



# Progress review of Scotland's Play Strategy 2021

Play in a COVID-19 context

Play Scotland and  
Scotland's Play Council  
and Strategy Group

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# 1. Executive Summary

This report is an update to the Progress Review of Scotland's Play Strategy following a year of emergency measures and restrictions in Scotland due to COVID-19.

Over the last year, Scotland, like the rest of the UK, has had to respond rapidly to the major impact of COVID-19. The play sector welcomes the positive steps that the Scottish Government has taken to ensure as many play opportunities as possible are still available to children, particularly enabling children under 12 to continue to play outdoors with their friends even during lockdown restrictions. However, the challenges for play of COVID-19 have not diminished a year into the pandemic and require further attention.

The report highlights how play organisations have responded to the pandemic and emerging evidence of the impact of emergency measures on children and young people. The update provides a summary of a Play Scotland consultation with children and young people on their views on play and the pandemic. It takes account of mitigating measures that the Scottish Government have put in place to support children's play at a time of national crisis. Finally, it provides eight recommendations on how Scotland's Play Strategy should be taken forward in the light of COVID-19. Work on the report was undertaken between late 2020 and February 2021.



Since March 2020, play organisations have worked hard to respond to COVID-19 emergency measures and the impact of the pandemic. They have delivered services online and face-to-face and have worked flexibly and innovatively to provide services to children and families in communities across Scotland. This response has been supported by significant funding from the Scottish Government including the Wellbeing Fund and Organised Community Play Fund.

The play sector is clear: play is essential for securing children's wellbeing and protecting their rights at this time of crisis and readjustment, and more still needs to be done. This is confirmed by the responses of over 340 children and young people who took part in a consultation undertaken by Play Scotland in early 2021.

The 'big message' from children and young people was that they wanted a return to play, more play, and better play. The overwhelming majority of children and young people wanted to see their friends, their clubs and activities to restart and to return to school. But they also wanted changes such as improved and inclusive spaces for play in the community and at school.

Eight recommendations update the previous report, 'Progress Review of Scotland's Play Strategy (2020): 24 steps for play' in the light of COVID-19. These highlight the importance of leadership, partnership and collaboration across sectors and interests; the importance of outdoor play and the need for play which includes all children; the necessity of funding to deliver play; and crucially, the necessity of engaging with, and listening to, children and young people in responding to COVID-19 and developing a refreshed Play Strategy. The eight recommendations are:

- Refresh the Play Strategy and ensure national and local leadership supports a child's right to play
- Renew and develop the national and local commitment to outdoor play
- Listen to children and young people and act on what they say
- Ensure the inclusion of all children and young people
- Ensure cross sectoral and inter professional approaches to play are in place
- Sustain and support play provision through adequate funding
- Maintain a focus on playful learning and play in schools
- Strengthen the play sector nationally and locally.

At a time of major change and disruption, it is more important than ever to maintain and strengthen a focus on children's right to play. The current developments in children's rights in Scotland with proposed legislation to incorporate the UNCRC in Scots law are seen as an essential and crucial underpinning to recovery from the pandemic and to realising children's rights for the future.

## 2. Introduction to COVID-19 Update

This report is a COVID-19 update to the Progress Review on Scotland's Play Strategy (2020) and has been produced in order to consider the impact of COVID-19 on play and to identify priorities for action.

Play Scotland commissioned this report in autumn 2020. The detailed work was undertaken in late 2020 and updated in February 2021 following a consultation with over 340 children and young people.

Since March 2020 there has been an unexpected and dramatic impact on people's lives with the implementation of emergency measures due to COVID-19. This has affected everyone, but the impact on children and young people has been immediate and profound.

Scotland's play sector has responded robustly to the impact of COVID-19. It has explored how services can continue, what indoor and outdoor play facilities can be provided, and what resources can be made available to families and communities so that children and young people are not denied their right to play.

This report takes account of evidence, surveys and guidance produced by the play sector, government and other agencies. It is informed by Play Scotland's consultation with children and young people. It draws on the expertise of members of the Play Council Strategy Group who contributed through a consultative online meeting and a call for comments.

It acknowledges the importance of the UNCRC Incorporation (Scotland) Bill, currently being scrutinised by the Scottish Parliament. If enacted, incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law will provide a crucial lever for children's rights in Scotland and, specifically, a child's right to play.

## 3. Progress Review on Scotland's Play Strategy

The Scottish Government's Play Strategy for Scotland and its Action Plan were launched in 2013. In order to update the Play Strategy, the Scottish Government commissioned a progress review in 2019 from Play Scotland. This was presented to the government in April 2020.

The Progress Review (2020) found that the Scottish Government's Play Strategy and Action Plan have had a positive impact on the provision of play in Scotland. Since the Strategy and Plan were introduced in 2013, there have been significant developments in play in Scotland with increased awareness of the importance of play and many examples of effective practice in communities and at national level.

The Progress Review found that the four domains of the Play Strategy have worked well and have provided the strategic foundation for developments in play. The importance of play has been embedded in the Scottish Government's early learning and childcare commitments and commitments to play-based learning in schools. There is more focus on outdoor play in early learning and childcare, schools and community settings with Scotland's Coalition for Outdoor Play and Learning position statement launched by the Minister for Children and Young People in 2018.

In cross-sectoral developments, the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduced a Play Sufficiency Assessment duty which requires planning authorities to assess the sufficiency of play opportunities in their area. In 2019, Play Scotland, in partnership with A Place in Childhood, were commissioned to co-create Place Standard Tools for Children and Young People. These are examples of well received policy developments supported by partnership between the Scottish Government, the play sector and other public bodies and are indicative of the progress made since 2013.

At the same time, the Progress Review identified areas where there needed to be further sustained development and the input of new energy in areas such as inclusive play. These areas for further development provided the basis for the recommendations in the Progress Review (2020) 24 steps for play, and remain relevant in 2021.

The legislation to incorporate the UNCRC in Scots law and the associated actions to embed children's rights in all areas of policy and practice are warmly supported by the play sector. It is anticipated that this legislation and its implementation will provide the basis for rights-based approaches to play in response to the pandemic and for the future.





## 4. Impact of COVID-19 on play

We do not yet fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on children and their families and their wellbeing. It is unclear how COVID-19 and its social, cultural, political and economic consequences will continue to affect children and young people, families and organisations over the next few years. Economic factors are expected to have consequences for Scotland and the UK with an increase in unemployment which will result in increasing levels of child and family poverty and low income. In the public sector, there may be cuts or changes in funding for services in the voluntary and public sectors. This could have serious consequences for the play sector and for children's right to play.

These uncertainties make it more important to ensure that children can play to the fullest extent possible – freely and often, inclusively and without discrimination, indoors and outdoors at home, in ELC and school, and in the community. Play organisations are concerned that opportunities for children's play may diminish or be eroded at a time when play is needed more than ever. The play sector is clear: play is central to securing children's wellbeing at this time of national crisis and readjustment.

Since March 2020, Government, local authorities and organisations with an interest in play have been working hard to respond to the COVID-19 emergency measures. National and local play organisations have maintained opportunities for children's play. Organisations have reconfigured and reopened services where possible. Play organisations have moved activities online where they could, maintaining contact with families and communities. However, in spite of the strenuous efforts of the play sector, children's play provision had to close or was seriously affected at different phases of the emergency measures. With restrictions on where children and their families can go and what they can do,

organisations have emphasised the importance of outdoor play in supporting child wellbeing during this unsettling period.

The work of the play sector has been supported by significant funding from the Scottish Government including the Wellbeing Fund and Organised Community Play Fund. A number of the funded projects have received international recognition. In addition, Play Scotland received funding to develop, produce and distribute 40,000 copies of the Play Well Pack aimed at supporting families to play together. Living Classrooms was granted £159,000 to develop Virtual Nature Schools which provided both practitioners and families with the learning resources they need to confidently explore nature with children. In 2020/2021 Government funding for play was £2,933,350.

Concerns about child wellbeing have been widespread internationally, UK wide and in Scotland. At an international level, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted the importance of play in April 2020, advising states to 'explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their rights to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities' and to ensure that there were opportunities for children's views to be heard and taken into account in any 'decision-making processes on the pandemic.'

The UK Children's Play Policy Forum expressed concern early in the first lockdown about the risks to children where they continued to be deprived of their fullest play opportunities. A review of UK and international evidence found that the restrictions and emergency measures restricted children's right to play. The authors state that 'play may be one of the most important areas of focus to promote children's health and well-being'.

## 5. Evidence on the impact of COVID-19

Organisations have shared a growing body of evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of children and young people and on play since March 2020. Reports have been produced in Scotland and across the UK along with a growing body of international evidence. This evidence has identified that children and young people's wellbeing has been affected by:

- children missing regular and consistent face-to-face contact with friends and family members;
- the impact of social isolation on children especially where they do not have digital access;
- restrictions on children's play opportunities in the initial lockdown and in ensuing emergency measures;
- restrictions on school attendance during the first and second lockdowns and home schooling;
- a significant number of children not having access to playable household or public space;
- children and young people not being heard or being invisible in decision making around COVID-19;
- families affected by unemployment, low income and job insecurity with a growing number likely to be affected in the future;
- the disproportionate and negative impact of restrictions on some children, including those children who are: disabled, care experienced; young carers; and/or experience other challenges.

A Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA), commissioned by the Children and Young People's Commissioner from the Observatory of Children's Human Rights Scotland, examined the evidence of the impact of COVID-19 across key rights including children's right to play. The CRIA found that children and young people experienced significant constraints as a result of the lockdown. Opportunities to play, to socialise with friends, and to express creativity and imagination were all limited with the focus on play at home. Children who lived in poverty, in inadequate housing, with little access to physical space or to online community were highlighted as being particularly negatively affected.

This overview of a right to play has been added to by the focus of play organisations. Play Scotland undertook a survey which explored the immediate impact on play and childcare provision with respondents concerned about the future of their services and the impact of lockdown restrictions on children and their families. IPA produced an international study of government and civil society responses to COVID-19 and their impact on children's play and mobility (August 2020). This report highlights the importance of the specific nature of play and for children's physical activity – and the hazards if children's play opportunities are neglected.



There have been important surveys undertaken with children and young people. This includes Play Scotland's consultation with over 340 children and young people undertaken in early 2021 (see summary at Section 7). The Children's Parliament, in its summaries of findings from four surveys between April and October 2020, found that the majority of children were doing better in autumn 2020 than earlier in the pandemic.

Children, post lockdown, reported that they were able to have more fun and be with their peers. On the other hand, one in three children were worried about family finances in both lockdown and post lockdown. More reported that they were feeling less safe online post lockdown than during lockdown.

The majority reported that they were able to be healthy but 2 in 5 children were worried about their schoolwork. There was a decline in positive responses about whether they were having a difficult time from all children but particularly by children aged 8 to 11.

The Teen Covid survey undertaken by the University of Edinburgh found that there was a significant impact on young people's wellbeing.

There was a three-fold increase in young people's loneliness, a fifth said they had been stressed because of COVID-19 with 39% sleeping more badly. Girls reported a more negative impact on wellbeing than boys. This complements findings from a lockdown survey undertaken by Youthlink, Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament with 2400 young people which found that 96% of young people had fears for the future with 77% concerned for their wellbeing.



Evidence of the impact on early years children also highlighted changes in behaviours. Public Health Scotland's Report 2 on young children's play and learning, outdoors and social interactions found that 5 in 10 children were playing more outdoors according to parents and carers.

Eight in 10 young children played outside every day. Conversely, 3 in 10 children spent less time outdoors than usual. Overall, 9 in 10 had access to 'good-quality safe green space' with 3 in 10 accessing green space most days. Younger children had fewer social interactions with friends but 5 in 10 were accessing better imaginative play.

## 6. Sustaining play during COVID-19

### Response of Scottish Government

From the beginning of March 2020, organisations concerned with play have worked hard to respond to the needs and rights of children and young people to play. Although playgrounds were closed in the first lockdown, the Scottish Government opened up play areas at the end of these first emergency measures and have ensured they have stayed open during ensuing restrictions. In the restrictions put in place in late 2020, children under the age of 12 years were still able to meet in larger groups with no social distancing with older children restricted to meeting one other person from another household outdoors. At the time of writing at the end of February 2021, there is a phased approach for children and young people to return to schools and early learning and childcare with younger children returning first. However, other restrictions are still having a major impact on children, young people and their families.

### Response of play sector

In contributing to this report, play organisations shared how they responded to COVID-19 and the impact on their services. A Play Hub section was added to the Play Scotland website to host a range of play and related COVID-19 resources from organisations across Scotland. Play Scotland developed a range of hard copy and online resources, in partnership with organisations such as ScrapAntics and Save the Children.

With a strong focus on outdoor play, organisations such as Play Scotland, Smart Play Network, Parent Club and Inspiring Scotland's Thrive Network, made their online resources widely available, covering the domains of the Play Strategy: play at home, play in early learning, childcare and school, play in the community and positive support for play.

Experts in play and child wellbeing, including academics and organisations such as the International Play Association, have made the case for attention to be given to the impact of a play deficit for children on their wellbeing and rights at this challenging time. Reviews are beginning to identify evidence on the short-term impact of emergency measures on children and young people with a call for more research.

In a consultation with the Play Council Strategy Group for this paper, play organisations reported that they were being creative in adapting to the new circumstances. Some, such as childminders and early learning, childcare and out of school care providers have been able to continue or return to face to face work with adaptations. Other organisations were offering a blend of face to face and online provision and adding value to digital provision by, for example, hand delivering resources to families for play activities.

There were seen to be positives in using digital tools to deliver services such as some enhanced communication and opportunities to revisit sessions through social media. On the other hand, organisations were aware that digital fatigue was setting in amongst parents and carers and that young children's digital attention span could be limited. It was emphasised that not all families had access to sufficient online resources.

Organisations identified that there was significant interest in outdoor play with children, parents and carers and play professionals keen for outdoor play opportunities. Smart Play Network reported that there had been a substantial increase in requests for staff training and professional development in outdoor play.

The Scottish Out of School Care Network (SOSCN), in its October 2020 survey report, highlighted that more services were using more outdoor activities as part of their provision. Children were enjoying being outdoors, had shown resilience and were able to adapt and enjoyed being in smaller groups. Childminders were outdoors more with children.

The restrictions have meant that services have been working with smaller numbers of children. This has had benefits for children but resulted in fewer children participating in activities. The smaller numbers have led to unmet demand and, in some cases, lower levels of income for the provider.

Play Scotland has found that many teachers and schools have been enthusiastic in wanting access to resources and opportunities for training and were keen to participate in the Playful Pedagogy Awards Scheme which is to be launched in 2021.

There have been significant challenges. Fewer unregulated play opportunities were being provided because of social distancing requirements. Families with babies and young children were missing out on socialising and play opportunities at a crucial point in children's development. Children with disabilities could not always participate in play opportunities due to children's specific needs and restrictions in services. Play organisations continued to be concerned about children and families who were experiencing difficult circumstances and might be isolated, without support and suffering from financial hardship.

As stated in the Progress Review (2020) report, there was concern about the play needs of older children and young people and this is confirmed by young people's responses to the Play Scotland consultation. There was a view by play and young people's organisations that young people had been seen as anti-social and as super spreaders of COVID-19 during different stages of the pandemic. Conversely, older children and young people had lost significant freedoms and autonomy due to the restrictions. In autumn 2020, for example, young people over 12 years were restricted in their social contacts and older young people had to wear masks when moving about at school.

There were practical factors affecting play provision. Accessing accommodation was a challenge especially where accommodation was in shared premises or owned by local authorities. There was increased administration and cleaning for organisations as a result of COVID-19 measures which put additional pressure on staff. Childminders were concerned about their financial sustainability.

Organisations also flagged up the need for attention being paid to the wellbeing of staff in play and childcare settings. Staff were finding their work more pressurised, uncertain and demanding. Organisations recognised that it was important to keep staff motivated and enthusiastic so that they could continue to deliver services in this complex environment. Generally, there was an urgent need for staff training.

Play organisations are now looking ahead, drawing on the lessons from the last year. There is a general view that there are opportunities to look anew at play provision and particularly at outdoor play. Play Scotland has developed a Position Statement with seven principles that should underpin play in Scotland in the light of COVID-19.



## 7. Play Scotland consultation with children and young people

This is a summary of the consultation with children and young people that Play Scotland undertook in early 2021. Funding was received from the Scottish Government to support the consultation. The full report of the consultation is also available.

### A return to play, more play and better play

Children want a return to play, more play and better play. This was children and young people's overwhelming response to a consultation on play undertaken by Play Scotland in early 2021.

COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on children and young people's lives. After the challenges of the last year, they want a return to the play they enjoy. They want to be with their friends and see their extended families. They want more play at school, at clubs and outdoors. Children and young people also want better play – with improvements to parks and play facilities which include everyone.

### Children and young people enjoy rich and diverse play experiences

Over 340 children and young people from 0 to 18 years described rich and diverse play experiences that they enjoyed. Many of the play activities they like take place outdoors, and with their friends.

Children and young people like the following play experiences:

- playing with their friends and family members
- playing in parks and natural environments such as the beach and woods
- participating in a wide range of physical activities such as football, swimming, dancing and cycling
- going to their clubs, including those for children with additional support needs
- imaginative play and games
- playing video games and other online activities.

**'Imaginative play and running around with my friends – park/school/beach/wood with sticks and stuff like that.'**

### Profound impact of COVID-19 on play

The contrast with what children and young people like doing and the impact on play in the current COVID-19 situation is stark. As one child, reflecting the views of other children and young people, said:

**'It's changed everything in the world.'**



Children and young people say that they have not been able to play in the way they want or choose. They have not been able to meet their friends and other family members in some way or at all. The emergency measures have stopped, changed or inhibited their everyday activities. For children with disabilities or additional support needs, the restrictions have meant that they cannot access the services and the support they need – and in many instances they have not had access to play outside their homes.

**‘I can’t have playdates or invite my friends round. No rugby, football or judo. No school so can’t see my friends. Can’t go on holiday.’**

Children and young people identified positive experiences from the last year. Many have enjoyed spending more time with their families at home. They liked having more relaxed approaches to their daily routines and going on walks. Children talked of new opportunities that were available such as school lessons which were fun as well as online play and other new hobbies and activities. A small but significant group of children preferred online learning and not being at school.

**‘I really liked the first lockdown because mum had more time. We did more crafts and games and played outside on long walks.’**



## Children and young people’s BIG MESSAGES about play

Children and young people had unambiguous messages about what they wanted to happen about play. They wanted to play as they did before COVID-19. They also wanted opportunities for more play. Finally, and crucially, they wanted better play experiences.

The overwhelming majority of children and young people stated that they wanted to see their friends. They wanted activities, such as swimming, football and their clubs to re-open. This was very important for children with additional support needs who also wanted to see significant improvements in outdoor play to meet their needs. Older young people wanted play and leisure opportunities that met their needs and interests.

Most children and young people wanted to go back to school. Some mentioned that they wanted more opportunities to play more at school. Some wanted changes in the way education was delivered after their experiences of the last year.

Finally, the responses show that play is of overwhelming importance to children and young people. They have not been able to participate in the range of play experiences they had before COVID-19. The ‘big message’ from children and young people is that they want a return to play, more play, and better play. As one young person stated in a challenge to adults:

**‘I don’t stop being a child, even with coronavirus. Don’t forget children.’**

## 8. Play in a COVID-19 context

### 8.1 Progress Review Update

The impact of COVID-19 has highlighted the urgent need for a refreshed Play Strategy for Scotland. Play has always been a fundamental and necessary part of children and young people’s lives: it is essential to child wellbeing. The 2013 Play Strategy and play policy and practice have asserted this importance. However, the COVID-19 national emergency has thrown the importance of play into sharp relief.

The Play Council Strategy Group has a firm collective view that a refreshed Play Strategy and Action Plan should continue to take into account the Progress Review (2020)’s findings and recommendations. The relevance of these have not changed: it is that the strategy and plan have become more urgent than ever.

### 8.2 Updated recommendations

Eight updated recommendations have been identified in the light of COVID-19. All are underpinned by a firm commitment to the UNCRC and its full implementation.

In addition, it is suggested that the Scottish Government should consider how to regularly monitor and evaluate what is happening to play in Scotland.

#### 8.2.1 Refresh the Play Strategy and ensure national and local leadership support a child’s right to play

A refreshed Play Strategy and Action Plan should take into account the impact of COVID-19 so that Scotland’s children and young people’s right to play is not negatively impacted by the effects of the pandemic.

A refreshed Play Strategy should acknowledge the central importance of play in rebuilding Scotland’s communities. It should put the learning from the impact of COVID-19 at its heart with ongoing discussion and consultation to inform the development and implementation of the Play Strategy.

The Play Strategy should include a commitment to supporting national and local leaders in safeguarding play. This could be integrated, for example, into Play Scotland’s Getting it Right for Play programme with local authorities.

The strategy should consider the medium and long-term impact of COVID-19 on children and young people's wellbeing and their right to play. This should reassert Scotland's determination to:

- ensure children's mental and physical health is supported through access to play opportunities;
- focus on children and young people who have been specifically impacted by COVID-19;
- address the opportunity gap for children who have missed out on education, developmental stages and transitions as a result of COVID-19;
- take into account children and families who have experienced exclusion due to disability, additional support needs and other circumstances;
- explore the role and impact of digital use on play during COVID-19;
- ensure the refreshed Play Strategy applies to children and young people of all ages;
- explore how COVID-19 has impacted on the domains of home, ELC and school and community;
- commit to taking forward the implementation of current legislation, guidance and policies that are relevant to play such as the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and the UNCRC Incorporation (Scotland) Bill.

### 8.2.2 Renew and develop the national and local commitment to outdoor play

The refreshed Play Strategy should have, at its heart, a strong commitment to outdoor play. This commitment should assess and include the benefits and opportunities that outdoor play has provided during COVID-19.

Play organisations and childcare providers have reported greater engagement by children, young people and families in outdoor play during the last year. This includes activities across the domains of play at home, early learning and childcare and in the community.

In the current situation, play organisations have found that children want to play outdoors, and this is supported by their families. The Play Scotland consultation with children and young people found that children had been playing outdoors and wanted more and better outdoor play opportunities for all age groups and needs. Staff in early learning and childcare and school settings have a newly revitalised interest in training, resources and advice on outdoor play.

The play sector has long championed the importance of outdoor play. Outdoor play is known to have multiple benefits in terms of physical activity and general wellbeing. In addition, experts have indicated that being outdoors is less risky for transmission of COVID-19.

The importance of outdoor play is reflected in the position statement of Scotland's Coalition for Outdoor Play and Learning. There is now a crucial and timely opportunity to have an increased national and local focus on a menu of outdoor play provision and facilities. This should be inclusive in intent and implementation and be accessible to children and young people of all ages.

### 8.2.3 Listen to children and young people and act on what they say

There should be an explicit and actioned commitment to engage with and listen to children and young people in the development of the Play Strategy as well as in ongoing responses to COVID-19.

Children and young people have stated that their views and experiences must not be unheard and invisible in responses to COVID-19. The consultation undertaken by Play Scotland in early 2021 demonstrates the importance of listening to children and young people and ensuring that policy and practice decisions on play are informed by their views and experiences. This is even more important in the light of COVID-19.

Children and young people should be involved as essential contributors to national and local play policies and provision. This should be undertaken in ways which facilitate meaningful engagement by children and young people.

This is not a new expectation. A commitment to listening to children and taking their views into account is already embedded in Scottish legislation and policy. However, the importance of involving children will be given intense attention as result of the incorporation of UNCRC in Scots law and because of provisions in legislation such as the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019. In turn, this requires a national commitment to involving children and young people at the earliest stages of developing a refreshed Strategy and Action Plan.

### 8.2.4 Ensure inclusion of all children and young people

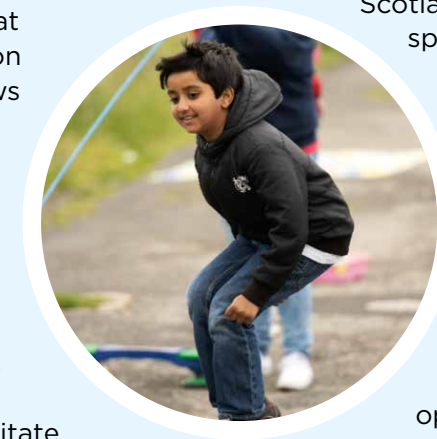
The Play Strategy should ensure that all children and young people's right to play is protected and realised during COVID-19 and in the future.

One of the concerns raised by the Play Council Strategy Group has been the needs of children and families who have been negatively affected by the impact of COVID-19 and are in need of support.

Children and young people with additional support needs, who took part in the Play Scotland consultation, stated that their specific needs were not being met under current restrictions with a lack of availability of services, clubs that support children and a lack of inclusive outdoor spaces.

In addition, older young people who took part in the consultation wanted to see better outdoor and indoor opportunities for their age group. They were also unhappy about the restrictions around meeting friends for the over-12 age group.

Other evidence shows that children's experiences have not been equitable during COVID-19. This includes the impact of living in low income and poverty, being disabled and/or care experienced and children's gender, race, age or status as asylum seekers or refugees. It is affected by where children live and what restrictions are in place and the physical and mental wellbeing of those caring for them. Some children and young people may be experiencing a combination of several challenging factors. They and their families might not be able to access the services that normally support them.





The concern is that these inequalities continue and that children and young people who need to play do not have access to play opportunities. The Play Strategy and Action Plan should prioritise addressing exclusion in order to promote inclusive play.

### 8.2.5 Ensure cross sectoral and inter professional approaches to play are in place

The Play Strategy and Action Plan should be informed by, and reflect, cross sectoral and inter professional approaches to play.

The response to COVID-19 has highlighted what the play sector has long known – that play is relevant across services and sectors. Policies on public health, education, children’s services, planning, transport, public spaces, leisure services and community buildings all have an impact on a child’s right to play.

The impact of COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of effective communication, planning and implementation between sectors and services in relation to play. In areas where these partnerships and relationships have not been utilised, play organisations have found it more difficult to maintain or restart their provision. This includes, at a basic level, use of public or shared buildings. Children and their families have not been able to access the fullest range of play opportunities where there has not been effective partnership and collaborative working.

Cross sectoral and inter professional approaches must be at the heart of an effective Play Strategy. In order to support this, there should be a collective approach to ensure that professionals and services across sectors are actively engaged in the development and implementation of a refreshed Play Strategy. In addition, consideration needs to be given to the impact on play of COVID-19 in services such as transport, planning, public spaces and community leisure and recreation services.

### 8.2.6 Sustain and support play provision through adequate funding

The Play Strategy should include a commitment to reviewing national funding for play with the aim of sustaining and growing funding for the play sector. This is especially important in the light of COVID-19.

Concerns about levels of sustainable funding for play were raised during the consultation on the Progress Review. These concerns have been intensified by organisations’ experiences during COVID-19.

Play providers have appreciated the emergency funding made available by government during 2020/2021 and the flexibility of funders in supporting the play sector. However, organisations have expressed fear that this funding will not be sustained and that the economic and social costs of COVID-19 will have an impact on the availability of funding and income in the future.



In addition, play organisations have found themselves bearing increased costs as a result of the pandemic because of the need for more staffing and an associated drop in income from services particularly for those delivering early learning and childcare. More staff time is being spent on cleaning and administration, and the need to respond to changes in restrictions.

### 8.2.7 Maintain a focus on playful learning and play in schools

The Play Strategy should include a firm commitment to playful learning and play in schools, informed by evidence and creative flexible responses.

The Scottish Government has acknowledged the central importance of maintaining children and young people’s education during this challenging year. However, the rate of infection in communities has meant that children continue to experience disrupted education. Children and young people themselves have expressed concerns about their education and their ability to concentrate in school and achieve their potential. In Play Scotland’s consultation, children and young people expressed their desire to return to school, although a small proportion of children stated that they had preferred home learning.

Play is acknowledged to have an important part to play in education and in the community life of schools. It helps children learn, provides opportunities for co-operative and co-produced activities, and supports peer and adult-child relationships. It is an enabler of creativity and imagination and supports children’s agency. Children and young people in the Play Scotland consultation stated that they wanted more play at school.

The commitment to play in schools should not lessen in the current public health crisis. Instead, play should be recognised as having a pivotal role in supporting children’s wellbeing at school as well as facilitating their learning.

This commitment should be underpinned by a balanced understanding of protection and risk which takes current national guidance into account but allows for playful learning indoors and outdoors.

### 8.2.8 Strengthen the play sector nationally and locally

There is a need to have a strong, coordinated and sustainable play sector to meet the challenges of COVID-19. The Play Council should refresh its vision and forward plan in order to support the refreshed Play Strategy and Action Plan.

This is an unprecedented time for the play sector. It has risen to the challenge of adapting its approaches and delivery modes to meet the needs of children and young people. Its staff and volunteers are committed to responding to the complexity of COVID-19 measures to ensure children and young people can continue to access play opportunities.

It is unknown how long the public health emergency will last and what will be the medium and long-term effects of this demanding year on the wellbeing of children and young people. The play sector wants to be equipped to deal with the challenges ahead.

A refreshed Play Strategy and Action Plan is therefore more important than ever. In order to support this, the Play Council should consider reviewing its vision and forward plan in order to provide a complementary structure which can inform the Play Strategy’s development.

## 9. Conclusion

This report updates the previous Progress Review on Scotland's Play Strategy (2020) 24 steps for play.

It highlights the strenuous efforts of the play sector, with the support of government, funders and other bodies, to continue to provide services and support for children's play during a tumultuous year. It considers the evidence which is emerging on the impact on children and young people. Specifically, it draws attention to what children and young people said about the play activities they enjoy, the impact of COVID-19 on their play and their big messages for those with responsibility for play. Finally, the report highlights eight key recommendations to progress and refresh Scotland's Play Strategy in the light of COVID-19.

The report concludes that it is more important than ever to maintain a focus on children's right to play in these complex and challenging times.



### Committed to PLAY



### Taic do Chluiche



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