

## **Play Improvement Strategy**

### **Overview and Scrutiny Board - 7 May 2025**

We want children and young people to feel part of their community, be safe and live well. We want to support healthy, physically active lives for all and in doing so will make greater use of our natural and cultural assets. We are continuing to work to get the basics right – so that our parks and residential areas are clean, safe and well-maintained. We want to celebrate and protect the places that make Torbay special.

This Play Improvement Strategy aims to provide high quality, safe and inclusive play spaces for children and young people of all ages.

### **Introduction**

Over recent years the quality of play provision in Torbay has decreased and there has been no significant investment since the play builder scheme 2010 - 2012. As a result, many of the play areas are reaching end of life, a large amount of equipment has had to be removed due to failure or safety issues and the remaining equipment provides a limited range of play opportunities. In recent years the way in which play areas are used has changed and the provision in Torbay has not kept pace with this.

Play equipment is expensive, high risk and heavily governed by regulations and standards (EN 1176: Play equipment standard and BS EN 117:2018 impact attenuating playground surfacing), whilst the market is very competitive there are only a limited number of suppliers of suitable equipment and the design and procurement process is complex. An average, medium sized fully equipped play area can be anywhere in the region of £100,000 - £200,000 to build from scratch and substantial repairs and improvements to an average site, in the condition of the play areas in Torbay can be over £50,000.

Inclusive play and access to play is important for children, families and carers including those with disabilities. In order to reflect the challenges in funding, maintenance costs and sustainability, play provision does not have to be all about equipment and play areas in the traditional sense.

National studies have shown that children benefit from imaginative play and sensory play based around the natural environment so play provision should be considered in the wider sense in terms of safe spaces with opportunities for enjoyment by children. Providing high quality, safe and inclusive play spaces for children and young people of all ages has a key part to play in improving health and wellbeing and preventing ill health for future generations.

With the various challenges and opportunities around the future of play in Torbay a vision and strategy based on robust evidence and best practice is required. In the short term this will identify and allow the removal of high-risk liabilities for the Council and ensure quick wins are maximised using currently available funding. In the long term the strategy will form a framework for the allocation of ad hoc funding, such as CIL and Ward Member budgets and provide a basis for attracting a cocktail of

funding such as government funding e.g. Long-Term Plan for Towns or Section 106, to reduce the funding liability for the Council.

The improvement strategy is in no way aimed at removing or closing play areas and the number of areas available for play will not change, however, to be realistic to circumstance and cost the strategy will focus on play spaces as opposed to equipped play areas and there will be sites where equipment is removed and replaced with high quality landscaped natural features.

## **National Context**

Torbay Council is not alone in facing significant challenges with regard to play provision and the local situation is reflective of the state of play across the country. Years of austerity and reductions in local authority funding has resulted in the serious decline of play standards, availability and quality in all areas of the UK.

In 2024 Play England wrote an open letter to the Government which was debated in January 2025 stating the importance of play, drawing attention to the national decline in quality play spaces and seeking change in the planning system to provide play sufficiency legislation.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) creates a specific right for all children to have rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

## **Local Context**

There are 74 Playgrounds or youth facilities managed by SWISCo on behalf of Torbay Council.

Investment from 2010 through 2012 saw an estimated replacement of 274 pieces of play equipment, this equates to an estimated 63% of the overall play stock. The funding at the time, particular playbuilder, saw an emphasises on timber and natural looking play equipment. Much of this equipment is beyond 10 years old and is reaching the end of its life. Recent years has seen the number of defects increase and the risk rating of defects rise. Defects rated as a low risk have increased to medium. This is evident in the latest annual inspections carried out in 2024 and 2025. The budget has not increased as the age of the equipment and number of defects increased. Furthermore, playground products are subject to inflation and RPI. These are the principal factors for the funding gap.

Since 2014 the annual budget for the repair, maintenance and management of play facilities has been £67,100. Of this approx. £5,000 per year is used to fund the required annual inspection, leaving £839 per play area for maintenance and replacement.

Repairs and replacement parts have to comply with relevant standards and as a result are not cheap, for example a new toddler swing seat is £120, a flat swing seat

£70 and a basket swing seat is £2000. Many of the pieces of play equipment have complex moving parts or bearings which can be in excess of £1000 to replace.

Given the limited budget the primary factor in allocating repairs, maintenance and replacement is limiting or preventing health and safety risk and the focus in the short term has to be on those parks presenting the highest risk and liability. This approach does limit SWISCo's ability to arrange repairs on a play value, community benefit or on an improvement basis.

The estimated cost to totally replace all existing play equipment, safety surfacing and associated infrastructure in its current form and distribution is over £6,000,000 (6 million). Whilst this is not an immediate requirement, it provides an indication of the scale and value of the current provision and the level of ongoing investment and maintenance considering an average lifespan of ten years for play equipment.

Following the most recent annual external inspection approx. 40% of the play areas in Torbay have been found to present a moderate to high risk which has to be resolved within 3 months, in most cases the cause of the risk is the age and condition of the equipment. With the limited maintenance budget funds are not available to carry out the necessary repairs so removal or decommissioning of equipment will have to be seriously considered.

There is a fundamental relationship between the equipment and the safety surfacing around it. The regulations regarding play equipment include statutory provision of safety surfacing to prevent injury from falling. The type, depth and area of the surfacing is mandatory depending on the equipment and the provision of it is at least as expensive in many cases as the play equipment itself.

During the play builder years there was a preference for cheaper rubber mat safety surfacing. This product is no longer considered compliant in many cases where it is currently used and would not be permissible in a new installation. Rubber mat is difficult and costly to maintain and looks visually unappealing. The amount of rubber mat used in Torbay play areas increases maintenance costs but would be very expensive to replace.

In order to make the safety surface sustainable and useable in the long term significant and costly ground preparation required, top soil has to be removed and replaced with compacted hardcore material to provide a solid foundation.

The type and quantity of safety surfacing is unique to the equipment it relates to and it is generally not possible to replace equipment without significant replacement of the surfacing around it and in many cases the defect rating and risk is itself a result of deteriorated surfacing.

Many of the play areas provided by new development over the last 30 years were done so by developers against out dated policy guidance or with no consideration of future use or maintenance, as a result Torbay has a legacy of badly designed and under used play areas.

A wider understanding of the long term plan for a play area is required to commit the investment to replace a piece of play equipment or an area of safety surfacing due to the significant expense involved and the need to not replace surfacing around equipment that itself is near end of life or the additional cost of surfacing around a new piece of equipment.

## Capital Funding

There is currently £500,000 of Council capital funding available for improvements to play. It is essential that this funding is allocated in the most effective way, to limit the risk to the Council of high risk play areas and deliver the highest level of play provision in the areas most in need. Simply allocating the capital funding evenly across all the current play areas would result in less than £7,000 per play area, resulting in low levels of improvement, in some cases where it is not required and offer no long term strategy for a sustainable play provision.

## Improvement Strategy

In order to make most use of all available future funding a strategic approach is required to ensure improvements and replacements are delivered in a coordinated manner to provide best value for our communities.

The vision for this improvement strategy is:

*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.*

## Key Considerations:

- **Quality not Quantity** – High quality well equipped play areas, evenly and suitably distributed that provide a significant range of play opportunities for users of all abilities rather than a large number of small under equipped spaces that provide little play value but are expensive to maintain. Innovative design and use of materials and the natural landscape can provide a far more valuable and inclusive play experience at a fraction of the cost and liability.
- **Safety Surfacing** - it will be understood that safety surfacing is an integral and essential part of the play area so it will be as high quality as possible.
- **Natural Play** - play areas do not have to be full of equipment – green spaces offer safe and attractive opportunities for imaginative and free play. With suitable conditioning and signposting safe and welcoming spaces can be created which do not require large amounts of expensive equipment.
- **Engagement** - Members will be consulted throughout the process and will be invited to join staff on walks around the clusters to discuss options and suggestions. When appropriate local schools and youth provisions will be engaged for opinion and design ideas.

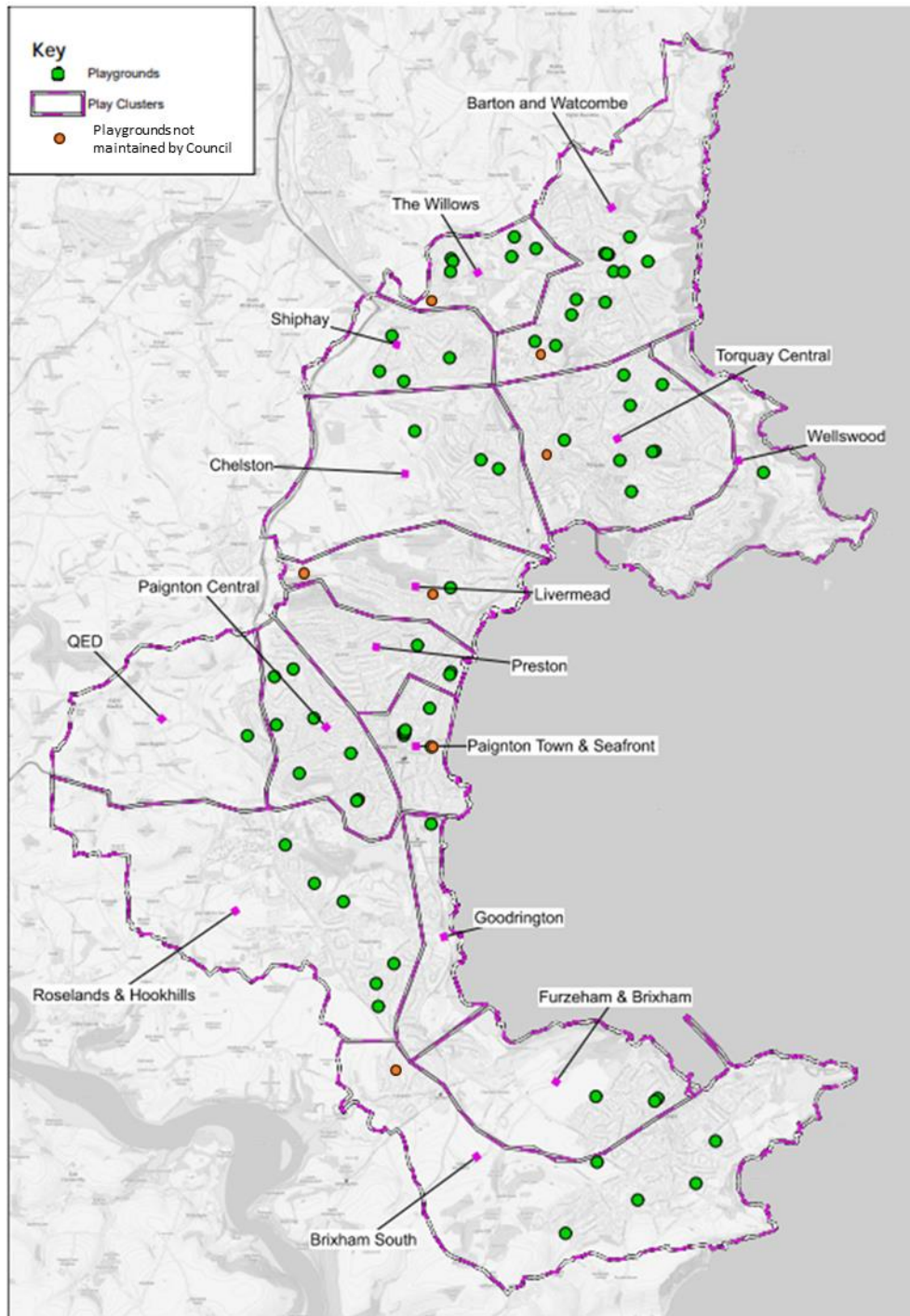
- **Clear Priorities** – using socio-economic data and play area specific risk, condition and play value information a priority list will be created to ensure available funding is allocated in the most appropriate and effective way.
- **Master Planning** – each site that will be retained, regardless of priority and available funding will be subject to a master plan to guide ad hoc replacement and maintenance actions to ensure they are in line with the overall strategy.
- **Safety and Reduction of Risk** – There are a number of play areas that have significantly deteriorated and are beyond end of life. The improvement strategy aims to create a safe play provision above all else so in some instances equipment will be removed without being immediately replaced.
- **Future Developments** – to be actively involved in discussions with developers to ensure Section 106 agreements and funding is in line with the overall strategy

## **Clusters**

Given the high number of play areas and nuances around each area the Bay has been divided into Clusters. The rationale for the clusters is based on the proximity and number of play areas and more importantly defined in area by the communities that are likely to use them as local assessable play spaces considering population density and major boundary factors such as main roads.

Analysing play provision on a cluster basis allows a more strategic approach to be taken; by looking at play areas in groups rather than individually a better overall picture of community play provision is achieved and improvements can be targeted to achieve overall quality above quantity improvements. The clusters will be used and considered to help inform prioritisation of investment and type of play area.

Map showing Clusters and Play Areas



## **Analysis and Priority**

Play areas have been assessed and scored against the following criteria to provide an evidence based approach to understanding the areas presenting the greatest risk and opportunity for improvement against the key principles of the vision and strategy

**Condition** All of the play areas have been inspected by qualified staff and an assessment made of the current condition in terms of age, appearance, structural condition, wear levels in moving parts and quality/condition of safety surfacing.

**Play Value** Based on Play England criteria this assessment looks at the type of variety of play functions within the play area and how much opportunity it offers for children to enjoy the experience. It is not necessarily reflective of the amount of equipment and in some cases natural play areas with low levels of equipment can score highly.

**Risk** Created using the 2025 annual external inspection reports this provides an indication of the level of risk and liability for the Council.

**Deprivation and Age** Using census data these score provide information around the level of population below 15 and the Multiple deprivation Index level

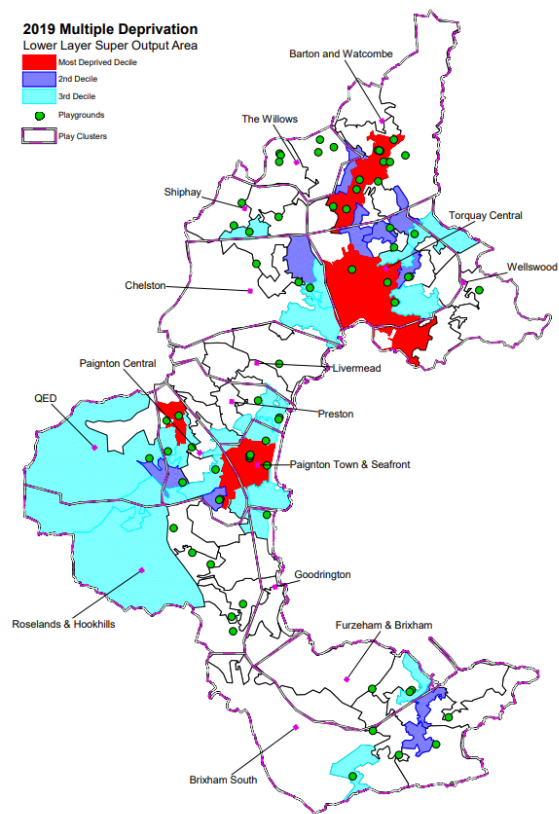
Scores for all criteria are from 1 – 5 with 5 being the most positive

Table of overall scores ranked in priority order

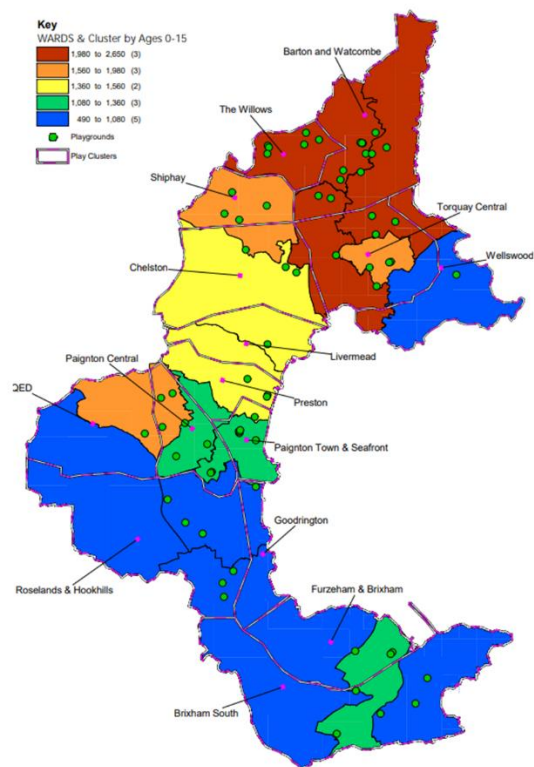
CLUSTER	Number of Play Areas	Average Play Value	Average Condition Score	Average Risk Score	Deprivation Score	Age Score	TOTAL
Barton & Watcombe	12	2.5	2.3	2.1	1	1	8.9
Torquay Central	13	3.1	2.7	2.2	1	1	10
Shiphay	4	1.8	2.3	2.5	3	2	11.6
Chelston	3	2.7	2.7	2	2	3	12.4
Paignton Central	7	3	2.7	2.3	1	4	13
QED	1	3	3	3	2	2	13
Paignton Town & Seafront	2	3	1.5	3.5	1	4	13
Willows	6	3.2	3.2	2.3	4	1	13.7
Livermead	1	3	2	2	4	3	14
Preston	3	3.3	2.7	3	3	3	15
Wellswood	1	3	2	1	4	5	15
Brixham South	6	2.7	3.3	3	2	4	15
Roselands & Hookhills	6	2.5	2.5	2	3	5	15
Goodrington	1	3	3	2	3	5	16
Furzeham \ Brixham	3	3.3	3	3.3	4	4	17.6



Map showing Clusters and Multiple Deprivation Index



Map Showing Play Areas and population between 0 – 15 years of age



## **Next Steps**

It is proposed that Members are offered the opportunity to attend a programme of site visits to each cluster. The site visits will provide an opportunity to brief Members on the general issues associated with play and the need for a strategic plan, highlight and agree mitigation for the immediate risks and to discuss and agree a suitable way forward in terms of improving and rationalising the play provision within the cluster. Within some there clusters there are play areas with exceptional and outlying scores which potentially require urgent attention not necessarily in line with the overall cluster score

The results of these visits can then be master planned, costed and on a priority basis a programme of work can be delivered to the value of the available funding. Furthermore, the improvement strategy will provide an indication for the level of future funding required and a guide for future improvements.

Where suitable and required, designs for new equipment and play areas can be shared with the local community for opinion and preference.

It is proposed that the programme of site visits be complete by end of June (see appendix one) with results and master planning being available by the end of July. This timeline would allow procurement and installation of new equipment and play areas to be carried out to be complete for spring 2026.

## Appendix 1 Proposed Dates for Cluster Visits

CLUSTER	Meeting Place	Date	Time
Barton & Watcombe	Starpitan Green	21.5.25	5.30 - 7
Torquay Central	Ellacombe Park	4.6.25	5.30 – 7
Shiphay	Shiphay Park	14.5.25	5.30 - 7
Chelston	Shiphay Park	14.5.25	5.30 - 7
Paignton Central	Victoria Park PGN	28.5.25	5.30 - 7
QED	Victoria Park PGN	28.5.25	5.30 - 7
Paignton Town & Seafront	Preston Green	3.6.25	5.30 - 7
Willows	Starpitan Green	21.5.25	5.30 - 7
Livermead	Preston Green	3.6.25	5.30 - 7
Preston	Preston Green	3.6.25	5.30 – 7
Wellswood	Stoodley Knowle	10.6.25	5.30 - 7
Brixham South	Furzeham Green	27.5.25	5.30 - 7
Roselands & Hookhills	Youngs Park	11.6.25	5.30 - 7
Goodrington	Youngs Park	11.6.25	5.30 - 7
Furzeham \ Brixham	Furzeham Green	27.5.25	5.30 - 7