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Risk control

Play: The Universal Language of Children



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Play: The Universal Language of Children

Introduction

The 'Play Strategy For Scotland: Our Vision'¹ is an initiative launched by the Scottish Government in 2013 as part of their wider ambition for Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up. The strategy promotes the value of play as a life-enhancing experience for all children and young people – not just at home but in nurseries, schools and within communities. The strategy sets out the Scottish Government's desire for children to be able to play freely and safely whilst learning to manage risks for themselves and begin to make choices.

What is Play?

The Play Strategy states that "Play comes in many forms. It can be active, passive, solitary, independent, assisted, social, exploratory, educational or just for fun. Moreover, it can happen indoors or outdoors, it can be structured, creative, messy, entirely facilitated by the imagination or can involve using the latest gadgets. Many people say it's a child's 'job' to play and the whole of society has a role in ensuring we can support children to behave as children, minimising the pressure on them to grow up too quickly. We consider play as the primary tool for addressing this challenge, through allowing children and young people to experience fun, joy and laughter in a way that is important to them"¹.

Why is it Important?

The Strategy makes reference to Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)² which states that every child has the "right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and participate freely in cultural life and the arts".

Play is the universal language of children and a fundamental part of any childhood. Its deeper benefits are that children who experience a rich play experience concentrate better in class and have better break time behaviour in school. By investing in children in their early years; the Scottish Government believes it will reap the rewards economically and socially in later years.

The Play Strategy is supported by an action plan³, with both contributing directly towards national outcomes via the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) approach which underpins and supports all policies for children and young people while complementing proposals in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill and supporting the 3 main social policy frameworks; Early Years Framework, Equally Well and Achieving our Potential.

Bringing the Strategy to Life

The Play Strategy is accompanied by the 'Play Strategy Action Plan'⁴ which sets out the activities that are needed to be delivered by multiple bodies, including local authorities, in order to achieve the aims of the strategy and improve the play experiences of all children and young people, including those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The timeline for delivering the actions ranged from 6-12 months through to 3+ years, which is why the actions within the Play Strategy are still actively being implemented today. There were many actions for local authorities to deliver.

These include the requirement to:

- Investigate and review good practice in reaching all parents and carers with clear messages and guidance on cost effective resources and suggestions for play suitable for children of all ages, stages and abilities.
- Audit current levels of community access to school grounds (including the wider school environment of streets and routes to school) and identify key influencing factors. Consider options for increasing community access to school playgrounds out of school hours. Put forward recommendations for piloting, evaluating and sharing good practice.
- Work to achieve high quality school grounds in new build schools which are consistent with the Good School Playground Guide.
- Task a working group to identify steps required to support the development of a Play Policy in every local authority including reference to the six priorities of single outcome agreements.

The Local Authority Role

The Scottish Government has invested significantly in the provision of financial funding for infrastructure and projects to bring the strategy to life.

Each local authority is tasked with delivering a Play Policy which should include the design and build of outdoor play equipment in school grounds and in natural and wild spaces.

Whilst the benefits of these provisions are clear, local authorities must be mindful of the property and liability risks which can attach.

Where the erection or installation of a play area or play equipment foreseeably introduces either a casualty or property risk, the council must ensure a suitable and sufficient risk assessment is in place to control any hazards.

If council officers do not have the required competence to undertake the required risk assessments, then the authority must access external sources of competence.

Further Support

RMP Risk Control have experience in assisting clients in all areas of liability risk management, including play equipment and play areas. More specifically, we have experience in assisting local authorities in the following areas:

- Casualty review of management systems designed to control the risk of pupil injury from playground equipment.
- **Note:** the duty to ensure the area and equipment are risk assessed and controlled is the responsibility of the local authority and we are unable to complete the risk assessments on behalf of the council.
- Where disputes arise between the education authority/schools and parents over the safety of equipment or play areas, we have reviewed the play area and provided recommendations on resolution steps.
- Training for school staff on the risk assessment process to support them in carrying out required risk assessments on their play areas.

References

1. Play Strategy For Scotland: Our Vision. Available online at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/play-strategy-scotland-vision/>
2. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf>
3. Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Action Plan – Part A: Context, Section 2: Policy Context. Available online at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/play-strategy-scotland-action-plan/pages/3/>
4. Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Action Plan - Part B: The Plan for Action. Available online at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/play-strategy-scotland-action-plan/pages/4/>
5. Progress review of Scotland's Play Strategy 2021. Play in a COVID-19 context. Available online at: <https://www.playscotland.org/about/play-strategy/>

Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.

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