

Play Improvement Strategy – Stage Two

11th November 2025

Introduction

Stage one of the Play Improvement Strategy was presented to Overview and Scrutiny Board on 7th May 2025. It provided an overview of both the local and national context, the issues and challenges facing Torbay regarding play provision and set out a vision for the strategy.

To provide high quality, accessible, safe, and inclusive play spaces where everyone of all abilities can have fun, learn and be active through play in such a way that quality is judged above quantity and the provision and maintenance of them is possible within budget and resource parameters.

The stage one report concluded with a series of 'Next Steps' and along with the recommendations and comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee the required actions for stage 2 are as follows.

- Organise a programme of site visits to speak with elected Members
- Carry out targeted community engagement at children's events
- Ensure strategic alignment with other Council services, in particular the UNICEF Child Friendly Torbay Programme
- Research how other Authorities have carried out similar work
- Recommendations to establish a way forward to address immediate risk and liabilities
- Lay the groundwork for strategy and master planning
- Investigate Funding Opportunities

Site Visits with Elected Members

The May report set out an estimated cost of over £6,000,000 for a total replacement of all existing play equipment and associated infrastructure. Recognising that such a level of investment would be unachievable, Officers advised developing a mechanism to identify priorities for investment. The Council's Overview & Scrutiny Board encouraged Councillors to support this process and over the summer, SWISCo officers attended numerous site visits alongside Ward Councillors and Cabinet Members, demonstrating a clear commitment to transparency, partnership, and community-focused service delivery.

Key Findings:

- Play equipment condition varies significantly, with several sites showing signs of age, disrepair, or low play value.

- Community usage is high in well-located and well-equipped parks, reinforcing the importance of visibility, accessibility, and supporting amenities.
- Councillor engagement has been strong, with valuable local insight contributing to discussions around future improvements, alternative uses, and strategic priorities.
- Feedback from these visits have been considered in the creation of this update and forms the foundation of a longer-term strategy.

Community Engagement

Following feedback from Overview and Scrutiny a Community Play Survey was undertaken over the summer and has provided clear insights into public preferences and expectations for play provision across Torbay.

The SWISCo team undertook 10 sessions of community engagement over 8 days during summer 2025. These sessions took place at a variety of children's events and play days in collaboration with Play Torbay. This work generated engagement with approximately 100 young people and their families.

The feedback highlights a strong preference for larger, well-equipped play areas that offer a range of facilities and cater to diverse age groups.

Key Findings:

- Over 75% of respondents favour large play areas with multiple features such as swings, climbing frames, seating, toilets, and refreshments.
- There is a consistent emphasis on quality over proximity — many respondents are willing to travel longer distances if the play area offers a richer experience and opportunities for extended visits.
- Comments frequently mention the value of destination-style parks that allow families to spend more time, engage socially, and enjoy a variety of activities.

Strategic Alignment

Torbay On the Move

SWISCo has engaged with colleagues delivering this programme, conversations have focused on identifying opportunities to align play area investment with wider physical activity and health objectives across Torbay.

Where there is overlap between play area investment and the objectives of the "Torbay on the move" initiative, SWISCo will maximise these opportunities and will feature in the creation of plans. Common aims:

- Enhance the health and wellbeing benefits of play spaces.
- Support increased physical activity for children, young people, and families.
- Ensure that investment in play areas contributes to broader public health outcomes.

Child Friendly Torbay Programme

The Child Friendly Torbay Needs Assessment (May 2025) highlights significant insights into the provision and quality of playgrounds and play spaces across Torbay. Feedback was gathered from 1,860 children and young people through surveys, consultations, and workshops.

Key Findings:

- Young people call for better parks and age-appropriate equipment.
- Broken equipment is not repaired promptly; old equipment is considered dangerous.
- Requests include new skate parks and more football pitches.
- Some parks are described as unsafe, with reports of drug use, antisocial behaviour, and teenagers dominating spaces.
- Torquay town centre and certain parks are perceived as “dangerous” and “unfriendly”.
- Investment in modern, safe, and inclusive play facilities is critical.
- Addressing maintenance, safety, and accessibility will improve community satisfaction.
- Enhancing youth engagement and free recreational opportunities can support wellbeing and social inclusion.

Other Local Authority Examples

A number of examples have been researched including Cheshire West and Chester Council, Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole Council, Rushcliffe Borough Council and Elmbridge Borough Council.

Key Findings:

- There are many common approaches to the challenges of providing high quality play spaces with limited resources.
- All other strategies include scaling against priority, deprivation levels and population of young people as covered in the Torbay work to date.
- In general, a higher level or Tier One strategy includes attention around large and well provisioned spaces being complimented by Tier Two or local level consultation and engagement around specific site design or refurbishment.

Recommendations to establish a way forward to address immediate risk and liabilities

Given the capital funding available, it is recommended phase one of the strategy should be immediate investment focused on addressing defects and missing equipment in some play spaces. These should be:

- Centrally located or easily accessible by Community.
- Designed to accommodate larger numbers of users with inclusive and age-diverse equipment.
- Equipped with supporting amenities such as seating, shade, and with good access and oversight.

This approach aligns with public sentiment and maximises the impact of available resources by replenishing equipment in high use play environments that serve broader communities. Accessible locations are those geographically near to housing and also with level access and equipment that is useable by children with additional needs where the views from Childrens Services will help determine the specific equipment.

Phase One - Immediate Action (Investment)

The first phase focuses on addressing immediate risk and liabilities, particularly where play equipment and/or surfacing has reached the end of its serviceable life. The allocated £500k will be utilised to mitigate medium and high-risk defects, to replace equipment that has already been removed due to safety concerns or remove equipment and create landscaped areas for natural/informal play.

In line with feedback gained during the visits and public consultation carried out at Children's week, priority has been given to key community play areas that serve a broader catchment and attract wider community use.

Following approval by Council, where applicable on-site consultation will take place inviting the local community, via online engagement, posters and community groups to choose suitable replacement items.

Phase 2 – Maintenance

Following the investment and allocation of £500k it is vital that the new and retained stock is maintained in good quality and risk-free condition to get full value from the capital investment and ensure viable play spaces.

Since 2014 the annual budget for the repair, maintenance and management of play facilities has been £67,100. On the basis of the works required to maintain and improve the current condition, including replacing items that require removal the budget for play would need to be increased by £60,000 to allow an additional £1k per year per play area or approx. 6 significant equipment replacements or combination of.

Phase 3 – Establish Long Term Proposals – Consulted Master Plan

It is recommended that a consulted master plan is created for each play area that falls within the criteria of being significantly valued by the community. The sites that are recommended for a consulted master plan are shown in Appendix 1.

These plans reflect commitment to engage with community members, and children to be central in terms of creating longer terms plan. This was a key discussion point during site visits with members. The commitment to develop longer term plans for key play areas also provides an opportunity to integrate facilities and amenities beyond the play area, for instance making use of walking routes or engagement with neighbouring sports clubs. Importantly, funding allocated in Phases 1 and 2 would not detract from this ambition. Instead, it is hoped that early investment will stimulate interest and engagement.

It is recommended that these plans be developed incrementally – carrying out a number each year, rather than adopting a front-loaded approach.

What is a Consulted Plan?

A Consulted Plan is a holistic approach to park and play area development that goes beyond the installation of play equipment. Where opportunities exist, these plans will incorporate a wider range of features such as park facilities and integrate walking routes, hold collaborative discussions with Friends group and key stakeholders. This would include sports clubs where there is a shared interest in the park, play area and sports field.

There are locations where traditional play equipment is aging, and the location may not be appropriate – Due to concerns around safety, accessibility or supervision. In these instances, alternative uses may be considered. Examples could include

informal seating and picnicking, natural play features, sports and fitness, wildflower planting, mounding and nature trails. Any changes in the public space will be designed to enhance the space and encourage inclusive, sustainable use with community at the heart of the recommendations.

Key stakeholders

- Elected Ward Members
- Colleagues across the Council in particular Childrens Services, Planning & Culture
- Play Torbay – **To ensure there is child participation**
- Torbay Communities
- Schools \ Sports Clubs as necessary
- Brixham Town Council

Funding Opportunities and Applications - Update

- To deliver the standard of play the community and Council seeks will require more investment. SWISCo has submitted a funding bid to the **National Lottery** under the Reaching Communities and Partnerships programme for England. The bid is valued at £500,000, with the Council committing to match this amount for play investment, demonstrating a strong partnership approach and significant local commitment.
- In addition, the **Awards for All** fund has been identified as a further opportunity. This fund supports smaller-scale projects, offering grants between £300 and £20,000, and is open to community and volunteer groups.
- SWISCo is working with Council colleagues to explore opportunities through the Heritage Place programme.
- A project has been submitted to the Torquay Pride in Place (formerly Plan for Neighbourhoods), the timing required by that programme meant a proposal had to be submitted before the end of August. As the Council develops the Paignton Pride in Place programme there may be further opportunities to benefit the communities in Paignton this programme is for. Any additional funding would complement funding already allocated.
- As the play project progresses and further consultation is carried out with community members, SWISCo will actively signpost relevant community groups to potential funding opportunities. This approach aims to increase overall project funding and ensure that as many local priorities as possible can be addressed.

Appendix 1 -Consulted Master Plans

- Armada Park
- Astley Park
- Barton Downs
- Brewery Park
- Brixham Skatepark
- Broadpark
- Cary Park
- Claylands
- Ellacombe
- Furzham Green
- Furzham Green MUGA
- Great Parks
- Hookhills (Freshwater Drive)
- Kitson Park
- Lancaster Drive
- Lindisfarne
- Plainmoor
- Preston Fitness
- Preston Play Area
- Primley Park
- Seacrest
- Sherwell Park
- Shiphay Park
- Smallcombe \ Jasmine
- St. Marys Park
- Stanley Gardens
- Starpitten Ball Court
- Starpitten Lower
- Starpitten Upper
- Steps Cross
- Stoodley Knowle
- The Willow
- Upton Park Juniors
- Upton Park Multiplay
- Victoria Park Ball Court
- Victoria Park Play Area
- Victoria Park TQY
- Windmill SkatePark
- Young's Park