

Leicester City Council

Scrutiny Review

**A review of support for Adventure
Playgrounds**

**A Review Report of the Overview
Select Committee**

February – August 2025

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Overview Select Committee

Commission Members:

Councillor Joel (Chair)
Councillor March
Councillor Batool
Councillor Waddington
Councillor Pickering
Councillor Zaman
Councillor O'Neill
Councillor Rae Bhatia
Councillor Osman
Councillor Dave
Councillor Kitterick
Councillor Porter

Evidence Presented by:

Strategic Director of Social Care and Education

VCSE Engagement Manager

Representatives from:

Highfields Adventure Playground Association
Mowmacre Young People's Play & Development Association
Goldhill Play Association – Also representing WhatCabin
Braunstone Adventure Playground
St Andrews Play Association
Woodgate Adventure Playground
Northfield's District Play Association

Chair's Foreword

Adventure playgrounds and the play associations who deliver their services provide a valuable service to families in Leicester. They provide a chance for children to be active, develop social skills and gain confidence in a safe and supervised environment, as well as bringing communities together. They are particularly valuable resource during school holidays and to families who in recent times are faced with challenging choices but require safe engaging spaces and opportunities for their children but who may not have the means to go further afield.

The changes in the ways in which play associations in Leicester are supported has caused a degree of concern within scrutiny. There is some concern that these playgrounds, and the play associations that deliver valuable services, will be lost due to a lack of long-term sustainable funding.

It is hoped that the recommendations from this task group can be taken on board as potential ways for the Council to provide support for the adventure playgrounds and play associations so as to ensure that they can continue operating in a sustainable way and optimise opportunities for external funding.



Councillor Ashiedu Joel

Chair, Overview Select Committee

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Background to the Review and Key Findings

- 1.1.1. At the Overview Select Committee on 30th January 2025, concern was raised about the withdrawal of funding to adventure playgrounds.
- 1.1.2. Concerns raised by OSC related to the unpredictability of funding, their ability to be financial sustainable without the funding and the statutory framework not recognising the uniqueness of the adventure playgrounds and the services they provide.
- 1.1.3. In February 2025, a decision was made to stop providing grants to the play associations from 31 March 2026.

1.2 Recommendations

The Executive are asked to consider the following recommendations:

- 1.1.4. That the Council communicate all opportunities for bids and funding as they become available to the Play Associations.
- 1.1.5. For Leicester City Council (LCC) to underwrite the risk with regard to Adventure Playgrounds/Play Associations in order to provide stability and security. This would require a budget being produced for 2026/27 detailing how much is needed for each Play Association to continue their current level of service and the likelihood of gaining external income to cover these costs and the Council to meet the deficit between each position.
- 1.1.6. That perspectives be heard on whether funding from external sources would replace funding from LCC. In terms of how much could be provided from external funders.
- 1.1.7. That LCC aim to keep playgrounds going and updated on status of Better Futures Fund with regards to support on applications. Until more is known about the Better Futures Fund.
- 1.1.8. That the Council provide longer leases (suggested 15 years) to help play associations be eligible for certain types of funding.
- 1.1.9. That the Council provide clarity on the processes for Community Asset Transfer. (A paper be produced by property services by September 2025 to explain leases, licences and asset transfer.)
- 1.1.10. That an impact assessment on the eventuality of the closure of Adventure Playgrounds be produced by December 2025.

2 Report

1.3 Background

- 1.1.11. On 13th February 2025, an initial meeting was held on the matter, prior to the decision being taken on the withdrawal of funding. At this meeting, the following proposal was made to the City Mayor:

“We request that the City Mayor commits to funding the adventure playgrounds at the same level during 2025/26 as a minimum, but ideally for the next 3 years, so that the same level of services can be provided. We also request that the Executive works with OSC to look at the long-term sustainable funding of the playgrounds. We would like an indication of the City Mayor’s position on their funding before the Council budget meeting.”

- 1.1.12. On 26th February 2025, the Executive Decision was taken (effective from 6th March 2025):
- To approve the making of grant in 2025/26 to the Play Associations, equal to the grant 2024/25.
 - The grants will be made on the basis that the Play Associations continue to support open play and work towards self-sustainability.
 - To approve the ceasing of grants to the Play Associations from 31 March 2026
 - For officers to work with Play Associations to explore, where needed, longer term tenancy options.
- 1.1.13. At Overview Select Committee on 19th March 2025, it was suggested that whilst the working group on adventure playgrounds had met, it would be useful for it to continue to look and how playgrounds could be helped and supported in continuing to operate sustainably.

1.4 Further Sessions

Points made on 3rd June 2025

- 1.1.14. Concern was raised that the cession of funding at the end of the year could cause severe difficulties for the sustainability of adventure playgrounds as it could prove difficult for them to obtain resources from elsewhere and to generate income. The need for sustainability of the play associations was highlighted. In response to this it was reported that so far, three playgrounds had formed a consortium with a business model for sustainability through re-structured governance and staffing, as well as strategies such as opening the premises during the day for alternative schooling to generate income to support open-access play, or by setting up nursery provision. A further four had sustainable models.

- 1.1.15. Further to this it was explained that playgrounds had received a full year's funding with no grant conditions for this year in order to help them.
- 1.1.16. It was stressed that playgrounds should be supported where possible, and questions were raised about the possibility of providing support on fund raising strategies as applying for funding was very competitive. In response to this it was suggested that the play associations had been given access to the VCSE Engagement Manager but had not utilised her services. Other than the VCSE Engagement Manager, there was not much skill on fundraising in the context of this sector in the council, although the Council does commission the voluntary sector for activity.
- 1.1.17. It is possible that other groups such as Voluntary Action Leicester (VAL) have offers for the play associations.
- 1.1.18. There have been conversations between the play associations and the National Lottery Community Fund. It was suggested that it could be the case that if the play associations formed a single community interest association rather than acting individually, they could be more successful in applying for funding and could also reduce costs in management. The National Lottery had their own decision-making process on who receives funding. A number of approaches had been made by play associations and it was thought that one had received a small grant.
- 1.1.19. An email from St Andrews's play association had expressed the desire to maintain a link with the Council either through direct funding or commissioning as this would provide stability, raise their profile and make them more of an attractive proposition for prospective partners. The email had also noted that they were conscious of potential funding coming on stream, for preventative work with youth groups and they wished to be in a position to assist the Authority in the delivery of such services. It could not be confirmed what was referred to with regard to the work with youth groups.
- 1.1.20. Initially the play associations were not due to receive any funding this year but had now received parachute grants which could be used flexibly, and they had free licence on the playgrounds for five years with an option for longer-term leases. It was further clarified that the play associations were independent charities, and it was not for the Council to tell them how to operate. It was stressed that there was a need for clarity that the funding would end and there would be no further payments once it did.
- 1.1.21. There would be opportunities for the voluntary sector, but not regarding the commissioning of play activity.
- 1.1.22. Concern was raised that if funding was withdrawn by the end of March, people working for the play associations could be made redundant by the end of the year, as such the Council needed to move quickly.

- 1.1.23. It was suggested that there needed to be dedicated resource around fundraising to help groups, and if this could be offered then the Council could help the groups.
- 1.1.24. It was suggested that it would be beneficial to maintain ties with the play associations. In response to this it was noted that there was still dialogue between the Council and the play associations and a representative from an association attended Children's Trust meetings, so a connection was maintained, although there was no longer a funding relationship.
- 1.1.25. The grant made to play associations this year was made on the basis that they continued to support open play and worked to sustainability. The executive decision was made and was not called in. Further funding from Council would require a separate decision and an available budget.
- 1.1.26. Meetings with VAL and the VCSE Engagement manager could be considered on what options may be available and where signposting could be offered.
- 1.1.27. It was clarified that there were nine play associations across the city who ran playgrounds on LCC land under licence. This means that the playgrounds are independent of the play associations. If the play associations no longer existed, the playgrounds would not necessarily disappear. If the play associations ceded control of a playgrounds, options could be Community Asset Transfers or small tenders. To clarify a Community Asset Transfer is a form of disposal from the Council and in such a case the playground would not necessarily transfer to the play association and would be open to bids from groups to say what they would do with it and would be competitive. As such, there was limited enthusiasm for Community Asset Transfer.
- 1.1.28. It was deemed necessary to consider how play associations could continue to run premises and be able to put in a strong application in the case of Community Asset Transfer.

Points made on 18th July 2025 (Meeting with Play Associations)

Points from Braunstone Play Association

- 1.1.29. A small amount of additional funding had been secured for existing roles.
- 1.1.30. The reorganisation surrounding those posts did not guarantee longevity or replace funding.
- 1.1.31. There was a commitment to open-access play and maintaining a level of service to the users and families of users, and to meeting the needs of the community.
- 1.1.32. The Adventure Playgrounds were exploring opportunities for funding and sustainability, collectively and individually.

- 1.1.33. Adventure Playgrounds concluded that the future of the playgrounds was uncertain without council funding.
- 1.1.34. Feedback from the communities and families indicated a preference to maintain a play service without transitioning into different provision.
- 1.1.35. Adventure Playgrounds brought communities together and added value to family life by encouraging play and promoting healthy lifestyles. This had been of particular value post-Covid.
- 1.1.36. The Adventure Playgrounds remained flexible in their approach and were adaptive to change.
- 1.1.37. There was a long-standing infrastructure, and trust had been built up in the neighbourhoods over several decades.
- 1.1.38. It was felt that if the AP's closed, this would be final, and that there was not a route back.

Other Points from Play Associations

- 1.1.39. Budgets had been tight over the previous 25 years and cutbacks had already been made.
- 1.1.40. Families in need utilised the services across the generations, with some current parents having attended as children themselves.
- 1.1.41. Other existing initiatives might not have the long-established family relationships.
- 1.1.42. Staff workloads were already stretched, and staff were not employed on bid writing.
- 1.1.43. The transition to becoming a money-making organisation would be difficult and help was requested from the Council.
- 1.1.44. The grants market was competitive.
- 1.1.45. Communications were awaited following discussions on leases.
- 1.1.46. National Lottery Funding bids had been unsuccessful so far.
- 1.1.47. Clarity was required on processes and business planning.
- 1.1.48. Core funding hadn't been sufficient previously, a lack of funding would mean that PAs could fold.

- 1.1.49. Services provided at the Adventure Playgrounds such as school holiday activities and food programmes could be discontinued if the Play Associations folded.
- 1.1.50. Adventure Playgrounds welcomed advice on community asset management.

Points from members

- 1.1.51. The possibility of Play Associations obtaining funding from the Governments Better Futures Fund was raised.
- 1.1.52. It was queried whether impact assessments could be carried out for areas if Adventure Playgrounds closed down.
- 1.1.53. Clarity was sought on around what Community Asset Transfer entailed.
- 1.1.54. It was requested that an officer from Property Services attend to clarify issues around leases, licences and Community Asset Transfer.
- 1.1.55. It was suggested that funding from the Council had helped Play Associations support LCC initiatives, so the knock-on effect of losing funding would be that LCC would lose these services.

Points from Officers (Strategic Director of Social Care and Education and VCSE Engagement Manager)

- 1.1.56. The final six-month grant would be paid to the APs in October 2025.
- 1.1.57. The difficulty of securing funding was acknowledged.
- 1.1.58. There were a number of possibilities, including The Better Futures Fund where funds would go direct to organisations.
- 1.1.59. Information from government schemes could be relayed to the Adventure Playgrounds.
- 1.1.60. The current offer from central government was limited with a narrowing of funding for community organised endeavours.
- 1.1.61. Adventure Playgrounds were encouraged to continue the discussion surrounding leases. Any decision to award a lease over seven years needs to go through the Council's property disposal policy. It would be the same for a Community Asset Transfer.
- 1.1.62. Community asset transfer could be an avenue to explore, but this could present risks.
- 1.1.63. The Adventure Playgrounds were already in touch with field experts such as the National Lottery team.

- 1.1.64. The funding market was notably challenging.
- 1.1.65. The Adventure Playgrounds would be invited to networking events and would be included as VCSEs.
- 1.1.66. Dialogue could remain open so that APs could be updated on external grants that may become available.
- 1.1.67. Liaisons with the Neighbourhoods Team could be useful.

1.5 Benchmarking

Islington London Borough Council

- 1.1.68. Islington council commissions their adventure play offer to the VCS sector, whereby all of their 12 adventure play sites are managed by three providers.
- 1.1.69. Formerly six of these were run by the Council and five by Play Associations, with one as a specialist playground for children with special needs.
- 1.1.70. The in-house playgrounds became part of a savings agenda and came out of the local authority to be run by a play association. Currently, the playgrounds are run as follows:
 - Five by a voluntary-sector organisation called 'Islington Play Association'
 - Six by an employee-led mutual called 'Awesome'
 - One by a specialist organisation called 'Kids'.
- 1.1.71. Islington London Borough Council (ILBC) continues to provide over £1m of funding per-year to these associations, over a 15-year contract, so as to provide stability.
- 1.1.72. As part of the three contracts, the play providers are required to generate additional income through various means to support delivery, such as through charitable trusts and commercial activity.
- 1.1.73. An example of this commercial activity has been from Awesome, who run a commercial offer for meetings and venue hire during school hours (up until 3pm when the playgrounds open).
- 1.1.74. No advice was given on bidding for charitable funds as the associations have their own fundraisers.

- 1.1.75. The ILBC supported playgrounds through helping with commercial offers in terms of marketing and publicity.
- 1.1.76. ILBC also offered a significant level of wider support, significant level of wider support over the years including support with income generation activities, publicity and quality assurance and safety of delivery.
- 1.1.77. ILBC has a Play Strategic group on which the Executive Member for Children and Families, Play London, and key officers sit. This group discusses strategic developments in play in the Borough. The Executive member has also issued a letter to the Minister for Children and Families to spotlight Islington as a highly supportive borough for adventure and also pledge the council's support for the recommendations set out in the recent Play Commission's report including the call for the National Play Strategy.
- 1.1.78. A call for a national play strategy has been discussed in central government and a report has been published, emphasising the benefits of play and making recommendations for the government to support play.

Nottingham City Council

- 1.1.79. Limited contact was made with Nottingham City Council, but it was acknowledged that many of adventure centres have closed down or have been moved as these were run by Council Staff, and that a number have closed or potentially been moved to third sector provision.

Manchester City Council

- 1.1.80. Originally in Manchester, Adventure Playgrounds had been run directly by the local authority, however, these were transferred out to Play Associations many years ago and are currently run by the group 'Manchester young Lives'. The Council does not deliver any of the services itself.
- 1.1.81. Manchester City Council (MCC) provides £1.6m (Roughly £50k per ward per year) funding for all youth and play provision. The Play Associations need to apply for this funding from a commissioning pot in 3-year cycles. This is an open and competitive process.
- 1.1.82. The amount of funding the Local Authority provides is a small proportion of what the Play Associations need. Therefore, MCC invests in capacity-building programmes looking at funding from other sources and helping them to build fundraising skills (i.e. how to find funding sources and complete applications and how to deliver other services from their sites).
- 1.1.83. Examples of other services delivered from the sites include an adventure playground in Wythenshawe who have a centre on their site which is used for education provision during the day which generates income and also is

available for meeting hire. Additionally, other youth providers (such as Debdale Sailing Centre) offer corporate team days.

- 1.1.84. A third-sector support agency known as Manchester Community Central (MACC) are the CVS for Manchester. They are commissioned by the local authority to provide support to all voluntary sector groups.
- 1.1.85. The Community Asset Transfer process is made use of. If a group wants to operate a former council premises and take over the building, they can go through a Community Asset Transfer whereby they need to demonstrate a robust business plan and show they can manage it effectively. This helps the groups to think about funding streams.
- 1.1.86. There are 63 groups on Community Asset Transfers, and a Community Asset Support Group was being looked into. Groups of officers from various disciplines in MCC help with Community Assets and putting leases in place. It is being looked into as to how to put in a process to help groups in the longer term.

1.6 Conclusions

- 1.1.87. Time is of the essence and Play Associations could fold whilst awaiting funds.
- 1.1.88. It is hoped that the Adventure Playgrounds risk could be underwritten.
- 1.1.89. Council funding provides a platform so Play Associations could bid for other funding.
- 1.1.90. Without a long-term lease Play Associations would struggle to secure funding.
- 1.1.91. Holding a one-year licence could prevent grant applications as sustainability would need to be proved.
- 1.1.92. The Council used to be responsible for the Adventure Playground buildings, this has dwindled and Capital Grants are required.
- 1.1.93. If alternative provision is needed, it is necessary to consider what resources are needed.

3 Financial, Legal and Other Implications

1.7 Financial Implications

The cost of the play association grants in 2025/26 is £1m. The Children's budgets from 2026/27 assumes a £1m saving, following the decision to withdraw the grant funding. Any decision to continue this funding will require alternative savings to meet the savings target in this area, otherwise will increase the budget gap for the Council.

Note that Community Asset Transfers can take place in different ways, and the financial implications of any specific proposals would require consideration as they come forward.

Mohammed Irfan – Head of Finance
05 September 2025

1.8 Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications arising from this review report, as its recommendations are not binding. It is noted that a formal Executive Decision has already been taken terminating from March 2026 the Council's grant funding of these Play Associations.

The Community Asset Transfer Policy is predicated upon a multi-stage open bidding process for sites that are deemed to be amenable for asset transfer (usually via short term lease).

The recommendations exploring the tenure of the Play Associations on their existing sites will be informed by a range of factors such as the legal status of the licensee/tenant and also the legal obligations such as repairing covenants (which tend to be more burdensome the longer the tenure) and the issue of personal responsibility that comes with leasehold status. Licenses are easier to grant and less burdensome in terms of legal obligations, though they may inhibit the ability to attract funding sources in some cases.

Kamal Adatia - City Barrister
10 September 2025

1.9 Equality Implications

Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which means that, in carrying out their functions, they have a statutory duty to pay due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't.

Protected Characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken on play association grants as part of the council's decision-making process to ensure due regard has been paid to the PSED. Whilst the EIA has identified that if funding is not secured for the play associations and adventure playgrounds, this will have an impact on current provision and those accessing the services, there are other options available across the city for play opportunities which can be accessed.

The EIA has an action plan which highlights that accurate data is needed on who is accessing provision and promotion of play opportunities across the city, so parents are aware of what options exist.

Sukhi Biring, Equalities Officer
2 September 2025

1.10 Climate Change Implications

There are likely to be limited climate emergency implications directly associated with this report, particularly where adventure playgrounds are to continue operating at current or reduced/consolidated levels. As part of work to engage with the adventure playgrounds on future financial sustainability, consideration should be given to 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.

Phil Ball, Sustainability Officer, Ext: 372246
26th August 2025

4 Summary of Appendices

Appendix 1 – Representation from Mowmacre Playground
Appendix 2 – Representation from St Andrews Playground
Appendix 3 – Manchester City Council - Youth, Play and Participation
Commissioning Framework
Appendix 4 – Manchester City Council – Commissioning Youth and Play
Presentation

5 Officers to Contact

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