



Huntingdonshire District Council

Play Sufficiency Assessment: Implementation Guidelines

Private & Confidential

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1. Executive Summary

To support the recommendations of the 2025 Play Sufficiency Assessment, Premier Advisory Group (PAG) has developed an equity-led framework for investment and delivery. The framework ensures resources are allocated transparently, strategically, and in line with the Council's corporate priorities, while recognising the strong track record HDC already has in maintaining a large play estate safely with limited budgets.

Key elements include:

- Capital Prioritisation Matrix – a weighted scorecard combining safety audits, deprivation indices, sufficiency data, and community feedback to help direct investment towards areas of greatest need and potential social impact.
- Principles for Excellence in Play – embedding standards for inclusive, sustainable, and age-appropriate design. This includes accessible surfacing, integrated equipment for children of all abilities, sensory play elements, sustainable materials, climate-resilient features, and provision for older children and teenagers co-designed with young people.
- Robust Execution and Governance – strengthening procurement through a mandatory 'Gateway' handover protocol that withholds final payments until contractors supply safety certifications, warranties, and maintenance schedules. This ensures new assets are safe, auditable, and durable.

This Implementation Guide provides Huntingdonshire District Council with the tools to take the next step in play sufficiency: moving from responsive maintenance towards a sustainable, inclusive, and strategically aligned estate. By targeting investment where it is needed most, and embedding governance safeguards, the Council can continue to deliver high-quality play opportunities that improve child wellbeing, strengthen community cohesion, and enhance Huntingdonshire's reputation as a great place to live.

2. Framework

2.1 Introduction

The Play Sufficiency Assessment highlighted opportunities to improve equity across the district. While flagship parks such as Hinchbrooke and Riverside are well-used and highly valued, some neighbourhood sites – particularly in areas with higher levels of deprivation or population growth – would benefit from further investment in accessibility, inclusivity, or play value.

To address this, PAG recommends that capital investment in play provision be guided by a formal, equity-based framework. This will ensure resources are allocated in a transparent, defensible, and data-driven way, maximising social impact and supporting the Council’s corporate commitment to building a better Huntingdonshire for all residents.

2.2 Capital Prioritisation Matrix

To implement an equity-led approach, every potential capital project should be assessed and ranked using the Capital Prioritisation Matrix. This weighted scorecard provides a consistent methodology for evaluating projects against the Council’s strategic objectives and reflects the dual priorities of safety and community value.

The matrix is designed to blend quantitative data (e.g. Health & Safety ratings, deprivation indices, child population density) with qualitative insights (e.g. community feedback, usage patterns). For example:

- A site rated H&S Amber may still be prioritised if community feedback highlights recurring issues of vandalism or perceived safety concerns.
- A site rated safe may nevertheless warrant investment if it lacks inclusive features in an area with a high population of children with additional needs.

By balancing these inputs, the matrix offers a holistic and defensible way to prioritise projects, ensuring that decisions reflect both technical evidence and community perspectives.

The matrix scores projects against four weighted criteria, set out in Table 1 below.

Criterion	Weighting	Scoring Metric	Rationale
Safety & Risk	40%	Based on the site's most recent independent Health & Safety (H&S) RAG rating. Red = highest score Amber = medium score Green = lowest score	The Council has a duty of care to ensure public safety. This prioritises immediate remediation of sites with significant safety concerns or compliance failures, mitigating legal liabilities and addressing the high number of Red-rated sites.
Equity & Need	30%	Composite score based on: Sufficiency RAG rating of the locality Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) decile of the LSOA served. Projects in the top 30% most deprived areas receive the highest score.	Aligns capital investment with deprivation indicators, ensuring resources are targeted to communities where access to high-quality public space is most vital for child wellbeing.
Sufficiency	20%	Score reflects: Density of child population (ages 0–14) in the catchment area Severity of sufficiency gaps, e.g., lack of facilities or inadequate provision for key demographics.	Ensures investment is proportional to latent demand and addresses critical gaps in scale and type of provision, such as areas with large child populations but limited or unsuitable facilities.
Community & Strategic Alignment	10%	Based on: Volume/severity of negative community feedback (surveys, focus groups, interviews) Alignment with strategic pilots, such as stewardship models or natural play design.	Ensures resident perceptions and lived experience inform decisions, while also enabling investment to pilot innovative models that can be scaled district-wide for greater strategic value.

2.3 Decommissioning Thresholds

While the Council remains committed to maintaining a wide estate of local play areas, there may be instances where continued investment does not represent best value for money. In these cases, decommissioning can serve as a strategic tool for reinvestment rather than cost-cutting, enabling resources to be redirected into better-used, higher-quality, and more inclusive sites.

A site may be formally evaluated for decommissioning if it meets all of the following criteria:

- It is identified through audits as requiring significant investment to bring to modern standards.
- Observations and engagement show consistently low or minimal community use.
- Consultation confirms the site is not valued or needed locally.
- Analysis shows that children and families would be better served through nearby, alternative provision.

This approach ensures that decisions are evidence-led, transparent, and focused on maximising benefit for children and communities.

3. Principles for Excellence in Play

To ensure that every new and refurbished play area becomes a genuine community asset, all projects should adhere to a set of core design principles. These standards translate the Council's strategic goals for inclusivity, sustainability, and age-appropriateness into tangible, non-negotiable specifications for all design and build contracts.

3.1 'Inclusive by Design'

PAG recommends that inclusivity be treated as a fundamental, guiding principle for all provision.

All projects should adhere to the following:

- All designs must demonstrate compliance with a set of inclusive play guidelines, which address physical, sensory, and social accessibility.
- Specific HDC Requirements as per the Gap Analysis
 - Accessible Surfacing: Continuous, step-free accessible surfacing (e.g., poured rubber) is mandatory throughout all primary play zones and on pathways connecting entrances to all equipment.
 - Integrated Equipment: Procurement should focus on equipment that enables children of all abilities to play together. This counters the practice of isolating accessible items, which can reinforce exclusion.
 - Sensory and Imaginative Play: Every new or fully refurbished site should include a variety of sensory and imaginative play features to support neurodivergent children and provide richer play experiences for all.

To ensure consistent implementation, project managers and contractors must complete and sign off the compliance checklist provided in Table 2 at the design and pre-handover stages.

Requirement	Compliance Check (Y/N)	Evidence / Notes
1. Access & Circulation		
1.1 Step-free, accessible pathway from site entrance to all play zones and equipment.		
1.2 Continuous, accessible safety surfacing (e.g., poured rubber) throughout all primary play zones.		

1.3 Sufficient circulation space around equipment for mobility aid users and carers.		
2. Play Equipment & Features		
2.1 At least one piece of equipment enabling integrated group play (e.g., flush roundabout, basket swing).		
2.2 At least one piece of equipment accessible to a wheelchair user (e.g., wheelchair-accessible trampoline, raised sand/water table).		
2.3 Inclusion of a minimum of two distinct sensory play elements (e.g., tactile panels, musical features, aromatic planting).		
2.4 Provision of varied physical challenges catering to different ability levels.		
3. Site Amenities		
3.1 Provision of accessible seating with backrests and armrests, located within play zones.		
3.2 Clear, easy-to-read signage with pictorial symbols.		
4. Policy Compliance		
4.1 Design formally reviewed against Sensory Trust's inclusive play guidelines.		

3.2 'Sustainable by Design'

This standard embeds the principles of the Council's Sustainability Strategy into every project, ensuring that play spaces are durable, cost-effective over their entire lifecycle, and environmentally responsible.

Procurement should prioritise materials with proven longevity and low maintenance requirements. These include:

- Recycled HDPE: Warranted for 30+ years, weather-resistant, and low-maintenance.
- FSC-Certified Hardwoods: Species such as Robinia offer excellent durability without chemical treatments.

- Galvanised or Stainless Steel: The most robust option for high-wear components and structural elements.

Recognising the impacts of climate change, all designs should incorporate:

- Shade Provision: A combination of natural shade from large-canopy deciduous trees and artificial shade structures (e.g., fabric sails) to mitigate heat risks.
- Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS): The integration of features such as playable swales, rain gardens, and permeable surfacing to manage stormwater, prevent waterlogging, and enhance play value.

In line with the Environment Act 2021, all new designs should contribute to the Council's 10% BNG target. This will be achieved through features such as wildflower meadows, native species planting, insect hotels, and other habitat creation measures.

3.3 'Age-Appropriate by Design'

This standard is designed to prevent shortfall in engaging provision for older children and teenagers, a gap identified through both observational data and direct feedback from young people.

- Youth Co-Design Mandate: All projects specifically targeting the 11–17 age group should be developed through the formal Youth Co-Design Programme.
- Exploration of New Typologies: The standard encourages the exploration of innovative and dynamic features that young people have expressed a desire for, including pump tracks, parkour and climbing installations, and informal outdoor social hubs with integrated seating, lighting, and device charging points.
- Gender-Aware Design: Drawing on feedback from parent focus groups which highlighted the need for spaces where teenage girls feel safe and comfortable, designs should incorporate principles from campaigns such as "Make Space for Girls". This includes features like circular or social seating arrangements that facilitate conversation, adequate lighting to improve perceived safety after dark, and locating facilities away from enclosed or intimidating areas.

4. Project Execution and Governance

Documented execution protocols are essential to ensure that the Council's strategic design standards are delivered on the ground and that the long-term risks associated with poor contract management are eliminated.

3.1 Procurement Based on Whole-Life Value

Procurement policy should shift from an emphasis on minimising initial capital outlay to a model that prioritises total lifecycle value. Tender evaluations should be weighted to favour bids that demonstrate superior long-term durability, lower maintenance costs, and extended warranties for materials and components. This approach is designed to prevent "false economies", where cheaper, short-lived solutions can result in higher long-term costs and the proliferation of high-risk play areas.

3.2 The Mandatory 'Gateway' Handover Protocol

The council should implement final checks and balances to prevent issues in documentation and certifications. This could take the form of a mandatory 'Gateway' protocol embedded into the payment terms of all future design and build contracts. This protocol would establish a "hard gate" for final payment. The final tranche of the contract value (e.g., 10-15%) will be withheld and will not be released until the contractor has submitted a complete Asset Information Pack to the Council's designated officer for verification and approval.

This pack should include, as a minimum:

- A certificate of compliance with BS EN 1176 standards from an independent, accredited body.
- All original manufacturer installation certificates for every piece of equipment.
- Manufacturer warranties for all equipment and surfacing.
- A full schedule of required maintenance and inspection tasks.

5. Community Partnership and Engagement

Meaningful community involvement is critical to the success and long-term sustainability of play spaces. This charter formalises the Council's commitment to engaging residents at every stage of the project lifecycle, from initial concept design to ongoing stewardship.

5.1 A Spectrum of Engagement

The level of community engagement should be tailored to the scale and context of each project, following a defined spectrum:

- Consultation (Standard for all projects): All projects should involve a baseline level of public consultation. This may include surveys on design preferences, public displays of concept plans, and feedback sessions.
- Co-Design (Mandatory for specific projects): A deeper, more collaborative co-design process should be used for all youth-focused projects (as part of the Youth Co-Design Programme). It is also recommended for major redesigns in areas where community trust has been eroded by historic neglect.
- Stewardship (A pathway for all communities): The Council will actively support communities who wish to take on a long-term stewardship role for their local park post-completion.

5.2 Involving the 'Friends of the Park' Model

To facilitate long-term community stewardship, the Council should support and include local 'Friends of the Park' groups in consultations. These voluntary groups work in partnership with the Council's Parks and Countryside team to enhance and care for their local play space.

The role of a 'Friends of the Park' group should include:

- Acting as local ambassadors and champions for the park.
- Supporting routine monitoring by flagging emerging maintenance issues or instances of vandalism to the Council.
- Organising community events and activities to encourage positive use and foster a sense of local ownership.

- Undertaking appropriate low-level maintenance tasks, such as litter picking, weeding, or bulb planting.