

Highland Council

Play Sufficiency Assessment

Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Measadh Pailteas Cluiche

Approved May 2026



Finalised Report

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Document Overview

The Play Sufficiency Assessment Report has five sections.

1 - Introduction

This section introduces the importance of play and what a play sufficiency assessment is. It describes the spatial scope and key terms used in the PSA.

2 - Play Context

This section presents the international, national and local context and how play is considered and supported through Council planning and amenities activities.

3 – Play Sufficiency Assessment Methodology

This section outlines the approach to assessing play sufficiency in Highland.

4 – Statements of Play Sufficiency

This section presents findings about the quantity, inclusivity, quality and accessibility of play spaces in Highland.

5 – Setting the Standards for Play

This section summarises the applications of the Play Sufficiency Assessment findings in Highland, including the Local Development Plan, Play Park Strategy and Local Place Plans

A Glossary is then provided, to explain terminology used throughout the Play Sufficiency Assessment.

Additionally, there are three Appendices to this document:

1. [Appendix 1: Play Quality Assessment Data](#)
2. [Appendix 2: Assessment Methodology](#)
3. [Appendix 3: Summary of Consultation comments.](#)

0 Executive Summary | Geàrr-chunntas Gnìomhach

What is the Play Sufficiency Assessment?

A Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) is the assessment of play spaces to provide a clear understanding of quantity, inclusivity, quality and accessibility of play. A PSA must be completed in accordance with the [Town and Country Planning \(Play Sufficiency Assessment\) \(Scotland\) Regulations](#)¹ and having regard to [Scottish Government Planning Guidance for Play Sufficiency Assessment](#)².

The Highland PSA has considered two categories of play space: Formal Play Spaces (FPS) and Informal Play Spaces (IPS). The assessment will both benefit Highland communities, stakeholders of play spaces, Council officers and elected members who are involved in decision-making of play provision. The PSA findings also form part of the evidence base that will inform the preparation of the Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP).

Our Approach

The Highland Council approach to assessing play sufficiency was developed with reference to the statutory guidance, other best-practice guidance and toolkits about play.

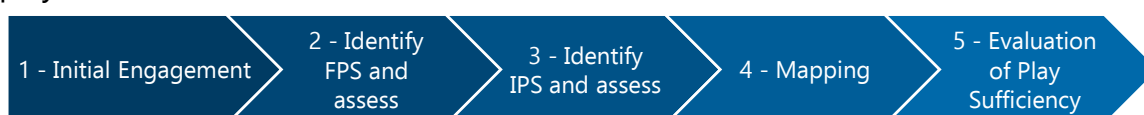


Figure 0:1 Summary of Play Sufficiency Assessment Process for Highland

This approach has five general steps, outlined in Figure 0:1, which assist the Council to develop an understanding of four dimensions of play sufficiency in Figure 0:2:

- Quantity – number of play parks within a Settlement Development Area (SDA),
- Quality – how well used and good experience do these parks provide,
- Inclusivity – how inclusive are the parks (number of play parks in Deprived areas, inclusion of inclusive equipment, etc),
- Accessibility – how reasonable walkable or cyclable are the parks from where people reside.

¹ [The Town and Country Planning \(Play Sufficiency Assessment\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2023](#)

² [Play Sufficiency Assessment Regulations 2023: planning guidance](#)

Spatial mapping and analysis supported the assessment of **Quantity** and **Inclusivity** of play. **Accessibility** to play spaces was informed by multiple evidence sources. The Council's [Local Living Tool](#) provided spatial insight into the accessibility of Council-owned play spaces, helping to understand proximity and walkable access across communities. In addition, accessibility was assessed directly through the Play Space Assessment (PSA), with play spaces scored against specific accessibility-related criterias. This combined approach ensured that both spatial access and on-the-ground accessibility considerations were reflected in the overall assessment of play space provision.



Figure 0:2 Four dimensions of Play Sufficiency Assessment.

The **Quality** of Formal Play Spaces was assessed using six categories* (Figure 0:3), each with a range of criteria.

Timeline:

- **2023** – Following the introduction of the 2023 Regulations, assessment work was aligned to the updated statutory requirements.
- **2023** – The Council's Amenities Team conducted surveys of all Council-owned Formal Play Spaces (FPS) to establish a baseline understanding of existing provision.

- **2024** – The Development Plans Team undertook further surveys, focusing primarily on Informal Play Spaces (IPS) and non-Council-owned FPS, to ensure comprehensive coverage of play opportunities.
- **Early 2025** – The PSA scoring framework was refined by the Development Plans and Amenities teams to support a balanced, consistent, and fair assessment of all play spaces.
- **Early 2025** – Preparation of the PSA report commenced.
- **Later in 2025** – Development of the PSA map was undertaken.
- **16 January – 27 February 2026** – The draft PSA Report and Maps were published for public consultation, alongside a targeted consultation through schools focusing on play spaces that had received recent investment.
- **February 2026** – Consultation responses were collated, with a summary included in [Appendix 3](#) of the report.
- **Post-consultation (2026)** – Feedback was reviewed alongside factual updates and corrections, and where appropriate, changes were made to the PSA report and mapping.
- **2026** – The PSA was finalised and is now presented to the Committee for approval.



Figure 0:3 Categories used for assessment of Formal Play Space Quality in Highland

***Note:** The colours assigned above to the categories have been used throughout the assessment (PSA scoring and Map) to maintain consistency.

Summary of Findings

A total of 445 formal play spaces were surveyed across Highland Council area. The assessment has focused on Settlement Development Areas (SDAs) within Local Committee Areas (LCAs), within which 333 formal play spaces (30.25ha) and 1,037.50ha of informal play space have been identified. In addition, a further 18 play spaces have been identified during the later part of the PSA preparation process and have been added to the PSA Map to acknowledge their existence, and they will be assessed at a future stage.

Play opportunities across Highland, and the sufficiency of these opportunities vary significantly across the dimensions of quantity, quality, inclusivity and accessibility. The assessment highlights that each play space offers different functions and opportunities for play. As such, in assessing play sufficiency context is a critical consideration and play spaces should not be considered in isolation. To support a context-based understanding of play sufficiency, PSA findings are reported by Totality (Highland) and Locality (Local Committee Areas) in this PSA, and spatially presented in the online map:

The Interactive online map is accessible via link:

[**Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment Map**](#)

The individual play space **quality** scores can be viewed in the online [Play Sufficiency Assessment map](#), by clicking the point for an FPS to reveal the dashboard, as shown in Figure 0:4.

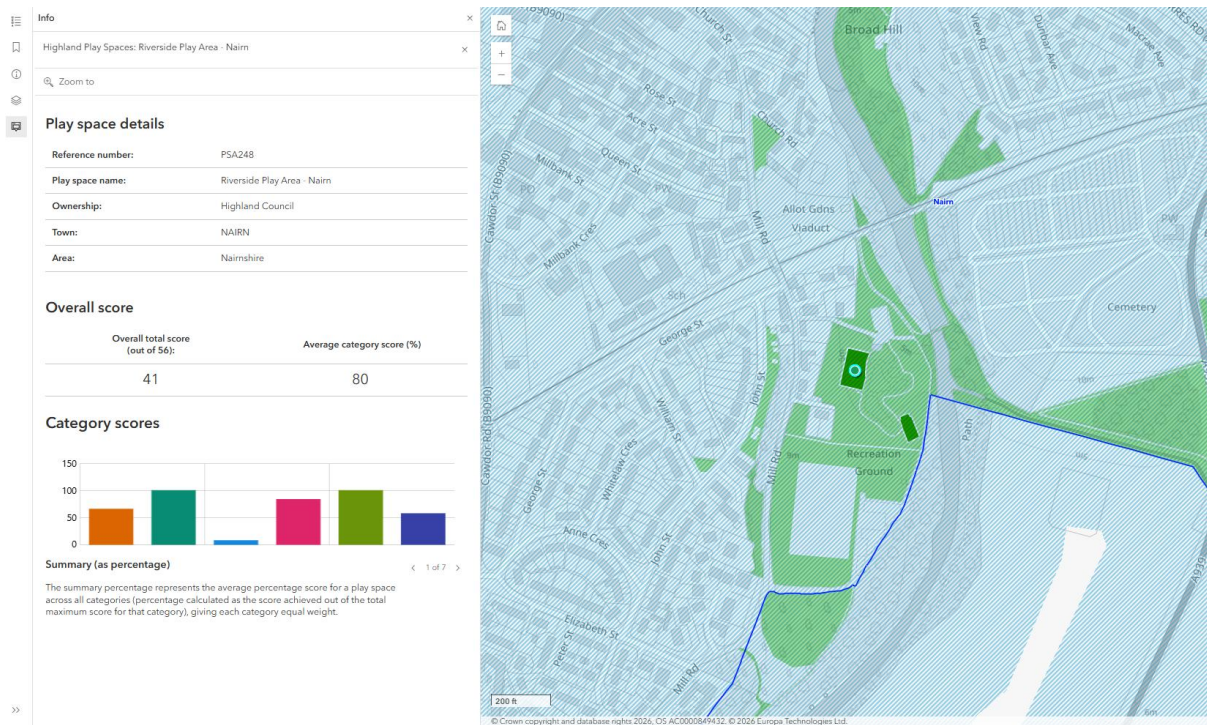


Figure 0:4 Example dashboard of play space details from online PSA Map

Quantity and Inclusivity

- A total of 445 formal play spaces were surveyed in Highland through play sufficiency assessment. Of those 333, are located within Settlement Development Areas.
- On average the provision of play space areas (m²) as a proportion of the area of Settlement Development Areas (m²) in Highland is 0.23% formal play spaces and 7.75% informal play spaces (for those identified). The highest proportion of FPS area provided within an SDA of a Local Committee Area is in Sutherland (0.42%) and the lowest is in Isle of Skye and Raasay (0.03%).

Following consultation on the draft PSA, an inclusivity analysis was undertaken alongside an assessment of formal play space provision across each Local Committee Area. The assessment focused on square-metre provision per person, allowing direct comparison with the [Open Space in New Residential Development Supplementary Guidance's](#) standard.

The analysis shows that overall provision of Formal Play Space across Highland equates to **2m² per person, which matches the current benchmark standard of 2m² per person.** However, provision varies considerably between SDA;

- Sutherland records the highest level of provision at an average of 4.2 m² per person, exceeding the guideline standard,
- While Nairnshire and the Isle of Skye and Raasay record the lowest levels, at 0.9 m² and 0.8 m² per person respectively, indicating a significant quantitative shortfall.

Notwithstanding these spatial disparities in provision, qualitative assessment indicates that many formal play parks within these Local Committee Areas perform relatively well, with scores typically ranging from moderate to high. This suggests that while overall provision matches the benchmark in several areas, the quality and inclusivity of existing facilities partly mitigates lower levels of quantitative provision.

Quality and Accessibility

All formal play spaces were assessed for **quality** and categorised into one of four quality classes overall:

Rating	Average percentage score (%)
Low	< 30%
Moderate	30% - 50%
High	50% - 75%
Very High	>75%

based on the average FPS category performance (%). The percentage of spaces within each quality class for each Local Committee Area is provided in Table 0:1.

Note: In summary tables in the following statement sections, the maximum and minimum percentage score has been highlighted for each criterion, to demonstrate the variability and spread of play quality within each category assessed. The overall Highland average (bottom row, in blue) is also included in summary tables, to indicate the average score or percentage achieved across Highland FPS, which serves as a benchmark.

Table 0:1 Summary of Formal Play Space Quality ratings, by Local Committee Area in Highland

Locality: Local Committee Area	FPS Quality Rating Class (% of spaces)			
	Very High	High	Moderate	Low
Badenoch and Strathspey	12%	35%	35%	19%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	5%	25%	43%	28%
Caithness	7%	40%	40%	13%
Dingwall and Seaforth	8%	16%	36%	40%
City of Inverness	7%	26%	36%	30%
Lochaber	8%	56%	31%	5%
Nairnshire	0%	64%	36%	0%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	11%	32%	58%	0%
Sutherland	3%	38%	50%	10%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	6%	45%	32%	16%
Totality: Highland	7%	34%	39%	21%

- In terms of the average across Localities, 7% of FPS achieve the Very High rating, 34% of FPS achieve the High rating, and 51% of FPS are rated as Moderate or Low quality.
- The Local Committee Area with the greatest proportion of very high-quality FPS is Badenoch and Strathspey (12%) and the lowest proportion is Nairnshire (0%).
- The Local Committee Areas with the greatest proportion of high-quality FPS are Nairnshire (64%) and Lochaber (56%).
- The Local Committee Areas with the largest proportion of moderate-quality FPS are Isle of Skye and Raasay (58%), Lochaber (31%).
- The Local Committee Areas with the largest proportion of low-quality FPS are Dingwall and Seaforth (40%), City of Inverness (30%).

Within each quality category assessed, there are a range of scores achieved by FPS in Highland (Table 0:2) which demonstrates the range of play qualities provided in each Local Committee Area. Play sufficiency is a consideration within a given context,

informed by the combination of qualities within play spaces in a particular area. This means that, for example, not all play spaces are expected to offer all equipment types, and different spaces may offer more specialised equipment that is accessible or nearby space for informal play.

Table 0:2 Summary of average category scores for Formal Play Spaces in each Local Committee Area in Highland

Locality: Local Committee Area	Average Category Scores (%)					
	Equipment Types	Features for informal play	Accessibility features	Context and Location	Environmental qualities	Additional Facilities
Badenoch and Strathspey	47%	57%	29%	66%	70%	24%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	33%	50%	34%	67%	73%	23%
Caithness	38%	49%	56%	78%	85%	25%
Dingwall and Seaforth	37%	46%	23%	55%	70%	18%
City of Inverness	38%	43%	37%	64%	71%	24%
Lochaber	49%	55%	48%	73%	79%	39%
Nairnshire	48%	64%	45%	74%	92%	38%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	44%	36%	57%	68%	70%	26%
Sutherland	36%	44%	51%	73%	90%	27%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	48%	48%	42%	62%	79%	30%
Totality: Highland	40 %	48%	41%	68%	76%	26%

Accessibility analysis for play spaces owned by the Council, using 800m walking catchments, was completed as part of the Local Living Tool mapping also undertaken by Highland Council. Areas within an 800m buffer (10 min walk) from any Council-

owned play area are highlighted as “Accessibility to Formal Play Areas” in the [Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment Map](#).

Summary of consultation

An online public consultation was undertaken between 16 January and 27 February 2026 to gather feedback from the wider community on the draft Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) report and the accompanying interactive online map. This consultation provided residents with an opportunity to review the draft findings and comment on play provision across the area.

In addition, a separate targeted survey was carried out from 2 February to 27 February 2026, specifically designed to capture the views and experiences of children. This survey focused on play parks where the Council has made recent investment, ensuring that children’s perspectives directly informed the assessment of new and improved play spaces.

The detailed findings from both consultation exercises are presented in [Appendix 3](#) of this report. Overall, the feedback identified a mixture of positive experiences and areas of concern. Responses highlighted that children value their local play parks, enjoy spending time with friends, and benefit from opportunities for play. Adult respondents also noted improvements to some existing play spaces and the provision of new parks. However, a number of recurring issues were consistently raised. The most significant related to the limited range and variety of play equipment within many existing parks, particularly the lack of provision catering for different age groups, including inclusive and accessible equipment to meet a wider range of needs. In addition, comments were received identifying a small number of play parks that were not included in the original survey; these sites have now been recorded and added to the list for future review and assessment.

Additional concerns related to the perceived lack of investment in play parks, alongside issues of safety, poor maintenance, and the impact of vandalism. Respondents noted that these factors detract from the quality of play experiences and can discourage regular use of play spaces by children and families.

Conclusion

Statements on the sufficiency of play provision in Highland in totality and by locality have been presented in this Play Sufficiency Assessment, providing an evidence base to support the preparation of the new Highland Local Development Plan and

implementation of the Play Park Strategy. To support the ongoing provision of play opportunities in Highland, the context of play provision and findings of this PSA are key considerations along with the demand for play (e.g. new development areas). Detailed findings of the PSA can be analysed in a myriad of other ways to support future planning and place-based investment decisions.

1 Introduction | Ro-ràdh

Why is Play important?

This Play Sufficiency Assessment has been undertaken in alignment with the Scottish Government vision for play in Scotland and recognising the importance of play spaces for children in Highland. Scottish Government Planning Guidance: Play Sufficiency Assessment³ states:

- The Scottish Government wants Scotland to be the best place to grow up. Scotland's Play Strategy⁴ sets out a vision which values play as a life-enhancing daily experience for all our children and young people.
- Through play, children and young people can explore the world around them in a creative and engaging way.
- Research shows that children experience a range of health, wellbeing, developmental and educational benefits from outdoor play, and through learning in and connecting with nature.
- According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) General Comment 17, play is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.
- Ensuring children's access to play and engaging children in the planning system upholds their right to play and relax; their right to freedom of association and their right for their views to be heard and be given due consideration under UNCRC Articles 31, 15 and 12 respectively.

What is a Play Sufficiency Assessment?

A Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) is the assessment of play spaces to provide a clear understanding of the provision and quality of play spaces, gaps in provision and an indication of possible barriers children face in accessing and using play spaces.

In Scotland, statutory requirements for preparing a PSA are set out in the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997⁵ as amended section **16D Play Sufficiency Assessment**, and supplemented by the Town and Country Planning (Play Sufficiency

³ Scottish Government Planning Guidance: Play Sufficiency Assessment

⁴ Scotland Play Strategy

⁵ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1997/8/contents>

Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2023⁶ (PSA Regulations) and Scottish Government Planning Guidance for Play Sufficiency Assessment⁷ 2023 (PSA Guidance).

This Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment considers two categories of play space: Formal Play Spaces (FPS) with formal equipment such as swings, slides, climbing structures; and Informal Play Spaces (IPS) which are open spaces with potential to support informal, unstructured play. These types of spaces are further described in the **Definitions for Assessment**.

The purpose of this PSA⁸ is to evaluate and present evidence on the quality, quantity, inclusivity and accessibility of formal and informal play spaces for children (aged 0-17 years) in Highland. It develops understanding on the distribution of formal and informal play spaces in Highland, what facilities and functions are on offer in different localities and where they may have limitations. Evaluation of inclusivity and accessibility of play spaces has also been undertaken.

The PSA is intended both for the benefit of Highland communities and stakeholders of play spaces, and for Council officers and elected members who are involved in decision-making around the provision, improvement, and long-term management of play spaces.

The findings from this PSA form part of the evidence base that will inform the preparation of the Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP). This evidence will assist in identifying where new play spaces may be required and where existing ones could be enhanced to better serve communities, helping to deliver high-quality, accessible, and sustainable play environments that promote children's health and wellbeing.

Spatial Scope and Approach

The Highland Council administrative boundary overlaps with part of the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) area, including most of the Badenoch and Strathspey Local Committee Area. The spatial scope of the PSA is the Highland Council Area (Figure 1:1), including the part in the Cairngorms National Park Area (CNPA). The **quality** assessment of formal play spaces in Badenoch and Strathspey is reported in both the CNPA Play Sufficiency Assessment and the Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment, for completeness. The Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment does not

⁶ [The Town and Country Planning \(Play Sufficiency Assessment\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2023](#)

⁷ [Play Sufficiency Assessment Regulations 2023: planning guidance](#)

⁸ [PSA definition by Play Scotland](#)

include a **quantity** assessment of formal or informal play spaces in Badenoch and Strathspey: this is reported in the [CNPA Play Sufficiency Assessment](#).

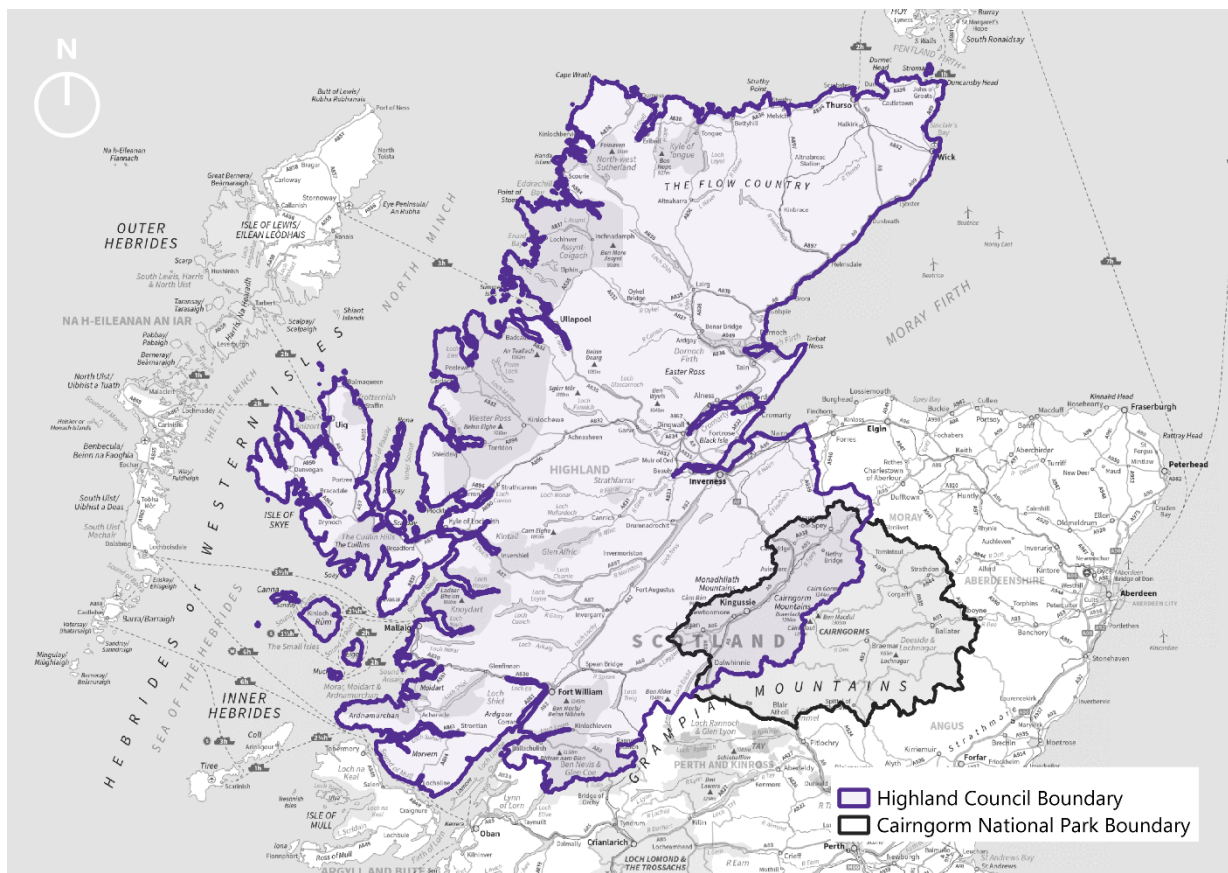


Figure 1:1 Spatial Scope of Play Sufficiency Assessment: Highland Council's Boundary

Cairngorms National Park Authority

The CNPA has prepared its own [Play Sufficiency Assessment](#)⁹, which was consulted on in October 2025, which will inform the preparation of the CNPA Local Development Plan. The CNPA Play Sufficiency Assessment has adopted the Highland Council assessment of formal play space **quality** within CNPA, and completed an independent evaluation of play **quantity**, including informal play spaces using the Ordnance Survey Open Data Greenspace layer and sportscotland data.

Definitions for Assessment

1.1.1 Play Space Types

Play opportunities for children are wide ranging and cover different settings. The Highland PSA adopts the PSA Regulations definition of “play spaces” as outdoor spaces, which are accessible by the public and offer free play opportunities for

⁹ [Cairngorms National Park Play Sufficiency Assessment 2025](#)

children, with a focus on Formal Play Spaces and Informal Play Spaces which are defined as:

- **Formal Play Spaces (FPS)** are areas specifically designed and maintained for the purposes of play, in line with the PSA Regulations. FPS are often found in play spaces and playgrounds and are typically characterized by structured equipment, defined boundaries, and a focus on physical activity and structured play.
- **Informal Play Spaces (IPS)** are play spaces that are, or are within, open space areas and are not specifically design or maintained for the purposes of play, in line with the PSA Regulations. IPS may include natural environments such as woodlands, open green spaces, or quiet residential streets that allow children to explore, interact, and be creative without fixed equipment or defined boundaries.

In Highland, the extensive landscape provides many opportunities for informal play, including outwith settlements. However, for this PSA the focus for assessment of IPS is on areas within Settlement Development Areas and generally within or associated with an open space. For example, in the online PSA map, the area extent of identified informal play spaces and formal play spaces are shown (Figure 1:2).

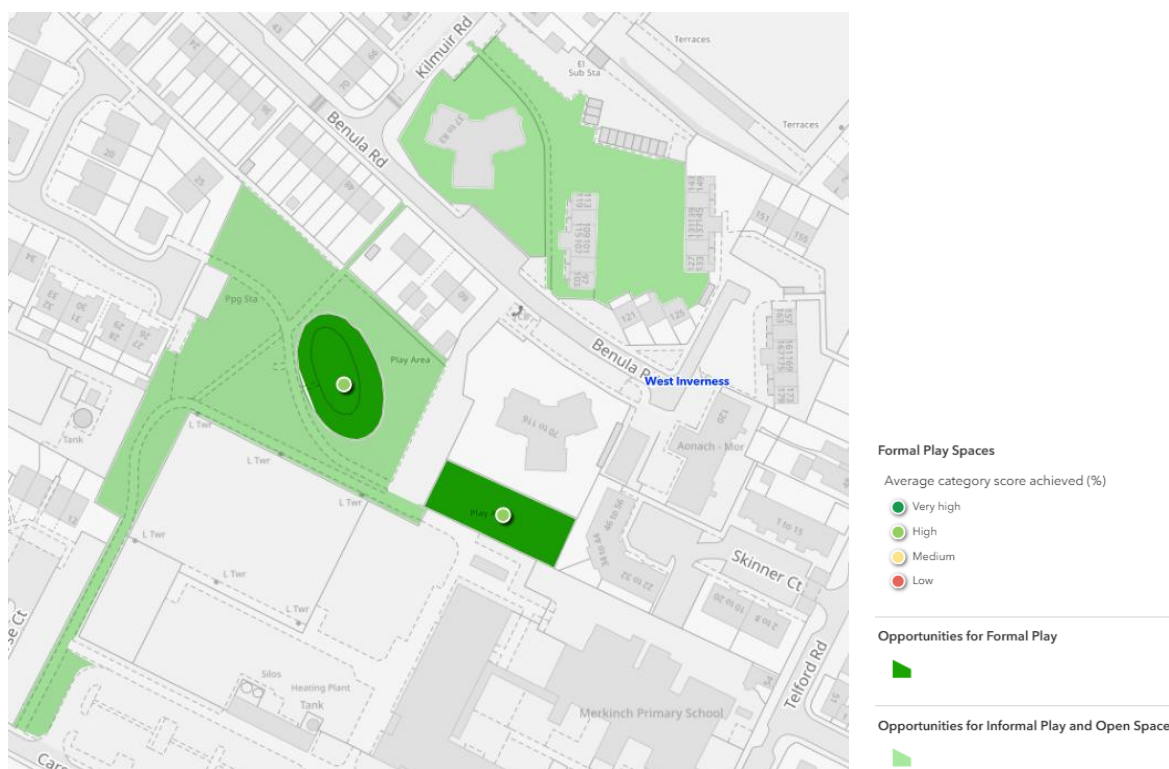


Figure 1:2 An example of Informal Play Spaces and Formal Play Spaces as shown in the online PSA Map

1.1.2 Children (play space users)

In the PSA Regulations, “children” is defined as persons under the age of 18 years. This is in line with the definition under Article 1 of UNCRC, an internationally mandated children’s rights framework. Also, there is a wider policy connection between outdoor play, education and health, which supports the consideration of children as those aged 0-17, including babies, children, and teenagers - from birth right up to completing formal primary and secondary school education in Scotland. For these reasons the Highland PSA has adopted the definition of children as those aged up to 18 years.

1.1.3 Totality and Locality

The Town and Country Planning (Play Sufficiency Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 requires local authorities to include statements about overall quality, quantity and accessibility of formal and informal play spaces in each **locality** and by **totality**. The whole Highland Council area (including CNPA) is used for the **totality** assessment of play sufficiency.

PSA Regulations apply Locality to have the meaning given in section 9(2) of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015¹⁰. PSA Guidance sets out that “Locality” must be defined, but with necessary flexibility for planning authorities to define the size and scale of the settlement or neighbourhood basis that is suitable for their own area. For the Highland PSA, Local Committee Areas have been defined as the “Locality” geography for analysis and reporting within the PSA, with a focus on the provision of play within the areas where most people live – Settlement Development Areas. The ten Local Committee Areas (Figure 1:3) in the Highland Council area are:

1. Badenoch and Strathspey
2. Black Isle and Easter Ross
3. Caithness
4. Dingwall and Seaforth
5. City of Inverness
6. Lochaber
7. Nairnshire
8. Isle of Skye and Raasay
9. Sutherland
10. Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh

¹⁰ [Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#)

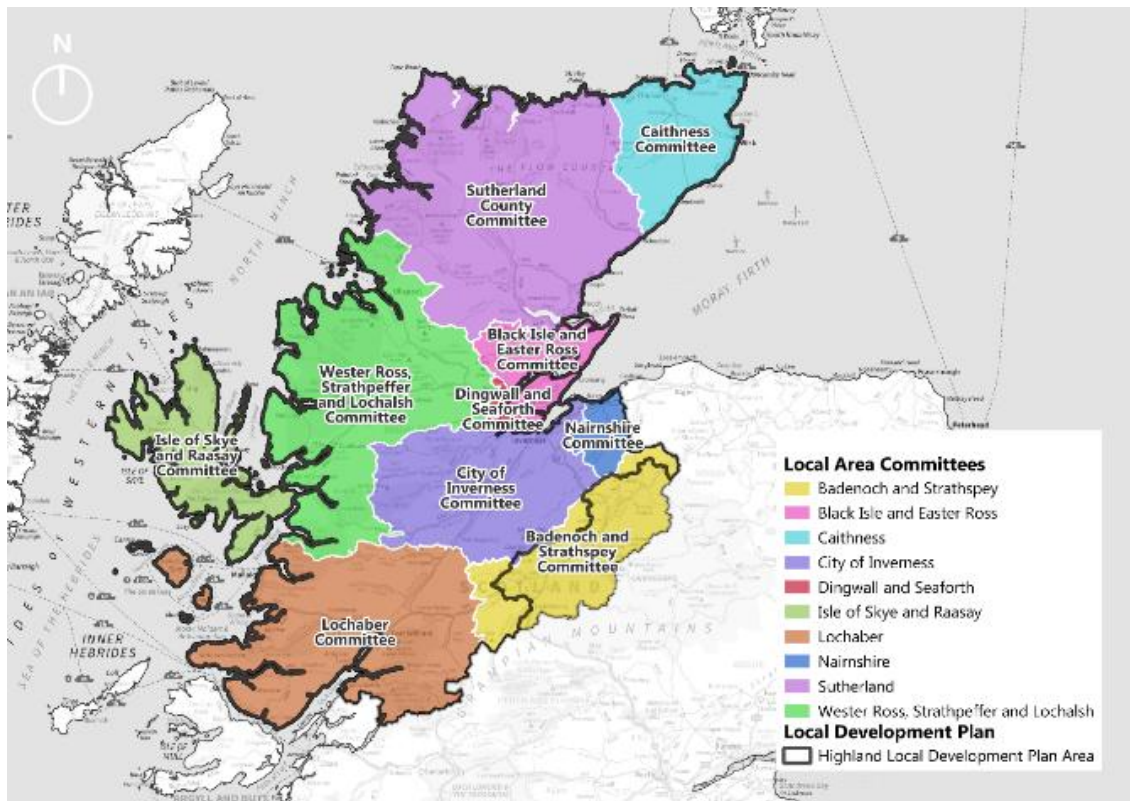


Figure 1:3 Localities for PSA, the Local Committee Areas in Highland (with HLDP area overlaid).

1.1.4 Settlement Development Areas

Settlement Development Areas (SDAs) were the spatial focus for identifying and assessing play spaces within Localities in Highland, as they represent the areas where the most people live and where future development sites are generally allocated. SDAs are defined in the current 'Area' Local Development Plans – Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan), West Highland and Islands Local Development Plan (WestPlan) and Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan 2 (IMFLDP2). These SDAs were identified from consideration of a range of factors that indicated community demand for growth at the time of preparing those Local Development Plans (LDP), including factors such as settlement size, range of facilities provided and capacity of existing infrastructure.

Note: Using the defined SDAs to assess play spaces it is merely a geography applied to identify and focus the evaluation of play spaces where the majority are located. Some FPS outwith SDAs, such as within smaller Growing Settlements¹¹, have been identified and assessed using the criteria for play quality. However, a full evaluation

¹¹ The other categorisation for settlements in Local Development Plans of 'Growing Settlements' also depends on several factors, but these tend to be much smaller, have less facilities and less potential for allocated development.

of play space quantity, inclusivity and accessibility outwith SDAs is not presented in this report. This does not indicate that a Growing Settlement has or needs less service and facility provision for play than an SDA settlement does.

2 Play context | Co-theacsa Cluiche

International Context

The importance of play for child development is internationally recognised. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹², play is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.

Play Sufficiency Assessments are a useful tool to support progress towards several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG¹³), particularly those related to child wellbeing, education, and inclusive societies. The Council's Play Park Strategy¹⁴ also aims at delivering the UNSDG.

National Context

Scotland's Play Strategy protects a child's right to play within their community and has been written in alignment with many national and international guiding documents including the Equalities Act, Disability Discrimination Act and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Scotland's Play Vision Statement and Action Plan¹⁵ published in 2025 outlines the steps the Scottish Government will take within that time to achieve their vision and aims. It recognises that to meaningfully enable children and young people to play outdoors more readily and to play in their communities, the planning system should promote and support provision for a variety of both formal and informal play spaces¹⁶.

Undertaking a Play Sufficiency Assessment is a statutory requirement for planning authorities in Scotland. The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019¹⁷ inserted a new section 16D Play Sufficiency Assessment into the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997¹⁸ with regard to LDPs, which sets out that a planning authority must assess the sufficiency of play opportunities for children in its area, in preparing the Evidence Report for the LDP.

¹² https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/UNCRC-General-Comment-17-on-Article-31.pdf?plsctml_id=20587

¹³ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

¹⁴ [Play Park Strategy](#)

¹⁵ [Scotland's Play Vision Statement and Action Plan](#)

¹⁶ [Scotland's Play Vision Statement and Action Plan](#)

¹⁷ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2019/13/contents>

¹⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1997/8/contents>

The Evidence Report for preparation of the new HLDP for Highland Council will be subject to independent assessment at the Gate Check¹⁹, which will check that the information provided is sufficient for The Highland Council (THC) to incorporate play-related aspects into the new LDP.

National Planning Framework 4²⁰ (NPF4) **Policy 21 Play, recreation and sport** aims to encourage, promote and facilitate spaces and opportunities for play, recreation and sport. The policy sets out that LDPs should identify sites for sports, play and outdoor recreation for people of all ages. This should be based on an understanding of the needs and demand in the community and informed by the planning authority's Play Sufficiency Assessment (this report) and their Open Space Strategy. These spaces can be incorporated as part of enhancing and expanding blue and green infrastructure, taking account of relevant agencies' plans or policy frameworks, such as flood risk and/or water management plans. New provisions should be well-designed, high quality, accessible and inclusive.

The Highland PSA seeks to align with the national policy objectives in NPF4 around Policy 21 Play, recreation and sport as well as Policy 14 Design, quality and place and Policy 15 Local living and 20-minute neighbourhoods, and the right to play.

Local Context

2.1.1 Highland Council Play Park Strategy

Highland Council actively supports children and youth by valuing, protecting, and developing their individual and unique skills as they journey towards learning the skills of adult life and the workforce. One thing that all children know what to do well, and is totally self-directed and free, is to play.

The Highland Play Park Strategy 2023–2033²¹ was developed to set a vision and long-term plan for all Council-owned play spaces in Highland. In November 2023, the Play Park Strategy was agreed and adopted by Council, setting out the key aims, visions and actions to support the implementation of the strategy. This strategy underwent consultation with children of all ages (through a Highland-wide

¹⁹ Gate Check – is carried out by a Planning and Environmental Appeals Division (DPEA) Reporter, makes an independent judgement of whether the evidence report contains 'sufficient information' to inform the preparation of the LDP.

²⁰ NPF4

²¹ https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/29605/play_park_strategy_and_action_plan_2023-33

questionnaire sent to all schools), and in turn this engagement has informed this PSA.

2.1.2 Local Development Plan

The LDPs that are currently operative in Highland are part of the policy context that influence the provision of play spaces. They are the Highland-wide Local Development Plan, Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan), West Highland and Islands Local Development Plan (WestPlan) and Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan 2 (IMFLDP2), supplemented by the Open Space in New Residential Development Supplementary Guidance.

Highland Council is currently preparing the new Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP). There are three key stages in local development planning: evidence gathering, plan preparation and delivery²². The legislative duty set out in the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 requires that a planning authority must assess the sufficiency of play opportunities in its area for children in preparing an evidence report. As such, the PSA forms part of the evidence bases within Chapter 13: Design, Wellbeing, Local Living and Placemaking of the HLDP Evidence Report. The new HLDP will replace the existing LDPs and the Supplementary Guidance and may be accompanied by non-statutory planning guidance.

The preparation of the PSA is intended to help ensure there is a good understanding of the sufficiency of both formal and informal play spaces for children across the Highland local authority area.

In addition to the PSA, an Open Space Audit in Highland is underway to provide evidence of open space provision to inform the new HLDP. This audit also focused on Settlement Development Areas (SDA) and identified informal play spaces, open space, amenity and other recreation facilities such as playing fields.

2.1.3 Local Place Plans

Local Place Plans (LPP) are a potential additional, emerging set of evidence about play demand and aspirations from communities. For example, some LPPs will contain community priorities about play spaces in their area. This evidence will continue to emerge as the preparation of LPPs progresses in some communities and it will be

²² See Figure 4 of [Local Development Planning Guidance](#) for overview of LDP process

taken into account in the preparation of the new HLDP as and when LPPs are registered²³.

2.1.4 Demographics and Diversity

In 2024, Highland was home to 42,252 young people aged from 0-17 years old, representing 17.9% of the local population²⁴ - slightly lower than the Scotland-wide child population (18.5%). Highland's population of children and young people is complex; from 2017 onwards Highland's population has shown a natural decrease with deaths exceeding births most recently by just over 1,000 per annum²⁵, but conversely Highland has experienced net in-migration of adults in their mid-30s and children aged 0-14²⁶, as it is viewed as a desirable location for bringing up younger children. With the significant rural and remote geography of Highland, one in three children live in remote rural areas²⁷.

Children have a range of play interests, needs and abilities, which arise from a range of factors such as community or family context, culture of origin, developmental stage, health, disability or neurodiversity, for example. In this Play Sufficiency Assessment, a particular focus on inclusivity and accessibility of play has been taken to understand how these dimensions of play sufficiency are provided for within Highland play spaces.

In Highland, there are 29,973 school pupils²⁸ of which 3.57 children per 1,000 are declared or assessed to have a disability (Pupil Statistics). Pupils have a range of support needs for learning at school, which can also provide an indication of their needs for play. Of the 5,562 Highland pupils with reported reasons for additional support at school, there are 66 pupils with hearing impairment, 66 with a visual impairment, 157 with physical or motor impairment, 361 with autism spectrum disorder, 458 with a physical health problem.

Socio-economic circumstances may also impact a child's access to play spaces or opportunities for play, based on the provision of formal play spaces in their local area or opportunities for informal play based on their neighbourhood context, unique family or household situation.

²³ Registered Local Place Plans are recorded online at [Local Place Plan Register | The Highland Council](#).

²⁴ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/mid-2024-population-estimates/#>

²⁵ NRS [Births](#) and [Deaths](#) Time Series Data 2024

²⁶ [NRS Migration Flows 2024 – Table 8](#)

²⁷ [Highland Children Young Peoples Needs Assessment 2023](#)

²⁸ [Pupil census supplementary statistics - gov.scot](#)

Figure 2:1 provides a summary of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation in Highland. In Highland, Pupil Statistics (2024)²⁹ report that 3,121 pupils attending a local school live in the most deprived (20%) areas (out of total 15,897 pupils). The online interactive [Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment map](#), which offers the viewer the ability to zoom into settlements of interest, also shows the most and least deprived areas of Highland which are all situated within Settlement Development Areas.

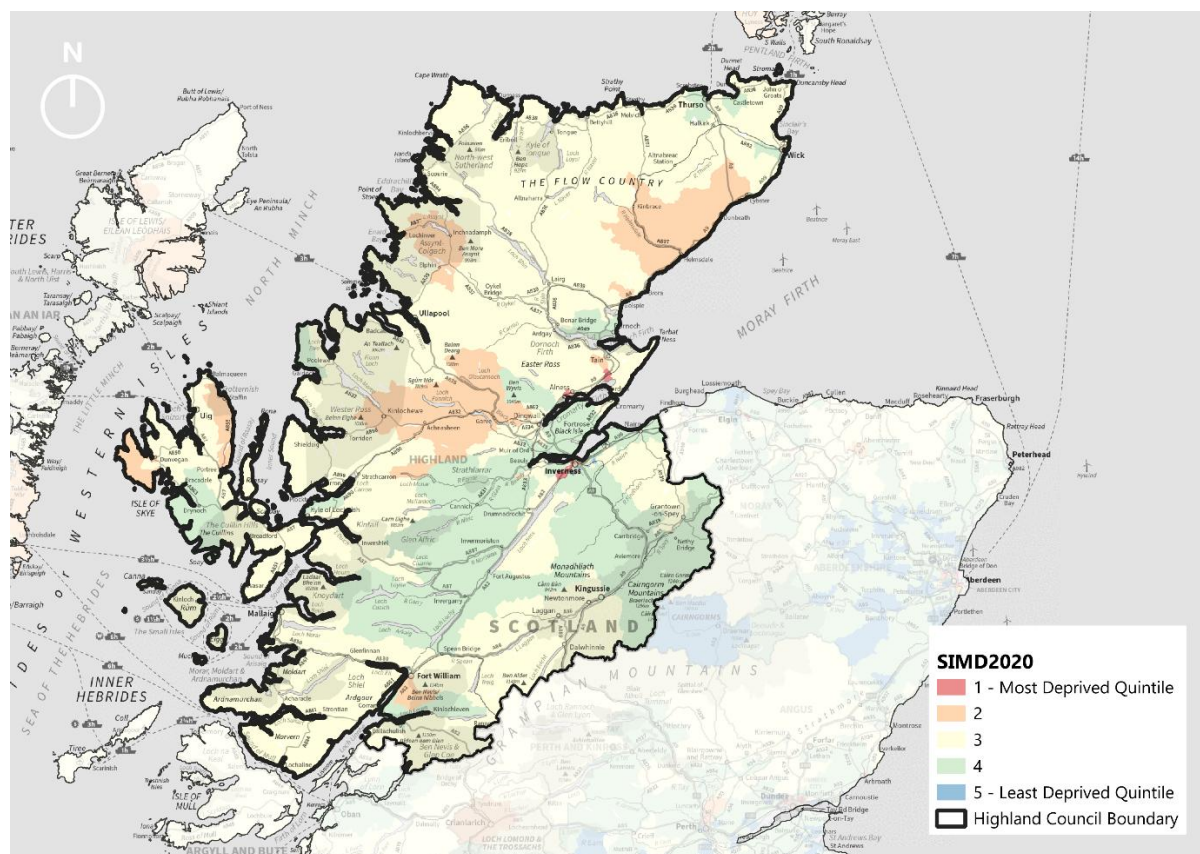


Figure 2:1 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, Highland overview

Creating inclusive environments for children with mobility challenges as well as those from socio-economically disadvantaged households is a priority. Considering these factors and the importance of supporting child & community wellbeing, this assessment offers an opportunity for the Council to improve its understanding of play space inclusivity and accessibility.

²⁹ [Pupil census supplementary statistics - gov.scot](#)

3 Play Sufficiency Assessment Methodology | Modh-obrach Measaidh Pailteas Cluiche

This PSA has been prepared collaboratively by Highland Council’s Development Planning and Amenities functions, and the assessment approach was developed with reference to:

- Scottish Government Planning Guidance: Play Sufficiency Assessment³⁰,
- Play Sufficiency Assessment (Scotland) Regulations 2023³¹, and
- Play Scotland – People, Places and Play³²
- The Getting it Right for Play Toolkit³³ was also referred to evaluate local play opportunities for children and young people in Highland.

Our approach to preparing the PSA followed five general steps, shown in Figure 3:1.

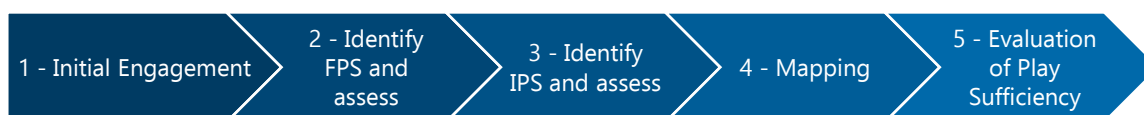


Figure 3:1 Summary of Play Sufficiency Assessment Approach for Highland

The detailed assessment methodology included:

- Amenities team undertook the following:
 - Engagement about play space provision with children, schools, stakeholders including youth organisations;
 - Identifying and assessing the present condition (quality, quantity and accessibility) of FPS through desktop analysis and site surveys;
- Dev Plans team undertook the following:
 - Identifying IPS through desktop analysis and site surveys (as part of Open Space Audit) and assessing the provision;
 - Online spatial mapping of assessment findings, and spatial analysis of quantity and inclusivity analysis using Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation;

³⁰ Planning guidance for PSA

³¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2023/97/contents/made>

³² <https://www.playscotland.org/playful-communities/people-places-play/>

³³ https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/Power-of-play-Toolkit.pdf?plsctml_id=13148

- Preparing the Play Sufficiency Report, including the establishment of standards for future provision and formal statements on play sufficiency.

Further to this, the feedback received from consultation on the draft PSA has been taken into consideration for this final PSA Report. An account of the full methodology is included in the **Appendix -2**.

The approach to assessing play spaces in Highland varied by type, which impacted the spatial scope for reporting on play sufficiency as shown in Table 3:1 for each of the dimensions of play sufficiency. In short, the **quality** of FPS was identified and assessed across all of Highland, IPS were only identified and assessed within SDAs, and the polygon extent of both these space types were only collected within SDAs³⁴ so the **quantity** analysis (spatial) is only reported within SDAs of Local Committee Areas.

Table 3:1 Overview of play sufficiency assessment by spatial scope and dimensions of play.

Dimension of Play Sufficiency	Play Space Type	Area of Assessment	
		Only SDAs of Localities	All areas
Quantity & Inclusivity	FPS	✓ ^{**}	
	IPS	✓ ^{**35}	
Quality & Accessibility	FPS		✓
	IPS	✓ ^{*36}	

** Only IPS adjacent to FPS were evaluated, as part of the Informal Play Features category.*

*** Excluding Badenoch and Strathspey*

Further analysis of play spaces by settlement or neighbourhood can be undertaken to understand place-based play sufficiency if desired to inform decisions for a particular context, for example with reference to any aspirations expressed in a Local Place Plan. The application of the statements of play sufficiency, within the local policy context, is further discussed in **Setting Standards for Play: Conclusion and Next Steps**.

³⁴ Polygons defined as part of the Open Space Audit, which considered a wider range of spaces within SDAs including formal and informal play areas.

³⁵ Badenoch and Strathspey are excluded from the Highland Council Open Space Audit, and so IPS are not reported for that Committee Area. The CNPA Play Sufficiency Assessment adopts a desktop-based approach to evaluate informal play quantity.

³⁶ As above.

4 Statements of Play Sufficiency | Aithrisean airson Pailteas Cluiche

This section presents the key findings about the quality, quantity, accessibility and inclusivity of FPS and IPS. These statements should be read in conjunction with the [Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment Map](#) which offers an interactive and detailed spatial representation of the Play Sufficiency Assessment findings for Highland.

The interactive online map is accessible via link:
[Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment Map](#)

The quality assessment scores of individual formal play spaces can be accessed by clicking on the point for the space in the map. An example of how the summary of category scores is presented in the online map is shown in Figure 4:1.

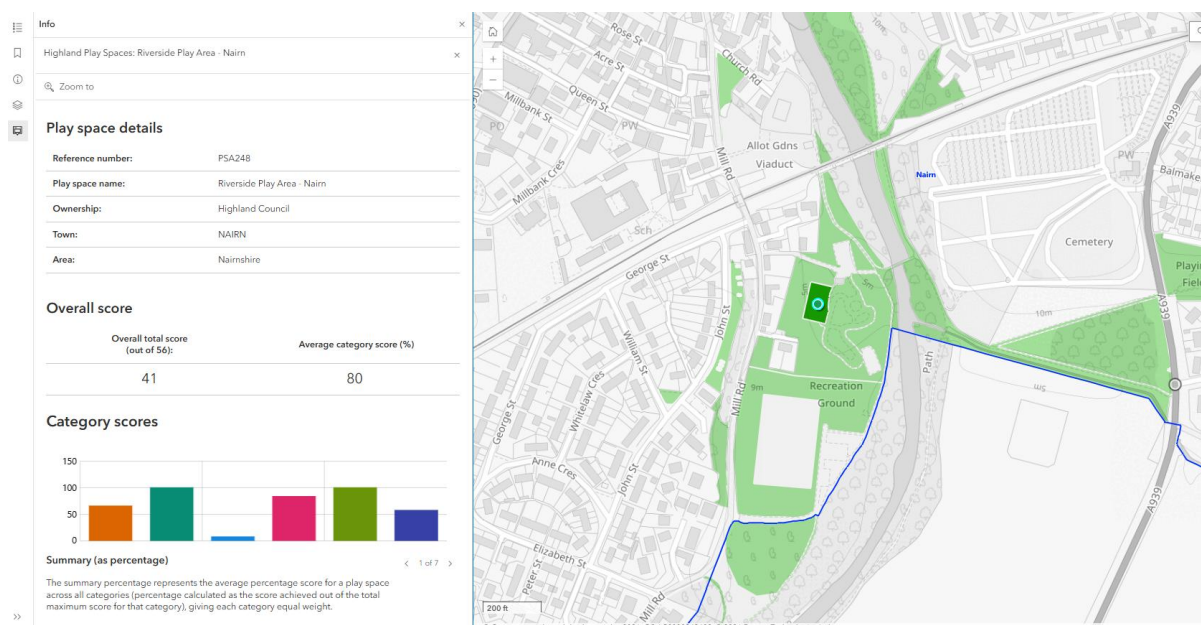


Figure 4:1 Example dashboard of play space details from online PSA Map

The quality of FPSs were scored against six categories (see Figure 4:2) to evaluate the quality of FPS and IPS (where situated next to FPS).



Figure 4:2 Categories used for assessment of Formal Play Space Quality in Highland

A high score against criteria in every quality category is not the goal, nor considered an appropriate measure of play sufficiency, but instead serves as an indication of the qualities and strengths of a particular play space in isolation across the six categories. The Highland PSA takes the view that play sufficiency should be considered in context, with consideration for overall provision for play in a Locality or a Settlement Development Area and consideration for all the elements that contribute to play sufficiency, including quantity, quality and accessibility.

Notes on data presentation

In summary tables in the following statement sections, the maximum and minimum percentage score has been highlighted for each criteria, to demonstrate the variability and spread of play quality within each category assessed. The overall Highland average (bottom row, in blue) is also included in summary tables, to indicate the average score or percentage achieved across Highland FPS, which serves as a benchmark.

The average percentage scores of play spaces in each locality are reported using the rating classes in

Table 4:1, with each rating class assigned a colour. These coloured rating classes are also used in the online interactive PSA map.

Table 4:1 Formal Play Space Rating Classes, based on average percentage score bands

Rating	Average percentage score (%)
Low	< 30%
Moderate	30% - 50%
High	50% - 75%
Very High	>75%

Quantity and inclusivity of play provision within Highland

There are **333 FPS within SDAs totalling 30.25 ha** (excluding Badenoch and Strathspey). Table 4:2 presents the spatial provision of FPS as the number of FPS within the SDAs of each locality. This supports the comparison of **Quantity** of FPS provision between Local Committee Areas.

Table 4:2 Quantity of Formal Play Spaces in Highland, within Settlement Development Areas of Local Committee Areas

Locality: Local Committee Area	Total	Within SDAs	
	No.	Percentage (%)	Total (m ²)
Badenoch and Strathspey ³⁷		-	
Black Isle and Easter Ross	51	0.23%	39,911
Caithness	30	0.31%	42,629
Dingwall and Seaforth	24	0.15%	11,926
City of Inverness	136	0.28%	125,635
Lochaber	31	0.22%	32,484
Nairnshire	10	0.15%	9,519
Isle of Skye and Raasay	11	0.03%	3,832
Sutherland	24	0.42%	26,059
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	16	0.11%	9,678
Totality: Highland	333	0.23%	301,673

Key findings about the quantity of FPS are:

- The Highland average provision of FPS within a settlement area is 0.23%.
- The greatest proportion of SDA's area that is FPS, by Local Committee Area is area provided within SDAs of a Local Committee Area is Sutherland (0.42%) and the lowest is Isle of Skye and Raasay (0.03%).

³⁷ The evaluation of quantity of play spaces in Badenoch and Strathspey is reported in the Cairngorms National Park Play Sufficiency Assessment.

- The highest average provision of FPS by SDA is Inverness and Area (125,635m²) and the lowest is Isle of Skye and Raasay Committee (3,832m²).

The **Quantity of Informal Play Spaces** (IPS) within SDAs was evaluated as part of the Highland Open Space Audit, identifying a total of **1,037.50ha**, as shown in Table 4:3. It is important to note that within and outwith settlements there are numerous opportunities for informal play in Highland, such as woodlands, which support nature-based play and quiet residential streets that allow children to explore, interact and be creative. As such, figures in Table 4:3 should not be considered in isolation.

Table 4:3 Quantity of Informal Play Spaces provided in Highland, within Settlement Development Areas of Local Committee Areas

Locality: Local Committee Area	IPS provision within SDAs	
	Percentage (%)	Total (m ²)
Badenoch and Strathspey ³⁸	-	-
Black Isle and Easter Ross	7.75%	1,326,352
Caithness	5.83%	799,794
Dingwall and Seaforth	7.76%	628,542
City of Inverness	11.58%	5,205,354
Lochaber	4.27%	629,782
Nairnshire	9.89%	638,283
Isle of Skye and Raasay	2.41%	280,951
Sutherland	5.76%	361,654
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	3.93%	342,643
Totality: Highland	7.75%	10,213,355

Key findings about the quantity of IPS are:

³⁸ The evaluation of quantity of play spaces in Badenoch and Strathspey is reported in the Cairngorms National Park Play Sufficiency Assessment.

- Of the IPS identified, the Highland average provision of IPS within an SDA is 7.75%.
- The greatest proportion of IPS area provided within SDAs of a Local Committee Area is City of Inverness (11.58%) and the lowest is Isle of Skye and Raasay (2.41%).
- Of the spaces identified, the highest provision of IPS by SDA is City of Inverness (5,205,354m²) and the lowest is Isle of Skye and Raasay (280,951m²).

Comparative Analysis of Formal and Informal Play Space Provision as per standards

The Highland Council currently has the [Open Space in new Residential Development Supplementary Guidance](#) in place, which provides advice on the Council's potential open space requirements for developments comprising four or more dwellings. The guidance identifies a standard provision of 2 square metres per person for Formal Play Space (FPS) or as referred to as equipped play facilities within the Supplementary Guidance, within new residential developments.

Overall Position

The table (Table 4:4) presents data on Formal Play Space ³⁹(FPS) provision across the Highland Council area, detailing the number of FPS sites, provision per person, availability of percentage of play spaces against total FPS area for each Local Committee Area.

Across Highland, the 333 FPS identified in SDAs, provide a combined area of **301,673m²**, calculated based on current population data (2024⁴⁰), this equates to an average provision of 2m² per person which aligns with the adopted minimum standard, indicating that, at a Highland-wide level, overall Formal Play Space provision meets the benchmark.

However, this figure represents an aggregate average and masks considerable variation between Local Committee Areas, with some areas providing significantly more play space per person than others. As such, while provision meets the standard overall, spatial inequalities in access and availability remain an important consideration for future planning and investment decisions.

³⁹ Formal Play Space refers to equipped play facilities, assessed against the Council's adopted standard of 2 square metres per person.

⁴⁰ [NRS Population data](#)

Table 4:4 Formal Play provision per person within Local Committee Areas (LCAs)

Locality: Local Committee Area	Total				
	No. of FPS	FPS per person (m ²)	% available per person	% Total FPS	Total FPS (m ²)
Badenoch and Strathspey	-				
Black Isle and Easter Ross	51	1.7	0.20%	0.23%	39,911
Caithness	30	2.7	0.41%	0.31%	42,629
Dingwall and Seaforth	24	1.0	0.08%	0.15%	11,926
City of Inverness	136	1.7	0.24%	0.28%	125,635
Lochaber	31	2.3	0.26%	0.22%	32,484
Nairnshire	10	0.9	0.07%	0.15%	9,519
Isle of Skye and Raasay	11	0.8	0.01%	0.03%	3,832
Sutherland	24	4.2	0.88%	0.42%	26,059
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	16	2.1	0.12%	0.11%	9,678
Totality: Highland	333	2.0	0.23%	0.23%	301,673

The table (Table 4:5) presents similar analysis of provision per person but for Informal Play Space (IPS), providing context for the level of provision of broader play opportunities.

Table 4:5 Informal Play provision per person within Local Committee Areas (LCAs)

Locality: Local Committee Area	Total				
	No. of IPS	IPS per person (m ²)	% available per person	% Total IPS	Total IPS (m ²)
Badenoch and Strathspey	-				
Black Isle and Easter Ross	273	57.5	8.5%	7.75%	1,326,352
Caithness	113	49.8	5.6%	5.83%	799,794
Dingwall and Seaforth	125	54.9	8.2%	7.76%	628,542
City of Inverness	549	6.6	0.1%	1.06%	475,458
Lochaber	120	45.4	3.7%	4.27%	629,782
Nairnshire	100	62.0	11.8%	9.89%	638,283
Isle of Skye and Raasay	30	60.6	2.8%	2.41%	280,951
Sutherland	93	58.7	6.5%	5.76%	361,654
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	69	73.7	5.6%	3.93%	342,643
Totality: Highland	1472	52.1	4.2%	4.16%	5,483,459

Key points:

Provision levels of Formal Play Space vary across the Local Committee Areas. Of the nine Local Committee Areas ^{*41} assessed, **four Local Committee Areas provision are above the benchmark standard of 2m² per person**, while the remaining areas fall below this level.

⁴¹ *Badenoch and Strathspey is not calculated in the above.

- Sutherland records the highest level of provision, at 4.2m² per person, significantly exceeding the standard and providing substantially greater per-capita play space than other areas.
- Caithness (2.7m² per person) and Lochaber (2.3m² per person) also exceed 2m², with provision levels slightly above both the standard and the Highland average.
- In contrast, the Black Isle and Easter Ross, together with the City of Inverness, each record provision of approximately 1.7m² per person, indicating more limited availability of formal play space. While these areas contain a reasonable number of play sites, higher population concentrations place increased pressure on existing provision, reducing per-person availability.
- The lowest levels of provision are recorded in Nairnshire (0.9m² per person) and the Isle of Skye and Raasay (0.8m² per person). These figures fall well below the standard and indicate a particularly limited level of equipped play facilities relative to population, highlighting areas where quantitative shortfalls are most pronounced.

Observation: The City of Inverness contains the largest absolute provision of Formal Play Space, with 136 FPS sites and a combined area of 125,635m², accounting for 40.8% of the total FPS provision across Highland. In contrast, Sutherland, with 24 play spaces totalling 11,926m² (representing 7.2% of total FPS provision), records the highest level of per-capita availability. This highlights the influence of population size on provision metrics, as the high concentration of residents in the City of Inverness significantly reduces play space availability on a per-person basis. Consequently, high absolute provision does not necessarily equate to sufficiency when assessed against per-person standards.

In rural and island areas, lower population densities do not uniformly translate into higher Formal Play Space availability. In several instances, a limited number of equipped play facilities results in low per-capita provision despite the presence of extensive informal open space. This underscores the importance of considering both quantitative provision and the distribution of formal play facilities when assessing access to play opportunities across Highland.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that Formal Play Space provision across Highland meets the adopted minimum standard of 2m² per person at an overall, Highland-wide level, but that this headline figure masks significant variation between Local Committee Areas. While four of the nine Local Committee Areas exceed the benchmark, the majority fall below it, indicating uneven distribution and variable per-capita access to equipped play facilities.

Although formal play provision is present in all areas, per-person availability remains constrained in several areas, particularly where higher population concentrations place pressure on existing facilities or where the number of equipped play spaces is limited. This highlights that compliance with the standard at an aggregate level does not equate to sufficiency or equity of access at a local level.

Addressing these disparities will require a more targeted approach to future investment, planning decisions, and developer contributions, with a focus on improving both the quantity and spatial distribution of Formal Play Spaces in areas of identified shortfall.

Inclusivity Assessment

Inclusivity has been considered through an assessment of where Formal and Informal Play Spaces are located in relation to areas of socio-economic deprivation. *Highland social deprivation data from 2020*⁴² indicates that 15.4% of the population resides within the most deprived quintile, reflecting an overall low level of deprivation across the Council area. Analysis shows that approximately 12% of both Formal and Informal Play Spaces are located within the most deprived quintiles, indicating that play provision is broadly proportionate to the distribution of deprivation across Highland. While urban areas such as the City of Inverness and Black Isle and Easter Ross contain higher concentrations of play spaces within deprived zones, other rural and island areas are predominantly within the least deprived quintiles. This suggests that Highland is performing reasonably well in providing inclusive play opportunities, while also highlighting the importance of considering rural accessibility and non-urban forms of disadvantage alongside deprivation data.

⁴² Highland Social Deprivation (2020) SIMD. Based on Overall Rankings Highland is tending towards low levels of deprivation: 36,193 residents (15.4%) of the local authority population – 235,710) are living in areas corresponding to the three most deprived deciles in Scotland (deciles 1 to 3) comprising 50 zones for this local authority.

Analysis of Play Space Provision within Most Deprived Quintiles

Locality: Local Committee Area	Total play parks in Most Deprived zones			
	FPS (No.)	% FPS in DZ out of total FPS	IPS (No.)	% IPS in DZ out of total IPS
Badenoch and Strathspey	-			
Black Isle and Easter Ross	11	17.3%	68	36.9%
Caithness	2	19.5%	7	23.5%
Dingwall and Seaforth	1	14.7%	6	2.9%
City of Inverness	23	14.6%	78	25.9%
Lochaber	1	2.1%	8	10.5%
Nairnshire	1	1.3%	10	4.7%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Sutherland	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Totality: Highland	39	11.7%	177	21.0%

Table 4.6 Play provision within Deprived Zones of Local Committee Areas (LCAs)

Areas with the Greatest Concentration in the Most Deprived Quintiles:

- Caithness record the highest proportion of formal play spaces and informal play spaces within the most deprived quintiles, with 19.5% of FPS and Black Isle and Easter Ross at 36.9% respectively.
- The City of Inverness contains the largest absolute number of play spaces in the most deprived quintiles, with 23 FPS (14.6%) and 78 IPS (25.9%).

Areas with No Play Provision in the Most Deprived Quintiles:

- Isle of Skye and Raasay, Sutherland, and Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh record no FPS or IPS within the most deprived quintiles.
- This does not necessarily indicate an absence of need but rather reflects the low prevalence or absence of SIMD-defined deprivation zones in these areas.

- It also highlights the limitations of SIMD in fully capturing rural deprivation, where issues such as isolation, access to services, transport constraints, and affordability pressures may not be spatially concentrated.

These areas are therefore identified as having play provision predominantly within the **least deprived quintiles**, while still potentially facing non-measured forms of disadvantage.

Across Highland, **39 of 333 Formal Play Space (FPS) sites (11.7%) and 177 of 1,472 Informal Play Space (IPS) sites (7.75%)** are located within the most deprived quintiles. These proportions are lower than the share of the population living within the **most deprived quintile (15.4%)**, indicating that play provision is relatively under-represented in areas of most deprivation when compared with population distribution. However, this analysis reflects the distribution of sites only and does not account for differences in the size, quality, accessibility, or relative level of need associated with individual play spaces. While certain areas, notably the Black Isle and Easter Ross and Caithness, exhibit comparatively higher concentrations of play spaces within deprived communities, other rural and island areas contain no formal play provision within SIMD-defined deprived zones. It should also be noted that this analysis reflects the distribution of sites only and does not account for differences in size, quality, accessibility, or relative levels of need. Further assessment will support a clearer understanding of need and help guide future planning, prioritisation, and investment in play provision, taking account of deprivation alongside rural accessibility and local context to promote more equitable play provision across Highland.

Quality and accessibility of play provisions within Highland

FPS across Highland have been identified and assessed for their **Quality** and **Accessibility**, helping to identify high-quality play experiences, where there are gaps in facilities or where FPS require better provision or improvement in facilities.

All the 445 play spaces surveyed were evaluated on six key categories. The analysis and statement of sufficiency for each category is presented in the following subsections.

*Note: Highland Council assessed the **quality** of play spaces in Badenoch and Strathspey, all situated within Cairngorms National Park, following the methodology used across Highland. For completeness, both the Highland PSA and the Cairngorms National Park PSA report play quality scores in Badenoch and Strathspey.*

4.1.1 Summary of Formal Play Space Quality Ratings

For the assessment of **quality**, a summary of the average FPS category performance (%) by each Rating Class for each Local Committee Area is provided in Table 4:7.

Table 4:7 Summary of Formal Play Space Quality ratings, by Local Committee Area in Highland

Locality: Local Committee Area	FPS Quality Rating (% of spaces)			
	Very High	High	Moderate	Low
Badenoch and Strathspey	12%	35%	35%	19%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	5%	25%	43%	28%
Caithness	7%	40%	40%	13%
Dingwall and Seaforth	8%	16%	36%	40%
City of Inverness	7%	26%	36%	30%
Lochaber	8%	56%	31%	5%
Nairnshire	0%	64%	36%	0%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	11%	32%	58%	0%
Sutherland	3%	38%	50%	10%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	6%	45%	32%	16%
Totality: Highland	7%	34%	39%	21%

Table 4:7 shows that on average 7% of localities meet the Very High rating for FPS (75% or more average category score), 34% of FPS achieve the High rating (50-75% average category score), and 60% of FPS are rated as Moderate or Low quality (<50% average category score). The Local Committee Area with the greatest proportion of very high-quality FPS is Badenoch and Strathspey (12%) and the lowest proportion is Nairnshire (0%). Local Committee Areas with the greatest proportion of high-quality FPS are Nairnshire (64%) and Lochaber (56%). Local Committee Areas with the largest proportion of low-quality FPS are Dingwall and Seaforth (40%) and City of Inverness (30%).

4.1.2 Summary of Average category scores for Formal Play Spaces

Table 4:8 summarises average category scores across six assessment themes, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in the quality and functionality of formal play spaces across Highland.

Table 4:8 Summary of average category scores for Formal Play Spaces in each Local Committee Area in Highland

Locality: Local Committee Area	Average Category Scores (%)					
	Equipment Types	Features for informal play	Accessibility features	Context and Location	Environmental qualities	Additional
Badenoch and Strathspey	47%	57%	29%	66%	70%	24%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	33%	50%	34%	67%	73%	23%
Caithness	38%	49%	56%	78%	85%	25%
Dingwall and Seaforth	37%	46%	23%	55%	70%	18%
City of Inverness	38%	43%	37%	64%	71%	24%
Lochaber	49%	55%	48%	73%	79%	39%
Nairnshire	48%	64%	45%	74%	92%	38%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	44%	36%	57%	68%	70%	26%
Sutherland	36%	44%	51%	73%	90%	27%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	48%	48%	42%	62%	79%	30%
Totality: Highland	40%	48%	41%	68%	76%	26%

At an overall level, the Highland average shows the strongest performance in Environmental Qualities (76%) and Context and Location (68%), indicating that play spaces are generally well situated and benefit from positive environmental settings. By contrast, lower average scores for Equipment Types (40%), Accessibility Features (41%), and particularly Additional Features (26%) point to more limited provision in terms of equipment diversity, inclusive access, and supporting infrastructure across many areas.

Key Points:

- Caithness performs well across several categories, particularly Context and Location (78%), Environmental Qualities (85%), and Accessibility Features (56%), suggesting relatively well-integrated and accessible play provision compared to other areas.
- Nairnshire records consistently high scores, including the highest score for Environmental Qualities (92%), alongside strong performance for Features for Informal Play (64%), Context and Location (74%), and Additional Features (38%).
- Lochaber shows a balanced profile, with good scores across most categories and the highest score for Additional Features (39%).
- Black Isle and Easter Ross (33%), Sutherland (36%) and Dingwall and Seaforth (37%) record lower scores for Equipment Types and Accessibility Features, despite stronger performance for Environmental Qualities and Context and Location.
- Accessibility Features and Additional Features are consistently among the lowest-scoring categories across most Local Committee Areas.

Overall, the analysis indicates that formal play spaces across Highland benefit from strong locations and high environmental quality, but are constrained by recurring weaknesses in equipment diversity, accessibility, and supporting features. While some areas perform well across multiple categories, significant variation remains between Local Committee Areas, with urban pressures and rural context influencing outcomes in different ways. Addressing these common gaps, particularly around inclusivity, accessibility, and the range of play opportunities will be central to improving the overall quality and functionality of play spaces and supporting more equitable provision across Highland.

4.1.3 Equipment types

Providing a range of play equipment types offers a variety of play opportunities which meet the needs of different ages and support stages of child development.

Each formal play space in Highland was assessed for provision of eight play equipment types - swings, slides, climbing frames, rocking, twirling and spinning, hanging, jumping and balancing - with scores assigned based on the presence of each equipment type and the range of age groups served⁴³. The three age groups used for the assessment were Nursery, Primary and Secondary. The average provision of play equipment by the number of age groups served⁴⁴ is shown in Table 4:

Table 4:9 Provision of equipment in FPS across all 8 equipment types, by the number of Age Groups served in Settlement Development Areas of each Local Committee Area

Locality: Local Committee Area	Total FPS	Average provision of equipment of any type (out of 8) (%) serving 1-3 Age Groups in FPS			No. of equipment types in FPS (max 8 types)
		1	2	3	Average
Badenoch and Strathspey	26	14%	24%	30%	5
Black Isle and Easter Ross	61	9%	28%	14%	4
Caithness	55	1%	24%	23%	4
Dingwall and Seaforth	25	18%	32%	12%	5
City of Inverness	138	12%	24%	20%	4
Lochaber	39	7%	31%	29%	5
Nairnshire	11	11%	36%	23%	6
Isle of Skye and Raasay	19	5%	30%	26%	5
Sutherland	40	4%	23%	21%	4
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	31	5%	36%	25%	5
Totality: Highland	445	9%	27%	21%	5

⁴³ FPS containing an equipment type suitable for only one age group received a score of 1, those with equipment suitable for two age groups received a score of 2, and those catering for all three age groups (Nursery, Primary, and Secondary) received a score of 3.

⁴⁴ Due to limitations of the methodology, analysis of provision for individual age groups was not possible. However, it is recommended that the methodology is adapted to enable this for future PSA.

Key findings for age provision of equipment in FPS are:

- Across Highland, the average number of equipment types provided is 5 types of equipment (out of the total eight), the average provision per FPS ranges by Local Committee Area from 4-6 types of equipment, which indicates that the provision of number of equipment types is not highly variable between Local Committee Areas.
- In Highland, the average provision of equipment in FPS serving 3 age groups is 21%, serving 2 age groups is 27% and serving 1 age group is 9%.
- Local Committee Areas with the lowest proportion of FPS providing equipment for all 3 age groups is Dingwall and Seaforth (12%), while the highest proportion of FPS equipment for all age groups is in Badenoch and Strathspey (30%).
- Local Committee Areas with the lowest provision of equipment for 2 age groups are Sutherland (23%), Badenoch and Strathspey (24%), Caithness (24%), and City of Inverness (24%) and the highest average provision of FPS equipment for two age groups is in Nairnshire (36%) and Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (36%).

It should be noted that the provision of a broader range of equipment types varies among individual play spaces, but this does not necessarily reflect that an FPS is of poorer quality or sufficiency. For example, while smaller scale neighbourhood parks may provide fewer equipment types, that is expected due to their scale, and these spaces still fulfil an important play function in their local area. Considering the provision of equipment types on offer across a Local Committee Area provides a useful generalised view of the diversity of play opportunities provided.

Figure 4:3 and Table 4: demonstrate the range of equipment types provided in general across FPS in each Local Committee Area. Key findings are:

- Swings, Slides, Rocking and Climbing Frames are the most prevalent equipment types, and across Highland are present in at least 67% of FPS. Further, over 90% of FPS in Badenoch and Strathspey, Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh, and Nairnshire have Swings.
- The provision of Jumping and Balancing equipment is lower across Highland. Badenoch and Strathspey provides the highest proportion of Jumping (58%) and Lochaber provides the highest proportion of Balancing (62%) equipment in FPS.

- The average provision of Hanging equipment in FPS across Highland is 47%, with the highest average provision in Nairnshire (73%) and the lowest in Sutherland (25%).
- The average provision of Twirling and Spinning equipment in FPS across Highland is 47%, with the highest average provision in Nairnshire (64%) and the lowest in Black Isle and Easter Ross and Lochaber (36%).

Table 4:10 Percentage of Formal Play Spaces which provide each equipment type in Settlement Development Areas of Local Committee Areas of Highland

Locality: Local Committee Area	Swings	Slides	Climbing Frames	Rocking	Twirling and spinning	Hanging	Jumping	Balancing
Badenoch and Strathspey	92%	81%	77%	85%	58%	54%	58%	38%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	72%	62%	66%	67%	36%	44%	23%	30%
Caithness	85%	69%	53%	58%	55%	35%	15%	18%
Dingwall and Seaforth	80%	72%	76%	76%	52%	68%	32%	40%
City of Inverness	75%	64%	64%	68%	47%	49%	41%	41%
Lochaber	85%	87%	82%	72%	36%	54%	56%	62%
Nairnshire	100%	73%	82%	73%	64%	73%	55%	45%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	84%	74%	68%	89%	47%	42%	32%	42%
Sutherland	83%	53%	60%	65%	48%	25%	18%	28%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	94%	87%	87%	68%	45%	55%	52%	39%
Totality: Highland	81%	69%	68%	69%	47%	47%	36%	37%

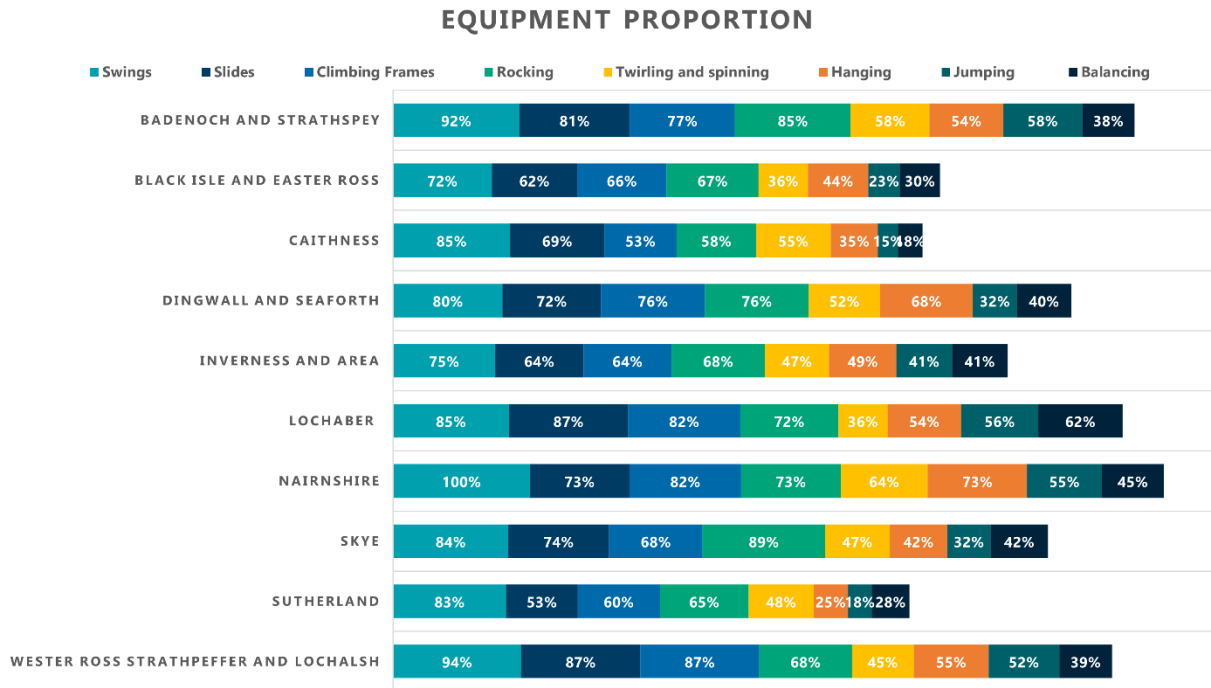


Figure 4:3 Relative proportion of different equipment types provided by FPS across Local Committee Areas in Highland.

Equipment in FPS was also evaluated to determine if it was nearing the end of its usable life, in terms of the play equipment condition, and how many pieces of equipment would need replacing within 12 months. A score of 0 meant no equipment was nearing end of useable life, a score of -1 meant that 1-3 pieces of equipment were nearing the end of their usable life and a score of -2 meant that 5+ pieces of equipment nearing the end of their usable life.

Table 4:11 Number of equipment pieces nearing end of useable life (scored 0, -1, -2) in Formal Play Spaces, by Local Committee Area in Highland.

Locality: Local Committee Area	Pieces of equipment nearing end of useable life					
	4+		1-3		None	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Badenoch and Strathspey	-	0%	5	19%	21	81%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	-	0%	11	18%	50	82%
Caithness	-	0%	13	24%	42	76%
Dingwall and Seaforth	-	0%	1	4%	24	96%
City of Inverness	2	1%	15	11%	121	88%
Lochaber	1	3%	4	10%	34	87%
Nairnshire	-	0%	2	18%	9	82%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	1	5%	1	5%	17	89%
Sutherland	-	0%	5	13%	35	88%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	-	0%	1	3%	30	97%
Totality: Highland	4	1%	58	13%	383	86%

Key findings regarding equipment nearing the end of useable life:

- Across Highland, 86% of FPS have no pieces of equipment nearing the end of their useable life.
- Isle of Skye and Raasay has the highest proportion of FPS (5%) with 4 or more pieces of equipment nearing the end of their useable life, followed by City of Inverness (1%) and Lochaber (3%) which will require replacement or upgrades in the next 12 months).
- Caithness has the highest proportion of FPS (24%) with 1-3 pieces of equipment nearing the end of their useable life.

4.1.4 Features for informal play

While open spaces for chasing, running or ball games are not classified as equipped formal play spaces, they remain a vital component in the overall provision of play opportunities and are considered as informal play spaces. These spaces provide children with the freedom to use the space in diverse and creative ways, encouraging imagination, exploration, and social interaction. These areas allow children to run, chase, play freely, and engage in unstructured activities experiences that are essential for their physical, social, and emotional development. Moreover, open play spaces are particularly valuable for children with mobility challenges or those from different socio-economic backgrounds, as they provide inclusive, flexible environments that require little to no equipment and can be enjoyed by all. In this sense, open spaces contribute significantly to the overall quality and accessibility of play provision across Highland through providing informal play opportunities.

Informal play features associated with a formal play space were assessed for all age groups including spaces for running and chasing, spaces for ball games, areas for natural play, places to be quiet and go relax, and places for teenagers to hang out. This assessment category links informal play spaces and formal play spaces and evaluates the quality of IPS which are adjacent to FPS for a range of age groups.

Each FPS was evaluated against five criteria, with a score of 1 assigned for the presence of each component that supports informal play. Consequently, any FPS that meets all five criteria receives a total score of 5, indicating a comprehensive range of informal play opportunities within or adjacent to the FPS. Conversely, a play space that meets only three criteria receives a score of 3, reflecting a more limited provision. The results of this assessment are illustrated in Figure 4:4.

This does not provide the full picture of informal play opportunities that children and young people have access to in Highland. Highland has rich provision of areas for nature play, for example, within and outwith settlements. Due to resourcing, a comprehensive evaluation of a wider range of informal play opportunities has not been completed, but it is a relevant consideration for play sufficiency and planning for play provision in the Highland context.

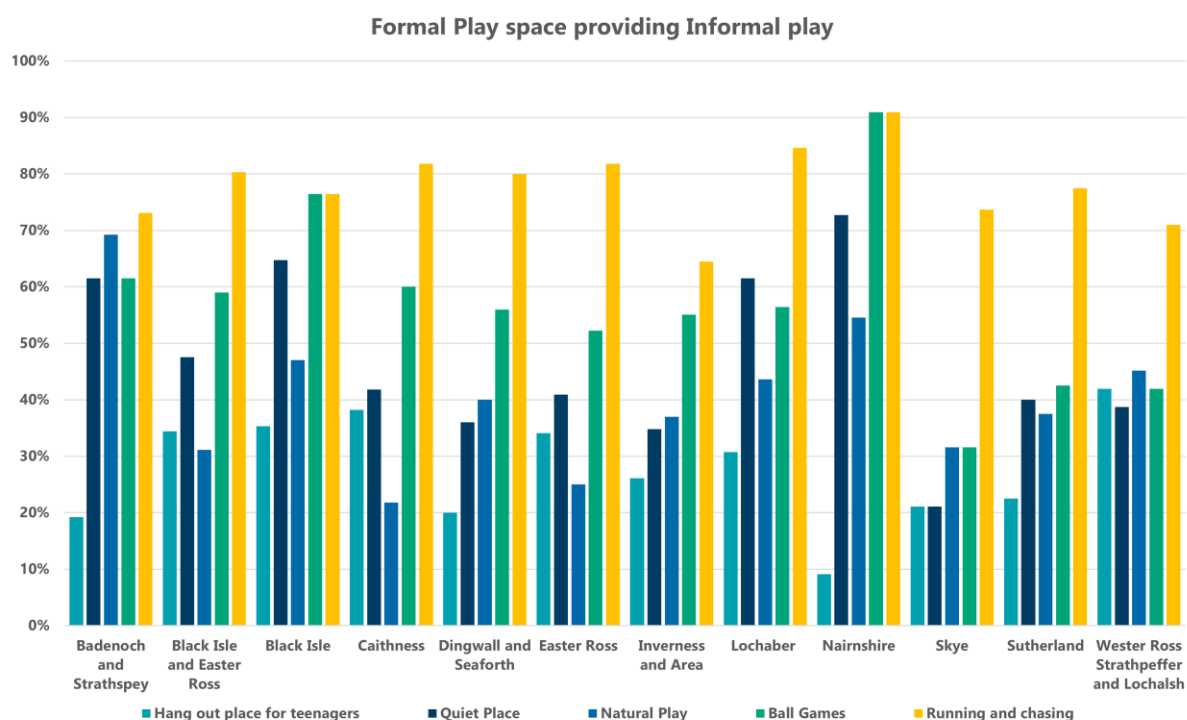


Figure 4:4 Proportion of Formal Play Spaces which provide features for informal play, in Settlement Development Areas of Local Committee Areas in Highland.

Key findings about informal play features in FPS are that:

- Most localities have a high proportion of FPS which offer nearby spaces for **ball games** (>50%, with Highland average of 55%) and space **for running and chasing** (>70%, with Highland average of 75%). City of Inverness has a slightly lower average provision of informal spaces for running and chasing (64%). Localities with lower provision of informal spaces for ball games are Isle of Skye and Raasay (32%), Sutherland (43%) and Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (42%).
- **Places for teenagers to relax and hang out** are on average only provided in 29% of FPS across Highland. Localities with the lowest provision of places for teenagers to relax and hang out are Nairnshire (9%), Isle of Skye and Raasay (21%), and Dingwall and Seaforth (20%). Caithness (38%) and Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (42%) have the highest provision of places for teenagers to relax and hang out across local FPS.
- Across Highland, 42% of FPS provide **places to be quiet or relax**. The lowest provision of places to be quiet or relax are within Dingwall and Seaforth (36%), City of Inverness (35%), and Isle of Skye and Raasay (21%).

4.1.5 Accessibility features

Accessibility is a crucial aspect of play space design, ensuring that all children regardless of physical ability and mobility can participate, play, and interact within their communities. Inclusive and accessible play environments promote social integration, independence, and equality, providing every child with the opportunity to benefit from outdoor play and physical activity.

Spatial attributes related to the physical accessibility to or from FPS, from areas where people live, was also assessed and is presented in the next section: **Context and location.**

In this assessment, all FPS were evaluated against seven criteria to determine the level of accessibility within each play space:

- The availability of **accessible parking** in proximity to the FPS: semi-accessible or street parking was scored 1, and fully accessible or onsite parking was scored 2;
- The presence of **wheelchair friendly paths** was scored from 0-2: no paths (0), some wheelchair friendly paths (1) or wheelchair friendly paths to all pieces of play equipment (2);
- The number of pieces of equipment **accessible and usable by children with a high level of mobility challenges** (1-3 pieces of accessible equipment scores 1, and 4 or more pieces of accessible equipment scores 2);
- The number of pieces of age-appropriate **equipment that a child, with a moderate level of mobility challenges, could be transferred from a wheelchair onto**, within 1m (1-3 pieces of accessible equipment scores 1, and 4 or more pieces of accessible equipment scores 2);
- The number of pieces of age-appropriate **equipment that a child with low mobility challenges could partake in**, e.g. difficulty balancing, core body strength, weakened arms and legs (1-3 pieces of accessible equipment scores 1, and 4 or more pieces of accessible equipment scores 2);
- The presence of **appropriate fencing**: no fences (0), some fenced areas (1) or all of play space fenced appropriately (2);
- The presence of **even and good quality surfaces** suitable for the visually impaired, e.g. no rips, holes or tears in surfaces: poor quality of surfaces (0), moderate quality of surfaces (1) and good quality of surfaces (2).

Overall, a rating of 2 for any criteria represents a good level of accessibility and a rating of 1 for any criteria represents a moderate level of accessibility.

Table 4:12 presents the proportion of FPS in each Local Committee Area which scored 1 or 2 across each criterion. Figure 4:5 highlights the proportion of FPS in each Local Committee Area which provide 4 or more pieces of equipment for mobility challenged children.

Proportion of equipment to cater impairment

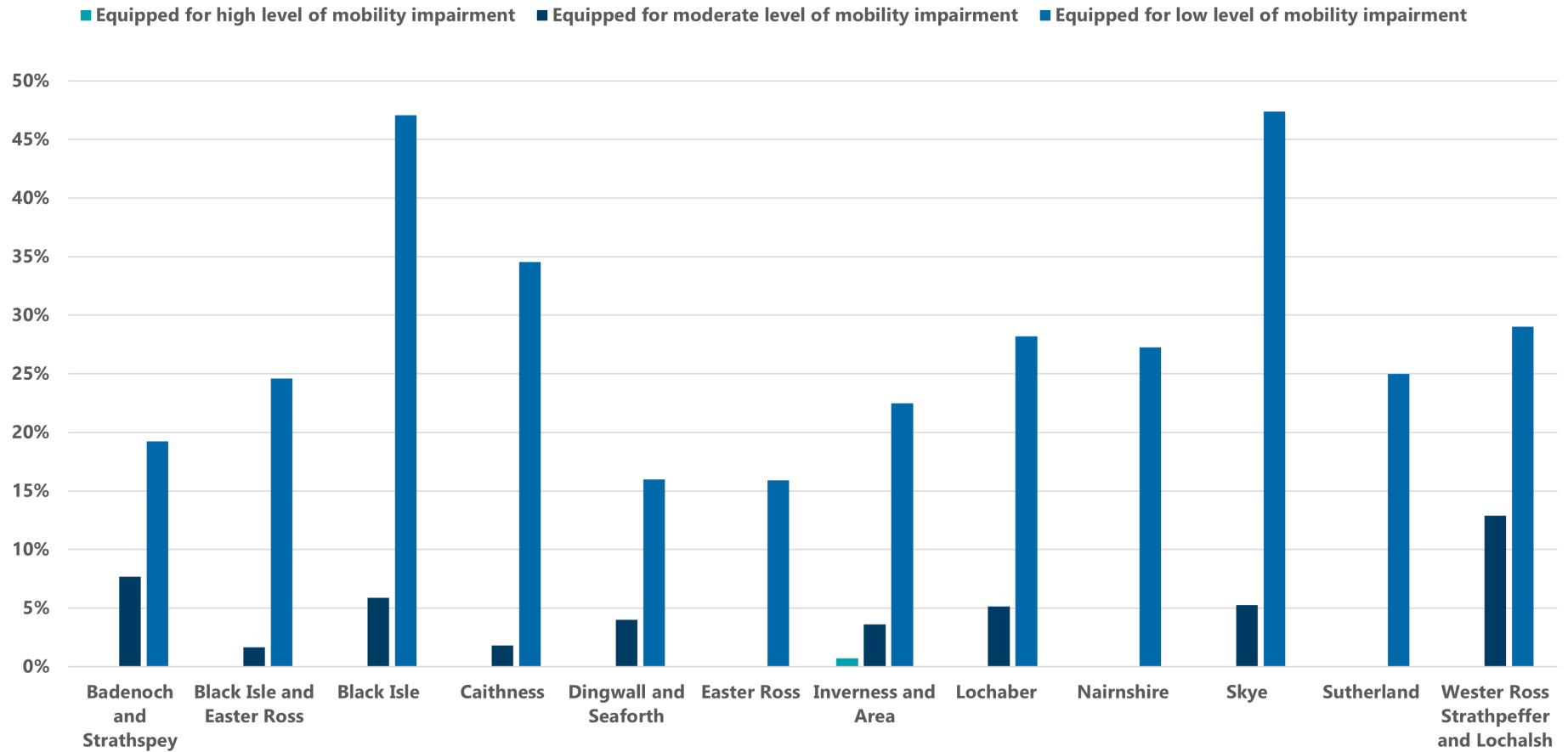


Figure 4:5 Percentage of FPS in each Local Committee Area that provide four or more pieces of equipment for fully, moderate or less mobility challenged children in Highland

Table 4:12 Level of accessibility of play features within Formal Play Spaces (1 – Moderate, 2 – Good), in Settlements of Local Committee Areas in Highland

Locality: Local Committee Area	Full Accessible Parking		Wheelchair friendly Paths		Full mobility challenged equipment		Moderate mobility challenged equipment		Less mobility challenged equipment		Park Fenced		Even and good quality surfaces	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
Badenoch and Strathspey	58%	8%	3%	19%	12%	0%	42%	8%	58%	19%	8%	35%	12%	19%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	49%	23%	59%	23%	7%	0%	18%	2%	39%	25%	23%	46%	31%	31%
Caithness	67%	27%	8%	87%	4%	0%	36%	2%	58%	35%	20%	67%	22%	69%
Dingwall and Seaforth	40%	20%	2%	4%	0%	0%	4%	4%	36%	16%	24%	44%	12%	16%
City of Inverness	51%	17%	15%	38%	9%	1%	28%	4%	30%	22%	23%	52%	24%	37%
Lochaber	54%	26%	18%	59%	3%	0%	41%	5%	54%	28%	21%	72%	38%	41%
Nairnshire	45%	36%	11%	64%	18%	0%	64%	0%	45%	27%	27%	27%	27%	36%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	21%	58%	3%	68%	11%	0%	58%	5%	16%	47%	5%	95%	16%	58%
Sutherland	63%	28%	29%	58%	0%	0%	33%	0%	55%	25%	13%	80%	35%	60%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	42%	35%	6%	39%	13%	0%	13%	13%	42%	29%	16%	55%	29%	45%
Totality: Highland	52%	24%	8%	45%	7%	0%	30%	4%	42%	26%	20%	57%	26%	42%

- On average in Highland, 24% of FPS provide **fully accessible parking**, and 52% provide **semi-accessible parking** (e.g. on street parking). Local Committee Areas with lower-than-average provision of fully accessible parking are Badenoch and Strathspey (8%), Black Isle and Easter Ross (23%), Dingwall and Seaforth (20%), and City of Inverness (17%).
- On average in Highland, 45% of play spaces provide **fully wheelchair accessible paths to play equipment** and 8% of play spaces provide **moderately wheelchair accessible paths to play equipment**. The highest provision of fully wheelchair accessible paths in FPS is in Caithness (87%), Isle of Skye and Raasay (68%) and Nairnshire (64%). Areas with lower provision of fully wheelchair accessible paths to play equipment are Dingwall and Seaforth (4%) and Badenoch and Strathspey (19%).
- There is only one play space which has 4 or more pieces of **fully mobility challenged equipment** in Highland, which is the Cameron Drive Play Area in Ardersier. In Highland, 7% of FPS provide 1-3 pieces of fully mobility challenged equipment, with highest provision in Nairnshire (18%) and the lowest in Dingwall and Seaforth (0%) and Sutherland (0%).
- Across Highland only 4% of FPS have 4 or more pieces of equipment for **moderate mobility challenged** children, and 30% of FPS provide 1-3 pieces of equipment for moderate mobility challenged children. The highest provision of 4 or more pieces of equipment is in Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (13%). Dingwall and Seaforth have only 4% of FPS with 1-3 pieces of equipment for moderate mobility challenged children, in contrast to Nairnshire which has the highest proportion of 64%.
- In Highland, 26% of FPS provide 4 or more pieces of **equipment that a child with lesser mobility challenges could partake in**, and 42% provide 1-3 pieces of such equipment. Isle of Skye and Raasay has the highest proportion of FPS (47%) with 4 or more pieces of equipment that a child with lesser mobility challenges could partake in, and Dingwall and Seaforth has the lowest (16%). For 1-3 pieces of equipment for lesser mobility challenged children, Caithness and Badenoch and Strathspey have the highest provision (both 58%) while the lowest provision (16%) is in Isle of Skye and Raasay.
- An average of 57% of FPS in Highland are **fully fenced**, and 20% are moderately or partially fenced. The highest provision of fully fenced FPS (%) is in Isle of Skye and Raasay (95%) and lowest being in Nairnshire (27%).

- The provision of **even and good quality surfaces for visually impaired children** is provided on average in 42% of FPS, and 26% of FPS have moderate quality of surfaces. Caithness (69%) and Sutherland (60%) have the highest proportion while the provision is less than 20% in Dingwall and Seaforth (16%), and Badenoch and Strathspey (19%). Context and location

The context and location of a FPS influences how effectively it serves its community, such as being within easy access & proximity to where people live, its physical integration, visibility and perceived sense of safety within a local area. FPS were evaluated across five location and context-based criteria:

- The **centrality of their placement** within communities (scored 1 for Yes and 0 for No),
- The **presence of passive surveillance** (such as outlook and visibility from nearby homes or streets) (scored 1 for Yes and 0 for No),
- The **availability and proximity to public transport options** (scored 1 for Yes and 0 for No),
- The provision of **vehicle parking spaces** (scored 1 for street parking, 2 for onsite parking, and 0 for no parking) and,
- The presence of **safe crossing points on adjacent roads** (scored 1 for Yes and 0 for No).

Together, these factors contribute to the sufficiency of FPS within local areas, providing locationally accessible, safe, and well-integrated FPS for the surrounding community to enjoy.

Figure 4:6 illustrates the percentage of FPS in Local Committee Areas which have a central location, good passive surveillance, proximity to public transport options and safe crossing points to nearby roads. In Highland, overall, most FPS are centrally located (89%) and benefit from good passive surveillance (94%) with outlook and visibility from nearby homes. In Nairnshire, 100% of FPS are centrally located. In Dingwall and Seaforth, and Nairnshire, 100% of FPS have good passive surveillance. In Highland, the availability of public transport options near FPS is more limited with only 56% of play spaces benefitting from this feature. Caithness has the highest proportion of public transport availability near FPS (69%) and Nairnshire has the lowest (36%). The provision of safe crossing points near FPS is highly variable across localities in Highland, with high provision in Lochaber (85%) and Caithness (84%) and low provision in Dingwall and Seaforth (24%), Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (23%) and Isle of Skye and Raasay (21%).

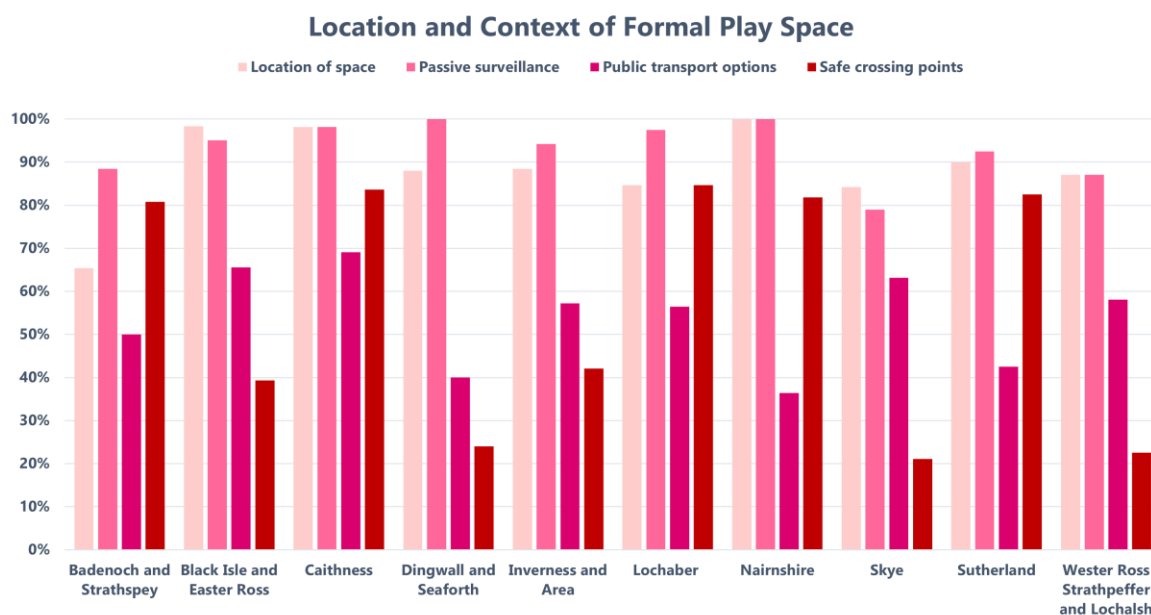


Figure 4:6 Percentage of FPS which include location and context features (excluding parking) of Formal Play Spaces within Settlement Development Areas, by Local Committee Area in Highland

In Highland, 25% of FPS provide onsite parking, and 61% have nearby street parking as shown in Table 4:. The highest provision of onsite car parking in FPS is in Isle of Skye and Raasay (68%) and the highest prevalence of no car parking provided is in Dingwall and Seaforth (36%) followed by Black Isle and Easter Ross (21%).

Car parking is one locality factor, and does not necessarily indicate that FPS is inaccessible, as other factors indicate how people might access a play space: play spaces located centrally, for example, would be within walkable distance, and play spaces with good public transport options are not dependent on cars and parking for access.

Work done by Highland Council to develop the Local Living mapping included an 800m buffer analysis for walking access to Highland Council Play Areas. This is included in the [Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment Online Map](#). Parts of settlements within an 800m walk demonstrating accessibility to play parks, without relying on a vehicle, are hatched in blue as shown in the example in Figure 4:7.

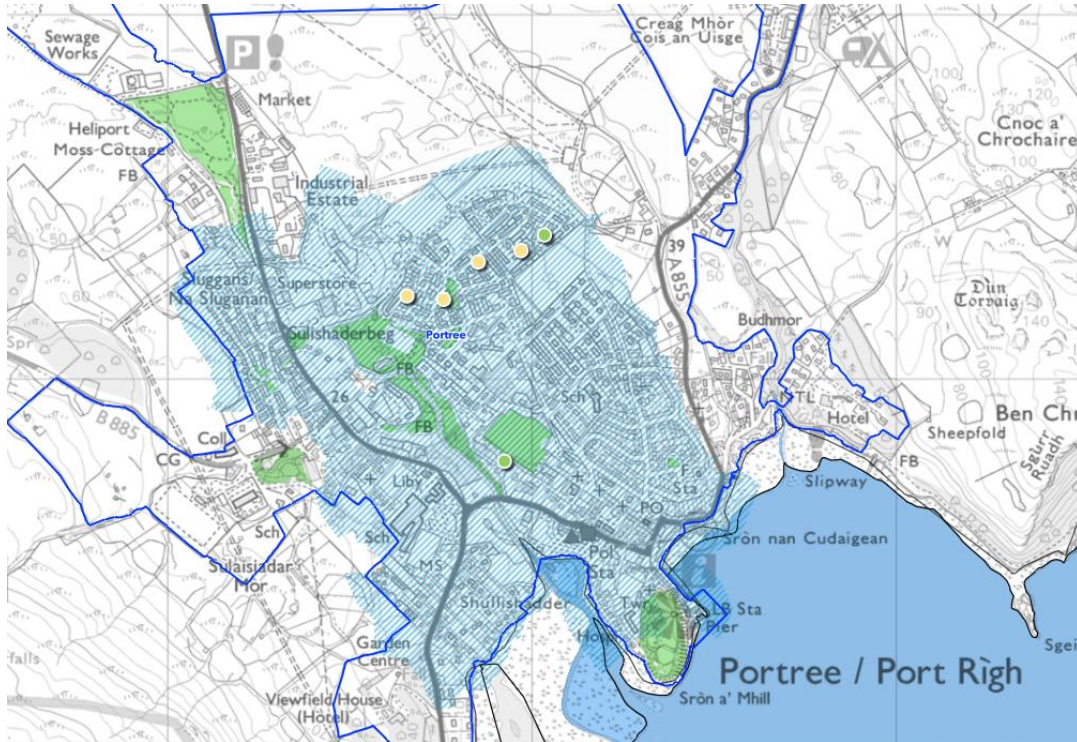


Figure 4:7 An example 800m walking catchment for Highland Council play parks, as presented in the online PSA map

Table 4:13 Parking provision in Formal Play Spaces in Settlement Development Areas of Local Committee Areas, in Highland

Locality: Local Committee Area	Parking Provision		
	None	Street	Onsite
Badenoch and Strathspey	8%	73%	19%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	21%	54%	25%
Caithness	5%	71%	24%
Dingwall and Seaforth	36%	48%	16%
City of Inverness	16%	66%	18%
Lochaber	10%	67%	23%
Nairnshire	9%	55%	36%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	11%	21%	68%
Sutherland	3%	68%	30%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	19%	45%	35%
Totality: Highland	14%	61%	25%

4.1.6 Environmental qualities and condition

The environmental qualities and condition of FPS were reviewed to understand how effectively each space supports and sustains a quality and safe play environment.

Criteria evaluated in this category include:

- The **quality and condition of the general environment** - e.g. is a FPS within a pleasant environment that is attractive, clean and tidy, scored from Poor = 0, Moderate = 1 to Good = 2.
- The **standard of maintenance**, scored from Poor = 0, Moderate = 1 to Good = 2.).
- The **condition of surfaces, including play surfaces and paths** scored from Poor = 0, Moderate = 1 to Good = 2.
- The **usage and busyness of the space** is scored as less used = 0, or busy / some level of use⁴⁵ = 1).

The usage and busyness of spaces was assessed for each FPS, but it was recognised following assessment that it only represented a singular point in time and the scoring was heavily influenced by when the officer assessed the space. Furthermore, assessors made an effort to undertake site surveys outside of 'peak' times (e.g. after school) where play spaces are busy, in an effort to not disrupt play, be perceived as strangers watching children play. It has been concluded that this data has limited use for reporting on play sufficiency and for this reason, this criterion has not been reported here and is not reflected in total scoring.

Table 4:14 provides a summary FPS that scored 2 (Good) for three criteria: the quality and condition of their environment, maintenance standards and surface conditions. Across these criteria, Highland has a high proportion of FPS with good condition of environment (72%), standard of maintenance (63%), and surface conditions (61%).

⁴⁵ This criteria was originally scored 0-5 on a scale of busyness, however the application of this scale was variable between assessors and so it was decided to use a binary rating of busy/used and not busy/less used

Table 4:14 Formal Play Spaces with a Good (score of 2) level of maintenance, surface conditions and environmental conditions within Settlement Development Areas of Local Committee Areas in Highland

Locality: Local Committee Area	Condition of Environment		Maintenance standard		Surface conditions	
	Score 2	%	Score 2	%	Score 2	%
Badenoch and Strathspey	17	65%	16	62%	16	62%
Black Isle and Easter Ross	43	70%	35	57%	33	54%
Caithness	46	84%	38	69%	38	69%
Dingwall and Seaforth	14	56%	16	64%	13	52%
City of Inverness	86	62%	79	57%	80	58%
Lochaber	30	77%	26	67%	24	62%
Nairnshire	11	100%	11	100%	6	55%
Isle of Skye and Raasay	12	63%	9	47%	11	58%
Sutherland	38	95%	29	73%	32	80%
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	22	71%	21	68%	20	65%
Totality: Highland	319	72%	280	63%	273	61%

4.1.7 Other facilities

Additional facilities and amenities provided in or near FPS, such as rubbish bins, public toilets, seating, picnic tables, shade and shelter, and other facilities (e.g. café, pump track, cycle maintenance tools, bottle bank, defibrillator), enhance the overall user experience and functionality of FPS. They offer comfort, convenience, and protection from the elements which encourage longer visits, cleanliness, and a more welcoming and sustainable environment for children and families to enjoy.

Figure 4:8 provides an overview of the provision of additional facilities in FPS (%) in each Local Committee Area. In Highland, the average provision of additional facilities in FPS is: rubbish bins 54%, public toilets 4%, seating 64%, picnic tables 30%, shade and shelter 24% and, other facilities 7%.

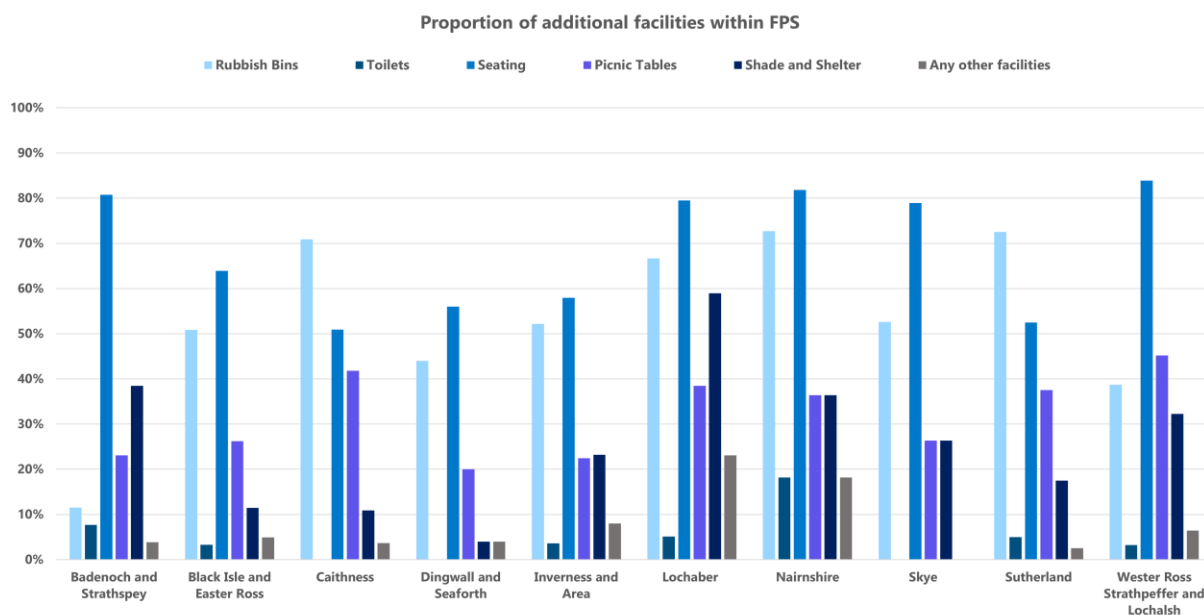


Figure 4:8 Proportion of Formal Play Spaces providing additional facilities, by type, by Local Committee Areas of Highland

- The provision of **rubbish bins** in FPS is lowest in Badenoch and Strathspey (12%), and highest in Sutherland (73%), Nairnshire (73%) and Caithness (71%).
- It is evident that many FPS lack **public toilet facilities**, with an average of only 4% in Highland FPS: the lowest provision is observed in Caithness, Dingwall and Seaforth and Isle of Skye and Raasay (all 0%). Nairnshire has the highest provision of public toilets in FPS at 18%.
- The provision of **seating** in FPS is lowest in Caithness (51%), and highest in Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (84%), Nairnshire (82%) and Badenoch and Strathspey (81%).
- The provision of **picnic tables** in FPS is lowest in Dingwall and Seaforth (20%), and highest in Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (45%), Caithness (42%) and lowest in Dingwall and Seaforth (20%).
- The provision of **shade and shelter** in FPS is lowest in Dingwall and Seaforth (4%) and highest in Lochaber (59%) and Badenoch and Strathspey (38%).
- The provision of **other facilities** was identified on average in 7% of FPS in Highland. The most were identified in Lochaber, 23% of FPS had other facilities, and the least were identified in Isle of Skye and Raasay (0%).

The Highland climate and weather is an important consideration when interpreting the provision of shade and shelter, outdoor seating and picnic tables. For example, high winds and less severe UV than compared to other local authority areas means that shade structures are not always provided.

The table 4:9 presents play space provision across Highland, showing both Formal Play Space (FPS) and Informal Play Space (IPS) in relation to the number of children in each Local Committee Area. This allows a comparison of provision per child, highlighting differences in scale, capacity, and access to different types of play opportunities.

- City of Inverness has the largest total IPS area (over 5.2 million m²), providing 372.3 m² per child, above the Highland average despite population pressures.
- Lochaber (246.3 m²) records the lowest IPS provision per child, although this still substantially exceeds formal play provision in all areas.

Locality: Local Committee Area	Total children	FPS		IPS	
		Area (sq.m)	Area per child sq.m)	Area (sq.m)	Area per child sq.m)
Badenoch and Strathspey	1721	-			
Black Isle and Easter Ross	4784	39,911	8.3	1,326,352	277.2
Caithness	3009	42,629	14.2	799,794	265.8
Dingwall and Seaforth	2222	11,926	5.4	628,542	282.9
City of Inverness	13983	125,635	9.0	5,205,354	372.3
Lochaber	2557	32,484	12.7	629,782	246.3
Nairnshire	1669	9519	5.7	638,283	382.4
Isle of Skye and Raasay	789	3832	4.9	280,951	356.1
Sutherland	942	26,059	27.7	361,654	383.9
Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	825	9678	11.7	342,643	415.3
Totality: Highland	32501	301673	11.1	10213355	331.4

Table 4:9 Area of Play space available per child

Key points:

Across Highland as a whole, a total of 32,501 children are served by:

- 301,673 m² of FPS, equating to an average of 11.1 m² per child, and
- 10,213,355 m² of IPS, equating to an average of 331.4 m² per child.

- Sutherland records the highest FPS provision per child at 27.7 m², reflecting a relatively low child population and comparatively large areas of formal play.
- Caithness (14.2 m²) and Lochaber (12.7 m²) also exceed the Highland average, indicating stronger per-child FPS availability.
- City of Inverness, despite the largest total FPS area (125,635 m²), provides 9.0 m² per child, below several rural areas due to its large child population.
- Isle of Skye and Raasay (4.9 m²) and Dingwall and Seaforth (5.4 m²) record the lowest FPS provision per child, highlighting more limited formal play availability relative to need.
- IPS provision per child is significantly higher than FPS in all areas, reflecting the extensive role of open and informal spaces.
- Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh records the highest IPS provision per child, at 415.3 m², followed by Sutherland (383.9 m²) and Nairnshire (382.4 m²).

5 Setting Standards for Play: Conclusion and Next Steps | A' Suidheachadh Inbhean airson Cluiche: Co-dhùnadh agus na h-Ath Cheumannan

To support the ongoing provision of play opportunities in Highland, future efforts should focus on the context of play provision, demand for play (e.g. new development areas) and the range of FPS within the area which all contribute to the sufficiency of play available to inform targeted upgrades or investment to improve play space quality, quantity or accessibility and inclusivity.

Statements on the provision for play in Highland in totality and by locality have been presented in this Play Sufficiency Assessment, providing an evidence base to support local development planning, investment prioritisation and decision making.

It should be noted that the detailed findings of the PSA can be analysed in a myriad of other ways to support future planning and investment decisions, for example with reporting at settlement development area level, or neighbourhood level to support a place-based consideration of play. **Appendix 1:** includes underlying data which is crucial resource to support the application of the PSA.

Setting Benchmarks for Future PSA Assessments in Highland

Benchmarks for future Play Space Assessments (PSAs) in Highland is established through maintaining a consistent, evidence-led framework that will allow performance of play spaces to be measured over time and across locations. The current PSA provides a robust baseline against which future assessments can be compared. Future benchmarks will be a combination of quantitative measures such as accessibility standards, catchment coverage, equipment provision by age group, and quality scores along with qualitative indicators drawn from consultation feedback and on-the-ground observations.

Key benchmarks could be aligned with nationally recognised guidance (such as play sufficiency – planning guidance (by Scottish Government), UNCRC principles, and accessibility/inclusivity standards and the Council's Play Park Strategy), while

remaining flexible enough to reflect the rural, urban, and island contexts unique to Highland. Distinct benchmarks could be considered for different types of provision to ensure like-for-like comparison, including:

- **Formal play spaces**

Assessed against standards relating to fixed equipment, safety surfacing, maintenance, inclusivity, and age-group provision, with benchmarks proportionate to their role:

- **Neighbourhood play spaces**

Small-scale spaces serving a local catchment within walking distance, providing basic and easily accessible play opportunities for a small residential population.

- **Settlement play spaces**

Medium-scale spaces serving a wider local community, typically offering a broader range of equipment and supporting a moderate catchment drawn from multiple neighbourhoods.

- **Destination play parks**

Large-scale, higher-order play spaces serving a wide catchment, often at settlement or town level, with diverse equipment, inclusive design, supporting facilities, and enhanced accessibility.

These categories align with the Council's adopted Play Park Strategy, which sets out a hierarchy of Neighbourhood, Settlement, and Destination play parks, including detailed criteria relating to size, function, catchment, and provision. The Strategy's criteria for different scales of play space provide additional context and complement the definitions above and can be used alongside the PSA assessment framework to support consistent categorisation, benchmarking, and future decision-making.

- **Informal play spaces**

Assessed against criteria relevant to unstructured play, including accessibility, natural features, perceived safety, and opportunities for exploration. Informal play opportunities are not defined by population thresholds but by their availability, accessibility, and ability to support unstructured play within communities of varying size.

Consistency in survey methodology, scoring criteria, and data recording should be a priority to improve comparability between assessment cycles. Future PSAs could also track change over time by benchmarking against previous scores (e.g. improvement,

decline, or no change), enabling trends in quality, accessibility, and distribution to be clearly identified.

Finally, benchmarks could be reviewed periodically and informed by consultation feedback, evolving policy priorities, and emerging best practice in play provision. This approach would support transparent decision-making, help prioritise investment, and ensure that Highland's play network continues to respond to the needs of children, families, and communities.

Local Development Plan

NPF4 Policy 21 Play, recreation and sport states that:

LDPs should identify sites for sports, play and outdoor recreation for people of all ages. This should be based on an understanding of the needs and demand in the community and informed by the planning authority's Play Sufficiency Assessment and Open Space Strategy. These spaces can be incorporated as part of enhancing and expanding blue and green infrastructure, taking account of relevant agencies' plans or policy frameworks, such as flood risk and/or water management plans. New provisions should be well-designed, high quality, accessible and inclusive.

We will consider including within the Local Development Plan, policies that explicitly support the safeguarding and enhancement of play opportunities, through the quantity and quality of play spaces, taking into account community needs and ensuring that new developments incorporate accessible and inclusive play features as part of their design. There is also opportunity for the LDP to promote integration between formal and informal play spaces, safeguard green corridors for recreation, and require developers to contribute to the provision or improvement of local play infrastructure. Areas of deficit or poor provision across Highland could provide the evidence to support improved policies for the provision of play spaces and equally features or functions that are generally well provided can be supported and sustained through policy.

It is recognised that the Highland Council has a high number of existing play spaces where several existing FPS are located close to proposed development areas developer contributions could be directed towards upgrading an existing play space. In such situations, provision of an additional play space by the developer on the site on or through developer contributions may not be preferable as it creates additional maintenance burden and repeats provision of similar play space.

5.1.1 Open Space in New Residential Development Supplementary Guidance

The [Open Space in New Residential Development Supplementary Guidance](#)⁴⁶ currently provides guidance on the Council's potential open space requirements for anyone seeking planning permission for four or more dwellings, and as part of that sets out standards for provision of quantity of equipped play areas. The Open Space Requirements Calculator⁴⁷ is used to estimate the equipped play area required to be provided for any new housing development. The calculator applies a minimum requirement of 1,500m² per play area, and 2m² per person.

Further analysis is provided up in the section 4.1 which provides a broad analysis shows that the average provision equates to 2m² per person, which matches the adopted standard for provision in new residential developments of 2m² per person; more detailed analysis can be undertaken to inform future policies and priorities in Local Committee Areas like Nairnshire, Isle of Skye and Raasay and Dingwall and Seaforth. The findings indicate that higher population concentrations significantly reduce per-person play space availability, while lower population densities do not consistently correspond to higher levels of FPS provision. As part of the HLDP preparation, the development of a new policy and/or new guidance will be considered to support ongoing provision of play spaces. Setting a standard helps guide planning and investment decisions and will help with future monitoring and evaluation of play provision.

5.1.2 Developer Contributions

The [Developer Contributions Supplementary Guidance](#)⁴⁸ currently sets out the Council's approach to mitigating the impacts of development on services and infrastructure by seeking fair and realistic developer contributions to the delivery of such facilities. This includes a section on Open Space, which links to the Open Space in New Residential Development Supplementary Guidance and reiterates the principle that open space should be delivered on-site and only in exceptional circumstances will contributions be sought to the provision of new/improved open spaces and/or play areas off-site.

⁴⁶ [Open Space Supplementary Guidance- latest | Open Space in New Residential Development Supplementary Guidance](#)

⁴⁷ [Open Space Supplementary Guidance- latest | Open Space Requirements Calculator](#)

⁴⁸ https://www.highland.gov.uk/directory_record/712087/developer_contributions

As set out above, the PSA will serve as a key evidence base to inform the preparation of the Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP) and the content of The Supplementary Guidance documents will be reviewed through the preparation of the HLDP. Any new or updated policies and guidance will be considered to support the ongoing provision and enhancement of play spaces. The PSA can also be used to inform future decision-making on investment priorities and budget planning for play provision. In this context, the Council will review the current approach to developer contributions relating to open space, including play spaces, and may bring forward a revised approach where appropriate.

Play Park Strategy

The information about play sufficiency prepared in the PSA can support the implementation of the [Council's Play Park Strategy 2023-2033](#)⁴⁹, the guiding principles of which are inclusiveness, creative opportunities, holistic play and sustainable play. It sets out a settlement-based hierarchy for Council-owned play spaces (referred to as play parks within the Strategy) which aligns with the Settlement hierarchy used in LDPs (Tier 1: Main Settlements, Tier 2: Growing Settlements etc). The three play space categories are:

- **Destination Park:** Within each Area Committee, Members can choose to identify or create one Destination Park.
- **Settlement Park:** Each Main Settlement has one play park equipped to the 'Settlement Park' level
- **Neighbourhood Park:** Within 'Tier 1 - Main Settlements', the Council will ensure that each neighbourhood area is served by a playpark equipped to the 'Neighbourhood Park' level and each 'Growing Settlement' is served by a play park equipped to 'Neighbourhood Park' level

Key qualifying criteria for each 'park type' are set out within the Strategy, and the application of categories is set out as finances permit. The Strategy proposes a place-based approach with Members agreeing which play parks fall into each category. Findings from the PSA can assist Members to make evidence-based decisions about play park categorisation.

⁴⁹ [Play Park Strategy](#)

Local Place Plans

There is an opportunity for community-controlled bodies and community councils to use the PSA to inform future Local Place Plans, as an evidence base about the quality, quantity, inclusivity and accessibility of play in their area.

Future Priorities and Next Steps

Building on the findings of this assessment, the Play Space Assessment (PSA) provides clear statements on the sufficiency of play provision across Highland, both at a Highland-wide level and by individual localities. These statements will form a key part of the evidence base to support the preparation of the new Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP) and the implementation of the Play Park Strategy.

The PSA will also support future planning and decision-making on investment priorities and budget planning for play provision. In doing so, it provides an important framework for considering not only existing provision, but also future demand for play spaces, including that arising from new development areas and changing population patterns.

While consultation responses have helped inform the assessment, it is recognised that future management and investment decisions must also reflect current on-the-ground conditions at individual play spaces, including those not raised through this consultation. Creating inclusive play environments particularly for children with mobility challenges and those from socio-economically disadvantaged households remains a key priority. By considering accessibility, inclusivity, deprivation, local context, and future demand alongside the findings of the PSA, the Council can take a more informed, place-based approach to planning and investment. Overall, the PSA and its supporting evidence provide a robust and flexible foundation to guide future planning, prioritisation, and investment decisions for play provision across Highland.

Glossary | Clàr-mìneachaidh

Accessibility features

Features of play spaces that support children with varying mobility challenges.

Spatial accessibility

Spatial proximity and access to a play space within a local area, as defined by an 800m walking catchment. This is considered in the Context and Location category of the play space quality assessment.

Formal Play Space

Play spaces which are specifically designed and maintained for the purposes of play.

Growing Settlements

The smallest, established settlements identified in Local Development Plans where appropriate, limited 'infill' growth will still be encouraged. These are settlements which we think would benefit from a set of guiding factors to direct development to the best locations rather than setting it out as a Settlement Development Area boundary and specifically delineated site allocations.

Informal Play Space

Play spaces which (a) are, or are within areas of open space, and (b) are not specifically designed and maintained for the purposes of play.

Local Committee Area

The area covered by any one of The Highland Council's Local (or City) Committees. As part of its democratic structure, The Highland Council area is divided into ten areas, each of which comprises one or more whole Council electoral wards (of which there are 21 across the Council area). For each of those ten areas the Council has a Local (or City) Committee.

Local Development Plan

Planning authorities must prepare one or more Local Development Plans (LDPs) for their area. The LDP sets out a spatial strategy, being a detailed statement of the planning authority's policies and proposals as to the development and use of land in the plan area. It must take into account the National Planning Framework and any registered Local Place Plans in the area it covers. It must have regard to the authority's adopted Regional Spatial Strategy, if it has one. The LDP must also have regard to any local outcomes improvement plan for the area it covers. LDPs are part of the statutory development plan.

Local Place Plan

Local Place Plans (LPPs) are community-led plans setting out proposals for the development and use of land. They must have regard to the NPF, any LDP which covers the same area, and also any Locality Plan which covers the same area. LPPs are not part of the statutory development plan but have an important role to play in informing LDPs.

Locality

A sub-regional geographic area selected for its size and scale to support a local assessment of play areas, focused on the most populated areas. For the Highland PSA, Local Committee Areas have been chosen as the Locality with a focus on the Settlement Development Areas within them.

Play Space

In the context of Play Sufficiency Assessment, “play spaces” means outdoor spaces which are accessible by the public, and which offer play opportunities for children.

Play Sufficiency

Play sufficiency is a consideration within a given context, informed by the combined qualities of play spaces in a particular area. This means that, for example, not all play spaces are expected to offer all equipment types, and different spaces may (or may not) offer more specialised equipment that is accessible or include nearby space for informal play.

Settlement Development Area

A delineated boundary that reflects the built-up area and allocated expansion areas for a main settlement. These settlement envelopes are the preferred areas for most types of development.

Totality

The [Town and Country Planning \(Play Sufficiency Assessment\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2023](#) requires local authorities to include statements about overall quality, quantity and accessibility of formal and informal play spaces by totality – i.e. the whole Highland Council area.

6 Appendix 1: Play Quality Assessment Data | Eàrr-ràdh 1: Dàta Measaidh Càileachd Cluiche

All data has been included in the online map. Click any play space to view its play space quality scores.

The Interactive online map is accessible via link:
[Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment Map](#)

7 Appendix 2: Assessment

Methodology | Eàrr-ràdh 2: Modh-obrach Measaidh

Initial Engagement

As per the Scottish Government's [Planning guidance for PSA](#)⁵⁰, it is the duty of the Council to undertake engagement on the Play Sufficiency Assessment.

Highland Council carried out initial engagement in 2023 to understand what types of play equipment and experiences children value most in playgrounds in Highland. This engagement informed both the Play Park Strategy and the Play Sufficiency Assessment.

Engagement focused on schools engaging with nursery, primary, and secondary-aged children and young people, as well as teachers and adults (recognising that many children need adults to accompany them to play spaces). Engagement questions were developed in line with Scottish Government and Play Scotland's recommendations for community feedback. It focused on understanding what types of play equipment and experiences children value most in playgrounds. Questions were tailored to suit different age groups. For example, photos were used for all school-aged children to create conversations about what they liked playing on at play parks. Nursery aged children were asked fewer questions to retain interest. As well as photos, different coloured questions were used to support teachers and caregivers to guide beginning readers to complete the questions independently with their own thoughts and opinions. Teenage questionnaires intentionally had less questions but more open questions so as that age group could express their individual thoughts and solutions towards play parks. Adult feedback was equally important because we identify many children need adults to accompany them to the play park.

Prior to distribution to schools, the following services were consulted for pre-approval of the questionnaire:

- Highland Council's Amenities team

⁵⁰ [Play Sufficiency Assessment Regulations 2023: planning guidance](#)

- Highland Council's Community Operation and Supports team
- Inspiring Voices
- Highland Youth Convener

There was a high return rate of 1,151 responses. 49% were from primary school aged children, followed by 30% of over 18's (adults), 14% nursery aged and 7% secondary school aged children.

A summary of the analysis of the engagement is included in Appendix 1 of the [Play Park Strategy 2023-2033](#). The Play Coordinator and the Educational Psychology Department have analysed both the qualitative and quantitative data.

Identify and Assess Formal Play Spaces

Highland Council officers undertook surveys of 445 formal play spaces (FPS), of which 322 are owned by the Council and 123 are owned by other organisations. Council-owned FPS were surveyed in autumn 2023 (by Amenities Team), whilst those owned by other organisations were surveyed mostly in summer to autumn 2024 (Development Plans Team) with a small number completed in January 2025. These 445 play spaces are spread across the 10 Local Committee Areas.

In addition, a further 18 play spaces have been identified during the later part of the PSA preparation process and have been added to the PSA Map to acknowledge their existence, and they will be assessed at a future stage.

All the play spaces were assessed based on the four themes – Quantity, Quality, Accessibility and Inclusivity - outlined in the following sections.

7.1.1 Quantity and Inclusivity

All FPS in Highland were identified through desktop survey using GIS tools and the existing Council database of FPS. Once identified, each FPS was defined by a polygon in GIS, which were confirmed on site visits. This included Council-owned and non-Council-owned FPS.

The inclusivity analysis used Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to identify the proportion of Highland FPS and IPS within the most deprived areas and least deprived areas.

7.1.2 Quality & Accessibility

Each FPS was surveyed on site against six categories:

- Equipment types: The types of play equipment provided and condition of play equipment (if near the end of its useable life) (maximum score 26). The shorthand for this category, used in Appendix 1: , is **Equipment**.
- Features for informal play: Opportunities for informal play for children of different ages (maximum score 5). The shorthand for this category, used in Appendix 1: , is **Open Play Spaces**.
- Accessibility features: The equipment for accessible and inclusive play provided for children with mobility challenges, including paths and accessible parking (maximum score 14). The shorthand for this category, used in Appendix 1: , is **Accessibility**.
- Context and location: The proximity to a neighbourhood, town or village centre, natural surveillance from residential areas, access via public transport, parking and pedestrian access (maximum score 6). The shorthand for this category, used in Appendix 1: , is **Park Location**.
- Environmental qualities and condition: The pleasantness and general attractiveness of the space, usage, maintenance and surface conditions (maximum score 6). The shorthand for this category, used in Appendix 1: , is **Environmental**.
- Additional facilities: The presence of supportive amenities such as toilets, bins, benches, shade, shelter and picnic tables (maximum score 7). The shorthand for this category, used in Appendix 1: , is **Other**.

Across six categories, a total of 37 questions were used to assess Formal Play Spaces. These covered a wide range of considerations, including the suitability and inclusivity of play equipment, the availability of open space, standards of maintenance, site location, and accessibility, including proximity to and connectivity with public transport. The questions were developed using the Play Quality standards outlined in Play Scotland’s Getting it Right for Play toolkit, to assess, and score play spaces. Each FPS was scored out of a maximum of 56 points, with some categories not transferred to the total numerical score for an FPS to avoid double counting.

The average category score achieved for each FPS (%), weighting each category equally, was used to report overall quality and accessibility scores. The four rating classes are set out in Table 7:1. Each rating level is also assigned a colour, which is used in the online interactive map presentation of the PSA.

Table 7:1 Formal Play Space Rating Classes, from Average percentage score

Rating	Average percentage score (%)
Low	< 30%
Moderate	30% - 50%
High	50% - 75%
Very High	>75%

The Highland Council [Local Living Tool](#), presented as an online map, included analysis of accessibility to Highland Council Play Areas. A network analysis using 800m buffers from the entry of Play Areas was used to create a walking catchment around them. The Play Areas dataset used in this analysis was for Council-owned spaces only and precedes the more comprehensive list of formal play spaces since identified through the PSA. That said, the analysis still provides a useful indication of accessibility to formal play spaces owned and maintained by Highland Council.

7.1.3 Limitations and Exclusions

While the methodology was developed in accordance with the relevant PSA regulations and guidance, limitations of the approach are noted herein:

- Growing settlements, which are generally areas with low populations have not been surveyed.
- Weather conditions, time and date of survey might have caused varied results, especially with regard to usage.
- Council and non-Council play spaces were surveyed separately, at different times and in different years, and by different teams. As a result, variations in scoring may occur due to the timing and nature of on-site audits. Survey visits may not always align with issues or conditions experienced by the public, as some concerns may be temporary or not evident at the time of assessment. Consequently, individual observations or perceptions may differ from the audit findings.
- Due to variations in data recording methods, the analysis of age-group provision focused on categorising play spaces by their suitability for one, two, or three age groups, rather than assessing individual age groups independently. As a result, the findings provide an indicative overview rather than a detailed breakdown of age-specific provision. Future PSAs could adopt a more standardised and independent evaluation of equipment suitability by age group, enabling a clearer assessment of diversity, inclusivity, and potential

gaps in provision across Highland's play network, and improving consistency and comparability over time.

Identify and Assess Informal Play Spaces

Informal Play Spaces (IPS) can be wide-ranging, varied, and challenging to accurately identify or map, as noted in the PSA Guidance⁵¹. For example, IPS are not formally designated as 'playgrounds' but are spaces where children can enjoy free, unstructured play. These may include natural environments such as woodlands, open green spaces, or quiet residential streets that allow children to explore, interact, and be creative without fixed equipment or defined boundaries.

For these reasons, a requirement for mapping informal play spaces has not been prescribed in the guidance and it sets out that informal play spaces within a planning authority area can be identified by the planning authority or by children for a PSA.

For Highland, IPS have been identified by Council officers within Settlement Development Areas only, as part of the [Open Space Audit](#). This audit identified Informal Play Spaces (IPS) as:

- areas surrounding Formal Play Spaces, where informal play often complements equipped areas and;
- areas within identified open spaces where there was potential or evidence of informal play (e.g. such as improved, relatively level or maintained surfaces for play).

In some instances, this means that former play spaces which are now unequipped or have no play equipment have been categorised as informal play spaces.

The polygon extent of IPS was recorded and using GIS tools the area of IPS, provision of IPS per resident and percentage of IPS by SDA in a Locality was calculated.

In the Highland context, it is recognised that there is a plethora of informal play opportunities situated outwith settlements, however these have not been assessed as it would be too resource intensive to include them in the PSA.

Note: Some informal play spaces were initially misidentified on the play space map, as they comprised wider amenity land rather than genuine informal play opportunities. This was rectified during the consultation period, with maps updated

⁵¹ [Play Sufficiency Assessment Planning Guidance](#)

on 4 February 2026 to remove these areas. The resulting changes have been reflected throughout this report.

Mapping

Once all the FPS and IPS had been identified and evaluated, polygons for all surveyed play spaces within Settlement Development Areas were mapped to provide a visual representation of their distribution and extent.

The interactive online map is accessible via link:
[Highland Play Sufficiency Assessment Map](#)

The online map offers full navigation functionality, allowing users to zoom in and out, pan across the area, and search for specific locations using the address or postcode search bar located in the top-right corner. This feature enables users to easily identify their nearest play space and access relevant information. A home button in the top-left corner resets the view to the default zoom level for convenience.

7.1.4 Formal Play Spaces

The interactive map includes clickable icons for each FPS, which open detailed pop-up windows with navigable tabs showing the FPS name, ownership, town, Area Committee, and overall scores and average scores (%). Summary graphs of total scoring and scoring by category are included for each FPS also, with a description of what was assessed and scored for each category.

Each FPS icon is colour-coded using the four-level rating - Very High (>75%), High (50-75%), Medium (30-50%) and Low (<30%) - which reflects the average category score achieved across categories (see also Table 7:1). By clicking on an individual play space, users can view a detailed breakdown of scores across all assessment categories.

7.1.5 Inclusivity

Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation⁵² information was used to identify the Most Deprived and Least Deprived Quintiles, to support interpolation of play park provision by area deprivation.

⁵² [SIMD \(Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation\)](#)

7.1.6 Informal Play Spaces

Informal Play Spaces were mapped using the Council's Open Space Audit as the primary baseline dataset. Relevant open space typologies, such as amenity greenspace and natural/semi-natural areas, were reviewed to identify locations that provide opportunities for informal play. The extents of these areas was surveyed and assessed based upon their physical characteristics and potential to support unstructured play, rather than the presence of formal play equipment. This approach ensured that the mapping of Informal Play Spaces was consistent with existing open space evidence while providing a realistic representation of where informal play opportunities occur across the area.

Evaluation of Play Sufficiency

Following the initial engagement and desktop and site surveys of FPS and IPS, the evaluation of play sufficiency was undertaken and presented via a data summary with statements about play sufficiency. Play sufficiency is presented both by locality (Local Committee Area) and for the totality of the Highland Council area in **4.0 Statements of Play Sufficiency**.

Consultation

As per the Scottish Government's Planning guidance for PSA⁵³, it is the duty of the Council to undertake consultation on the Play Sufficiency Assessment.

Highland Council undertook a comprehensive public consultation to support the preparation of the Play Space Assessment (PSA) report and the associated mapping. The consultation engaged children and young people, parents and carers, schools, community councils, community groups, key stakeholders, and the wider public, including organisations with an interest in play and/or open space. This engagement helped to inform and strengthen the evidence base underpinning the PSA:-

- An online consultation for the general public (particularly adults) and organisations was carried out between 16 January and 27 February 2026, focusing primarily on the prepared draft PSA and the associated map;
- A focused consultation with school pupils was undertaken between 2 February and 27 February 2026. This consultation concentrated on the 45 play spaces that had received investment since they were surveyed for the PSA, engaging

⁵³ [Play Sufficiency Assessment Regulations 2023: planning guidance](#)

41 primary and 26 secondary schools whose catchment areas those play spaces are located within.

The consultation focused on validating the findings of the PSA and gathering additional insights into the issues experienced by children and the wider public, as well as the on-the-ground condition of play spaces. It also sought to share and invite feedback on the PSA's intended and potential uses, as well as to capture any wider feedback that may inform future work, including any subsequent review or re-survey for purpose of PSA.

8 Appendix 3: Summary of consultation | Eàrr-ràdh 3: Geàrr-chunntas air a' cho-chomhairle

The outcomes of consultation on the draft PSA, including a summary of feedback received and consideration of the comments, was reported to the Council's [Economy and Infrastructure Committee](#) on 28 May 2026.





**The Highland
Council
Comhairle na
Gàidhealtachd**
