

Play Associations Grants Decision Report

Decision to be taken by: City Mayor
Decision to be taken on: 25th February 2025
Lead director: Laurence Jones

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: Western, Saffron, Wycliffe, Abbey, Castle, Spinney Hills, Troon
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- Report version number: 1.1

1. Summary

- 1.1. Leicester City Council recognises the importance of play in children’s lives and has provided an annual grant to nine play associations across the city for a number of years. These play associations are independent registered charities and their core activity is the delivery of a play offer for primary school aged children predominantly through a “open, supervised play” delivered on Council land. The Council recognises the challenges for Play Associations in establishing regular income so that they can be self-sustaining and provides the land for the play associations to operate on free of charge and has agreed licenses for the Play Associations to continue to occupy the sites from April 2025- March 2030 on the basis of a number of conditions, the central one being the continued delivery of regular open access play. The 2024-25 grant levels are shown below:

Ref	Provider	Annual Grant Funding Allocation
1.	Braunstone Adventure Playground	£116,978
2.	Goldhill Play Association	£116,340
3.	Highfields Adventure Playground Association	£109,848
4.	Mowmacre Young People’s Play and development Association	£84,110
5.	New Parks Play Association	£121,200
6.	Northfields and District play Association Playbarn	£138,991
7.	St Andrews Play Association	£88,689
8.	St Matthews Childrens Action Group	£84,186
9.	Woodgate Adventure Playground	£116,575
	Total	£976,917

- 1.2. Whilst professionally supervised play is not a statutory service and most local authorities across the country ceased funding these activities some years ago Leicester has continued to recognise the role play has in child development and the popularity of such provision with local communities.
- 1.3. Unfortunately, the medium-term financial outlook for the Council is the most severe we have known, in all our years as a unitary authority. This is a common position across the local authority sector compounded by recent budget pressures, particularly in respect of children’s social care and accommodating homeless people.

- 1.4. Due to the financial position of the Council the future funding for discretionary activities are at significant risk and given this it is important that play associations are able to move to a position where they can be self-sustaining without ongoing grant funding from the local authority and they will require some time and support in order to be able to do this. The Children's Social Care division of the Social Care and Education Department has savings targets of £0.5 million in 2025-26 and a further £0.5 million (cumulatively £1m) in 2026-27. In order to deliver the recommendations in this report and to facilitate the saving in 2025-26 we propose to delay project starts and manage staffing vacancies in our children and family early help and prevention services to release the £500k required to meet the savings target and provide this level of grant to the Play Associations. This may lead to reduced service availability or increased waiting times for support for some families.

2. Recommendations

Executive are asked to:

- 2.1 To approve the making of grant in 2025/26 to the Play Associations, equal to the grant 2024/25 paid in two instalments.
- 2.2 The grants will be made on the basis that the Play Associations continue support open play and work towards self-sustainability.
- 2.3 To approve the ceasing of grants to the Play Associations from 31 March 2026
- 2.4 For officers to work with Play Associations to explore, where needed, longer term tenancy options
- 2.5 Note the delivery of the annual saving of £1m from 2026/27.

3. Supporting information including options considered:

- 3.1 The Play Associations have received annual grants for many years. Over the last decade the council has identified similar voluntary sector organisations providing non-statutory services and has withdrawn funding to make savings on increasingly pressured budgets. The Play Associations have previously been informed that grants were likely to end after the 2024-25 financial year and were written to formally on the 18th March and had meetings with the Lead Member and Senior Officers on 25 March 2024 to discuss the implications of this and

the need to develop alternative revenue streams. The Associations have been creating business plans with alternatives to local authority funding since this time and all reported in September 2024 that these plans were in place. Some reported they have new models of business to provide funding and some are awaiting grant applications from national organisations. The provision of further grants for 2025-26 will give the Play Associations additional support whilst they continue to explore how they can become financially self-sustaining.

- 3.2 There has been reconsideration of grant funding from the Play Associations a number of times over the last decade and with support from the local authority and partners such as Voluntary Action LeicesterShire (VAL) some associations have developed their range of activities and funding sources and so are more resilient. During the past year Play Associations have had been given access to the advice of the Play Development Worker and the Third Sector Development Worker from the council. All nine Associations notified the local authority in September 2024 that they had plans to for sustainable funding for the future, although some depended upon grant applications from other sources or on charitable fund raising. Other have developed income from commercial sources or other commissioned activity such as alternative provisions schooling or short breaks for disabled children.
- 3.3 The success of some Play Associations in moving a significant way towards sustainability and improving their governance and oversight paves the way for all of the Associations to have a bright and vibrant future independent of annual grant cycles from the local authority. It is recognised that in the development of a strong early help offer which prevents the need for more expensive social care, health and justice services that grass routes community organisations may be well placed to deliver on services tendered by public sector partners in the future given their ability to engage children and families that statutory services can find it difficult to reach.

Options explored and preferred option.

- 3.4 The option of continuing to grant each Play Association at the same level has been considered but is not financially achievable for the local authority and leaves the Play Association themselves vulnerable to sudden funding withdrawal, particularly as they are non-statutory services.
- 3.5 Funding some priority Play Associations for a longer period and ceasing funding immediately for some has been scoped. All of the Play Associations operate in localities where there is deprivation and where the community support a continued presence. Given that, prioritisation has been discounted as the impact of sudden closure would be detrimental to local children.
- 3.6 Immediate cessation of all grant funding or giving just a half years grant has been considered. Given the variability across the Play Associations in terms of preparation for independence this would inevitably lead to the closure of some of the provision. There are good examples of where some settings have

diversified, for example providing funded childcare, short breaks for disabled children, Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) and alternative provision schooling. This, alongside funding raising and working with other community organisation, shows there is an opportunity for Play Associations to operate successfully without the Council's grant funding but time would be needed for all to make the transition.

3.7 Transferring provision to the Council's own youth service has been considered. Whilst this could be significantly cheaper, £28,000-£35,000 per setting for 15 hours of play over 40 weeks and using HAF for holiday activities, it remains a cost that is unaffordable for a discretionary service without a clear evidence base for preventing need in high-cost statutory services.

3.8 The preferred option is for final grants to be made for the 2025-26 financial year which will in total have given the Play Association two years to develop and instigate business change so that they are self-sufficient. As the Play Development Officer post, which previously oversaw conditions of grant, is to be disestablished there will be minimal monitoring requirements.

4. Details of Scrutiny

4.1 There has been significant engagement with each of the Play Associations over recent months and communication to make them aware of the Council's financial position. The future of Adventure Playgrounds has also been considered by Children and Young People's Scrutiny Commission on 26 March, 19 June, 20 August and 29 October 2024

4.2 A petition was submitted and debated by Full Council on 5 September 2024 which resulted in a motion that Executives of the Council would agree five-year licenses for the Play Associations, deliver of the 2024-25 funding commitments and offer one off funding for the year 2025-26. It was also resolved that a further report would be brought back to Full Council as a date in the future.

5. Financial, legal and other implications

5.1 Financial implications

The report proposes to continue providing a grant in 2025/26 to support the play associations through the transition to identify alternative funding models. The budget for 2025/26 set a target saving of £1m for Children's. The report proposes action to make savings of £1m in a full year from 2026/27.

Amy Oliver, Director of Finance

10 February 2025.

5.2 Legal implications

Grant arrangements are in place for this current financial year and new grant conditions will be entered into in line with the Recommendations of this report if approved.

Alongside there is a licence to occupy in place with each of the Play Associations for this current financial year with new licences in place for a 5 year period through to March 2030.

Kevin Carter, Head of Law - Commercial, Property & Planning
17 February 2025

5.3 Climate Change and Carbon Reduction implications

There are likely to be limited climate emergency implications directly associated with this report, especially where adventure playgrounds are able to continue operating at current levels. As part of their work to achieve financial sustainability, play associations could be encouraged to consider opportunities to increase energy efficiency and therefore reduce energy bills, which may act as a significant cost pressure. For example, this could include signposting around potential grants and funding to support the delivery of such work, where available and appropriate.

Duncan Bell, Change Manager (Climate Emergency). Ext. 37 2249
18 February 2025

5.4 Equalities Implications

When making decisions, the Council must comply with the public sector equality duty (PSED) (Equality Act 2010) by paying due regard, when carrying out their functions, to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a 'protected characteristic' and those who do not.

In order to demonstrate that the consideration of equalities impacts is taken into account, and as an integral part of the process an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is being undertaken.

Further advice and guidance can be sought from the Corporate Equalities Team.

Corporate Equalities Team.
18 February 2025

5.5 Other Implications (You will need to have considered other implications in preparing this report. Please indicate which ones apply?)

6. Background information and other papers:

7. Summary of appendices:

8. Is this a private report (If so, please indicated the reasons and state why it is not in the public interest to be dealt with publicly)?

No

9. Is this a “key decision”?

Yes