commitment to ensuring all children and young people across the County have access to high-quality, diverse play opportunities. Building on a decade of significant investment, which saw the number of public playgrounds grow from 9 to over 70, the policy sets a clear vision to embed play in the everyday fabric of life in South Dublin.

The policy sets out:

A vision for play that supports children's right to play freely, safely, and creatively, both within designated play areas and in public spaces across the county.

A spatial profile of South Dublin to ensure equitable distribution of play provision and address emerging needs in both established and growing communities.

Clear objectives and design principles that promote accessible, nature-based, and inclusive play environments, including best practices in materials, universal design, and safety.

Guidance for developers and planners to integrate play into residential developments, ensuring play is a core element of place-making.

A focus on engaging with children and young people, recognising their voices as central to shaping the spaces they grow up in.

An expanded understanding of play that goes beyond traditional playgrounds to include libraries, schools, streets, and natural landscapes and other spaces which includes the needs of teenagers.

This policy affirms SDCC's long-term commitment to building a play-friendly County where every child can thrive and recognises that teenagers have distinct play and recreational needs. It is committed to creating inclusive spaces where teenagers can feel welcome.

SDCC has adopted the Fields in Trust (FiT) model as a guiding framework for play provision to ensure a consistent, equitable, and evidence-based approach across the County. The FiT model provides clear benchmarks for the quantity, quality, and accessibility of play areas, helping assess local need and guide strategic investment in both existing and new developments.

By applying this model, SDCC can identify gaps in provision, promote balanced distribution of play opportunities, and ensure all children and young people, regardless of where they live, have access to safe, engaging, and inclusive spaces within a reasonable distance of their home.

Local Area for Play (LAP) is a small open space intended for very young children to play near their homes, ideally within 100 metres. A LAP should cover at least 100 square metres, which can be distributed along playable routes within a development.

Local Equipped Area for Play (LEAP) is a dedicated open space with play equipment for children playing independently or with adults. It should be safely accessible within 400 metres of every home, located centrally within developments, and free from major barriers like main roads. LEAPs offer varied, stimulating play experiences using equipment and natural features, and must provide at least 400 square metres.

Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play (NEAP) is a large open space designed mainly for older, more independent children, but also provides opportunities for younger children. It should be safely accessible within 1,000 metres of homes and cover at least 1,000 square metres. NEAPs offer a wider range of age-appropriate play and recreation, including more challenging equipment, space for group games, and seating and shelter for socialising.

While not part of the FiT standards SDCC will aim to have teenspaces within 1000 meters from homes.

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POLICY BACKGROUND

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

As stated on article 31 of the UNCRC recognizes every child's right to rest, leisure, and play, as well as their right to take part in cultural and artistic activities. It emphasizes the importance of allowing children the time and opportunity to engage in recreation appropriate for their age and development. Furthermore, it places a responsibility on governments to ensure these rights are upheld by promoting and supporting environments where children can freely participate in recreational life.



National Play Policy - Ready, Steady, Play

The policy outlines the significance of play in children's development and offers a structured approach to support it. It emphasizes involving young people in shaping their play experiences and ensuring that play spaces are accessible to all children, regardless of age or ability. The document advocates for collaboration between the government and local communities to enhance play environments.

Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028

This policy reinforces five core outcomes aimed at supporting children to be active, healthy, safe, economically secure, and engaged in their communities. Importantly, the framework acknowledges the critical role of play in children's physical and mental development, and it commits to enhancing opportunities for play, particularly through outdoor and inclusive environments.

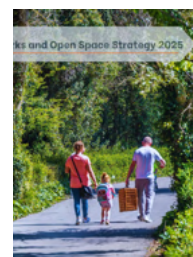
South County Dublin Development Plan 2022-2028

The County-wide development plan is in place for the years 2022-2028 and the purpose of the document is to provide core strategic approaches to climate change, cultural heritage, health, built environments, sustainability, energy and overall green infrastructure development in relation to the continued provision of natural play.



Parks & Open Space Strategy 2025-2029

This strategic document sets out how the Council plans to protect, manage, provide and enhance public parks and open spaces to meet current and future needs. It highlights the value of parks for communities and nature, assesses existing spaces, and sets goals for sports, recreation, and equitable access.



Fields in Trust (FiT) standards

South Dublin County Council has adopted the Fields in Trust (FiT) model as a guiding framework for play provision to ensure a consistent, equitable, and evidence-based approach to planning and delivering play spaces across the County. The FiT model offers clear benchmarks for the quantity, quality, and accessibility of play areas, helping to assess local need and guide strategic investment in both existing and new developments.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



SDCC envisions a County where all children have access to safe high-quality playspaces close to home that are inclusive, nature-connected and supportive of their health, happiness and wellbeing.



SCOPE

This Play Policy outlines South Dublin County Council's commitment to promoting, protecting, and enhancing the right of all children and young people to play freely within the county. It recognises play as a fundamental part of childhood, essential for the healthy development, wellbeing, and social inclusion of children. The policy recognises that play happens in many different forms, from traditional playground equipment to informal, natural, and incidental opportunities in parks and open spaces.

The scope of this policy extends to all children and young people from birth up to 18 years of age. It acknowledges the diversity of needs within the county's population, including children with disabilities, children from minority backgrounds, and those living in disadvantaged areas.

This policy establishes a framework for all stakeholders engaged in the planning, development, management, and maintenance of play spaces in South Dublin. It sets out a clear set of guiding principles designed to ensure that play provision across the county is inclusive, accessible, safe, sustainable, and reflective of the diverse needs of the community.

Places where children play serve as vital social spaces, not only for children and young people, but also for parents, carers, and the broader community. These environments should encourage children and young people to spend time actively, connect with nature, take manageable risks in a setting where they feel secure, and, importantly, engage in play.

Whether located in rural or urban areas, such spaces can include residential streets, town squares, parks, playgrounds, teenspaces, woods or open areas in housing estates. In this context, "play" is understood as freely chosen and self-directed; therefore, organized sports or structured recreational activities with formal rules and supervision fall outside the scope of this policy. This policy will help those involved in designing places for play to make play a top priority. Our aim is to create a playable county, where play opportunities happen everywhere and are not restricted to the traditional playground form with a strong focus on child friendly design for the public realm.

A key part of implementing the policy was carrying out a full audit of existing playspaces in the county. This audit assessed:

- The location, accessibility, and condition of play facilities;
- The age groups it currently catered for;
- The coverage and number of pieces of equipment in each playspace.

Findings from the audit will support the development of a targeted action plan to improve and expand play opportunities across the county. Ongoing monitoring will ensure that play provision remains responsive to the changing needs of South Dublin's growing population.

WHAT IS PLAY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Play is a fundamental and essential part of childhood. It is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated activity that engages children both physically and mentally. Children play because they want to, not because they are told to. This freedom allows them to explore their social, physical, and imaginary worlds in meaningful ways. Through play, children develop a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter, learning to adapt, solve problems, and express themselves creatively.

Play is central to children's happiness, health, and development. It supports the growth of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills and helps children make sense of the world around them. Far from being a trivial pastime, play is recognised internationally as a human right. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms every child's right to rest, leisure, and age-appropriate play and recreational activities.

Research shows that play contributes directly to **physical health** by promoting movement and active engagement, which are essential in preventing obesity and related health issues. Studies have linked a decline in physical play to increased screen time and sedentary behaviour among children. Conversely, regular outdoor and active play helps children meet daily physical activity recommendations and supports overall wellbeing.

The **mental health** benefits of play are equally important. Play provides a safe space for children to process emotions, reduce stress, and build resilience. Children who engage in play-based activities are less likely to experience anxiety and depression. Play allows them to express complex feelings, practice coping strategies, and develop emotional regulation. It is particularly valuable for children who may have difficulty verbalising their thoughts, offering an alternative way to communicate and be understood.

Social development is also deeply rooted in play. Through play, children learn to share, **cooperate, negotiate, resolve conflicts**, and take on different roles. These early social experiences form the basis for empathy, leadership, and self-advocacy. **Imaginative and pretend play** allows children to explore relationships, rehearse real-life situations, and safely confront fears.

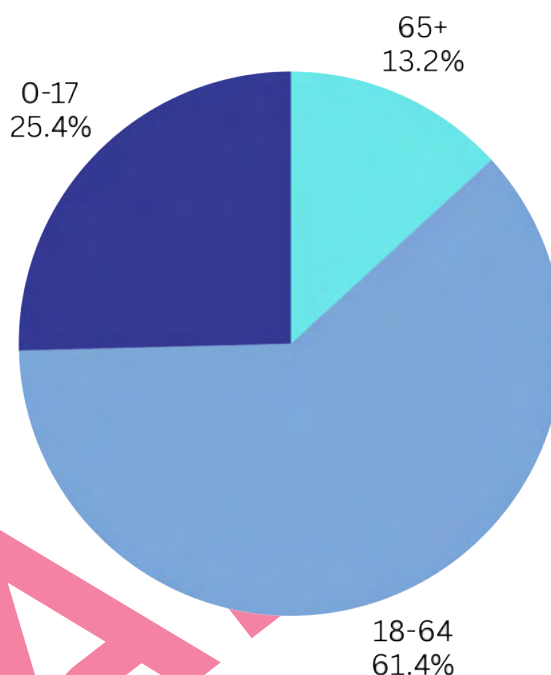
Educational theorists have long emphasised the role of play in **cognitive development**. Play enables children to construct knowledge through exploration and discovery. It encourages curiosity, **problem-solving, and flexible thinking**. Unstructured, child-led play nurtures decision-making skills and supports academic readiness by enhancing attention span, motivation, and learning behaviours. Research highlights the powerful connection between play and learning, suggesting that play is not separate from education but central to it. Play is not a luxury. It is a biological, psychological, and social necessity. It is how children learn about themselves and the world, how they form relationships, how they grow. Play is the language of children and the foundation of healthy development across all areas of life. Quality play experiences contribute significantly to positive social, mental, and emotional well-being, allowing children to explore and process a variety of emotions within a secure environment. Play enhances and reinforces learning acquired in both formal education and informal settings, and it is widely recognized as essential to children's cognitive growth and focus. It is important for stakeholders to ensure that children have access to a healthy mix of both organized and free play during their free time.

“Play is freely chosen;
personally directed,
intrinsically motivated
behaviour that actively engages
the child...”



PROFILE OF SOUTH DUBLIN COUNTY

South Dublin County has experienced continued population growth over the last 10-20 years. While the rate of growth reduced between 2002 and 2006, the years thereafter have contributed to an overall increase of 24.94% (+62,240 persons) between 2002 and 2022. According to the 2022 census, the County has a population of 301,075 people living in 100,364 homes. This represents a just over 8% population increase from the previous census in 2016. This is roughly equal to the national population increase of just under 8%, and about equivalent with the level of growth in Dublin City. According to the 2022 census 76,456 persons are under 18 years old, this represents 25.4% of the total population, making South Dublin County one of the youngest Counties in Ireland.



USERS OF THE PLAY POLICY

The play policy has been prepared for:

Local communities : To help residents and community groups understand the Council's approach to play, our goals for play provision, and the level of facilities and opportunities they can expect.

Council staff : To guide those involved in planning, designing, maintaining, and promoting play spaces so they reflect best practice and meet diverse needs.

Private sector : To provide clarity for developers, designers, and service providers on the Council's expectations for play provision in new developments and projects.

**“Children need the
freedom and time to play,
Play is not a luxury, Play is a
necessity.”**

Kay Redfield Jamison



OBJECTIVES

1. Promote the health and wellbeing of children, recognising play as essential to physical, mental, and social development, and ensuring that all play opportunities support happier, healthier childhoods.
2. Design playspaces that are fun, engaging, and full of opportunities for creativity, discovery, and active play.
3. Champion inclusion and accessibility, ensuring that every child, regardless of ability can enjoy the benefits of play.
4. Bring play close to home, providing safe and stimulating play facilities within walking distance of residential areas.
5. Connect children with nature, creating natural play areas to give children the opportunity to connect and engage with nature
6. Work hand-in-hand with local communities, listening, collaborating, and co-creating play spaces that reflect local needs.
7. Set a clear standard for developers, providing practical guidance to ensure that all new developments deliver high-quality, sustainable play opportunities.

CHAPTER 2

GUIDING PRINCIPLES



LAPS, LEAPS, NEAPS

South Dublin County Council has developed accessibility guidelines based on the Fields in Trust (FIT) standard. These guidelines are helpful for developers planning new playspaces, as well as for council staff assessing play provision coverage.

Local Area for Play (LAP):

A small area of open space designed and primarily laid out for very young children to play close to where they live interwoven within the development. Every home should have access to play space within **100 metres walking distance from their home**. It should provide a minimum area of 100 square metres, but this can be distributed within a development as part of playable routes.

Local Equipped Area for Play (LEAP):

An area of open space specifically designed and laid out with features including equipment for children who are beginning to play independently with friends, without accompanying adults, and for adults with young children. Spaces should be reached safely by children and be within **400 metres walking distance from every home**. They should be located at the heart of the site and not on the outskirts of the development, with no significant barriers such as main roads. Spaces should provide for informal recreation and varied, stimulating and challenging play experiences. For example, equipment and natural landscape features which cater for different play types that test children's physical capabilities as well as provide imaginative, social and sensory play with natural materials such as sand and water, or other activities. It should provide a minimum of 400 square meters.

Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play (NEAP):

This is an area of open space specifically designed, laid out and equipped mainly for older more independent children who go further from home but potentially with play opportunities for younger children and siblings as well. Spaces should be reached safely by children and young people and be within **1000 metres walking distance from home**. It should have a minimum area of 1000 square metres. Spaces should provide a wide range of play experiences than a LEAP with age appropriate play and informal recreational experiences for children and young people. There are likely to be more challenging items of equipment and features that meet the needs of older children and young people and sufficient space to play larger group games and seating and shelter to enable young people to socialise with their friends.

HIERARCHY AND DISTRIBUTION OF PLAY FACILITIES

The table below shows the hierarchy and access standards for Play areas, ensuring a variety of accessible spaces to meet the needs of the County's residents.

Play Area Type	NEAPS (Neighbourhood Equipped Areas for Play)	LEAPS (Local Equipped Areas for Play)	LAPs (Local Areas for Play)
Type of Public open space	Regional Park	Neighbourhood Park	Local Park
Distance from dwellings (FiT guidelines)	1000 m	400 m	100 m
Total Play Items	Minimum 20	10-20	5-10
Age Group	Up to 12 years old	Up to 12 years old	0-5 years old
Minimum Space (FIT Guidelines)	1000m ²	400 m ²	100m ²

EXAMPLES IN SOUTH DUBLIN COUNTY



NEAP: Grifteen Valley Park



LEAP: Willsbrook Park



LAP: Avonbeg Park



NEAP: Rathfarnham Castle Park



LEAP: Tandy's Lane Park



LAP: Clonburris

DEVELOPER'S GUIDE



The minimum requirements for play provision in new developments are set out in the County Development Plan.

South Dublin County Council (SDCC) recognises the practical and logistical challenges that developers may encounter when incorporating play into the design of new residential areas. However, we also firmly believe that high-quality play opportunities are a vital part of building healthy, vibrant, and inclusive communities.

To support this, we have developed this dedicated chapter to provide clear guidance on how the core principles outlined in our Play Policy can be translated into practice within new developments. This chapter is specifically aimed at developers, planners, architects, and other key stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of residential environments. This chapter provides developers with the tools and direction needed to go beyond minimum requirements, helping to shape neighbourhoods where children are visible, valued, and free to play.

PLAY PROVISION IN NEW DEVELOPMENTS

In order to achieve the optimal standards for play provision and to better understand the play provision in relation to development scale, the following gives a guide on the mix of different play spaces that should provide for different sizes of development and therefore different quantities of play space.

10 to 20 dwellings: should provide minimum 1 Local area of Play (LAP)

Between 21 and 100 dwellings: should provide minimum 2 Local Areas of Play (LAPs), or 1 Local Equipped Areas of Play (LEAPS) and informal play spaces;

Between 100 and 500 dwellings: should provide minimum 1 Local Area of Play (LAPs), 2 Local Equipped areas of play (LEAPs) and informal play spaces.

Of more than 500 dwellings: should provide all types of playspaces all ages, 1 Neighbourhood Equipped area of play (NEAP), 2 Local Equipped area of play (LEAP), 2 Local Area of Play (LAP)

If the developer is unable to provide play facilities within the development site, in accordance with policies in the County Development Plan, they may be permitted to provide the equipment in another park or open space which would serve the development.

PLAYSPACES GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

To deliver the highest quality play spaces, South Dublin County Council has developed 6 key requirements for playspace provision. These principles guide the development of all new playgrounds and playspaces, ensuring a cohesive and consistent approach that supports children's health, creativity, and connection with nature.

1. Diverse Types of Play

Provision should support the broad range of play types that children naturally engage in. This includes:

Physical play: climbing, running, jumping, balancing, pushing.

Imaginative play: role play, storytelling, fantasy. Free play.

Social play: group games, cooperative play.

Creative play: building, manipulating materials.

Sensory play: engaging with textures, water, sound, light, hidden spaces, quiet spaces.

Constructive play: digging, collecting, nature interaction, making.

Risky play: climbing heights, moving objects, navigating uneven terrain.

2. Age-Appropriate playspaces

Include play equipment, play opportunities and nature-based play that caters for children in different age groups.

0-5 (sensory play, sand/water play, imaginative play)

6-12 (physical play, social play, risky play)

13+ (hang out spaces, places for group activities, opportunities for physical activity)

3. Accessible and inclusive design: Accessible design ensures that play environments can be enjoyed by children of all abilities, including those with physical disabilities, ADHD, and other sensory considerations. Our approach draws on the 7 principles of universal design, ensuring equitable use, flexibility, and intuitive play experiences. We trial equipment with wheelchair users and others with varying needs, adapting designs based on feedback to remove barriers and enhance participation. We research accessible equipment in order to offer our residents a wide choice of experiences. This ensures spaces are not only physically accessible but also engaging, stimulating, and supportive for a wide range of abilities.

For more information refer to Chapter 5.

4. Developing Natural Play

Natural play creates simple play opportunities within natural environments, viewing the outdoors as a limitless space for exploration and adventure. SDCC's natural play spaces encourage:

Direct contact with natural elements such as plants, water, earth, and sand.

Unstructured, varied play opportunities that encourage imagination and movement. Children are encouraged to run, jump, roll, climb and express themselves physically.

Greater engagement with the environment, supporting both physical and mental wellbeing.

Designs often incorporate features like rocks, logs, and natural planting, willow structures, shady areas, all making each site unique and rooted in its local landscape.

Encourage child-led play.

This approach shifts the focus from equipment to environment, ensuring that spaces themselves spark curiosity and exploration. Considering the existing site characteristics in the design helps this approach.

Where possible adequate space for active play should be provided to allow children to run freely.

5. Using Sustainable Materials

SDCC prioritises sustainable and natural materials to ensure both environmental responsibility and play value. We encourage use of locally sourced materials.

For equipment we prefer Robinia timber for its high durability and natural aesthetic.

We choose locally sourced rocks, felled logs, and native planting to reflect the surrounding landscape.

For safety surfacing our preferences include Sand, woodchip, grit, wildflower meadows and grass.

We try to avoid plastics and wetpour in favour of greener alternatives. We encourage the use of recycled materials.

These materials not only mimic natural environments but also create cost-effective, vandal-resistant play spaces with a low environmental footprint.

6. Signage

Signage can play an important role in providing information to users and for the purposes of reporting accidents and damage. SDCC aim to keep text to a minimum and use pictograms that are easily understood by playground users. This allows non-English speakers and people with intellectual or reading difficulties to understand the signage.

The important information to impart is:

- Available equipment and its age appropriateness.
- Rules especially regarding smoking/drinking alcohol and bringing dogs into a play area.
- SDCC have committed to including a Young lungs at Play symbol on all play areas.
- Emergency contact number and SDCC contact info.
- Text fonts/size as per National Disability Authority Guidelines.
-

In the case of an accident, the clarity of the signage may become an important issue. The sign should clearly identify each piece of equipment and the parent should know if it is suitable for their child.

Contact SDCC for new logo/branding requirements.



INTEGRATION WITH OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES

Developers should consider incorporate existing and proposed landscape features into the design of play spaces to provide nature-rich play experiences. This may include incorporating the following:

Meadows and grasslands: for unstructured play, games, exploration, and seasonal nature experiences.



Trees and woodlands: to create natural play structures, shaded areas, and habitats that support wildlife interaction.



Streams, ponds, puddles and Sustainable Urban Drainage features (SUDS): to allow safe, interactive water play and observation of nature while also serving ecological and drainage functions.



Hills and mounds: to provide opportunities for climbing, rolling, balancing, and imaginative play.

Other landscape features: such as rocks, logs, and native planting, which can serve as informal play elements, sensory exploration, and environmental learning opportunities.

CHAPTER 4

SDCC PLAY PROVISION



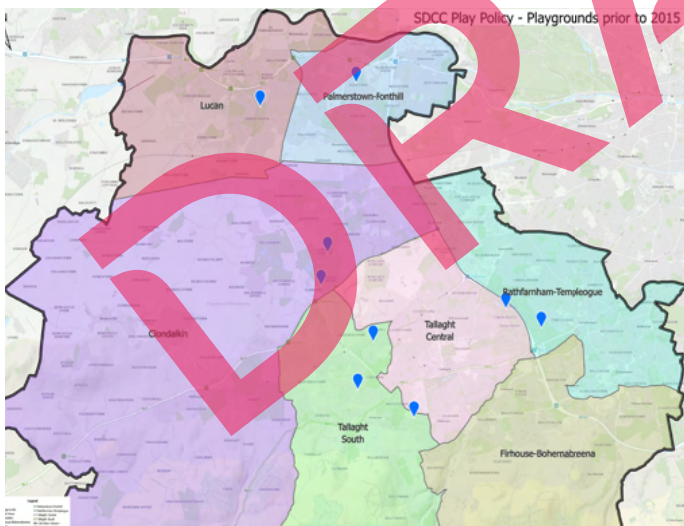
PLAYGROUND CONSTRUCTION PROGRAMME

The Playspace programme in South Dublin County Council from 2014 to 2019 was proposed as a five-year programme aimed to address the deficiency of play opportunities across the county. It was an innovative programme based on encouraging children back into the outdoors to engage in active, imaginative, constructive and social play. The playspaces were designed to adapt to the place where they were installed. They focus on creating appropriate settings for play (rather than equipment for children to play with); are located closer to where children live, with the emphasis on natural playspaces; which focus on the type of play that is most important to younger children.

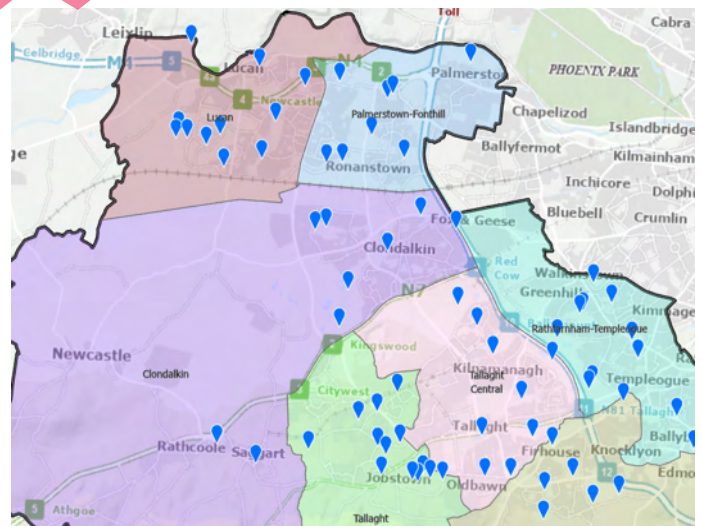
Before the launch of the Playspace Programme in 2014, South Dublin County had a notable deficiency in playspaces. Provision was largely limited to traditional playgrounds dominated by brightly colored equipment and rubber play surfacing. The focus was on structured play rather than free play and natural play.

The playspace programme aimed to provide opportunities to play rather than just equipment for play.

Below is a comparison map showing play provision before the launch of the playground construction programme and the provision available today. Since the last Play Policy- Space for Play, published in 2006, when there were only nine playgrounds in the County, SDCC has made significant progress. Today, the Council has more than 70 playspaces across the County.



Existing Playspaces in 2015



Existing Playspaces

The Council's commitment to play is demonstrated by an investment of €6.25 million in the past decade, delivering new playspaces, upgrading existing playgrounds, developing regional playgrounds, and creating teenspaces.

EXISTING PLAY PROVISION

As part of an assessment of the play infrastructure in the South Dublin County Council area, we conducted a comprehensive field survey of all public playspaces within the council boundary. We included all playspaces that are accessible to the public, including playspaces that have been built by SDCC or playspaces built by developers on public open spaces in housing estates. Each playspace was visited, mapped, and assessed in terms of location, facilities, condition, age and age groups it caters for.

The playspaces were divided into 3 different categories based on the number of items of equipment as follows:

NEAPs: minimum 20 pieces of equipment

LEAPs: between 10 to 20 pieces of equipment

LAPs: less than 10 pieces of equipment

To better understand spatial accessibility and service coverage, we developed a geographic analysis using buffer zones of 400 metres of LEAPs and 1000 metres of NEAPs. LAPs are marked with a dot without a buffer zone. These buffers represent short and moderate walking distances, respectively, and were used to evaluate how well the existing network serves the local community. Playspaces located within apartment complexes or in areas not accessible to the general public were excluded from our analysis, as they do not contribute to broader community access; however, they were still considered as local play provision for the residents of those complexes.

The mapping allows us to see areas with good play provision as well as identifying potential service gaps and opportunities for future improvement.

We have identified LEAPs that with additional pieces of equipment could be upgraded to NEAPs. The majority of playspaces are LAPs, and we identify a few that could benefit from more equipment to be upgraded to LEAPs.



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Legend

- NEAP (1000m buffer)
- LEAP (400m buffer)
- LAP
- 400m Buffer
- 1000m Buffer
- Non residential areas
- County Boundary

TEENSPACES

To better understand the provision of teenspaces we included a 1km buffer around each teenspace in South Dublin. There are currently 12 Teenspaces with 8 more planned. SDCC believe 1km to be a reasonable distance for teenagers to travel be it on foot, by bicycle or by any other means. Below is a list of teenspaces existing in the county and the ones planned for the near future.

Existing Teenspaces

- Avonbeg
- Bancroft Park
- Ballycragh Park
- Carrigmore Park
- Collinstown Park
- Graydon
- Griffeen Valley Park
- Jobstown Park
- Kingswood
- Quarryvale Park
- Tandy's Lane Park
- Tymon Park (Limekiln)

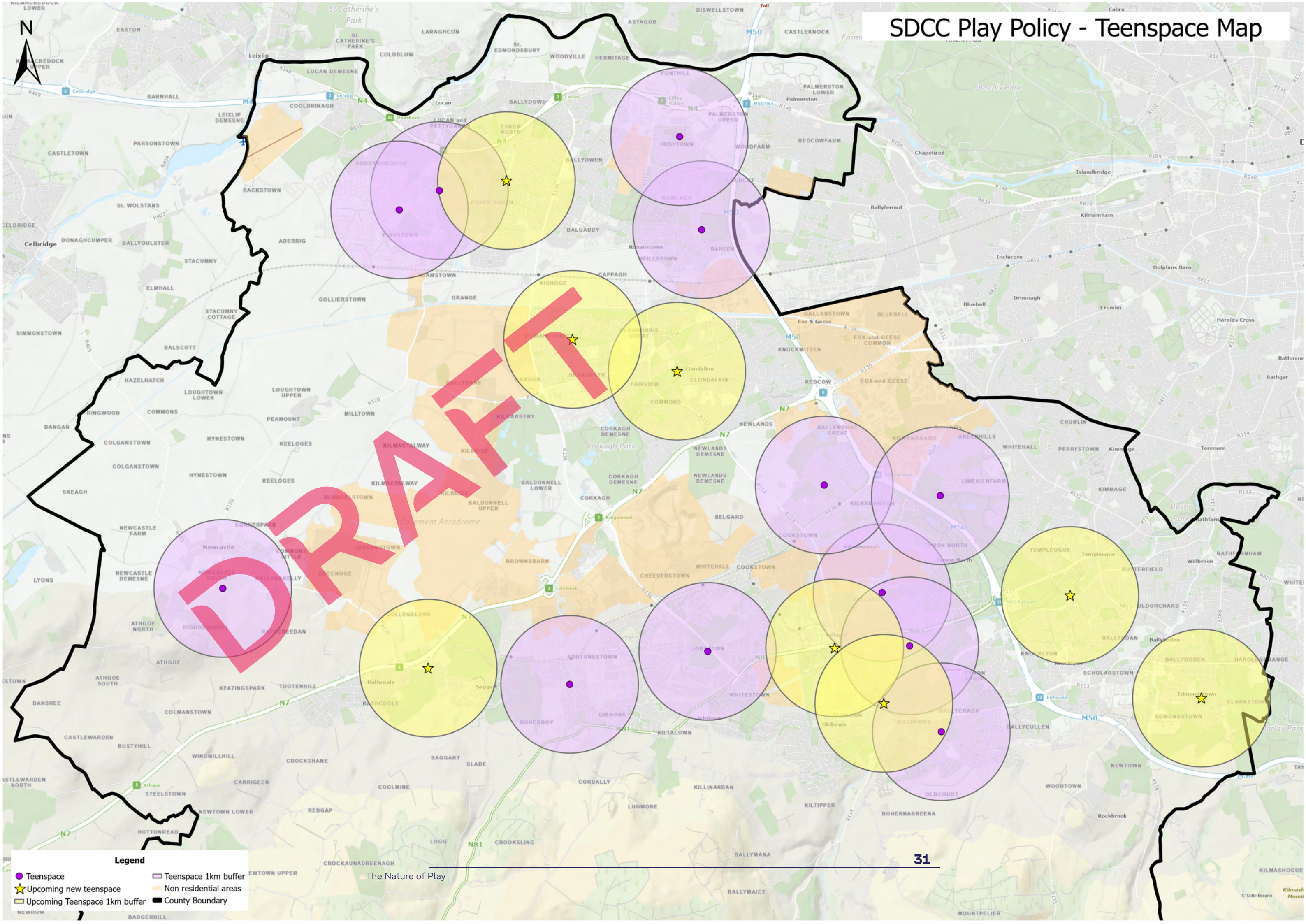
Upcoming Teenspaces

- Clondalkin Park
- Dodder Valley Park (East)
- Dodder Valley Park (West)
- Griffeen Valley Skatepark
- Rathcoole Park
- Sean Walsh Park
- St Cuthbert's Park
- Whitechurch Park

The buffer analysis enables us to pinpoint gaps in the current provision and assess the extent to which different areas are being served. Overall, there is a strong coverage of teenspaces across South Dublin County, ensuring that many young people have access to dedicated facilities. However, our findings also highlight specific locations where provision is limited or absent, suggesting clear opportunities for targeted investment and further development to improve equity of access.



SDCC Play Policy - Teenspace Map



COMMUNITY LED DESIGN

SDCC will continue to work closely with local communities to ensure playspaces reflect their character, needs, and aspirations. This often involves workshops, school visits, play days, and public consultations, along with direct engagement with children, parents, special needs advocates, and community groups. Such collaboration fosters a sense of ownership and ensures spaces feel welcoming, vibrant, and relevant to the people who use them.

CONSULTATION WITH CHILDREN

It is important that children are consulted on the design of playspaces as they are the primary users, and their input helps to create spaces that truly meet their needs, interests, and abilities. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, states that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

SDCC are committed to consulting with children and young people in the design and improvement of playspaces. Consultation can be carried out through a variety of methods to suit different ages and abilities and may be different in different communities. It can include including meetings with residents, workshops, school visits, play days, questionnaires, drawings, and model-making activities.

Younger children often express their ideas most clearly through drawings and creative play, while older children respond well to conversations and discussions.

Consultation ensures that all voices, including those of children with additional needs, are heard and reflected in the playspaces we deliver.

We have also trialled equipment with wheelchair users to ensure accessibility, and invited children to share their views directly through presentations.

Engagement can also take place through youth advocates, Comhairle na nÓg, and Foróige, with local councillors, disability advocates, parents and carers sometimes representing the wishes of children in their communities.







CONSULTATION WITH TEENAGERS

In 2018, South Dublin County Council began a county-wide consultation process with teenagers to better understand their needs. The results of this initial survey showed that the main request from young people was to have somewhere to meet up and hang out with friends. Other frequently mentioned ideas included access to play facilities such as swings, climbing equipment and zip lines, as well as free Wi-Fi, shelter, a place to play music, toilets and water fountains.

During the wider playspace programme consultations, SDCC often heard from teenagers who reported feeling harassed by adults wherever they went. Many felt unwelcome in town centres, outside shops, in playgrounds, parks and even while sitting and chatting in their own housing estates. They explained that fast-food restaurants and shopping centres had become popular destinations because they provided a place to go, opportunities to see and be seen, and somewhere to gather with friends. SDCC also recognised a broader trend that children growing up in Ireland today are less physically active than previous generations. Teenagers tend to prefer informal and self-directed activities over structured sports, and this is an important factor when planning facilities for them.

Research carried out alongside the initial survey confirmed these findings. Sports clubs across the county reported that they had space for more teenage members, and community centres offering activities such as dance or drama were not oversubscribed. This reinforced the message from the consultations that more organised activities were not what teenagers wanted. Instead, three key needs emerged: a place to hang out with friends that offered seating and something to do; a space for group activity and fun through equipment such as basket swings and rotating disks; and opportunities for physical activity through facilities like fitness areas, skateparks or ball courts, distinct from organised sports.

In schools, students complete surveys on their iPads, allowing questions to be answered promptly and providing clear explanations of the aims of the teenspace programme. In-person consultations help ensure that each teenspace is tailored to the needs of its local area.

An interim survey on the teenspace programme was carried out in 2022 and promoted through SDCC's social media channels. This invited young people to share their experiences of existing teenspaces, suggest future locations and highlight the elements they would like to see included. The strong response to this survey has helped identify the priorities of the teenage population and has allowed SDCC to continue implementing these much-needed spaces in the right locations.





**“Play is our brain’s
favorite way of
learning.”** Diane Ackerman

CHAPTER 5

ACCESSIBLE AND EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLAY



The 2005 Disability Act in Ireland aims to ensure that all those who are disabled have the same access to public amenities, this includes parks, playspaces and public open spaces. Inclusive design goes far beyond wheelchair ramps or surfacing, though these are critical. In fact, the vast majority of childhood disabilities are not physical. In Ireland, of every 1,000 children under 18 years old, approximately 108 will have a disability, this includes a wide range of conditions, not just physical disabilities, but also cognitive, communicative, sensory, and emotional needs. An inclusive play space must recognise and respond to this wide spectrum of needs.

A successful playspace should provide disabled children and young people with the same quality and range of play experiences as those available to their non-disabled peers, while acknowledging that not all equipment can be fully accessible to everyone. Applying the principles of universal design helps remove barriers by addressing the widest possible range of users from the outset. The 7 principles of universal design are the following:

PRINCIPLE	BUILT ENVIRONMENT EXAMPLE
1. Equitable Use: How well does the building, place or project appear to be fully usable, and appealing to a wide range of diverse users with differing ages and personal capabilities?	Is there the same means of use for all users whenever possible, avoiding segregation – for example play equipment that everyone regardless of age, size, ability or disability can use with ease?
2. Flexibility in Use: How well does the design readily adapt or offer multiple methods of use to enable a wide range of individual preferences and abilities?	Does the Playground provide choice in methods of use, for example play equipment and the surrounding spaces designed to accommodate children of different heights, those with mobility difficulties, those who lip-read & those with visual difficulties?
3. Simple and Intuitive Use: How well does the design make it simple for diverse users to understand the important features of the building, place or project?	For example, is it easy to use the Playground & the play equipment for the first time?
4. Perceptible Information: (Sensory abilities, e.g. vision, hearing, touch). How well does the design offer multiple use options for people, especially those with sensory limitations at any age and including the use of specialty equipment or strategies?	For example, does the use of colour and materials provide visual contrast and/or tactile information to allow all children & adults regardless of age, size, ability or disability to navigate the Playground with ease?
5. Tolerance for Error: (Features that promote safe use and reduce risk). How well does the design prompt or assist the user to minimize hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintentional interactions?	For example, is the play equipment designed with easy access, well-designed handrails and good use of materials, finishes and colours?
6. Low Physical Effort: How well does the design enable all users, including those with limited strength and stamina, to have a comfortable and effective user experience?	For example, is the various play equipment provided easy to use for all children & adults regardless of age, size, ability or disability?
7. Size and Space for Approach and Use: (Efficient access and use for all user sizes) How well does the design enable users of diverse size, (including people who may use specialty equipment) to use the building, place or project?	For example, are the spaces in the Playground designed with sufficient dimensions to allow all children & adults regardless of age, size, ability or disability to circulate and use the Playground with ease?

ACCESSIBLE EQUIPMENT

There are a number of items of accessible equipment that are often popular with all children, however equipment which is specially designed for disabled children can encourage segregation so should be used with care. Examples of accessible and inclusive equipment that we use in our playspaces are:

Accessible swings: this includes swings with harnesses, different seats for children of different abilities or basket swings that can accommodate multiple people at the same time. This allows children with additional needs to use the equipment the same way as their friends.



Double with Slide: This allows 2 people to use at once, this will benefit children that might need more time to go down or want to be accompanied by their parents.



Accessible Carousel: This equipment is great for group play and coordination, children with disabilities can take advantage of the same type of play as non-disabled children. This equipment has enough space to accommodate a child in a wheelchair. Units with good bearings improve ease of use.



Accessible Trampoline: This equipment can bear the weight of a child's wheelchair, and due to the way it is designed and built, a child in a wheelchair can use it independently. Children of different abilities can all use this equipment together.



Spinning Disks- bowls-saucers:

These come in many different designs. The spinning helps children of all abilities to develop their balance and are particularly enjoyed by children in need of certain sensory experiences. While some children may need to be assisted into the equipment it is enjoyed in the same way by all children.



Sand tables: Can be provided at different heights and can be accessed by children of different ages and abilities. Sand is also very useful for constructive play.

We have developed board walks into sand pits for wheelchairs to be able to reach it.



Imaginative play: This type of play involves role play, storytelling, fantasy and other activities where children use their imaginations to invent scenarios or act out stories. Especially important for younger children. Impacts on how our brains are formed and influences later health.

Include equipment like play houses, shops, tables, stones, sculptures. This will promote their imagination. Example: In the first picture, by providing a simple table, kids used their imagination in different ways, for some they were in a spaceship for others in a kitchen. By providing equipment like this children can create their own stories.



AUTISM FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENTS

For neurodivergent children, especially those with autism, traditional play environments can sometimes be overwhelming or difficult to navigate. Sensory-friendly play spaces offer opportunities for exploration and regulation. Autism friendly environments include:

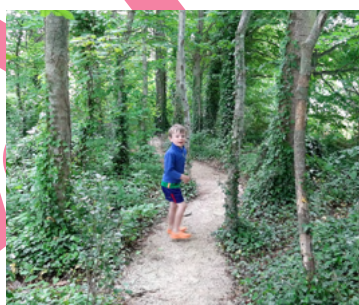
Sensory/Tactile elements: Children may require sensory rich environments and sensory stimulation. Sand, water or textured surfaces provide a great sensory experience for all children.



Mounds: For some autistic children, being above the action creates a buffer from sensory overload, while still allowing them to observe and feel part of the environment.



Quiet zones: Not all play needs to be loud, it is important to provide places with calmer environments, this could be a seating area with shade, tunnels, hideaways or incorporate wood areas into the play space. Some children may require quiet spaces with little activity to reduce their stress levels.



Contact with Nature: Contact with nature provides important benefits for children with autism. Natural play spaces with trees, plants, sand and water can offer calming sensory experiences, reduce stress and encourage imaginative play. These spaces also give children chances to explore and build confidence at their own pace.



Removing the rules: Children with autism often engage with the world in unique ways, strict rules in play (e.g., “Use the slide only this way” or “No spinning”) can be overwhelming and limit their freedom and unintentionally exclude them from fully participating. The rules of a playground may exclude some children so we should try to remove as many as possible. Parents worry about how their child's behaviour may be perceived if they break these rules/conventions. The less rules and more free play the better. By removing rigid constraints, we allow autistic children to express themselves authentically and explore in ways that are meaningful to them.

COMMUNICATION BOARDS

A communication board is a visual tool designed to help children express themselves using symbols, pictures, or words. It's a way to make play more inclusive, especially for children who are non-verbal, have speech or language difficulties, or use alternative forms of communication. All playspaces should include a communication board, below are the general requirements.

Communication board design and production guidance:

Boards are all 400mm in height and range from 1500mm to 1200mm in width.

They are aluminium sign with rails on the back and mil finish frame all around, and are printed and over laminated. They are hung on steel posts via brackets.

All text on the artwork needs to be kept approx. 25mm from the edge to allow for the frame.

Pictures should be a minimum of 2in² in size with the exception of the letters/numbers, which can be smaller to fit the display. The images should be presented in a grid with space between them. The size of the display will be determined by the number of pictures on it. The pictures should be big enough that the images are clear and the font legible.

The font should be a minimum of size 14-16 once printed (size 16-24 for people with a vision impairment) and should be a Sans Serif font (e.g. Arial, Helvetica, Gill Sans, Verdana, Tahoma, Avante, Garde and Futura – Arial is probably the most widely used). For the colour symbols, it is recommended that black font should be used on the coloured boxes – white font on a coloured background is harder to read.

Both Irish and English are being used, both pieces of text should be the same size, regardless of the length. I have put the English above the picture and the Irish below.

The pictures are colour-coded as provided. This is a specific system of language-coding – each colour is associated with a particular part of sentence structuring and should be printed exactly as shown below without changes to the colour or order provided.

The background of the display board should be white.

The structure of the display should be as presented as provided below – letters/numbers on the left, picture symbols in the middle and photos of the specific play equipment to the right.



CHAPTER 6

PLAY OUTSIDE THE PLAYGROUND



PLAYFUL STREETS

The Playful Streets Pilot, led by South Dublin County Council in collaboration with A Playful City, transformed residential streets into temporary play zones by restricting vehicle access for short periods. The initiative unfolded across several phases in 2024, beginning with community outreach and culminating in a series of vibrant street events, including an Open Day and themed pilot days. These events featured play equipment, workshops, and community-led activities, attracting hundreds of participants and fostering spontaneous outdoor play. The programme was designed to be low-cost, inclusive, and easy to replicate, with strong visual branding and a communications strategy that helped build momentum and visibility.

Feedback from both residents and council staff was overwhelmingly positive. Surveys revealed that participants felt safer, more connected, and more physically active during Playful Street events. Many families met neighbors for the first time, and children, especially those with additional needs, benefited from the freedom to play outdoors.

The initiative was praised for its capacity-building impact, with strong interest in continuing and expanding the scheme into 2025. Ultimately, the pilot not only brought joy to communities but also laid the groundwork for more sustainable, community-led urban play initiatives across the county.



CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION



Play is essential to the health, wellbeing, and development of children and young people growing up in our communities. This Play Policy sets out South Dublin County Council's vision and commitment to providing safe, inclusive, and engaging play opportunities that support healthier childhoods and stronger communities.

While effective delivery will require cooperation across departments, including Public Realm, Housing, Community, and Planning, the primary focus of this policy is to establish clear requirements and best practice for play. The policy also provides guidance to developers on play requirements in new developments, ensuring that play opportunities are integrated into new communities from the outset.

The policy defines the quantity and quality standards expected for play provision. It also introduces a method for assessing provision across the county, using GIS mapping to identify areas where additional play is required and it advises on accessible play provision.

A strong emphasis is placed on community engagement, ensuring that new and upgraded play facilities reflect the needs and priorities of local people. The Council's commitment to play has already been underlined by a capital investment of €6.25 million over the past ten years, delivering new playspaces, upgraded playgrounds, regional play facilities, and dedicated teen spaces across the county.

Next Steps

The next stage of this policy will focus on:

- Analysing mapping data to identify where there are deficits in play provision.
- Engaging with communities to establish local demand and priorities.
- Developing a clear plan for the delivery of new play facilities where both a need and a demand have been identified.
- Using this information to inform a new Playground Construction Programme.

Finally, this Play Policy is a living document. To remain relevant and responsive, it will be reviewed every five years, ensuring that play provision continues to evolve in line with demographic changes, community needs, and best practice standards.

Through this policy, South Dublin County Council reaffirms its commitment to creating vibrant, inclusive, and accessible play opportunities that enrich lives, improve health and wellbeing, and strengthen communities across the county.



